

# From the Editors

AGATA DZIUBAN

PAWEŁ TOMANEK

## Cultural Reflexivity in Poland and Beyond – Introduction

The notion of reflexivity has been prominent in social science at least since the 1970s and 1980s, when it was brought to the foreground with the ‘reflexive turn’ in anthropology (Asad 1973; Clifford, Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Rabinow 1977). In sociology the surge of theoretical and empirical interest in reflexivity came in the 1990s, when two influential works were published – *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), and *Reflexive Modernization* by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994). Since then, the number of works on reflexivity has been growing steadily\*. With such proliferation, it is easy to understand that the term itself has acquired multiple meanings and to some extent has become one of the ‘token terms’ in social science – widely used, but often unspecified or under-theorised. Without going into too much detail, we can distinguish between at least three principal aspects or dimensions in which reflexivity has been discussed in contemporary social science.

**Reflexivity as a general feature of human practice.** From this point of view, reflexivity is seen as inherent in human cognitive processes and, consequently, in all forms of practice involving a cognitive dimension (which virtually means human practice *in toto*). Those who regard human beings as reflexive creatures argue that hardly any form of behaviour is merely ‘habitual’ or ‘culturally determined’; instead, human actions are reflexively monitored at the level of ‘practical consciousness’ (Giddens 1984: xxiii; 1991:

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\* For example, a query in Reuter’s Web of Science database on the topic ‘reflexivity’ in social-scientific publications showed no more than 5 records yearly before 1992, 10 in 1992-94, 33 in 2000, 147 in 2010 and as many as 375 in 2016. The query was run on November 20th 2017 and showed the total of 6,614 records on the topic of ‘reflexivity’. As the term has other meanings in mathematics and natural science, the query was narrowed down to seven most numerous categories of social science: “sociology”, “social sciences interdisciplinary”, “education educational research”, “anthropology”, “communication”, “women’s studies”, “social work” and “political science”. The refined query showed 2,543 publications in the years 1957-2016, with the first record from 1977.

36), and if needed, social actors are mostly able to give reasons for what they do or did. In another influential account developed by Margaret Archer (2000), general reflexivity is achieved through ‘internal conversation’ within human subjects – an incessant flux of ‘emotional commentaries’ on ‘ongoing or potential commitments’; only due to this affective feedback can individuals evaluate different courses of action and prioritise some of them against others (Archer 2000: 228).

**Reflexivity as a specific cultural phenomenon.** In this account, reflexivity is understood as a defining feature of a specific category of human actions – ones that are not sufficiently ‘scripted’ by existing cultural patterns or models, and therefore have to be continually reinvented or reframed by social actors. These open-ended forms of practice are always prone to risk and uncertainty, but also – according to some scholars (e.g. Giddens 1991: 78 ff) – allow for a greater degree of personal autonomy, authenticity and self-actualisation. Reflexive practice may be found in all social circumstances, but historically it was mostly available to specific categories of social actors, such as prophets, artists, thinkers or scientists. Only with the advent of ‘late’, ‘second’ or ‘high’ modernity does reflexivity become a widespread phenomenon that pervades all spheres of social life, including those previously governed by ‘tradition’, ‘custom’ or ‘common sense’ (see Giddens 1990: 38-39; Lash 1993, 2001, 2003; Lash and Urry 1994). Thus understood, it is inextricably bound to processes of individualisation, the reconfiguration of individual lifeworlds based on the principle of ‘do-it-yourself’ (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2001: 3) – becoming a designer and manager of one’s own lifestyle, intimate relations, biography and identity.

**Reflexivity as an attitude and approach in social research.** In the most specific sense, reflexivity is part of the research process, based on the researcher’s awareness of their positionality and the modes of involvement in the social world that may influence research procedures and their outcomes. This understanding refers to the aforementioned ‘reflexive turn’ in anthropology in the 1980s (Clifford, Marcus 1986), but also to Gouldner’s plea for a ‘reflexive sociology’ (1971: 481-512) and the approach developed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), further elaborated in feminist and postcolonial scholarship (Ahmed 2000; Bhabha 1994; Haraway 1988; Mohanty 1994; Reinharz 1992). According to Bourdieu, social-scientific descriptions and explanations are always to some extent biased by the researcher’s social background, their position within the academic field and the discipline’s ‘unthought categories of thought’ – general presuppositions inscribed in the ways of imagining and analysing the social world (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 39-41). Therefore, social scientists have to remain vigilant and systematical-

ly check their own claims for the effects of habitus and *doxa*, both general and professional.

The focus of this volume is reflexivity in the second sense (except for the contribution by Świrek, who discusses Freud's account of the self as posing a particular challenge for reflexivity). To delineate this meaning from the other two, we have decided to use the term 'cultural reflexivity'. A detailed discussion of this concept can be found in Tomanek's paper; for the time being, suffice to say that by cultural reflexivity we mean a certain relationship between social actors and cultural objects remaining at their disposal. These objects may include different forms of knowledge produced and distributed in a society, as in Giddens' account of 'institutional reflexivity' (1991: 2, 187), but also texts, images and material items experienced in aesthetic rather than cognitive ways (Lash 1993, 2001, 2003; Lash and Urry 1994). The relationship in question is one of active choice and appropriation, creative adjustment and attribution of an individualised meaning. Thus cultural objects employed in a 'reflexive mode' not only serve as social markers of a pre-established personal or social identity, but more importantly, they become involved in the process of self- or identity-formation, providing a specific medium through which individuals (and groups) can relate to themselves and to the social world.

The authors of this volume set out to establish how contemporary reflexivity manifests itself in various fields of social practice, especially those connected to leisure time and individual aesthetic self-expression. Most of the empirical contributions pertain to cultural practices in Poland, with one exception – an anthropological account of religious reflexivity in Buryat society in Siberia. Four of the contributors refer extensively to their own systematic research on specific cultural phenomena. We consider this a particularly valuable aspect of this volume, as the discussion on reflexivity has long tended to revolve around theoretical issues, and empirical evidence has frequently been used merely as an illustration for general claims or models of reflexive practice.

In his introductory paper, Tomanek makes an attempt at defining cultural reflexivity as a form of social practice. He departs from a purely psychological concept of reflection to show that cultural reflexivity is a socially emergent phenomenon, a specific relationship between human agents and cultural objects. His main goal is to provide criteria for distinguishing between cultural reflexivity and two other forms of social practice commonly recognised in sociology – traditional and rationalised. Especially the latter can be easily – and often is – confused with reflexivity, as both involve the dissolution of taken-for-grantedness inherent in traditional worldviews. Ra-

tionised forms of behaviour, however, are based on explicit and (possibly) universal rules of correctness and coherence, allowing for a sense of certainty, whereas reflexive practice is more open-ended, and reflexive agents strive for a sense of personal authenticity. Also the media of cultural reflexivity to some extent differ from those of rationalised practice, as they include not only cognitive verbal information, but also sensual particulars, such as images, songs or clothing. In the final part of the paper Tomanek discusses the social conditions conducive to cultural reflexivity or, conversely, reducing the potential for reflexive practice.

Świrek in his essay outlines the boundaries to individual reflexivity, understood here – in a more psychological vein – as a “possibility of performing conscious insight”. Through a detailed analysis of three classic texts by Freud, he investigates the process of subject-formation to show that the psychoanalytic account of the self is based on a profound tension. Freud and his followers have systematically undermined the individual capacity for autonomy and self-determination as a ‘façade’ for the predominance of unconscious mental processes. Thus, what appears to the subject as a result of reflexive insight may in fact be “an answer that is already prepared and comes from our history”. On the other hand, psychoanalysis itself is an emancipatory project, as it involves a promise of deeper self-understanding and “freeing oneself from the grasp of illusions”. In therapy, the patient has to fully realise his or her mental structure and internal limitations; however, they are not subjected to intellectual scrutiny, but unravelled through specific procedures reaching beyond the realm of the rational, such as the method of free associations. ‘Psychoanalytic reflexivity’ is therefore a peculiar one, being based on a theory which dismisses conventional forms of reflection as invalid means of self-cognition.

Połeć examines how cultural reflexivity operates in the Russian Republic of Buryatia, embodied in modern forms of shamanism. He shows how contemporary Buryat shamans, rather than simply following traditional precepts of their practice, accommodate it to the changing social and cultural circumstances. The very phenomenon of the ‘shaman revival’ in the Republic of Buryatia results from the fact that shamans have managed to establish themselves as ‘cultural experts’, whose field of expertise is not confined to magic or traditional medicine. After the collapse of the USSR the Buryats found themselves in a situation of massive disembeddedness as previous, state-sanctioned ways of establishing group identities and dealing with everyday problems became obsolete. Thus there emerged a profound need for an ‘expert system’ to master insecurity, and shamanism fitted the bill. Połeć argues that the reflexive modernisation approach largely ignores the return to tra-

ditional religious beliefs as a possible response to late-modern life conditions, whereas the Buryat case shows the opposite – that the second modernisation and the emergence of risk society may bring about a re-enchantment of the world in the form of a ‘reflexive religion’, drawing on local traditions, but reoriented towards specifically modern issues.

Mroczkowska addresses the practice of going to fitness clubs as a form of modern preoccupation with bodily aspects of the self. Based on in-depth interviews with fitness club members, she outlines the fundamental dialectic of freedom and discipline inherent in fitness activities. On the one hand, her interviewees consider the gym to be their space of personal freedom where they can shake off other concerns, relax, and focus on themselves, finding immediate pleasure in physical effort or exhaustion. On the other, systematic exercise is a form of self-discipline, adopted instrumentally to achieve further goals – a sense of control over one’s body, physical fitness, health and better looks. Thus exercise may not be pleasurable in itself, but following a physical regime brings a delayed gratification, that is, the possibility to “shop for a newly fit body”. The struggle to discipline oneself and shape one’s body becomes a display of individual agency, but at the same time it fosters dependence on experts (gym trainers) and expert knowledge. This is yet another dialectic of reflexivity, explored by many scholars (Beck and Giddens among others) and is neatly illustrated in this paper.

In her article, Żuchowska-Zimnal critically engages with the notion of cultural reflexivity to explore the role of ‘trivial’ acts of everyday consumption in communicating meanings and the construction of one’s self-identity in late modern reality. While pointing out the proliferation of meanings, aestheticisation of everyday life and consumerist ‘coercion to choose’ as the main parameters for the process of identity formation in the context of fluid modernity, she posits that late modern individuals/consumers increasingly invest in self-formation and self-communication through clothing and sartorial strategies. These investments, she argues, can be best captured through Lash’s conceptualisation of ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ and Willis’s concept of symbolic creativity. In her own research she explores how young urban adults with high cultural capital make their sartorial decisions, and what kinds of effect they intend to achieve. The bulk of her research participants display a strongly critical attitude toward fashion and a preference for more personalised styles of dress. Interestingly enough, only some of them are able to verbalise an overall self-image behind their choices; for others, sartorial reflexivity works at the level of visual codes that are not readily translated into discourse. Moreover, many participants, while declaring independence from fashion trends and external pressures, remain deeply aware of what their

clothing communicates to other people and adjust the impression to get positive feedback on their aesthetic decisions.

The aesthetisation of everyday life is also addressed by Wyrzykowska in her paper on the musical practices of Warsaw adolescents. Discussing the results of her extensive research, she describes the variety of ways in which music mediates experience. Among the most interesting ones is listening to music as a soundtrack to everyday activities, such as commuting to school, doing homework, gaming or falling asleep. In such cases music often serves as a mood regulator, helping individuals to calm themselves or, conversely, boost their energy. Consequently, the author distinguishes between two opposite modes of music reception: hearing music, when it is used as a background for other activities, and listening to music, when it is focused upon and engaged in a more reflexive manner. Music intended to serve as a background largely differs (in terms of music genres) from that to be 'listened to'; however, it is actively chosen to perform its function, and therefore this kind of hearing cannot be regarded as an instance of 'passive' reception. Later in her paper, drawing on de Nora's concept of music as a cultural vehicle, Wyrzykowska shows how it mediates individual experience and memories and can thus be used to (re)organise one's biography, either through facilitating the recollection of past episodes, or by providing a reference point to narrate them as a coherent whole.

Finally, Nóżka and Smagacz-Poziemska explore the possibilities of a dialogue between various approaches to designing urban space. The authors argue that reflection on space is usually developed within 'reflexive communities' representing different scientific disciplines and professions, such as architecture, design, art, sociology and philosophy. These communities are characterised by their own (often implicit) assumptions, standards and rules of practice, based on specific ontologies of space. Thus, professional reflection on space, even though performed consciously, is always to some extent limited in its scope and outcomes. To overcome these limitations and incorporate different forms of reflexivity into one project was the goal of interdisciplinary spatial design workshops, embracing students of architecture, interior architecture, sociology and philosophy. The authors, who led two editions of the workshops, found the participants largely entrenched in their professional perspectives, which made it very difficult to elaborate shared understandings of what space is and how it should be designed and used. An especially profound rift could be seen between the aesthetic perspective of architects (focused on the artistic value and 'personal mark' of the design) and the cognitive approach of sociologists (concerned foremost with the functional aspects of space and the expectations of its prospective users).

Also the media of reflexivity differed – for sociologists these were mostly narratives, whereas architects worked directly with pictures or graphics, with little need to translate them into words. Consequently, the authors recommend that such collaboration, constituting a challenging attempt at combining different forms of reflexivity, should be organised on a prolonged basis to give participants more opportunity to negotiate meanings and perspectives.

It goes without saying that such a selective survey cannot answer any general questions concerning the pervasiveness of reflexive practice in Polish society or the socio-structural conditions enabling reflexivity. In Western countries such questions have been asked by many scholars (e.g. Lash 1994; Atkinson 2010), and the diversity of answers indicates that this issue is far from being settled. Another important and unresolved question concerns the outcomes of reflexivity: the extent to which it fosters individual autonomy and coherent self, or – alternatively – contributes to its fragmentation and discontinuity. The papers in this volume suggest both; perhaps this paradoxical nature of reflexivity is what makes it such an engaging subject of social-scientific attention.

We hope that these and other questions will be addressed in further research, both empirical and theoretical. What we have in mind is not necessarily research *on* reflexivity, but rather incorporating this notion as an important vector in studying contemporary cultural phenomena. To acknowledge general reflexivity of human agents is one thing, but to analyse specific forms of reflexive practice is quite another. If this volume somehow manages to inspire Polish and foreign scholars to follow this path, we will be more than satisfied.

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