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## Section I: Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual

** Edited by Udo Simon **

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Section I: Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual

Edited by Udo Simon
Udo Simon

Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual –
Introductory Reflexions

A history of the concept behind the term “reflexivity” would have to list quite a spectrum of uses. Within a science of culture understood in the broader sense of the term, “reflexivity”, in its least specific usage, would mean just “reflexion” or “interpretation”. At the other end of the spectrum, one finds reflexivity in the sense of “self-referentiality of a closed system”. Because the concept oscillates between the semantic poles of self-reference and (self-)reflexion, there is some doubt as to whether it actually disposes of more obscurity than it creates.1

However, the fact that the term is nevertheless used could indicate not only a lack of terminological precision, but also a more or less – probably the latter – clearly perceived relation among the various usages. Despite its vagueness, the term can be of heuristic value in a more general, non-axiomatic sense. The criterion here is the question of whether it opens up a fertile perspective of the matter at hand, not whether it is unnecessary. If one only paraphrases with sufficient precision, most concepts become dispensable.

One can approach the phenomenon from different disciplines, depending on the question(s) being asked, using, for instance, the methods of religious science, ethnology, sociology, cognitive science, and the various integrative theoretical approaches, such as discourse analysis. As usual, a specialised approach, oriented towards the discipline, enables not only a deeper understanding of important aspects, but also limits the view again, through the analytical segmentation.

Understood quite basically, reflexivity is another expression for feedback and reproduction.2 Applied to an action, this means that every sequence of the action constitutes a part of the framework for its own continuance. The constant sequence of action and adjustment is reflected in social life as a sequence of acts and interpretation; the action itself provides us with indicators showing how it should be integrated into a culturally given system of categories.

In the context of system theory, Luhmann uses the term with different nuances of meaning. In his view, the decisive performance of social systems lies in their

1  See Stausberg 2006: 646.
2  After the sociologist Hartmut Esser 201: 184.
simplification of complexity. The filtering of communication and the control of attributions of sense constitute the self-referentiality of social sub-systems. The reflexive structure of such autopoietic systems, however, shows itself equally as much in the constantly reproducing self-regulation through the application of processes to processes of an identical kind (e.g. teaching teaching; normalising normalisation).3

Related to rituals, this means the ritualisation of ritual, i.e. increasingly prescriptive framings, restrictions with regard to agency, limitations imposed on the participants, etc., so that rituals may prevent participants from reflecting on the ritual character of the rituals; or at any rate from reflecting on them in any way other than in a standardised sense. Yet such reflexion does occur. To the extent that rituals alter insoluble questions into solvable questions of procedure, in other words, eliminate complexity, reflexivity, in the sense of a mental activity, implies a renewed complication.

A characteristic claimed for modernity is that the relation between, on the one hand, the given and the predefined and, on the other, the negotiable and self-constructed is changing to the benefit of the latter, so that self-delineations can be more freely chosen than was previously the case. While, for Giddens, the entry of the modern into a reflexive phase is of central significance primarily owing to the circulation of constantly available knowledge content, Beck emphasises the knowledge deficits of reflexive modernisation, which must, in the first place, deal with the problems caused by its own products. What Beck has in mind is, above all, “unconscious, unintended reflexivity in the sense of self-application, self-dissolution and self-endangerment of industrial modernization.” With an eye to the different interpretations of the relationship between modernity and reflexivity on the part of Giddens, Lash, and himself, Beck confirms that, with all their differences, primarily found “on the axis of consciousness/non-consciousness (or the autodynamism) of ‘reflexive’ modernization”, in all three approaches a role is played by both kinds of reflexivity.4

Indeed, the question of consciousness or unconsciousness of self-reference is a pivotal one in the debate. The relation of these two kinds of self-referentiality is fundamental to the dynamics of social change. Precisely because the subsystems (such as administrative organisations, and the like) tend to reproduce themselves,

3 See Luhmann 1967; Luhmann 1984. The idiosyncratic logic of subsystems in a global context is also underscored by Appadurai’s “scapes”, i.e. dimensions of global flows, cf. Appadurai 1996: 33ff. One example of this would be the self-reference of the financial networks that act worldwide, the so-called “financescape”, which just recently led to a serious financial crisis.

4 Beck et al. 1994: 176–177. Quite a number of researchers use "reflexivity" on both levels of meaning, depending on context; this is true of Luhmann and Bourdieu, for instance.
change must be induced either by outside intervention, or by subjective impulses, contradiction by individuals or the protests of, at times small groups.

According to an oft-quoted definition by Barbara Babcock, reflexivity designates the capacity of thought processes and symbol systems “to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself, and to refer to itself”.\(^5\)

Social embedment is more strongly emphasised in Margret Archer’s designation of reflexivity in the sense of a mental activity whose essential criterion consists of the fact that people “consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa”.\(^6\) For Archer, reflexive thought is synonymous with internal conversation, which “not only mediates the impact of social forms upon us but also determines our responses to them”.\(^7\) Reflexive processes such as self-observation, self-criticism, self-commitment, and so forth, are, in this view, instances of the exchange between the inner and the outer worlds.

Looking at oneself from different angles is a fundamental ability of human beings, although it can be developed to varying degrees. It is needed for a realistic appraisal of circumstances, but goes beyond this at the same time, for it conveys an idea that things might be different from what they are perceived as. This ability also enables the simulated dissociation of oneself, a temporary release from the unity of the subject, in a chain of disintegration and reintegration, which, in the end, represents a condition of the subject being able to perceive itself as such.

Conscious reflexivity is only possible with the ability to change perspective. In order to fulfill social expectations, one must at least be able to interpret these within one’s own situation, i.e. to temporarily take the perspective of those whose perception and evaluation is of significance in the relevant situations. This leads to a readjustment of one’s position in relation to a social setting.

Such externally-driven self-inspection is a frequent social fact. The construction of identity, too, requires a view of oneself as a part of, or in contrast to, a group, or the view of the group as a part of oneself, respectively. How any particular group, for example “the Muslims”, is perceived is part of the self-perception of the members of that group; individual and group identity are closely interwoven, in any case. Reflexivity is always additionally concerned with integration into what already exists, or at least with the relationship to that which already exists, and, in this way, is a determination of position. The fact that looking upon oneself from a different

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5 Babcock 1980: 2. Compared to simple reflexion, reflexivity takes place as a reflexion of reflexion on a metacommunicative level, according to this understanding. For further literature on this, see Stausberg 2006: 553.
6 Archer 2007: 3. Elsewhere, Archer writes: “Quintessentially, reflexivity involves a subject considering an object in relation to itself, bending that object back upon itself in a process which includes the self being able to consider itself as its own object.” See Archer 2007: 72.
7 Archer 2007: 5.
perspective often does not result in change, but rather in the affirmation of what already exists, shows that this step to one side, in the end, has the aim of making certain of oneself. In a deeper sense, every examination of something else is an examination of oneself.

Finally, reflexivity is used in a more restricted sense of the self-reflexion of the researcher, using his or her epistemological basis of theorising or doing fieldwork, which, at the same time, is a critical discussion of the scholarly traditions of the discipline involved.\(^8\)

Bourdieu, for instance, understands reflexivity as a systematic reflexion on the unconscious presuppositions of our knowledge; Foucault undertakes an archaeology, then genealogy of our conceptual world; the debate on orientalism, which was initiated to a great extent by Edward W. Said, highlights, in an exemplary way, the essentialist constructions of the “other”, so often guided by particular interests; Clifford Geertz and James Clifford look at the researcher as author; these are just some of the contributions here. In the course of this self-reflexive phase, with its critical view of representations, researchers have come to realise, not least in view of the role of ethnography in the colonial context, that they cannot totally liberate themselves from their culturally-determined system of categories. The very questions asked of the matter being investigated are determined by the researcher’s cultural background. Unconscious bias, the unwanted influencing of the research situation on the part of the researcher, distort the objectivity of research.

Reflexivity, then, is located in a continuum stretching from unavoidable, unconscious retroactivity in the sense of self-regulation to voluntary and conscious, thoughtful consideration. Equally significant as distinguishing between conscious and unconscious reflexivity is the extent to which a (simulated) external perspective may be incorporated. Moreover, a certain degree of vagueness is unavoidable, even with the limited meaning of reflexivity as a specialised form of reflexion, unless one wishes to suppress the transitional zones between the dimensions of emotion and cognition, description and interpretation, the individual and the collective, and so on.

However, the notion of reflexivity in the sense of self-reference on the part of the one reflecting – also, and more exactly, in view of the relationship of the individual to others – requires additional specification outside the concept, some limitation with regard to the main subject of reflexion, or else it would become so general as to be well-nigh useless. In our case, this is the relation to ritual. Reflexivity,

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8 Cf. the articles by Bührmann, Quack, Schmitt, and Chidester on the long-lasting influence of Western concepts of religion, magic, and ritual, etc., that have led to misinterpretations or disregard of emic reflexion.