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Rethinking Individuals: New Figurations

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[Rethinking Individuals: New Figurations] ¹*How we became ourselves*

The aim of this text is to discuss individuals and cultural spaces and, equally, to investigate some of Norbert Elias' concepts, and the ways of considering or using them under contemporary circumstances. We could commence by quoting *The Society of Individuals* (1939, 1987), one of his key works on the topic, but I wouldn't like to miss the opportunity to recall the emotion and fascination with which, at an earlier stage, still as a student, I read another *opus magnum: The Civilizing Process*². Magnificent pages with the history, a historical sociology with Elias' profoundness, of the long development of its figurations, processes and changes, which constructed us as individuals on the Western path of individualisation especially from the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

How we became what we are: this was the fertile revelation in the story of how the individual is structured by a civilisational transformation through the double process of socio-genesis and psycho-genesis that simultaneously runs through and explains the political formation of states, the regulation of violence, the dialectic of distinction and inequality among groups, classes and cultures, the development of manners, mentalities, behaviours and values, the borders between the public and the private and the structures of the personality. I was fascinated by the imitable way in which Norbert Elias gave us this vast civilisational portrait with the complexity and pulsation of time, and the bridges between comprehensiveness and detail, the global and local, episodes and story, and theory and empiria. And, no less, by Elias' so personal and powerful writing, with a clarity and depth that should still be an inspiration for distinctly more rhetorical meta-theory authors and texts.

To sum up, a fascination with this non-dichotomous thinking, more than all the false oppositions between individualism and holism, action and structure, subjectivity and society, synchrony and diachrony or macro and micro levels of analysis. It also a fascination with the singularity of an author who introduced the connections between pulsional drives, or emotions, and power into sociology. Dimensions of the human condition always lay on Elias' horizon (1985), ones that the civilising process moulded or transformed, combining two types of regulation: social constraints in normative, institutional and political regulation and self restraint or self-control which individuals apply from within themselves, from their bodies, feelings and emotions, from public life to the intimacy of their being. For this reason, the sociologist Norbert Elias does not restrict himself to individuals: this is rather a sociology of society with and of the individual³.

From other perspectives, the historic course from individuality to more modern forms could also be described as ontological metamorphoses⁴, until the context of what is called contemporary individualism where the meta-

¹ Paper presented at the Conference *Beyond dichotomous thinking: the society of individuals. The legacy and continuing relevance of Norbert Elias's sociology*, organized by Polo delle Scienze Sociali, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence, 7-8 October 2010. Translation by Colin Archer, whom I would like to thank for the care and clarity with which he has interpreted this and other, already published, papers of mine.

² Original text from 1939, with English editions in 1969 (*The Civilizing Process*, Vol. I. *The History of Manners*, Oxford: Blackwell), 1982 (*The Civilizing Process*, Vol. II. *State Formation and Civilization*, Oxford: Blackwell) and 2000 (*The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Revised edition of 1994. Oxford: Blackwell). Translated into Portuguese in 1989 and 1990 (*O Processo Civilizacional*, Lisbon: D. Quixote, 2 vols).

³ For an overview, see, Goudsblom and Mennell (1998, eds), Mennell (1992), Heinich (1997), Lacroix and Garrigou (1997), Van Krieken (1998), Salumets (2001), Mennell and Dunning (2003), Kilminster (2007), Loyal and Quilley (2004, eds), VV. AA. (2010).

⁴ For example, to quote Marcel Mauss' famous essay on the construction of the category of the person, passages that, according to

morphic and plural process continues towards the *self* if we keep sight of its ambivalent or ambivalently interpreted declinations. A *self* that in different views of individuals can be associated with more anomic and narcissistic forms of the *minimal self* and the *fall of the public man* - as Christopher Lash (1984, 1991) and Richard Sennet (1977, 1988) wrote of individualism in the entry of the 1980s) - or a *self* in the almost symmetrical sense of *maximal self* that has been more common since the 1990s - overflowing (for some even lacerated) with multi-faceted experience of its subjectivity, reflexivity and identity (Lipovetsky 1989; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991, 1992; Bauman 2000, 2001, 2004; Gay, Evans, Redman 2005)⁵.

Here, I do not intend to run through all this fluctuating discussion around individuals in contemporary society. Rather, in the main, my purpose is only to consider certain sociologies that have assumed them as a centre of gravity parallel to other points of view. These sociologies, though diversified, have established a specific line in which the apparently common notion of the individual is now a double sign (sometimes ambiguous) of both proximity to and difference from Norbert Elias' sociology. But it is also necessary to recall other current characteristics that challenge the choice of a single line of reflection. In effect, how can the sociology of individuals be reconciled with the sociology of our transculture, in particular the accent on singularity (i.e. transverse dimensions that dim or reconstitute the mark of the difference/differences, borders and autochthonies in contemporary societies)? I mean the trilogy of global, media and consumer culture and the inter/multicultural dynamics and new forms of urban, visual, technological and information culture. Like the impact of flows and networks on relationships, communication, the economy, power, meaning and identity.

This reflexive ambivalence arises from two directions in the contemporary sociology on symmetrical processes of de/singularisation that challenges and requires conceptual proposals to re-articulate and re-situate individuals in new trends and in trans/local cultural spaces with new or transformed configurations and mediations. My proposal is to return to a key concept in this relationship of individuals with their contexts: the *habitus* that Norbert Elias explored, from *The Civilising Process* to *The Germans. Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1989, 1996). Another *opus magnum* which was published, fortunately, a year before his death and reconfirms how *habitus* had already been introduced into sociology long before the uses and reconceptualisations by Pierre Bourdieu. The same, moreover, could be said about the dialectic of the distinction between classes and cultures, which is so closely associated with Bourdieu's work: Elias had also introduced it long before in his work *The Civilising Process*⁶.

Without covering the whole of the conceptual and empirical trajectory of *habitus* in these two authors, I will consider the main aspects of this *system* (Bourdieu's term) of *figuration* (Elias' term) of dispositions that are socially incorporated in individuals and generate of their practices, values, representations, orientations. In Elias the *habitus* unites, in a specific manner, the two processes of psycho/sociogenesis and, to a greater extent than in Bourdieu, involves the historical dimension – heritages and national cultures, as happens, precisely, in *The Germans*. Though structured and historically grounded the dispositions of the *habitus* are obviously not immutable; they change with the individual's action and reflexivity. In this way, in addition, a coherent overview of diverse perspectives on *habitus* should not only consider how it appears in Elias' figurational sociology and Bourdieu's theory of practice but also how it can be converted into alternative concepts in other theoretical formulations. They, too, on the pathway of a different non-dichotomous way of thinking, e.g. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and similar ones, to the mutual overlapping of structure with agency, which have become, moreover, key reference points for contemporary sociology (Giddens 2000, 1984, 1990; Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994).

What I shall try, then, is to give a brief and eclectic recontextualisation of *habitus*. Transformed, moreover, into the outcome of multiple dimensions, among which the usual or "traditional" are added to the more contemporary ones. Such as those of transculture that have become a key reference for postmodernity (or late/advanced

him, introduced a new psychological, moral, metaphysical and legal basis for the old Latin notion of the person: «from the mask to the role, from the role to the individual, from the individual to the person, from the person to the self» (Mauss 1985: 357, 347). Other perspectives: Dumont (1983), Lukes (1973); Carrithers, Collins and Lukes (1985, eds); Sosna and Welbery (1985, eds); Taylor (1994); Cohen (1994).

⁵ Further references on the issue of identity appear in Idalina Conde (2011).

⁶ With regard to Pierre Bourdieu, see – among his countless publications – (1979, 1980, 1992, 1997) and also (1992, 1989).

modernity, as some prefer) after the great and rapid changes of the last three decades. Furthermore, this larger content for the *habitus* (thus re-named *dispositions* not to be confused with other conceptions) takes account of the specific biographical dimension. Aspects of individuals' lives and their narratives that should be given prominence not only because they shape the dispositions, but also because they are actually re-shaped in a wider contemporary biographical space. How it is composed and by what polyphonic trends and impulses have become primary issues for an understanding of individuals today in both their singularity and common lives.

Finally, since recontextualisation has other levels if we are to rethink Elias' concepts and, at the core, the concept of figurations that he related to several kinds of social formations (groups, institutions, places, nations, etc), it seems equally pertinent to recall other key notions to describe the contemporary panorama. One is that of mediations. Various mediations from tranverse types (the media, new technologies, networks discourses) to more specific ones (e.g. professional) in certain areas of activity that run through and structure society, individuals and their spaces. How can they be crossed with figurations in Elias' sense, with their interdependencies and a variable geometry of both exchanges and power asymmetries?

We move, then, from interferences in the *habitus* or dispositions that produce individuals (and that they also produce) to the issue of their interdependencies in the figurations that I develop in a longer version of this essay with a round of different mediations and mediating processes, in certain cultural and artistic domains (Conde 2011a). If I mention it here, it is because interferences and interdependencies represent complementary issues in a wider reflection on the path to responses - that have been renewed now though many are certainly still open - to the initial question, which lay at the base of my fascination with Norbert Elias and the civilising process: how did we become what we are?

Individuals: interferences and dispositions

The sociology of the individual, which is differentiated by authors and academic contexts, looks at the singularity of individuals or the plurality that they represent: dispositions, practices, subjectivities, rationalities that appear in *individual grammars* or *the actors' regimes* (Martucelli, De Singly 2009)⁷. An habitual lexicon in the French context, expanded by other notions like self, agency and reflexivity, which reflect a more Anglo-Saxon origin and the influence of Giddens and similar sociologists. They strengthen the actionalist (and emancipating) sense of the individual, as well as being related to the perspectives of empowerment and citizenship within the workings of the new *institutionalized individualism*, *risk societies* and the *Welfare State* (Beck 1992; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2001).

Therefore, through the various prisms, these sociologies go against totalising, cohesive and/or determinist perceptions of *habitus*. Especially the actionalism that attaches importance to voluntarist and reflexive processes in the self/construction of the individual in relation to the incorporation of socialisations assumed by the concept of *habitus*. These have precisely aroused renewed debates on Bourdieu in the French context, among whom Bernard Lahire is the leading example with his new *dispositional sociology*, based on portraits of the individual's plural dispositions⁸. Taking another line, we can also recall the *sociology of experience* that François Dubet (1994) introduced earlier to analyse the relationship between the heterogeneity of the individual's personal/social life and his or her ideas of action, rationality and subjectivity. So, what Dubet calls the *work of the actor*, or the individual, to make him or herself a non-fragmented and non-volatile subject throughout different contacts and involvements, is a practical, reflexive and subjective kind of work that converts the individual and the whole of identity into an

⁷ For further references, see Idalina Conde (2011) *Crossed Concepts: identity, habitus and reflexivity*, already quoted. This paper, which is partly retrieved here, also develops a broader reflection on the issue of identity and globalization.

⁸ These portraits, constructed on the basis of massive empirical work on portraits, show how every individual may combine diverse modes of socialization/incorporation as well the construction and the "activation" of dispositions throughout the different contexts of action. See, among other publications: **Bernard Lahire (1998, 2002, 2004)**. Among other re-evaluations of the *habitus*, see also Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2001, 2005).

activity, a process⁹.

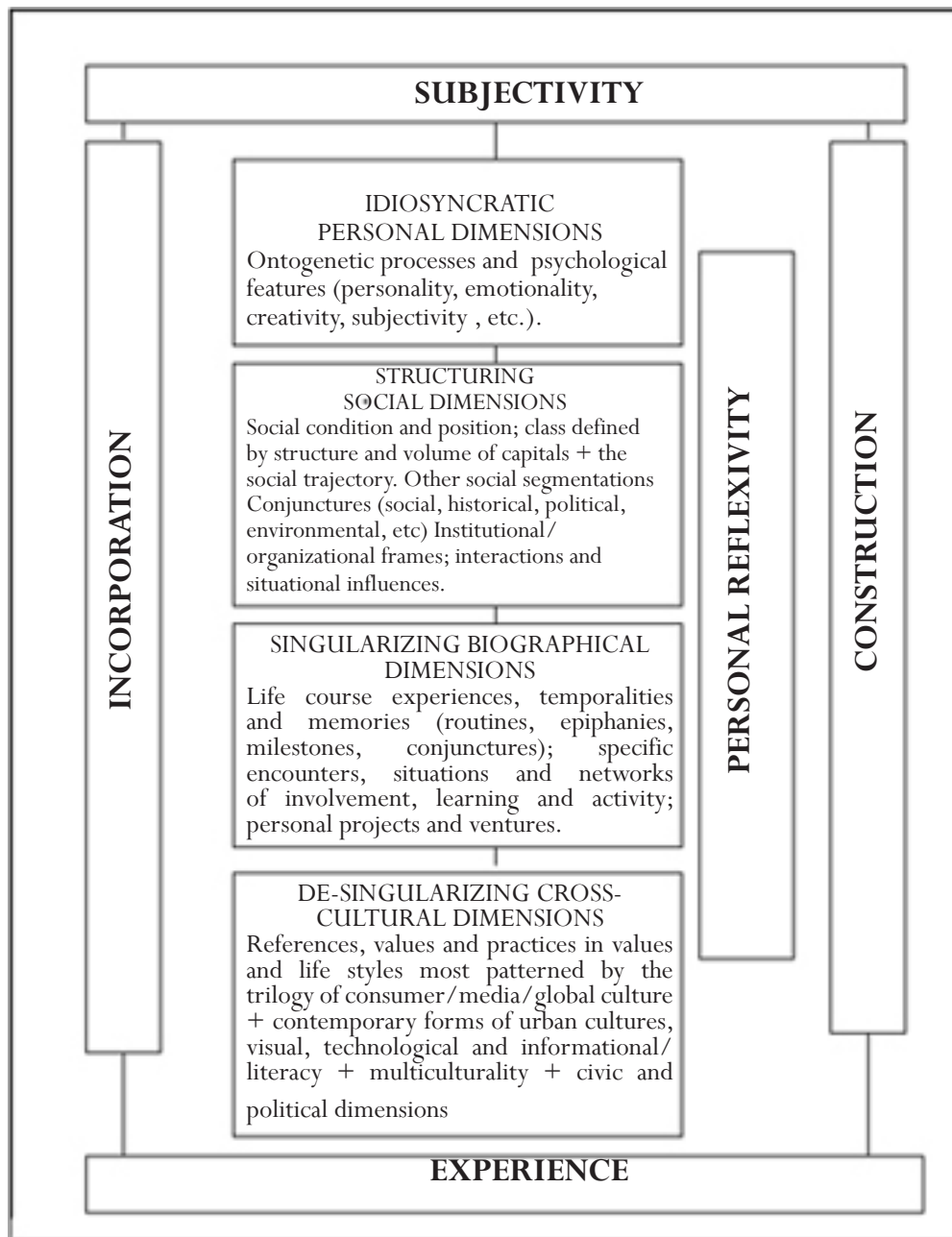
In this way, subjectivity and subjectivation as a construction inherent in individual identity represent a response or resistance to heteronomy and indifferenciation. However, other viewpoints on contemporary societies may consider different processes. Now, less concerning individuals and more concerning collective models that, precisely, de-singularise them, such as the macro-trends of what above I called transculture. Certainly a highly inclusive word for all the types of content, flows and resources that move about our global or translocal places, though it serves to note how they interfere in individuals' dispositions and their lifestyles, imaginaries and identities. They correspond to more cosmopolitan aspects of contemporary culture in which the notion of global culture itself is not reduced (as it is often interpreted) to the *Macdonaldisation* (Ritzer 1995) of the world or the imperialism of cultural industries. It takes in other possibilities with a different direction, including the literacy produced by informational, communicational and knowledge flows; multiculturalism as a close or media experience of "otherness"; the civic and political manifestation itself of transnational activism and "causes"¹⁰.

Figure 1 may supplement the narrow senses of *habitus*, combining these de-singularizing cross-cultural dimensions with what appears there as a broad matrix of interferences in the individual's dispositions. Surprisingly, they are contemporary cultural dimensions that have been removed from the debates on *habitus* in the notion of Bourdieu as well as (now comprehensibly) of Norbert Elias, who died precisely at the beginning of the 1990s: a decade of many turns towards the present situation. This coincided with the publication of *The Germans*, Elias' great work on his total historical and national perspective of *habitus*: the second nature or embodied social learning of individuals, which connects the social structure with the structure of the personality and is expressed in ways of life, attitudes, and codes of behaviour and thought. A concept, in this book, that is neither essentialist nor ideological for the study of the specificities and changes in a national character, always in relation to the state-formation process in Germany, and its socio-political, cultural and generational configurations.

⁹ As François Dubet states in his sociology of this experience, this work of the actor, to run processes across the institutional, interpersonal and intimate spheres, requires at least three forms of action: integration, strategy and subjectification.

¹⁰ As happens in the areas of human rights, protest and sympathy movements, the environment, planetary governance issues, among various global movements. It is to be noted that, in this highly diversified global culture, the notion of multiculturalism itself also extends beyond the multiculturalism related to minorities or ethnic segmentations. It is an experience of diversity which not only includes exposure to the otherness in public re/presentations (discursive, media-related, image-related) but also in the commitment to the civic, ethical and political bases of contemporary citizenship.

Figure 1: The Individuals. Dimensions of the Interferences in Dispositions



Therefore, *The Germans* does not belong to the age of globalisation, translocal condition and its trends, which reorganise the framework of time and space and the reference points in our lives. Nevertheless, as in this work as in the rest by Elias, the issue of interdependencies and the power ratio between nations (similar to the figuration of relationships between individuals and groups such as generations, among others particularly addressed in this book¹¹ is the backbone of his thinking. Indeed, like a condition for the comprehension of the singularities of every

¹¹ Generations and the relationship between the sexes are central, here, to an analysis of power struggles, cultural changes, freedom movements for dominated groups (young people and women), and a spurt of informalisation in social relations, which introduced new

nation state and the process of its formation and culture. Furthermore, *The Germans* also goes back to the long timespan involved in the formation of *habitus*, with the structuring role of the past in the civilising curve of the world's nations. For the past is never simply the past, as Elias repeats so often, and even less so for Germany. It was to return to haunt the present with its traditions, traumas and missions and in *The Germans* we see how they influenced the breakdown of civilization: Hitler's rise to power and the tragedy of the Holocaust¹².

However, this basic historical dimension in Elias' work should also be questioned now. By our now more presentist regime of historicity (Hartog 2003): an accelerated and highly mediated experience of time and its marks and amnesias with possibly more fragile, contingent or reversible sedimentations of the *habitus*. *How Societies Remember* (1989) and *How Modernity Forgets* (2009) are, for example, a dyad of titles for books by Paul Connerton, published ten years apart, which raise the question of our re/constructive relationship with the past. A multi-form mobilisation of remembrance against forgetfulness, whether with history, whose legacy, from the events to the myths, is in the meantime being excavated and rewritten by a more post-modern, de-constructivist and de-sanctifying culture; or through the processes of capturing memory, which are also held in such esteem today, not only at a personal and biographical level but also in the "archives" of social, oral and popular memories. Those of a history that is still alive¹³.

Finally, *habitus* is total for Elias because it is the basis of psychogenesis and sociogenesis. We see it being constructed and operating in his dense descriptions/analyses: a spiral that, in the same thread of meaning, "rolls up" fragments and huge *frescoes* of reality, people and their intimacy into large institutional and social formations. Hence, for a way of thinking that rejects the compartmentalisation of levels, layers and categories, the segmentation of Figure 1 into sets of dimensions may reflect this dialectic and process with a certain difficulty. An argument that would immediately apply to the set of idiosyncratic personal dimensions, which are inseparable in Elias from others in an overall ontogenetic process: the being of individuals with that of their environments¹⁴.

Nevertheless, Figure 1 accentuates them to indicate what can be least explained, or totally explained, by sociology (especially other sociologies), though it explains the processes of subjectivation across this configuration: the specificity of a person, certainly never separate from the social environment and, yet, an inner world most approachable through psychology, psychoanalysis or other perspectives, even biological. In many works the sociological perspective does what is possible: it follows the traces of subtle or radical differences inscribed by that idiosyncrasy in the combined processes of other dimensions: structuring, singularizing, de-singularizing...

Preserving the umbrella notion of dispositions, this diagram¹⁵ merely attempts to achieve a wider and multi-dimensional perspective of *habitus*. Or, more precisely, of dispositions and their interferences. In addition to the structuring social dimensions that combine structural and institutional effects – usual in Bourdieu's uses of the concept – with others that are less evident in some of his studies: more conjunctural, events-based, situational or interactional. Although, to return to comparisons, they are viewed, in Elias' *habitus*, with equally overall and detailed scrutiny.

I prefer to call them interferences instead of determinations, to avoid a restricted conception of causality. Multiple interferences that express the internal plurality of individuals (thus possibly breaking the coherent *Gestalt* of the *habitus*), along with their reflexive autonomy and ability to transform it. This is why reflexivity represents a crucial mediation for the processes of self-construction, in two senses, personal and social; from the internal con-

civilisational configurations in Europe in the 20th century. The book opens with precisely these aspects (the chapter *Civilization and Informalization*, pp. 21-120, with the first point on changes in European standards of behaviour in the twentieth century) before the historical digression on Germany and nationalism.

¹² Norbert Elias, *The Breakdown of Civilization in The Germans*, op cit: 299-402.

¹³ Several references in Conde (2011 a).

¹⁴ A point to recall, also, Elias' liaison with psychoanalysis and, in particular, references to Freud. A recent publication in France (Elias 2010) resumes some his texts from 1950, 1965 and 1980.

¹⁵ This conceptual "decompartmentalisation" began with an earlier essay aiming to understand the ways to construct the singularity of artists. From charismatic to pragmatic, this singularity is an essential trait of these individual (and statutory) identities: Conde (1996, 2001).

versation (Archer 2003) with which individuals cogitate and rationalise their experience to the social competence provided to them by the knowledge, expert knowledge and other resources available to embed it in agency. An “institutional” reflexivity, to use Giddens’ terminology, that is constitutive of late/post modernity and so is part of our diagnoses, choices and foresights¹⁶.

In reality, reflexivity also requires another note. The (also polysemic) centrality that it has won in the social sciences, a concomitant of the coefficient of information and literacy in contemporary societies, carries a new vision of the individual. Or a twist in his or her representation that, so to speak, is due to the two effects of theory and reality because part of the answer to the initial question – how did we become ourselves? – involves this sociological filter, which is quite Giddensian or inspired by him in contemporary sociology. We have thus become highly cognitive beings, not to say even more than emotional ones, as Elias saw and accompanied us in the civilising process. But, still, the question persists when we want to debate both Elias’ thinking and certain sociological trends. Did we become definable mostly by this leap in civilisation of reflexivity that represents a new supplement, tool or resource for self-regulation (Giddens even identifies it with self-monitoring) or have we also remained under the perturbation of a (particularly sociological) regard that confines the vector, so essential, of the emotions – and pulsations – to a darker zone of the social and personal?

Be that as it may, reflexivity participates in the dialectic of incorporation/construction and brings voluntarism into individuals’ actions and awareness. The intentionality with which they interpret and can change both the conditions and directions of their lives and ties – as we say for identities, the belonging vs becoming. That is the reason why Figure 1 does not neglect the effects actually produced by biography, always an interplay of the probable, the possible and decision. So the singularizing biographical dimensions in the matrix alert us to elements that are rather clouded by the *habitus* in a narrow sense. They are directed towards the phenomenology and specificities of a personal life story that implies various hermeneutic rotations and recontextualizations: a crucial insight for the sociology of individuals with new paths of their lives, identities and narratives.

¹⁶ For further considerations of reflexivity and its role in the construction of personal projects as the motor of agency, see Conde (2011).

Final point: a passage through biography

So I will close this essay with an incursion into biography with regard to its web of meanings, levels of analysis and new contexts that even challenge traditional ways of doing research in sociology and the restricted conception of the “personal” in people’s lives. Beginning with a plural notion of auto/biography as it is increasingly recognized, we must then take a multidimensional approach that requires at least five accounts of an individual life¹⁷.

The first, the most common in sociological routines, is to see biography as a *trajectory* in the double sense, personal and social; a peculiar form of treading the collective paths to which the individual belongs (of profession, class, generation etc). But, considering biography as an individual’s *course* crossed by other anchorages, movements and calendars, a second account must still reconstitute the multiplicity of relationships and chronotropies (spaces and times) that make this course unique. Thirdly, the way in which it is due to personal *projects* is an essential question for biographical inquiry because, despite different scopes, formulations and degrees of obstinacy, practicability or idealism, the important point is to recognize that the very transitive nature of all projects (purposes vs expected or imagined outcomes) installs intentionality (also reflexivity) and deliberation at the centre of life (Conde 2011). It is indeed this presence of the projects that contradicts teleology or determinism and reminds us of Wright Mills’ words in *The Sociological Imagination* of 1959. They could be written today about all biography – as always being an interplay of the probable, the possible and decision. An open horizon:

Within an individual’s biography and within a society’s history, the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history. The future of human affairs is not just some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided – within the limits, to be sure, of historical possibility. But this possibility is not fixed; in our time the limits seem very broad indeed (Mills 1959: 174).

Equally relevant for such a perspective is a fourth account of the *biographical capitals* involved in the life course, to be understood as skills learnt in experience. But these capitals may have another meaning, too: as material (and symbolic) legacies that carry the individual’s history and self-story, anchoring the fundamental role of memory, identity and self-images that, from traditional to new devices (e.g. letters, books, photographs vs sites, blogs, YouTube, etc.), have changed self re/presentations in the private and public realms.

Finally, the fifth account is concerned with own *narratives*. Personal narratives to be approached in the two axes of self-telling and self-making, which correspond, respectively, to discursive and identity modelling(s) in these stories. However, it should be noted that self-making is not simply in the sense of ontological strategies producing manipulations (constructions, representations) of the self, like the «mythological rearranging of one’s life-history» with an instrumental role, self-referential and self-regulatory (Hankiss 1981: 203-209). Beyond this part, self-making also expresses the other sense of discourses with agency potential, i.e. a reflexive return with regard to practice, to remodel it, as it exists today in various emancipating or empowering uses of life stories, from the pedagogical to the therapeutic.¹⁸

In fact, it is a revaluing of the narrative as a re/constitutive dimension of the individual that belongs precisely to the turns that have transformed the biographical approaches since the first «biographical turn» in the early 1980s (Bertaux 1981; Chamberlayne, Bornat, Wengraf 2000; Roberts 2002). That time, a coherent movement with the return of the actor in the social sciences, to use Alain Touraine’s expression (1984, 1996). So, for the biographical incursion, it matters what the individuals say and how they say it: a second level that diversifies the perception of narratives, which is indeed a plastic notion for the various connotations in the own narrative turn in the social sciences, from the broadest perspective of narratives in peoples’ lives to an analysis of specifically auto/biographical discourses produced by individuals, their biographers, and researchers (sociologists, anthropologists,

17 Ideas that I have explored since the initial Portuguese biographical turn, which took place in the 1990s: Conde (1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994, 1999).

18 As happens in non-formal and adult education or in the field of clinical sociology. As I mention with some references in Conde (2011a).

historians)¹⁹.

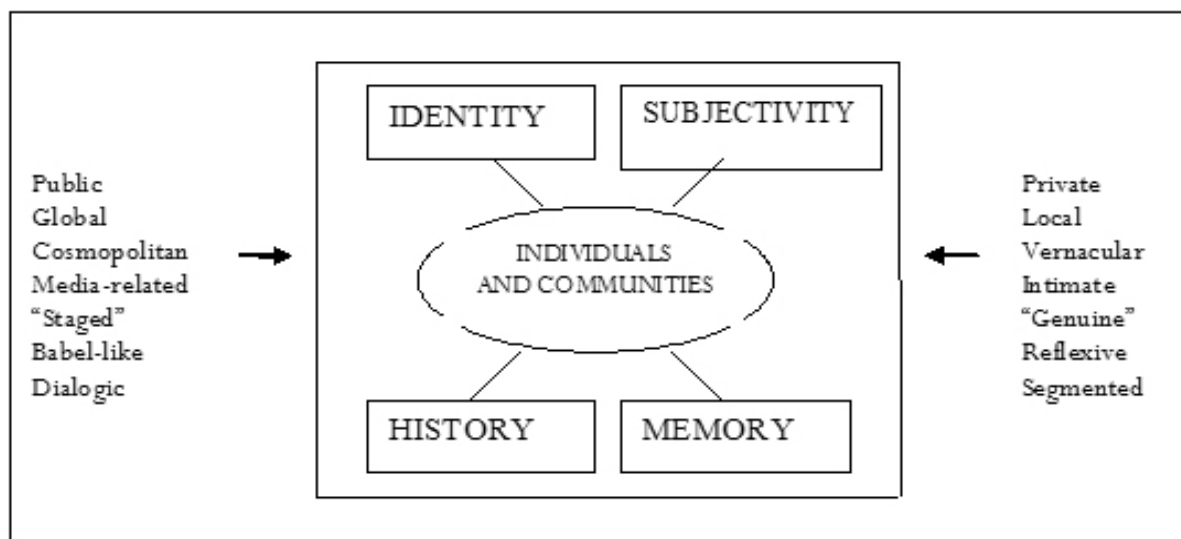
After that first movement, as Figure 2 indicates, some of the new impulses since the 1990s and current biographical issues become extensively transversal. The traditional use of life stories and other testimonial accounts of cultures, communities and singularities are now the subject of renewed incursions, gatherings and reflections, alongside others that are emerging and recurring in new approaches to our lives. For instance, those connected with migration and the *diaspora*, multiculturalism and several aspects of citizenship (VV.AA. 2006, 2009, 2010b), as well with areas of memory and history that have acquired great centrality.

Figure 2. Contemporary Biographical Approaches

TURNS:	ISSUES:
Post-structuralist: with reference to individuals, subjectivity, contingency. Biographical: in various traditions and registers; in the social sciences, with two impetuses since the 1980s; in history associated with oral history, historical biography and the relationship with memory in different “regimes of historicity” Discursivist: with narrative and de/construction occupying the central ground.	De/centring, plurality, reflexivity and reconstructions of the subject Multiculturalism, dialogue and identity/otherness. Oral tradition, writing and memory in the construction of cultural and identity heritages Glo(c)alisation, diaspora and contextual remapping Mediatization, interdiscursiveness and hybridisation of the public/private spheres

In addition, and related again to narratives, the definition of biography itself, as normally understood in the social sciences, in the literary, journalistic or documentary *genre* on the life of the individual and communities, has assumed more varied hues and a new extension in what may be called the contemporary biographical field. Another emerging and multidisciplinary notion, for the diversity of registers, feelings and narratives regarding life and some of its axes (subjectivity and identity; memory and history) that shows how the “biographical” is produced and circulates today in an interdiscursive, polysemic and hybrid area (Arfuch 2002; Dosse 2005; Lejeune 2005). As Figure 3 describes it is reflexive and media-oriented even for the most intimate forms, public and private, trans/local and multi/cultural, cosmopolitan and vernacular, and Babel-like and dialogic in the polyphony of voices about life. But also a biographical field, unequal or segmented in the ways in which each voice speaks and lays claim to its “truth”.

¹⁹ References to multiple approaches in Conde (2011a), namely Ochs and Capps (2002); Langellier and Peterson (2004); Berger and Quinney (2004); Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998); Smith and Watson, 2001; Andrews, Scater, Squire and Treacher, 2004; Riessman, 2007; Taylor and Littleton, 2006.



In brief, it is an area that recontextualizes and transforms the conventions and limits of *genres* (auto/biographies, histories, reports and portraits) because there is more life, from the erratic to the kind organised in discourses, that takes place through other supports and experiences of the witness: in daily life and its stories, in the body, in writing, and in the words and images of documentaries and fiction, along with the social sciences relating to life. Equally sublimated and de/constructed, nowadays, on the diversified stage of the media, from traditional screens and press interviews to digital narratives, forms of digital storytelling, and other uses of the new technological devices²⁰. For this reason, these plural expressions of life are also open to new interdisciplinary approaches to the sociology and methodology of biography²¹. New gains of the biographical which, though hardly common in the traditional protocol hitherto practised in the social sciences, have become necessary for an understanding of our lives. As each one participates in and is influenced by this intertextual/contextual chain.

Nevertheless, parallel to this search towards the near-heteronomy that entangles individuals in their interdependencies – to quote Elias’ core element in human figurations, contrary to the illusory and ideological model of the *homo clausus* – the other complementary track continues to seek biography as a privileged mean of access to the individuals’ autonomy. Or their singularity, which is possible through processes of differentiation in personality,

²⁰ Several references in Conde (2011a).

²¹ For instance, areas like the literary studies and similar that are dealing with personal narratives and their metamorphoses, from the fictional to the interpretative, in the *modus operandi* of auto/biographies, videographies, diaries, memoirs etc, which now include new writings and exploitations/expositions of the “I” by different mediums, arts and inter/media. Indeed, they share common issues to those of the social sciences, e.g. identity and self-reflexivity in contemporary culture. Another range of discourses relates to media and journalism that are important in various senses. In the first place for its large biographical production, in particular documentaries and interviews with journalists; secondly, for the characteristics of the media discursivity on life and the individual, which shapes forms of subjectivity and contemporary remembrance; and thirdly, for its role in the construction of public and political narratives associated with civic commitment.

life and work, though it may actually challenge collective patterns and constraints. In this regard, as the acclaimed author of *Mozart. Portrait of a genius* (1938, 1993), Norbert Elias showed how misfortune arose from the tensions of an individual with his context. A desire for autonomy in Mozart that indeed anticipated the romantic model of the “independent artist” in a context that was still that of the “craftsman-artist” in the service of court tastes.

Now, if we attempt an equivalent analysis for a contemporary artist, musician or composer, the passage through biography allows the visibility of a personal horizon created with singularizing processes. Biography is made then in interlocution with the individuals, the dialogical basis of this kind of research, which explores a life story on two levels. As I remarked before, one relates to content, what they recount to us or tell us as facts of life; the other, that of their narratives, relates to their way of talking and their type of presentation. The first may adopt an operational and flexible framework to map dimensions, thematic axes and points of focus in relation to life, from factual evidence, like events, to its symbolical embeddedness in representations, values, beliefs, ideologies²². The second level deals with the life story as a discourse organized in a peculiar narrative: its compositive Gestalt, forms of presentation, self-reflexivity and mnemonic traces. How does a person recount the story, and with what precisely narrative identity of the authors of a tale, among other rhetorical, reflexive and even fictional resources for it? (Conde 1994; 2001).

Ranging from objective to subjective, stories and history, they are always double and, no less, oblique evidences because autobiography, like other personal testimonies, is always intertwined with the opaqueness and transparency produced by an “I” that is also recounted as “another”. That is, it has the marks of the distance involved of individuals with themselves, to recall and mix here the terms of another dialectic that was very dear to Norbert Elias (1987): involvement and detachment. In other words, the real and spectral play of mirrors/identities which Rimbaud summarised in the poetic trilogy of the “I as he and another”: *Je est un Autre*²³.

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²² See an illustration in Conde (1993c, 2011a) that I constructed for the sociological biography of artists, a biography with a variable dimension. That is, from reduced comprehensiveness (a biography involving an occupation or some of its fields, which, in the example, represents the “artistic life”) to the maximalist version of the biography, to which other life spheres are attached (another or more “lives of the artist”). Once again, the diagram I propose there hardly appears Eliasian in that it divides a global, indivisible process: biography. However, this kind of research instrument acts as a compass in the guided and floating navigation that takes place in biographical research. A progressive elucidation, in the two senses of cumulative and reversible by the desired effects of serendipity (precisely, the most hoped-for discoveries in science) that rectify coordinates, issues and starting questions. As a result, the theoretical frames and assumptions that we bear for this journey about (and with) individuals. Moreover, in this revisability, based on inferential processes in this kind of research that attaches value to induction, lies the heuristic comparison between grand and grounded theories. Another leap in knowledge, of which the studies become aware when they are skilful in interpreting what the “ground” – i.e. people – brings and says.

²³ A recurring trilogy when these discourses of the “I” and its multiple truths are being discussed (Lejeune 1980, 2005; VV.AA 2004).

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