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## The individual: An unresolved issue for sociology

### El individuo: una cuestión no resuelta para la sociología

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**Abstract:** This article aims to vindicate the importance of the individual for sociology. Its main objective is to discuss and problematise the way in which various sociological perspectives (classical sociology, the action-structure debate, microsociology, methodological individualism, dispositionalist sociologies, the individualization thesis and the new institutional individualism, the sociology of social trials) have theorised the individual and the place it should occupy in sociology. We offer a critical review of each of these sociological approaches, showing some of their weaknesses and their potential to analyse current societies and the type of individual they produce. In this way, this article defends the project of a sociology of the individual that makes the individual a primary heuristic tool to understand our societies at a time when there is increasing demand for forms of social representation rooted in individual experiences.

**Key words:** sociology of the individual, individualization, dispositionalist sociology, social trials, microsociology, classical sociology, action-structure debate, methodological individualism.

**Resumen:** Este artículo tiene la finalidad de reivindicar la importancia del individuo para la sociología. Su objetivo principal es discutir y problematizar el modo en que diversas perspectivas sociológicas (sociología clásica, debate acción-estructura, la microsociología, el individualismo metodológico, las sociologías disposicionalistas, la tesis de la individualización y el nuevo individualismo institucional, la sociología de los desafíos sociales) han teorizado sobre el individuo y el lugar que debe ocupar en la sociología. Ofrecemos una revisión crítica de cada uno de dichos enfoques mostrando algunas de sus debilidades y las potencialidades que brindan para analizar las sociedades actuales y el tipo de individuo que producen. Así, el presente artículo defiende el proyecto de una sociología del individuo,

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que hace de éste una herramienta heurística de primer orden para entender nuestras sociedades en una época en la que se demandan de manera creciente formas de representación social enraizadas en las experiencias individuales.

**Palabras clave:** sociología del individuo, individualización, sociología disposicionalista, desafíos sociales, microsociología, sociología clásica, debate acción-estructura, individualismo metodológico.

## Introduction<sup>1 2</sup>

From the outset, sociology has maintained a distance from the notion of the individual, considering it a *common-sense* entity. It is perceived as the only empirical reality and immediate referent of social life, but it obscures the true heart of sociological interest: the social fact and the social structure. In fact, in its origins, sociology was constructed in opposition to the individual, thanks to Durkheim's epistemological rupture whereby the gaze shifted to the social fact. The "discovery" of social facts ("capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint") (Durkheim, 1993: 14), necessitated the emergence of a new positive science. However, this decision hindered some of the discipline's potential developments through its rejection of the individual as a legitimate object. Indeed, in conceptualizing the social fact as something "external" to the individual, Durkheim equated the social with the collective.

Certainly, Durkheim's work, as well as Marx's, can be read from approaches that are more attentive to the individual, but the problematisation of the individual and its place in social science are clearly subordinated in his writings. In the case of other classics of sociology, such as Weber and Simmel, there is undoubtedly greater attention to the individual, who takes on new profiles in the framework of comprehensive sociology and the study of socialisation processes, respectively. But also, in these cases, as in the proposals of authors such as Giddens and Bourdieu, the sociological approach to the individual has been subordinated to other questions of interest such as that which marked the action-structure debate in the case of these two sociologists.

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2 We would like to thank the reviewers, their comments helped us improve the article.

Over time, i.e., from the work of the classics to the present day, it is undeniable that sociology problematised the status of individuals and has provided them with greater space from methodological and substantive perspectives. However, in much of mainstream sociology the individual continues to be considered a problematic notion that should be shelved in favour of analyses of other, more important issues such as social class or institutions. Few works in contemporary sociology dare to openly advocate the project of a sociology of the individual, and those that do so must fend for themselves before the sociological community from the accusation of undermining this social science and mistaking it with psychology (Chalari, 2017). Nevertheless, in recent decades, new steadily-emerged sociological approaches pay greater attention to the individual, re-problematizing one of the oldest sociological issues (Lahire, 2020; Masson and Schrecker, 2017; Tarragoni, 2018; Martuccelli and Singly, 2012).

To show the plural renewal of interest in the individual in these sociologies, we will proceed in four stages. First, we will quickly outline the main ways in which “classical” sociology approached the issue of the individual. Then we will show how the problem of the individual was approached through debate between structures and action. Thirdly, we will present two major perspectives, micro-sociologies and methodological individualism, which privileged the approach to the individual as a methodological tool. Finally, in a fourth moment, our aim will be to problematize the way in which various sociological approaches (dispositionalism, the theses of individualization and the new institutional individualism, the sociology of social trials) have theorised about the individual and the place it occupies in sociology.

In order to remain within the scope of the present article, which does not aim to be comprehensive, we shall briefly examine each of the perspectives above, focusing primarily on the work of one or two authors who are particularly representative of these schools of thought, and the way in which each proposes a specific relationship between social phenomena and individuals. Through this critical review, we will seek to highlight the primary weaknesses and strengths of these sociologies for social analysis and their conceptualisation of the individual.

### **Classical sociology: the first problematisations of the individual**

Our aim in this section is none other than to schematically indicate some of the main problematisations of the individual developed by classical sociologists.

An initial major problematisation of the individual was organised in relation to the *idea* of society that can be defined as a form of representing social life as a whole, as a functional and coherent organized system whose components interact as parts of a mechanism or organism, and which become intelligible once the place they occupy within the entirety is identified.

In this representation of social life, which brings together such opposing traditions as functionalism and some currents of Marxist and critical sociology, individuals were considered constituent elements of this system that could be explained in terms of the place they occupied within it. Within the framework of this *idea of society*, the individual was conceived on the basis of the “model of the social character”, which does not refer only to the social situation of individuals, but more deeply, to the desire to make their actions and experiences intelligible in terms of their position in social structure. Thus, the individual, especially in Durkheim’s work – as well as Parsons’ (1949) proposed reading for this author–, was theorised as a reflection of the system, and social action as the other side of the social structure.

This is not to say that *Durkheimian* sociology has paid no attention to the individual, especially in its normative aspects (Durkheim, 1970), but ultimately individuals have been analysed according to the “model of the social character”, on which the *idea of society* has been constructed. In Durkheim’s work we can see the importance of this representation of social life as an integrated system based on core values that individuals had to internalize through the process of socialisation, which ensured continuity between society and the individual. Parsons (1964) also constructed his representation of social life as an integrated system: culture (values), social system (roles) and personality (actions) are intimately interwoven, establishing close ties between individual orientations and collective processes.

A second major problematisation of the individual, which can be schematically associated with Marxism also grounded its analysis in relation to the *idea of society*. The key to interpretation is in analysing the individuals’ experiences according to their position in the class structure as a means to making social life understandable. As it has so often been pointed out, two dissimilar perspectives lie at the heart of Marx’s work (Castoriadis, 1975; Gouldner, 1980).

The first is more deterministic and gives a decisive role to the contradictions between capital and labour (Marx, 1975); the second is more voluntarist and is very much present in Marx’s historical analyses of class struggle, especially in France (Marx, 1992). However, as far as individuals themselves are concerned, his analysis was always subordinated to class positions and

the productive transformations of capitalism. Without ever ignoring the subjective dimensions (as the studies on alienation attest) or the necessary work of ideological inculcation, in all cases it is in the light of the critique of the political economy of capitalism that the apprehension of individuals as supports of structures takes place. This did not preclude dynamic interpretations of domination and class struggle –especially in Gramsci’s (2013) work through the notion of hegemony– but it clearly indicates the largely subordinate role that the question of the individual played in Marxism, even when the role of great men in history was problematised (Plejánov, 2007).

In contrast to the holistic interpretations of social life that underpinned the *idea of society*, in classical sociology we witness an inflection with the works of Weber and Simmel, from which the individual is problematised in a different way. In the case of Weber, this inflection stems from his conception of comprehensive sociology and his distancing from the *idea of society*. Indeed, in his work we do not find a representation of social life as a coherent whole in which the various parts fulfil a function for the maintenance of the system. On the contrary, in Weber’s writings there is a proliferation of tensions between the parts that compose social life, as evinced in his analyses of the different spheres of experience, which are marked by internal conflicts and tension between them as a consequence of their different legalities (Weber, 1983 and 1944).

Added to this is Weber’s emphasis on the principle of heterogony of ends or the unintended consequences of action, based on which it is implausible to conceive of society as a functional and coherent whole. These tensions are also reflected in social actions, the focus of his comprehensive sociology. It is within this framework that the individual takes on greater prominence, since, as he understands it, sociology cannot limit itself to the study of external social facts but must attend to the motives of individuals that give rise to social actions.

Let us recall in this respect that for Weber (1944: 6) social action is that action to which individuals attach a subjective meaning and provided that it refers to the conduct of other individuals. This social action takes on different profiles in real life, which Weber (1944: 20) redirects to four ideal types (rational action according to ends, rational action according to values, traditional action and affective action). Tensions with respect to these types of social action arise insofar as individuals have to manage and hierarchise them, as Weber makes it clear in his analyses of the conflict between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility (Weber, 2007), and in his

writings on the “struggle of the gods” between which the modern individual must choose (Weber, 1988).

Finally, in this presentation of the problematisation of the individual in classical sociology, which is obviously not exhaustive, Simmel’s work deserves particular attention. Simmel (2007) rejects a global conception of society in favour of a dynamic and reciprocal conception of socialisation between individuals. Consisting of multiple processes, socialisation is endlessly made and unmade through a permanent flux and effervescence that crystallises in certain social forms. The forms (which other schools from other coordinates call institutions) are consolidations –enduring frameworks and autonomous figures– that enable reciprocal actions between individuals. Society unravels as a total concept for the benefit of a whole series of durable or ephemeral forms of socialisation, more or less antagonistic to each other. For Simmel, society is an overly blunt concept that errs in producing a totalising representation of social life, silencing the actual dynamics of social relations. What defines sociology is the study of the ways in which individuals are in reciprocity of action and constitute a permanent or transient unity through various forms of socialisation.

Since society renews itself through the action of its individuals, the need arises to study the processes occurring in them. Even if Simmel affirms the possibility of studying social forms independently from the psychic states of individuals, he never ceases studying them in relation to particular configurations of different social circles. In modern societies, the individual is increasingly dependent on the actions of an ever-growing number of actors and, at the same time, increasingly independent of each particular individual. This tension, for Simmel (1986), is at the basis of the opposition between the objective and the subjective, and of the specific tragedy of modern culture.

Of course, these rapid presentations do not do justice to the diversity of perspectives from which classical sociology, including Parsons, approached the problem of the individual. Our aim is only to highlight how, through these theorisations, a dominant type of problematisation of the question of the individual crystallised. Through different modalities, the individual was apprehended from the theory of society, which shows the central analytical importance given to socialisation, social positions, differentiation, coercions and social dominations. It is against this background, taking up and criticising these works, that one is able to read another major sociological problematisation of the individual, which was organised through the articulation between structures and action.

## The individual and the action-structure debate

Although in their theoretical perspectives classical sociologists sought to articulate theories of society and individual experiences, it is not too much to say that they tended *in fine* to privilege the study of social systems and structures over individuals. In general, they tried to draw out the consequences of social changes at the level of individuals.

In deep dialogue with the previous sociological tradition, the individual has been the subject of a new problematisation since 1970. Without ignoring the importance of socialisation or social positions, an attempt was made to provide a more dynamic interpretation of the practices or agencies of individuals. Of the disparate group of authors who worked in this direction, for reasons of space we shall confine ourselves to the works of Giddens and Bourdieu.

In Giddens' problematisation of the individual, we find the will to overcome both the dualism of objectivism and subjectivism and the opposition between microsociology and macrosociology (Giddens, 1984). In order to achieve this, he progressively explored the ways in which social systems link time and space, presence/absence (Giddens, 1976), interactions in contexts of co-presence and the coordination of behaviours at a distance (Giddens, 1979).

Giddens proposes a new articulation between agency and structure through a highly dynamic and recursive view of social life. In structuration theory, all the elements of society are constituted through social practices, which places human agency at the centre of his studies. The duality of the structural designates the set of rules and resources that are part of the constitution of practices and at the same time they only exist when practices are generated. Structures are both conditions and outcomes of social practices executed in space and time. If Giddens makes distinctions according to the differential embeddedness of structures, he breaks with the idea of the structural as something external to agency. His conception of agency stresses the constant transformative capacity of individuals.

If individuals are never passive or mere supports of structures, they possess different kinds of consciousness with respect to their practices and routines. Without reducing social action to intentionality, Giddens points out that all individuals develop a reflexivity from which they monitor their behaviour. If the notion of habitus aims to provide, at least theoretically, a durable answer to the adjustment between structures and practices, Giddens' work does not cease to address the problematic character of the coordination



of actions in space and time. Certainly, the influence of past routines on practices is not negligible, but due to the profoundly dynamic character of social life, there is no absolute guarantee as to the future reproduction of social practices.

Giddens' particular understanding of the notion of structure as rules and resources that simultaneously and recursively emerge and inform actions is analogous to the relationship between grammar and speech. In both cases, rules only exist through practices (action, speech) and at the same time, practices (speech, action) are only possible because of the existence of rules. If the duality of the structural, as pointed out, runs the double risk of becoming one-dimensional (either at the level of agency, or from the structural properties given the recursive character of social life) (Archer, 1989: 77), what we are interested in highlighting is the fact that in structuration theory the problem of the individual is approached from the question of agency, and the articulation between structures and action.

In a similar way to Giddens, Bourdieu approaches the individual in the framework of the structure-action debate with a proposal to overcome, through his theory of social practices, both structuralist objectivism and individualist subjectivism. The result in terms of the analytical equidistance achieved is the subject of much debate. As far as the problem of the individual per se is concerned, his concept of habitus seeks to overcome the classical dichotomy between society and the individual, the habitus being the way in which social life is incorporated into the individual. It is on the basis of this concept, and that of the field as an external structure, that Bourdieu approaches the individual. In other words, the action of individuals is explained on the basis of the two ways in which the social structure manifests itself —fields and *habitus*— between which there is an adjustment or ontological complicity, as this system of dispositions is objectively adapted to the state of the field in which it originated.

Indebted to a strong *idea of society*, Bourdieu's theorization explains individuals' actions on the basis of the notion that there is a "relation between social positions (a relational concept), dispositions (or habitus), and stances ("position-taking"), that is, the "choices" made by the social agents in the most diverse domains of practice, food or sport, music or politics, and so forth" (Bourdieu, 1994: 14). In the light of his theory, Bourdieu presents habitus as a set of transferable dispositions that constitute a system, thus conceiving the individual as homogeneous and not a plural actor.

Certainly, the richness of Bourdieu's work is such that we can find in it passages in which the *idea of society* is not so evident and in which greater

tensions and mismatches can be appreciated with regard to the relationship between the spaces of positions, dispositions and position-taking, with regard to a less compact and unitary conception of the habitus, or with regard to the adjustment between the habitus and the field. Let us recall in this regard his concept of *hysteresis of the habitus* with which Bourdieu refers to the discordances and mismatches between dispositions embodied in the past and the current situation of the field (Bourdieu, 1979: 158, 231; 1980: 104; 1984: 135).

However, these passages are peripheral with respect to the “hard core” of his work, wherein the influence of the *idea of society* was evident until his last books, in which an inflection in his theory can be observed, as is especially the case with *Pascalian Meditations*. There, Bourdieu (1997) distances himself much more from the *idea of society*, placing greater emphasis “mismatches, discordances and misfirings” between dispositions and positions; between habitus and objective conditions; and referring to habitus as not necessarily adapted or coherent. These considerations give rise to a more nuanced approach which could lay the foundations of a sociology that considers individuals beyond the framework of the *idea of society* and the “model of the social character”. However, as a result of the influence that these have exerted on the Bourdieu’s school of thought, the latter has not engaged in, and has strongly criticized, the development of the sociology of the individual (Pinto, 2009).

The works of Bourdieu and Giddens have many nuances and have been the subject of diverse interpretations, but as far as the study of the individual is concerned, there is something in common between them. Unlike the classics, but in conversation with them, the authors above proposed a new problematisation of the individual around different readings of the link between structures and action.

### **Sociology and the individual as a methodological tool**

Preceding, in concurrence with and postponing the previous problematisation, the individual has also been the subject of another major approach from methodological considerations. In the two perspectives that we will present, the individual is never really studied as such, as their approach is either subordinated to interactions or to the aggregation of individual behaviours.

*Micro-sociologies: the individual as a precipitate of situations of interaction*

Strongly inspired by Simmel's work, a disparate group of authors questioned the characteristic interest in social structures on the part of macro-sociologies, as they did not allow for the explanation of individuals' experiences in everyday interactions. This was the main criticism and stance of the so-called micro-sociologies that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the United States, with the goal of examining an aspect of social life that had hitherto received little attention in sociology: interaction.

Goffman has unquestionably contributed the most to this school of thought in sociology. Extending the studies by Mead, Goffman posited that individuals maintained a separation from roles, thus creating individual mediation between roles and actions. This suggested that in contrast to the thesis of hegemonic classical sociology, social interaction was not dependent on the social structure: "the dependency of interactional activity on matters outside the interaction –a fact characteristically neglected by those of us who focus on face-to-face dealings– doesn't in itself imply dependency on social structures" (Goffman, 1983: 12).

By focusing on the situation, micro-sociologies have convincingly described how individuals may distance themselves from their roles and class positions according to the constraints and opportunities that the situation imposes. Social action cannot be explained solely on the basis of class values, norms or *habitus* that individuals have internalized, because on many occasions the situation leads individuals to behave differently and sometimes contrary to the dictates of their socialisation.

From different assumptions, it is also possible to note the priority of methodological aspects over the study of the individual as such, both in phenomenology and in ethnomethodology. If the ways in which actors define situations are addressed, in both cases attention is paid to shared meanings. Without ignoring the importance of interactions, the analyses privilege consciousness and subjectivity over intersubjectivity. In social phenomenology, the broad categories of action are drawn from the structure of human consciousness (thus distinguishing between directly or indirectly perceived facts; between a world of successors or predecessors) (Schutz, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

In ethnomethodology, with even greater force, the aim is to elucidate through different ethno-methods (experimental, conversational, descriptive) the set of meanings taken for granted in which individuals bathe and which make possible the production and reproduction of social

life (Garfinkel, 1967). Phenomenology privileges human consciousness and its intentionality; ethnomethodologists scrutinise the manifestations of subjectivity in social behaviour. But in both cases, the individual is only a methodological tool.

This shift to the level of micro-sociology and interaction has entailed a considerable gain for the practice of sociology, facilitating greater space for individuals; albeit this is still limited since sociological interest in individuals remains reduced to a methodological rather than a substantive question. As Collins (2004: 3) has indicated: “the centre of micro-sociological explanation is not the individual but the situation”. Analysis is focused on situations, from which “we can derive almost everything that we want to know about individuals, as a moving precipitate across situations” (Collins, 2004: 4).

However, the degree of inquiry into individuals is based on the fact that the situation derives not only from the analysis of the latter, but also from the analytical approach employed to describe the former. This can be more clearly stated using the distinction that Goffman draws between “two fundamental forms of identification: the *categoric* kind involving placing that other in one or more social categories, and the *individual* kind, whereby the subject under observation is locked to a uniquely distinguishing identity through appearance, tone of voice, mention of name or other person-differentiating device” (Goffman, 1983: 3). In his work, Goffman tends to privilege “categoric forms” over “individual forms”, and thus observation of interactions is often limited to the individuals’ outward manifestations, paying little attention to how individuals experience these interactions internally. Consequently, despite Goffmanian sociology makes the level of interaction a legitimate space for sociology, it does not evidence any real interest in individuals.

More recently, Collins has revisited the place occupied by the individual in microsociology: “is there any place left for the individual? It might seem that the theory fails to do justice to individuals, and especially to their autonomy, idiosyncrasy, and apartness” (Collins, 2004: 345). The way in which Collins addresses this question is very significant. He seeks to account for the types of (introvert) individuals that challenge the premises of his theory, according to which humans seek the emotional energy generated by the solidarity triggered by social interaction. Collins thus states that his interaction ritual theory “must show not only that there is a place for individuals in its conceptual universe, but it must set forth the social conditions under which the various forms of individuality, and ideologies about individuality, occur” (Collins, 2004: 346).

The reason for his foray into the terrain of the individual is an attempt to critically analyse the ideology of individuality, the idealized vision of an individual who passes through various situations acting in the same way, as a “unique” individual who remains unaltered by them. In contrast, Collins views the individual as a precipitate of interactional situations: “In a strong sense, the individual is the interaction ritual chain” (Collins, 2004: 5). Thus, with the situation rather than the individual taken as the starting point, (“not men and their moments, but moments and their men” as Goffman noted), in Collins’s radical microsociology it is interactions that shape individuals: “Not individuals and their interactions, but interactions and their individuals”.

From a sociological perspective, it is of course difficult not to agree with Collins when he observes that the singularity of individuals is not due to a purportedly immutable essence. However, one does not have to agree with him when he states, “individuals are unique to just the extent that their pathways through interactional chains, their mix of situations across time, differ from other persons’ pathways” (Collins, 2004: 4). Although it is indisputable that everyday interactions do indeed shape individuals, their uniqueness is also the result —as we shall see in the last section— of how they address social trials imposed by the macrostructure. This thus gives rise to the need to construct a sociology of the individual to explain these structural trials, which can be captured not by the postulates of microsociology but by a macro-sociological approach based on the individuals’ experiences. We shall devote the final part of this paper to this question.

### *Methodological individualism: the individual and the aggregate sum of courses of action*

As with micro-sociologies, it is also the need to clarify the link between micro and macro which has prompted advocates of methodological individualism to see individuals as a central methodological tool to explain social life. In contrast with holistic macro-sociologies, methodological individualism is based on “the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are in principle explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals and beliefs” (Elster, 1982: 453).

According to the original premises of this approach, the individual consciously chooses courses of action based on instrumental rationality. This conception of individual action has been used to link methodological individualism and the theory of rational choice, or more generally, the theory

of rational action. According to this theory, individuals behave as rational actors, calculating costs and benefits when deciding how to achieve their goals.

An excellent example of this type of sociology that examines how individuals' courses of action generate macrosocial effects is provided by Goldthorpe (2007). In contrast to approaches that seek to explain the class differentials in educational attainment based on socialisation, *habitus* or class subcultures, Goldthorpe argues that the persistence of these social regularities is the result of the action of individuals. His explanation focuses on individuals' choices and the so-called "secondary effects", to use Boudon's terminology (1973). The "primary effects", in which the relationship between social class and academic capacity can be observed, remain important, but the true heart of explanatory interest resides in the "secondary effects", those that are manifested in individuals' rational choices over the course of their school trajectories, such as continuing or not to study. In most cases it is these individual's rational choices that exert an effect on the class differentials in educational attainment.

As with the micro-sociologies, methodological individualism creates a greater space for the individual, not as an object of interest in itself, but rather as a result of what is considered a necessary epistemological orientation. Although explanatory privilege is located at on the individual level, analytical primacy is located at the aggregate level, and this has important consequences for the status of the individual in this theory. Given that rational choice theory seeks to clarify the relationship between micro and macro, the way in which individual actions generate macrosocial phenomena, this implies that "no more descriptive detail or theoretical understanding is sought at the individual level than is called for by efforts to this end" (Goldthorpe, 2007: 125). In other words, rational choice theory refuses to analyse the individual in depth because its true interest is in the macro level. However, this is not considered a compromise or a weakness of the theory, but rather the contrary, because as observed by Stinchcombe (1991: 368) and seconded by Goldthorpe (2007: 125), from the standpoint of an explanation, the mechanisms that serve to explain macro regularities should not involve "complex investigations" at a lower or psychological level. This level of depth is unnecessary from the perspective of the rational choice theory, because although explanatory primacy is located at individual level, analytical primacy is located at aggregate level (Lindenberg, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2007).

It is methodological individualism's lack of interest in achieving greater analytical depth regarding the individual that limits its approach. Although this sociological approach does not rely solely on rational action theory,

intentional action nevertheless tends to be privileged.<sup>3</sup> The fundamental notion is that individuals pursue their interests, but such interests are often assumed by analysts as if these were abstract individuals rather than singular people, which is reflected in a conceptualization of the same as unitary and coherent individuals. Despite proposals such as those presented by Elster (1986), which refer to a “multiple self”, the truth is that methodological individualism needs to overcome a vision of the individual that is generally overly unitary and coherent. Because of contemporary social transformations, individuals in current society present many tensions and contradictions, and this is one of the reasons why there is an increasingly pressing need to construct a sociology of the individual.

These tensions and contradictions are often the product of diverse contradictory dispositions that the individual unconsciously internalizes via socialisation, and to which methodological individualism pays insufficient attention because it privileges rational action. We refer here to the assimilation of such dispositions at infra-conscious level, which is the focus of interest of dispositionalist sociologies. In the next section, we shall conduct a critical examination of this approach, which has become one of the most consistent and productive sociological perspectives aimed at constructing a sociology at the scale of the individual.

### **New problematisations of the sociologies of the individual**

If the problematisation of the individual within the framework of the structure-action debate remains very significant in contemporary sociology, as do approaches of microsociologies or methodological individualism, other perspectives have gradually asserted themselves, each one of them proposing a new approach to the individual question. These are interpretations that seek to account for various processes of social change that took place as part of advanced modernity such as deinstitutionalization, individualization of social life, multiplication of inequalities and spheres of socialisation, and

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3 The criticisms levelled against methodological individualism and its privileging of rational action have prompted its advocates to pay more attention to other types of rationality. Hence, Boudon has even argued that the ultimate goal is to show the reasons, the good reasons (*les bonnes raisons*), that individuals have to do what they do (Boudon, 2003). An important consequence of this is that the actor's rationality, transformed into a plurality of reasons that an individual can invoke to explain an action, not only anchors sociological analysis to the level of the individual but also renders methodological individualism a variant of comprehensive sociology.

growing societal singularization, and which call into question the *idea of society* as an integrated system. For reasons of space, we will focus on three major sociological approaches.

*Dispositionalist sociology: the individual as palimpsest of dispositions*

It is important to note that Bourdieu's work has inspired the development of the sociology of the individual. As noted at the end of the second section, although this new way of practicing sociology has been criticized by some representatives of the Bourdieusian school (Pinto, 2009), critical reception of the sociology developed by Bourdieu has served both Lahire (2001 and 2020) and Kaufmann (2001) to construct a sociology of the individual. Thus, the genesis of Lahire's proposals can be located in a critique of the way in which individuals incorporate dispositions. Lahire extends the socialisation processes that require study without privileging those of social class, as in the case of Bourdieu. Sociology must explain differences in socialisation as the result, always individual, of various forms of socialisation (family, school, friends, cultural institutions, etc.).

This implies showing the tensions between an individual's constitutive dispositions, due to their diversity and sometimes their contradictions, when they are transformed into actions (Lahire 2001). The individual is defined by the complexity of his or her socialization and the diversity of his or her practices, and it is based on these, at this scale as Lahire says, that social behaviour and social phenomena should be explained (Lahire, 2013: 113). Due to the differentiation of the social world, the individual is plural, a palimpsest of diverse and contradictory dispositions in mutual tension, activating and reactivating according to context and, returning to Kaufmann's (2001) proposals, without evidencing the existence of a control centre.

Lahire advocates an inextricably *dispositionalist* and *contextual* sociology to address an individual's multiple assimilation of the social structure, together with the plurality of contexts of action. This all makes the adjustment of the action to the social structure less plausible, as opposed to the *idea of society* that we saw in the first section. From this point onwards, the ontological complicity between *habitus* and field becomes more problematic, because what we find contrarily —so frequently that they cannot be dismissed as mere “anomalies”— are individuals with a multiplicity of dispositions without the contexts needed to update them or individuals devoid of the dispositions necessary to deal with situations that are more or less inevitable in their lives (Lahire, 2001: 149).



Faced with these “situations of disadjustment”, which are the result of finding a *multi-socialised* and *multi-determined* individual, it becomes necessary to construct “a *sociology at the scale of the individual* to analyse social reality that takes into account its individualized, incorporated, internalized form; a sociology that asks how external diversity is embodied, how different and sometimes contradictory socialising experiences can (co)inhabit (in) the same body, how such experiences are instilled more or less durably in each body and how they intervene at different moments in the social life or biography of an individual” (Lahire, 2013: 113).

Dispositionalism opens a wide horizon of research on the *individualized social order*. However, one of the main difficulties with this sociological approach, which curiously stems from its strength, is the risk of reducing sociological analysis to the level of the individual actor, revealing the limitations of a sociology of the individual in strict sense. All things considered, it is no great novelty to state that in a highly differentiated society, individuals are plural and produced by secondary socialisations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Although dispositionalist sociology studies have the undeniable merit of renovating the explanation of certain social phenomena, the act of focusing analysis on plural socialisations clearly is at risk of *circumscribing sociology solely to personal experiences*. In essence, dispositionalist sociology is produced at the level of —or even exclusively around— individuals rather than at the scale of individuals. Although this approach opens the door to a series of new explanations that enrich sociology, this is usually at the expense of a macro-sociological perspective and to the benefit of a close study of the processes involved in cultural assimilation and transmission. Social structures are never ignored, but are eventually addressed almost exclusively from often infra-consciously assimilated dispositions (Kaufmann, 2007). This poses the very real risk of neglecting macro-sociological issues and challenges. Hence, the need to construct —as we attempt to do in the latter part of this paper— a sociology based on individuals’ experiences that shows the macrostructural trials that society presents, and which individuals must face.

### *The thesis of individualization: the individual as product of a new institutional individualism*

Another trend in sociology that shows considerable interest in individuals is what has come to be called the thesis of individualization. Underlying this notion is the idea that the individual should receive greater attention

because of observable changes at the level of institutions. Although the relationship is less direct, while dispositionalism proposes a sociology of the individual based on a critical reading of Bourdieu's work, the thesis of individualization is presented, at least in part, as a revised version of Parsons' institutional individualism (Beck and Willms, 2003). Since institutions can no longer harmoniously transmit rules for action, or they transmit more open prescriptions, they invoke —and enjoy— individuals to give meaning to their practices, thanks especially to the expansion of reflexivity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Dubet, 2002; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2001).

Consequently, sociology should turn its attention to individuals, a difficult task according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 15) because, given its “congenital bias”, practically the entire discipline is based on a critique of individuality and the individual as being no more than an illusion. Nevertheless, according to these authors, the fact that the development of individualization ushers in a new institutional balance in the relationship between society and individual renders it increasingly necessary that sociology turn its attention to the individual. Institutions in second modernity (work, employment, school, the family, etc.) are oriented more towards the individual than towards the group, which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim believe justifies a sociological approach that addresses institutional individualism. Individuals are encouraged by institutions to assume responsibility for themselves, “to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xxii; Bauman, 2000: 38).<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on structuration theory, Giddens (1990 and 1991) proposed a renewed analysis of late modernity and globalisation around a specific historical diagnosis of the process of individualization. In modern society the problem of integration can no longer be solved at the level of face-to-face interactions. The distancing of space-time becomes decisive with the new means of communication, the increased ability to travel and the massive recourse to abstract systems. The link between behaviours and physical inscription is weakened (what occurs in a place is less and less determined exclusively by such occurrence in such place), which reinforces the need for a permanent reflexivity of behaviours.

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4 Attention is always focused on the institutional change that has arisen with the advent of second or late modernity. In this context, uncertainty, risks, transformations in identity, urban and family metamorphoses and changes in consumption and dietary practices are all viewed as key elements of a historical context specific to a phase in modernity (Lasch, 1979; Ehrenberg, 1998; Singly, 2003; Bajoit, 2003).

However, to what extent are individuals the focus of interest of the thesis of individualization and the new institutional individualism and what place do these occupy in the analysis? The first thing to note is that in sharp contrast to the strategy of dispositionalist sociology outlined in the previous subsection, macro-sociological analysis is more important in this approach than micro-sociological observations, and furthermore, macro-sociological and structural interpretation is often strongly independent from actors' experiences.

Sociological interest in the individual is restricted to the study, at the scale and also the level of the individual, of the consequences of social and institutional change. Although the personal dimensions of the individual are addressed (from intimacy to sexuality, from the demands of continuous education to diverse professional experiences), many studies based on the thesis of individualization and the new institutional individualism—especially the most important works by Beck, Giddens and Bauman that may at times centre on individuals—focus primarily on transformations in institutional prescriptions as structures for individualization. This process is visible, for example in the consequences that the new social prescriptions have for the health of individuals. Increasingly, responsibility is placed on individuals for their own bodies, generating an unprecedented anxiety about appearance that has given rise to the emergence or consolidation of new somatic illnesses such as bulimia and anorexia (Giddens, 1992; Rose, 1990; Turner, 1984).

It is also important to note that Beck has never really put his idea—that social changes resulting from second modernity are more visible in personal biographies than in groups—into practice in his work. The reason for this is simply that, despite what the notion of 'individualization' might suggest, his intellectual project lacks any sensitivity towards the singularity of individuals or, most notably, towards the work that individuals actually do. Although the theories of Beck, Giddens or Bauman differ in their conceptions of the risks or the characterisation of the epoch (second modernity, Late Modern Age or postmodernity) as far as the analysis of individual singularities is concerned, the perspectives are similar: individuals are studied primarily from the perspective of institutional prescriptions. In fact, when examining through empirical research the work that individuals actually do, the difficulties of applying the institutional individualism thesis beyond the United States and Europe become increasingly apparent (Araujo, 2021).

However, it is not impossible to grant a greater analytic function to the work of individuals within the framework of the new institutional individualism, as evidenced by the studies inspired by Foucault's (2004) work on biopower. Despite evident theoretical disagreements, one idea common to works on biopower and the thesis of individualization is that in contemporary society, the individual is invoked—and produced—in a particular manner by a series of social institutions that oblige the development of a new kind of personal biography or work.

In a critical return to Foucault, Memmi (2003) studied the new governmentality in contemporary societies, focusing her attention on individuals and basing her research on interviews and observations mainly conducted during medical consultations on questions related to birth, abortion, or the morning-after pill. Her book depicts a new model of government of social behaviour: control is not exercised more on the masses or populations, but on individuals, because it is these who are invoked and must personally give their formal consent to institutional rules. In this respect, Memmi's book is an advance insofar as it represents a more serious examination of the work that actors really do in the face of institutional control. Nevertheless, works such as that by Memmi share the same space of analysis as that of the theorists of individualization: it is changed at the level of institutions (or in the technologies of the production of the self) and in the ways these invoke or discipline individuals that are at the heart of this type of study. In essence, the theory of individualization is more an extension of classical sociology and the lack of interest of the latter in individual actors than a shift in the gaze towards and from them.

### *The sociology of social trials: structural mapping and the work of individuals*

As seen in the first section, Weber's comprehensive sociology opens up a broad horizon of analysis of the work that individual must do to manage the different logics of action. This is the purpose of Dubet's (1994) sociology of experience, understanding experience as the permanent trial that individuals have to face, consisting of combining and articulating three major logics of action (integration, strategy, subjectivation). In other words, individuals must face the search for their belonging to a community, the defence of their interests by competing in markets, and the development of critical activity.

For the sociology of experience, the heterogeneity of social life can no longer be captured by the categories of the *idea of society*. Since social action no longer has a unity, it is necessary to analyse social experience. In

short, for Dubet, individuals must face a single trial, articulating the three logics of action outlined above. In contrast to this, we will now present a final perspective on the sociology of the individual, the sociology of social trials, which focuses on how individuals must cope with a set of trials that are structurally produced by societies.

We will be presenting this last perspective in greater detail as it involves a proposal for overcoming some of the weaknesses of the sociological approaches we have analysed thus far. For this perspective, the centrality of the individual in contemporary sociology stems from a profound socio-historical transformation (Corcuff *et al.*, 2010: 18). According to this hypothesis, the increasing interest in the individual evidences above all a profound transformation in the social sensitivity of our contemporaries. Personal life has increasingly become the great normative horizon of societies, while at the same time a vast series of diverse structural processes of singularization have emerged (in production, consumption, the new ICTs, social ties, etc.), and these present sociology with the challenge of explaining social phenomena based on personal experiences. In this context, the individual acquires a new analytical function: it is fruitful to account for the principal social changes and structural trials from a stance whose horizon is the individuals' experiences.

One of the first versions of this sociological approach is located in the theoretical reflections —perhaps more than in the empirical studies— of Wright Mills, who in *The sociological imagination* defines this imagination as the effort “to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills, 1959: 5). This implies establishing a relationship between public debate and the personal problems of individuals. According to Wright Mills, the central issue is to account for the historical and social processes that construct individuals, and the ways that the latter, at least in principle, face the trials of the societies in which they live. Wright Mills's work paved the way for sociological imagination using an analysis of the relationship between personal problems and the social structures that create and amplify them, for which the notion of social trial can become a theoretical tool.

The sociology of social trials proposes shifting the centre of gravity of sociological analysis from the *idea of society* to the process of individuation, as a strategy to explain the relationship between history and structure, on the one hand, and biographies and experiences on the other. What is proposed is the study of individuation by means of social trials, understanding individuation as a particular approach that interrogates the type of individual

structurally created by a society at a given historical moment. Social trials are historical challenges, socially produced, culturally represented and unevenly distributed, which individuals are obliged to face within a structural process of individuation (Martuccelli, 2006; Martuccelli and Santiago, 2017).

From an analytical perspective, social trials are inseparable from a narrative dimension: it is not so much that actors face “a” decisive moment (as was the case in the ancient epic visions) as a series of experiences that put them to the test. Describing the social trials thus implies a recourse to a particular narrative structure, which is fundamental to modernity (Berman, 1982), in which life itself comprises a continuous series of trials, as a permanent adventure. Social trials are not events through which actors read their lives as being subject to a series of progressive biographical phenomena (as in the life course perspective).

The sociology of social trials proposes a different perspective. Personal trajectories are not constructed through the life courses approach and its progressive biographical temporalities, but through the synergy of various trials; for example, economic difficulties or unemployment can exert well-known effects on marital stability. Social trials do not designate just any type of test, event, or experiential problem; rather, the aim is to circumscribe a set of a limited number of social trials considered particularly significant for a specific historical and social context. Depending on the society, sometimes it will be necessary to prioritize trials of an institutional nature (school, work, family) and, at other times, trials relative to social bonds (relationship to groups, to norms or to social management of time); but in all cases, these social trials will have a distinct form specific to each society.<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, describing the main set of social trials is equivalent to giving a structural description of a historical society at the scale of individuals. At its core, it involves a recognition of the analytical importance of the fact that individuals are compelled, for structural reasons, to face a series of structural trials (school, work, relational, etc.) that give rise to difficult episodes that tend to be experienced as being irreducibly personal in their consequences (as is evidenced by school failure). The social trials are linked to the generalization of assessment processes that are different in nature; some are heavily formalized (school or work), others are less so (urban or family), and still others may not be formalized at all (intersubjective or existential

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5 Only by means of empirical study is it possible to explain the specific and distinctive form that social trials take in each society (Martuccelli, 2006; Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012; Santiago, 2015). Note that this analytical approach has been implemented in empirical studies in areas such as health, education, depression, urban discrimination and young people’s experiences.

relationships). However, in all cases, measured against each and every one of these social trials, actors can “pass” or “fail”, “win” or “lose”.

In contrast to the philosophy underlying the classical *idea of society*, society here is interpreted as a factory for the structural production of individuals through a set of common trials. Mapping society using a standardized series of significant structural trials thus makes it possible to describe a historical society at the scale of individuals. This is the most important characteristic of the notion of social trials. This analytical strategy differs from perspectives that examine social structures to infer consequences at the level of individual experiences in a “deductive” or “top-down” manner. It also differs from studies that give priority to the level of interactions or socialisations.

This sociology of social trials has a different goal: to propose a problematization of social structures at the scale —and from the experiences— of individuals. It is based on actors’ experiences that an explanation can be given of a society’s most significant structural and historical trials. The analysis work is thus two-fold. On the one hand, individual experiences are examined to infer a representation of the major structural trials of the processes of individuation present in a society. Using frequently qualitative methods, a macrosociological vision is thus obtained at the scale of individuals that is different from that proposed, for example, by the theory of social systems, social classes or the individualization thesis. On the other hand, the individual constitutes a privileged object of sociological analysis since this perspective facilitates singularized studies of the effective ways that actors face the various social trials, thus enabling the implementation of an individualized sociology.

This structural mapping must be used to explain the work that actors really do. This requires an analysis of social positions through highly detailed descriptions of the personalized social ecologies from which individuals face social trials and the differentials in margins of action that such ecologies confer. Many other factors must be added to the customary trio (employment, income, education), including social capital, the material and symbolic supports, social stereotype differentials, the capacity to access and control dominant cultural codes, the importance of places of residence (neighbourhoods), being a home owner or not, and the effects exerted by personal and family life (separations, deaths, etc.) on social trajectories. These are all indispensable elements of the work individuals carry out on themselves and their surroundings (Martuccelli, 2006; Santiago, 2021).

This sociological perspective therefore proposes a heuristic relationship between personal experiences and structural phenomena. Individuals and society are studied and described from an intermediate space between biography and history, through a sociology of social trials. It is never at the level of the actor –of an actor’s interactions, dispositions or identities– that the analysis is conducted. It is a question of understanding the structural social trials that are constructed analytically from the experiences of individuals. The individual becomes a heuristic tool for sociological analysis.

By adopting this stance, the sociology of trials mitigates several of the problems that we have underlined in this paper. Nevertheless, it opens the question as to the relevancy and comprehensiveness of the “meso” level analysis of social trials when characterizing the relationship between the work of structures and that of the individuals.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article we have analysed how various sociological perspectives have theorised the individual and the place it should occupy in sociology. As it could not be otherwise, this critical review has not aimed to be exhaustive and has been limited to certain sociological approaches that are particularly relevant for our purpose.

Interest in the individual has always been present in sociology, but up to very recently it was subordinated to various problems that have marked the evolution of sociological thought. Thus, in Durkheim’s work, and in Marx’s with different nuances, their approaches to the individual are framed, in accordance with a holistic conception of social life, within the *idea of society* from which the “model of the social character” is constructed. The works of Weber and Simmel bring about a turning point by distancing themselves from the *idea of society* and by orienting themselves towards the individual on the basis of comprehensive sociology and the sociology of forms of socialisation, respectively. But the interest in the individual is likewise subordinated to their theory of society.

The dichotomies to which classical sociology gave rise were the fuse for new theorisations which, from the 1970s onwards, set out to overcome debates such as the structure-action debate. In this framework, we must contextualise the works of Giddens and Bourdieu, for whom, with different nuances, individuals were regarded as agents who were bearers of structures with a greater or lesser capacity for action. Without detracting from the theoretical importance acquired by this problematisation of the link between



structures and action, neither the theory of structuration nor the theory of practice gave rise to a sociology of the individual, although the work of both Giddens and Bourdieu has stimulated some of the current sociologies of the individual.

The individual has also been the subject of a number of perspectives which have approached it above all as a methodological tool. We have seen how both micro-sociologies and methodological individualism started from the individual in order to account for the situation or social regularities resulting from the aggregate sum of the courses of action. Without denying the contributions of these sociological approaches to the knowledge of social life, we consider that, in the current state of sociology, it is insufficient merely to concede more space to the individual as a result of an epistemological and methodological shift.

As a consequence of the profound social change experienced in recent decades, sociology has to take a greater substantive interest in individuals. The current state of the process of individuation calls into question the manner of analytically understanding the relationship between society and the individual and entails a deep transformation of the sensibility of the contemporary individual. Therefore, it is necessary to pay greater attention to individuals in sociological analysis, as other sociological perspectives such as dispositionalism and the new institutional individualism are doing. These sociologies are not exempt from problems that pose different risks.

On the one hand, there is the risk that sociology focuses on the individual by adopting a micro approach that renders the individual and only the individual the true object of sociological analysis. On the other hand, there is the risk of an interest in individuals falling within the framework of a macrosociology that essentially pays little heed to individuals, focusing instead on institutions (social, cultural or economic). These problems are partially overcome through a sociology of social trials, which seeks to understand major social changes and structural trials from individual experiences, even though this perspective does not clearly address the nature of the relationship between these two dimensions.

As seen in this article, the sociological study of the individual includes a variety of approaches and proposes a set of diverse lines of enquiry rather than a cohesive body of theories and unified propositions. However, beyond these differences, the most interesting aspect of the so-called sociologies of the individual per se is that these perspectives argue that the individual is an indispensable avenue for understanding contemporary societies. Individuals have acquired growing importance in the social sciences in a

period in which there is a increased demand for forms of social representation that are related to individual experiences.

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