

Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency*

FRANÇOIS DÉPELTEAU
Laurentian University

This article presents a relational criticism of the “morphogenetic theory” of M. Archer. This theory is founded and representative of the most influential mode of perception of the social universe of the last few decades: co-determinism (structure ↔ agency). Co-determinism’s influence can be explained by its integration of modern general presuppositions like freedom, individualism, and the quest for a new social order. By identifying five basic principles of relational sociology, we see that Archer’s co-deterministic theory offers a complicated solution to avoid voluntarism and co-determinism, limits the potential of sociological imagination, cannot adequately see the fluidity of social processes, produces a certain reification of social structures and agency, and is based on an inconsistent use of egocentric and relational perspectives. These problems can be avoided if we use a relational approach (actor ↔ actor ⇒ structures) based on the study of complex and empirical trans-actions.

Sociology has been strongly influenced by two modes of perception of the social universe over the last two or three decades: co-determinism and relationism. The most influential is co-determinism. In contemporary sociology, this refers to the works of well-known social scientists such as M. Archer (1982, 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2003), R. Bhaskar (1998), P. Berger and T. Luckmann (1967), P. Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990a, 1990b), A. Giddens (1979, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1993), C.W. Mills [1959] 2000, and N. Mouzelis (1989, 1993, 1995, 2000). In the first part of this article, we will discuss that in one way or another, co-determinism explains social phenomena as the effects of inter-actions between agency and social structures. We will also briefly explain that the influence of co-determinism can be explained by some modern “general presuppositions”—partly composed by “ideological assumptions” (Alexander 1982)—such as the paradoxical need for some individual freedom and a stable social order. Despite their cultural affinities with modernity, various co-deterministic theories have generated many debates and disagreements in sociology. Generally speaking, these problems refer to questions like: How much respective power should we recognize in social structures and agency? Are we dealing with separated or intertwined “properties”? What is the source of agency if constraining/enabling structures impose themselves on social actors before they act? Does agency come from individuals? Rational individuals? Is agency related to the effort of actors? Is it only connected to collective action of “corporate” actors? Perhaps it emerges from individual interactions at the micro-level? Or maybe it is related to some critical form of reflexivity linked to a class consciousness, some feeling of deprivation, or internal conversations?

The works of P. Bourdieu, A. Giddens, and M. Archer have played a central role in these debates (Parker 2000). It has been said that general explanations such as

*Address correspondence to: François Dépelteau, Department of Sociology, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario P3E 2C6. Tel.: 705-675-1151 (4228); Fax: 705-675-4873. E-mail: fdepelteau@laurentian.ca. Thanks to Sara Fryer, MA candidate at Laurentian University, for her assistance in editing this article.

“structuring structured” (P. Bourdieu 1990b) and the “principle of duality” (A. Giddens 1984) gave too much power to social structures or agency; or that they are too vague, confusing, or unclear (Archer 1982, 1995, 2000; Cohen 1989; Craib 1992; Emirbayer and Mishe 1998; Healy 1998; Held and Thompson 1989; Jenkins 1982; King 1999, 2000; Mouzelis 1989, 1995, 2000; Parker 2000; Sewell 1992). M. Archer (1995, 2000a, 2003) has proposed a “morphogenetic approach” to resolve this type of problem. Relatively speaking, Archer’s theory appears to be, at this point, one of the most sophisticated co-deterministic attempts to define the relationships between structures and agency. We will present its key principles and our hypothesis is that a “relational” critique of this theory may help to observe some key weaknesses of co-determinism. This critique will be based on ideas taken from or inspired by thinkers from different theoretical approaches and ontologies such as J. Alexander (1988), H. Blumer (1969), R. Collins (2005), J. Dewey and A. Bentley (1949), N. Elias (1978a, 1978b, 1987, 1991), M. Emirbayer (1997), M. Emirbayer and A. Mishe (1998), J. Goudsblom (1977), A. King (1999, 2000), B. Latour (2005), M. Mann (1986, 1993, 2005), S. Menzel (1992), and C. Tilly (1998). These names do not represent “clear” relational thinkers. However, they have all tried in one way or another to move beyond co-deterministic distinctions between agency and structure, micro and macro-levels, and individuals and society by giving more weight to social relations as the engine of production of social phenomena. By identifying five basic principles of relational sociology, we will see that Archer’s co-deterministic theory offers a complicated solution to avoid voluntarism and determinism, limits the potential of sociological imagination, cannot adequately see the fluidity of social processes, produces a certain reification of social structures and agency, and is based on an inconsistent use of egocentric and relational perspectives. The main goal of this critique of M. Archer’s works is to contribute to what might become a “relational turn” in sociology. In other words, we would like to show that if co-determinism was a logical answer to the influence of deterministic theories such as structuralism, structural-functionalism, and structural-Marxism, it is time to shift from co-determinism to relationalism.

TWO MODES OF PERCEPTION OF THE SOCIAL UNIVERSE

Brief Presentation of Co-Determinism

Generally speaking, co-deterministic theories explain the evolution of the social universe as the effect of inter-actions between social structures and agency. The social world results from the intertwined powers of initial social structures and agency (preexisting structure ↔ agency → reproduced or transformed social structure).

Co-deterministic explanations can be found in classical texts. One famous example is the well-quoted statement made by K. Marx (1963) in the *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” However, co-determinism became a common mode of perception in contemporary sociological theory when key sociologists rejected deterministic explanations from theories like structural-functionalism and structural-Marxism. These sociologists sought to add some agency by preserving the ontological view of social structures as “social things” (constraining factors that are external to the actors). This mode of perception is presented as more complex, balanced, and realistic than voluntarism (agency → structure) and determinism (structure → action).

C. W. Mills's "sociological imagination" is one good example. In the late 1950s, C. W. Mills found Parsons's structural-functionalism to be too deterministic and conservative. He explained that social life is not made up of "a series of traps" [1959] 2000:3). Social actors are not simply "outsiders" or "permanent strangers" in the social world. Of course, they are shaped by "History" (structural changes they do not control), but social actors can also shape their society through their "biography." Therefore, the main goal of sociology cannot be to explain how social structures, cultures, societies, and other fully external and constraining social things determine social action (structure \rightarrow action). The "task" and "promise" of sociology come from the understanding of dialectical tensions between agency and structural properties. In other words, we should say that the social universe is made up of various forms of structured agency.

Through their explanations of the "objectification" of the social world published in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), P. Berger and T. Luckmann also contributed to this co-deterministic turn in the second part of the 20th century. Here again, determinism is rejected in favor of a dialectical study of relations between individuals and preexisting institutions. The "objectivity of the institutional world" is explained as "a human product" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:50). Seen as an external world and a necessity, social order is a "constructed objectivity"; it is "an ongoing human production" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:49); and "it does not thereby acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:57). However, "man (not of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:57). Indeed, first social practices acquire some solidity through the passage of time. Second, the objectivity of institutions "thickens" and "hardens" as similar actions and interactions are repeated and time goes by. Finally, producers are in the world; they interact with a produced world; they face a preexisting, external, and constraining social reality. In this logic, P. Berger and T. Luckmann could write that "the product acts back upon the producer" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:57) and it is internalized by the individuals. Institutions "control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:52); the individual "posits that actions of type X will be performed by actors of type X" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:51–52); they "are *there*, external to him, persistent in their reality, whether he likes it or not" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:57); and they "have coercive power over him" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:57). In brief, in T^1 , at least two actors create a new form of interaction ($actor^A \leftrightarrow actor^B \Rightarrow new\ structure$). As time goes by [$T2 - T3$], through its reproduction this not-so-new pattern of interaction is faced by the producers and transmitted to newcomers ($actor^A \leftrightarrow actor^B \Leftrightarrow new\ structure \Rightarrow actor^C$) as something they do not choose anymore and as a "controlling" factor. Sooner or later, in T^4 , the pattern is simply perceived and internalized as an objective reality by all the actors A, B, and C. Reification may appear if the actors forget that the institution exists only through their actions. In sum, it seems reasonable and logical to say that actors interact with social structures (or institutions) since we are usually in T^4 when we act:

$$\begin{aligned}
 [T^1] & \text{ actor}^A \leftrightarrow \text{actor}^B \Rightarrow \text{structure}^X \\
 [T^2 - T^3] & \text{ Objectification of the structure (through "habitualization")} \\
 [T^4] & \text{ structure}^X \Leftrightarrow \text{actor}^C \leftrightarrow \text{actor}^A \leftrightarrow \text{actor}^B
 \end{aligned}$$

P. Bourdieu was another contemporary sociologist who contributed to the development of co-determinism. He denied that he had developed a deterministic theory of

action through the notions of fields, capitals, social classes, and habitus. Moreover, in the last phase of his career (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), he presented his works as a relational theory compatible with the works of E. Cassirer and N. Elias. However, there is little doubt overall that Bourdieu's theory is more a co-deterministic than a relational one (Dépelteau forthcoming). For instance, in *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu rejected the artificial opposition between "objectivism" and "subjectivism" and announced his intention to move beyond "the antagonism between these two modes of knowledge" (1990b:25). Once again, determinism and voluntarism were rejected in favor of "the dialectic of objective structures and incorporated structures" (1990b:41). P. Bourdieu's co-determinism (with a clear deterministic tendency) refers to "structured structures" that are also "structuring structures." In brief and as P. Bourdieu wrote:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures (1990b:53).

A. Giddens (1984) also proposed his type of co-deterministic theory. He rejected any form of dualism to explain the relationship between structures and agency. In some ways, we are getting closer to relationism since the "structuration" of the society is the result of "social practices across space and time" (Giddens 1984:2). Like P. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966), A. Giddens wrote that "in and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible" (Giddens 1984:2). Therefore, a social structure "exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents" (Giddens 1984:17). But even as "memory traces" (and rules and resources), as "'virtual order' of transformative relations" (Giddens 1984:17), social structures have some structuring properties—"the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them 'systemic' form" (Giddens 1984:17). Therefore, and once again, social structures are separated from agency, which refers to "events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently" (Giddens 1984:9). The "structuration" of the social world is seen as the effect of some relationships between social structures and agency, even if social structures and agency do not exist without each other.

Co-Determinism as a Convenient Mode of Perception in Modernity

According to C. W. Mills, P. Berger and T. Luckmann, A. Giddens, M. Archer, and many others, social actors face a social world full of structural "properties" they did not choose and design and actors are not fully determined by these structures. This co-deterministic perception of the evolution of social phenomena makes a lot of sense for many people in modernity. We can say that co-deterministic social theories are representative of and compatible with modern culture in many ways. In a modern world characterized by reflexivity and individualism (Beck et al. 1994; Giddens 1990), the development of the natural sciences has favored a habitus according to which a phenomenon (the effect) is explained by the influences of external factors (the causes). On one hand, it seems that modern reflexivity tends to lead toward determinism. But there is a paradox since modernity is also based on progress and progress comes

from some freedom and critical reflexivity. In this respect, modern thinking cannot easily accept determinism as a mode of perception of the social universe without, at the same time, killing the possibility of progress based on freedom and critical reflexivity. What is the purpose and efficiency of critical reflexivity if our actions are fully determined? In other words, modernity leads to determinism as its main mode of perception due to some fascination about (“pure”) sciences. However, at the same time, fundamental modern hopes, goals, and values such as progress and freedom are antagonistic to determinism.

Why not, then, adopt voluntarism as the main mode of perception of the social universe? At least four reasons explain the common rejection of this mode of perception of the social universe. First, from an historical standpoint social sciences are the younger cousins of natural sciences. Through a process of imitation, a positivist and deterministic sociological habitus has been developed and transmitted from one generation to another. Using this logic, it has been “abnormal” to be “scientific” and voluntaristic.

Second, like many other actors, social scientists *feel* that societies, institutions, cultures, etc. exist with or without “me.” And “we” (as in you *or* me, and not you *and* me) also know that “we” (you *or* me) cannot change a society or a culture by “ourselves” (you *or* me). Thus, co-determinism seems to be the most reasonable solution if one wants to combine the quest for progress and freedom, the legacy of “pure” sciences, and the sense of separation between “me” and the social world.

Third, modern science is also based on a quest for objectivity. The scientific “subject” is an external observer of an “object.” In this sense, dualism seems to be the only acceptable epistemological posture that scientific people can adopt. It is more or less required to conceive scientific explanations as based on the study of external *objects* from “us” (you *or* me) if we want to avoid subjectivism and relativism. In this manner, the transformation of dynamic social processes into “social things,” as explained by É. Durkheim [1938] 1982, becomes for many a necessary foundation for any scientific thinking on the social universe. Once again, co-determinism is convenient since it allows us to see social phenomena as social things and to preserve some form of agency at the same time.

Fourth, sociology was not based only on a quest for progress and freedom. It was also founded on a search for new foundations for a stable social order. In this respect, voluntarism is simply unacceptable. The “discovery” of soft social structures offers a reasonable solution to deal with this paradoxical quest for freedom (agency) and order (social structures). This “need” of structured agency is still present. One clear example, among many others, is given by I. J. Cohen in her critique of Giddens’s structuration theory:

The answer is that to concentrate upon the situated production of social systems does not immediately make clear the conditions that permit systemic patterns and modes of organization to be reproduced. Such conditions are absolutely vital, for in their absence systems would not and could not be maintained. Instead, social life would consist of an inconstant flux of events: an unpatterned and disorganized chaos in which social life in any recognizable form could not occur. Structural properties in social systems may not reproduce systems, but they shape, channel, and facilitate system reproduction whenever it occurs by providing agents with the practical awareness of the practices, relations, and spatio-temporal settings they require in order to participate in the reproductive process. (Cohen 1989:200–01)

In brief, epistemologically and culturally speaking, realism, dualism, and co-determinism seem to be the best options. The main problem here is that what seems to be so logical, rational, and reasonable is not necessarily relevant in order to understand social phenomena. Social theory should not correspond to cultural demands and some scientific habitus. It should reflect the reality of the social universe. In this sense, it seems to be useful to oppose relationism to co-determinism.

A RELATIONAL CRITICISM OF THE “MORPHOGENETIC APPROACH” OF M. ARCHER

General Principles of the “Morphogenetic Approach”

Margaret Archer proposes one type of co-deterministic theory based on four general principles: a rejection of any form of “conflation,” a critique against the “structuration theory” of Giddens, the development of “analytical dualism,” and the concept of “internal conversation.”

Rejection of “Conflations.” Archer criticizes most of the well-known preexisting social theories as different forms of “conflation.” “Conflationists” are social scientists who refused dualism and the separation of the social universe into levels. In M. Archer’s theory, it is all about the separation of social structures of the society and the agency of people. “Conflationists” see only the “properties” and the powers of the actors or the structures instead of seeing both of them in the “stratified nature of social reality”:

Basically conflationists reject the stratified nature of social reality by denying that independent properties and powers pertain to both the “parts” of society and to the “people” within it. . . . In Upwards Conflation the powers of the “people” are held to *orchestrate* those of the “parts”; in Downwards Conflation the “parts” *organise* the “people.” (Archer 2000a:5)

Methodological individualism, for instance, denies that social systems (or social structures) refer to something real and constraining. This is an example of an “upward conflation.” Archer refutes any modern conception of actors based on rational choice theory since they do not take into account the causal and preexisting properties of the environment of an action. On the contrary, when explanations are founded on “downwards conflation,” “the properties of the ‘people’ can be ‘upwardly reduced’ to properties of the system, which alone has causal power” (Archer 2000a:5). In this respect, Archer rejects any poststructuralist variants of the over socialized conception of the actor since it neglects the causal properties of agency. Postmodernism is seen “as the apogée” of “downward confluations” since the “postmodernist denies human subjects any form of external mastery over society’s development and form” (Archer 2000a:24). It is based on “linguistic terrorism” “because postmodernism not only asserts the primacy of (linguistic) structure over human agency, it ultimately seeks to dissolve the human subject entirely” (Archer 2000a:25).

Rejection of the “Duality” of Structure. There is a third form of conflation called “central conflation.” It refers to one type of co-deterministic theory, which is the opposite of the dualism defended by critical realism. The most well-known case

of the “central conflation” approach is the “structuration theory” of A. Giddens (1984) where agency and structure are mutually constitutive (principle of duality). According to M. Archer, “[in structuration theory] the two elements cannot be untied and therefore their reciprocal influences cannot be teased out, which is held to be their major defect and one which severely limits their utility in practical social research” (2000a:6). M. Archer is opposed to A. Giddens’s suggestion that social structures do not exist outside of the constant flow of relations between social actors in their daily lives. If structures cannot be separated from actions and their agential properties, Archer is saying, then there is no possible autonomous reflexivity (and agency) since an actor can think about something, and try to change it, only if it is seen as external to him or her.

Moreover, the “duality” of structure and agency (or arguments about the homology between the positional and the dispositional), which conceptualize them as inextricably intertwined, are both hostile to the very differentiation of subject and object that is indispensable to actorial reflexivity toward society. Consequently, the potential of such reflexivity for mediating the influence of structure upon agency is lost in advance (Archer 2003:2).

So, agency has to be conceived of as external to structures if we want to see these structures as constraining or enabling factors: “Constraints require something to constrain, and enablements something to enable” (Archer 2003:4):

As mutually constitutive, the two elements cannot be untied and therefore their reciprocal influences cannot be teased out, which is held to be the major defect and one which severely limits their utility in practical social research. . . .

Their [A. Giddens and P. Bourdieu] respective approaches to human practices generically preclude from disengaging the properties and powers of the practitioner from the properties and powers of the environment in which practices are conducted—and yet again this prevents analysis of their interplay. Instead, we are confronted with amalgams of “practices” which oscillate wildly between voluntarism and determinism, without our being able to specify the conditions under which agents have greater degrees of freedom or, conversely, work under a considerable stringency of constraints. (Archer 2000a:6)

We must see the social reality as based on the constant inter-actions between “human beings” and the structured “world.” It just seems inevitable and logical to Archer to study relations between structure and agency since these two concepts have to be seen as a strata of reality that have their own power or “properties.” In this sense, her co-determinism appears to be an epistemological necessity. As S. Kemp (2005) explained, R. Bhaskar and M. Archer presume that fundamental characteristics of the social realm can be deduced from, or depend on, some philosophical/epistemological discussions.

Analytical Dualism, Time, and Corporate Actors. M. Archer defends a principle she calls “analytical dualism” where time is crucial. By making a distinction between ontology and epistemology, she claims that, *analytically speaking*, social structures must be external to actions because they exist *before* them. Time helps us to understand how preexisting social structures limit or influence agency and, subsequently, how agency can transform or reproduce preexisting social structures. Once again by following R. Bhaskar, M. Archer divides a social action and its consequences into

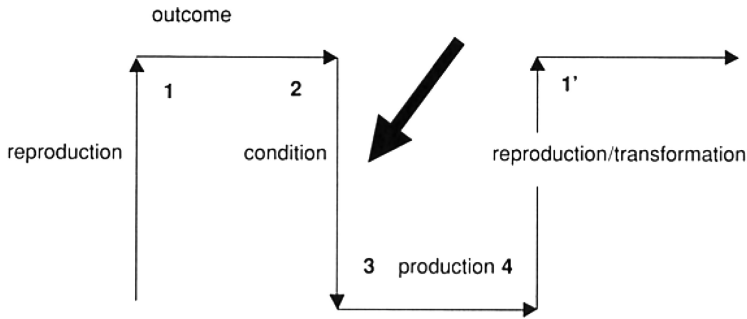
three or four steps: structural conditioning (T^1), sociocultural inter(-)action ($T^2 - T^3$) and structural elaboration or structural reproduction (T^4) (see Figure 1).

This “morphogenetic” cycle is based on the following sequence. First, there are some “emergent properties” (T^1). They are “structural” and “cultural” and they come from the past. Thus, when they inter-act ($T^2 - T^3$), actors have to deal with both constraining and enabling structures. These structures create different life chances, costs, opportunities, etc. related to preexisting distributions, roles, institutions, systems, cultural products, and so on. Through their involuntary placements into a preexisting social order, actors are not free but are not simply determined by the past and its social structure and culture. On the basis of their own vested interests, reflexivity and other emergent properties, actors can change the order of things. This is why “ T^4 ” is not always a “structural reproduction” (“morphostasis”) but can also be a “structural elaboration” (“morphogenesis”). Therefore, two types of actors exist in the social universe. The actions of “primary actors” reproduce the preexisting structures. This means “they can play no part in the strategic guidance of society because they literally have no say” (Archer 2000a:268). They are embedded into the daily reproduction of the social order; “their influence is that of uncoordinated co-action of those similarly placed, rather than co-ordinated interaction of promotive interest groups with clearly defined goals” (Archer 2000a:268). But action is not restricted to reproduction. Actors may also realize their full potential as “corporate actors” when they are not confined to the “Me”; when, as collective actors, they “become part of an active ‘We’, which seeks strategically to transform this structure in order to make it a better place within which to live” (Archer 2000a:268–69). In this different logic of action, social change—or social “elaboration”—is shaped by the resources of actors, their negotiations, pressures, and bargaining power.

The “Internal Conversations.” The mediation between social structures and agency is assured through “internal conversations.” These conversations happen in between T^1 and $T^2 - T^3$ (see the big arrow in the lower part of Figure 1). Briefly, they are “genuinely interior,” “genuinely subjective,” and they have “causal efficacy” (Archer 2003:104 – 205). Through our own mental privacy “we can modify ourselves reflexively and we can also modify the world as a consequence of our internal deliberations about it” (Archer 2003:105). Agents do this by: diagnosing their situations (as they perceive them in T^1), identifying their own interests, and designing “projects they deem appropriate to attaining their ends” (Archer 2003:9).

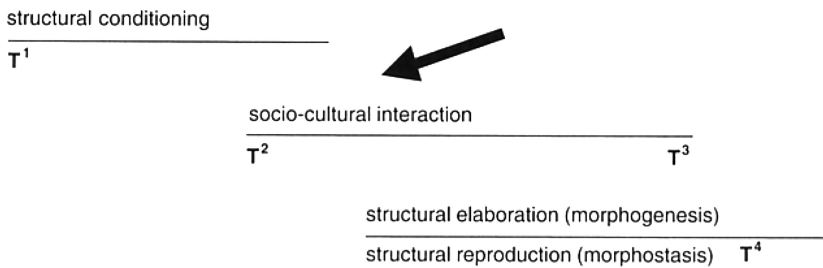
M. Archer insists on separating these “internal conversations” from the society. It is a conversation *about* the society, not *within* the society. In this respect, she proposes what one could call a sort of deterministic interpretation of the works of G. H. Mead (1962). G. H. Mead’s theory is explained as proposing an “over-socialisation of the internal conversation” (Archer 2003:78). More precisely, through the “Me” and the “generalized other,” the “I” lost any kind of real or potential autonomy since “the whole community enters into the individual’s thinking” (Archer 2003:81–82). Therefore, according to Archer:

Mead is a radical anti-subjectivist. Because to him, there can be no separate self apart from others, and because the development of mind depends upon a social environment, Mead is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian and Jamesian notion that individual thought begins from “subjective contents”, ones of which we alone are directly aware—with introspective certainty and without external mediation. (Archer 2003:84)



Source. Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 94

Figure 1.1 The place of conditioning in Bhaskar's transformational model of social action.



Source. Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 157

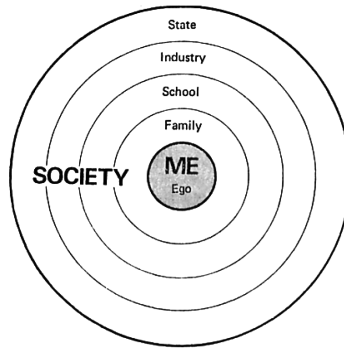
Figure 1.

Dualism between agency and structure is logically coupled with some dualism between the mind (subjectivity) and the empirical reality (objectivity). This logic, constantly based on a clear “sense of separation,” leads M. Archer to the following general formula of the “courses of action”:

Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances. (Archer 2003:141)

General Principles of Relationism in Sociology

The labels “relationism,” “relationalism,” or “relational sociology” are used to identify theories that perceive social structures, if any, as effects of trans-actions between various social actors (actor ↔ actor ⇒ social structure, if any). The social universe is seen as the effect of trans-actions between various and interdependent social actors. M. Emirbayer (1997) was probably the first to use this label in an explicit way in his “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology.” As he wrote, “relational analysis” studies “dynamic, unfolding relations” (Emirbayer 1997:281). Generally speaking, the main challenge posed by relational theories is to explain social phenomena without *any* total or partial causal relation from social structures to action. As a developing mode of perception, relational sociology is still a challenge in itself. It is also challenging an old, persistent habitus in social science: to see social actions as the effects of social things.

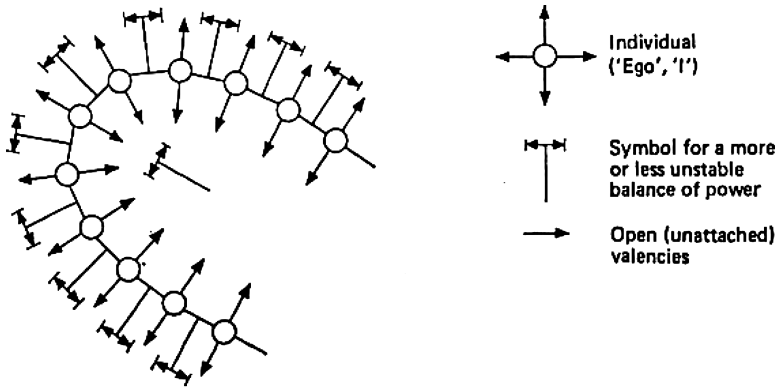


Source: Elias (1978a:14)

Figure 2.

Like co-determinism, relational sociology rejects voluntarism and determinism as realistic and acceptable modes of perception. No specific social actor can transform any social structure according to his/her free will, but no social actor is determined by any social structure. In fact, relational sociology is more “radical” since it denies the possibility of any empirical relationship between structures and social actors. Relational theory studies social structures, if any, but it sees them as more or less stable effects of trans-actions between interdependent actors. In fact, social structures, if any, refer to similar and continuous trans-actions, which can be seen from T^X to T^Y in specific spaces. Starting from these general ideas, we can identify more precisely five basic and closely connected principles of relational sociology.

Principle of Trans-Action. Specific social actions can be understood only as parts of a chain of trans-actions. In other words, any individual action is always one piece of a moving puzzle composed by interdependent actions: the action^A is the action^A only because it is interconnected to the action^B, and vice versa. In this logic, people are “bonded together in dynamic constellations” (Goudsblom 1977:7). They make up webs of interdependence of many kinds, like family, social classes, states, nations, organizations, etc. (Elias 1978a:15). Therefore, relationists study trans-actions rather than self-action or interaction. “*Self-action*” is related to the notion of agency in voluntaristic and co-deterministic explanations and to the concept of social structure in deterministic and co-deterministic explanations. In both cases, agency and structures “are viewed as acting under their own powers” (Dewey and Bentley 1949:108), as if their respective “powers” would be “owned” by the actors or the structures, or as if their “properties” would be simply intrinsic to the actors or the structures. In relational thinking, power is the effect of social relations; and “properties” do not exist outside or prior to social relations. N. Elias’s habitus in the process of civilization (1978b) is a good example of a relational analysis showing how and why “individual” or “natural” “properties” are habits, which are created through a long chain of complex trans-actions between various social actors (kings, nobles, merchants, etc.). These habits are also produced, diffused, appropriated, etc. through trans-actions between educators and students, parents and children, priests and believers, writers and readers, and so on. They are not social things that are internalized by totally or partially determined individuals. A process of socialization results from empirical and complex trans-actions. Habits are more or less stable depending on trans-actions between involved actors like parents and children, priests



Source: Elias (1978a:15).

Figure 3.

and believers, and elites and ordinary people. Parents, priests, elites, and so on are also “socialized” through these trans-actions since the actors are all interdependent.

The notion of “*inter-action*” refers to pure, perfect co-deterministic theory. Here, “thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection” (Dewey and Bentley 1949:108). Structures and agency, for instance, possess intrinsic or *a priori* properties or powers (ideologies, interests, force, and so on); they manifest themselves by limiting the power of agency (if it is a structure), or by changing the structure (if it is agency). The form of the social world results from their inter-actions.

The notion of “*trans-action*” is different since it denies that social actors and their actions can be understood as preexisting “things” outside social relations. Social actors and actions are what they are, at some specific time and space, only through empirical chains of trans-actions. Besides basic and important biological properties, their properties are not intrinsic to their “nature” or just individual. They constantly change in more or less significant ways through their trans-actions. In this sense, their properties are social not because they are determined by society, but because they occur through trans-actions. “Individual” properties come from individuals and they are developed by them, but only by trans-acting with actors and other parts of their environment.

Moreover, we should never say that (interdependent) actors are affected by initially structured trans-actions since trans-actions do not exist outside, beside, or prior to actors who act. Real, empirical structures are real, empirical trans-actions. The fact that some trans-actions can be memorized and more or less reproduced in similar ways does not transform real social structures into something other than empirical trans-actions.

In this way, the principle of trans-action can be seen as the radicalization of the principle of duality proposed by A. Giddens (1984). Relational theory does not only affirm that structures do not exist without agency, and vice versa. It also rejects the use of any ontological or analytical distinction between structure (more or less continuous and similar trans-actions) and agency (social action). It is simply illogical to pretend that trans-actions can exist outside, without, or prior to social actions. We will see later that an analytical distinction between structure and agency implies an egocentric perspective of the social universe, which severely limits the potential of sociological imagination.

As far as causal factors are concerned, the concepts of social structure and agency are neglected in favor of empirical studies of interdependent actors and their

trans-actions. For example, the structure of one language is seen as more or less continuous similarities in terms of grammatical rules, sounds, words, etc. These continuous similarities might seem quite stable from the egocentric perspective of human beings who are condemned to live only several decades in this world. But we can guess that none of them will be eternal since they are the empirical effects of trans-actions between interdependent users (speakers, listeners, writers, readers, teachers, students, specialists, and so on). There is no influence of grammar on any speaker, but there are conscious or unconscious, hard or soft, noisy or quiet, social relations between various users where actor^A accepts or not, understands or not, etc. the speech of actor^B; where actor^A uses “old” or “new” words; social relations where actor^B ignores, accepts, or refuses a new word; where some authorities try to preserve or change some rules, etc. Attempts to explain the relative stability of one language thanks to internalized and constraining/enabling structures, which totally or partially determine speeches, come from some confusion between a structure as a “thing” and some specific knowledge, understanding, memory, etc. of a language. “Individual” knowledge, understanding, memories, etc. may look similar as if they would impose themselves on many individuals in time and space. In fact, they are moving effects of complex chains of trans-action. In sum, people are driven by their “personal” but interdependent (or “trans-acting”) knowledge, understanding, memory, etc. when they talk or write. Habitus are “inter-subjective” and can be studied as “objects” from the (egocentric) perspective of a researcher. But they have no agency since they do not exist without, prior to, or after trans-actions. Habitus are not bridges between objectified structures and subjective practices. They are more or less shared, imposed, contested, remembered, appropriated, etc. “trans-acting” legacies of long chains of trans-action.

Principle of the “Primacy of Process.” The socialuniverse should be depicted “in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms” (Emirbayer 1997:281). We should not “fall into the trap of process-reduction” (Mennel 1992:256). This process-reduction happens when social processes are transformed into “things,” and when individuals are separated from the society as if they would be outside, beside, or prior to social relations. Social phenomena are fluid and moving like movies instead of being fixed like pictures. However, and once again, it does not mean that there is no continuity in the social universe. The social universe is full of more or less continuous and similar trans-actions (or social structures) that we call market, wedding, war, genocide, racism, exploitation, domination, love, and so on. Their discovery and explanation is one of the most important tasks in sociology. But these structures should be studied as chains of trans-action. In terms of structures, relationists are not looking for the “girders of the building,” but for “webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds,” that “people make up,” and that are “characterized by power balances of many sorts, such as families, schools, towns, social strata, or states” (Elias 1978a:15). In this sense, we cannot treat societies “as static givens” (Goudsblom 1977:7). Figurations, or social processes, “are continually in flux, undergoing changes of different orders—some quick and ephemeral, others slower but perhaps more lasting” (Goudsblom 1977:6). We always come back to the same general ideas: sociologists should study interdependent actors and their relations instead of social things and isolated, pre/post-“trans-acting” individuals.

Principle of Dereification. Another major task and challenge of relational sociology is to get rid of any reifying concept, expression, and form of thinking. From

a relational point of view, states, social classes, social movements, political parties, pressure groups, nations, firms, cultures, societies, gender, patriarchy, capitalism, etc. do not act, think, enable, nor constrain since they are neither people nor social things. They are evolutionary social processes made up by interdependent actors through their trans-actions (actor \leftrightarrow actor \Rightarrow nation, social class, social movement, capitalism, etc.). In the same logic, and once again, the notion of agency cannot be seen as an individual “property.” It is true that individuals are all different and they develop some knowledge, memory, etc. about “past pattern of thought and action” (Emirbayer and Mishe 1998:971); they can also “make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer and Mishe 1998:971); and it is also true that their knowledge, memory, expectations, hopes, desires, etc. do not appear and evolve in a social vacuum as various deterministic and co-deterministic theories have repeated. Besides very specific factors, which are part of the biological environment of the “ego” (as defined in Parsons 1937), other “properties” exist only through empirical trans-actions. B. Latour (2005) would probably agree with us if we say that individuals “trans-act” with other “trans-actors” (individuals, weapons, mountains, and so on); and that sociologically speaking, individuals and other “trans-actors” take their properties through trans-actions. An individual is a soldier full of hate, a knife is a weapon, and a mountain is a defensive wall or an obstacle, etc. when there is a war. In another trans-action, the same individual is a “loving machine,” the mountain a romantic view, and the knife might become a gift. Even our most “personal” thoughts and habits are linked to trans-actions in one way or another. When we think, alone in our bedroom, we do it by using words, ideas, etc., which have been learned, appropriated, memorized, forgotten, adapted, modified, etc. through specific trans-actions. No action is detached from more or less long chains of trans-actions. There is no pure “individual” action (or agency) outside, beside, or prior to social relations; and there is no “social” outside, beside, or prior to real, specific trans-actions.

Principle of Relational Perspective. Elias explained how “natural” it is for individuals to see the social universe from an egocentric perspective (see Figure 2):

This egocentric view of the social world and its social “things” fits very well with voluntarism, determinism, and co-determinism. It “shows the individual person, the particular ego, surrounded by social structures,” which “are understood to be objects over and above the individual ego.” (Elias 1978a:14)

One important goal of relational sociology is to replace the egocentric perspective for a relational perspective, which helps us to see what is occurring by studying trans-actions.

We will see that in the case of M. Archer’s “morphogenetic approach,” the main difference between co-determinism and relational sociology is that the latter takes a relational perspective from the beginning to the end, whereas the former switches from an egocentric one to a relational one during the demonstration. The same comment could be made about P. Berger and T. Luckmann’s social construction of reality and many other co-deterministic theories.

Principle of Emergency. The quest for social laws is rejected by relational sociology because the evolution of trans-actions is undetermined and unpredictable. If more

or less stable social structures are simply effects of trans-actions, there is no social law to discover in the social universe. If someone is looking for causal mechanisms (another persistent habitus in social science), then someone has to write like C. Tilly that “causal mechanisms” “do not consist of individual mental events, states of consciousness, or self-sustaining actions of social systems. They operate in the domains of collective experience and social interaction” (1998:24). Continuities that we call social mechanisms, patterns, figurations, processes, etc. are only similar and contingent trans-actions that happen from T^X to T^Y in the space^z. In this sense, everything is possible in the social world, including the total annihilation of the social universe through aggressive trans-actions based on the large-scale use of nuclear weapons. The development of a relational sociology is an urgent task because we have the capacity to destroy ourselves in so many ways through our trans-actions (principle of emergency). Relational sociology is founded on the idea that the understanding of self-actions or of inter-actions between detached individuals and social things did not and cannot help us to control our trans-actions. We can only hope that a better understanding of our trans-actions will help us to improve our production of the social universe.

A Relational Critique of M. Archer's Co-Deterministic Theory

There is no reason to believe that co-deterministic thinkers disagree with the principle of emergency. M. Archer's theory, for instance, is a critical one that favors emancipation by telling people they are dealing with structures they can transform as “corporate actors.” In this sense, this critical theory is an improvement compared to critical but deterministic theories like structural-Marxism. M. Archer correctly understands that a critical theory cannot explain that people are simply or foremost “bearers” of structures without destroying its own critical goal and efficiency. At least, social actors have some agency. However, M. Archer also proposes a *co-deterministic* critical theory based on realism and dualism because social actors cannot be seen as free producers. When actors act to reproduce or change some structures, they are always embedded in structures, which impose themselves upon them. Therefore, the main concern of sociologists is “how structure shape(d) interaction, and in interaction, in turn re-shape(d) structure” (Archer 2000b:464). We must see an analytical cycle, which goes from structural conditioning to some form of possible agency where the actors can change the initial structures (see Figure 1). Analytically speaking at least, there is no doubt that we are dealing with a clear co-deterministic theory that is very different from relationism. But what is the best mode of perception?

One Weird and Costly Solution to Avoid Voluntarism. M. Archer is saying that we must study inter-actions between structures and agency. Relationism opposes the study of trans-actions and relationists agree with A. King (1999:200) “that the concept of structure, as an ontologically prior or autonomous realm, independent at some point from individual knowledge or activity, emerges as a metaphysical notion, and is only arrived at through the reification of (interpretative) relations between individuals.” So-called “structural conditions are only other people” (King 1999:211).

In her reply to A. King's criticism (1999), M. Archer relied on a Durkheimian logic. She explained that social structures are (relational) “emergent properties.” Once they are created, they have “the generative capacity to modify the powers of its constituents in fundamental ways and to exercise causal influences *sui generis*” (2000b:466). Therefore, we need a “realist analysis of how structural emergent

properties impinge upon agents, by generically shaping the situations which they confront” (Archer 2000b:467). She used the example of literacy rates to support her point:

My discussion of literacy rates has to be taken as precisely that: the influence which an initial distribution of literacy exerts upon proportions of the population who have the skills to change it, and the different amount of time which this distributional feature entails before illiteracy is eliminated. (Archer 2000b:466)

This approach avoids self-action and voluntarism: “In short, more than desire plus knowledge is needed to explain change, its magnitude and speed” (Archer 2000b:466). Fair enough, but there is nothing here to justify the necessity of dualism and its analytical separation between actors and social structures. Relationism also recognizes that no specific and detached actor can change one structure only on the basis on his/her desire and knowledge. The main point is that we do not need dualism (and some form of reification) to explain that actors face real people and other environmental features they did not choose and design. The notion of trans-action implies that the production of the world is not based on free will and self-action. The principle of trans-action is founded on the idea that the production of the social world happens through social relations and in a physical environment. In this sense, as far as relations between actors are concerned, it “is not hard to grasp the idea that what we attempt to conceptualize as social forces are in fact forces exerted by people over one another and over themselves” (Elias 1978b:17). A. King was right to note that “social conditions are thus independent of any individual, as an individual, but they are not more than all the individuals considered together in their social relations” (1999:213). We will see later that M. Archer reifies “structural conditions” when she adopts an egocentric perspective (in T^1 and T^4 in Figure 1).

The key point is that there is no need for any co-deterministic approach to understand that it is more difficult to improve literacy rates in poor countries than in a state with many resources like the United States or Great Britain. Comparative and empirical studies of trans-actions would easily show this type of difference. Moreover, relationism could also explain how changing trans-actions could significantly improve the rate of literacy in a poor country; and how certain trans-actions can damage literacy in another country even when “structural conditions” offer plenty of resources. In fact, it shows that trans-actions may transform initially useless features into resources that actors can use to achieve their goals. On the contrary, some trans-actions also transform previous useful resources into useless ones. M. Archer’s co-determinism cannot provide this sort of explanation. As preexisting conditions of action in T^1 , structures are defined as having “ontological properties” that affect agency before the actors “trans-act” in $T^2 - T^3$. It is only *after* this initial determination that some agency becomes active:

(A) *Properties of structures* \rightarrow *Actors X, Y...*; (B) *Agency of actors X, Y...* \rightarrow *(reproduced or transformed) properties of structures*

It seems that social structures are substantialized since they exist before—and then somehow without—trans-actions. M. Archer is conscious of this problem and she wants to avoid it. But she also wants to preserve some form of autonomous properties to the structure. She achieves this paradoxical goal by linking the “conditional” properties of the initial structures to the inter-actions of the actors:

There are no constraints and enablements *per se*, that is as entities. These are the potential causal powers of structural emergent properties, such as distributions,

roles, organisations, or institutions, and of cultural emergent properties, such as propositions, theories or doctrines. Yet, to constrain and to enable are transitive verbs; they have to impede or to facilitate something. As with all potential causal powers, they can remain unexercised because it is a wholly contingent matter whether they are activated. In other words, constraints and enablements do not possess an intrinsic capacity for constraining or enabling in abstraction. For anything to exert the power of a constraint or an enablement, it has to stand in a *relationship* such that it obstructs or aids the achievement of some specific agential enterprise. (Archer 2003:5)

Archer agrees that the “properties” of mountains, for example, depend on relations between social actors. In relational words, it means that *sociologically speaking*, the “properties” of mountains are deeply shaped by some contextualized trans-actions between social actors—so deeply shaped that, as sociologists, we can rely on this formula:

{Trans-actions → (sociologically relevant) properties of “things”}

War figuration → *Mountains as a defensive wall*

Market figuration → *Mountains as a tourist attraction*

Chess game → *Mountains have no relevant/efficient “property”*

Thus action and its environment are interconnected. They “trans-act.” But one problem with Archer’s co-deterministic framework is that the recognition of the connection between the “conditioning properties” and the relations contradicts the time sequence that she adopts at the core of her theoretical framework (as seen in Figure 1). In effect, the co-deterministic theory of M. Archer should be logically impossible to combine with the idea that the sociologically relevant “properties” of some parts of the environment depend on some trans-actions since these properties come first in her theoretical framework. Any added subtlety or distinction between the reality and some “analytical necessity,” which tries to avoid the initial substantialization as represented in Figure 1, transforms a clear theoretical core into some vague and contradictory explanations based on principles such as the “potential causal powers of structural emergent properties” (Archer 2003:5). How should we understand time if T^1 is in fact “activated” by $T^2 - T^3$? The concept of “potential causal power” might help us to make sense of this weird time sequence where the “potential cause” is the effect of its eventual effect. But do we really need to deal with these types of logical problems only to remember that there is a reality out there; and that none of us, as specific and abstractly detached actors from an egocentric perspective, choose the reality in which we act?

Reformulation of the Sociological Imagination. Like C. W. Mills and many others, M. Archer explains that we have some agency, but we do not choose the world in which we use it. As far as sociological imagination is concerned, the effect of co-determinism is limited. We do not want to deny some important discoveries that have been made by deterministic and co-deterministic theories, but with them our sociological imagination is always restrained by the effects of initial “structural conditions” (class position, deprivation of “capital,” and so on). In this sense, deterministic and co-deterministic theories are usually depressing and fairly well-known stories to tell to excluded, oppressed, and exploited people.

On the contrary, by adopting relationism, sociologists put themselves in a situation where their expertise on social relations might be more useful and refreshing.

Sociologists can explain, for example, that with more division of labor, the same people in the same poor environment can increase their productivity in significant ways—no matter what are the initial structural conditions. But to provide this type of explanation, we should avoid any egocentric perspective where individuals (as “egos”) have to face some social things that existed before them.

In other words, sociology has a bright future if it succeeds in renewing the reflexivity of social actors. It can make a marginal contribution to contemporary reflexivity if it adopts a mode of perception that fits well with this phase of modernity, its scientific model, and its individualism. However, the best gift that sociologists can offer to other actors is a different mode of perception and thinking. Relational sociology can help us to move beyond an individualistic worldview and the sense of separation that so many individuals support when they see themselves in the social world. Deterministic theories can clearly contribute to develop or maintain some form of alienation, if we define alienation as “the estrangement of individuals from one another, or from a specific situation or process” (Scott and Marshall 2005:12). Co-determinism has represented an improvement since it usually tries to add one form or another of agency. But it is still based on this sense of separation, which may lead to alienation. In co-determinism, individuals inter-act with social structures they did not want and produced instead of trans-acting. Generally speaking, relationism explains that “I” do not control the evolution of any social process, but “I” am part of some process and its evolution with “You,” “They,” and so on, which are the social universe. It explains that if “I” and “You” adopt a relational perspective, a new “We” may realize that we are the producers of the social world for the better or the worse. At this point, (relational) sociological imagination has an enormous potential we can only vaguely envision. In this respect, the principle of emergency should push us to have comparative and deeper discussions about the respective merits of co-determinism and relationism.

Reification and Agency. M. Archer recognizes some form of agency. In this sense, her co-deterministic theory improves deterministic explanations. However, this co-deterministic vision of action reifies agency as individual properties. In effect, when agency is attached to detached actors, when agency is explained as an intrinsic individual property and comes from the adoption of an egocentric perspective, agency is reified. This is clearly what M. Archer is doing when she writes:

In other words, it [subjectivity] is a *personal interior property*, with a *first-person subjective ontology*, and with powers that can be *causally efficacious* in relation to himself and to his society. . . . These [the properties of the social world] are *temporally prior* to his conceiving of a course of action, *relatively autonomous* from how he takes them to be, but can *causally influence* the achievement of his plans by frustrating them or advancing them. (Archer 2003:14)

In reality, notions such as agency, will, and freedom are empirical effects of social processes. And there is no “no-social-land,” no space in the social universe, where the actor ceases to be embedded in trans-actions. As A. Giddens (1984:9) wrote:

Action is a continuous process, a flow, in which reflexive monitoring which the individual maintains is fundamental to the control of the body that actors ordinarily sustain throughout their day-to-day lives.

Pure conceptual inventions and distinctions (structure/agency, micro/meso/macro, etc.) should not be seen as real things. As J. Alexander said about the distinction between micro- and macrophenomena, they are simply shaped by the observer:

The terms micro and macro are completely relativistic. What is macro at one level will be micro at another. . . . Equally significant, there are levels of analysis “larger” than that of individual interaction—for example, the level of institutional exchange—which themselves can be viewed as micro processes relative to structures and processes of still larger scope. (Alexander 1988:303–04)

Structures, levels, and other similar concepts do not refer to things that exist outside of individual trans-actions. There is nothing but various trans-actions. Actors always and constantly think and act within the social world. Any “agential property” exists only *through* trans-actions because they are developed not by isolated individuals, but by *social* actors who exist only through trans-actions. There is no space or time for pure Hegelian spirits or Cartesian minds in the social universe. Our reflexivity is not a detached one; it is the real, empirical, and concrete reflexivity of a social actor, of someone who lives *only* in the world, *only* through the world—even when someone thinks or talks to himself or herself.

Of course, people have the capacity to have “internal conversations” and think about their world, their goals, and their future actions. These “conversations” matter a lot. But actors do not think or talk to themselves in a social/physical vacuum frozen in time. It is not because a sociologist can focus his or her attention on some individuals and their “internal conversations” that they can be detached from their trans-actions. As N. Elias (1978b) showed by insisting on the emergence of habitus, very “personal” actions like tastes, perceptions, reactions, evaluations, and so on are closely connected to the evolution of long chains of trans-actions. The evolution of these chains produces moving habitus that are part of the mind and the flesh of the individuals. In this sense, if individuals exist as biological entities, social actors never exist outside of the social processes in which they trans-act. Actors are always connected to the evolution of some empirical social processes. They do not exist outside, before, or after them. There is no agency floating across the sky. Even when they talk to themselves about their projects, jobs, couples, etc., actors are not Hegelian spirits that transform a preexisting world. Projects, goals, wishes, identities, emotions, mobilization of resources, evaluations, etc. evolve through the constant social and physical *existence* of the actors.

M. Archer would probably reject this type of relational explanation by saying that it leads to an oversocialization of the actor. It would be another form of “conflation.” As we explained before, she insists in her criticism against G. H. Mead (Archer 2003) that the mind cannot be constantly infiltrated by the “Me” and the “Generalized Other.” The “I” has to be independent in the “internal conversations” if we want to preserve agency. Again, the reality does not depend on epistemological needs or discussions. If we accept the idea that the mind of the actor is constantly in touch with other actors in one way or another, then there is no possible pure “I.” Are we going back to some form of determinism by saying this? The answer is “yes” only if, *a priori*, we oppose the individual to the society according to an egocentric and dualistic perspective of the social universe. In this logic of action, where the structure precedes and initially determines the actor, it seems that we need an independent agency, a substantialized agency, to explain how specific and analytically detached “agents” can change some initial structural conditions. But the answer is “no” if we simply try

to understand how trans-actions (actor ↔ actor) evolve in a physical environment. Then, we do not need the notion of agency. We need to study effects of trans-actions. We need complex and *empirical* studies of trans-actions to see and understand the fluid dynamics of interdependent people who create their social universe through their constant transactions.

The Fluidity of Social Processes. There is no need to find a way to protect pure individual “properties” isolated in a temporary stop in action (situated in between T^1 and $T^2 - T^3$), where the world is suspended before detached actors make new moves and are immersed in the world again. There is no need for any artificial (or “analytical”) broken sequence of inter-actions between units, levels, entities, or “substances” such as structures and agency. Any “structure” refers simply to specific transactions that share some similarities and that are more or less reproduced through time and space. In this sense, social structures are fixed only in our imagination or on paper. In reality, “structures” are always in motion. In this respect, we are dealing with fluid social processes more than fixed social structures. Many of these processes may seem to be stable and simply reproduced because some transactions are more or less continuous and similar. These similarities may create an illusion—the illusion of a unity, as if a society or a family would have a fixed structure like a building. In fact, a society, a family, or a culture is always a “continuity of changes”:

in many processes of change the unity is not due to any substance which remains unchanged throughout the process, but to the continuity with which one change emerges from another in an unbroken sequence. Take the example of a specific society, the Netherlands in the fifteenth and twentieth centuries—what links them to each other is not so much any core which remains unchanged but the continuity of changes with which the twentieth century society emerged from that of the fifteenth century, reinforced by the fact that it is a remembered continuity. (N. Elias, quoted by Mennel 1989:256)

Of course, there is a real, objective past, and actors “trans-act” in an environment they do not choose. But sociologically speaking, one real, objective reality at T^X is composed and made up by continuing transactions, not by preexisting structures. And once again, the preexisting reality of a trans-action is not so important sociologically speaking. Let’s use one last example. M. Archer is more or less saying that a military conquest that happened 200 years ago is not chosen by any present actors in a society today, and that this conquest created some structures that constrain or enable some actions after they were created. This is a truism that is relevant only if some voluntaristic thinkers pretend that individuals choose their social universe. (Where are these thinkers in social science?) However, *sociologically speaking*, as far as *social processes* are concerned, the important point is that no social structure, which seems to come simply or directly “from the past,” has any autonomy and power of its own—even “conditional” ones. Imagine that Dutch and Protestant actors^a conquered some Catholic and French actors^b 200 years ago in one society. Today, this conquest has no empirical effect on these social processes if the actors a and b use English as a common language, and if exploitation and domination happen in a free market, which is blind to ethnic differences but full of class identities, and if the objective, real past is not remembered, appropriated, or used in one way or another in ongoing transactions. It is possible to think that the evolution of certain social processes based on specific ideologies, emotions, mobilizations of

resource, strategies, etc. has transformed this conquest into an historical fact with no significant social effect. It exists as “facts” in museums or books but not in transactions in any significant way. On the other hand, if the actors^a have wished and succeeded to preserve social processes based on ethnic/racist domination and exploitation to the detriment of the actors^b, then the conquest *can* be used as a constraining or an enabling resource by some of the actors^a and/or the actors^b in their attempts to preserve or transform this figuration. Through their transactions, this past—as it is used, appropriated, etc.—matters a lot but not the past in itself.

In sum, sociology does not need more epistemological discussions about the links between social structure and agency. We need concepts that can help us to see the evolution of social processes in a complex social universe. We need research on what are the main interconnected dimensions of empirical transactions. And we also have to develop methodological tools to deal with the high complexity of these empirical chains of transactions. There is a lot of work to do; a lot of empirical and conceptual work. Many relationists have already started this work in what seems to be, or could become, a new post co-deterministic era in social science. In this new era, complex social transactions between real people are finally becoming, or could finally become, the main focus of research in sociology if, and only if, co-determinism becomes one phase in the evolution of sociology.

“Analytical” Dualism and its Contradictions. In conclusion, principles of trans-action, of primacy of process, and of relational perspective explicitly imply that social processes are not produced by any specific actors but by transactions. So, why do we need co-determinism considering the high costs associated with it? More precisely, why should we take the risk of reifying social structures by separating them from their interdependent producers? Why should we restrict the potential of sociological imagination to some “structured agency” and the egocentric perspectives of “I” and “You”? Should we not talk about “We” as interdependent producers of more or less stable social processes? Why should we adopt this strange epistemological posture that obliges us to transform processes in motion into fixed pictures and miss the fluidity of social processes? These questions bring us back to the ad hoc argument that M. Archer’s dualism is just an analytical tool. M. Archer is worth quoting at length here:

It is analytical because it sees great utility in differentiating the two in order to examine their interplay, something which is of particular importance to practical analysts of society.

...there is never a moment at which both structure and agency are not jointly in play. As far as the basic scheme is concerned, its phases of “Structural Conditioning” → “Social Interaction” → “Structural Elaboration” are ones in which “all three lines are in fact continuous, the analytical element consists only in breaking up the flows into intervals determined by the problem in hand: given any problem and accompanying periodization, the projection of the three lines forwards and backwards would connect up with the anterior and posterior morphogenetic cycles”...What makes analytical differentiation possible are the two simple propositions: that structure necessarily post-dates these actions... , which of course is precisely what practising sociologists want to examine in various fields. There is no philosophical dualism because (a) structures are only held

to emerge from the activities of people, and because (b) structures only exert any effect when mediated through the activities of people. Structures are ever relational emergents and never reified entities existing without social interaction: the converse would be tenets of dualism. (Archer 2000b:465)

Even if we proceed to some hermeneutic reading of M. Archer's works, her "analytical dualism" is difficult to buy. It seems confused and full of contradictions. If social structures "are ever relational emergents," then why should we study something else than empirical transactions? What is the utility of a theoretical framework based on the study of interactions between agency and structures? Once again, if structures are transactions (in T^1), how can they influence... transactions (in $T^2 - T^3$)? M. Archer pretends that there is no problem since structures are not causes and effects at the *same time*. But the problem is that her utilization of time makes sense only because she constantly switches from an egocentric to a relational perspective. When T^1 is related to $T^2 - T^3$, structures are seen as social things. It makes sense only because she uses an egocentric perspective, which shows how structures shape specific actors. During $T^2 - T^3$, structures are defined as social relations by using a relational perspective. And from $T^2 - T^3$ to T^4 , structures are seen as effects of social relations according to a relational perspective. In this cycle, T^4 becomes the next T^1 and it announces the return of the initial egocentric perspective. This flexible and relativistic approach might be useful to reply to some critiques, but it is unacceptable in itself—especially for a realist social scientist! If social science has to make sense more than creating confusion, the nature of things should not depend on the perspective adopted by the social scientist, especially if this perspective is constantly changing.

The good news is that when we put the theory of M. Archer into its historical and dialogical context, it represents a significant contribution to sociology. It shows the limits of co-determinism and the need for a shift toward relationism. Maybe the most important point we should keep in mind is that M. Archer partially adopts the principle of dereification like any relational sociologist: in reality, social structures can only be empirical transactions. This is why her dualism is only an "analytical" one. In the same vein, her attempt to avoid reification obliges her to partially move toward the principles of trans-action, of the primacy of process, and of relational perspective. At the end of the day, there is no social thing when M. Archer talks about the social world as it is in *reality*. It is all about transactions. Therefore, the conclusion should be that we have to fully move beyond the study of inter-actions between structure and agency.

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