



Obituary: Margaret S Archer (1943–2023)

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Frederic Vandenberghe** *UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Margaret Archer, the grand old lady of British sociology, died on 21 May 2023 in Kenilworth (UK) at the age of 80 from pancreatic cancer. She was the first woman to be elected president of the ISA and she was also a formidable social theorist in her own right. Maggie (as she liked to be called) studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Cambridge. She obtained a PhD in sociology from the London School of Economics in 1967 on the educational aspirations of working-class mothers for their children. In 1968, she joined Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski at the Centre of European Sociology in Paris as a postdoctoral researcher. Her work is best known for her association with critical realism, her trenchant critique of Giddens' structuration theory and her exploration of internal conversations. In a series of highly influential books published by Cambridge University Press, she developed the morphogenetic approach as an overarching theoretical framework for the analysis of social, cultural and personal change in late modernity. Professor Archer spent most of her career at the University of Warwick, from which she retired in 2010. She holds two honorary doctorates, one from the University of Navarra and another one from the University of Warsaw. She was involved in the peace movement and also active in the Catholic Church. From 2014 until 2019, she was the President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences at the Vatican. Acting as an advisor to the Pope, she put human trafficking and Artificial Intelligence on the agenda of the Holy See, while chastising the obsession with abortion as a travesty of Catholic Social Teaching. She also ran a charity for trafficked persons in her hometown in the British Midlands.

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Within sociology, Margaret Archer was the most eminent representative of critical realism, a philosophical movement in the social sciences that is inspired by the work of Roy Bhaskar, who died in 2014. She was one of the editors of the canonical reader *Critical Realism. Essential Readings* (1998) and published regularly in the *Journal of Critical Realism*. Following Bhaskar's death, she also copy-edited *Enlightened Common Sense* (2016), his posthumous introduction to CR. While critical realism provides the social ontology, Archer's morphogenetic/morphostatic (M/M) approach constitutes its methodological complement. Archer considered it not a theory, but an explanatory framework – in fact, a model – for a sequential analysis of the interchanges between social structures, cultural systems and social agents that undergird the reproduction (morphostasis) or transformation of society (morphogenesis). Archer insists with vehemence that structure, culture and agency are analytically independent and need to be investigated separately, sequentially and in relation to each other. 'Social life comes in a SAC', she says, using shorthand for structure, agency and culture. Without an independent analysis of structure (relations between social positions), everything becomes contingent and one can neither explain cultural change nor individual or collective action. Without an independent analysis of culture (relations between ideas), structuralism takes over, agency goes out and one can no longer understand how actors make sense of the situation of action. Even if one takes structure and culture fully into account, without agency, one can neither understand how novelty comes into the world nor how and why culture and society are reproduced or transformed. It is only if one acknowledges the ontological stratification of society that the causal power of structure, culture and people can be satisfactorily investigated without reduction or, to use her idiosyncratic language, without 'conflation'.

The M/M model with its cycles and diagrams of structural/cultural conditioning (at T^1), social interaction (at T^2) and structural/cultural elaboration (at T^3) can be, and has been applied, at all levels of society. At the micro-level of individuals, to investigate the role of reflexivity in the personal development of the self and its impact on the life-course; at the meso-level of institutions, to study the change of concrete social systems (educational systems, but also the economy, the polity, religion, the family, etc.); at the macro-level, to examine the transformation of social formations as a whole and epochal transitions. In the last decade of her life, together with an interdisciplinary group of social scientists, Archer plumbed the developmental tendencies of late modern societies and wondered whether the acceleration of social change would ensue in the advent of the morphogenic society.

Margaret Archer was a systematic thinker with a sharp analytical mind and a critical spirit. Although she often advanced her own position through a sharp critique of her opponents (Anthony Giddens in the initial phase, Rom Harré in the middle phase, Ulrich Beck and Pierre Bourdieu in the end phase), her work displays a remarkable continuity. Already in her first book, *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (1979), an 800-page comparative analysis of state educational systems in France, England, Russia and Denmark, some of the main influences (David Lockwood and Walter Buckley) and main concepts (analytical dualism and morphogenetic sequence) of her morphogenetic theory of the emergence, reproduction and transformation of cultural systems and social structures were put to work. In her second book, *Culture and Agency* (1988), she used the same concepts to launch a devastating attack on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which at the time was considered the pinnacle of social theory. Latching on to his

concept of time, she showed that Giddens' main achievement was, in fact, a sham. Structuration theory had not overcome the opposition between agency and structure in a dialectical ontology of practices. Instead of overcoming the reductionist tendencies of Weberian 'methodological individualism' and Durkheimian-Marxist 'structural holism', the ontology of practices had merely added 'central conflation' as a supplementary form of reductionism to the other two, which she called 'upwards' and 'downwards conflation'. The problem of structurationist theories – in which she included, wrongly in my opinion, Bourdieu's theory of practices – is that they do not acknowledge the phenomenon of emergence and fail to specify when, how and where social and cultural systems have the upper hand over agency or when, how and where conflictual relations between actors can lead to the transformation of society. Working with a flat ontology, they assume that structure and agency operate at the same time and at the same level with the result that they cannot satisfactorily analyse their interplay.

Culture and Agency was written before her encounter with critical realism, but eminently compatible with it. In her next book, *Realist Social Theory* (1995), she fully incorporated Bhaskar's concepts (generative mechanisms, causal powers, stratified ontology) and showed the difference and incompatibility between Bhaskar's own transformative model of social action and Giddens' structuration theory. Formalising the tenets of the morphogenetic perspective in social theory, she developed what would become the orthodox view within CR of the linkages between structure and agency. Having satisfactorily resolved the micro–macro problem, her next book *Being Human* (2000) tackled the problem of agency. In an attempt to rescue the self from social constructivism (Rom Harré) and deconstruction (from Foucault to Butler, which she despised so much she didn't even consider post-structuralism), she distinguished three ontologically distinct orders of reality (Nature, Technology and Society) and argued that the child's embodied relations to nature and to artefacts ontogenetically precede their relations to society. The social mediation and discursive constitution of the self are not denied; they come later, though, when the subjects define their 'ultimate concerns' and become persons who try to realise their vocation in life in circumstances which they have not freely chosen.

Reflexivity was already pivotal in Archer's account of personal powers and capabilities, but it would take her another trilogy to fully work out the role of internal conversations in the formation of personal projects. Following the American pragmatists (Peirce, James and Mead), Archer conceived of the internal conversation as a dialogue in which 'I' address my former self as a 'Me' and invoke a future self as a 'You' to articulate a life project and evaluate its viability in given circumstances. Through a series of longitudinal interviews with co-religionaries, university students and family members, she revealed the existence of various modes of reflexivity (communicative, autonomous and metareflexivity with a fourth type, fractured reflexivity, shading off into passivity). Depending on their ultimate concerns (friends and family, work and achievement, values and ideals), subjects have different life projects, deal differently with situational constraints and enablements and experience different forms of mobility as they make their way through the world. She also pointed out that in late modernity, traditions, routines and habits that once secured stable reproduction of society were washed away by social

acceleration. With simultaneous change at all levels of society, she argued that the imperative to be reflexive was becoming categorical for all.

To cap half a century of reflections on the analytics of morphogenesis, in the good company of Pierpaolo Donati, fellow member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and founder of the Italian school of relational sociology, Archer eventually complemented the analysis of individual reflexivity with a normative analysis of the constitution of collective subjectivities orientated to emergent common goods. *The Relational Subject* (Archer and Donati, 2015) foregrounds social relations between people. These are both the ground (the *arche*) and, when they have become conscious as a common good that needs to be cherished and strengthened, also the end (the *telos*) of social life. In this archeo-teleology of realist relational sociology, social solidarity is both the product and the engine of relational goods that are produced collectively and enjoyed collectively. In accordance with the four principles of the social doctrine of the Church (human dignity, fraternity, solidarity and subsidiarity), Archer conceives of the eudemonic society as a society in which the common good is the ultimate relational good, produced and enjoyed together by relational subjects who care about the quality of these relations and are united by a common purpose.

Archer continued to work till the last moment of her life. Together with colleagues from the Centre for Social Ontology, which she founded following her retirement from Warwick, she launched an ambitious research programme on the phase transition from late modernity to the Morphogenic Society, a new type of social formation emerging at the global level. The project is quite original because of its unusual format, its guiding question and its productive output. Over the span of a decade, she and her colleagues met annually for a whole week to think and drink together and examine a single question: 'Will Late Modernity be replaced by a social formation that could be called Morphogenic Society?'. Is societal change dislocating the M/M formula in such a way that untrammelled morphogenesis, that is, the continuous creation of novel forms (structures, cultures and social groups), is tendentially outstripping morphostasis in all spheres of social life? Interestingly, as they investigated various aspects of the emerging formation, they insisted on the question mark and kept the question open till the very end. Instead of answering, they tried to figure out what criteria a sociological theory of the morphogenic society would have to satisfy. In line with critical realism, it would have to indicate the generative mechanisms that drive societal change. In line with the morphogenetic perspective, it would also have to provide an analysis of the interchange of structure, culture and agency at all levels of society. And in echo with their humanist beliefs that people matter, it would have to incorporate a critical diagnosis of society and evaluate whether it was conducive to human flourishing. The result of this longitudinal collaborative research in sociological theory are two impressive series of books, a first one, the *Social Morphogenesis Series* (Archer, 2013–2017), published by Springer, contains five volumes, and a second, *The Future of the Human Series* (Archer, 2019–2021), published by Routledge, comprises four.

Wary of metaphors, like Hartmut Rosa's speed and Zygmunt Bauman's flows, Archer seeks to define the new age systemically. Unlike theories of globalisation that zoom in on a single factor in the social structure (neoliberalism), culture (the knowledge society) or agency (reflexive modernisation), the M/M approach to societal change is realist and

multidimensional. It does not look for empirical generalisations, but for generative mechanisms that produce the regularities one can observe. The generative mechanism that produces variety – ‘variety fostering ever-more variety’ in the language of second cybernetics – and explains the increasing structural and cultural variation, as well as the extension, intensification and transformation of reflexivity, turns out to be a ‘generative complex’ and ‘causal combination’ of multiple mechanisms. Archer ventures that the generative mechanism of late modernity is grounded in the existence of ‘contingent complementarities’ between structural elements (interests) and cultural elements (ideas) that have been exploited by different groups since the 1950s, but with a significant breakthrough in the 1980s when an alliance between technological innovators and venture capitalists disrupted the post-war compromise between lib- and lab politics. The vertiginous production of novel ideas and technological innovations in the IT-sector, made possible by research and development in the universities of Silicon Valley, was seized upon by economic actors who were seeking to explore and to exploit new markets. The encounter between transnational corporations who were competing for new sources of profit and the digital scientists who needed the markets to diffuse their innovations explains the increasing variety in ideas, technologies, companies, commodities and lifestyles. The delinking of the economy from the confines of the nation state and the recoupling of the state to global markets that define neoliberalism have enforced the logic of competition in all institutions and all spheres of life.

With the proliferation of new social and cultural forms and the decay and even death of old forms (morphonecrosis), morphogenesis becomes unbound from stable reproduction. With Parsons dead, the shared norms that once integrated and regulated society were replaced by a cascade of ‘bureaucratic anormative regulations’ of all sorts (laws, norms, decrees, rules, standards, etc.) that must be obeyed, even if their validity or legitimacy is questionable. Without *Grundnorm* that assures the normative integration and regulation of society, it is not only the systemic integration that starts to plummet. As inequality, injustice and discriminations of all sorts increase, splitting society into winners and losers, social integration is compromised as well. Social conflicts explode everywhere, but with the demise of Marxism and the rise of populist movements, it is difficult to conceive of a better future attained through social conflict. Social media certainly facilitate the mobilisation of internetworked social movements, but those fizzle out rapidly. The individuals for their part become more reflexive. Communicative reflexivity is waning, while autonomous, meta and fractured reflexivity are waxing. Autonomous reflexives are concerned with their career and do not join social movements. Metareflexives do. They are motivated by values and invest in the concrete utopia of the commons and its relational goods – unless they get distracted by their mobiles and become digital wantons. More preoccupied with their digital appearance than with social and political action, with a thousand friends on Facebook, their reflexivity shades into expressivism and thwarts lasting worthwhile engagement. At the end of her five volumes, Archer points to three interrelated megaproblems that will not go away. Climate change, capitalist addiction to growth and the predominance of relational evils over relational goods undermine the realisation of human flourishing that morphogenesis has made possible. In the name of her colleagues, she lifts the question mark and concludes:


‘Thus we are announcing without fanfare the advent of the Morphogenetic Society – one that falls short of meeting the Eudemonia criterion’.

In the tug of war between the ‘logic of opportunity’ of the techies and the ‘logic of competition’ of the bankers, Archer had pinned her hope on the idealism of metareflexive individuals, the economy of the common good of the third sector and the reinvention of cooperatives of peer-to-peer communities. Like her colleagues, she feared, however, that new developments in artificial intelligence and robotics might challenge the future of humanity. In order to safeguard human dignity in the face of cyborgs, clones and drones, she therefore initiated a new research programme with her colleagues of the Centre for Social Ontology, securing a contract with Routledge for the publication of another series of four books, called *The Future of the Human* (Archer, 2019–2021). The original plan was to defend human essentialism against anti- and post-humanism, but eventually, under the influence of Douglas Porpora, Archer ended up including robots in an enlarged humanism. Porpora, an amateur of science fiction books and series, wonders if personhood can be extended to non-humans, like Vulcans and Klingons who live on other planets. Denying personhood to foetuses, he confers it, however, to humanoids and robots. Archer ponders the same question and denies that embodiment is a sufficient condition for personhood. She also invents a story in which Homer, a distinguished scientist, and Ali, his digital assistant, work together on a scientific project to establish that first-person perspective, reflexivity and concerns confer personhood to Ali. I knew that Maggie endorsed robots in elderly care and thought that robots could be friends (with humans and also among themselves). I confess I was surprised to find out that she was arguing in all earnest for granting rights in the future to AI’s to vote and stand for election, compete with humans for appointments and promotions, marry and adopt, and become full members of the Church.

Now that the morphogenetic cycle has come to a close, we can look back and distinguish different sequences in a successful career that spanned half a century. In a first moment (1960s–1970s), following her PhD, she made her mark as a macro-sociologist working in the field of education, comparing the emergence of educational systems in England and France (later Russia and Denmark would be added). While the formal mechanics of morphogenetic change were already adumbrated in her first book (Archer, 1979), she would fully develop the morphogenetic approach to social theory during the last quarter of the century as a critical realist alternative to Bourdieu and Giddens in a series of books that parsed the conceptual linkages between culture (Archer, 1988), social structure (Archer, 1995) and agency (Archer, 2000). This foundational trilogy was followed by another successful, influential and much debated trilogy on reflexivity and internal conversations in late modernity (Archer, 2003, 2007 and 2012). Following her retirement from the University of Warwick in 2010, in the last decade of her life, she got more deeply involved with the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences and the Centre for Social Ontology. Together with a team of colleagues, she applied the tools of the morphogenetic perspective to investigate the advent of a new civilisation and evaluate its humanistic potential. While she was not optimistic about the chances of human flourishing in the twenty-first century, she nevertheless was able to avoid the apocalyptic visions of the immediate future. Without denying the civilisational dangers of platform capitalism, she welcomed the new robots in our midst and put her

hopes both in close interpersonal encounters and in peer-to-peer communication. Being herself a metareflexive with a passionate concern for social justice, she found ultimate solace in her faith and in her friendships. Maggie was a strong and forceful but also caring woman. She was the main representative of critical realism within sociology. She has set the agenda for social and sociological theory in Britain and beyond. Her work on reflexivity, internal conversations and the morphogenetic society will continue to inspire future work. Even if she herself is no longer among us, she will remain present in our internal conversations and public debates about the future of social theory and of humanity in times of morphogenetic societal change.

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Frédéric Vandenberghé is professor of sociology at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. He's a member of the Critical Realism Network and has published widely in the field of social theory. In English, he published *A Philosophical History of German Sociology* (2009), *What's Critical about Critical Realism?* (2014) and, co-authored with Alain Caillé, *For a New Classic Sociology* (2021).