

# Becoming individuals: processes of individualization and reflexivity

Enzo Colombo<sup>1</sup>

ORCID: 0000-0001-7231-5819

## Abstract

The article aims to show how young adults (starting with empirical research in Italy, but with the aspiration to highlight more diffuse phenomena among youth growing in the constant experience of the ‘crisis’) face the widespread injunction to be active, creative, flexible, and independent, that is, to be entrepreneurs of themselves. Young people born at the end of the last century have grown up in the midst of continuous crises – economic, health, and geopolitical – which have accentuated the tension between the social drive for personal autonomy and a growing awareness of the inability to individually solve problems that are systemic. Although the pressure to develop an entrepreneurial self and to internalize the drive for individualization may overlap with the development of a form of individualism, they can also promote new forms of sociation, based on sharing and cooperation. These forms are strongly supported by dialogical reflexivity, that is, by social conditions that promote processes of innovation and change stemming from common actions and constant confrontation with different points of view. Introducing the concept of dialogic reflexivity, the article analyses the practices that young adults put in place to support forms of individualization released from mere individualism and how social research and public policies can foster reflexive processes and create favourable conditions for youth participation and inclusion.

## Keywords

Youth – Individualization – Individualism – Dialogical reflexivity – Itineraries.

---

**1-** Università degli Studi di Milano, Milano, Italy. Contact: enzo.colombo@unimi.it



<https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202349270106eng>  
This content is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type BY 4.0.

## ***Tornar-se indivíduos: processos de individualização e reflexividade***

### **Resumo**

*O artigo pretende mostrar como os jovens adultos (começando com pesquisas empíricas na Itália, mas com a aspiração de destacar fenômenos mais difusos entre os jovens que crescem na experiência constante da 'crise') enfrentam a injunção generalizada de serem ativos, criativos, flexíveis e independentes, ou seja, serem empreendedores de si mesmos. Os jovens nascidos no final do século passado cresceram em meio a crises contínuas – econômicas, de saúde e geopolíticas – que acentuaram a tensão entre o impulso social pela autonomia pessoal e uma consciência crescente da incapacidade de resolver individualmente os problemas que são sistêmicos. Embora a pressão para desenvolver um eu empreendedor e internalizar o impulso para a individualização possa se sobrepor ao desenvolvimento de uma forma de individualismo, eles também podem promover novas formas de sociabilidade, baseadas no compartilhamento e na cooperação. Essas formas são fortemente sustentadas pela reflexividade dialógica, ou seja, por condições sociais que promovem processos de inovação e mudança a partir de ações comuns e confronto constante com diferentes pontos de vista. Apresentando o conceito de reflexividade dialógica, o artigo analisa as práticas que os jovens desenvolvem para apoiar formas de individualização libertas do mero individualismo e como a pesquisa social e as políticas públicas podem fomentar processos reflexivos e criar condições favoráveis à participação e inclusão juvenil.*

### **Palavras-chave**

*Juventude – Individualização – Individualismo – Reflexividade dialógica – Itinerários.*

---

### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of the 1990s an important series of sociological analyses and reflections have highlighted a radical crisis – at least in Western societies – of classical modernity (GIDDENS, 1990; BECK, 1992; MELUCCI, 1996). The constituent elements – the 'premises' (BECK; BONSS; LAU, 2003) – of classical modernity have been subject to a deconstruction and radical revision which have rendered ineffective and less reliable the organizational forms, cultural codes, and collective imagination that structured social life in the period of mass industry, the myth of progress and control over nature.

The idea that we have entered a second modernity – 'radical modernity', 'postmodernity' or 'reflective modernity' according to the author concerned – hypothesises that the epochal transition in modern societies today is characterized by the transformation of the basic institutions of industrial society at the same time as a radicalization of its fundamental principles (BECK; BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2002). It is precisely on the basis of the

global success of the principles of modernity (the market economy, the democratization of social life, the enhancement of freedom, autonomy and personal experience, a 'scientific' attitude critical of tradition and the tendency to constantly review the knowledge produced) that unforeseen side effects are generated (acceleration of changes and widespread creation of risks, global financial crises, climate change, constant circulations of people, goods and ideas that question the national dimension as the sole foundation of the social) that make institutions, regulatory arrangements, language, conceptual categories and modern routines ineffective or dysfunctional.

The more complex and confusing articulation of the distinctions, categorizations and institutions that regulated the social and relational order in classical modernity – social class, gender identification, family, transition paths to adult life, work and professional careers, political identification, to name just a few of them – makes social action freer and more uncertain. Individuals are dis-embedded from traditional forms of interaction and find it difficult to find new forms of re-embedding by themselves. Increasingly, individuals are forced to manage their fragile affective, work, family, parental, and child biographies on their own through processes and resources that must be constructed on the basis of obsolete, contradictory, uncertain models (BECK, 1992). Increasingly, people are called upon to individually resolve contradictions that are systemic; they are required to make choices without being able to act on the options available to them and without having sufficient models and information with which to predict the degrees of success and failure of their decisions.

An important part of these transformations that mark the transition to a second modernity is constituted by the accentuation of the processes of individualization. The article intends to provide a theoretical framework within which to interpret the tension that is created between drives towards, on the one hand, self-fulfilment, autonomy, proactivity, and initiative and, on the other hand, individualistic closures, especially for young people who find themselves living in a context of permanent crisis. The interpretative keys proposed are based on a series of qualitative research carried out in the last 15 years with young people aged 18-30 in the Milan area, in Northern Italy (COLOMBO, 2010; COLOMBO; REBUGHINI, 2012, 2019; COLOMBO; LEONINI; REBUGHINI, 2017, 2018; COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022) (to which reference is made for methodological indications).

The article aims to indicate some possible research directions capable of grasping new forms of sociation constituted by the reworking of the principles of individualization in concrete forms of relationship and interaction. By clarifying the analytical distinction between individualization and individualism, the article intends to focus on how the constant and widespread injunction to be active, responsible, and independent subjects is concretely elaborated in the experience of young people. In the final part, the concept of dialogic reflexivity is introduced as a specific competence – and as a possible compass for youth educational policies – for the development of forms of individualization capable of building solidarity relationships that counteract solipsistic closures.

## **The ambivalent thrusts towards individualization**

Individualization must be understood as a result of historical-social processes that place the subject at the centre of social dynamics and relations; processes that, at the same time, build spaces of individual freedom and structural constraints that require the subject to exercise his/her freedom as an element necessary for social functioning. To function, modern society needs active, autonomous subjects able to choose (MELUCCI, 1996). The social order is maintained if people ‘participate’, ‘activate’, and make choices. More and more, the economy, politics, and public space function if people assume the active role of “prosumers”; if they participate dynamically in the production of what they consume. Processes of individualization are constantly supported by the convergence of different institutional forces. The production system and contemporary consumption patterns are based on the valorisation of individual capacities. The consumer assumes the burden of a part (increasingly substantial) of the work of producing what (goods and services) s/he consumes: customers must use an ATM to withdraw money from their bank account or manage it; in a supermarket, they must themselves scan the codes of the products they buy; when making online purchases, they must fill in all the necessary information themselves to complete the purchase and start the shipment process; when dealing with public services, they must be able to act as active terminals, both by providing the information required by the services and by having the information and skills necessary to activate the correct one. This implies that the subjects of late modernity, in order to be participating and included citizens, must develop specific skills. They must be able to acquire the necessary information and make the best use of it so that they actively participate in economic and social life (ROSE, 1999). People must invest in the development of their personal capacity (MELUCCI, 1996). School systems are designed to prepare subjects constantly engaged not only in learning to learn but also in acquiring the soft skills necessary to provide value to the productive and relational contexts in which they will find themselves acting. As André Gorz (2010) observes, until the 1970s (in the period of classical modernity), the manufacturing worker was stripped of whatever s/he had first learned and ‘put to the machine’, while the post-Fordist worker had to enter production with all that life and the community had taught him/her. It is this ‘vernacular knowledge’ that the post-Fordist enterprise puts to work and exploits; a knowledge that also includes personal experience. Indeed, even the ‘aesthetic sense’, experiential experience, and individual creativity contribute to strengthening the main social substance common to all commodities and which, according to Gorz, is no longer abstract work but general intelligence. Subjective characteristics, personal skills, creativity, active and proactive participation do not constitute simply a new frontier of value but instead a territory of discipline and expropriation. People are freer and constantly subject to the disciplinary injunction to be free. There is a constant tension – a territory of conflict, therefore – between, on the one hand, greater individual independence and agency capacity and, on the other, forms of discipline increasingly deeply rooted in the bodies and minute practices of everyday life. Such disciplinary drives tend to make it common sense, taken for granted, that a ‘realized’ subject is an active, dynamic, entrepreneur of him/herself (BRÖCKLING, 2016).

As Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiappello (2005) observe, the new capitalism is characterized by the metabolization of the libertarian, individualistic, creative, spontaneous, authentic, autonomous spirit that animated the criticism ('the artistic criticism') of capitalism made by the movements of '68 in conflict with the traditional 'social criticism' which instead asserted values such as solidarity, security and equality. The new late modern subject is then configured as an 'entrepreneur of him/herself', the possessor of a 'human capital' (the totality of his/her potential) to be put to good use. Another powerful push towards individualization – or towards 'singularization', as Danilo Martuccelli (2023) appropriately calls it to emphasize particular aspects of the broader processes of individualization – derives from the market. The transition from the Fordist production of mass, homogeneous, standardized goods to products 'tailored to the customer' enhances the space of consumption as a place where individuals are recognized as unique, different from others, bearers of a plural form of uniqueness and unity (MARTUCCELLI, 2017). The promise of the market of customizable goods is to support subjects in the search for their authenticity, in the singular realization of themselves, and in the enhancement of their most unique and personal characteristics. The concept of singularization highlights that "late-modern subjects attribute value to themselves as individuals, and this attribution is based on the presumption that the freedom to develop oneself as one pleases is unquestionably legitimate and even natural" (RECKWITZ, 2020, p. 211).

From these profound structural transformations of society emerge contrasting thrusts. On the one hand, the increase in differentiation and the lack of shared references may induce individuals to direct their impulses towards immediate, ephemeral and individualistic forms of satisfaction (LIPOVETSKY, 1983; LASCH, 1984; SENNETT, 2006) driven by the so-called "sad passions" (BENASAYAG; SCHMIT, 2003): a sense of helplessness with respect to the possibility of intervening significantly in the options relevant to one's life; scepticism about a future that is expected to comprise more problems, obstacles and delays than opportunities and improvements. On the other hand, they enhance personal abilities, and they emphasize freedom and autonomy by encouraging active participation in social life. Agency assumes greater importance than status, change greater importance than tradition, subjectivity and uniqueness greater importance than conformism and the taken-for-granted. This is an enhancement of individual abilities that is also strongly binding and that eventually imposes specific forms of individuality. If there is a constant call for autonomy and self-determination (BECK, 1992; BAUMAN, 2001), individuals are pushed to develop an entrepreneurial self, constantly 'under construction', incomplete – a self that constitutes a form of discipline and subjugation, constantly requiring individuals to be efficient, open, available, creative and independent (BRÖCKLING, 2016; FARRUGIA, 2022). Guided by the principles of neoliberal economics, the quest to build an entrepreneurial self often leaves individuals with no free choice other than constantly deciding between alternatives that they have not chosen themselves.

Globalization makes these processes 'planetary' and at the same time differentiated and differentiating, not only according to the local and geographical dimension – a horizontal differentiation – but also within the same communities – a vertical differentiation. Social

position, age, cultural and social capital, gender and ethnicity are elements that make 'the need for personal choice' and the pressure to be 'active and autonomous' unevenly distributed constraints or resources.

## **Young people**

The institutional transformations (BECK; BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2002) that created the transition to the second modernity do not constitute an experience of change and discontinuity, but rather an experience of normality for young people born in the late 1990s, the young people of the crisis. Whilst the previous generation was forced to change its foundations and to do so in an unstable condition, having to constantly question the assumptions that made it possible to understand that same change and cope with it, contemporary young people experience this situation of uncertainty, fluidity, lack of stable references as a 'normal' condition, the 'natural' context in which to act (ROBERTS, 2012; SILVA, 2013; FRANCE, 2016; COLOMBO; LEONINI; REBUGHINI, 2017).

The constant drive towards increasing individualization is often experienced not as a break with the past but as the undisputed condition of individual experience. It is internalized as the indispensable condition for personal fulfilment, autonomy, and the ability to recognize oneself – and to be recognized – as a subject (ROSE, 1999).

The young people of the 'crisis generation', born at the end of the last century and raised in the midst of a series of situations characterized by constant uncertainty – the financial crisis of 2008 and its long-term consequences, the pandemic crisis from 2020 onwards and, more recently, the geopolitical crisis of 2022 and its economic backlash – undergo in an acute and unprecedented way the tension between a prescriptive model of independence and individual autonomy and a social context in which individuals experience a constant vulnerability that is not possible to completely overcome on the basis of simple personal commitment (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI, 2019). The need to balance precariousness and uncertainty with the search for autonomy constitutes the everyday context in which young people are required to give meaning to their experience and to find forms of relationship and action that allow them to find a balance – however precarious and always unstable – between personal fulfilment and support for the containment and mitigation of negative risks. Having experienced the condition of dis-embedding, they are looking for new forms of re-embedding, new models of sociation that give meaning to acting in constant uncertainty.

It is by looking at the forms of relationship put in place by this generation that it is possible to grasp some significant aspects of the intersection between the forces behind the construction of active and independent subjects and the tactics put in place to cope with the uncertainty and persistence of the crisis (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022). Growing up in a context of constant crisis and uncertainty radicalizes the processes of individualization, also in terms of an intensifying drive for individualism. But at the same time it tends to support a specific form of generational reactivity that experiments with new forms of relationship, sharing, and cooperation oriented to the management of the complexity, unpredictability, and variability that characterize every aspect of daily life.

Young people are an important source of insights into the contemporary dynamics of individualization processes and how these intersect with the drives towards individualism and collective action. Individualization is most often understood as synonymous with individualism. Although the pressure to internalise the drive for individualisation may overlap with the reinforcement of individualistic attitudes, it is important to maintain a clear analytical distinction between the two concepts.

The term 'individualism' usually refers to a personal attitude that tends to consider that the interests of the individual should prevail over the collective ones. It refers to a weakening of the bonds of solidarity and, at the same time, to the imposition of the idea that it is beneficial to people, if they want to succeed, act independently, 'bowl alone' (PUTNAM, 2000). It emphasises that the high level of competitiveness of contemporary societies, with their insistence on the independent, self-sufficient, result-oriented individual, focused on his/her own actions and goals, promotes the willingness to be solitary and rewards a free-rider attitude: that is, the ability to pass on to others the costs of one's own earnings and to take advantage of the action of others for the full individual benefit. Individualism induces people to be self-centred, narcissistic and competitive in order to affirm their uniqueness, their value (LASCH, 1979; LIPOVETSKY, 1983). Rivalry, competition, the meritocratic ideology that does not recognize the asymmetries of the starting positions, and moral relativism become the compass points that guide them in their solitary battle for self-affirmation, in the constant need to navigate through uncertainty.

However, individualism is a possible but not necessary consequence of individualization. The drive for individualization does not necessarily equate to a self-referential withdrawal into subjectivity (ELLIOTT; LEMERT, 2006; MARTUCCELLI, 2010; COLOMBO; REBUGHINI, 2019). The search for one's own autonomy and independence does not necessarily produce isolated individuals, illusorily autonomous monads. The functioning of contemporary societies requires subjects capable of choice and action, dynamic and flexible; but this does not necessarily imply an individualistic retreat. On the contrary, the drive to seek autonomy and independence, the enhancement of individual uniqueness, and the injunction to be active can also be combined with the need to create new forms of social relations that take individuality into account, recognizing that this can be fully realized only within a cooperative social context that allows adequate recognition of subjectivities.

Thus there is a constant tension between, on the one hand, the construction of independence and enhancement of individual capacities and, on the other, the awareness of the necessary dependence on others and contexts in order to be able to cope with the fragility of oneself amid risks, uncertainties, forces, and powers that are systemic and that cannot be faced and overcome individually. This tension makes it clear that contemporary society is structured in such a way that it requires the individual to be the protagonist, active producer and reproducer of his/her own biography and his/her own social world, but that s/he certainly cannot be an independent and self-sufficient actor in dealing with the risks and uncertainties that have systemic origin and scope (ÁLVAREZ-BENAVIDES; TURNBOUGH, 2022).

Especially among the younger generation, the need to mediate individualization and the management of uncertainty and precariousness often takes the form of experimentation, of implementation that can always be reviewed and subjected to adjustments. It manifests

itself not as a progressive realization that proceeds by successive consolidations, but as a continuous exploration that changes direction, intensity, and modes of implementation according to contexts and situational needs.

Contemporary young people increasingly find themselves at the centre of the contradictory experience of trying, on the one hand, to build a present of autonomy and independence, following a model of enhancement of personal skills in the context of constant work on themselves to build their own unique individuality and, on the other, to create new models of action and interaction in a context in constant change characterized by complexity and uncertainty.

Young people find themselves constantly moving between different relational contexts, in which different rules and languages apply. The experience of migrating from one context to another makes it clear that what is valid in one context cannot be mechanically transferred to another, just as it is not possible to transport without adaptation what has been acquired in a relational situation – recognition, power, bonds, privileges – into other relational situations (MELUCCI, 1996). This experience promotes a relativistic attitude: rather than adhering to a set of defined norms, young people learn that it is important to adapt and to understand what is useful or strategic to use in the context in which they find themselves acting (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI, 2019). The injunction to be self-entrepreneurial takes on an ambivalent value. On the one hand, it induces young people to seek independence, take charge of choices, be active, and build their own path among the multiplicity of possible options by taking responsibility for the outcomes of their actions. On the other hand, it becomes evident that the individual possibilities of choice are limited to the options made available by structural constraints, while acting to modify the options seems far beyond the individual's possibility/capacity. This implies that, at the same time, people experience the importance given to the capacity for individual action at the very moment in which they experience its limitations. The result is that they are constantly looking for personal stability characterized by a strong enhancement of individuality, but that can only be guaranteed by the recognition given by the relationship with others (MARTUCCELLI, 2017).

If we consider the younger generation as primarily defined by the intersection of the subjective experience of the drives to individualization with the inadequacy of what is available, inherited from previous cohorts, to cope with precariousness, uncertainty, complexity, and the pervasiveness of risks, it is possible to focus better on how young people are required to rework the processes of individualization – without being able to ignore their normative force – and, at the same time, are pushed to seek new forms of thought and action that enable them to cope – or feel that they are able to cope – with the pervasiveness of the crisis (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI, 2019).

## **Looking for new forms of re-embedding**

In the scenario of this constant tension between being independent and finding forms of support to cope with systemic problems, it is possible to identify some tactics of action that seek to moderate the intrinsic contradiction of contemporary experience. These are directions of action that are not mutually exclusive, and they can be adopted



by the same subjects in different situations for different purposes. Given the fluidity of contemporary experience, rather than identifying possible 'types of subjects', it is possible and more useful to highlight the possibility of new forms of re-embedding that do not occur routinely through institutions but are instead enacted *ad hoc* by individuals in their interactions with others (BURGESS, 2018; ZHANG; WANG, 2022).

The first tactic of action consists in orienting the processes of individualization towards strong forms of individualism (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022). In this case, the logic of 'bowling alone' prevails. One way to try to overcome the precarious condition that characterizes daily experience may consist in the attempt to find individual solutions to navigate uncertainty. This leads to emphasizing the construction of an entrepreneurial self: study or work more, get busy, be ready to seize opportunities, be flexible and willing to adapt to contexts, increase your know-how and enrich your curriculum with new experiences and new skills, rely only on your own strength, feel responsible for your successes and failures. This attitude appears particularly suitable for situations in which the process of individualization is perceived as a zero-sum game, situations in which the sense of autonomy and individual fulfilment is built and finds realization in forms of competitive comparison with others. In this case, the individual trusts in his/her own personal abilities to cope with the uncertainties and difficulties that s/he encounters in daily life, without the need to sympathize with similar experiences of others. The focus is on the full realization of an entrepreneurial self, characterized by the ability to respond personally to the challenges of uncertainty and the hard task of being the master of one's own destiny. This capacity is combined with the neoliberal injunction to constantly show enthusiasm, flexibility, determination, creativity, innovation and willingness to take risks, invest in one's personal abilities and continuously improve one's skills to meet the needs of competitive contexts (TRNKA; TRUNDLE, 2014; SCHARFF, 2016). From this particular point of view, individualization is definitely aligned with individualism: to succeed means defeating others, beating them in a competition for limited resources in which everyone 'bowls alone' (PUTNAM, 2000). The individual risk is to see self-confidence weaken in the face of the impossibility of changing structural constraints on one's own for one's own benefit. This increases the sense of frustration and fosters the creation of a 'minimal self' (LASCH, 1984) which defines the goals of one's life in extremely narrow terms of pure and simple daily survival, in an attempt to seize the moment, to get by, to live from day to day. On the collective level, extreme individualism risks weakening the social bond and hindering the formation of forms of cooperation that promote civic trust, solidarity, and dialogue, without which democratic institutions become brittle (PUTNAM, 2000; BAUMAN, 2001).

A second way to link individualization with new forms of social relations is to select a small group of people to trust and with whom to share solidarity and mutual help (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022). The re-embedding effort is geared to building strong bonds with a small group ensuring a warm environment in which to feel protected and recognized. People do not remain isolated from each other but connect and socialise mainly with like-minded individuals. In this case, it is the side of community sharing that is privileged; a form of re-embedding limited to rigid boundaries and

declined according to an individualistic perspective. Faced with uncertainty and a very competitive environment, one can seek a safe haven in one's family and a limited number of close friends. A network of strong relationships constitutes a possible reliable point of reference to reduce tensions and anxieties, but it maintains a contradictory character because it contrasts with the self-representation of oneself as an autonomous subject (ÁLVAREZ-BENAVIDES; TURNBOUGH, 2022). This attitude seems particularly effective in coping with situations and moments of great uncertainty and potential risk. The material and symbolic support of the strong community acts as a safety net that guarantees the maintenance of self-esteem even in the case of failures or the evident inadequacy of one's means to deal with complex situations. The cost is, on a personal level, isolation from wider social dynamics and the limited options available; at the social level, the cost is a radicalization of the processes of differentiation and exclusion due to the construction of rigid boundaries that separate Us and Them and define a difference in substance between who is categorized as similar and who is categorized as different.

A third, more direct, way to link the drive to individualization with forms of relationship with others is to consider others as necessary means for one's own self-realization (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022). In this case, the union of different individualities is seen as an effective way to exploit the abilities of others in order to increase the chances of affirming one's individuality. This attitude implies being part of a group without belonging to it completely; it implies being "in" the group without being of the group. Relationships with others are configured according to an instrumental logic, as transitory, dynamic and non-binding bonds. They serve as means to increase personal opportunities thanks to the contribution made by others. Personal autonomy is also given central importance; but at the same time a possible temporary union is considered a fundamental kind of help – mainly in terms of interests, although it can also be realized on the basis of the sharing of affective or value affinities. However, these are relationships oriented towards obtaining specific objectives or oriented towards providing leisure and momentary relief from excessive tensions. These are relationships that constitute mobile and situational networks, not real communities. They are useful in situations where it is important to have contingent support to face the challenges of individualization (FARRUGIA, 2018). This strategy seems to reflect the ability to create and exploit relationships as a form of building and consolidating the entrepreneurial self. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 130) observe, the possibility of exploiting networks as a form of support for the realization of one's objectives and the full development of one's autonomy and individuality presupposes the ability to establish relationships of interdependence and trust and to consolidate them in the long term. Being part of a network means not being excluded, and it guarantees resources and knowledge. However, it does not imply the rigid constraints imposed by a strong community, nor does it imply the reciprocity that is expected from belonging to a cooperative community. It is a weak but not ephemeral type of bond that requires independence and a certain degree of trust in others. This tends to create networked selves, identities that are defined by interconnections rather than by belonging (CASTELLS, 1996). Networked individuals are members of different groups in which they try to satisfy different personal needs. Each connection is aimed at maximizing a personal goal from an instrumental point of view

(CUZZOCREA; COLLINS, 2015). Rather than being embedded in a group or institutional context that ensures a certain degree of stability, social relations are shaped on the basis of individual values and interests. Rather than promoting collaboration and cooperation, an individualization aimed at maximizing one's priorities through loose and instrumental connection with others produces competition and new forms of exploitation. People with fewer cultural and social resources easily become the new excluded, those who pay for the fulfilment of the wishes of the few who can exploit the networks from a privileged position.

A fourth way to link individualization and relationships with others, with a strong emphasis on the importance of the latter, is to accept the injunction to be active, flexible, responsible, creative and self-entrepreneurial but, at the same time, to criticize and reject extreme forms of individualism (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI, 2019; COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022). In this case, the uniqueness of one's personal life path is perceived and set in close relation to the destiny of other people; recognition is seen not as a self-referential process but as the result of references coming from a community with which one shares feelings, experiences and goals. The sacredness of the autonomy of the individual is not questioned, but the possibility that such autonomy can be achieved in solitude is subjected to reflective criticism, opposing the naïve conviction of being able to face uncertainties and systemic risks individually. Self-sufficiency and constant competition are seen as inconsistent and misleading goals, as narcissistic practices that make it impossible to recognize individual weakness in the face of structural constraints and a market logic that tends to isolate subjects by making them passive and powerless. In this case, the process of individualization implies the awareness of the blind alleys of the liberal model, such as precariousness, isolation and economic dependence, seeking in sharing and solidarity action the opportunity to counter them (PICKARD, 2019).

When this attitude is assumed, the disjunction between individualization and individualism is more evident and is contrasted. The search for personal fulfilment and autonomy is declined in the form of a 'cooperative-entrepreneurial self' (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2022) in which the capacity for action, creativity, and flexibility are realized thanks to the sharing of experience with others. The construction of oneself as an autonomous subject is not seen as a self-referential process in which others enter only as pawns or as competitors, but instead as a collective enterprise based on the sharing of individualized experiences. In this case, the experience of sharing does not contrast with the drive towards individualization. Rather, the construction of an autonomous individuality is realized in the search for a collective project, through the articulation and integration of individual particularities. The spaces of cooperative relations become, in this case, both spaces of agency and autonomous self-construction and areas of construction of collective actions and identities. These are places in which personal characteristics find space for realization thanks to the support of, and comparison with, other experiences of individualization; places in which subjective abilities are put to the test and strengthened through opportunities to share with others.

The school and, more generally, the educational environments aimed at young people can significantly influence how young people adapt to the drive towards individualisation. Educational contexts that stimulate competition and comparison can

push young people to favour forms of individualistic closure or to assume instrumental attitudes towards others, entering into relationships with others mainly to take advantage of them and better achieve their personal goals. On the other hand, educational contexts that fail to involve young people and that are unable to act as spaces of support and protection from excessive forms of precariousness can favour isolation and forms of community closure in which strong barriers tend to separate the members of the group – who can be trusted and from whom help can be expected – from ‘others’, ‘strangers’ who are best avoided. If it is unable to sustain and develop self-confidence, promote autonomy and equip young people with the tools to make sense of uncertainty and complexity, the educational context can promote a sense of uncertainty and fear which pushes towards forms of closure and chauvinism.

Educational contexts capable of satisfying the expectations of individualization processes, orienting them towards forms of cooperation and sharing, require the ability to stimulate a relational reflexivity that makes it possible to place the moment of dialogue and exchange as central moments in the construction of autonomy and personal growth.

In fact, the possibility to develop a cooperative-entrepreneurial self requires the availability of specific resources on both an individual and a social level. On an individual level, the ample availability of cultural and social capital allows the internalization of the pushes towards individualization, autonomy and individual freedom while maintaining awareness of structural limits. This supports the search for collective forms of action that enable their elimination or, at least, their containment. On a social level, it requires contexts able to sustain a dialogical, relational reflexivity (PINHEIRO; COLOMBO, 2021) that favours moments of confrontation between different subjects and promotes forms of empowerment that enhance subjectivities through cooperative and supportive relational forms.

## **The need for dialogical reflexivity**

As evidenced by the re-embedding tactics put in place by young people, individualization does not necessarily imply individualism. Individualization is understood as a process of emancipation (dis-embedding), a process that implies an increase in freedom and a constant call to participation and responsibility. Grasping and valuing its positive aspects, however, requires the ability to create new forms of re-embedding; new forms of sociation that define a sufficiently stable context within which to give meaning to one’s actions. This means the ability to create the conditions for a different relational reality that ensures cooperation and solidarity in order to make greater freedom an effective tool for personal fulfilment (increase in options and possibilities of choice) without forcing solipsistic reactions of closure. It concerns recognition that the injunction to be active and responsible individuals implies social relationships, the ability to be – in specific ways – ‘with others’.

Effective forms of re-embedding able to create innovative forms of sociation – that is, forms of re-embedding that are rooted in a strong sociological imagination (WRIGHT MILLS, 1959): i.e., awareness of the deep intersection between personal biography and structural restraints – are not impossible. However, they can hardly be done by the

lone individual because they require a context able to develop “dialogical reflexivity” (PINHEIRO; COLOMBO, 2021).

As is known, the dialogic dimension is the fundamental element of the production of knowledge and empowerment in the works of Paulo Freire and Michael Bakhtin (RULE, 2011). As Paulo Freire (1987 [1970]) observes, the dialogical relationship is the indispensable condition for the knowability of the subjects who carry out every act of knowledge, including self-knowledge and one’s historical-social position: it is in the dialogic relationship that the possibility and space for criticism and for overcoming doxa are created. Dialogic reflexivity does not contrast with the development of an autonomous and active self; on the contrary, it is a stimulus to the constant critical analysis of one’s limits, it is an urge to ‘be more’ together with others. As Freire (1998, p. 117) writes, ‘the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity but actively defend it, and thus grow together’. As Bakhtin states, dialogue does not have the ultimate goal of cancelling differences. On the contrary, dialogue ‘stimulates and deepens understanding, makes the other’s word more resilient and true to itself, and precludes mutual dissolution and confusion. The clear demarcation of two consciousnesses, their counterposition and their interrelations’ (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 142).

Taking advantage of these important observations on the cognitive and educational strength of the dialogic experience helps to highlight that the ability to develop forms of cooperative individualization does not lie in the capability of the individual. It requires specific contextual conditions that recognize autonomy, freedom, personal sympathies and idiosyncrasies but help subjects to recognize structural constraints, supporting them in their efforts to modify them. A process of individualization that does not flatten out on individualism and narcissistic closure requires a specific form of reflexivity: a “dialogical reflexivity” that allows the development of independent and active subjectivities in relation – and not in competition – with other independent and active subjectivities (COLOMBO, 2003; PINHEIRO; COLOMBO, 2021).

In general terms, reflexivity indicates that what people do and how they do it has implications for the reality in which they find themselves acting. This is a central component of the process of individualization: the idea that subjects are ‘producers’ (responsible) for their own condition. This is not necessarily a process of greater individual awareness. Rather, these are structural, historical-social and cultural conditions which generate the settings for social actions able to take into account how people act and that insert the results of this collective awareness into subsequent actions in order to reshape social reality and the constraints that define it.

Types of individualization that seek forms of re-embedding in a competitive individualism and exploitation of others or in forms of tribal closure based on the exclusion of those who are constructed as different and threatening feed on forms of reflection oriented to the development of strategies of action that ensure (presumed) individual advantages. By contrast, forms of cooperative individualization find possibilities of existence in dialogical, relational and collective reflexivity: a reflexivity that is founded and strengthened in comparison with others (GILBERT; SLIEP, 2009).

The idea of “dialogical reflexivity” considers reflexivity – unlike Archer (2012) – not as an internal dialogue but as a social activity. Reflective ability – the ability to produce knowledge about social reality and the acting subject – is activated in comparison. Following Bakhtin (1984), we can look at reflexivity as the result of a dialogic relationship with an ‘outsider’ who ‘responds’ to our actions, desires, and expectations. The reflexive capacity does not reside in the mind reflecting on itself. Instead, it is activated by a relationship with what is able to jeopardize thinking-as-usual, to impede the flow of doxa and give an unexpected and surprising new interpretation (PINHERO; COLOMBO, 2021; LIWANAG; RHULE, 2021).

Creating the social conditions for relational, dialogical reflexivity entails building social contexts in which the singularity of individuals can be valued through comparison with the singularity of others in order to achieve a shared goal. This involves fostering conditions that strengthen individual capacities for choice, independence and autonomous action but, at the same time, reinforce the awareness that these capacities can only be achieved through collaboration and collective action. The capacity to sustain individualization without reducing it to individualism is grounded on social conditions in which the development of one’s own biography is intertwined with the development of the biographies of others and in which collective action can act on the structural dimensions that reduce or hinder the necessary development of individualized subjects. The key driver of cooperative individualization is the fulfilment of personal needs, often oriented towards a career or personal support.

The creation or otherwise of forms of individualization that are not enclosed in solipsism and individualism does not mainly depend on individual characteristics. Social position, cultural and social capital, material resources, and social categorizations – gender, age, ethnicity, etc. – play an important role in opening or closing the possibility of realizing forms of cooperative individualization. For this reason, creating the conditions for dialogical reflexivity that supports forms of cooperative individualization is a collective task that engages society as a whole and it is central to every educational relationship. It is a matter of encouraging the activation and maintenance of spaces for comparison and debate – even conflictual – in which the different subjectivities have the opportunity to meet and be recognized under the constant stimulus engendered by exposure to different subjectivities as bearers of different and unexpected objectives, points of view, and questions about reality.

Faced with the dis-embedding of contemporary modernity and the constant experience of the crisis, young people can strive for other means of ‘re-embedding’ (BURGESS, 2018, p. 93). However, this needs to be done within the project of ‘making a life of one’s own with others’ that is the essence of the process of individualization. This cannot be done individually; it requires an open society and a constant collective effort to provide subjects – all subjects – with the resources necessary for an individualization that does not end in sterile individualism.

## References

- ÁLVAREZ-BENAVIDES, Antonio; TURNBOUGH, Matthew L. Supporting oneself: the tensions of navigating a prolonged crisis among Spanish youth. **Current Sociology**, London, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921221093094>
- ARCHER, Margaret S. **The reflexive imperative in late modernity**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. **Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. **Speech genres & other late essays**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt. **The individualized society**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.
- BECK, Ulrich. **Risk society: towards a new modernity**. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1992.
- BECK, Ulrich.; BECK-GERNSHEIM, Elisabeth. **Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences**. London: Sage, 2002.
- BECK, Ulrich.; BONSS, Wolfgang; LAU, Christoph. The theory of reflexive modernization: problematic, hypotheses and research programme. **Theory, Culture & Society**, London, 2003, v. 20, n. 2, p. 1-33, 2003.
- BENASAYAG, Miguel; SCHMIT, Gérard. **Les passions tristes: souffrance psychique et crise social**. Paris: La Découverte, 2003.
- BOLTANSKI, Luc; CHIAPELLO, Eve. **The new spirit of capitalism**. London: Verso, 2005.
- BRÖCKLING, Ulrich. **The entrepreneurial self: fabricating a new type of subject**. London: Sage, 2016.
- BURGESS, Adam. Individualization revisited: global family developments, uncertainty and risk. **Journal of Risk Research**. London, v. 21, n. 1, p. 83-95, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2017.1359205>
- CASTELLS, Manuel. **The rise of the network society**. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- COLOMBO, Enzo. (ed.). **Figli di migranti in Italia: identificazioni, relazioni, pratiche**. Torino: UTET, 2010.
- COLOMBO, Enzo. I molteplici riflessi della riflessività. **Animazione Sociale**, Torino, n. 4, p. 10-18, 2003.
- COLOMBO, Enzo; LEONINI, Luisa; REBUGHINI, Paola. A generational attitude: young adults facing the economic crisis in Milan. **Journal of Modern Italian Studies**, London, v. 23, n. 1, p. 61-74, 2018.
- COLOMBO, Enzo; LEONINI, Luisa; REBUGHINI, Paola. **Giovani dentro la crisi**. Milano: Guerini, 2017.
- COLOMBO, Enzo; REBUGHINI, Paola. **Children of immigrants in a globalized world**. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

COLOMBO, Enzo; REBUGHINI, Paola. (ed.). **Youth and the politics of the present: coping with complexity and ambivalence.** Milton Park: Routledge, 2019.

COLOMBO, Enzo; REBUGHINI, Paola; DOMANESCHI, Lorenzo. Individualization and individualism: facets and turning points of the entrepreneurial self among young people in Italy. **Sociology**, London, v. 56, n. 3, p. 430-446, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211037857>

CUZZOCREA, Valentina; COLLINS, Rebecca. Collaborative individualization? Peer-to-peer action in youth transition. **Young**, London, v. 23, n. 2, p. 136-153, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308815569390>

ELLIOT, Anthony; LEMERT, Charles. **The new individualism: the emotional cost of globalization.** London: Routledge, 2006.

FARRUGIA, David. **Spaces of youth: citizenship and culture in a global context.** Milton Park: Routledge, 2018.

FARRUGIA, David. **Youth, work and the post-fordist self.** Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022.

FRANCE, Alan. **Understanding youth in the global economic crisis.** Bristol: Policy Press, 2016.

FREIRE, Paulo. **Pedagogia do oprimido.** 17. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra 1987 [1970].

FREIRE, Paulo. **Pedagogy of hope: reliving pedagogy of the oppressed.** New York: Continuum, 1998.

GIDDENS, Anthony. **Modernity and self-identity.** Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

GIDDENS, Anthony. **The consequences of modernity.** Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.

GILBERT, Andrew; SLIEP, Yvonne. Reflexivity in the practice of social action: from self- to inter-relational reflexivity. **South Africa Journal of Psychology**, London, v. 39, n. 4, p. 468-479, 2009.

GORZ, André. **The immaterial: knowledge, value and capital.** London: Seagull Books, 2010.

LASCH, Christopher. **The minimal self.** New York: Norton, 1984.

LASCH, Christopher. **The culture of Narcissism.** New York: Warner, 1979.

LIPOVETSKY, Gilles. **L'ère du vide.** Paris: Gallimard, 1983.

LIWANAG, Harvy Joy; RHULE, Emma. **Dialogical reflexivity towards collective action to transform global health.** *BMJ Global Health*, 2021, 6, e006825.

MARTUCELLI, Danilo. **La condition sociale moderne: l'avenir d'une inquietude.** Paris: Gallimard, 2017.

MARTUCELLI, Danilo. **La société singulariste.** Paris: Gallimard, 2010.



MARTUCCELLI, Danilo. Singularization. *In*: REBUGHINI, Paola; COLOMBO, Enzo. (ed.). **Framing social theory**: reassembling the lexicon of contemporary social sciences. London: Routledge, 2023, p. 108-122.

MELUCCI, Alberto. **The playing self**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

PICKARD, Sarah. **Politics, protest and young people**. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019.

PINHEIRO, Leandro Rogério; COLOMBO, Enzo. Riflessività e ricerca sociale: la produzione dialogica della realtà / reflexividade e pesquisa social: a produção dialógica da realidade. **Educação**, Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, p. 1-37, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5902/1984644467093>

PUTNAM, Robert D. **Bowling alone**: the collapse and revival of American community. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

RECKWITZ, Andreas. **The society of singularities**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.

ROBERTS, Ken. The end of the long baby-boomer generation. **Journal of Youth Studies**, London, v. 15, n. 4, p. 479-497, 2012.

ROSE, Nikolas. **Governing the soul**: the shaping of the private self. London: Routledge, 1999.

RULE, Peter. Bakhtin and Freire: dialogue, dialectic and boundary learning. **Educational Philosophy and Theory**, London, v. 43, n. 9, p. 924-942, 2011.

SCHARFF, Christina. The psychic life of neoliberalism: mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity. **Theory, Culture & Society**, London, v. 33, n. 6, p. 107-122, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415590164>

SENNETT, Richard. **The culture of the new capitalism**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

SILVA, Jennifer M. **Coming up short**: working-class adulthood in an age of uncertainty. Oxford: Oxford Polity Press, 2013.

TRNKA, Susanna; TRUNDLE, Catherine. Competing responsibilities: moving beyond neoliberal responsabilisation. **Anthropological Forum**, London, v. 24, n. 2, p. 136-153, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2013.879051>

WRIGHT MILLS, Charles. **The sociological imagination**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

ZHANG, Yan; WANG, Junxiu. Chinese rural left-behind elderly: their individualization, descending familism and difficulties. **Ethnography**, London, p. 1-23, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381211050009>

*Received on: December 02, 2022*

*Reviewed on: March 13, 2023*

*Approved on: April 10, 2023*

Enzo COLOMBO

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. Leandro Rogério Pinheiro

**Enzo Colombo** is a professor of Department of Social and Political Science – Università Degli Studi di Milano.