

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDU

Margaret S. Archer, *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 352 pp. \$US 34.99 paper (978-0-521-69693-7), \$US 90.00 hardcover (978-0-521-87423-6)

Margaret S. Archer's *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* represents a further installment in a sustained theoretical project that can be traced back to *Culture and Agency* (1988) and which has included *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995), *Being Human: the Problem of Agency* (2000), and *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (2003). With each successive contribution, new objects of analysis have been brought into focus while existing and fresh conceptual tools have been strengthened or reworked, leading to more refined modes of theorization. Naturally, these developments have been underwritten by a number of core metatheoretical and theoretical commitments.

First, Archer has remained committed to the broad critical realist metatheoretical problematic in which the natural and social world are conceptualized as existing independently of the fallible knowledge we produce to grasp them. Second, ontologically, reality is understood to be stratified such that different levels (e.g. the psychic, the self, the social, and the cultural) are characterized by their own emergent properties and powers. These remain dependent on the strata below them without, however, becoming reducible to them. Third, given her position on the existence of stratum-specific powers associated with the cultural system, social structure, and human agents, Archer has positioned herself critically vis-à-vis substantive theories that reduce social structures to the aggregate effects of individuals (e.g., rational choice theory), reduce individuals to the status of carriers of structural relations (e.g., structuralism), and collapse the distinction between social structures and agents (e.g., Giddens' structuration theory). For Archer, the challenge is to respect the integrity of each of these levels of reality (i.e., the human agent, the social, and the cultural) and to explore their complex interplay in a structured but nonetheless open system. Finally, Archer's last core commitment is linked to her ongoing development of a substantive theoretical mode of analysis, *morphogenetic realism*, where cultural properties

and social structures are understood as preexisting action, thus providing the context in which action takes place. In turn, action, which in Archer's framework is an exercise of the powers of human agents, as they harness enablements and confront constraints, can lead to the reproduction or transformation of social structures, setting up the context for further rounds of agency and structural transformation or reproduction.

The current book draws on the previous two where Archer has focused on advancing an analysis of the powers of human subject as they emerge at the intersection of three orders: the natural, the practical, and the social. The first refers to individuals' embodied nature and the exigencies of well-being and adaptation due to their own physicality and their insertion in a physical environment (e.g., avoidance of injury and pain), the second to individuals' development of competence and a sense of achievement in practices that though socially framed are also dependent on the nature of things, (i.e., physical and mental skills and abilities). The last refers to individuals' positions in the order of normative social relations. Managing the demands of these different orders is the role of the self. Importantly, for Archer, the self initially develops an ability to reflect upon itself through the agency of emotions; thus the self is not the mere epiphenomenal effect of either a hardwired neurological system or the linguistic discursivity of the social order. This emotional register of the self does not disappear through or after socialization. The distance between the self and the social order is also evidenced, according to Archer, by the development of internal conversations which she argues are not necessarily language-based or interiorizations of external linguistic practices, the latter of which are indelibly social in nature. The internal conversation is the medium through which human individuals locate themselves in the context of the three orders and fallibly grasp and act in them. They do so by transforming subjective concerns into projects (or specific courses of action) and reproduce them by establishing pleasing and/or sustainable practices, a *modus vivendi*. The viability of these different *modus vivendi* is, in keeping with Archer's theoretical approach, socially shaped rather than determined.

In her previous book, Archer distinguished four modalities of the internal conversation through in-depth interviews with a small group of individuals: communicative, autonomous, meta, and fractured reflexivity. In the research addressed by the book under review, she develops, pilots, refines, and deploys an Internal Conversation Indicator (ICONI) in order to distribute a sample of respondents, in the city of Coventry, into four groups, each defined by the dominance of one of the forms of reflexivity. Twelve respondents were selected from each group for the in-depth

interviews which provide the data for the book, though the analysis of fractured reflexivity is postponed to a future book.

In the present book, Archer distinguishes her analysis of reflexivity from that associated with the reflexive modernization approach in which reflexivity itself, as opposed to social structure, bears the weight of structuring contemporary social life. She also distances her work from Bourdieu's *habitus*, which she claims excludes the possibility of reflexivity, makes it oxymoronic or limits it to the practitioners of a reflexive sociology. Instead she understands reflexivity as "*mediating deliberatively* between the objective structural opportunities confronted by different groups and the nature of people's subjectively defined concerns" (italics in original, p. 61). More specifically, Archer deploys reflexivity's deliberative mediation to explain patterns of social immobility, mobility, or volatility. Communicative reflexives are individuals whose internal conversations, about themselves and their projects, are completed or externalized through conversations with others. These others are "similar and familiars" typically drawn from their natal context: consequently this mode of reflexivity tends towards the reinforcement of the existing *modus vivendi* and a lack of social mobility. Autonomous reflexives are characterized by the use of self-sufficient internal conversations. This does not mean that they never canvass opinions from those in their environment, but these are rarely decisive. As a result, autonomous reflexives are less likely to be constrained by interlocutors in their natal context and more likely to entertain alternative projects that can eventuate into social mobility. Metareflexives, like autonomous reflexives, also engage in self-directive internal conversation, isolated from immediate interlocutors from natal communities. The difference, however, is that whereas the autonomous reflexives use internal conversations strategically or instrumentally to devise how to best pursue their chosen projects, metareflexives tend to reflect on their own reflections. The internal conversation of metareflexives, to use the Weberian concept invoked by Archer, embodies a value rational logic. On that account, lateral moves or even downward mobility will be accepted in the pursuit of projects that dovetail their value commitments with their work activities in the social order.

Archer's conception of reflexivity is neither psychological or essentialist. Thus, she attempts to elucidate the types of social and biographical arrangements and processes that account for the dominance of one of the modes of reflexivity. For communicative reflexives, it is "contextual continuity," or the spatial, social, biographical, and intersubjective reproduction of dialogical ties with members of the natal community that explains the selectivity towards this form of reflexivity. In the context

of autonomous reflexives, it is the severing or rupturing of these ties and arrangements that has explanatory efficacy. In addition to this, an early attraction to activities in the practical order (i.e., physical or mental skills), perhaps provoked by these types of breaks, also feeds into this mode of reflexivity. Metareflexivity is the outcome of a “contextual incongruity” between the social environment and strongly held projects or dreams. Archer skillfully and flexibly uses these explanatory tools to provide a rich account that brings together social context, reflexivity, and outcomes. She argues that, in many instances, contextual continuity is the product of active work undertaken by communicative reflexives rather than passive resignation. Similarly, autonomous reflexives frequently face the repercussions of the fallibility of their calculations and the resistance of the social arrangements. Modes of reflexivity are important explanatory tools but alone do not suffice to provide an account of social immobility, mobility, and volatility. Archer also attempts to derive some macroscopic consequences deriving from these modalities of reflexivity: e.g., social reproduction, social productivity, and social reorientation for communicative, autonomous, and metareflexives respectively. She concludes her book by exploring the functioning of these modes of reflexivity against the background of broader structural trends in modernity such as innovation and globalization.

Archer’s book is well worth reading and thinking about. I would, however, like to conclude with a few comments and questions, one conceptual, another metatheoretical and the last methodological. These are neither dismissive in nature nor, given their brevity, properly speaking criticisms, just reactions to a thoughtful book. First, the concept of social mobility, which is fundamental for the argument of the book, is not theoretically conceptualized. This is surprising and tends to weaken many of the substantive arguments Archer develops. For instance, in the book, there is an equation between communicative reflexivity and social reproduction. This leads in the direction of equating the reproduction of social relations with stability, but surely this is not the case in the context of capitalist relations. Autonomous reflexives oriented strategically towards social mobility in the market may change their socioeconomic status but in so doing reproduce capitalist social structure. Second, Archer relies heavily on the presence of human interlocutors to distinguish between communicative reflexives and the two others. Need only humans qualify as interlocutors? Can social things such as representations or discourses not serve as interlocutors? Might not the interaction between these non-human interlocutors and autonomous and metareflexives provide us with a better account of their internal conversations? Third, Archer’s generous use of citations from her interview data adds texture and depth to her

discussion; however, she does not explicitly present a methodological reflection on the status of these narratives or the strategies deployed to analyze them. Her argument would only have been strengthened had she done so. Archer would be the first to admit that all attempts to produce knowledge are fallible. Archer's venture is the product of a mature and skillful theoretical gaze; consequently it is intrinsically rewarding and thought provoking.

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