I - A BRIEF SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

According to a plausible generalization, sociological theory in the twentieth century polarized between holistic approaches which asserted social determinism, and individualist approaches which asserted, on the basis of «methodological individualism», the autonomy of action by single agents (Cesareo 1999). In the second half of the 1900s, as both these approaches evolved and acquired a flexibility that gave them more penetrating and broader insight into historical-social phenomena, a new orientation, what may be labelled «sociological minimalism», arose as well. We shall briefly describe this sociological panorama by starting from the dichotomy between the individualist and holistic theoretical perspectives that distinguished the doctrines of the founding fathers of sociology.

1.1. The individualism-holism dichotomy

The difference between individualist and holistic sociologies can be straightforwardly described in terms of symmetries. For the individualist theory, sociology is the science of social action: the science of non-logical actions for Pareto (1916), the science of meaningful action for Weber (1922 and 1968), the science of the action-frame of reference for the early Parsons. For holistic theory, sociology is the science of social determinisms: the science mainly of structure for the later Parsons, the science mainly of function for Luhmann (1970), the science of systems for Buckley (1967). Individualists theorize the autonomy of the individual agent, whilst holists theorize social determinisms, reducing the human being’s autonomy to the minimum. This antithesis between the individualist and holistic orientations can be specified as follows. Firstly, individualists and holists adopt opposite abstractive procedures: atomist the former, and holistic the latter. Individualists reduce or relate complex social phenomena to their simpler and constitutive elements, so that the individuals, and the interaction systems that they create, respectively represent the logical atoms...
and molecules of theoretical inquiry (Boudon 1979). Conversely, holists reduce or
relate elementary and simple phenomena to complex social ones, relating every theo-
ry of human action to a theory of order, change or social conflict. Secondly, individu-
alists and holists adopt opposing concepts of rationality: the majority of individu-
alists (Pareto, Weber, game theory, rational choice theory) interpret rationality largely
in the manner of economic theory, which assumes a relationship between alternative
means and ends in conditions of scarcity whereby the most efficient use is made of
means to achieve particular ends. Holists instead interpret rationality in ways analo-
gous to those of biology or the cybernetic theory of systems. Thirdly, individualists
and holists found their respective approaches on opposing ideas which they both
present as reasonable: individualists on the idea that the authentic object of sociol-
ogy is the choices made by free and rational individuals concerned to pursue their
‘material and ideal’ interests; holists on the idea that the authentic object of sociol-
ogy is the fundamental uniformity of human behaviour and the persistence of social
groups that derives from it.

By way of summary, individualists conceive the individual human being as an
active subject whose will produces effects of a social nature. In individualist theories,
acting subjects temporally precede, ontologically cause, and epistemologically explain
society – and specifically the social structure. Conversely, holists conceive the individ-
ual agent as primarily passive and therefore, at least to some extent, as a kind of
automaton whose behaviour is the product of social causes. In this case it is society,
with its social and cultural structures, that temporally precedes, ontologically causes,
and epistemologically explains the action of individuals.

As said, in the second half of the 1900s sociology underwent, by virtue of new the-
oretical and epistemological contributions, an increase in generalization which aug-
mented the explanatory capacities of both the individualist orientation and the holistic
one. Boudon’s position exemplifies the former, because it explains individual actions
on the basis of their relationship with the systems of interaction and interdependence
in which they are embedded. Luhmann’s structural functionalism exemplifies the latter
because, contrary to Parsons’ structural-functionalism, it locates the primary explican-
dum of sociology – and hence the dominant social phenomenon – in social change
rather than in social order. It therefore regards social stability as only a limiting case of
the system’s operation, rather than as the essence of that system.

1.2. Sociological minimalism

More recently, since the 1990s, the attention of sociologists has tended to focus on
identity rather than on action. This new sociological individualism, which is distinct
from methodological individualism, emphasises the sphere of experience over that of
projectuality and social bonds. An exemplary proponent of this theoretical position is
Guy Bajoit, who advocates abandonment of the «classical paradigms» – centred on
integration, alienation, conflict, and the contract – because they reduce the individual
to a mere product of the structure’s workings. These paradigms, Bajoit argues, should
be replaced with an «identitarian paradigm» which pivots on the subject – this being
defined in light of to the ability of human beings to act upon themselves to construct their own personal identities, and to manage by themselves the existential tensions involved in relations with others and with the world (Bajoit 2003: 14).

This new sociological tendency of focusing on identity rather than action has fostered the spread of a «post-modern» sociology distinguished by a new kind of sociological individualism which asserts a radically atomistic conception of society. Contrary to «modern» sociology, which was exposed to the risk of sociological determinism or sociologism, this «post-modern» sociology risks producing excessively weak and subjectivist analytical and explanatory models marked by a phenomenological reductionism. This has had two effects in particular: one sociological, the other epistemological. On the sociological plane, this new status of sociology retroacts upon people’s self-understanding, so that they come to perceive themselves as detached from any context of belonging and thereby justify their disengagement. On the epistemological plane, this weak status of sociology also weakens its paradigms, with the consequent loss of authoritativeness and credibility vis-à-vis the other human and social sciences, which are deemed better suited to analysis of socio-cultural phenomena.

This postmodernist strand in sociology is not a simple reprise of classical methodological individualism, which since the beginnings of sociology has vied with holism for epistemological primacy (Cesareo 1999). Instead it is a risky way to conceive sociology which reduces it to a mere «story of stories» recounted by single individuals. It is a tendency, moreover, that already in 1975 Coser had stigmatized as a worrying development in the discipline 1. We shall call this theoretical orientation sociological minimalism. In its epistemological options, it seems at least partly to reflect the characteristic tendencies of the contemporary age: namely fragmentation and deinstitutionalization accelerated by globalization.

II - THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL OPTION OF HUMANIST CONSTRUCTIONISM

The foregoing discussion of current trends in contemporary sociology, as well as the need to address the problems highlighted by those trends, induces us to put forward a theoretical proposal that we shall call humanist constructionism. This proposal is contrary to both the more traditional and opposing unilateralisms of deterministic holism and methodological individualism, and to the more recent phenomenological reductionism – what we have called minimalism.

1 In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Coser was harshly critical of ethnomethodology – which he accused of introducing an «orgy of subjectivism» into sociological studies – and he stressed the risk that sociology might be reduced to the mere gathering of discourses by actors about their actions. Subsequently, also Bourdieu expressed this concern, emphasising the limitations of a sociology that consists solely in a «story of the stories» produced by social actors, so that it does no more than report the representations expressed by those actors (Bourdieu 1987), relinquishing «understanding», interpretation and explanation of social phenomena, with the discipline’s consequent loss of authoritativeness.
The theoretical frame of reference for the constructionist-humanist approach is the current of contemporary sociological thought known as «social constructionism» (Corcuff 1995). The approach follows the route already marked out by scholars like Simmel (1950), Schutz (1962), and exponents of symbolic interactionism, who stressed that analysis must not disregard the action of human beings, the dynamics springing from their symbolic exchanges, their representations, and their categorial systems. At the same time, it capitalizes on the suggestions of scholars who have sought, also more recently, to develop theoretical models which combine systemic and structural approaches with sociologies of social action and interaction. We refer in particular to Giddens (1991; 1985), Elias (1978; 1991) and Bourdieu (1987), who have begun with analysis of structure and then shifted to action (structuralist constructionism), and Elster (1990), Berger-Luckmann (1966), who have moved in the opposite direction (phenomenological constructionism).

The distinctive feature of the constructionism presented here is its conception of social reality as not something natural, given once and for all and therefore potentially unchangeable, and as an organically and mechanically compact reality which dominates the human subject because of its «objectivity». On the contrary, this form of constructionism conceives social reality as a composite set of historical constructs – that is, products of the constant everyday activity of «construction» and «reconstruction» performed by human beings. The latter are therefore active protagonists of social construction by virtue of their reciprocal interactions. As Caillé stresses (1998: 47), the origin of social life is not the individual considered per se or society understood holistically, but rather interaction among concrete individuals, that is, persons.

This construction of social reality takes the form of a circularity between social action and social structure (Cesareo 1999: 111-152) which articulates between two movements: the first, which proceeds from the objectivity of social and cultural structures to arrive at subjectivity, is the movement of internalization; the second, which proceeds in reverse, is the movement of externalization.

With respect to objectivity, human beings are immediately confronted by a cultural and social world that «stands before them» (object derives from objectium, that which «stands before») as a reality able to raise resistance and therefore difficult to shape and transform: it is, a «social fact» à la Durkheim (1947). This social world which is objective in the sense of being «objectified» as the outcome of a previous social construction has solidified to the point of being reified so that it is perceived as an autonomous reality.

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3 With the term «social constructionism» Corcuff (1995) denotes the common denominator of a wide variety of theories (most notably those of Giddens, Berger - Luckmann, Bourdieu, Elster, Elias) which affirm the polarity, and above all the circularity, of the categories of social action and social structure, combining systemic and structural approaches with sociologies of social action and interaction.

4 Contrary to what will be argued below, in this section the term «subjectivity» is used as the opposite of objectivity, i.e. according to its definition by Berger and Luckmann (1966).
With respect to subjectivity, human beings construct their personalities by assimilating cultural and social objectivity through socialization. As the subjectivity of human beings grows, it enables them to externalize. They thus become the «constructors of social reality» by projecting their subjectivity externally to their inner sphere, «building» patterns of behaviour, values, material and immaterial objects, discoveries, and inventions. More precisely, human beings re-structure the pre-existing objectified social structure «erected» by previous generations. They do so in the sense that social forms inherited from the past are produced, acquired, perhaps problematized, and in various degrees superseded, that is to say, «de-constructed». In other words, they are transformed or eliminated, while other social forms are invented and more or less enduringly stabilized.

All this highlights the strategic importance of **historicity**, as discussed below. The processes of constructing-deconstructing-reconstructing social reality are, in fact, inscribed in a time which is liable to discontinuity – that is, the emergence of the new – and thus qualifies as «history».

At this point we can specify that constructionism distances itself from the perspective which we have called idealist because the latter maintains that social reality is only or primarily representation. Idealists reach this conclusion because they fail to consider the mechanisms which objectivize, materialize and stabilize social reality. But one should not underestimate the importance of representations, given that they contribute significantly to the construction of social reality.

Constructionism also distances itself from theories which conversely take the positivist stance which holds that phenomena are only important in their effectual external-objective dimension and accordingly neglects to seek out their meanings, which belong to the cultural-internal-subjective sphere. Accordingly, the constructionist perspective goes beyond what is presented as «given», the naturalistically conceived fact, in that it questions and problematizes the latter. In this way constructionism performs the critical function that, as Habermas (1968) and Bauman remind us (1990), should be distinctive of the social sciences.

Therefore, with reference to the objective-subjective and real-ideal dichotomies, constructionism is an approach that differs from both positivism and idealism.

2.1. **Humanism**

The humanist constructionist approach does not only assume constructionist epistemology; it also proposes a constructionism which is specifically humanist because it recognizes the ability of human beings to participate in the construction of social reality not as individuals but as persons\(^5\). It is therefore necessary to clarify the sociological distinction between these two concepts. That of individual is abstract and gen-

\(^5\) This sociological meaning of «person» must be compared with that of the dramaturgical and philosophical-theological tradition. «Person» is mainly understood as a singular unique entity (uniqueness denotes that the singularity of the person is not random or fungible, but is rich with meaning and therefore, in its way, absolute). As such, it is separate and able to distance itself from the
eral, in the sense that it «abstracts» the human being from its relational context and considers this being in its generality rather than in its uniqueness. Consequently, to use Berger’s expression, the concept of individual regards as analytically irrelevant those differences of history or culture with which every epoch and every society has historically declined the anthropological constant of every human being, thus giving rise to different types of man (Berger 1984). The intellectual success enjoyed by the concept of human being as individual is historically connected with the «individualism» understood as the distinctive feature of modernity (Watt 1996). Modernity has indubitably brought decisive improvements to the lives of human beings in terms of dignity, freedom, and recognition of individual and collective rights. At the same time, however, modernity has produced a situation where human beings are considered on the basis of general categories, rather than in the concreteness of their specific individuality within a particular setting and a specific network of interpersonal bonds. Consequently, human beings have become potentially interchangeable as a-historical units in political, legal and economic systems. By contrast, the sociological concept of «person» is concrete and particular (Selznick 1995), in the sense that it considers human beings in their existential quality that makes them unique entities identified by their histories and their social bonds, and therefore structurally open to relationships with others and to the mutual recognition implicit in this openness (Cesareo 2004b: 8-9). A person is therefore always in becoming, intrinsically and jointly historical and relational, because s/he is embedded in a temporal context of a both social (a chain of generations) and cultural nature (a tradition which, to the extent that it continues to be creative, qualifies as «living»: Mac Intyre 1981). In short, one only becomes a person within a relationship of mutuality (Ricoeur 1990).

It is precisely the concept of person, not that of individual, which has crucial analytical importance in regard to the circularity between social action and social structure that, as said, is the core of our constructionist approach. This is a circularity that preserves sociological theorization against both sociological determinism and methodo-logical individualism, as well as the current minimalist drift. We would stress in particular that, although it is important for human beings to belong to socio-cultural contexts that transcend and condition them, their behaviours are never entirely predictable. In sociological analysis, therefore, one should always bear both objective and subjective aspects in mind. We would stress in particular that, although it is important for human beings to belong to socio-cultural contexts that transcend and condition them, their behaviours are never entirely predictable. In sociological analysis, therefore, one should always bear both objective and subjective aspects in mind.

6 «In our view, the basis of the social fact resides in human individuals taken in their concreteness and original non-resolvability» (Sturzo 2005: 6).
7 On the importance of relationality see Donati (1991).
causes and subjective intentions in mind: in short, a human being, is always at once a subject and an object.

Precisely for this reason intrinsic to a person’s membership of society, it is only possible to infer probabilistic laws (given phenomenon \( a \), also \( b \) will probably occur) rather than deterministic ones (given phenomenon \( a \), \( b \) will necessarily occur).

The constructionism presented in this essay is termed «humanist» not only because it centres its analysis on the person, but also because it shares the anthropological conception of humanism. Both humanism and constructionism recognize that a person has significant capabilities: primarily, the capacity to be creative and to resist homogenization. However, this recognition combines with acknowledgement of the limitations of those same capabilities, and this prevents, at anthropological level, the adoption of superhuman doctrines. Translated into sociological terms, this conception implies that humans are the only living beings with self-awareness and able to act intentionally to modify their environment. More precisely, human beings can act with a certain freedom which varies according to the situation. But they are always subject to conditionings, so that they are at the same time free and conditioned. But saying that a person is conditioned is very different from saying that s/he is subject to determinisms.

Conditionings, in fact, can be managed, and therefore approved, rejected, suffered, overcome; they can be operated upon, modified, eliminated, replaced with others; or they can be resisted. If one instead adopts a deterministic standpoint, this excludes any modifying intervention by the actor, and human beings are thus reduced to «marionettes» whose freedom is non-existent or a mere illusion.

Humanist constructionism, therefore, not only attributes an evident protagonism to the person, which must constantly deal with constraints and conditionings, but – once again distancing itself from deterministic approaches – also recognizes the person’s potential capacity for deconditioning, as amply demonstrated by the history of humanity.\(^8\)

From this analytical perspective, therefore, human behaviours are at least to some extent unpredictable; yet, as noted above, this does not rule out the possibility of formulating probabilistic sociological laws.

The notion of «person» as a concrete individual – and therefore as conditioned but also enable to enact processes of (relative) deconditioning – differs markedly from the conception of humans as merely biological beings (as exemplified by socio-biology: see Wilson 1975), but also from the conception of them as socializable beings passively and primarily engaged in internalizing the culture of their environment (as exemplified by structural-functionalism, with its conception of the ultrasocialized man; see Cesareo 1985: 73-74).

\(^8\) Testifying emblematically to the ability of people to withstand conditionings is the case of concentration camp inmates who, even though subjected to brutal «brain-washing», were able to preserve their freedom of thought, if not of action.
2.2. Humanist constructionism as a sociology of the person

Although some sociological approaches have used constructionism in a manner at odds with a humanist vision, there is reason to believe that an approach that conjugates these two elements is not only plausible but can also help escape the impasse in which contemporary sociological analysis finds itself. Hence, one deduces from the epistemological option outlined in the two previous sections an analytical distinction internal to the sociological concept of person which chimes with the issue of subjectivity identified as one of the ‘fundamental sociological problems’ of the contemporary age.

More specifically, with reference to the ways in which a person acts in a particular context, s/he can be identified as (a) an agent if and to the extent that s/he simply executes the demands of the system of which s/he is part; (b) an actor if and to the extent that s/he is able to control his/her environment; (c) a subject if and to the extent that s/he is endowed with autonomy and the ability to construct his/her own history so as to be author of is/her own life. In light of this threefold specification, the concrete individual, the person, may, from time to time, in different situations and at different times, be an agent or an actor or a subject.

Recalling a distinction that we have drawn elsewhere, it is possible to specify further that an agent tends to engage in adaptive action, an actor in teleological-normative action, and a subject in historical action (Cesareo 1999: 155-175). In light of these specifications, there is reason to believe that as one moves from agent to actor to subject – that is, the more that the third modality prevails – the more a human being is fully a person.

Having clarified the nature of humanist constructionism, we can now systematically state the main differences between this approach and those previously mentioned.

A. Humanist constructionism and sociological determinism. Sociological determinism maintains that human action is solely the effect of social causes. Although at present only infrequent recourse is made to this approach, it still persists in some strands of contemporary sociology, especially in the form of technological determinism and socio-biology. By contrast, humanist constructionism maintains that social causes act upon the person but do so only as conditioning factors. Consequently, humanist constructionism shares with sociological determinism a constant reference to the macrosocial context, but differs from it by refusing to absolutize the latter’s ontological and epistemological status.

9 «By “historical action” is meant unexpected action, which therefore always comprises an element of novelty and entails the assumption of risk by the subject performing it because of the uncertainty of the outcome and the importance of the predictable and unpredictable consequences» (Cesareo 1999: 158). «By “teleological-normative” action is meant a kind of action which complies with norms and is undertaken in pursuit of a goal and which therefore always involves a projection into the future. The normative and teleological components are always co-present in action, although they may assume different weights in specific concrete occurrences» (ibid.: 162-163). «Adaptive action is characterized by the fact that it relates a subject to a situational reality external to him/her in such a way as to eliminate the imbalance in the relationship. In order to come about in this way, the action tends to comply with rules that change according to the mutable demands of the environment. Hence it is action characterized by marked automatism and strongly conditioned by the environment» (ibid.: 166-174).
B. Humanist constructionism and methodological individualism. Methodological individualism claims that subjective motivations are the only drivers of social action. Yet its conception of the individual tends to neglect the social, historical and relational context in which the individual is necessarily embedded, which gives rise to a monadic and abstract image of the human being. Methodological individualism therefore fails to take account of the intersubjective and intrasubjective dimensions of social reality, that is, of the various components which constitute individual identity. By contrast, humanist constructionism believes that individual motivations are of great importance in determining the behaviours of human beings. They always relate to the broader social and cultural context in which a person acts and inter-acts with others.

C. Humanist constructionism and sociological minimalism. While the approaches just considered have long been present in sociological thought and theory, minimalism is the most direct consequence of the current circumstances of contemporary society, in which deinstitutionalization and social fragmentation have led to a resurgence of subjectivity, but in problematic forms. Minimalist sociology, however, is only concerned with the «return of the subject», which it uncritically views as an entirely positive development. Hence minimalist sociology on the one hand evades the requirement of problematizing this emergent subjectivity, while on the other, it neglects the macrosociological dimension, thereby helping legitimate and emphasise a disengaged facet of subjectivity. Instead, humanist constructionism not only recognizes the increasing importance of the subjectivity apparent in contemporary society but also problematizes that same subjectivity.

With reference to the person, this comparison among the three approaches examined has highlighted the following aspects. The deterministic approach rules out that a person can be a subject, that is, a human being able to be the author of his/her own history; methodological individualism reduces the person to an abstract individual bereft of history and culture; and sociological minimalism disempowers the person by asserting a weak and disengaged vision of the human being.

2.3. Constructionism and historicity

Having outlined the two distinctive features of our approach – the sociological concept of person and the humanist conception – we now focus on the third theoretical element of key importance, and which further specifies the constructionist-humanist approach by underlining its antideterminist character: historicity. In fact, all the sociological categories pertaining to this approach are markedly «historically rooted» (Mills 1962: 162). Humanist constructionism is therefore necessarily historical, in that any construction perforce takes place in time, and therefore in history. The concept itself of person is intrinsically historical because it concerns the individual in his/her becoming. As well known, the sociological doctrine to have most consistently incorporated and valorized the historical dimension is that of Max Weber, which hinges on the intrinsic connection of sociology with history, assuming a close interweaving between sociological and historical randomness. A further linkage between the constructionist-humanist
approach and Weberian sociology consists in the multiform importance of the subjective dimension in Weber’s theory. In this regard, Weber’s contribution to the sociological tradition has been characterized precisely by a concern with the «problem» of «a new humanism» (Hennis 1987). This entails «recovery of the subjective dimension in social analysis» (Procacci - Szakolczai 2003: 193) and therefore merges with the humanist perspective of our constructionism. Specifically, the concept of chance in Weberian sociology is of crucial importance for our approach. This concept lies midway between an anthropological assumption and a sociological principle, and it constitutes the explanatory key to the antideterminism and pluralism characteristic of Weber’s sociology (Bendix 1962).

III - HUMANIST CONSTRUCTIONISM AND MARGARET ARCHER'S MORPHOGENETIC THEORY

As said, the history of sociological thought exhibits theoretical strands which are at least to some extent attributable to constructionism; yet one infrequently finds theories that decline constructionism in humanist terms. However, there seem to be «elective affinities» between our humanist constructionism (specifically its sociological concept of person) and Margaret Archer’s morphogenetic-morphostatic approach. This theoretical perspective belongs among the sociological theories which thematize the circularity of action and structure – which, following Corcuff, we have called social constructionism – and it has close correspondences with our constructionist-humanist approach, by virtue of its analytical emphasis on the autonomy and causal power of acting subjects with regard to social processes. The core of Archer’s theory is the agency/structure «analytical dualism». In analytical terms, these two fundamental social entities are both interdependent and separable, while, in factual terms, they are temporally distinguishable. This means that agency and the (social and cultural) structure are relatively autonomous from each other; more specifically, they are endowed with conditioning and not necessitating causal powers, as well as with emergent properties (i.e. temporally defined by their novelty). Hence the «analytical dualism» focuses on the interplay between structure and agency – that is, their reciprocal shaping – and specifies their temporal sequences, which take the form of morphogenetic cycles. This interplay assumes two fundamental forms: transformation of the temporally antecedent, concrete, structure; and simple reproduction of that structure. Archer terms transformation of the structure «morphogenesis»: this engenders the social change manifested by the appearance of «emergent» properties in the structure; and she terms the reproduc-

10 In his introduction to Economy and Society, Weber writes that, both for sociology in its current sense and for history, the object of knowledge is the set of subjective meanings of action. A further indicator of this subjective dimension is the pervasiveness of power, essentially in the Nietzschian sense of Macht (potency) in Weber’s sociology (Vaccarini 1998).

11 With reference to Weber’s doctrine, «no other sociologist (with the exception of Tocqueville) has based his theory on an anthropology that exalts the liberty and the dignity of man» (ibid.: 379).

12 See the theory’s systematization in Archer (1995).
tion of the structure «morphostasis»: this produces social stability. The humanist connotation of the morphogenetic approach is evident in its recognition that acting subjects acquire autonomy from the pre-existing structure that has formed them, developing, through separation from the social context of their formation, personal properties: these being primarily reflexivity and the ability to assume risks by taking binding decisions. These emergent personal properties enable the acting subject to interpret the antecedent structure in an innovative, personalized and unpredictable way. This connotation, humanist in our opinion, of the morphogenetic approach is the dominant theme of *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, which attributes mediation between structure and agency to that eminent kind of emergent personal power that is reflexive deliberation, as performed through the internal conversations of the acting subject. The latter reflexively elaborates the forms of the cultural structure in which s/he has been shaped, and on this basis defines the situation in which s/he finds him/herself, identifying his/her interests and ordering them in a scale of priorities at whose apex stand the person’s «ultimate concerns», that is, the interests closest to his/her heart, and therefore closest to his/her identitarian core. It is on the basis of this connection between reflexive self-awareness and identity that the subject defines projects and takes decisions. In this regard, Archer analytically stresses risky decisions taken in situations of uncertainty, exemplary those most fraught with consequences, and above all those taken in the absence of, or in contradiction with, social norms that pre-establish specific behaviours (as in the exemplary cases of ethical dilemma faced by Antigone and Oedipus). Consistently with this account, Archer gives sociological credit to exponents of American pragmatism: James and especially Peirce, who put forward a dynamic conception of the self inclined to project itself into the future, and able to use contracted habits as resources for personalized and innovative life-projects.

IV - THREE AXIiological PERSPECTIVES

Having described the humanist constructionism approach, and having shown some «elective affinities» between it and Archer’s social theory, we now compare humanist constructionism with the long-standing sociological dilemma between currents of thought that affirm the primacy of the individual dimension and those that affirm the primacy of the collective dimension. As we shall show, a distinctive feature of these theoretical currents is their axiological profile. From this it logically follows that comparison of humanist constructionism with these currents requires thematization of the axiological profile of humanist constructionism itself. To this end, we shall examine the three axiological perspectives verifiable in sociological thought, specifying that by «axiological perspective» we mean the assumption of a difference in value, or a hierarchical distinction, between two levels of reality and experience ordered according to a higher-lower scheme. The three axiological perspectives identified are: A. the collectivist perspective, which privileges the collective dimension; B. the individualist one, which privileges the individual dimension; C. what we call the citizenship perspective, which seeks to arrange the opposed unilaterality of the two previous perspectives into
a complex and dynamic unit, according relative autonomy to both the dimension of individuality and to that of the collectivity. Accordingly, the citizenship axiological perspective acknowledges the irreducible tension between these two dimensions and therefore refuses to grant primacy to one or the other.

A. The collectivist axiological perspective considers humans as qualified univocally by the collective dimension, that is, by their membership of society, and essentially identifies them as constrained and dependent. According to this definition, human beings conform their behaviour to social norms which determine action in an essentially uniform and repetitive manner.

From the collectivist perspective the axiologically higher level is therefore that of society, while the lower one is that of the individuals of which that society is made up. «The essential element of the personality is the social aspect in us»; willing society therefore means on the one hand willing something that extends beyond us but on the other willing ourselves therefore society is in a certain sense the best part of ourselves (Durkheim 1912: 390).

On the one hand, society is an unitary whole rich with meaning; this richness of meaning is manifest firstly in society’s «power to rise above the particular, the contingent, the individual» (ibid.: 388) and socialize its members to common values. For the personality of society’s members, this means the overcoming of particularistic motives with the elevation to «consciousness of ourselves» (Heller 1984). Secondly, it is manifest in society’s ability to stabilize over time. Society is potentially permanent and is therefore able to develop long-period expectations and projects: «the maintenance of collective unity during a theoretically infinite time gives a value to the social being that is, ceteris paribus, infinitely superior to that of any individual» (Simmel 1897: 78). Therefore, society, in comparison with the individuals of which it is composed, is an absolute reality: (social groups) maintain themselves in identical form, while their members change and disappear.

On the other hand, human beings – which the collectivist perspective considers to be entities enclosed within their singularity, and therefore as individuals – are defined on the basis of characteristics symmetrically contrary to those of society. In fact, individuals are identified both by dispersion (rather than by unity), in that they consist of a disaggregated mass, a «lonely crowd» (Simmel 1950; Riesman 1950), and by a poverty of meaning. In this respect, individuals are incapable of transcending the horizon of «poor needs» (Maslow 1954) and are therefore enclosed in the accidentality of their idiosyncratic singularity: they are fungible and replaceable.

\[\text{13} \text{ Durkheim (1960: 226) describes mankind’s inability to transcend the horizon of poor needs as follows: «The functions indispensable for physical life concern only the individual. In their regard, therefore, man can act reasonably without purposes that transcend them. In so far as man has no other needs, he is therefore self-sufficient and can live happily with no other objective than living. This is not the case, however, with the civilized adult who has reached adulthood», who adopts «superior forms of human activity: art, morality, religion, political faith, science itself».}\]
B. The individualist axiological perspective\textsuperscript{14} considers humans as univocally individual beings, i.e. as belonging to themselves or as having a self-referential singularity manifest in the flux of their subjective experience organized by the space-time coordinates historically specific to that same experience and constituted by the «“here” of my body and the “now” of my “present”» (Berger - Luckmann 1966: 22). Hence, the individualist perspective identifies the essential features of human beings as the freedom and the autonomy of choices which draw their motivational force from the flow and multiformity of the self’s experiences.

Compared with the collectivist perspective, the individualist perspective is structured by an inversion of the axiological hierarchy. The axiologically higher level is that of the human being considered as wholly an individual, while the axiologically lower level is that of society. Taken to its extreme, this perspective confers an absolute character on individual choices, which are conceived as free and autonomous. Such choices are «sovereign»: that is, they are absolved (ab-solutus) from justifying themselves on the basis of evaluative parameters which transcend the level of impulses, inclinations, preferences, or immediate desires. Indeed, choices are deemed to be unimpeachable by any judgmental body, whether internal (the «tribunal of the conscience»: Simmel 1950) or external (judgement by the public sphere). This absoluteness of the human being considered as solely an individual produces the «sacredness» of privacy (Goffman 1959) as a sphere of choices unimpeachable by others. This emphasis on the absolute freedom is largely accompanies by the disappearance of restraints and responsibilities.

Also to be stressed is that the individualist perspective comprises numerous different sociological approaches: in particular, both the well-known methodological individualism, and what I have called the sociological minimalism characterized by a radical individualism which introduces an ambiguous and complex axiological perspective\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{14} It should be pointed out that the individualism referred to in this section does not coincide with the epistemological perspective of methodological individualism, which is instead one of the various epistemologies derivable from the individualist axiology.

\textsuperscript{15} The axiological ambiguity and complexity of the sociological approach of radical individualism is manifest in the following aspects. A neutralization of differences – specifically, a levelling of «qualitative distinctions» between an axiologically higher level of reality and an axiologically lower level – and an extolling of differences: specifically, a literally «absolute» postulation, that is, one which is not subordinate to a broader horizon of experience and action of each particular and contingent entity of the human, social and cultural condition. This «non-difference» and «difference» can be combined into a range of features pertaining to contemporary Western society: (a) the perception and comprehension of the self and the world, marked by the fragmentation of experience, so that the inner lifecourse and the flow of external reality are simultaneously perceived as undifferentiated, in that they consist of a succession of relatively random and different «nows»; for each of these moments is deemed worth living and being enjoyed in its particularity and transitoriness; (b) the social attitude, distinguished by a blasèness characterized at the same time by non-difference – blasèness blunts differences of value (Simmel 1984) – and by difference: the blasè restricts expectations by focusing the attention on the bic et nunc of everyday life; (c) the social action, represented emblematically by consumer choices, which are distinguished at the same time by their non-difference – for consumers, their choices among the «rich, heterogeneous assortment of accessible possibilities» are optional, that is, discretionary and non-commital – and by the difference among those choices – every act of consumption is an expression of the freedom and autonomy of the private sphere which constitute «the basis for the somewhat illusory sense of autonomy which characterizes the typical person in modern society» (Luckmann 1967: 97-98); (d) the society, marked by social fragmentation: this state configures society...
C. The axiological perspective of citizenship: besides the two classic axiological perspectives of collectivism and individualism, we believe it possible to identify in sociology a third perspective with an axiological profile *sui generis*: what we have called the citizenship perspective. This considers human beings jointly in their individual and collective dimensions, and therefore as capable of free-and-binding (i.e. responsible) choices. The citizenship perspective differs from the other two (a) *in negative*, because it refuses to give an axiological profile to the relationship between the individual dimension and the collective dimension, attributing equal importance to each of them; (b) *in positive*, because it hinges, not on «individual» or «collective» elements, but on the «personal» element, and centres its axiological profile precisely on the latter. Hence, the citizenship perspective draws a hierarchical distinction, not between the individual and collective dimensions, but between the single person's levels of existence. In the citizenship perspective, the human being, considered as a «citizen», is defined on the basis of the two principles constituting the person in the sociological meaning of the term: uniqueness and relationality. «Uniqueness» denotes the transformation of the ontological status of the citizen’s singularity from that of being a simple exemplar of a species to that of absolute reality, that is, «deprivatized and deindividualized» (Arendt 1958) and thus irreplaceable because it has no equivalents. «Relationality» denotes the openness to others that is constitutive of the citizen. The corollary to this definition of «citizen» based on the personal element is the attribution of crucial sociological importance to the activities of the human mind. These mental activities – the ability to formulate strong evaluations and apply them in ordinary life; the «reflexive deliberation» that hierarchizes the person's interests and values (Archer 2003) – possess an intrinsic and immediate axiological profile. Indeed, the more the citizen is able internally to develop axiological hierarchies and to act on the basis of those hierarchies, making motivated personal choices and being aware of their consequences for others, the more the relationship between the individual and collective dimension becomes paritarian. Consequently, the more the axiological profile intensifies in the «inner forum», the more it becomes irrelevant to the relationship between the individual and collective dimensions.

The citizenship perspective can been specified more precisely by considering the following aspects: (a) the features of citizenship understood in the sociological sense; (b) citizenship as tension, and sometimes conflict, between the individual and collective dimensions considered as the poles of existence, and therefore as configuring a specific pattern of social action; (c) the human being as capable of elaborating axiological hierarchies.

as a Tönnesian *Gesellschaft*, although one of expressive rather than utilitarian type, that is, as an aggregate of social atoms *undifferentiated* in that they are levelled into the common insignificance of minimum selves able to establish only superficial bonds, on the logic of an expressive contractualism (Bellah, 1985), and *different*, in that each of them is identified by an expressive individualism [ibid.]; (e) the culture, marked by a cultural relativism indicative at the same time of *non-difference* – no doctrine or idea is considered superior or inferior to any other in the order of truth and transcendental values – and of *difference* – every doctrine or idea is attributed a value, a legitimacy, «equal» to that of all the others on offer in the supermarket of ideas (Boudon 1996).
(a) The citizenship perspective considers humans not as individual or collective beings, but as citizens, in the twofold political-juridical and above all sociological meaning of that term (Schnapper 2000; Marshall 1950; Dahrendorf, liberal-communitarian debate). On this basis, following Dahrendorf (1979), the citizen has life-chances which result from a combination of options and constraints. This entails that citizenship is necessarily both a source of rights and a source of obligations: in other words, it conjugates freedom and equality with duties and responsibilities. Thus the citizen founds his/her sociological identity upon the binomial «personal subjectivity/collective solidarity», and therefore on uniqueness and creative relationality, and hence on the ability to create bonds primarily through generativity (Erikson 1950). In short, a citizen is definable as a human being identified at the cognitive level by a deliberate reflexivity; at the level of action, by autonomy and by responsibility for choices; on the affective level, by an originality which is not self-referential but, on the contrary, open to others and to ourselves. These distinctive features of the citizen manifest in the most congruous manner the elements of the person, in the sociological meaning of the term, and of the humanist conception, that are constitutive of our approach.

(b) The citizenship perspective does not replicate the univocality and unilaterality distinctive of human beings envisaged by the collectivist and individualist perspectives. Indeed, far from neutralizing the double polarity of human beings consisting in the co-presence of the individual and the collective elements, the citizenship perspective is distinguished by its recognition of the tension, sometimes conflictual, between these two elements.

Hence the citizenship perspective – as suggested by the sociological definition of citizen as a person able to make autonomous-and-responsible choices – gives particular salience to the tension between juxtaposed elements: freedom and restraint, autonomy and responsibility, subjectivity and strong communitarian and cooperative bonds. It is no coincidence that this tension between the individual and social poles has been evidenced by sociologists belonging to a national tradition, that of the United States, profoundly influenced by the citizenship perspective. This fundamental tension between freedom and restraint is a crucial aspect of the humanist constructionism approach, because it precludes every social determinism. In fact, this tension – specifically the recognition of the constant co-presence of both a decisive margin of autonomy in choices and the binding nature of those same choices – shows that the present abounds with possibilities, both positive (opportunities) and negative (risks). This implies that the future is uncertain, being fraught with both promises and threats: hence society is in state of constant experimentation («the examinations are never-ending») (see Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address).

16 For Berger and Berger (1983) the nuclear family, that of the US in particular, is based on a delicate balance between individual and social responsibility; for Alexander civil society «is paradoxically, a dimension of social organization rooted simultaneously in a radical individualization and a thorough-going collectivism», and between these individual and collective dimensions there is a «tension-in-balance» (1994: 13-14).
From these axioms derive, on the analytical level, firstly a specific conception of *social action* (of which the tradition of sociological thought provides an example with the category of «fateful action» developed by Goffman in *Where the Action is*, 1967). The sociological identification of the citizen on the basis of the autonomy/responsibility bipolarity entails in fact a characterization of the citizen’s social action based on the decision-consequences scheme, which following Goffman, structures social action on the duality between «problematicity» and «consequentiality». «Problematicity» denotes that achieving the goal pursued by the person is by no means guaranteed, but is instead contingent: that is to say, it may or may not be accomplished. «Consequentiality» denotes that the achievement or non-achievement of some goal of action exerts a substantial long-period influence on the future of the actor. This kind of duality-structured social action can be plausibly termed a «serious game»: an oxymoron which efficaciously conveys the tension between the juxtaposed elements of, on the hand, freedom and autonomy (the «game») and, on the other, constraint and responsibility (the «seriousness») – a tension which constitutes the distinctive feature of our citizenship perspective.

(c) The citizenship perspective gives prime importance to the human ability to think, to feel, and to act axiologically, as Taylor (1989: 14, 19) writes:

There are questions about [...] constitutes a rich, meaningful life – as against one concerned with secondary matters or trivia; [which implies] «the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us».

Taylor therefore expressly draws a dichotomy between a «qualitatively distinct» level of existence and a level of banal existence bound up in the monotonous seriality of time-points and space-points which its merely quantitative character renders «undifferentiated».

Hence, in the citizenship perspective, the features of a reality which is richly meaningful – in that it is marked by the twofold ability to overcome particularisms and to stabilize over time – do not inhere in society, as in the collectivist perspective but, on the contrary, in the single person; or more properly, to put it *à la* Heidegger, in the «authentic» level of the person’s existence that corresponds to Taylor’s «rich and meaningful life». This signifies that the citizen is able firstly to access «consciousness of us», and especially of the other, assuming social bonds of various extents and importance; and secondly, to stabilize him/herself in time – that is, s/he is able to actively extend his/her protensions into the future (Jameson 1984) by assuming long-term commitments. In sum, for the citizenship perspective the person is an absolute, in the sense that s/he is unique, and this absoluteness is manifest, not in the condition of being absolved (*absoluti*) from bonds and commitments, as envisaged by the individualist perspective, but rather in the ability to assume those bonds and those commitments. It is this ability that denotes the «deprivatized and deindividualized» nature of human beings as citizens, and by virtue of which their singularity is transformed – transfigured – into uniqueness (or as Ricoeur puts it: into «self-hood»). It is therefore in the ability to assume bonds
and commitments that the sociological concept of person is fully manifest. Just as it is in the readiness to grasp the opportunities and to assume the risks connected with the assumption of bonds and commitments that the humanist element of our constructionism is fully manifest.

In light of the foregoing discussion of the three axiological perspectives of collectivism, of individualism, and of citizenship, the axiological profile of our humanist constructionist approach can be located within the third perspective: that of citizenship. It is evident, in fact, that the citizenship perspective reproduces the three elements that constitute humanist constructionism. More precisely, the citizen, in the sociological meaning used here, is fully manifest as a person who values his/her subjective qualities in light of a humanist conception and acts as a subject embedded in a network of relationships and characterized by historicity. Moreover, for humanist constructionism, the citizenship perspective introduces an epistemological «surplus value» consisting in the axiological profile just discussed.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This study has made an epistemological proposal (humanist constructionism) characterized by elements – the sociological category of person, the humanist conception, and historicity – which give rise to the specific difference of this approach from the general frame of constructionism. This specific difference, which hinges on valorization of the axiological profile, makes the humanist constructionism similar to the sociologies that set value on the person of agents, and specifically on their internal sphere, as in Margaret Archer’s morphogenetic approach. In *La libertà responsabile* (Cesareo - Vaccarini 2006) the humanist constructionist approach is developed in analytical detail and yields ideal-typical concepts of Weberian inspiration which are used to conceptualize particular historical-social formations or situations, with specific reference to the history of Western society.

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