# Hybridizing Habitus and Reflexivity: Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Identity?

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**ABSTRACT**

This article initially summarizes two dominant tropes in the sociology of identity in recent years, centred on the concepts of *self-reflexivity* and *habitus*, followed by an overview of extensive critical debate to which both have been subjected. It is claimed that the key criticisms of the extended reflexivity thesis gather around accusations of excessive voluntarism in accounting for contemporary identity, while critiques of Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus deem it overly deterministic. In an attempt to move beyond the conceptual stalemate of two distinct approaches to identity, a number of hybridized accounts have emerged in social theory. The remainder of the article discusses a number of these accounts in relation to social change, and offers an initial consideration of their strengths and limitations. It is argued that the importance of post-reflexive choice must remain integral to any attempt at hybridization of these important terms, particularly in relation to the contemporary workings of social stratification.

**KEY WORDS**

habitus / identity / reflexivity / social change / stratification

## Introduction

What is the relationship between identity, reflexivity and choice in the context of changing social structures? As we live through an era of supposedly rapid and transformative social upheavals, sociology potentially provides the tools to make sense of their dialectical impact upon the constitution of subjectivity. Two dominant tropes have emerged in the sociology of identity in recent years, broadly clustered around notions of *self-reflexivity* and

*habitus*. The first aim of this article is to summarize the key conceptual claims of each, their ramifications for a sociological understanding of identity in the context of social change, and their critical reception. More recently, attempts have been made to build on critical findings, and move beyond the impasse offered by these two apparently opposing perspectives by bringing them together. This is still a relatively new direction in the sociology of identity. A second aim of this article is to attempt a timely overview and consideration of what is referred to as the *hybridization* of the concepts of reflexivity and habitus. Finally, the extent to which various attempts at hybridity help further an understanding of late-modern identity is considered.

## Reflexivity

The first trope revolves around the assertion that *reflexivity* increasingly constitutes self-identity in late-modern societies. The most prominent stalwarts of this thesis are Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992) and Ulrich Beck (1992), but various nuanced versions remain popular and continue to be developed (e.g. Castells, 1997; Gergen, 1991), to the point where we might refer to an *extended reflexivity thesis* being commonplace in sociological theory (Adams, 2003).

Extended reflexivity stems from the dynamic interplay of a number of social changes which are increasingly characteristic of late modernity. Paramount are expansive changes in communication technologies and structures (Heelas, 1996: 5), increasing our exposure to others, and relativizing our established cultural and individual practices to the point where nothing can be taken for granted as simply 'the way things are done' (Gergen, 1991: 48–80). Increasing global flows of employment, finance, imagery and ideas and the mass-culture of consumption that accompany changes in communication only exacerbate the situation. The binding power of tradition and social structure has ebbed away – 'it is rather a *lack* of social structures which establishes itself as the basic feature of the social structure' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 51) – resulting in a post-traditional and individualizing society.

Amidst the rubble of radical and unsettling social upheavals we do not simply find postmodern dissolution, despite some commonalities with the conception of selfhood found in versions of that movement, but a flexible, authored self, more open, transparent and above all, reflexive:

> Each of us not only 'has', but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question 'How shall I live?' has to be answered in day-to-day decisions. (Giddens, 1991: 14)

Social theorists whose work otherwise differs in many ways converge in an emphasis upon extended reflexivity: 'identity is in the process of being redefined

as a pure reflexive capacity' (Melucci, 1996: 36); '[there is] an increasingly sig-
nificant reflexive subjectivity' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 3); 'people have to turn to
their own resources to decide what they value, to organize their priorities and
to make sense of their lives' (Heelas, 1996: 5); 'the self today is for everyone a
reflexive project' (Giddens, 1992: 30).

The relevant critique for our purposes accuses the extended reflexivity
thesis of employing an excessively weak concept of social structure, which fails
to account for the restraints on agency which either persist in contemporary
societies, or are novel to them. For Giddens, new levels of relatedness mean that
the modern individual also has a chance to affect the broader social system:
'The day-to-day activities of an individual today are globally consequential. My
decision to purchase a particular item of clothing, for example, or a specific
type of foodstuff, has manifold implications', namely an 'extraordinary, and
still accelerating, connectedness between everyday decisions and global out-
comes' (1994: 57–8). As all social bonds reach new levels of reciprocity, the
individual is implicated in a radically reflexive relationship with social struc-
ture. However, critics argue that little attempt is made to differentiate between
experiences of people in diverse, structurally positioned settings (Hay et al.,
1996[1994]; Meštrovic, 1998; O'Brien, 1999). It is claimed to be an excessively
uniform analysis, which gives 'short shrift to the structural and cultural factors
still at work in fashioning the self' (Tucker, 1998: 208). Others have voiced a
suspicion of social theory envisioning a situation 'where agency is set free from
structure' (Lash, 1994: 119), and assert the necessity of a more sophisticated
account of degrees of reflexivity, freedom and constraint in relation to
changing, but not disappearing social structures (Craib, 1992; Jamieson, 1999;
Lash, 1994).

In defence of Giddens, at least, his earlier work offered a comprehensive
account of the 'unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences' of
agency (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984). The latter continually feed into the for-
mer; both fall routinely beyond reflexive awareness and can be 'traced out' in
'the mechanisms of reproduction of institutionalized practices' (1976: 78), par-
ticularly in terms of class: 'Repetitive activities, located in one context of time
and space, have regularized consequences, unintended by those who engage in
those activities, in more or less "distant" time-space contexts' (Giddens, 1984:
14). Here Giddens's account sails close to Bourdieu's position on the function
of habitus. However, in Giddens's more recent writing, *no* reference is made to
either term (1990, 1991, 1994). 'Practical consciousness', stocks of taken-for-
granted knowledge, still contribute to identity, but Giddens's individualized
use of the term does not lend itself to an analysis of social embeddedness as
easily as Bourdieu's 'practical knowledge' or 'feel for the game' (Giddens,
1991: 36–42). This absence, combined with the increased emphasis upon the
reflexive project of the self, seems at the very least to obscure his earlier argu-
ments about the partial nature of reflexivity in relation to the reproduction of
social conditions for action.

## Habitus

A second important trope offers a very different analysis of contemporary identity, and has developed out of Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu, 1977). The *field* refers to the always existing, obligatory boundaries of experiential context: 'a relational configuration endowed with a specific gravity which it imposes on all the objects and agents which enter it' (Bourdieu, cited in Widick, 2003: 684). We move through different fields but the collection of fields we confront tends to be common for different social groupings (e.g. class). Fields engender and require certain responses, 'hailing' the individual to respond to themselves and their surroundings in specific ways to the point of habituation. 'Habitus' is the collective term for this array of dispositions. Thus, the field instantiates us as subjects and reproduces social distinctions via the enactment of habitus.

For Bourdieu, the habitus is fundamentally an *embodied* phenomenon. It signifies not just how we think about the world but the bodily 'system of dispositions' we bring to a field: 'a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech and … a certain subjective experience' (Bourdieu, 1977: 85–7). Though thoroughly individualized, the habitus in fact reflects a shared cultural context. The cultural commonalities of a class become inscribed upon the body and are reproduced in personal deportment in the field, which is forever a constitutive response to already existing social conditions. Thus, for Bourdieu: 'the body is a mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture, the practical taximonies of the habitus, are imprinted and encoded in a socialising or learning process which commences during early childhood' (Jenkins, 1992: 75–6).

Habitus is also an unconscious formation. The various characteristics of the habitus are enacted *unthinkingly*; that is partly what defines them as habitual. The ticks and traits of our established habitus are the result of an experiential schooling stretching back to childhood. The sense of ease in our surroundings – 'le sens pratique' (the feel for the game) as Bourdieu refers to it (Bourdieu, 1990: 52) – thus develops as an *unconscious* competence: the habitus becomes 'a *modus operandi* of which he or she is not the producer and has no conscious mastery' (Bourdieu, 1977: 79).

Reflexive awareness of the production process is necessarily rare: 'principles em-bodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence *cannot* be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation' (Bourdieu, 1977: 94; emphasis added). Consequently, the reproduction of 'classed' identities happens via unwitting determinancy: 'what they do has more meaning than they know' (Bourdieu, 1977: 35). Thus Latour describes how Bourdieu 'subjugates the multiplicity of expressions and situations to a small number of obsessively repeated notions which describe the invisible forces which manipulate the actors *behind their backs*' (Latour, cited in Boyne, 2002: 119; emphasis added).

Bourdieu also stresses the *generative* nature of habitus. The habitus engenders countless practices, which, as they reverberate in specific fields of action, reconstitute it in a loop of agency and structure. Fields limit what we can do, make some actions more possible than others, or encourage a certain bodily deportment rather than another, but there is often an opportunity to 'play the game' in more than one way. For Bourdieu, habitus does not simply read off and reproduce practices from social structure, but neither does it succumb to a 'fetishization of the indeterminacy of social structures' (McNay, 1999: 105). Agency and autonomy are embodied in the concept of habitus, but they are qualified by the caveat of accumulated history, both personal and collective, which imprint themselves as *pre-reflective* action-orientations: 'Thus, habitus gives practice a relative autonomy with respect to the external determinants of the immediate present but at the same time ensures that it is objectively adapted to its outcomes' (McNay, 1999: 100). Bourdieu's approach is often stressed sceptically in relation to the theorization of social change, emphasizing continuity of established social differences as the basis for identities.

Despite his attempt to find a place for the generative capacities of habitus, Bourdieu has still been accused of reflecting an excessively *deterministic* tendency in his writing (Alexander, 1994; Halle, 1993; Lamont, 1992; Widick, 2003).[1] Notwithstanding its generative abilities, agency is still a bounded process, compromised and attenuated, via habitus, by social structure and unconsciousness – 'the cognitive structures which social agents implement in the practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, "embodied", social structures … which function below the level of consciousness and discourse' (Bourdieu, 1984: 468) – to the point where the applicability of the term 'agency' is stretched to its limits. It is hardly *reflexive* agency in any meaningful sense of the word; not an agency upon which we are capable of reflecting, hence the claim that 'it is difficult to know where to place conscious deliberation and awareness in Bourdieu's scheme of things' (Jenkins, 1992: 77).

In fact, Bourdieu does allow for the possibility of reflexivity, understood as 'the systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 40). In Bourdieu's scheme, the reflexive process, paradoxically, is itself a form of habitus, a required constituent of a particular field; and it is the scientific and academic fields that tend to generate reflexivity as a habitus-field requirement; though reflexivity can potentially emerge anywhere in 'crisis' situations. It is not a transcendent reflexivity however; it is simply a procedural requirement within that field; a necessary form of collective cultural capital, which becomes engrained in individual agency. Thus reflexivity is as much the habitual outcome of field requirements as any other disposition. Reflexivity becomes, in a sense, the very 'feel for the game' that it is initially defined in opposition to.[2]

Even if, on occasion, we can reflexively apprehend the knowledge-limitations imposed by a field, or if some forms of habitus are apparently more reflexive than others, *when* we do so is still guided by the particular constitution of one's habitus. Thus Jenkins argues that what appears to be reflexivity is

in fact 'part of the repertoire of the habitus, not, in any sense, an autonomous or chosen process or … an illusion, insofar as the principles of its operation are constrained by and derive from the habitus' (Jenkins, 1992: 77). Bourdieu's version of reflexivity stretches the meaningfulness of the term to its limit, and this is one reason why accusations of determinism may still stick: 'His model of practice, despite all its references to improvization and fluidity, turns out to be a celebration of (literally) mindless conformity … It is a world where behaviour has its causes, but actors are not allowed their reasons' (Jenkins, 1992: 97); 'it is still the language of conditioned disposition and environmentally triggered response … of inculcation and inscription of socially constituted dispositions' (Widick, 2003: 688); or more bluntly, 'the habitus will always submit to the field' (Adkins, 2003: 36).

Despite the complexity of the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, respective assertions of voluntarism and determinism cannot be completely dismissed. Thus, critiques of one side of the debate shade into an assertion of the other and we appear to reach a theoretical impasse. It is in this context that a potentially fruitful navigational course appears to be emerging in sociological literature, in the form of a *hybridization* of reflexivity and habitus. The remainder of this article sketches the potential of this hybrid for understanding contemporary complexities of class and identity.

## Hybridizing Reflexivity and Habitus

Building on the aforementioned critiques, numerous authors have argued that the persistence of forms of habitus heavily qualify, but do not fully deny, the transformative potential of reflexivity to move beyond 'traditional' identity markers (Bufton, 2003; Mitchell and Green, 2002; Skeggs, 1997), suggesting there may be potential in conceptualizing a reflexivity/habitus hybrid.

An initial problem is a lack of consensus over what is actually meant by reflexivity. For McNay, an authentic or political reflexivity has become possible, though it is fragmentary, contextual and discontinuous (McNay, 1999, 2000). It is authentic because it indicates the subjective capacity to genuinely 'stand back' from habitus/field relations and transform them. For Adkins, reflexivity is an ambivalent and aesthetic process, incorporated into the everyday reproduction of social structures rather than transcending them (Adkins, 2002, 2003). For Sweetman, it appears cognitively as an increasingly common form of mundane identity construction, but also as a habituated form of regulatory pseudo-awareness (Sweetman, 2003). For the purposes of this discussion, reflexivity is measured against the claims made for it by the extended reflexivity thesis: in terms of the extent to which it is invested with the ability to reflect with perspicuity upon the previous 'givens' of all dimensions of social structure in relation to subjectivity, to the point of further substantiating transformative social change that makes such reflexivity possible. All those discussed here have answered ambivalently, and Bourdieu's social determinism casts a possibly

necessary shadow over optimistic claims for agency. McNay perhaps comes closest to asserting the political and subjective potential of reflexivity.

Lois McNay's analysis in particular is a nuanced attempt to work through the relationship between habitus and reflexivity. She initially argues that gender identity is 'less amenable to emancipatory processes of refashioning' than the extended reflexivity thesis suggests (McNay, 1999: 95). McNay views the reflexive self as a normative, masculinist creation, a disembedded and disembodied valorization of cognitive, rational autonomy. In noting 'a tendency in certain theories of identity transformation to construe identity as a process of symbolic identification without considering its mediation in embodied practice' (1999: 98), she moves towards Bourdieu's vision of structure and agency. She argues that the generative nature of habitus helps explain the persistence of reasonably entrenched gender identities. Following Bourdieu, agency is seen to operate within broader systems of constraint of which the individual is routinely unaware. These systems allow, demand even, investment, negotiation and creative appropriation to create meaningful gender identifications.

McNay is claiming that reflexivity is a creative possibility, but it is founded upon pre-reflexive commitments originating in the social world, which shape that possibility. In this sense, Bourdieu is vital to dampen the 'celebratory subjectivism' implicit in the extended reflexivity thesis (McNay, 1999: 105). Though McNay is concerned with gender identifications, the claim is echoed in earlier analyses of class (Skeggs, 1997; Willis, 1977). Thus Skeggs claims her analysis:

> … is not an account of how individuals make themselves but how they cannot fail to make themselves in particular ways … the women are not the originators of their identities but are located in temporal processes of subjective construction … *Within* these constraints they deploy many constructive and creative strategies to generate a sense of themselves with value. (Skeggs, 1997: 162; emphasis added)

Reflexivity is bounded in advance by the limits of social structure as embodied in one's habitus. McNay thus appears to be defending Bourdieu's notion of habitus rather than granting any significant ground to reflexive capabilities. However, McNay raises an important issue with Bourdieu's analysis in considering contemporary gender identity, and this is the point at which hybridity becomes a complex potential. She claims that the notions of habitus and field do not fully explain how, in contemporary society, movement *across* fields may attenuate the power of habitus in the formation of gender identity (McNay, 1999: 107).

McNay returns to an under-developed area of Bourdieu's own work to indicate how he allows for 'the possibility of reflexive self-awareness' in shifting between unevenly aligned, relatively autonomous fields. Habitus is defined in relation to field and though established dispositions become transposable between fields, the possibility of a lack of fit is always possible. This lack is the space where reflexivity can emerge, according to Bourdieu, particularly during times of crises (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 131). A 'crisis' might be radical

changes in the field or unexpected movement between fields (suddenly losing one's job or being moved from one's home to a detention centre). This is a result of increased individual mobility, institutional reflexivity, an increased quantitative differentiation of social fields and the blurring of boundaries between others (McNay, 1999: 106–7). In such a context, the establishment and maintenance of habitus is problematized, allowing reflexivity 'in'. McNay argues that contemporary society is in fact much more routinely marked by the 'crises' emanating from movement between fields than Bourdieu allows.

In terms of gender, Bourdieu's oversight means that 'he significantly underestimates the ambiguities and dissonances that exist in the way that men and women occupy masculine and feminine positions' (McNay, 1999: 107). Consequently 'the habitus cannot be said to always ensure unproblematic alignment between the demands of the field and subjective dispositions' (p. 108). Whether or not reflexivity will occur, or lead to any kind of radical transformation in the micro-social structures of existence and/or the broader social field, depends on the 'particular configuration of power relations' (p. 109) in any given context. McNay argues that this is a conceptualization which allows for the great variety of experiences which make up gendered identities much more accurately than the blanket notion of extended reflexivity as a universalized response to broad social changes. There *is* an increased movement between fields; this *can* lead to reflexivity and change. As women enter the workforce, for example, it creates dissonance and an awareness of 'objective' relations in the sphere of work: the 'lucidity of the excluded', which in turn can generate resistance and negotiation (e.g. the formal outlawing of sexual harassment). However changes are always 'uneven':

> If there can be said to have been any attenuation of conventional notions of masculinity and femininity in the last 30 years or so, it needs to be thought of as a much more piecemeal, discontinuous affair arising from the negotiation of discrepancies by individuals in their movement within and across fields of social action. (McNay, 1999: 110)

To extend the example of work, many occupational roles are still almost exclusively filled by women or men, and equality varies between countries, professions, firms, factories, offices and the interpersonal relationships within them. Reflexivity arises in the specific, concrete negotiation of conflictual fields, not amidst the world of increased exposure to choice-based social systems posited by the extended reflexivity thesis. Thus McNay attempts to hang on to Bourdieu's determinism to explain social continuity whilst allowing for a version of reflexivity, tempered by a number of caveats, to make sense of differential social change.

Lisa Adkins's work is also relevant to a potential hybridization (Adkins, 2002, 2003). She assents to the importance of Bourdieu's analysis and its interpretation in the work of McNay and others. The attempt to explain continuity, gradual change and radical transformation in gender identifications by bringing Bourdieu's concept of habitus to bear upon accounts of reflexivity is seen to be

significant. However, Adkins also claims that reflexivity is in fact *constitutive* of structural inequality, reflecting and maintaining socially structured gender identifications in contemporary settings. She argues that reflexivity has become a habit, suggesting that in distinguishing between habit and reflexivity as distinctly separate spheres of experience, 'such analyses may be greatly underestimating the ways in which reflexivity is part of everyday habit and hence overestimating the possibilities of gender detraditionalization' (Adkins, 2003: 34; Crossley, 2001). Adkins challenges the assumption that reflexivity is 'a transforming practice' (2003: 34–5) *and* that the incorporation of habitus into the normative requirements of field simply 'works' outside of reflexivity (2003: 37). Instead, reflexivity is argued to be a situated process that is ambivalently related to norms; not necessarily transformative or detraditionializing, nor simply incorporating the social order. Everyday practices are highly reflexive but, in being so, routinely reflect and maintain gender distinctions rather than dissolving them.

To briefly develop what is a complex argument, Adkins asserts that 'the self-reflexive subject is closely aligned to neo-liberal modes of governance, indeed is the ideal and privileged subject of neo-liberalism' (Adkins, 2002: 123). In this context, reflexivity is a resource, allowing mobility and thus 'privileged positions' in late modernity (p. 130). It is not, therefore, a simple outcome of social change but a vehicle for the re-edification of social differences and divisions. Thus: 'Techniques such as experimentation are not understood as unproblematically involving free play and free will and hence as "liberatory" or detraditionalizing, but rather are understood as techniques which rework and are constitutive of differences' (p. 131). Adkins draws on Skeggs's recent work to argue that self-reflexivity relies on 'specific techniques for knowing and telling the self' (Adkins, 2002: 8), which imbue the speaker with a naturalized epistemological authority (Skeggs, 2002). These characteristics are 'more available to some than to others' and 'rely on forms of appropriation, which dispossess certain "selves" of such properties' (Adkins, 2002: 8). Reflexivity is thus implicated in power relationships and the maintenance of privileged positions. Adkins offers a thorough and detailed analysis in arguing that women often end up as 'reflexivity losers', being denied the positions of reflexive authority and mobility. She thus appears to be more sympathetic to Bourdieu's understanding of reflexivity as a habitual position which bestows advantage in certain (gendered) fields.

What is not so apparent in Adkins's analysis is that the practice of reflexivity cannot unequivocally be thought of as privileged, as indicating a position of power, particularly as we move beyond a consideration of gender. A wealth of studies have indicated how 'reflexive thinking' has permeated the work, welfare and governance environments, becoming a management tool of self-regulation and surveillance involving both men and women (Bryman, 2004: 103–30; Cremin, 2003; Du Gay, 1997; Sennett, 1998): 'The corporate identity becomes individualized through a reflective process in which the needs of the company are emphasized within individual thought as a means for achieving

career success' (Cremin, 2003: 118). This is seen to be the outcome of combined social changes including the globalization of labour markets, short-term and temporary contract culture, a shift from manufacturing to service industries in the west and the culturalization of corporate management. The research suggests that reflexivity may regulate those habituated to it, as well as those who find themselves adversely and powerlessly positioned in relation to it. Such a qualification may appear to support Bourdieu's portrayal of reflexivity as a form of habitus but it need not be an unconscious, habitual enactment of reflexivity, if such a thing is possible, to be a regulatory and reproductive process. This point aside, reflexivity emerges from Adkins's analysis as a complex process, bound up in social distinction but not straightforwardly a resource of one class or gender over another, so not simply a product of habitus in the maintenance of simplistic social distinctions.

In a discussion which echoes McNay's and Adkins's, Paul Sweetman notes that Bourdieu allows for the *possibility* of reflexivity, particularly in 'times of crisis', for those with a habitus in which dispositions of anticipation and calculability are ready options (2003: 535–6). Sweetman similarly seizes on Bourdieu's acknowledgement of the possibility of reflexivity under certain social conditions to make some more general and apparently novel claims about identity in the contemporary context. His main point is that 'certain forms of habitus may be *inherently* reflexive, and that the flexible or *reflexive* habitus may be both increasingly common and increasingly significant due to various social and cultural shifts' (Sweetman, 2003: 529; emphasis in the original).[3]

At first glance, reflexivity becoming habitual for growing numbers seems to replicate the extended reflexivity thesis: reflexive awareness is becoming a normative state pervading more and more areas of life including our sense of identity. Sweetman correspondingly locates the genesis of the reflexive habitus, and evidence of it, in social and cultural changes affecting fields as diverse as employment, community, fashion and media. The norms of these fields are increasingly open to questioning, subject to uncertainty and change, rendering habits unwieldy before they can even become established. The result is the prevalence and normalization of *crises* 'understood as situations where one is unable to simply keep on going as before become all but ubiquitous' (Sweetman, 2003: 540), and contributing 'towards a continual and pervasive reflexivity that itself becomes habitual, however paradoxical this may at first appear' (p. 540). Bourdieu's scenario of reflexive awareness emerging in crisis becomes endemic in post-traditional settings, as individual movement between fields is increased, the boundaries between them blurred, and fields themselves become subject to 'rapid, pervasive and ongoing changes' (p. 541).

Sweetman claims that today the *disjunction* between habitus and field has become the norm, 'a more or less permanent disruption' (2003: 541). In such a context there is a paradoxical incorporation of reflexivity into the habitus: 'Reflexivity ceases to reflect a temporary lack of fit between habitus and field but itself becomes habitual' (p. 541). Such a claim historicizes Bourdieu's analysis:

> To the extent that Bourdieu's 'non-reflexive' habitus depends upon relatively stable social conditions and on 'lasting experience of social position' his analysis may thus be said to apply more to simple – or organised – modernity, where the comparative stability of people's social identities allowed for a sustained, coherent and relatively secure relationship between habitus and field. (Sweetman, 2003: 541)

Sweetman thus draws on Bourdieu in an attempt to reassert the claim that reflexivity has become a *general* capability reflecting social change. He briefly takes up Scott Lash's notion of 'reflexivity winners and losers' in an attempt to draw out the *differentiated* nature of the reflexive habitus, but his conclusions are unclear. On the one hand reflexivity is argued to be something of a Trojan Horse. Reflecting the aforementioned studies of the work environment, Sweetman claims that, whilst being announced as a quality of freedom and liberation, reflexivity in fact contains hidden processes of regulation at work, self-surveillance and nervous self-scrutiny. On the other hand, those of whom reflexivity is not demanded are 'doubly disadvantaged': involved in menial tasks without the opportunity to develop a habitual reflexivity (2003: 544).

But if reflexivity does not unequivocally bestow social advantage, but instead a new form of regulation, in what sense are 'reflexivity losers' *doubly* disadvantaged? The main implication appears to be a replication of Bourdieu's claim that reflexivity often amounts to another form of habitus connected to social reproduction: he is unclear about how it maintains social distinctions, vital for Bourdieu; he is also ambiguous about whether or not it does contain any liberatory potential. The value of habitus and/or reflexivity in understanding contemporary identity remains uncertain. Thus, what at first appears to be a novel development of Bourdieu and the extended reflexivity thesis ends up as something of a conceptual cul-de-sac.

What does emerge from the work of Adkins, McNay and Sweetman is a more complex portrayal of an embedded, embodied and contradictory reflexivity which is not naively envisaged as either some kind of internalized meta-reflection or simplistic liberatory potential against a backdrop of retreating social structure. A notion of habitus tempered by an ambiguous, complex, contradictory reflexivity suggests how social categorizations can be reproduced but also challenged, overturned in uneven, 'piecemeal' ways. It is *not* clear, however, that changes afoot in gender relations and identifications, however patchy, are also happening in terms of class.

## Class: Limits to a Reflexive Habitus

Many studies point to a growing polarity in the distribution of wealth and associated life chances as a key social change (Bradley, 1996; Davies, 2004; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995), particularly between skilled and unskilled workers across the globe (Ehrenreich, 2001; Lawrence, 1994; Wes, 1996). Poor health, bad housing, limited employment, fewer rights of movement, even toxic

waste, 'will always run downhill on an economic path of least resistance' (Bauman, 2004: 59) and are marking out the field of a growing number. The in/ability to escape from that field may be the most accurate definition of class, or of stratification more generally (Bottero, 2004: 987).

In fact it could be argued that in terms of the lived experiences of the globe's poorest and wealthiest, the distinction between fields has *increased* and the transposability between them is decreasingly viable for the overwhelming majority of the poor, leaving them adrift and bereft. Numerous accounts have detailed the lifestyles of the underprivileged: the 'wasted lives' of refugees and impoverished migrants (Bauman, 2004); the urban slums, 'warehousing the twenty-first century's surplus humanity' (Davies, 2004: 28), the total population of which was recently estimated at 921 million, or a third of the global urban population (p. 13); or the working poor, whose working lives only serve to perpetuate their continual state of impoverishment (Ehrenreich, 2001). There are accounts too of an equally bounded and separate existence at the other end: the rich and powerful, increasingly hidden behind gated communities and moving through secure, defended spaces (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 1996), to the point where 'some odd optical property of our highly polarized society makes the poor almost invisible to their economic superiors' (Ehrenreich, 2001: 216).

It may be that these increasingly exclusive, inescapable fields of resource inequality, experienced as obdurate realities, are *not* maintained primarily by the 'behind-the-back' workings of the habitus, *nor* are they dissolved by concentrated reflexivity. An acknowledgement of the complex coexistence of reflexive awareness and habitual dispositions can only take us so far in coming to terms with the generation of contemporary identities and their relation to an increasingly differentiated social structure. One's habitus may restrict and condition a proportion of 'choices'; social change may be facilitating a reflexivity which penetrates the fog of structured dispositions; but identities are formed in the ability to translate the choices which emerge from this complex interplay into meaningful realities. Even a heavily qualified reflexivity can only tell a partial story of contemporary identity.

## Post-reflexive Choice

Reflexive awareness does simply not equate with the ability to transform one's situation in every context:

> … in our individual and social worlds, we can look around us, identify what is going on and institute changes – some of the time. Some of the time we can look around us, identify what is going on and find ourselves incapable of instituting changes …Sometimes our capacity for reflective thought can leave us recognising but unable to do anything about our lack of freedom. (Craib, 1992: 150)

By extension, despite a reflexive awareness of numerous possibilities potentially available for self-development, it does not necessarily alter the fact that

they are much more easily accessible to some rather than others. Clearly then, it is as important to document aspects of social experience that are relatively impenetrable to an agent's demands, *despite* high levels of reflexivity, in relation to the perceived openness of the social world. Thus, to fully understand contemporary identity formation we need to also emphasize what comes 'after' that moment of reflexive awareness, in which choices are resourced or otherwise.[4] The key focus in understandings of contemporary identity and the social basis for their distinction thus becomes what is here tentatively referred to as *post-reflexive choice*.

Scott Lash and John Urry's account of reflexivity 'winners and losers' can be interpreted as an attempt to specify the extent to which the resourcing of reflexive agency is structurally ordered (1994: 6). The phrase 'reflexivity loser' is something of a misnomer, however. It is argued here that a lack of reflexivity neither underpins nor is a significant outcome of 'losing', any more than it is a surfeit of unconsciousness. In fact, as I understand it, Lash does not envisage a lack of reflexivity per se as marking out those at the bottom; rather they 'lose' in relation to reflexivity because they are marginalized by a social structure which empowers reflexivity in others.

The structures in question are 'information and communication structures', which, according to Lash and Urry, are the basis for dividing a global population (1994: 7). Those at the helm or close to the heart of these structures – such as those creatively involved in the design, finance, publishing and advertising industries – are the 'winners', marked by self-monitoring and the reformulation of rules and regulations in the service of innovation which 'entail self-reflexivity' (Lash, 1994: 119). In the sweatshops of clothing manufacturers, the assembly lines of electronics firms, the development of crack economies, the rising homelessness numbers, swelling minority ghettos, Lash and Urry see a growing battalion of reflexivity 'losers': 'What sort of reflexivity for those effectively excluded from access to the globalized, yet spatially concentrated information and communication structures?' (1994: 143). A suitable answer would be that it is a reflexivity separated from meaningful choices, potentially avoiding two problematic claims: that pseudo-reflexivity or a lack of reflexivity somehow marks out the most marginalized; or that reflexivity is necessarily socially or personally transformative.

Some recent research into working class mothers' support networks reflects this interpretation of Lash and Urry's work, to illustratively sustain a more complex portrayal of the coexistence of reflexivity, habitus and post-reflexive choice along similar lines (Mitchell and Green, 2002). The authors interviewed a number of young mothers in 'Townsville', who were defined as working class and predominantly white. They found women whose reflexive and creative capabilities were tightly bound up with broader inequalities:

> Townsville's young mothers may be increasingly individualised self-reflexive actors but one cannot and should not ignore, the continuing importance of their 'habitus' … Here, their everyday experiences and discourses of motherhood, kinship and their

own self-identity as a mother still remain closely interwoven with the wider socio-economic inequalities which permeate their lives. (Mitchell and Green, 2002: 2)

Despite being grounded in the 'externalities' of class, locality and kinship, via habitus, those interviewed were reflexive agents, revealing the specific characteristics of reflexivity highlighted by Giddens and others, such as attitude flexibility, the centrality of the individual and relationship plasticity (Mitchell and Green, 2002: 9). The prevalence of reflexivity did not, however, equate with the choice to move beyond the parameters set by these externalities; there was no inevitable freedom to construct individualized biographies.

This is because 'making life-style choices' in the context of a reflexive project of selfhood would 'frequently require practicalities such as socio-economic resources and opportunities, which many of Townsville's young mothers do not have access to' (2002: 10). For example, despite the Townsville women stating an awareness of, and desire for, more varied activities in their free time, 'their leisure was usually home based, such as watching television/reading due to childcare issues and financial considerations' (2002: 16). This example suggests that reflexivity is an expressive capability of the working-class mothers who took part in the research. It is not, as the hybrids discussed have suggested, a capability of the fortunate (or the sociologically inclined), a regulatory form of self-presentation or a transformative process of identification. Considering degrees of reflexivity in the context of habitus may in fact be misplaced if what matters for individual experience and opportunity is the capacity to convert 'reflexions' into meaningful realities, which requires material resources that the women simply do not have access to.

Although the hybridization of habitus and reflexivity frame contemporary identifications in interesting ways, a complexly imagined extension of reflexivity amounts to very little if it is detached from its immediate embeddedness in a differentiated resource context. Thus, the specifics of *post-reflexive choice* were vital for the life-chances and subsequent identities of the individuals interviewed by Mitchell and Green. The point here is not that reflexivity is attenuated by habitus, nor that reflexivity should be interpreted as a form of regulation: habitus and reflexivity seem to coexist in no doubt complex ways. Whilst acknowledging degrees of independence and reflexivity, 'underlying structures and inequalities' are still vital for making sense of identity but not just 'behind the backs' of subjects via the enactment of habitus.

In fact it is *via* reflexive capabilities that the women 'perceived a dearth of social opportunities and life-chances for themselves, which in turn had important ramifications for levels of self-esteem and future aspirations' (Mitchell and Green, 2002: 14). Boyne similarly argues that whilst reflexivity is increasingly prevalent, the consequences are far from celebratory for many. Where class once provided a meaningful context to the experience of poverty, reflexivity reveals 'a picture of unadorned exclusion' (2002: 121); 'the connection between class location and cultural identity appears to have unravelled' (Bottero, 2004: 987). In a context of increasing polarization and 'structural

downward mobility for substantial sections of the [previously] organised-capitalist working class' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 145), for the poorest, reflexivity compounds a distinct lack of agency, as individuals are cut adrift from any meaningful social order, 'located within unformed or fractured or multiply chaotic fields' (Boyne, 2002: 124), which offer no escape routes. The 'losers' have little choice but to occupy servicing positions on the margins of wealth as traditional forms of working and lower-working class work and leisure have been eroded by these new structures. Reflexive awareness and the delimitations of field enclosures uncoupled from resource realization amount to frustrated isolation. Reflexivity in this context does not bring choice, just a painful awareness of the lack of it.

## Conclusion

What can be said in conclusion about the relationship between identity, reflexivity and choice in the context of changing social structures? Certainly, 'the relations between reflexivity and detraditionalization or social transformation can in no way be taken for granted' (Adkins, 2003: 35). Instead, Adkins suggests a more complex understanding of the relationship between habitus and field is needed before a Bourdieu-inspired sociology can offer an alternative vision of practice, some attempts at which have been explored here. It has been argued, however, that it is at least as important to direct critical attention towards the individualized opportunities available to transform embodied, partial, reflexive awareness into an opening out of choices for a relational and autonomous self-identity, by focusing on the ways in which opportunity, or the lack of opportunity, gravitates towards particular social groups. Such processes cannot be overlooked if social theory is to make a valuable contribution to our understanding, not just of 'classed' identities, but of the globally differential transformations stratifying and hierarchicizing resourced identities in a context of social change (Bottero, 2004: 1000). As Bauman argues, 'all of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers' (1998: 86).

## Notes

1   See Jenkins (1992), Calhoun et al. (1993), and numerous commemorative journal issues (e.g. *Theory and Society* 42, 2003), for an overview of Bourdieu and his critical reception.

2   Bourdieu has also viewed sociology as a potential harbour for authentic reflexivity (Bourdieu et al., 1999). A problematic binary of relatively ignorant everyday processes of the masses, 'capable only of restricted, practical knowledge', enacted in the mimesis of habitus, versus the enlightened meta-knowledge of social science, remains however: 'Bourdieu can only come to

this (meta)understanding of the limitations of knowledge … because he places himself as the "scholar inside the machine" of everyday, non-scientific life' (Schirato and Webb, 2003: 552).

3  It is worth noting that 'flexibility' and 'reflexivity' are not the same thing, despite their apparent interchangeability here. A flexible habitus may be able to move from field to field relatively easily and comfortably maintain a set of dispositions, or be capable of revising dispositions in the light of changes in the field. In both cases, Bourdieu argued that flexibility is already an inherent property of the habitus; it is both transposable and adaptable. A reflexive habitus suggests something else: an openness to scrutiny.

4  This is not so say that reflexivity and choice follow a linear, ordered trajectory, that unconscious motivations and dispositions are unimportant in the choices we consider or make, or that the social structuring of choice never escapes reflexivity.

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