

Advances in Reflexive Sociology: Theory, Agency and Dialogical Inquiry *Charalambos Tsekeris**

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Advances in Reflexive Sociology: Theory, Agency and Dialogical Inquiry

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Abstract

This theoretical essay seeks to comprehensively present and critically discuss the major advances in reflexive sociology, overtly promoting a kind of dialogical reflexivity. This mode of reflexivity claims to efficiently renounce the allegedly irreconcilable opposition between theory and agency, as well as to self-consciously challenge the frequent sociological dismissal of explanation and empirical reference. Hence, reflexive sociology ceases to be a monologic exhibition of epistemological power and tends to develop a more critical and collaborative character within the relational complexity of our contemporary social world.

Keywords: Reflexivity, knowledge, agency, dialogical inquiry

Introduction

For almost thirty years now, social and sociological theorists have been increasingly dealing with the polysemous notion of reflexivity, which has already joined the pantheon of discipline's keywords and created new insights at the same time as going back over old ideas (Tsekeris, 2010). As Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) interestingly explain, reflexivity is not *inherently and inevitably* a "good thing" (a cure) – nor a "bad thing" (a curse). Instead, it must be *constantly and dynamically* negotiated: "It is, in our opinion, important not to mystify reflexivity. Without critical interrogation, reflexivity risks becoming a dead end rather than a route to more thoughtful and interesting research" (Alvesson et al., 2008: 498).

The increasing use of reflexivity is partly associated to the epistemological break with the old concept of reflection, allegedly pertaining to modern philosophy's decontextualized (Cartesian) subject.¹ The talk of reflexivity thus points to the permanently contingent, contextual and situated nature of human reflection, explicitly signifying the demise of the so-called philosophy of the subject (see Lash, 2003).²

In the same line, Alvin Gouldner (1970) emphatically rejected the methodological dualisms (be they Cartesian or Kantian) chronically haunting American sociology. He thus targeted to naive positivistic difference

¹ For Scott Lash: "To reflect is to somehow subsume the object under the subject of knowledge. Reflection presumes apodictic knowledge and certainty. It presumes a dualism, a scientific attitude in which the subject is in one realm, the object of knowledge in another" (Lash, 2003: 51). Scott Lash's and Ulrich Beck's reflexive sociological conception of individual agency, as well as their non-linear middle ground of reflexivity, persistently and consistently "averts the duality of agency / structure, which Habermas, for instance, maintains in his conceptualization of life-world / system" (Han, 2010: 204). In particular, Lash offers an anti-mentalist phenomenological theory of the subject of knowledge that is "not free from her own intentionality, constituted by individual interest and thus only able to know the object partially. In other words, the subject of knowledge in second modernity is an embedded subject that exists within the world, much like Heidegger's spatio-temporally constituted *Da-sein*" (Han, 2010: 205)

² Here, reflexivity is introduced in direct contrast to cognitivist or moral-practical interpretations of agency and modernity.

“between the social scientist and those whom he observes... Methodological Dualism calls for the separation of subject and object ... it enjoins the sociologist to be detached from the world he studies... Methodological Dualism is based on fear; but this is a fear not so much of those being studied as of the sociologist's own self... it assumes... that feeling is the blood enemy of intelligence... In effect, methodological dualism prohibits the sociologist from changing in response to the social worlds that he studies and knows best; it requires him to finish his research with the same self, the same biases and commitments with which he began it” (Gouldner, 1970: 495-496)

Hence, a genuinely reflexive sociology should necessarily involve acknowledging “the biases inherent in all research, the larger structural issues empirical work often cannot see, the diversity of opinions and perspectives ignored among the group actually observed, and the limitations of the findings” (van Heertum, 2005: 15). For Sandra Harding, we must self-consciously capitalize on research biases in order to become more objective: “The subject of knowledge – the beliefs its members are likely to hold ‘unknowingly,’ so to speak – must be considered as part of the object of knowledge from the perspective of scientific method” (Harding, 2004: 136).

The reflexive work should also self-critically disclose its political underpinnings, or implications, and rigorously attempt to “limit essentializing narratives, while working toward replicable and generalizable findings grounded in the present, and comprehensiveness in offering provisional utopian alternatives” (van Heertum, 2005: 15).

Debates on reflexivity are also triggered by the observation that we live in an ever more reflexive (neo-modern and post-traditional) society. This observation is mostly elaborated within the influential literature on Second Modernity and reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). In this analytical framework, reflexivity has been strongly identified as one of the central and defining features of post-industrial society, as well as of the “new” social movements (Melucci, 1989). In a different philosophical context, Jurgen Habermas perceptively sees modernization as an unfinished and unexhausted project, which contains the realization of the reflexive potential inherent in the “communicative rationality of the life-world” (Habermas, 1987).

1. Dialogical Reflexivity

In a more open and synthetic spirit, Hans Herbert Koenigsgleider (1996, 2012) imaginatively attempts to overcome polarized sociological debates and re-locate reflexivity in the field of contemporary social praxis. This is a systematic effort in the epistemological direction of re-discovering the critical potential of reflexivity.

Of course, such an effort pertains to the very project of critical social theory, dealing with how we can take up a critical or reflexive (epistemic) distance toward social contexts of meaning and power, while overtly acknowledging our own historicity, situatedness and embeddedness in those contexts. According to Michael Lynch, there is a long and varied history of attempts in social and sociological theory to identify

“critical detachment and perspicacity with social marginality. Classical Marxism embraced the proletariat as a social location for a theoretically guided critique of dominant ideology, Georg Simmel (1970) and Alfred Schutz (1964) treated the stranger's marginal position as a source of insight into taken-for-granted beliefs, and Karl Mannheim (1936) treated the position of the unattached intellectual as an institutional vantage point for the sociology of knowledge.” (Lynch, 2000: 30)

This raises the difficult and long-standing theoretical issue of tackling the apparently irreconcilable opposition between the hermeneutic emergentist (bottom-up) micro-approaches, premised on agents' reflexive self-understandings, and the distancing holistic (top-down) macro-approaches. Koenigsgleider (1996) smartly synthesizes these two intellectual approaches under the innovative integrative project of a “critical hermeneutics”, which introduces itself as a general methodology of critical dialogical interpretation.

Interpretation should necessarily be dialogical because of the intersubjective roots of self-identity. In this regard, self-consciousness spontaneously emerges from intersubjective perspective-taking and dialogue, where a socially embedded and symbolically mediated (yet irreducible) notion of the self and human agency becomes viable (Koezler, 2012). So, the Other is offering the essential gift of selfhood in so far it is constitutive of the reflexive self's capacity to establish an identity – a socially situated yet agent-driven self-interpreting process.

Dialogical reflexivity is *both* rational *and* non-rational, cognitive *and* emotional, and emphasizes the on-going formation and transformation of our minds in relation to (significant) others and the social world:

“Reflexivity, if thought of in emotional terms, can change participants' relations with others and change how they feel. The exigencies of lives within modernity often create confusion and guilt. If connection to others is a matter for design, not tradition, then there are many possibilities but few guidelines. Making one's own life comprehensible and meaningful is achieved to some degree through comparison to others. Where some equanimity is achieved by those doing things differently it is reached partly via critical attitudes to normalized traditional ways of living, and partly by recognition of fellow trailblazers.” (Holmes, 2010: 148)

Here, the human subject is of course not passive, self-assured, atomistic and narcissistically private. In other words, the *self-in-relation-with-others* (i.e. methodological relationalism) theoretically prevails over the “old”, “received”, or “traditional” *self-in-social-vacuum* of methodological individualism (see Ho et al., 2001).

The intriguing notion of self-in-relation refers to the reflexive social individual as autonomous and separate, and yet highly interdependent and reciprocally embedded within sociocultural and historical contexts (see Balswick, King and Reimer, 2005). Subjectivity is not an atomized, isolated and self-referred locus of individual experience, according to the classical *Cartesian ego* and the utilitarian ideal of the rational *Homo Economicus*. Arguably, the latter is largely irrelevant to actual human behaviour just as *homo clausus*, which has also been largely pervasive in the development of the social sciences.

From a dialogical reflexive perspective, the self is “social – not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in the multivoiced self” (Hermans et al., 1992: 29). Hubert Hermans rightly observes the reflexive interplay between individual and collective voices: “The voice on the higher, superordinate level brings together and organises a specific combination of voices at the lower, subordinate level. At the same time, the latter level gives a personal touch to the former level” (Hermans, 2002: 149). That is, the different levels at which the social being is structured inherently affect one another.

In the same epistemological line, the Croatian Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf (1996) perceptively elaborates on the innovative conception of *the other as occupying the self in the unceasing synergetic process of self-construction*:

“The human self is formed ... through a complex process of ‘taking in’ and ‘keeping out.’ ... a result of a distinction from the other and the internalization of the relationship to the other; it arises out of the complex history of ‘differentiation’ in which both the self and the other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with one another.” (Volf, 1996: 66)

Dialogue opens up the collaborative space of redemptive possibility for “renewal and innovation” (Hermans, 1996: 43), as well as for new vistas, which are “both conceptual and practical” (Gergen, 2002: 273). Human beings can only be understood, studied and theorized within the anti-reificatory and dynamic analytical framework of the relational interdependencies with their multiple selves, as well as with each other.

The creative process of self-construction, in the form of story-formed identity, signifies a constant interplay between aspects of one's self (voiced self-aspects or I positions) and a never-ending dialogue between internal I positions and the significant others with whom the reflexive individual is communicating and interacting (see Hermans et al., 1992).

2. The Internal Conversation

This involves the inspiring and increasingly influential conception of the “internal conversation” (Archer, 2003; 2007),³ which theoretically describes the continuous reflexive self-confrontation of the individual (that is, *the self-self relationship*), as well as its complicated dialogical interaction with the ever-changing social environment (i.e. the macro-level).

It is thus defined as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa” (Archer, 2007: 4). Schematically, the internal conversation, as a *hidden mediatory process*, intervenes *in between* agency and structure (Giddens), the life-world and the system (Habermas), the habitus and the field (Bourdieu), or “people” and “parts” (Archer).

Hence, social reproduction or transformation is – more or less – an active “accomplishment” of the reflexively deliberating human subjects themselves, who are still embedded in (and constrained by) an “alienating” and “stratified” objective reality (contra the conflation logic of constructivism, or of Giddens’s structuration theory⁴).

This inherently relational “process” or “mental ability” is nevertheless being seriously neglected within the very flux of routine or habitual daily action (infra-reflexivity). In direct response to such an unwarranted neglect, Gerald Myers reflexively observes that the crucial importance of

“self-dialogue and its role in the acquisition of self-knowledge, I believe, can hardly be exaggerated. That it plays such a role is a consequence of a human characteristic that deserves to be judged remarkable. This is the susceptibility of our mind/body complexes to respond to the questions that we put to ourselves, to create special states of consciousness through merely raising a question. It is only slightly less remarkable that these states provoked into existence by our questions about ourselves quite often supply the materials for accurate answers to those same questions” (Myers, 1986: 206)

From the innovative social epistemological standpoint of the “internal conversation”, the self (including the philosophical, psychological or sociological self) is rather reflexively created and re-created; it is necessarily intertwined with the real world and dialectically re-constituted by the ongoing, synergetic and self-organizing *mutual interaction* of the ego (a) with the emergent social structures and (b) with the significant others (actual, imagined, or implied).⁵

Most importantly, the very existence (or appearance) of these “significant others” is completely integral to the evolutionary reflexive emergence and development of selfhood. Yet, in the original social interpretivist sense of George Herbert Mead, the “other” is not only the other (significant) person, “but another *perspective*: another way in which the world is judged or appreciated” (Natanson, 1956: 64).

Arguably, the general (relational) sociological theorization of reflexivity *as internal conversations and a complicated dialogical interaction* heavily draws from the famous school of American Pragmatism (mainly grounded on the original stimulating insights of John Dewey, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and George Hebert Mead).⁶

³ See also Wiley (1994).

⁴ In the last instance, Anthony Giddens’s ultra-activistic structuration theory can be seen as being in line with Berger and Luckmann’s subjectivistic accounts of social constructivism, which implicitly reproduce and naively celebrate the old tradition of phenomenological individualism (see Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In a sense, the “internal conversation” effectively correlates subjective projects and objective situations within a workable *modus vivendi* (Vandenberghe, 2005).

⁵ In parallel, what should also be reflexively recognized and acknowledged here is the particular importance of the “I-thou” relationship (Buber, 1970), which was the very essence of the great Socratic dialogues. This complex relationship has been involved with the original introduction of second-person inter-subjective methodologies, such as the Bohmian dialogue, surprisingly leading to innovative forms of “*dialogic consciousness*” (Bohm, 1985).

⁶ According to Margaret Archer, “only if the ‘internal conversation’ can be upheld as an irreducible personal property, which is real and causally influential, can the exercise of its powers be considered as the missing mediatory mechanism that is needed to complete an adequate account of social conditioning” (Archer, 2003: 16).

While the main theoretical advances in sociology nowadays no longer come from macro-sociology but from the theory of action and pragmatism (namely, Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Bruno Latour, François Dubet, Nathalie Heinich, Bernard Lahire, Alain Caillé), knowledge also becomes more self-reflexive and potentially capable of boosting the self-reflexivity of individuals, groups, and institutions. It will thus enable them “to integrate their experience, rendering knowledge more socially robust” (Nowotny, 2010: 321).

In general, increased reflexivity may indeed be *empowering*, by allowing the social subject to critically oscillate “between the stability of habitual and positional structures, and the contingencies that surface within rapidly changing contemporary social realities. By synthesizing each of these causal powers within one theory of social action, it becomes possible to appreciate the complex interplay between structure and agency” (Kemp, 2010: 11). Of course, agency is understood here with Giddens *as the capacity to act otherwise*.

Researchers should then explore a fruitful plurality of methodologies and theories, strategies and questions, given that the social is strongly characterized by plasticity, fluidity, heterogeneity, diversity and contingency. But the question of social ontology is crucial and irreducible. According to Margaret Archer, objective circumstances

“as shaped by socio-cultural properties are real; we cannot make what we will of them with impunity. If the descriptions under which they are known are wildly divergent from reality, then reality will have revenge, because the strategy for pursuing a project will be defective” (Archer, 2003: 139-140)

Within an empirically informed reflexive-realist⁷ framework, knowledge cannot and should not be erroneously confounded with the mere “recording and analysis of the ‘pre-notions’ (in Durkheim’s sense) that social agents engage in the construction of social reality; it must also encompass the social conditions of the production of these pre-constructions and of the social agents who produce them” (Bourdieu, 2003: 282).⁸

This “analytical dualism” is absolutely necessary for human agents’ creative capacity to distance themselves *cognitively* from the objective social and cultural circumstances, in order to critically see and elaborate on them (meta-reflexivity). In other words, it is absolutely necessary for the sequential radical transformation of the passive “individual agent” (in a Bourdieusian sense) into an active and self-critical social actor and role-taker.

Through the internal conversations (Archer, 2003), we can possibly cultivate and enhance our *meta-theoretical reflexivity*, defined as a “stepping back from full engagement in cultural activity”, or as a “form of ironic detachment: a disengagement from tribal custom and a heightened awareness of taken-for-granted assumptions” (Lynch, 2000: 30).⁹

3. Reflexivity and Explanation

But this advanced kind of reflexivity, as Kogler (1997a) rightly explains, should concurrently be *both* inward-looking (introverted) *and* outward-looking (extroverted), that is, a *structural self-reflexivity* (sharply distinguished from the instrumental and practical reflexivity of situated agents), resulting as the demiurgic combination of “individual self-reflexivity and socio-structural

⁷ For the interesting and challenging notion of reflexive or circular realism, see Pels (2000).

⁸ Of course, this should carefully refrain from any sort of “last-instance” objectivism and decisively move towards a rather *never-ending reflexive dialectic* between micro and macro, action and structure, transformation and reproduction, individuality and sociality (or individual and collective action), randomness and simplicity, contingency and directionality, emergence and social causation (Sawyer, 2007), as well as towards a generalized critique of naïve/uncritical/unreflexive realism, reification and essentialism, at the level of *both* everyday world-making *and* professional scientific (sociological) analysis.

⁹ For a superb analysis of the intriguing notion of “alienation as epistemological source”, see the relevant sociological work of Hans Herbert Kogler (1997b).

reflexivity, in so far as the constitution of oneself as an interpreting and evaluating agent is related to objective social contexts” (Koegler, 1997a: 247n.3).¹⁰

Of course, the reflexive-dialectical relationship of micro-macro does possess important methodological “values” and implications. That means, social research should not only focus upon structures and systems, coldly seeking causes, but also upon social action itself, vividly expressed in polymorphous human behaviour, as well as upon the “results of communication and interaction between individuals and their knowledge of the world seeking the comprehension and interpretation of behaviour, while at the same time sensing the weight of history in the formation of the present” (Lydaki, 2012: 297).

In other words, the obsolete dichotomies between (flexible) interpretation of meaning and (rigid) scientific explanation cannot be accepted anymore. On the one hand, human beings, as *both* externally determined *and* internally motivated, do create (unpredictable) meaning and are inherently capable of reformulating it.¹¹

On the other hand, it can indeed be fully justified to make coherent and logical statements about “regularities that help in explaining and even predicting (or retrodicting) the human construction of meaning. Subjectivity need not rule out regularity as long as different sorts of people feel subjective in similar ways regarding similar objects” (Thompson et al., 1990: xiii).

What is therefore needed is to reflexively envision and fashion the synthetic and dialogical possibility of a *cultural social science*, which is “historically circumscribed, but it is also theoretically informed, empirically responsible, and epistemologically aware, and it searches for explanatory validity” (Reed and Alexander, 2009: 36). Besides, sociology is a subject that strongly resists to any naïve “formation as a discipline based around a fixed frame of reference or ‘core’. In that sense, it is a discipline that has to be ‘achieved’, or continually re-invented in new circumstances” (Holmwood, 2009: para 1.16).

Most interestingly, the empirical responsibility of sociology implies that dialogically linking the (reflexive) subject with history, objectivity and inter-subjectivity does not (and should not) reduce ontological questions to epistemological ones (just as Kant did), or empirical facts to performative descriptions and interpretations, mental constructions, symbolic categories or abstract conceptual frameworks.

In the same line, the American feminist theorist Donna Haraway (2004) argues that we must fruitfully combine “radical historical contingency” with a critical reflexivity to language and a strong commitment to empirical accounts of the real world. This dialogical reflexive position sees “the object of knowledge as an actor and agent, allowing the synthesis of a multiplicity of perspectives into a larger, more coherent (though panoramic) whole” (van Heertum, 2005: 5). Objectivity is thus re-entered in a more reflexive and dialogical mode; instead of the demise of objectivity, a kind of *reflexive objectivity* emerges, according to which:

1) “research can move to a position where balance, fairness, and reflexivity replace value-free norms. Science can then return to the study of uncertainty rather than the attempt to overcome it, and thereby, re-engage the centrality of questioning official knowledge.”

2) “Researchers would be in a position to recognize their own biases and prejudices and, to the extent practicable, communicate those to the audience. They could be clear about their political objectives and offer a project for positive social transformation together with the now ubiquitous critique” (van Heertum, 2005: 14)

The explanatory task (or project) of reflexive sociology is irreducible and dialogical; it must involve tackling specific issues of understanding and analysis in a more inclusive account, with a strong orientation towards the real world and problems of public relevance. In this context, reflexive scholars should always refer to the meanings of actors and their inherent capacity to purposefully reformulate meanings as a necessary condition of the adequacy of any sociological account (Holmwood, 2003).

¹⁰ Obviously, this is heavily inspired by the Bourdieusian relational methodological notion of intellectual socioanalysis, or “self-socioanalysis” (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

¹¹ This should necessarily be included in all sociological accounts, as an essential criterion of their very adequacy.

Reflexive sociology thus pertains to a joint dialogue between *partners*,¹² between social inquirers and those whose actions are the objects of inquiry. This is associated to the re-introduction of explanation in theories of social inquiry, as well as to the re-establishment empirical reference and logical coherence as criteria of adequacy (Holmwood, 2003). The reflexive orientation to explanation constitutes the contribution of social inquiry to any dialogue. In a similar spirit, van Heertum critically warns against the displacement of explanation:

“Empirical work should never be marginalized or dismissed as sometimes occurs among critical theorists. It should be remembered that Adorno and Horkheimer undertook extensive empirical work in laying the groundwork for critical theory and many who have followed have done the same. Empirical work is critical to any project for social change, but this work must itself be critical in nature. This does not mean a return to positivistic fetishizing of statistical methods and neutrality ... More than anything it involves a movement from the cataloging of what is to the struggle to define what can be.” (van Heertum, 2005: 15)

On the same epistemological basis, John Holmwood perceptively suggests the radical reflexive move away from a “monologic” universalistic position toward an inclusive and dialogic social inquiry centred on common real problems (see Holmwood, 2009). Universalistic positions rather act like the court in Kafka’s “Trial”, that is, like an aimless, irresponsible and absurd bureaucratic force interested only in exercising power and condemning innocent and unknowledgeable victims, which are kept in total ignorance of what is really happening against them. This is typical to the distancing stance of the unreflexive sociologist, who “neutrally” uncovers hidden structures and mechanisms misrecognized by social agents (Bourdieu, 1977).¹³ Instead, the meaning of the social is reflexively generated or “emerged” within a dialogic space and *any sociological argumentation must have a collaborative assent*.

Dialogical reflexivity thus means carefully looking for multiple voices, approaches and perspectives, rather than dogmatically imposing our worldview; that is, it is preferable to openly question rather than authoritatively answer, once and for all. This also points to the dialogical recognition of the other on the basis of empathy and mutual understanding, as well as to “the small measure of synthesis and objectivity which is still available in the chronic ‘war of positions’ which is waged in the social world” (Pels, 1997: 91). Over against the Habermasian conception of practical discourse and its overemphasis upon the participant’s (first-person) perspective, we do need to see that interpreting meaning necessarily requires both a participatory and an objectivating (third-person) stance. This yields the very conception of sociological reflexivity as a process of partnership, or *as a dialogic mediation between theorist and agent* (Koegler, 1996).

On this view, the outsider position equips the sociological theorist with a privileged distanced perspective from which to better study the symbolic assumptions and practical contexts that would otherwise go unthinkable, unproblematic and unthematized by the social agent. But such an epistemic distancing rather emerges from the on-going hermeneutic interaction with unfamiliar meanings, not from any superior individual or institutional (professional) competence, rationality, or authority. Koegler overtly rejects “the ‘vertically’ conceived model of the theorist as one who can objectively see through the distortions of subjects’ in favor of the ‘horizontal’ conception of a dialogue between members of different cultures and communities” (Koegler, 1996: 267).

Reflexivity is thus defined *as a dialogic form of hermeneutic self-distancing*, whereby the unfamiliarity of the other depicts the social agent and the sociological theorist alike with a distancing “view from somewhere”. This recasts both reflexive sociology and critical theory as a *collaborative practice* of self-distancing critique between theorist and agent, where purist, transcendental aspirations to Platonic perfectionism, unbounded knowledge and monological truth

¹² For this notion see Apel, 1967.

¹³ As Dick Pels puts it, “I, the reflexive sociologist, knowing myself, also know who you are, where you come from, what your deepest interests are, why you remain unconscious of what you actually do and why you entangle yourself in performative contradictions. If you are unprepared to ‘know thyself’ on my theoretical conditions, you are an unreflexive bastard, and I must tutor you in my explanatory theory, which will liberate us both” (Pels, 2000: 9).

are perceived as an obstacle or problem; in addition, they are epistemologically dangerous and unhealthy (see Tsekeris and Katrivesis, 2009). Reflexive inquiry must then concern

“not just an examination of the grounds upon we may claim to know the social world, but also point to the limitations of our knowledge. In this sense it acts as a corrective to the instrumentalism informed by the desire to control, rather than understand, the social world. Academic commentators do not enjoy a monopoly on reflexive questioning and also find themselves increasingly subject to the very forces which may act to counter reflexivity. We should always be aware that in our apparent methodologically post positivist/empiricist/modernist age, the quiet revenge of instrumentality marches onwards.” (May, 2010: 39).

Conclusion

In the above analytical context, reflexivity can be presented as a real point of departure, collaboration and critique, in order to dialogically challenge and contest the constitution of any emergent form of essentialism and reification on the very ground of complex everyday life (albeit with no final adequacy).

Of course, this comprises an incisive dialogical reconstruction of sociological judgements, categories, worldviews, lifestyles and life-worlds, towards a general, comprehensive and dynamical (yet corrigible and modest) understanding and analysis of the social forces of human emancipation, as well as of the very possibility of a transformative politics of human emancipation (Vandenbergh, 1999: 62).

Besides, sociology (and social science as a whole) refers to historically relevant, ethically responsible and inherently relational human activities, which can only exist in our social togetherness, our social being-in-the-world. In the last instance, reflexivity is perhaps the best way to permanently avoid perfectionism, scholasticism, epistemological arrogance and, in general, the multiple and underlying “dangers of complacency” (Rachel, 1996).

Reflexive sociology must eventually be conceived as a fruitful form of joint dialogue (between equal partners), where both professional social theorists and social agents (as *lay social theorists*) have indeed a *mutual interest in explanatory undertakings* (Holmwood, 2003). Most importantly, it is actually this “mutual interest” that makes the dialogical activity possible, meaningful and critical.

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