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A Sociological Genealogy of Transcendence

Javier Gil-Gimeno

I-Communitas: Institute for Advanced Social Research

Public University of Navarra (Spain)

fcojavier.gil@unavarra.es

Maya Aguiluz Ibargüen

Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Science and Humanities (CEIICH)

National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)

aguiluz.maya@gmail.com

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to carry out a sociological genealogy of transcendence -understood as a condition of possibility of creativity- articulated from three milestones in its conceptual evolution: The first focuses on the study of the link between transcendence and religiosity in the scenario of primitive societies. We will stop to study how, as Émile Durkheim shows in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in this type of societies transcendence acted and was articulated mainly through two types of mechanisms: ritual and collective effervescence. The second milestone is established theoretically on the basis of the analysis of transcendence carried out by Hans Joas, in his work *The Power of the Sacred*, and by Georg Simmel, in "Life as Transcendence". For the former, transcendence is sacredness that becomes reflexive, while for the latter, transcendence is the essence of social life, and implies an exercise of going beyond oneself. In this second moment in the sociological evolution of transcendence we focus on its reflexive dimension, linked to the fact that, since the emergence of the Axial era (800-200 B.C.), the subject becomes an object for itself, a problem to which answers must be given, whether in terms of soteriology or truth. The third milestone analyzes what we can call 'variable geometries of transcendence', and for its study we take as a reference the typology of transcendences articulated by Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann in their work *The Structures of Social Life* (vol. 2), which unfolds around three categories: 'Little Transcendencies', 'Medium Transcendencies' and 'Great Transcendencies'. In this

scenario the sociological key is provided not so much by the decline of the formulas of religious transcendence, but by the coexistence of different and heterogeneous formulas of transcendence (secular and religious) that struggle to obtain a voice and social recognition in the civil sphere.

Keywords: Primitive Transcendence- Reflexive Transcendence- Theoretical Culture- Secularization -Immanent Frame- Little Transcendences- Medium Transcendences- Great Transcendences.

1. Introduction

The 'commonplace' usually associates transcendence with religion, whether in its 'primitive', 'archaic' or 'historical' forms (Bellah, 1969). This narrative is deeply rooted in social discourse, and -in part- also in scientific discourse. The clear example of this is that most research on transcendence has been carried out from the field of knowledge of theology. Our intention is not to question the fact that theology can contribute significant and/or relevant keys to the study of transcendence -because it has done so and will continue to do so in the future-, but it is to point out that its study should not be limited to this specific field of knowledge. This paper proposes to carry out a sociological

genealogy of transcendence, that is, it proposes to make a sociological approach to the evolution of the concept of transcendence understood as a social phenomenon. The fact that those who experience and develop processes of transcendence are individuals and collectives should be more than enough evidence to make us aware of the need for sociological approaches to this phenomenon.

The proposal we make is based on the following observation: *If sociology*, as Max Weber (1978) reminds us, *must be concerned with social action in all its manifestations, and if we start from the fact that transcendence is a social phenomenon, the sociologist must analyze those social actions that are either directed by transcendence or are articulated to generate it.* Thus, this work is developed from the recognition that, in their actions, subjects and collectives generate dynamics of creation of experiences of transcendence, and/or are acted upon by and through them. It is also important to point out that the formulas or vehicles that such transcendence acquires are a reflection of the concrete social frameworks (Halbwachs, 1925; Goffman, 1986) in which they emerge and/or are implemented. In summary, *this text argues that transcendence has a clear social dimension that must be approached from sociology.*

Based on the statement made in the previous paragraph, and with the aim of laying the theoretical foundations that will allow us to carry out solid approaches to the sociological analysis of transcendence, our proposal focuses on presenting an

evolutionary genealogy of this phenomenon that focuses on three milestones or moments that have been previously addressed by different and prominent authors from sociological theory, and that offer us a clear sample of both its social meanings and the main vehicles or social forms that it has acquired in and through time.

Before advancing in our line of argument it is necessary to point out that, although sociological approaches to transcendence -from a quantitative point of view- have been relatively few, some of them -qualitatively speaking- are great contributions to sociological thought made by outstanding authors such as Émile Durkheim (1995), Georg Simmel (2010), Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann (1989) or, more recently, Hans Joas (2021). The contributions of these authors to the sociological analysis of transcendence help us to structure the content of this paper. Likewise, before focusing on the three dynamic axes from which our sociological genealogy of transcendence is articulated, we would like to point out three issues that will have a direct impact on it, as we will be able to verify in the following pages: 1. Transcendence is the condition of possibility of creativity (which is why our paper is inserted in the scenario of this special issue about creativity). 2. Transcendence as a concept has religious-theological origins, but 3. Modern societies and sociological discourse (understood as a product of the modern context) have provoked a secularization of the concept. Having pointed out the above, let us concentrate on the three milestones in the sociological-conceptual evolution of transcendence.

The first milestone we call 'primitive transcendence', and to present it we will focus on Durkheim's analysis in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995) of certain rites of passage and collective effervescence, both understood as mechanisms of articulation of transcendence dynamics and/or as vehicles of transcendence in a worldview context of 'primitive' religiosity (Bellah, 1969). The second milestone we call 'theoretical-reflexive' and articulate it from the works of Simmel in "Life as Transcendence" (2010) and Joas in *The Power of the Sacred* (2021). In this second moment the emergence of transcendent forms would require dynamics or processes of articulation of second-order thinking (Elkana, 1986), either understood as *Mehr-als Leben* from Simmel's perspective, or as *Self-Transcendence* from Joas's theoretical proposal. This implies that the characteristic vehicle of transcendence at this point would be reflexivity. In this sense it is important to point out that the development of this second type cannot be understood without the emergence of theoretical culture (Donald, 1991) during what Karl Jaspers (1965) defines as the Axial era. The third milestone we call 'variable geometries of transcendence'. To develop it we take as a reference the typology of transcendences elaborated by Schutz and Luckman in their work *The Structures of Social Life* (1989, vol. 2), which is articulated in and from three levels: 'Great Transcendencies', 'Medium Transcendencies' and 'Little Transcendencies'. The heterogeneity of forms of transcendence present in today's societies allows us to become aware of the presence and vitality of this phenomenon in modern and secular societies and, above all, of its concreteness in terms

of a co-presence of different vehicles and forms of transcendence that strive to obtain voice and influence in the civil sphere (Alexander, 2008).

Before concluding this introduction and fully immersing ourselves in the analysis of the three milestones in the evolution of the phenomenon at hand, it seems necessary to offer a sociological definition of transcendence. To do so, we turn to what was possibly the first effort of our discipline to study this phenomenon, which is none other than Simmel's "Life as Transcendence": "The innermost essence of life is its capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them; that is, beyond itself" (2010:10).

We understand that Simmel's sociological approach to the notion of transcendence is valuable for our task in three senses: 1. For him, what is nuclear is that transcendence necessarily implies - in all its manifestations - the existence of dynamics of interaction. 2. Because he tries to extract the collective sap of the concept, differentiating it from its concrete manifestations or vehicles. In this sense, the sociological core of the idea of transcendence would lie in the 'go out beyond itself', in the basic task of overcoming that

implies every transcendent process. 3. Because he presents it as something essential¹ to understand social action.

To continue paving the way for a sociological approach to the phenomenon of transcendence, we consider that it is also interesting to dwell briefly on the concept of 'Boundary Crossings' developed by Schutz and Luckmann (1989:99-103). For them, the 'knowledge' of transcendence is always acquired from 'experiences' of transcendence: "Everyone knows that the world in which he lives 'transcends' him. Now, it will have to be shown what performances of consciousness are involved in the *experience* of such givens" (1989:102). On this basis, in order to make sociological approaches to transcendence we must focus on studying what 'provinces of meaning' are co-involved in the different experiences of transcendence. To carry out this overstepping, this surpassing of the limits of previous experience, subjects and collectives use a series of means that the authors call 'indications', 'marks', 'signs' and 'symbols', elements that the sociologist must take into account for analyzing this phenomenon. Similarly, the analysis of these mediated experiences of overstepping would also require a study of the 'conditions of experience', the 'limits of action' and 'the boundaries of life' (1989:102), elements that are clearly implied in the exercises of overstepping oneself.

¹ Here it is interesting to note that, although Simmel refers to transcendence as the 'essence' of social life, we are not going to take this statement literally. Our idea is to reduce its rotundity. From our point of view transcendence would be an essential aspect of social action, but not the essential aspect *par excellence*.

2. Ritual and effervescent transcendence in primitive societies

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995²), Durkheim attempts to sketch a general sociological theory of the origins of religion from its simplest or most primitive ('elementary' in his own terms) forms. Beyond the fact that we could debate whether these forms observed -mainly by anthropologists during the period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century- are really representative of primitive religiosity, what is essential in Durkheim's work is that he considers religion as a collective representation, thus laying the theoretical foundations for sociology to approach this phenomenon: "But religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it" (1995: 227).

Before proceeding with our analysis, we consider it necessary to make several methodological nuances. At no point in his work (1995) does Durkheim refer to transcendence, which might lead the reader to suggest his work is not a contribution to the sociology of transcendence in general or to this genealogy in particular. Although we

² Originally published in 1912.

do not deny the major - that is, that Durkheim at no point speaks of transcendence - we understand that the forms of religiosity and the vehicles for reaching the 'sacred' state he presents are clear religious manifestations of what Simmel defines as overstepping the self. Thus, although Durkheim does not directly analyze transcendence, his analysis of primitive religiosity refers to a clear horizon of transcendence understood in the terms in which we have defined it in the present work. It is for this reason that Durkheim's work serves as a basis for an approach to a first sociological-primitive stage of transcendence, in which it operates through a religiously based logic.

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life is one of the first sociological efforts focused on analyzing how the sacred arises from social interaction, that is, it is one of the first efforts that focus on the sociological dimension of (religious) transcendence in primitive societies, since access to the sacred status requires an exercise of going beyond oneself. 2. Similarly, it offers an analysis of how transcendence (sacred status in its terms) is accessed, and the vehicles which it acquires in such societies. Regarding our argument, the first point must necessarily lead us to the second one.

For Durkheim, religion is a collective representation. This statement implies that religion is a reality socially constructed from the interactions carried out by subjects and collectives in specific contexts. For Durkheim, the religious (as the collective phenomenon that it is) always refers to a sublimation of the social whole, and this is

clearly exemplified in societies in which the complexity of the cultural artifact is lower, reason why he stops to analyze them: "Thus, the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be none other than the clan itself, but the clan transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal that serves as totem" (1995:208).

To understand primitive transcendence from the perspective of Durkheim's analysis of religious life, it is key to pay attention to what he defines as two states of social life: the profane and the sacred. From his perspective, the primitive experiences these states as two radically different and antagonistic: "the condition of belonging fully to one is fully to have left the other" (1995:37), "the sacred thing is (...) that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity" (1995:38). Based on his words, access to the sacred state would require what we are calling a transcendent overflow, a kind of rebirth, of going beyond oneself, which implies a transformation "*totius substantiae*" (1995:37).

With regard to the overstepping itself, that is, the transition from the profane to the sacred state and the vehicles used to carry out this social exercise (which we have defined as the second element of interest for the analysis of transcendence provided by *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*), is where Durkheim's work reveals itself to be more ambivalent, because if we turn to the introductory chapter that concludes with the definition of religion (entitled "Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion") it seems that is through initiation that the individual abandons the profane state in order to gain access to the

sacred; whereas if we turn to chapter 7 (entitled "Origin and Notion of Totemic Principle, or Mana") it seems that this transit occurs through phenomena such as collective effervescence. In the first case, the transit from one state to another would be definitive and would be articulated in a ritual way; while in the second case, the transit would be temporary and the dynamics of access to the sacred would come from a 'force' (the collective effervescence) external to the subject (although internal, proper to the action) that overwhelms him and leads him to a transitory state in which he finds himself 'outside himself', that is, outside his profane experience (state) of existence. We wanted to record this argumentative duality before briefly analyzing each of the two primitive mechanisms or vehicles for the creation of transcendence that Durkheim develops.

1. In the first case, the formula of access to the sacred state would correspond to the development of a religious-ritual mechanism of integration of the young layman into the adult community. During his minority the young man would develop his existence in the realm of profane things, a realm of "generally of rather low intensity" (1995:217), but once he has been initiated into the 'mystery' of the community, once he has been invested by the community through a rite of passage, he would experience a rebirth, definitively abandoning the previous profane state to, from that moment onwards, become an active part of the *communitas*. This implies that being a full member of the *communitas* entails having transcended into the sacred state, that is, having entered the "circle of the

sacred things" (1995:35). Here Durkheim does not analyze the sacred state as a transitory space of transcendence, but as a *definitive* state. Whoever has reached it no longer returns to the profane state. Thus, in these societies we would find two types of subjects: those who have been initiated and, therefore, have acquired the sacred status, and those who either have not yet acquired it, or who cannot or do not have the right to acquire it, and who will develop their existence in the realm of profane things. Therefore, the transcendent surpassing for the acquisition of the sacred status that we have just analyzed would be articulated as a mechanism of social structuring and differentiation that would entail different social experiences according to the position occupied by people in that social structure. Those who acceded to the sacred status became full subjects of the community. In the same way, this is a mechanism of articulation of transcendence in which the *control* of the group over the process of sacralization of its members is total. In this approach transcendence is a vehicle of the socialization process.

2. But, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim refers to another type of articulation of religious transcendence in primitive societies that is different from the one we have just studied. In this second sense, the acquisition of sacred status would not be linked to the overcoming of an initiation ritual in the community, nor to the need to structure society, *but to the emergence and impact of what Durkheim defines as 'collective effervescence' on a concrete community.*

Such effervescence is conceived "in the form of a moral power that, while immanent in us, also represents something in us that is other to ourselves" (1995:214). In this approach transcendence is a vehicle for the self-sacralization of the social.

The concept of collective effervescence is one of the best examples in which the capital Durkheimian notion of 'exteriority' of the social fact, a type of 'exteriority' internal or immanent to the human being himself, can be observed. This 'immanent exteriority' is totally different from that which operates in the theological conception of transcendence, which links the essence of our being to the dependence on a series of supernatural forces or beings that are defined as an absolute other, as the 'absolutely heterogeneous' (Otto, 1924). This effervescent force, external and internal at the same time, 'electric' for Durkheim, emerges in scenarios in which the convergence of subjects and their proximity acts as a spur to excitement, which is reproduced as a 'snowball' effect, since "by expressing this excitement, they also reinforce it" (1995:218). In this state, the human being feels "possessed and led on by some sort of external power that makes him think and act differently than he normally does (...) It seems to him that he has become a new being (...) and because his companions feel transformed in the same way at the same moment, and express this feeling by their shouts, movements and bearing, it is as if he was in reality transported into a special world entirely

different from the one in which he ordinarily lives, a special world inhabited by exceptionally intense forces that invade and transform him. (...) It is in this effervescent social milieu, and indeed from that very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born." (1995:220³). It is interesting to note that, contrary to what happened in the first case, in which ritual acted as a ritually controlled vehicle for the emergence or for the acquisition of the sacred state, in the case of collective effervescence it acts in an uncontrolled way as a vehicle for the emergence of the sacred (transcendent) state at the same time that it generates an experience of transcendence itself. The collective effervescence leads the subject and the collectivity into a *transitory* sacred state in which the forms and formulas proper to the profane state have been surpassed, to which one will return after the episode of effervescent transcendence.

This second type of transcendent articulation would not be used to fertilize the permanent production or reproduction of a social organization functionally differentiated around the possession of sacred and profane status, but would act in a more democratic way (any member of the community can experience it) as well as transitory (when the episode of effervescence ends, the subject and the

³ For further discussion of the issues noted see also G. Bataille, 2018, *Teoría de la religión*, Madrid: Taurus, pp. 28-49; N. J. Allen, "Effervescence and the Origin of Human Society" in N. J. Allen, W. S. F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller (Eds.), 1998, *On Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, London: Routledge, pp. 149-162.

collectivity return to the daily life of the profane state). Thus, collective effervescence would not be a religious form of functionally differentiating, structuring, social roles by activating transcendent processes, but would focus on another social task of the first order: to act as a vehicle that allows subjects and collectives to experience the two basic planes and times of primitive societies: the profane and the sacred.

Similarly, the type of transcendence that generates collective effervescence would be linked to episodes of social *uncontrol*, in which the collectivity transgresses normality, often as a way of reinforcing it, as has occurred historically with social events such as festivals (Caillois, 2014: 1011 et seq.), with rituals related to death (Hertz, 2004: 78-79; Thomas, 2017: 52-82) or with revolutionary mobilizations (Tiryakian, 2009, pp. 89-115; Mathiez, 2012). In this sense, the sacred status would have a less definitive character than in the first case and, although it could develop in the medium term, as in the example of the revolutionary processes of which Durkheim or Mathiez (2012) speak, the truth is that it would have a clearly temporal-punctual character, linked to specific experiences or celebrations in which the collective is imbued by forces that: "They bring about such an intense hyperexcitement of physical and mental life as a whole that they cannot be borne for very long" (Durkheim, 1995:218). Thus, from this perspective, most of the members of the community -except for some

endowed with permanent charisma such as the shaman or the medicine man- would live their daily existence in the profane state, accessing the sacred state at specific moments of social life. Access to this state would occur through an episode of collective effervescence.

Regardless of the differences between the two modes of access to the sacred-transcendent, what is certain is that, in both, the object that is sublimated is the community itself (whether tribe or clan). That is, the sacred object, the *res sagrada*, is none other than society sublimated and erected as the beginning and end of social existence. Therefore, in these primitive forms analyzed by Durkheim, transcendence is articulated through a transcendence of the individual oriented *ad majorem communitas gloriam*. Now, this religiously oriented immanent transcendence does not yet entail a reflexive dimension. The tribesman experiences an overflow -whether in the form of ritual or collective effervescence-, but at this stage he does not yet establish second-order thinking (Elkana, 1986) around this experience. These reflexive dynamics will emerge with force during the Axial era (between 800 and 200 B.C.), materializing from their origins in both secular and extra-mundane transcendent formulas.

3. Theoretical-reflexive drift of transcendence

Throughout this epigraph we will analyze a second milestone in the sociological genealogy of transcendence that we are undertaking. *In this second moment transcendence acquires the status of an object for the subject.* In this sense, it is no longer enough to *have experiences of overcoming oneself, but to understand -to exercise control - over how and in what sense they are produced.* This development of a reflexive transcendence, as Matthias Jung (2012:90) or Shaun Gallagher (2006:127) remind us, has an impact on both the universal (holistic in Jung's terms) and the particular (corporeality in Jung's terms), generating a large number of tensions between these two levels of social experience that will later be reflected in the third milestone, which we have called 'variable geometries of transcendence'. To carry out this epigraph we will rely fundamentally on the analysis of the works already mentioned in the introduction by Simmel (2010) and Joas (2021).

For making this theoretical-sociological transition to the second milestone in the evolution of transcendence operational, we consider interesting to introduce into the debate -first of all- the double conceptual formula articulated by Simmel in his work "Life as transcendence" (2010): *more-life (Mehr-Leben)* and *more-than-life (Mehr-als-Leben)*. More-life implies a type of transcendent overflow that occurs "within the plane of life itself, of its current, delimited form" (2010:16), and, therefore, a transcendence of a 'mechanical' type directly linked to the inherence and inertia of the processes of social change that is summarized in the following idea: *By the very fact of living we transcend.*

Each vital act supposes an exercise of transcending of the *more-life* type. For *more-life* to be activated, it is not necessary for a profound rupture to take place, an experience, for example, of a revolutionary type; on the contrary, *life is continually more-life, continually surpassing itself through* daily interactions.

But transcending is not limited exclusively to this first type, since experiences are produced that provoke 'leaps in being', as conceived by Karl Jaspers in *The Origin and Goal History* (1965), through which individuals are able to articulate an "expanding reality" (Jaspers, 1965:19). Since the emergence of the Axial era (800-200 B.C.) and 'second order thinking' (Elkana, 1986), reality and social action require to be understood/explained. Whether soteriologically or scientifically, the human being becomes a problem for himself, he becomes in a task to which a solution have to be found. This means and implies that he has to look at himself from the outside, as if he were an object. This is the breeding ground for the emergence of different proposals of transcendence oriented towards the other world (historical religions) and towards this one (Greek philosophical thought). This profound socio-cultural transformation, this transit towards theoretical culture (Donald, 1991), is what allows the emergence of the *Mehr-als-Leben* typology of transcendence, which develops "into the level of objective content, of logically autonomous and no longer vital meaning" (2010:16). Therefore, transcendence of the *More-than-life* type implies, firstly, a capacity and, secondly, a demand that the human being carries out a self-analysis, from which he/she can explain(-

self) the/its reality. It requires something similar to the mechanism of the 'mirror self' proposed by Charles H. Cooley (1902) that we spoke of elsewhere (Gil-Gimeno, 2022). This type of transcendence would follow a logic of the *Looking-Glass Self* type in the sense that it forces us to place ourselves in front of the mirror and analyze ourselves from this unfolded perspective. In doing so, the image projected is, at the same time, *that of the self on the other side and that reflected in the mirror*. The reflection would not be spectral, but real, it would give us back the image of the *subject converted into an object for himself*. George Herbert Mead says that since the subject cannot see or touch his back, he has no choice but to "become an object to himself" (Mead, 1972:137), that is, to transcend himself to account for this *blindspot*.

Both types of transcendence, *Mehr-Leben* and *Mehr-als-Leben*, emphasize the sociological dimension of transcendence, since both refer to how experiences or processes of transcending oneself are produced through social interaction. The difference lies in the level of reflexivity required of the transcending subject, which is the axis on which the second concept is articulated. Let us continue to deepen this variant that we have called reflexive or theoretical transcendence through the work of Joas (2021). When he defines transcendence as "sacredness-become-reflexive" (2021:6 and 163) he is putting the focus on that overflow in which the subject becomes an object for himself (albeit from the religious plane), and in which society acquires that same status for society itself. For him, the Axial era would act as the "turning point" (2021:154) in which social

life undergoes a major transformation, an evolutionary milestone of the first level, which leads it towards theoretical culture, which, as we have mentioned, is articulated around reflexivity and thought that thinks thought itself. "The nub of this idea is the reflexivization of the sacred (...) As a result, the power of the sacred reached a historically unprecedented level" (2021:163). The axial hatching provokes that the *transcendent no longer appears hegemonically through magical or ritual-sacred procedures, but that it must be thought, reflected upon*. The clear example is the importance acquired in this type of religiosity by the so-called 'sacred' scriptures such as the Jewish Torah or the Christian Bible, among others. The word, the logos, replaces the sacrificial banquet or the effervescence as primordial modes of access to the transcendent-sacred. This clearly opens transcendence to a secular-reflexive path whose main exponent is Greek philosophy (Elkana, 1986). The analysis of the logos will become the formula through which the subject becomes self-reflexive, that is, from which he generates experiences of critical-reflexive overcoming of oneself, first in religious format with the emergence of universal religions in the First Axial Revolution and later in secular format with the *secularization* of worldviews in the Second Axial Revolution that occurs in the Modern Era. For Joas (2021) the transcendence that has become reflexive participates in and contributes to carry out the process of Weberian *Entzauberung der Welt* (1983), exemplified magnificently in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1983).

Thus, the emergence of the axial theoretical culture would have provoked a chasm with respect not only to the past ways in which social reality was articulated and understood, but also to the ways in which transcendence (understood as a social fact) manifests itself. In this sense, *the question is no longer so much to tell stories, but to offer answers subject to logics of action and thought. The storyteller of mythical culture* (which, in turn, had replaced the iterative actor of mimetic culture) *mutates into an interpreter who tries to understand how reality works*, and does so by carrying out a "systematic reflection on the basic conditions of human existence" (2021:164). *In this scenario, transcendence emerges as the result of a reflective process of introspection through which the subject finds either salvation or truth, or both.* Reflection would be the main vehicle for the access and development of transcendence in this type of society.

Concretely, what does "transcendence" imply in these new religious constellations? (Joas, 2008: 8-9; Eisenstadt, 1986: 1-29). The articulation of a *hiatus* between the intra-mundane and the extramundane, between the world of the profane and the world of the sacred, thus inaugurating what Bellah (1969) calls 'dualism' between this and the other world characteristic of historical or universal religions. This reveals the emergence and development of new ideas that break with the totemic or primitive logic studied by Durkheim (1995) in which, as we have seen, transcendence always referred to a horizon of immanence. While throughout the pre-axial phase of religiosity the divine was in the world and was part of the world -in a scenario in which spirits and gods could be directly

influenced and manipulated by the fact of being part of the world- with the emergence of the new religions of redemption and the philosophies of the Axial era a *hiatus* is created between the two spheres. The guiding idea is that the divine is the actual, true and irrefutable Other and the mundane, in comparison, can only be inferior. This tension between the mundane and the transcendent will have important consequences for social life, and not only for transcendence.

As we see, reflective transcendence emerges in a context -the axial one (Jaspers, 1965)- in which a set of societies or "civilizations" (Eisenstadt, 1986:1) -Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, Early Christianity, Zoroastrian Iran, early Imperial China, and the Hindu and Buddhist civilizations- undergo a series of profound transformations that materialize in what we know as theoretical culture (Donald, 1991; Bellah, 2011). This fact should make us aware of the social and, therefore, sociological dimension of transcendence at two levels: 1. Transcendence -its forms and manifestations- is affected by the transformations that occur in other dimensions or aspects of social life, especially those that have an impact on the macro-structures of collective life; however, 2. Its own development as a social phenomenon also affects the configuration of the structures of collective life. In fact, as the main analyses carried out on the emergence of theoretical culture during the Axial era show us (Jaspers, 1965; Bellah and Joas, 2012; Eisenstadt, 1986; Joas, 2021) both transcendence and the social forms it acquires -analyzed from a sociological perspective- play a central role in the development and evolution of social life, something

that has a direct impact on understanding where we come from as a society and why we are as we are today, perhaps not as the great or only 'essence', as Simmel presented it, but as a social activity of the first order that has and has had a direct impact on the configuration of social life. The role played by transcendence understood as *Mehr-als-Leben*, as self-transcendence or as reflective transcendence, is fundamental to understand the emergence, and, subsequently, the institutionalization and hegemony, that is, the central character of theoretical culture in our societies. In fact, we understand that the concrete forms of reflexive transcendence that we have just pointed out have been one of the main ways through which key processes for understanding the evolution of societies or their current state as the Weberian *Entzauberung der Welt* (1978) or secularization have been dynamized.

We consider that affirming that transcendence (in this case reflective) has favored the development of macro-social processes such as the disenchantment of the world or secularization is the simplest way of justifying the need for sociological approaches to this phenomenon. In fact, it allows us to break with a socially and sociologically established logic -although questioned in recent decades by authors such as José Casanova (2012) or Peter L. Berger (2014)- that established a marked functional differentiation between the rational-secular and the religious-transcendent. Well, neither the analysis of transcendence (as we are proving) can be reduced to its theological derivations, nor is there such a marked differentiation between the secular-rational and

the religious-transcendent. From the point of view defended in this paper, the loss of hegemony of reflective transcendence of a religious-historical nature (fundamentally of Christianity in European societies) should not be confused with a general crisis of transcendence, but with a transformation in the imaginary frame of modern societies, which has become immanent⁴. This immanent frame refers, as Charles Taylor points out, to: "an order which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to interventions from outside" (2007:832). Therefore, *what has entered into crisis in today's societies are concrete forms of transcendence, and not so much transcendence itself* (which, let us remember -sociologically speaking- fulfills a function of the first order for the becoming of societies). *At the same time, other forms of transcendence that we can call 'secular' have acquired importance*. In fact, this important transformation has a great impact on the third milestone we are going to present in this sociological genealogy of transcendence.

⁴ In this sense, we consider important to refer to three confusions -in a footnote and with the aim of not detracting from the narrative of the body of the article- that have caused members of modern and secular societies to have difficulties in perceiving the capacity of transcendence to acquire secular 'masks': The first of these stems from the fact that a considerable part of the discourses coming from the Enlightenment identifies progress with modernization, and, the latter with desacralization; The second frequent confusion has been an identification of modernization with nihilism, which makes it equivalent to the Nietzschean "God is dead" and, consequently, with the advent of nothingness or the absence of any foundation, when in fact this is one of its extreme aspects, if it can really be conceived as a possibility of an acceptable description of historical coexistence. But there is still a third confusion, that which identifies secularization and disenchantment. For further discussion of these ideas see: Beriain, J., Sánchez de la Yncera, I. (2012): "Tiempos de postsecularidad", in Sánchez de la Yncera, I., Rodríguez Fouz, M., *Dialecticas de la postsecularidad: Pluralismo y corrientes de Secularización*, Barcelona: Anthropos, pp. 31-92.; and Gil-Gimeno, J. (2020): "Repensando la relación entre lo religioso y lo secular: Análisis de dos puntos ciegos asociados a la teoría de la secularización", *ILU. Journal of the Sciences of Religions*, 25, pp.57-76.

4. Variable geometries of transcendence in the modern '*Immanent Frame*'.

Before analyzing in depth what we have called 'variable geometries of transcendence' (Beriaín and Sánchez Capdequí, 2022: 55-71) in a context of 'immanent frame', it is important to clarify the type of transformation experienced in this second transition -that which takes us from reflexive transcendence to variable geometries of transcendence-, comparing it with that which took place in the first one -from primitive to reflexive transcendence-. In this sense, and despite the fact that the emergence of the 'immanent frame' is one of the hallmarks of modernity, and that the latter inaugurates a new 'era' in the history of societies, *the transition to modernity means a secularization and a pluralization of transcendence, never its disappearance*. We understand that the transcendence that develops in the context of the 'immanent frame' remains fundamentally reflexive. Why, then, do we articulate a third milestone associated with the emergence of the immanent frame? Only within this sociological forging of the concept of transcendence can it be understood that the *limit* of experience only becomes possible through the intramundane, reflexive and plural *experience* that transcends -as we saw in the introduction through Schutz and Luckmann's '*Boundary Crossing*' concept- a certain limit -religious, ethnic, political, class, etc.-. Thus, we articulate this third milestone because, in the first place, in this scenario a profound secularization of social

life and, also of transcendence has taken place. Transcendence is no longer accessed from outside, but from within (*von innen heraus*, as Weber pointed out), and is henceforth governed by the 'heretical imperative' (Berger, 1980). The individual becoming the center of the collective imaginary has undoubtedly provoked the emergence of a more secularized experience of transcendence; secondly, because the 'immanent frame' scenario has provoked the development of a great heterogeneity and diversity of forms of transcendence with respect to those existing in societies characterized by the existence of a dualism between this and the other world (Bellah, 1969) and by the hegemony of a theocentric worldview. This has generated a new scenario of interaction in terms of transcendence on which we consider interesting to dwell.

Thus, as we pointed out at the end of the previous section, the transformations introduced by modern life have not brought about the end of transcendence, but quite the contrary, the *flourishing of a series of multiple and heterogeneous forms* of carrying out what we have sociologically defined by Simmel as 'overstepping oneself'. Thus, neither the emergence of the 'immanent frame' nor secularization have provoked something like a crisis of transcendence, but rather the appearance of a great *heterogeneity and plurality* of transcendent forms that converge in the context of present-day societies. Making this reflection their own, Schutz and Luckmann elaborate a 'variable' typology of transcendences, the basis on which the analysis of this third milestone will revolve.

For Schutz and Luckmann "yet it cannot from the outset be ruled out that there might be experiences aimed at a transcendent, although merely an inner-wordly transcendent" (1989:103), that is, their starting point is that of a scenario oriented from the influence of the 'immanent frame', which has also provoked a secularization of the experience, in this case, of transcendence. Similarly, the methodological architecture of analysis employed by the authors is clearly sociological. For them, one can only arrive at the *transcendence of experience* (that is, at its reflective theoretical analysis) through the *different experiences of transcendence, to that type of concrete social experiences (transcendent) that subjects experience and/or develop in their actions. Therefore*, what is sociologically relevant for Schutz and Luckmann -as it was for Weber (1978)- is social action, in this case, that exercised around transcendence. On these two axes -theoretical and methodological- their typology of transcendences is based, articulated around three levels or types: 'little', 'medium' and 'great', which we will now analyze.

Little transcendencies. This first category is related to the access to the near 'beyond', that of the world of everyday life. It has to do with what is not present now, but which, with the activation of memory or recollection, quickly reappears on the scene. In a now famous passage, Schutz and Luckmann summarize it as follows: "To remember what happened yesterday; to note where one has hidden the key; to walk through the door behind which there is nothing more mysterious than the kitchen (...) to shout "Fire" after one begins to smell the smoke" (1989:105). Let us say that these 'little transcendencies' are those that

allow us to *cross certain pre-existing limits or thresholds in our daily experience*, and, at the same time, place us before new ones. The transcendence to which they refer is 'at hand', since it is available to each person. There is no chasm or great precipice separating one shore or the other, but the leap simply requires the activation of memory, or something even less reflexive than that: the appearance by surprise of something or someone we thought we had forgotten. Through this process the 'I' becomes 'Me' (Mead, 1972). *This type of transcendence is dominated by that which is known, that which was previously known which somehow returns to the mind.* Broadening the spectrum of Schutz and Luckmann's analysis, we understand that slightly more complex phenomena that originate around the important metamorphoses that human nature itself is currently undergoing, and that allow us to transcend the limits of what we understood as humanism or its anthropocentric imprint, could also be considered 'little transcendencies': issues such as homo-prosthetics, avatars and the trans-humanist exit, which place the dilemma between mere therapeutic repair or the improvement of the human species. These debates are based on a redefinition of the limits of human nature, the origin of which is an 'overflow' of what previously existed.

Medium transcendencies'. They are articulated around the leap from the everyday of concrete otherness to social otherness, that is, to the 'generalized other' of which Mead (1972) speaks. Although the 'little transcendencies' are characterized by the fact that people reach the limits of experience in an individual and practically unconscious way,

and, although -as in them (in the little ones)-, also in the medium ones a limit is reached that, immediately, will be surpassed, for this second level of transcendence to be articulated, the individual always needs the participation of another: "In the "medium" transcendencies, however, the present experience points to another thing, which in principle can never be directly experienced. In this regard it is thus irrelevant whether the other thing indicated in the present experience is itself present or not: it can never be experienced except mediately" (1989:110). *The 'medium transcendencies' require the intervention of the 'generalized other'. In this case, to transcend the subject must recognize him/herself in intersubjectivity, that is, he/she must experience him/herself as being part of the other, at the same time that the other begins to be part of him/her. Through this process the 'I' becomes 'We'. This type of transcendence incorporates otherness and reveals the contingency that opens up around it. Schutz and Luckmann give as an example of this category the processes of human communication. In the same way that we did in the case of 'little transcendencies', we understand that this conceptualization can be extended to other fields of application such as collective-cultural creations like the state, the church, the ethnic group, the nation, etc., and, fundamentally, the ways in which the different *self* are transcended through these collectively articulated means.*

Finally, for Schutz and Luckmann, the *'great transcendencies' are articulated when the experience of transcendence departs from 'everyday life'*, whether religiously or secularly. In this category they include experiences linked to semiconscious states such as sleeping,

dreaming, the state in which we find ourselves when we are waking up, daydreams, ecstasy, crises or contacts with (the idea of) death, theoretical orientation, among others. These are everyday experiences that, in some way or to some degree, everyone experiences, but which *constitute openings to ignored, unknown, borderline dimensions*. *In this type of experience there is a leap from the 'generalized other' - characteristic of the 'medium transcendencies' - to 'the absolutely other', to the ineffable, to the mysterium tremendum et fascinans (Otto, 1924), to the Mana, the Tapas, the daimon, the charisma.*

In his own words:

"The point that matters here is that another reality is concerned than that of daily life-whether "reality" is placed in quotation marks or not. The "logic" of a dream is in no way the "logic" of everyday action. And what is remarkable about this other reality is that everyone enters it daily (viz., nightly) by crossing an experiential boundary behind which there is no experience of the same kind and out of which he returns by again crossing a boundary. In contrast with the boundary-crossings within everyday reality, he can, however, take but little with him and bring back even less: memories of indications and indications of memories" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1989:121).

Thus, the categorization of transcendence developed by Schutz and Luckmann is based on two main sociological analytical axes: the individual or collective character of

the experience of transcendence, and the everyday or exceptional nature of the same, resulting in a 'game' of experiences that offers us an interesting measure of the complexity of the phenomenon at hand and of the different 'masks' through which it manifests itself in modern and secular societies.

We pointed out above that the development of these levels of transcendence takes place in a scenario of 'immanent frame' and 'theoretical culture'. However, in the typology we have just presented we find formulas that, on the one hand, are articulated on the basis of the 'absolutely other' and other formulas that, on the other hand, do not require reflexivity to be articulated as such. To explain why this happens, we will bring up a basic social-evolutionary axiom which is the 'principle of conservation of gains' (Donald, 1991), according to which any social process has to take into account that the appearance of a new artifact or a new milestone in the evolutionary process does not eliminate from the social scene the previously articulated forms. These are still co-present in the new scenario since, as Bellah points out, in the evolution of culture and societies "nothing is ever lost" (2011:13). New and old forms coexist in a scenario of dynamic tension that becomes evident, through Schutz and Luckmann's typology, in the scenario of modern secularized societies. Thus, and in accordance with the logic employed by Donald, we must differentiate between the hegemonic character of the 'immanent frame' and theoretical culture and the existence of other forms not necessarily reflexive or immanent of articulating transcendence that can flourish and develop in the plural and

heterogeneous context of modern and secular societies. In short, the diversity of vehicles, forms and types of transcendence characteristic of modern societies comes, basically, from a double source: on the one hand, from the evolutionary logic to which we have just referred and, on the other, from the orientation and openness towards the heterogeneous, something inscribed in the genetic code of modernity.

Therefore, what is characteristic of 'immanent frame' societies is the co-existence of different modes, levels, vehicles of transcendence that are deployed in different contexts of concrete action. In the same way, in a scenario of post-material societies, in which the cultural dimension seems to have displaced others such as the religious or the economic, the different social forms -in this case of transcendence- request, even, at times, demand, voice and social recognition. This provokes the different transcendent formulas to find themselves in a context of dynamic tension, which does not always have to materialize in a conflictive way, although sometimes it does. To conclude this section, and by way of example, we will briefly analyze some of these dynamic tensions existing between the different levels of transcendence established by Schutz and Luckmann.

The 'variable geometries of transcendence' we have outlined configure a field in dynamic tension that proceeds from the very logic of conflictual social action in the midst of which it arises. Today the three planes of transcendence maintain a dynamic tension within and between themselves. This 'conflictual dynamism' borrowed from the

Weberian-inspired sociology of values is the complement that, in our opinion, was missing in the analytical phenomenology of Schutz and Luckmann's model of multiple transcendences. There is no hierarchy of values, religiously or politically assured, as was the case in traditional society, nor is there even an axiological superiority in identifying oneself as a Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Buddhist as opposed to a French, Spanish or American citizen, or vice versa. The different values to which we can aspire are embodied in narratives and collectivities that are spontaneously in conflict with one another. In this sense, the 'little transcendencies' clash with the other levels developed by Schutz and Luckmann when they try to create a kind of evolved agency of the individual that breaks with the previously established boundaries between what we understand as human and non-human, creating a new link -and, therefore, paving the way for new forms of transcendent experience - between human beings and machines, something already noticed by Bruno Latour (2005) or Maya Aguiluz (2014). An individual agency where the 'Me' analyzed by Mead (1972) is a prosthetic instance and where such agency is a hybrid connection of human part and non-human part. The same happens with the 'medium transcendencies' that have created collective values, ideals and narratives that confront each other as it happens today with Chinese techno-nationalism or Russian nationalist neo-imperialism, which fight with the Western liberal model in a sort of global cultural war. Fundamentalist versions that arise within universal religions, understood as representatives of the 'great transcendencies' also present important cleavages of tension, as in the case of certain factions of White Christian Nationalism in the USA (Gorski and

Perry, 2022) that try to re-fuse spiritual and earthly power, even resorting to violence; The authoritarian political religion of Islamic origin present today in Iran or the attempts by Jewish fundamentalist sectors to subordinate constitutional power to the power of a religious caste in Israel are all along the same lines. No less belligerent is the harassment and persecution of the Muslim minority in India today by the Hindu majority, incited by President Narendra Modi himself and his Bharatiya Janata Party.

5. Conclusions

The three milestones analyzed in this sociological genealogy of transcendence reveal that in order to understand this phenomenon from its collective dimension, the key is not to be sought in the conceptual pair - or in the distinction - between the secular and the religious. The interpretative hegemony that the theological perspective has enjoyed in academic approaches to transcendence does not imply that the outline of the phenomenon is limited to exclusively historical, primitive or archaic religious explanations. Our work attempts to demonstrate that there is a social dimension of transcendence that needs to be approached from a sociological perspective. Transcendence is a social 'must', an element or characteristic feature of the social being, which over time has materialized -and continues to do so- through various figures and formulas. These modes of being of transcendence are conditioned by the tectonic movements that occur in the structural bases of different societies. In this sense, our work reveals that, in its evolution,

transcendence has been deeply influenced by the religious-primitive worldview (by its ritual vehicles and by the expressions of collective effervescence that developed in them) (first milestone), by the emergence and development of theoretical culture during the Axial era and by its impact on later societies (second milestone), and by the establishment of the 'immanent frame', understood as the framework of action of modern and secular societies (third milestone). All this does not imply understanding the process in an evolutionary, finalistic and teleological way, that is, as a process that leads from magic through religion to reason. *Rather, a new stage implies a reconfiguration of old and new possibilities, rather than an overcoming and disappearance of previous stages.*

6. Bibliography

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