



Flexibility and the Individual in the Late Modernity

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Abstract: *Flexibility is a key word of contemporary modernity: sociologists, as well as other social scientists, employ the term in order to explain the new patterns labour organisation and labour market have recently assumed. As a key term of late modernity, flexibility has acquired an overall semantic relevance: which means that the term flexibility may be adopted in order to understand the “liquid” character of both social structure and individual biography. Indeed, the term has also assumed a somewhat ideological character: flexibility, intended by most as a way to foster a more rational organisation of work, actually legitimates new forms of social exclusion, ideologically disguised as effectiveness and efficiency of economical strategies.*

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In what one could approximately call late modernity, the praxis of flexibility has deeply changed the way in which work and the social roles associated to it are perceived. These changes should not be understood as an evidence of the gap between early and late modernity, but as the radicalisation of some of the characteristics of modernity and its social implications. Present-day transformations are structural, in the sense that they are connected to the evolution of social systems and their functional differentiation (Luhmann, 1988); but they have to do with social actors as well, whose conceptualisation as individuals is a typical aspect of modernity. Individualism has been conceived as one of the most salient aspects of modernity ever since sociology established itself as an intellectual field of investigation. The emergence of social systems (market economy in particular) as relatively autonomous spaces within society, produced the necessity for social structure to refer to the social actors not in relation to their ranks, but as individuals, endowed with acquired competences and skills. Modern individuals were socially compelled to be flexible, in the sense that they were to run the risks connected to choosing among alternatives of actions in a social structure where social position and identity were no more determined by birth. Anyway, in the age of solid modernity (Bauman, 2000) the welfare state and the fordist mode of production guaranteed a number of social protections which could convert the instability of choice among alternatives into normal biographies. Recent sociology has stressed how social processes are becoming more and more autonomous from individual intentions and motivations: Weber's *Zweckrationalität*, by which a rational control of means is sufficient to guarantee the social (individual or collective) actor to reach his goals, is now incapable of giving sociologists hints useful to explain social processes and transformations. The modern conception of risk (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990) has created a representation of the contemporary world, pessimistically based on the in-transparency of present-day complexity. Against this theoretical background, the individual seems to be no longer able to give coherence to his biography, since he has lost his own social bearings. Labour flexibility may be intended as one of the causes of the loss of biographical stability.

In reference literature, the organizational and normative matrices of flexible labour have been the object of a great number of reconstructions, based on heterogeneous disciplinary, theoretical and methodological assumptions. In particular, this theme has been the focus of analyses by theorists of organization and by jurists of labour, as well as by sociologists interested in economic processes, organizations, and labour. Generally speaking, sociological research draws heavily on reconstructions worked out in other disciplinary areas; sociological studies have often adopted



definitions and argumentative resources provided by technical-managerial knowledge, by the theory of organization as well as by labour law. The notions of “flexibility” and “precariousness” employed in social research have often been borrowed from other disciplinary areas. Sociologists have, for example, accepted as a semantic field for the word “flexibility”, an area of meanings provided by managerial and organizational literature; in the same way, the workers’ condition of “precariousness” has been derived, often in a mechanical manner, from employment contracts normatively classified as “atypical” or “flexible”. By assuming structural and subjective aspects of flexibility as interrelated, we suggest that flexibility is much more than that: its central role in recent economical, organisational, political and sociological discourse has to do with an overall restructuring of the relationship between social structures and the individual, often thematically described as late, reflexive, liquid modernity.

The crises of Fordism as a form of social and labour organisation and the development of the so-called risk society (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990), has had, as one of its outcomes, a deep transformation in social equilibrium and social integration. That affected both labour conditions and individual biographies: there is no longer either a dominant model of work organisation, or a single pattern of the typical worker. New forms of labour and labour organisation are emerging, connected to new cultural and ethical models, characterised by increasing spatial and temporal flexibility and uncertainty (Harvey, 1993). As a consequence, individual biographies becomes increasingly fragmentary: they are made of separated work experiences, which may occur in different geographical places, often involving a re-definitions of skills, tasks, competences. That makes planning a normal life-course ever more difficult (Sennett, 1999). What sociologists call “normal biography” was typical of industrial (or fordist) modernity, a period in which the welfare state, political organisations, the trade unions, as well as the fordist mode of production *cooperated* in order to give the worker a stable social biography within a relatively stable social environment. Within the variety of roles a social actor took on in modern society, the professional role was the one which gave the individual an integrated and coherent social identity.

Theoretically, one could assume Talcott Parsons as the sociologist who more than anyone else has fostered the idea of modern identities as based on the professional role, in a social context where the national (welfare) state was still perceived as able to produce equity through social differentiation (e.g. social inequalities). By introducing the pattern variables, intended as models of action orienting social roles, Parsons proposed a conception of modernity as characterised by acquired skills, as opposed to ascribed qualities. In what Parsons named the *universalistic model of realisation* the individual may accept the logic of social differences just because they are not based on the old social distinction linked to rank and birth. One is what he/she becomes thanks to the professional role and the realisation of individual tasks, within a functional differentiation of social work, whose primary basis “... is the imperative of free mobility within the occupational system” (Parsons 1951, p. 187). So, “stratification in terms of an open class system seems to be inherent in [modern] society” (Parsons 1951, p. 188). If the structure of society is open, characterised by a system of inequalities whose main character is the rationality linked to individual realisation, the integrative processes may no longer be based on the particularistic values of small communities. Solidarity is by now an affective tie to the nation as a whole, to be intended as the widest social community. Since Parsons transfers solidarity from particularistic social settings to the nation, he may conceive the individual not in connection to his (or her) ascribed social characteristics, but as a citizen, deserving inclusion and protection. Thus, the concept of the nation is to be integrated by the idea of citizenship, to be intended as the new basis for social inclusion, regardless of ascribed qualities and able to define “belonging in universalistic terms” (Parsons 1966, p.188).

The theoretical model proposed by Parsons (synthesised and made trivial here) clarifies the interconnection of individual action and collective tasks within a national state able to guarantee inclusion and a common set of values. Parsons' theoretical description works as a plausible representation of industrial (or Fordist) modernity, in so far as it presupposes an alliance between Fordism as a production mode and the welfare state as an effective way to produce and implement



political decisions (Harvey 1993, p. 155). The crisis (both ideological and fiscal) of the welfare state (Hill 1999, p. 349 ff.) has been discussed before globalisation became a fashionable concept in the social sciences. From a structural point of view, this crisis can be imputed to what one may call summing-up logic of the welfare state: more and more marginal groups deserve protection, an increasing number of vindications of individual and collective actors becomes politically relevant, in a process by which, by widening the number of social rights, the welfare state becomes incapable of implementing political decision (Luhmann 1981).

The crisis of the welfare state has made contemporary individuals weaker. Their professional experiences are more and more de-standardised, so that individual workers' biographies can no longer be described in terms of a "permanent position" and of a stable career. A better description is one stressing the overlapping of a series of succeeding jobs, often not consistent with one another or with the overall workers' experience (including chances of career, of professional education, of geographic mobility, as well as of human relations). This complex social and economical background affects, on the juridical level, the rights of workers and their implementation, as well as the recent forms assumed by labour contracts within the context of the present labour legislation (concerning Italy, see, e. g., the so called "legge Biagi", l. 30/203). Those transformations are inevitably producing social, economic, and cultural effects, the main character of which is a deep ambivalence. Indeed, labour flexibility is, at the same time, to be understood both as the outcome of present macro-economical dynamics and as one of the factors able to trigger all them off. Moreover, in present society flexibility legitimates production standards, wealth, welfare, technological innovation on a global scale, but it is also capable of generating social conflicts, protest movements, new lack of tolerance, in other words, a generalised sense of uncertainty (Sennet, 1999;. Bauman, 2000).

Of course, this complex set of macro elements has deep individual implications: the social actor has to translate momentous changes into motivations for action. That implies a constant subjective effort in order to interpret a constantly variable social horizon, against which a coherent individual biography becomes increasingly difficult. In our present society, individual actor and social context are part, as it were, of a single process, within which what is possible becomes actual. Subject and context, individual and social environment, can be seen as elements of a single process concretely defining the contents of "possibility" existing in our present society. Such possibility is to be referred not only to economic relations and to work organization (even if relevant), but also to those cultural aspects which characterize individual expectations and tendencies. Social research should take into account these two distinct, yet interdependent levels, i.e., subjective expectations and perceptions, as well as those "objective" conditions defining the character of the social environment.

As a member of a research project financed by the Italian Ministry of Scientific Research (*Flexibility, labour organization and identity in a peripheral area*) I have empirically investigated some of the aspect of work flexibility. Without analytically describing the empirical results of the inquiry (the main of which is connected to a strong adaptive willingness of the workers to the organisational requests) it has raised a number of questions which deserve further scrutiny: is flexibility the symptom of a new and more efficient organisation of labour and economy? Or should it be considered as one aspect of the third-world-like restructuring of work and society (Beck, 2000), due to global processes able to de-legitimize the national state and its capability to produce wealth redistribution and social security? Or it should be contextualized, for example within a regional perspective, by which under-developed areas (such as South Apulia) may simulate the adoption of mainstream strategies, actually keeping on structuring social and work relations still based on informality and acquaintanceship?

The arguments exposed above shows how complex the concept of flexibility may be. It has economic as well as biographical implications; it has to do with work organisation as well as with a complex set of phenomena, connected to the new role of the State and politics in the so called world society; it has a local dimension, related to its geographical specificity, although it may be



understood only within global economic processes. By assuming the complexity of the topic as a resource, some aspects may be selected, as deserving further attention:

1. flexibility implies the structuring of new representation of the relationship between the economic and the political system, by which the “old-fashioned” idea of political intervention on the economics is by now replaced by a set of economic limits to the political action. That produces a radical change in the representation of the political system as a central and guiding structure of the society as a whole, so typical of solid modernity and post-classical sociology (e.g. Parsons).
2. It is plausible to understand this process as confirmative of Luhmann’s representation of modernity as a set of non-hierarchical social system, as well as of a stronger differentiation between the economic and the political system.
3. It is possible to assume that flexibility is the symptom of new forms of the structural coupling between the individual and the political system. The legitimacy of the welfare state was the output of the political stabilisation of individual biographies connected to the pervasive employment of social programs. On the contrary, flexibility seems to legitimate new forms of social exclusion, ideologically disguised as effectiveness and efficiency of economical strategies.
4. One may assume that the processes as sketched above may be understood as the emergence of a new semantic description of the individual in late modern society, connected to structural changes in the direction of an overall increase of risk and uncertainty.

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