

Is mobility a question of social inequality?

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Since the 1980s globalization has brought deep social and economical changes, difficult to summarize. Nevertheless, I will take the risk of outlining three sociological processes that are interconnected and have witnessed continuous grow. I am referring to the intensification of *individualization*, economic and social *inequality* and *mobility* practices.

Regarding the first topic, in the late 1990s authors such as Ulrich Beck or Anthony Giddens have diagnosed the rise of individualization as one of the structural mechanisms that define so-called 'late modernity'. The concept of reflexivity has been used to characterize the focalization on individual biographic trajectories and identities. The self and his/her ability to produce social agency has been considered to be one of the core dimensions that constitute the contemporary society. According to Beck, with the erosion of the institutions that have structured industrial society and supported individual and collective interests (nuclear family, unions, parties, social state...) the self now finds on his/her own: one has to make use of one's reflexive capacity to face daily problems. Reflexivity enables subjects not only to accumulate knowledge about the surrounding social world (in its several dimensions: the cultural, the economic, the political...) but also to make decisions regarding present and future ways of life: decisions with respect to different sectors of daily life, such as career, family, consumption, leisure...

This individualization process is mainly analyzed with reference to urban and metropolitan spaces, neglecting others geographical contexts. For instance, it would be interesting to find out what forms of reflexivity are produced in rural spaces. Is reflexivity an intrinsic urban phenomenon? Is individualization increasing in rural areas, too? Christopher Ray (1999) has been one of the few authors to have worked on reflexive modernity from the point of view of the rural endogenous development.

The 'reflexive modernity' program proposed by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) has fostered intense theoretical debate in sociology. But since the beginning of the new century, this theory has also been the target of criticism, mainly because it has neglected the importance of some structural concepts such as social class. For example, in *The Risk Society*, Beck (1992) prematurely announced the end of class as a determinant concept for the analysis of modernity. However, since 2007, with the beginning of the financial and economic crisis, the topic of inequality as reappeared in the academic and scientific agenda. In fact, issues of social class and income distribution have been raised in several debates and discussions, taking their place in the public sphere. Indexes such as the Gini Index – which measures the level of income inequality – have become central. Recent books like *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and

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Picket, 2009), and *The Haves and the Haves-not* (Branko Milanovic, 2011) have revealed the continuous growth of inequality in most European countries and the US. With some exceptions, like Northern-European countries, it is fair to say that the societies of the so-called developed world are now much more polarized than they were thirty years ago.

Recently, Will Atkinson (2010) has criticized individualization and reflexivity theories on the basis of the argument that they have neglected statistical trends pointing out the inten-

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sification of social polarization. Societies continue to be stratified in social classes with different access to economic and cultural capital, as Pierre Bourdieu showed in his several studies since the late 1970s. In his recent book *Class, Individualization and Late Modernity:*

in Search of the Reflexive Worker, Atkinson proves that reflexivity is above all a matter of class. Individuals still belong in different classes, each endowed with its own type of reflexivity. In the dominant classes, individuals define their biography has a result of personal choices. On the other hand, the dominated tend to justify their life trajectories as a consequence of social and economical constraints, like income, education, and socialisation. According to Atkinson, the amplitude of one's reflexive choice depends on social position. So, if reflexivity is also a question of inequality, these two dimensions should be analyzed together.

Atkinson's is based on data about Bristol, but it would be interesting to apply this kind of analysis to less urbanized areas, finding for example if, in rural spaces, there is any link between reflexivity and inequality. In the studies I have carried out in rural areas of southern Portugal, reflexivity seems not only a question of economic and cultural capital, but also of age classes (Carmo, 2010). In spaces suffering from ageing and depopulation, age appears to be one of the independent variables that explain the production of different types of reflexivity.

For most elderly people, to move to another region or to a city is no longer an option. They are stuck in the place where they live. Only a disease or a misfortune will take them from their village or community. On the contrary, younger people have alternatives and their reflexivity is embedded in different future scenarios regarding the possibilities of staying or leaving. Thus, specific forms of reflexivity could be produced in rural spaces, distinct from those that are produced in urban ones. Can we conclude that reflexivity is also a question of space? In my opinion, this is a pertinent question to which sociologists and geographers should pay attention.

This takes us to the third concept: mobility. The issue of spatial mobility has increasingly proved crucial in the social sciences (Cresswell, 2006). This has in part to do with the impact of globalization and the development of the network society (Castells, 2000). There are several factors that produce mobility, but I would like to stress two that have created an enormous impact in the modernized countries. The first is *migration*, a phenomenon which reflexive modernity theory tends to miss. And how it is possible to theorize contemporary society without taking migration into account? The second is *sprawl*, an intense and dispersed form of commuting in expansion in metropolitan regions. I think sociologists should also look at sprawl as one of the components that structure individual daily life. In my opinion there is a strict connection between individualization and the fragmentation of mobility

practices, as it was partly demonstrated by Putnam (2001) in his study on social capital.

As mentioned above, it is becoming clear that mobility – and, specifically, migration and sprawl – is not entirely an urban phenomenon. Recent findings have shown that mobility practices are being produced in different rural contexts (Hedberg and Carmo, Eds., 2011). In rural communities, mobility is an important resource for people who intend to settle permanently, too. But those who haven't this ability or the conditions to move regularly are in serious risk of social discrimination, due to the lack of autonomy. In this sense, mobility is strongly related with social inequality. And this is particularly evident in rural areas. My studies in rural Portugal show that there is a cleavage between people who can move frequently to the cities and people who are stuck to their local dwellings. The latter are mainly elderly people, poor people, women, and migrants.

With the dismantlement of traditional bonds that used to characterize rural communities, immobility may easily lead to isolation and solitude. This is particular clear for elderly people. New types of stigmatization could arise from this perverse relationship between mobility and inequality. In a way, this reveals the dark side of individualization, whereby people have lost their traditional bonds, not because of personal choices, but due to social constraints. In rural spaces, 'individualization' may have meanings quite different from those outlined by reflexivity theory.

In this paper I have questioned some theories of modernity and globalization that focus on urban space only or, to be more precise, I have tried to show the limits of theories asserting the general validity of theses drawn from the condition of urban middle classes. These approaches have ignored other social and spatial contexts – such as the working class, or the rural space – that are still part of the contemporary society. As social scientists, it is our duty to bring those contexts back into scientific and public debate.



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