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NEW EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN 'POSTMODERNITY'

NOWE EPISTEMOLOGICZNE WYZWANIA BADAŃ BIOGRAFICZNYCH W „PONOWOCZESNOŚCI"

ABSTRACT: The following article deals with the problem of a dramatic change of the modern 'subject code'. Modernity has changed. The magic of individuality, the autonomy of the subject that successfully opposes the class conventions of pre-modernity has probably become a myth and perhaps turned into a compulsion to be 'singular' in late modernity, as Andreas Reckwitz points it. We rediscover new dimensions of 'subjectivisation' and 'governmentality', as Michel Foucault identified it decades before. And we are even reminded of Pierre Bourdieu's polemical thesis that the idea of a consistent biography is a pure illusion. Has 'modern subject' lost its importance? Is there no way out from this perspective? The article closes with a 'skeptical optimism'.
KEYWORDS: modernity, postmodernity, subject code, singularisation, subjectivisation, governmentality, biographical illusion.

ABSTRAKT: Poniższy artykuł dotyczy problemu radykalnej zmiany współczesnego „kodu podmiotu". Nowoczesność uległa zmianie. Magia indywidualności, autonomia podmiotu, który skutecznie przeciwstawia się klasowym konwencjom przednowoczesności, w późnej nowoczesności stała się prawdopodobnie mitem i być może przekształciła się w przymus bycia „szczególnym" (*singular*), jak wskazuje Andreas Reckwitz. Odkrywamy na nowo inne wymiary „subiektywizacji" i „rządomyślności", zidentyfikowane kilka dekad wcześniej przez Michela Foucaulta. Przypomina się nawet polemiczna teza Pierre'a Bourdieu, że idea spójnej biografii to czysta iluzja. Czy „nowoczesny podmiot" stracił na znaczeniu? Czy nie ma wyjścia z tej perspektywy? Artykuł kończy się w duchu „sceptycznego optymizmu".
SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: nowoczesność, ponowoczesność, kod podmiotu, singularyzacja, subiektywizacja, rządomyślność, iluzja biograficzna.

Modernity has changed. The current 'digitalisation narrative' has revolutionised our lifeworlds and our working worlds. It has forced new patterns of division onto late-modern societies, superimposed on old class differences but without qualifying them: between the creative and the low-skilled, between men and women, between the indigenous population and migrants, between hetero- and homosexuals, between urban and rural dwellers, between digital natives and those sceptical of technology, between young and old. It has also called into question the 'subject code' of classical modernity – with very direct implications for the construct of 'biography' (Alheit 2018): the magic of individuality, the autonomy of the subject that successfully opposes the class conventions of pre-modernity and which keeps alive the hope of perpetual progress,

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has probably become a myth and perhaps turned into a compulsion to be 'singular', special, with a 'unique feature' (Reckwitz 2017, pp. 429-442), a compulsion which embraces individuals, organisations, even collectives and the things of everyday life and forces them into a whirlpool of non-stop marketing. Foucault's prediction, in his lectures on the 'history of governmentality' as early as the late 1970s, of the 'generalisation of the economic form' (2000, p. 261) appears to be coming true. Just like the two effects that this trend is producing: the subjugation of all non-economic areas of life, namely social relationships and individual needs, under strictly economic rationales, and the power of global 'cultural capitalism' to subjugate even government policies to a permanent 'economic tribunal'.

A qualitatively new theoretical perspective on biography has been established in late modernity, and not just in educational science. Early studies by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (Giddens 1991; Beck 1986, 1992; Beck et al. 1996) were already positing the diagnosis of a radical *'individualisation'* of social existence due to traditional social milieus that were obviously disintegrating, while a dramatic increase in decision-making options was forcing individuals to become reflexive 'agents of the self'. However, since the turn of the millennium, awareness of a perceptible transformation of modernity has further intensified. We realise a trend from 'individualisation' to 'singularisation', as Andreas Reckwitz (2017) describes it (1). We rediscover new dimensions of 'subjectivisation' and 'governmentality', as Michel Foucault (2000) identified it decades before (2). And we are reminded of Pierre Bourdieu's *'biographical illusion'* (1990) – a polemical essay which he published more than 30 years ago (3). Has the *'modern subject'* really ended? Is there no way out from this perspective? (4). The following considerations deal with such questions.

1. Individualisation and singularisation

The most pointed diagnosis of contemporary society at present is provided by Andreas Reckwitz, a German cultural sociologist who predicts a *'society of singularities'* (2017). According to Reckwitz, this new form of society can be traced to three trends that are initially unrelated: (a) a 'new middle class' that began to establish itself in Western democracies in the 1970s and 1980s, featuring changed lifestyles and greater needs for authenticity; (b) a replacement of industrial capitalism by a kind of 'cultural' capitalism and (c) the digital revolution, not just in contemporary working environments, but also in the communicative infrastructures of the lifeworld as a whole (Reckwitz 2017, pp. 102-110).

Each of these trends follows its own logic, to begin with. The obvious transformation of values in that new middle class (already noted by Inglehart 1977) does have

historical precedents in the 'counter-cultures' that accompany modernity. These include not only those *counter cultures* associated with '1968' as a significant date, but also early 19th-century Romanticism, or the *Lebensreform* ('life reform') movement a century later. The notion that new, post-materialistic value orientations develop in a society characterised by burgeoning mass consumption, and appear to an ambitious stratum of educated and creative protagonists to be a worthy goal to strive for, is a plausible one, although by no means novel.

The 'cultural capitalism' that is engendered in the process also obeys its own developmental logic. It does away with industrial mass production, which appears to be reaching the limits of its usefulness with its standardised production lines. In its place, it creates a structure in which the special or the unique, is put on show. The markets in this new form of capitalism are no longer arenas where mass-produced products compete against each other, but instead are *'visibility, valorisation and affectation markets'* (Reckwitz 2017, p. 107). The competitive criterion is the particular, the special, the individual. Consumers no longer prefer a BMW 3-series car, but a product which is specifically manufactured to their taste and testifies to the singularisation of their own choice. Attractive is no more the *pure material dimension*, rather the *symbolic value of the unique aspect* of the consumer product.

It is precisely this option that is made possible by the digital revolution in technology. The latter is what guarantees industrial production processes that result, not in Fordist standardisation but in differentiated products that are made to fit. This technological innovation, too, is not designed originally to provide singularities. It is the inevitable result of computer development, especially in the military field (Ceruzzi 2003). Its importance for the new knowledge and cultural economy is an interesting but by no means planned coincidence.

The interaction of these three factors – the coming into being of a new, economically privileged middle class that is mostly involved in creative fields of work in the new service industries and whose lifestyle is characterised by successful self-realisation, the transformation from industrial to cultural capitalism, and the penetration of new production practices, media communication and everyday social relationships by digitalisation – has dramatically changed the frameworks for biographies in late modernity. 'The radical singularisation and culturalisation of all elements of life – housing, food, travel, body culture, education, etc. – that is happening here, goes hand in hand with investment in one's own status and singularity capital and in the representation of this *special* life before others.' (Reckwitz 2017, p. 108).

This coinciding of three different developments in late modernity needs to be critically reflected upon, however. The option of the special – in the world of work by expecting individuals to each have their own, creative profile of competencies, in

leisure time by choosing highly unusual forms of self-realisation, as consumers by the attraction of the unique and distinctive – has become the *compulsion of the singular* to which that newly arisen middle class of the educated and creative must subject itself and which pushes people in precarious situations on the margins of society, who account for an increasing proportion of the population, out of the core areas of social life. The biographically autonomous 'subject', that myth at the heart of the bourgeois concept of *Bildung* (Alheit 2018, pp. 324-327), is unmasked by the singularities of late modernity: what we find operating behind the superficially special, behind the inflated markets for attention and valorisation populated by the agents and consumers of the extra-ordinary, the attractive and the authentic, are placement and ranking strategies – the emotionless and functional algorithms of digital technology. The late-modernity 'subject', that 'I' which has been stylised into something special, is literally the 'subjugated' (Lat. *subiectum*), and involuntarily represents what Michel Foucault convincingly described as 'subjectivisation'.

2. Subjectivisation and governmentality

For Foucault, however, this phenomenon is neither a discovery unique to late modernity nor is it as unambiguous as it might seem at first glance. In 'The Subject and Power', he states: 'There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault 1987, p. 275).

If one looks at how Foucault's use of concepts evolves in the course of his oeuvre, it seems that his focus on subjugation (French *assujettissement*) is initially dominant. In his later work, the subjectivisation of the individual through his self-empowerment (French *subjectivation*) comes to the fore. In Foucault's case, however, that observation means nothing less than a banal correction to his original concept of subjectivisation. It has to do, instead, with the *'microphysics of power'*: 'If there are power relations that diffuse through the entire social field, it is because freedom is everywhere.' (Foucault 2005b, p. 290) The subtle interaction of inescapable subjugation and self-empowerment as resistance are precisely what define the changing historical relationship of subject and power.

In his Collège de France lectures on the 'History of Governmentality' (Foucault 2004), Foucault develops a kind of historical anthropology of heterogeneous and discontinuous 'arts of government' (Foucault 2000, p. 42). The essence is summed up in the interesting observation that the modern western state is the result of a liaison between 'political' and 'pastoral' techniques of wielding power (Foucault 1987, p. 248). According to Foucault, 'pastoral power' is a Christian religious concept in which the

relationship between the 'shepherd' and his 'flock' is about the 'government of souls' (Foucault 1987, p. 249). The origin of this idea can be explained historically by the growth of Christianity from a community of religious virtuosos in the early Middle Ages into a church with a mass following in which the only way it seemed possible to safeguard the Christian lifestyle in the long term was for the individual to assume personal responsibility for the salvation of his soul. Confession – only once a year at first, then more and more frequently – was the institution that 'trained' this newly assumed self-control. 'Pastoral power' thus consisted in the subject beginning to 'rule' itself in alignment with that power (Hahn 1982).

This concept of governmentality is secularised and extended in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, says Foucault. The sovereignty of government separates itself from the figure of the 'Prince' and becomes an abstract responsibility of everybody. In one passage, Foucault defines governmentality as 'the totality of institutions and practices by means of which people are controlled, from administration to education' (2005a, p. 116). And what interests him particularly is how disciplinary technologies change, how security mechanism arise and how the relationship between the state and the economy transforms. His concluding diagnosis relates to what he calls the 'generalisation of economic form' (Foucault 2000, p. 261), which has two drastic impacts: it also subjects the non-economic spheres of social relationships and individual needs to economic rationales and puts additionally current state politics under 'a kind of permanent economic tribunal' (lecture on 21.3.1979).

However, the special feature of governmentality as a phenomenon remains the fact that the techniques of power and dominance that are constantly emerging and developing in modernity can only function when the subjects affected by them develop complementary *'self-techniques'* of their own to match those techniques of dominance. These analyses are certainly relevant for biographical research as well. In his study entitled 'Surveillance and Punishment', long before he developed the concept of governmentality, Foucault produced a critical analysis of this interest in the biographical:

'For a long time, ordinary individuality – the everyday individuality of everybody – remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by uninterrupted writing, was a privilege […]. The disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality, and made of this description a means of control and a method of domination […]. This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection. The carefully collated life of mental patients or delinquents belongs, as did the chronicle of kings or the adventures of the great popular bandits, to a certain political function of writing; but in a quite different technique of power' (Foucault 1976, pp. 246-247).

Foucault's socio-historical analysis raises awareness of the fact that any (educational) scientific interest in biography is always embedded in a social context. Biographical

subjects construct themselves within a historical and social space and are exposed to institutional structures and contingent definitions of what it means to be a subject. That could lead to the radical conclusion, of course, that biography is nothing but an 'illusion'.

3. The 'biographical illusion'? Criticism of the criticism

That is precisely the conclusion drawn by *Pierre Bourdieu*, Foucault's fellow countryman and colleague, in an unusually provocative essay on the 'biographical illusion', in which he refers to life history as a 'perfect social artefact' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 80). He challenges the 'complicity' he saw 'between biographical narrators with an interest in what might be called a "nice story" and researchers who see themselves on a professional quest for "meaning"' (1990, p. 76). The product, very often, was that 'linear' type of life story which has nothing to do with reality and which is also deeply 'un-modern'. Citing Faulkner and Proust as examples, Bourdieu shows how the modern novel has long since taken leave of the rhetorical conventions of narratives. It clings to biographical identity 'only at the price of a massive abstraction' which basically means nothing but the *proper name* (1990, p. 78). Proust's talk of the 'Swann of Buckingham Palace' or the 'Albertine of those days' refers to the sequence of *independent* states into which our life course could fall. However, such sequences do not justify a 'life story' but at the most a 'trajectory' in social space 'that is constantly developing and is subject to never-ending transformations' (1990, p. 83).

In three respects, Bourdieu's provocation can help to provide a more precise answer to the question concerning a theoretical framework for biographically based education: (1) It explains the *social* phenomenon of 'biography' to us, in unsentimental terms, and makes us somewhat sceptical about 'biography' as a purely *semantic construct*. (2) It confronts us with a pointedly sociological perspective and may sharpen perception for an *educational* approach to the biographical. (3) His position is dubious and questionable in a most stimulating way, but for precisely that reason it gives us an opportunity to reflect on *biography as a life history and a learning history*.

(Re. 1) Concealed behind Bourdieu's rejection of the 'biographical illusion' is a specific diagnosis of modernity, namely that brand of scepticism which characterises the discontinuous experience of reality as a collage in the *nouveau roman* – at most, biographies are trajectories in social space. It is worthwhile enlightening others about positions that are passed through, but there is no such thing as a coherent story or history to be told. This attitude has nothing in common with post-modern constructions and is not in any sense a plea for 'paralogical knowledge' (Lyotard 1986). It conceives of itself as radically *modern* (Liebau 1990, p. 85), because it recognises the dissolution of conventions as an opportunity.

This rigorous perspective makes an irony of the educational and therapeutic idea of healable damage caused to biographical identity, and places modern biography unsentimentally into its structural context: 'Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient sequence of events, with any ties other than those to a subject [...] is almost as absurd as trying to explain a route on the metro without taking account of the overall network, i.e. the matrix of objective relations between the various stations' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 87). Such a structuralistically explained and strictly sociological perspective belabours the important insight into the 'sociality' of the biographical, however, it ignores the latent *'biographicity of the social'* (Alheit & Dausien 2000): Even if the various metro stations in Bourdieu's metaphor can be defined in terms of the network of their respective connections, the route from station to station must still be travelled. Getting on and off are decisions which obey a logic of their own.

Without this 'obstinacy', biographies are inconceivable. Nor can the coherence and continuity of biographical self-experience be simply discredited as an 'illusion', because biographical subjects cannot suspend their biographical knowledge every time their biography enters a new 'state', but have to reactivate that knowledge to a certain degree. An interesting question, however, is whether such biographies will still be 'worth narrating' in the future, i.e. whether they will still produce a 'life history' that can be narratively reconstructed – since the narrative structure of experience needs to be meshed with the history of collectives (Habermas 1981, pp. 206-208). Yet, when individuals are cut off by the radical modernisation of traditional lifeworlds from the resources of traditional or unquestioned, shared experience, a key biographical competency may be lost as a consequence of being *networked* into collective contexts.

(Re. 2) There is no denying the discontinuities and frictions that occur in modern biographies. Bourdieu's critique brings this fact into sharper focus. But is it enough to describe the lives of contemporaries whose biographies change in an unplanned but unmistakeable way as nothing but a series of 'positions'? Can the emergent windows of opportunity that do indeed exist, even at the individual, positional levels for actors in their particular nexus with other social actors and with structures of power and dominance, really be exploited in a way that filters out the biographical perspective; that is without any recourse to action resources deriving from earlier positional experience on the part of individuals, and without the notion of positional opportunities that could biographically succeed current embroilments? Viewed in this way, Bourdieu's 'structuralist voyeurism' does not appear to be even sociologically convincing. To solve the broader problem facing *educational science*, it would be counter-productive. Yet what sort of answer could educationalists provide when an unreflected return to the 'therapeutic paradigm' is blocked? What chances are there of understanding the subjects of contemporary biographies not only as *victims* of modernisation, but also

as *learning* individuals who discover and appropriate new scope and opportunities for their biographies?

We 'learn' in the course of modernisation to dispense with certainties and conventions of the lifeworld that were previously accepted without question. This involuntary reneging doubtlessly harbours the risk of banal *de-learning*, of falling backwards into 'pre-conventional' behaviour. However, there is also the chance that we form 'post-conventional' action schemes, thus learning to tap into entirely new biographical options[1]. This opportunity has always been an integral part of modernisation processes in the past. It leads to the formation of new socio-moral milieus in the constitutive phase of the modern proletariat (Alheit 1994), to a class 'defending' itself through its own social integration. However, it is also the driving force behind that essentially 'moral-economic' function of the modern social welfare state, namely preventing the totally market-based exploitation of the individual's labour power (Kohli 1989, pp. 272-273). It could also become the foundation for what is initially a very vague option, namely that subjects at risk collaborate (through radical individualisation) in new processes of learning and association.

(Re. 3) Of course, that would also contribute to the production of 'life stories', which would in no way be purely illusionary because they would lend expression to the *persistence* of biographical experience in the face of modernisation and social change. We can only understand the 'logic' of historical fractures and discontinuities, of wars, disasters and revolutions, when we have understood people's need for continuity in the midst of these discontinuities (Niethammer 1990, p. 92). In contrast to Bourdieu, we can only develop an educationalist perspective when we see and understand continuity and discontinuity as a *'learning history'*. We have to realise, like Bourdieu, that the 'stories' will be more strenuous in the future than the narrative reconstructions of the past. The forces of singularisation to which Reckwitz (2017) draws attention, provide a foretaste in that respect.

4. Unresolved issues and future outlook

Does this all mean that the modern subject has come to an end? Has talk of a personal biography actually become an illusion? Does it still make sense to talk of a liaison of biography and education? Does educationalists' interest in the biographies of learning

[1] Such processes can be observed empirically, for example in the transformation of trajectory-like (i.e. heteronymous) processual structures into action-related (i.e. autonomous) processual structures of the life course (Schütze 1984): for example at the end of a drug-taking career, where a cathartic collapse allows a fresh start that is biographically self-determined; or in the status passage from long-term unemployment into a new skilling process.

individuals help to modify the trends described? Premature *dystopias* fail to realise that, throughout European modernity, biographies have always been threatened by crises (Reckwitz 2006; Alheit 2018). '*Bourgeois modernity*' from the end of the 18th to the end of the 19th century can uphold its ideal of the autonomous, educated subject only by accepting systematic class divisions and banishing the majority of social individuals into dependence and (educational) poverty. By creating corporatist forms of participation in social life, even for the lower social classes, '*industrial modernity*' from the 1880s to the end of the 20th century provided at least a chance of democratic constitutions, and thus surrogate forms of equality for many, yet failed to remove the structural causes of factual inequality, because it helped capitalist economies to become more flexible and adaptable. National Socialism and the neo-socialist post-war societies in Eastern Europe document the dramatic contradictions of this phase in the development of modernity, which did not by any means contribute to the autonomy of all subjects. With a kind of 'hyper-aestheticisation', the '*post-modern*' phase that commenced in the 1970s and 1980s not only threatened to make individuality dependent on markets, but also engendered populist right-wing counter-movements that call its core tenets into question. All these contradictory trends need to be put into perspective and reassessed once again, if one adopts the post-colonial analytical perspective and takes into consideration those social processes that have occurred 'in the shadow' of '*western*' modernity, or rather as the brutal price to be paid for it, and which have enduring effects to this day. These also have impacts on the formation of subjects and on biographical research (Spies & Tuider 2017).

Despite these crises and destructive potential in every period of modernity, there are astonishing examples of how resistant the biographical can be – the impressive collection of life stories from the Po Valley in Piedmont, for example, which Nuto Revelli (1977) presented in *Il mondo dei vinti* ('The World of the Defeated'), leads us to the boundaries of conventional biographical rhetoric. It breaks with the euphemism that the 'life story' must be a well-produced document of social integration and reminds us of the possibility that the very insight into the 'states' that people go through can be enlightening in itself. Revelli's remarkable collection also sensitises one to the less dramatic consequences of modernisation – the 'normal' frictions in contemporary women's biographies (Dausien 1996), the discontinuities and 'traps' encountered when cultural boundaries and levels of modernisation are transgressed (Apitzsch 1989), or to changing 'positions within the social space' (Mannheim 1964, p. 526)[2], the overlapping

[2] This unusually modern expression, coined by Karl Mannheim as early as his classic essay on 'The Problem of Generations' ([1928] 1964, 524ff), is useful for describing the complex relationship between individual biographical uniqueness and the ever-changing influences of the social space (class, gender, generation, etc.).

of potentials for crisis, which can also be identified in late-modern biographies and which can be relativised with laconically reflected acceptance. The impressive autobiographical essay by Didier Eribon, the French sociologist (*'Returning to Reims'*, 2015), is a successful example of this resistance, which must be newly created in every phase of history. The formation of biographical identity is a project that never ceases, historically speaking, to impose new demands on us, but it does not look as if we can escape from those demands.

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