HOMO SOCIOLOGICUS REVISITED: HOW RELEVANT COULD QUESTIONS BE THAT WERE FORMULATED HALF A CENTURY AGO?[1]

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Abstract

In his study from 1958 Ralf Dahrendorf claimed that there is a simplified notion of the human individual in the foundations of sociological thinking, in which he/she is considered as unilaterally determined by social forces. Dahrendorf called this idea "homo sociologicus", and he linked it with the concept of social roles in the context of his period. This contribution proposes returning to the issues raised by Dahrendorf half a century ago with regard to developments in Sociology since. The basic question is whether approaches in which the human individual is subordinated to social order still dominate. Its purpose is to explore what image of the individual predominates in sociology at the beginning of the 21st century.

Keywords: *sociolgical theory; social role; actor; action; structure*

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1. Introduction

In his book *Homo Sociologicus*, Ralf Dahrendorf said that there is a simplified notion of the human individual in the foundations of sociological thinking, in which

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he/she is considered as unilaterally determined by social forces. Dahrendorf's study was first published in *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (Vol. 10., No. 2, 3) in 1958, and later as a monograph [10]. Since then, it has been re-published several times, translated into many languages and read and reflected on to this day [e.g. 41, 29]. In his work Dahrendorf asserts that at the very core of sociological thought is a simplified idea of human nature. In this idea, the human individual is seen merely as subject to social forces and unilaterally subordinate to the social order. To convey this idea, Dahrendorf coined the term „homo sociologicus", and in the context of his era, he related it to the conception of social role. The central topic of Dahrendorf's book is the theory of social roles and the consequences of its acceptance for the sociological insight on humanity.

In the project, *Homo Sociologicus Revisited*, a team of sociologists from Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague intends to revisit the issues formulated by Dahrendorf a half-century ago, and address them with regard to the more recent development of sociology. The project's aims arise from the fact that in the past 50 years the sociological image of man has undergone certain shifts and changes. This has had an influence on the choice of research orientation, theoretical approaches and conceptual apparatus. New problems and issues have emerged. Apart from the notion of social role, there is the increasing importance of such conceptions as actor, agent, habitus, self, identity and individualization. The basic hypothesis of this research project is that, in spite of these changes, Dahrendorf's idea of a simplified sociological understanding of the individual [10: *69-70*] retains its importance and relevance.

2. Individualism and Holism

Today's situation in the field of sociological theory is rather complicated, and very confusing. This is largely because from its very beginning theoretical thinking in sociology was shaped by opinions arising from different starting points. As a result, certain theoretical dilemmas recur, including in contemporary efforts in sociological theory. One of these dilemmas is connected with the terms individualism and holism.

Norbert Elias's book, *The Society of Individuals*, constantly comes back to the problem that the author characterizes as a gap in Western thinking which has opened up between the individual and society and is not easy to bridge [18: *25*]. There are two opposing parties of opinion: the proponents of one view claim that "Everything depends on the individual," while others believe that "Everything depends on society." The former argue that there are always particular individuals who decide what will and will not be done. The latter argue that what individuals do is always socially conditioned [18: *68*].

All our thinking is thus affected by antinomies. We have an idea of what we are as human individuals and also some idea of what society is, but these two images are not a very good fit. Nevertheless there is no doubt that individuals make up society and every society is a society of individuals [18: *15*]. Although we suppose that the "gap" between the individual and society does not really exist, our way of thinking is influenced by this polarity, which constantly fissures. One of the issues that Elias focused on in his sociology is how to overcome this polarity of thought and bridge the long-standing metaphorical gap.

The antinomies which Elias referred to, are associated with various terminological references in current theoretical literature. Jeffrey C. Alexander [1] distinguishes between individualistic and collectivist theories. Brian Fay in the book, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Sciences*, puts in the mutual counter-position conceptual pair – *atomism* and *holism*. According to atomism, each individual represents a distinct unit of social life endowed with the ability to "control their own action on the basis of their beliefs and desires" [20: *45*]. Atomists understand society as a collection of individuals and at the same time they consider that social units are transferable to the activities of the individuals who create them. Fay connects atomism with the strong belief in the "fundamental singularity of individuals", who are considered "as if what they are, were independent of their relations to other people" [20: *46*]. He considers Thomas Hobbes to be the philosophical founder of atomism, while in the social sciences of the 20th century this position is strongly represented by Friedrich von Hayek, who argues that social phenomena cannot be understood other than through understanding the individual acts of individuals. In sociology the origins of such methodological individualism are associated with Max Weber.

The opposite of atomism is holism, which Fay characterizes as the doctrine according to which the characteristics of individuals are exclusively the function of their place in society or in a broad system of meanings [20: *67*]. According to holism it is always necessary to take social units as the basis for social theory, rather than their individual members. Holism does not admit that it would be possible to reduce or transfer theories concerning social units to theories about individuals. A key figure of holism is Emile Durkheim; Fay considers structuralism (Levi-Strauss, Foucault, etc.) a more modern version of holism.

This opposition that Fay describes has many aspects that can be expressed in terms of other, interrelated dualisms. Three of them are mentioned by Derek Layder in his book *Understanding Social Theory* [33: *3*]: the dualisms of individual - society, micro - macro and action - structure. The distinction individual - social, considered to be the oldest and also the most persistent dilemma of sociological thought, in principle corresponds with the opposition of atomism - holism, which Fay addresses. Layder points out that the problem of this dualism lies in the fact that individuals cannot be put into sharp opposition to society because many of the needs and motivations that influence human individuals are created by the social environment in which these people live. In other words, there is no society without the individuals who define it, and at the same time there are no individuals who exist outside the influence of society [33: *3*].

Layder's list of three dualisms needs to be complemented by another, which reaches deep into the past as it has its roots in medieval scholastic philosophy. This is the opposition of nominalism and realism. In application to sociological thinking, the term realism expresses the assumption that entities labelled by aggregated terms, such as social class, organization, society or public opinion, exist in reality. By contrast, nominalism considers such terms as mere names which indicate intellectual constructs rather than things of independent real existence. According to nominalists there exist only specific individuals and their individual actions. The nominalistic position is traditionally associated with Weber; the realistic one with Durkheim.

In terms of Weber's sociology all social phenomena, formations, and the entire social order, are human creations which consist of social relationships between acting

individuals that pursue their own goals and value orientations; they are series, or complexes, of the interconnected actions of human individuals.

Generally speaking, individualistic opinion attributes primacy to the subjective, sovereign, individual free will, applied in the actions of human individuals. The individualistic perspective brings a 'view from below' that sees the individual as an actor who creates social reality with his activities on the basis of how he understands the world affairs around him, how he interprets them and what meaning or significance he attributes to his actions. Society, social institutions, structures and systems, are something built (if need be constructed) from below, as a result of the interconnected actions of individuals, and thus the result of interpersonal interactions.

Holism on the other hand is based on the philosophical assumption that the whole is more than the collection of its component parts. Therefore social reality cannot be explained by reference to individuals and their individual actions, but must be explained on the basis of its own principles. Émile Durkheim claims that the subjects of sociology are so-called social facts, whose primary feature is that they are supra-individual, external to the individual, and entering consciousness as something external, independent of the will. The second essential characteristic is that they are endowed with coercive power and are able to exercise social pressure for the individual to conform to [14: *36-37, 46*].

Durkheim sees society as a reality of a special kind which cannot simply be identified with the sum of its individual parts, because it has its own specific qualities that cannot be transferred to individuals. In relation to the individual it is the social or collective that is determining and that the individual submits to. Society has primacy over the individual in that it existed long before the individual and will be there long afterwards. It is the whole that has the ability to force individuals to live and act in a certain way. In the holistic perspective individual actions are seen not as a result of the sovereign decision of the individual, but as a consequence of social (functional pressures) that society imposes on human individuals, which they obey.

The history of the sociology of the 20th century shows that both lines of interpretation – individualistic and holistic – presented viable exploratory strategies that transformed themselves into many specific forms, in to a series of sociological schools and specializations. Through the individualistic approach we can encounter utilitarian

theories, based on the concept of *homo oeconomicus* (exchange theory, rational choice theory), but also interpretive sociology (in particular, phenomenological sociology). From holism on the other hand arise first and foremost structuralism, then functionalism and systems theory. However alongside this, several exploratory approaches emerged in the 20th century which viewed both these tendencies as one-sided and limited and attempted to overcome them by bridging or linking them.

During the 20th century there were other theorists who attempted to overcome the antinomy of individualism and holism. First of all, there was Talcott Parsons, who, in his work *The Structure of Social Action,* tried to interconnect the ideas of Weber and Durkheim [42]. Later, there was Norbert Elias [17], Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann [7], Jürgen Habermas [23], Pierre Bourdie [9], Anthony Giddens [22], Roy Bhaskar [8], Margaret Archer [4], Bruno Latour [32], and many others. In principle it is possible to distinguish in this effort two basic strategies. The first is based on postulating some "third" that is placed as a bolt between the individual and society to connect both poles. The second is led by the effort to bring together both poles – individual and collective – and put them into a single explanatory framework, so that in the explanation of social events these perspectives are alternated. Both strategies are not too different from each other; on the contrary they are complementary and have various points of contact.

The origins of the first strategy can be traced back to Georg Simmel, whose conception of sociology can be interpreted as a response to the dispute between sociological nominalism and realism [28: *357*]. Extreme nominalism is the claim that only human individuals really exist, not society. Realism – on the contrary – not only ascribes objective existence to society and other social wholes, but in addition has a tendency to put society above the individual. Simmel's definition of sociology tries to take a specific position that avoids the extremes. Simmel stands apart from nominalism, emphasizing the primacy of sociability over individuality, and moreover admits that interactions between individuals result in specific social qualities that are not original to the acting persons. However, at the same time he distances himself from realism, from the substantialist concept of social reality, and emphasizes its processual character. Society, according to Simmel, does not exist as a substance, but always as a interaction

between individuals [45: *27*]. Simmel believes that society exists only because it is moment by moment re-created by the interaction of people and their mutual interaction, in which various forms of interpersonal association are lastingly formed, reproduced, but also abolished. Simmel highlights this as the third and the most important social phenomenon and refers to it as *Wechselwirkung*.

A typical example of the second approach is Anthony Giddens and his theory of structuration, in which the individual pole is represented by the term action, and the social pole by the name structure [22]. Giddens's theory is based on a duality theorem of action and structure, which states that structures are the product of human action, but, once formed, they represent a tool for other human actions; a tool which on the one hand allows such action, but on the other, directs and limits it. Giddens – simply put – shifts his standpoint throughout his theoretical interpretation to explain observed issues by alternating lindividualistic and holistic positions. Essentially he says: the first step is to adopt an individualistic position because it is individuals whose actions create structures; however, the second step is to adopt a holistic perspective, as these already-formed structures affect subsequent individual actions. The third step is to return to the individualistic point of view as individuals by their actions enable the existing structures not only to reproduce but to modify and transform.

3. Determinism and Freedom

Sociological thought approaches the topic of the human individual quite broadly, ranging from attempts to develop the „sociology of personality“ [47, 30] to tendencies to eliminate the individual from reflection on social structures and systems- the position of theoretical or methodological „anti-humanism“ [3: *119*, 36]. The notion of social roles gained ground in Sociology from the 1930’s, developed by G. H. Mead and R. Linton; later in the 1950’s and 1960’s it was used by T. Parsons [42].

The most common and widespread understanding of social roles in sociology was initially proposed by Ralph Linton [34: *113-114*]. His conception is based on the assumption that society is a space composed of social positions (status), which are being occupied by human individuals. Certain expected and required behaviour is assigned to

these positions, and is mandatory for the holder of one or another position. Social role is thus a pattern of behaviour expected from an individual in a certain social position (with a certain social status) [34].

It is precisely this conception of the human as an actor of social roles which is discussed in Dahrendorf's book *Homo Sociologicus*. He assumes that the individual behaves according to the expectations related to the roles assigned to him or her. If an individual's behaviour fulfils these expectations, they are rewarded and receive social approval. On the other hand, if an individual does not live up to expectation, they are punished and penalized with social sanctions. Dahrendorf understands this approach as a reductionism [10: *64-65 ff.*], and shows that it is related to certain problems both for the real world of roles, and their theoretical reflection.

As for the criticism of reductionism, this is based on the implicit assumption that the social aspect of human personality, consisting of accepted and performed roles, is just one dimension of a human self. The personality is understood as a whole which cannot be reduced to this aspect, because there is always some contradictory dimension [48: *65-68*, 49: *35-38*, 50: *563-564*]. Prior to Dahrendorf, many other scholars formulated this assumption as well. In particular, we should point out Emile Durkheim and his notion of „homo duplex“ [13, 15]. Durkheim understands the human being as divided in an internally contradictory way. He states that every person possesses two kinds of consciousness, two aspects of psychic life: personal and non-personal. Our physical body on the one hand is a source of unceasing wishes and desires – of our egoism. Our socialized being, on the other hand, is a product of society living and acting through us, and also monitoring and restricting the expressions of our egoism through internalized social requirements.

Similar approaches are present in the works of other authors as well. According to Georg Simmel, the human being is split and remarkably ambivalent in its nature. In his essay „*Brücke und Tür*“, Simmel describes the situation of the human being, which is at one and the same time outward-oriented, attracted to society and association with other people, while remaining a world in itself, longing for autonomy, independence and distance from others [44: *1-7*]. William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki made a distinction between two components of human personality – temperament and character –

the former being naturally constituted, the latter socially formed [51: *1844-1846*]. George Herbert Mead outlines a theory of the human Self as an ambivalent unity of two dimensions, „*I*“ and „*Me*“ [37: *209-246*]; „*I*“ being the individual, subjective component, which is active and creative, *„Me“* being the objective and passive component, formed by the internalized attitudes of the social group or society of which the individual is a member.

Durkheim seeks the cause of this duality of human nature and reaches the conclusion that the essence of this antinomy reflects our parallel existence. One dimension of our existence is purely individual and based in our corporeity. The second dimension of our existence is social, and within this dimension we are merely an extension of society [15: *30*]. According to him, society has its own nature, and its requirements are therefore entirely different from those present in our individual constitution. According to Durkheim, morality is all about the socialization of norms and values that are often opposed to our individual desires, which is why even contemporary scholars argue that Durkheimian homo duplex is crucial to understanding the nature of the “moral self” [e.g. 21].

At the same time Durkheim was also aware of the fact that during historical development it is not only the way people live together (in Durkheim’s terms “solidarity”) that changes, but also the personality of human individuals [12], with the increase of individualization [cf. 11, 46, 25, 24]. According to Norbert Elias, the process of individualization is related to the shifting proportions of the We- and I- Identities [17: *263*]. Contemporary scholars presume that in the postmodern world individualization is increasing further [5, 27], and can even lead to a formation of a narcissist character [31, 35].

The issues of human operation in the world of social roles are most traditionally associated with “role conflicts” [10: *59-61*, 39]. Amongst the most often introduced, are: 1. “personality – role” conflict, when the role does not suit the individual for psychological reasons (he or she is not predisposed for the performance of that role), 2. ethical reasons (the role is not morally acceptable), etc.; 3. conflict arising from the inconsistent, vague or ambiguous delimitations of the expectations assigned to the role; 4. „role – role“ conflict, in which two or more roles are defined in a way which makes their

expected performance contradictory. A less elaborated theme is the issue of personal responsibility for behavior in the role. This relates to the fact that many people accept their role as something they do not inherently identify with, so they do not realize or admit responsibility for the consequences of playing their role [52: *95-97*]. This responsibility is delegated to the institution that has defined the rules for the performance of such a role set.

The construction of homo sociologicus is problematic especially because it leaves no space for human freedom, creativity and autonomy. In this perspective, the individual has no other dimension than as an actor who plays prescribed roles. Roles are the coercive and determining factor. The domination of society over the individual manifests itself through them. Therefore Dahrendorf asks what place freedom has in the world of roles [10: *65 ff*].

Peter L. Berger reaches a similar conclusion: his conception of social reality evokes the image of a strict determinism that connotes the idea of the world as a prison where man as a social being is imprisoned, from which nobody is able to escape because all human behavior is determined and set by a socially binding repertoire of roles. Compliance with these is supported by various forms of social control. Berger adds, however, that we are trapped in this world by our own actions [6: *106*], because we play most of our roles gladly, voluntarily, automatically and naturally, sometimes even with enthusiasm, because it is profitable and brings rewards: money, fame, prestige and power. Most people do not even notice that the roles they play are, among other things, historically-, socially- and power- conditioned.

Berger also comments on the question of freedom in the context of sociology, first formulated by Dahrendorf. He argues, paradoxically, that this freedom can be realized and shown only in the world of roles. Berger, inspired by Helmuth Plessner, finds (right in this world) ways for people to prove that the external coercive power of society is not all-powerful and they are not powerless as players of forced roles. Berger argues that there exists the transformation of roles, role distance, handling roles or, finally, rejection of roles [6: *112 ff*]. In Berger's approach, freedom is understood primarily as personal choice entailing possible innovative interventions in the world of roles.

Freedom – meaning the freedom of choice – is particularly emphasized in research programs which are based on methodological individualism (e.g. rational choice theory [19]). They assume that an individual in a specific social position does not have only one direction, but a variety (sometimes wider, sometimes very limited) of options, and they can choose according to personal preferences and calculations. Actors in these theories, however, usually choose from the options that are already socially given and, moreover, usually decide according to criteria that are already socially formed and thereby arbitrate what is considered desirable, convenient, rational, ethical, beneficial etc. Therefore freedom is freedom to choose from the options offered by society, maybe even to reject these options, but this usually means leaving the sphere of what is accepted and exploring a path forsaking reputable values and standards that leads to behavior of an anomalous – deviant – character.

Freedom means choosing from alternatives that are socially set in advance; on the other hand, it means the possibility to act in a way that crosses the boundaries of what is considered rational, reputable and acceptable for society. The second form of action – called "innovation"by Robert K. Merton [38: *146*] (in his analysis of ways of adaptation to anomic social situations) – does not lead to affirmation of the order but a step beyond it. And this is an issue – the problem of innovative action – that has not been satisfactorily elaborated in sociological literature yet. That is because sociological theory tends – for understandable reasons – to focus primarily on widely recurrent human manifestations, not on the unique action which comes up with something new. This can be demonstrated by Bourdieu and his structural conception of habitus on the one side and by Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration on the other. Bourdieu understands habitus as a set of dispositions to see the world in a certain way, to think about it and act in a certain way [9: *16*]. The author construes this concept of habitus as a collective characteristic, in other words as a "subjective structure" that occurs en masse among members of a particular class or section of the population. Giddens's version is based on the idea of competent, conscious actors (agents) equipped with *knowledge* and *capability* [22: *15*]. Knowledge and proficiency in practicing appropriate behaviour is both the condition and the outcome of their action. Giddens (and his theory of structuration) emphasizes the role that

knowledge and skill play in human behavior, but he also paints an image of the social world dominated by inertia, reproduction of institutional patterns, routine and repetition.

By contrast, the issue of creativity and innovation is reflected in the theory of Hans Joas, who argues that human behavior does not start with firmly set goals, but with rather vague notions that are continuously revised [26: *218-244*]. Joas talks about creativity, which is characterized as the ability to create something new, unexpected and surprising, to see things differently than before and to combine new things against prevailing experience. Creativity manifests itself in the readiness to think, speak and act unusually, to take a greater risk of failure and not to look back to responses of the others.

However, until now it has been typical for all these theoretical considerations for the effect of actors on the formation of social reality to be granted only on the micro-social level. There remains a significant and neglected question of whether and how actors are able to manifest their influence on the macro-social level. This point is emphasized by Nicos Mouzelis. He states that the problem cannot be solved unless we take sufficient account of the hierarchical organization of modern society and of the role that so-called "macro-actors" play [40: *20*]. The concept of "social performance", from Jeffrey Alexander, goes in a similar direction by recognizing the impact of media-amplified individual performances on a societal level [2]. The issue of individuals with influence on the entire society is quite common and legitimate in the context of historical sciences; sociology, by contrast, ignores it, one could say "out of principle". With some simplification, we can say that for many years we have had a situation where historiography tends to see social processes as the work of major historical figures and sociology, on the contrary, tends to view these processes as the manifestation of supra-individual social units, structures and powers, or social systems and their functions. Aside from the contemporary trends of historical research focusing social history or the history of everyday life, we can say that for the traditional conception of history the past primarily means a concatenation of the acts of important individuals. Conversely, sociology – and this goes for contemporary sociology too – sees in the past primarily processes of social change taking place at the level of culture, civilization and various types of human coexistence or social formation. In other words, the individualistic approach tends to dominate the historical science and, as opposed to that, the holistic

approach dominates historical sociology. Sociology lacks adequate theoretical and methodological armaments for grasping the issue of individual “macro actors”.

4. Conclusion

This project – inspired by Ralf Dahrendorf and his book *Homo sociologicus* [10] – touches on a wide range of current theoretical issues. Its main question concerns ways of opening up the conceptual apparatus of contemporary theoretical sociology to enable such insight into the human individual as may be able to overcome the reductionism that Dahrendorf analyzed in his work several decades ago. From this basic question then, several specific research questions follow:

- What heuristic importance can be attributed to the concept of social role today? Does this concept still have the ability to intellectually stimulate the sociological imagination? Is it able to adequately reflect the problem of the human individual in society in the context of contemporary sociology, or has it been superseded by other concepts and approaches? If the second hypothesis holds, what concepts are substituting the concept of social role in sociology?
- Does the concept of “homo duplex” (Durkheim and others) offer the potential for solving the problems indicated by Dahrendorf in his book *Homo sociologicus*? Is it possible to overcome the reductionism about which Dahrendorf spoke with a conception of the human individual that respects the dual nature (duplex) of the human self, or is it an outdated model which needs to be replaced with a new approach?
- Is it possible to satisfactorily clarify the historical-social process of individuation using the approach of Norbert Elias, i.e. as a process of transformation of proportions (or “balance”) between the “I”-identity and the “we”-identity, or does this developmental process require a different model of interpretation?
- How is contemporary sociology equipped for capturing in descriptive and theoretical analysis the innovative actions of human individuals, and for the overall explanation of innovative social processes? How could possible approaches be developed and elaborated?

- How is contemporary sociology equipped for capturing in descriptive and theoretical analysis the achievements in society of individuals who are able to influence the macrostructures of social reality? How is it possible to develop such an approach for the needs of historical sociology?

These questions may offer a guideline for further research which the sociologists from the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague can focus on in the years to come. The team expects these issues to awaken the interest of social scientists from different countries, which may lead to a wider debate of an interdisciplinary nature.

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