

Between Morphogenesis and Reflexivity: some Considerations on the Contribution of Margaret S. Archer

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Abstract

Margaret Archer has contributed to defining the agenda of sociological debate in a decisive way, for decades. Her works are known throughout the world, especially with reference to the association with critical realism and for the development of the morphogenetic perspective: a complex social theory that relates structure, culture and agency without reductions – or ‘conflations’. This contribution intends to pay homage to Archer’s memory by observing a joint reflection (although necessarily synthetic) between social morphogenesis and reflexivity, two key concepts of the English scholar’s work.

Keywords: *Reflexivity, morphogenesis, modernization, postmodernity, social action.*

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Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, Nietzsche's shocking cry spread across the Earth: God is dead (Zoia, 2009, p. 12). And as Zoia recalls, even though this death has emptied the heavens, we continue to need someone to worship. And here is where man steps in. Because the place of God is taken by man and his works: the ideal man is deified, therefore no longer a near man (Zoia, 2009, p. 13). The British sociologist Margaret Scotford Archer – one of the most representative figures in the international field of critical realism in the social sciences, who passed away in May 2023 – does not share the same opinion. According to her, with the death of God comes also the death of man: humanity and the human subject are threatened by postmodernist thought, which has killed both God and man. As Pierpaolo Donati (2023) recalls, between the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, Archer developed her research by combining three key words: critical realism, social morphogenesis, and reflexivity as inner conversation (an essential characteristic of the human being). A cornerstone of these developments is *“Being Human: The Problem of Agency”* (2000), followed by investigations into reflexivity: *“Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation”* (2003), *“Making our Way through the World”* (2007a), *“The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity”* (2012).

And it is, according to Donati, that emerges in this period, the central theme of her work: the assertion of the uniqueness of the human person and at the same time, the refusal to give centrality to the individual as such. A perspective that apparently presents a certain contradiction in terms, but which constitutes the heart of the author's message. Archer in *Being Human* takes a stand against

the idea of the hypo-socialized individual proposed by rational choice theory while, at the same time, rejecting every hyper-socialized approach because, if it is true that being human means depending on interaction with the real world, it can also be shown that the identity of the individual human person is formed as self-awareness, thought, and emotionality, before the acquisition of social identity and therefore is not a product of society (Donati, 2023).

From these considerations, the present contribution aims to summarize the use of the concept of reflexivity, first defining it with the idea that the way things are done has implications for what is done, and then delineating Archer's perspective on reflexivity, to which is progressively entrusted an increasingly incisive function in the processes of morphogenesis.

Social Morphogenesis

A crucial point in the sociological speculation of the English scholar is that concerning social morphogenesis: a theme as vast as it is complex, which has sparked a debate among scholars of contemporary sociology, among whom Archer holds a prominent position. The morphogenetic approach is addressed in a monograph from 1995, *“The Morphogenesis of Society: A Realist Social Theory”* (Archer, 2007b), as well as in an article from 2008 included in the collection edited by Maccarini et al (Archer, 2008).

The term ‘morphogenesis’ refers to the process related to the complexity of relationships that produce changes in the form or structure of a system and is therefore subject to continuous changes. As the scholar herself asserts, the investigation into the relationship between human action and social structure

constitutes the perennial challenge of sociology: the theories that have succeeded over time oscillate in highlighting either the first element or the second (Archer, 1982, p. 455). Archer's fundamental ideas about the structure of society, how she investigates things, and the basic principles for making social theories have been clearly laid out in her 1995 book, *"Realist Social Theory."*

Before delving into the heart of the issue addressed by Archer, it is necessary, as she herself suggests, to focus on the definition of structure and action and on the problematic relationships that criticism has highlighted over time; this process of analysis has led to the definition of absolutizing dichotomies such as object/subject, individual/society, action/structure, which are the subject of debate among theorists who follow an individualistic and holistic methodological approach. The problematic nature of these relationships is at the center of Archer's study interest, who, by exploring the potential and limits of this "analytical dualism," aims to go beyond and find new solutions to this problem starting from the fact that action and structure presuppose each other, as can be read in an article of hers from 1982: "Both the 'morphogenetic' and 'structuration' approaches concur that 'action' and 'structure' presuppose one another: «structural patterning is inextricably grounded in practical interaction. Simultaneously both acknowledge that social practice is ineluctably shaped by the unacknowledged conditions of action and generates unintended consequences which form the context of subsequent interaction» (Archer, 1982, p. 456).

From this assumption, Archer's ontological approach perspective is clear, according to which, in her concept of society, structure and agent must be considered distinctly, and this analytical dualism leads to dividing

the cultural system from socio-cultural interactions. This theory of culture is developed in *"Culture and Agency"* (Archer, 1988) and is based on two fundamental ideas, analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach, bearing in mind that the cultural system can contain ideas that contradict or complement each other. On the other hand, socio-cultural interaction concerns how these ideas influence people's behavior. The way these two dimensions, the cultural system and socio-cultural interaction, relate to each other determines whether there will be a change and development (elaboration) of the system or whether it will remain stable (morphostasis).

Archer's theory starts from the concept of cultural conditioning, which refers to the ideas held by people at a certain moment. These ideas become relevant only when adopted by someone and influence how they act. According to Archer, cultural conditioning is characterized by the logical relationships between these ideas. If cultural ideas contradict each other, they create problematic situations for those influenced by them, while if they complement each other, they create smoother situations. In the end, the cultural system provides a logical framework that influences people's actions. Zeuner (1999, p. 83) argues that this is both the point of continuity and originality of Margaret Archer's work, who, in developing this theory, manages to include basic principles of classical sociology in a completely innovative vision of socio-cultural relations and the resulting dynamism. Also interesting is the study of the ways in which, in this process of continuity, the scholar relates to classical sociological theories: Zeuner, analyzing these relationships, highlights that Archer identifies three types of conflation in the relationships be-

tween culture and socio-cultural levels: ascending, descending, and central conflation (Zeuner, 1999, p. 82).

In descending conflation, it is presumed that cultural cohesion is the driving force of socio-cultural cohesion. In practice, it is believed that a cohesive culture automatically generates a similar cohesion in social relationships and dynamics. Thinkers such as Sorokin, Parsons, and Lévi-Strauss have supported this perspective, considering the socio-cultural level as a reflection or a direct effect of culture. On the contrary, ascending conflation suggests that socio-cultural cohesion has the power to shape and define culture itself. In this view, prevailing social dynamics and relationships are thought to determine and influence culture. Thinkers such as Gramsci, Miliband, and Habermas have adopted this perspective, considering culture as a reflection of the socio-cultural level. The central conflation, instead, believes that culture and the socio-cultural level influence each other in an inseparable way, hindering a clear understanding of the interaction between them. According to this perspective, proposed by thinkers such as Giddens, culture and the socio-cultural level are interdependent, connected in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish which of the two influences the other.

This last aspect deserves particular attention, as Archer dedicates a lot of space in her works to the theories of Anthony Giddens, which she reworks, criticizes, and aims to overcome: Giddens rejects theories that separate static from dynamic elements in understanding society. According to him, understanding how structure (established social order) and action (individual behaviors) are linked requires considering time and space. Giddens suggests that to fully understand how past actions influence future behavior, it is

necessary to overcome the traditional separation between synchronous aspects (occurring simultaneously) and diachronic aspects (occurring over time). In essence, social interactions are shaped not only by current structures or past events separately but by the continuous interaction between these elements over time (Archer, 1982, p. 457).

According to Archer's critique, accepting this perspective implies rejecting the recognition of unique and distinctive characteristics in the social world, defined as emergent properties belonging to a specific level of reality, without being able to be explained or reduced to other levels, and thus one would come to deny the idea that the social world has an ontological structure with unique characteristics not reducible to other levels of reality.

In a study from 1999, published by Bortolini and Donati, we find an interesting analysis of the criticisms that Archer makes of Giddens' structuration theory (Bortolini & Donati, 1999); Anthony Giddens addresses the dichotomy between the importance of the individual and that of broader structures in society. Giddens seeks to overcome this contrast by seeing social structure and human action as interconnected and part of a single reality called 'praxis'. However, in this approach, Giddens seems to assert that there are no fundamental differences between social structure and human action. This also implies the refusal to study how human actions relate to the rules and resources imposed by social structure.

According to this view, defining structure solely in terms of social relations is no longer appropriate, as this would give ontological status to relations that is not accepted by Giddens' theory. Fundamentally, for Giddens, the social world is formed by social

practices that develop in the present and persist over time with varying levels of coherence, without being rigidly defined solely by social relations. In light of these premises, Archer “must personally take on the task that she preferred to leave to the reader a few years earlier, that is, to demonstrate that the morphogenetic approach reflects and respects more than structuration theory the ontology of society proposed by critical realism, centered on the concept of “*emergent properties*” (Bortolini & Donati, 1999, p. 300). According to Archer, Giddens explicitly avoids defining structure as something exclusively relational or as an emergent property that influences individuals and cannot be fully reduced to their actions. Concepts such as interaction, institution, and system are reinterpreted by Giddens in terms of praxis, where structure is implicit in the practice itself, represented by the rules and resources that guide social action. Finally, the scholar suggests that within Giddens’ theory, it is not easy to clearly separate structures from actors or social practices. The definition of structure as rules and resources requires a thorough analysis of the ontological status of material resources, which exist independently of social meanings and use in different societies.

In summary, Archer highlights the challenge of clearly distinguishing rules from resources and determining which aspect of social life is assigned to one or the other category within Giddens’ theory. According to Archer, structuration theory, by eliminating the idea of independent causal powers of social structures and individual personalities, along with reducing motivation to mere knowledge, fails to fully explain why groups or individuals act in certain ways in specific social contexts. This suggests that Giddens’

theory may have limitations in fully understanding what drives people to behave in certain ways within social dynamics (Archer, 2007b).

On the meaning of reflexivity

Questioning the existing relationships between individual action and reality, the connections between perception, personal knowledge, and the constitutive characteristics of the external world, is perhaps an essential characteristic of being human and has always had significant and problematic relevance in every context. The importance of the concept of reflexivity for the social sciences has inevitably led to a sedimentation in the term of various meanings, all certainly important for reflection on the epistemology, theory, methodology, and practice of the social sciences but which, nevertheless, emphasize different aspects and not always strictly coherent with each other. The semantic plurality of the term highlights that every reflection on reflexivity inevitably refers to a complex field of related issues; a field that defines a space within which to make sense of epistemological questions (how do we come to know what we believe we know), questions of agency (what role does the social actor play in defining reality; how much can action be considered linked to subjective will and how much to structural constraints), and identity issues (how can I recognize myself in my thoughts and actions). Colombo (Pinheiro & Colombo, 2021, p. 5) does well to associate, among others, some meanings with the term reflexivity in the social sciences:

- Cognitive ability to reflect, to consider oneself as subjects capable of action;

- Cognitive ability to consciously explain/realize what one is doing (Mill, 1843 2012 according to references);
- Ability to anticipate, in an inner dialogue, the possible responses of the Other and include them in our actions (Mead, 1934);
- Radical reflexivity (Garfinkel, 1967): at every moment of its unfolding, action constitutes - that is, maintains, alters, or in any case elaborates - the sense of the context in which it unfolds and is in turn constituted by it;
- Late modern reflexivity (Giddens, 1990; Melucci, 1998; Beck, 1992): the ability to act in the world and to critically reflect on our actions in such a way that it is possible to reconstruct how we act and to integrate the outcomes of this reflection into our actions in order to reshape the reality of the world;
- Dialogical reflexivity (Bakhtin, 1981) (social/relational): emphasizes that meaning is in the exchange, in the actual (unpredictable) response that the Other gives to our actions.
- Social reflexivity: the social condition of constant questioning of knowledge and interpretations of the situation that constitutes the space for constructing shared meanings and practices.

Within the variability of these conceptions of reflexivity, it is possible to reconstruct at least three main sets of meanings: (1) reflexivity as the reflection of the acting and knowing subject on oneself and one's own

practices; (2) reflexivity as a recursive process in which the products of knowledge and action are constantly incorporated into knowledge and actions, modifying them; (3) reflexivity as a social process, as a relational practice of producing meanings and action in interaction.

Attention to reflexivity as a tool for reflecting on oneself and one's own practices is fundamental for developing awareness of the constructed and processual nature of social knowledge. In this sense, Bourdieu (2001) insists on the need to go beyond reflection on the individual characteristics of the knowledge producer to focus on the structural conditions and power relations that define the researcher's position in the field of research. Following Bourdieu, reflexivity requires not so much intellectual introspection as permanent sociological analysis and control of research practice and knowledge production. This type of reflexivity in the social sciences - both reflexivity that invites the researcher to constant self-analysis of their practices and thoughts, and more political reflexivity that invites consideration of the researcher's social position and power relations structuring the field of social knowledge - which we could define as methodological reflexivity, promotes a constant process of reflection, comparison, and verification of the research goals in order to learn how we learn and to use this knowledge to improve our practices and knowledge (Morley, 2015).

Another way of understanding reflexivity is to emphasize the recursive nature that links action, knowledge, and social reality. In sociology, this idea of reflexivity is linked, on one hand, to ethnomethodology, and on the other hand, to the idea of reflexive modernity developed, among others, by Giddens, Beck, and Melucci. Ethnomethodology uses the

term reflexivity to refer to the “embodied” nature of social practices, that is, to the fact that “the activities through which members of society produce and manage situations of organized daily relationships are identical to the procedures used by members to make them ‘account-able’” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 1).

The concept refers to the special characteristic of social actions whereby, for a social action to be possible, recognizable as such, and endowed with meaning, the conditions of its production must be presupposed; production that in turn contributes to the construction of a shared sense within which to place and recognize such action. It indicates the necessary circularity that links every action to its contexts, emphasizing how there is a full equivalence between describing and producing an action, between understanding and expressing that understanding. Describing a situation is constructing it, and constructing a situation is possible only within a set of presuppositions - which in most cases remain necessarily implicit - that make such construction sensible and feasible (Pinheiro & Colombo, 2021).

This means that in order to act practically, it is always necessary to “know” from the outset the situations in which one is acting. The reflexivity highlighted by ethnomethodology is in this case completely distinct from the ability to reflect on one’s actions: those who act often do so without being aware of the reflexive nature of their own practices, nor are they interested in subjecting their actions and the practical contexts in which they are carried out to careful scrutiny. Every type of practice, description, and interpretation - from that of service users to that of operators, to that of any analysts or researchers interested in studying that particular service - is necessarily and in-

evitably reflexive, recursively linked to mundane definitions, that is, common sense, shared, and not definitively explicable outside the context in which they are produced.

A second perspective on reflexivity as recursiveness is linked to the reflection on late modern society (or second modernity, post-modernity, or, indeed, reflexive modernity). The idea, developed with different tones and nuances by Giddens, Beck, Lash, Melucci, and Bauman (just to indicate the most well-known authors), posits as a central characteristic of contemporary modern societies the scrutiny of knowledge and activities and the constant inclusion of the products of these knowledge and activities in subsequent courses of knowledge and action. In this case, reflexivity is not a characteristic of the observer, but a structural characteristic of the modern social system. The condition of contemporary modernity constitutes a radicalization of the processes underlying modern society. Following Weber, modernity can be characterized as a process of disenchantment of the traditional world, a constant application of rationality to areas previously governed by tradition, affection, and the realm of personal relationships (Weber, 1919). We will return to this point later.

Another way of understanding reflexivity emphasizes its social character. What we could define as constructionist or performative reflexivity (Pels, 2000; Colombo, 2003) focuses on the dialogical dimension, on the construction of knowledge about society as a social process; it argues that every knowledge and investigation of social reality has a circular, interactive character, and it is precisely in this that its explicative capacity lies. Constructionist reflexivity is dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981). Rather than highlighting self-reflection, it emphasizes recursiveness, the circular

process within which knowledge and social action are produced.

The idea of constructionist reflexivity aims to emphasize how the production of social knowledge requires institutional spaces conducive to dialogue and confrontation. Social knowledge arises when actions and interpretations confront each other, and meaning emerges in the moment of the response that, to be understood in turn, awaits further response. Social knowledge materializes when there is a rupture that requires the suspension of thinking-as-usual (of both the researcher and social actors). Surprise, challenge, stumbling, misunderstanding, diatribe, interrogation, requests for clarification and justification, conflict are the moments that make knowledge about society reflexive – recursive, revised based on its assumptions – and social. Adopting the perspective of constructionist reflexivity implies accepting a certain degree of relativism; recognizing that rather than arriving at knowledge of universal laws capable of deterministic and certain explanations, social knowledge allows for different local interpretations, which are more or less suitable for accounting for the questions they have generated and which result from active selections, highlighting some elements while concealing others. It also means highlighting the situated nature of social knowledge, i.e., the fact that the observer's position, social characteristics, expectations, interests, and sensibilities define the reality intended to be observed. It further involves considering different positions not as equivalent, but marked by asymmetries of power and disparities of resources, structurally more equipped to see some things and to ignore others. Social reality thus appears defined as a conflictual field in which the elements highlighted are always

part of the available resources and are the result of agreements, conflicts, and mediations between different positions and interests. Knowledge of this field and the action possible within it thus appear as the result of more or less openly conflictual forms of dialogue and confrontation. The constructionist reflexive standpoint chooses to foreground the relational dimension: reflexivity can manifest itself especially where there is real confrontation between positions and voices capable of expressing themselves, where the conditions for possible conflict exist; if one thinks that knowledge and change occur only as social facts, reflexivity cannot reside in the mind of the individual observer but can only exist as a product of a relationship, as a collective fact. The reflective process is primarily activated when one is called upon to question their own knowledge, when they are interrogated and prompted to provide good reasons for their interpretations and actions (Pinheiro & Colombo, 2021).

Another proposal comes from Boltanski (2009), for whom reflexivity is not a specific characteristic of the social researcher, but a characteristic of the actor: the need/capacity of human beings to review their own actions and those of others in order to morally justify them. This reflexive capacity also implies that individuals react to the interpretations given to their characteristics and actions, including those of the sociologist. In this case, reflexivity, from the critical work of the researcher, becomes primarily the study of experiences of 'critique' from below conveyed by the actors themselves, in their practice, in their narratives, in their various reasons for suffering and discontent, resistance, and rebellion starting from the concrete situations of lived life. One of the interesting aspects of this idea of reflexivity is the proposal to take the action of the

subjects seriously and to anchor social research in a rigorous empirical dimension, placing as its specific contribution a detailed description of the situated action of the various social actors.

The opening and maintenance of a dialogic space that allows for relational reflexivity cannot, therefore, be guaranteed by the simple will of the individual researcher. It is rather a matter of promoting those collective conditions that allow for continuous discussion on the production of social knowledge. The researcher can still facilitate the creation of this space, for example, by showing the reader the choices made at relevant moments of field research, or by seeking to adequately convey in writing the complexity and polyphony that characterize the research experience, incorporating comments, criticisms, and back talk related to their own work. However, ethnomethodological admonitions regarding the possibility of evading every radical reflexivity, such as concerns about the full sincerity of the researcher (Salzman, 2002), make it difficult to imagine that achieving full “transparency” of the processes of research construction and its narratives is possible.

This leads to the central point of a constructionist reflexive perspective: the idea that reflexivity can be ensured primarily by social processes and institutional arrangements rather than individual will. Constructionist reflexivity - understood as the ability to critically distance oneself from one’s constructions and as an awareness of the constructed nature of social knowledge - is not an ‘intrinsic’ trait of cognitive abilities, nor can it be activated simply on a voluntary basis. Constructionist reflexivity takes shape in confrontation, in conflict. To paraphrase Bakhtin, we could say that its meaning always emerges as deferred, unfolding in the time of waiting for

the Other’s response. Therefore, the reflective effort consists in allowing the Other to respond. An assertion, an observation, a research that actively solicits criticism, confrontation, discussion is reflective - in a constructionist sense. A society that activates spaces of discussion, that protects the voice of dissent, that ensures that there can always be a response is reflective - in a constructionist sense. Reflexivity, like recursiveness, primarily consists of this constant social dialogue on social reality, so that we are continually called upon to justify our reasons. It requires that diverse perspectives and narratives be present in the public space to enable taking positions, assuming responsibility, and questioning the dominant voice (Pinheiro & Colombo, 2021).

Human Reflexivity

A significant contribution to the concept of reflexivity certainly comes from Archer, who defines it primarily as an operation inherent to human beings, as it is related to their emotions. Therefore, Pierpaolo Donati (2009, pp. 7-8) adds the adjective ‘human’ to the noun to distinguish it from more mechanical or automatic forms of reflexivity. To understand the importance of reflexivity in personal and social life, we adopt a sociological perspective: treating reflexivity not as mere inner introspection but as the capacity for dialogue with oneself in relation to the world, as personal action in the social sphere (Donati, 2009, p. 8). In other words, what importance does reflexivity have in people’s lives and in society itself? While initially reflexivity was limited to the individual subject, concerning their interiority and remaining confined within it, over time reflexivity has increased its scope (what can and should be examined, scrutinized), its speed, its rhythm, its modes of

action, investing all social life. The initial small choices, unfolding over time, will produce enormous consequences - unexpected in the long term - on the entire social organization, to the extent that today we speak of reflexive schools, reflexive communicative networks, reflexive enterprises, and so on (Donati, 2009, p. 5).

Archer, in her book *“Human Reflexivity and Life Paths: How Human Subjectivity Influences Social Mobility”* (2009), studies how a certain type of personal reflexivity corresponds to a given life path in terms of social mobility: for example, some individuals remain in the same social status while others move and occupy different social statuses. Consequently, different types of social context correspond to different types (in individuals) of reflexivity that will bring out a certain *modus vivendi* and therefore a certain type of social mobility. According to Donati, Archer’s attempt lies in wanting to understand reflexivity as a process of seeking one’s identity and position in the world, which unfolds throughout individuals’ lives, to then arrive at a specific result (Archer, 2009, pp. 8-9).

In this regard, Donati (2009, p. 11) explains how the concept of reflexivity is polysemic and distinct from that of reflection: the former, in fact, is something more, it is a reflection that does not exhaust itself but takes into account the context in which it is placed. Specifically: *“The regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and viceversa”* (Archer, 2007a, p. 4), in other words, reflexivity is *“the regular exercise of the mental ability, common to all (normal) people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and viceversa.”* Furthermore, it is a characteristic of a subject’s action (not of a social system) that

examines their interests (*concerns*), to develop concrete courses of action and thus establish life practices that are satisfying and sustainable (*modus vivendi*) (Donati, 2009, p. 14).

As Bagley et al. (2016, p. 408) remind us, in her volume *“Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation”* from 2003, Archer focuses her thinking on the concept of structure (seen as a lasting form within society) and agency (i.e., how individuals subjectively relate to the social structure), both with their own independence but in whose mediation human reflexivity plays a crucial role (Archer, 2003, p. 14): namely, the potentials of our reflexive deliberations are seen as the process that mediates between structure and agency (Archer, 2003, p. 129). To the point that Archer states that *“any form of social interaction, from the dyad to the global system, requires that subjects know themselves to be themselves”* (Archer, 2003, p. 19), therefore, any form of social interaction requires that subjects know themselves to be themselves. Furthermore, in Archer’s model, individuals’ reflexive internal conversations and self-assessments in their interactions with others have a causal power in modifying structures (Bagley et al., 2016, p. 409): *“extrinsic effects that mediate the cultural and social properties of their societies and the private life of social subjects are indispensable to the existence and functioning of society”* (Archer, 2003, p. 52). In fact, drawing on the works on *“personal reflexivity”* by James (1890) and Mead (1934), she is critical of their idea of an “inner world” not autonomous from the individual’s “external world”; instead, Archer’s goal (2003, p. 129) was to “recover internal conversation” understood as speaking “to” society, not simply “about” society.

Human reflexivity, however, has not fully addressed the emotional aspect, even though emotions have become central to subjectively constructed sociality (Holmes, 2010, p. 139). The emotionalization of reflexivity refers to individuals' increasing tendency to draw on emotions to evaluate their lives. Therefore, emotions are crucial in how they reproduce and endure within the social world. Understanding emotiveness is vital for examining how contemporary subjects reflexively produce a sense of feeling, thinking, and being in the world that relies on others (Holmes, 2010, pp. 139-140).

Reflexive Modernization

Reflexivity, therefore, inherent in the subject itself as according to Archer, the subject is naturally reflexive (Donati, 2009, p. 14): it is necessarily so without ever being able to cease to be, as from birth, it constantly questions what it wants in relation to its context. A sort of "inner conversation" of the human person that, according to Donati (2009, p. 14), brings it closer to personal reflexivity. Subsequently, at the end of the twentieth century, it became a sociological theme, referred to the entire society up to the critique of what is defined as "reflexive modernization" proposed by Beck, Giddens, and Lash, as observed above.

Beck et al., indeed, speak of "reflexive modernization" (1999, pp. 32-35) as an orientation that has attempted to tame the wildness inherent in reality, a sort of self-transformation of industrial society: the first modernity must be replaced by a second one that in turn must shape its principles. In practice, for Beck et al., it means "an enhanced modernization capable of changing society" (Beck et al., 1999, p. 38).

In this regard, Beck distinguishes between "simple modernity" and "reflexive modernity": the former is synonymous with the development of industrial society, concerned with the production and distribution of goods, while the latter is synonymous with the emergence of the so-called risk society, organized around the management and distribution of "evils," namely dangers arising from the application of technologies, as well as those related to the consequences of social relations characterized by risk (Donati, 2009, p. 16). Thus, while the reflexive modernization of Giddens and Lash is essentially linked to knowledge (reflection), that of Beck is linked to the secondary consequences of modernizations (reflexivity) (Beck et al., 1999, p. 231). In other words: while Beck identifies reflexive modernization in the risk society, linking reflexive modernization with the new issues of political organization, Giddens identifies it in "de-traditionalization" (the erosion of traditions inherited from the past) and the emergence of "institutional reflexivity," concluding that we are entering the global society; and finally, Lash assimilates reflexive modernization to a third space expressed in an "other economy," that is, the new structures of information and communication, which replace the typical structures of modern capitalist economy (Donati, 2009, pp. 17-18).

In contrast to the thought of reflexive modernity proposed, Archer intends to consider reflexivity as a characteristic related to society in crisis of modernity: in what way individuals are becoming reflexive in relation to the technological progress of late modernity, which, imposing an "individualization of individuals", entails greater reflexivity of the individual in order to survive (Donati, 2009, p. 15).

Conclusions

Starting from Giddens' definition (1990) of reflexivity, understood as the capacity through which individual and social life is produced and modified as people react to circumstances, Archer will provide her significant contribution in Sociology on the meaning and importance of reflexivity in the contemporary social world (Archer, 2007a; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1999; Giddens, 1990).

Reflexivity concerns the social process of discourse production – specific to social sciences – starting from other discourses – those of social actors – to promote discourses in the public space – that is, to translate experiences and issues into 'political' matters. Reflexivity is what keeps this dialogue between discourses 'fluid,' in awareness of the constructed, situated, and dynamic nature of understanding social reality. Reflexivity aims to signal – and guide reflection on – the circularity and interconnection that exists between knowledge of reality and reality, between subjective perspective and objective perception, between action and interpretation. It therefore signals a social process – not an individual capacity – fully activatable only on the social level. For this reason, constructionist reflexivity depends on historical, social, and political context. It is not a necessity of human action and understanding but a possibility. A possibility that, to be feasible, requires specific contextual conditions. As emphasized earlier, constructionist reflexivity intends to highlight the dialogical nature of the social construction of reality and therefore does not reside (solely) in individual awareness. Reflexivity is fully activated when called upon to respond, it lies in the response of the other – especially when it is unexpected, challenging, critical – rather than in the mind of the individual.

As Bakhtin observes, the author is not solely responsible for the content of the discourse they produce; the recipient also participates, at least as the author imagines them: one writes differently depending on whether addressing one audience or another. However, it is never possible to know for sure how the other will act: meaning is always deferred, it is in the anticipation of the response, it is 'outside' the author because it is a social fact. Reflexivity, understood in a constructionist sense, can only find fulfillment in a social context where there is space for discussion and criticism. Where rigid positions prevail, where dissent and criticism are seen as a threat, where emergency, protection, defense are the main concerns, there is not much space for dialogical reflexivity. Creating spaces for reflexive research thus implies a constant socio-political commitment to counteract the possibility that emergency reduces democracy, exception suspends law (Agamben, 2003; Martini et al., 2022; De Luca Picione et al., 2022), simplification discriminates against variability and difference.

It is useful, finally, to consider another research perspective, which Bortolini and Donati (1999, p. 305) propose to analyze: "to verify the accuracy and relevance of the remarks raised by Archer". They proceed to examine Giddens' texts in which, in the most recent versions of the theory of structuration, the importance of emerging characteristics is recognized. This conceptual approach draws on various insights from different sociological traditions, although at times it is ambiguous and lacks clarity. However, according to Archer, this Giddensian view does not transform into a true theory of social change. It does not offer an evolutionary explanation of human history, but rather constructs a view of change mainly through the negation of social

conflicts and contradictions. Even the Archerian theory shows its limits, as evidenced by the conclusions of Bortolini and Donati: “the theoretical comparison proposed by Margaret Archer versus Giddens’ theory, if it wants to be effective, must access a more fully critical and relational view of social relations, as mutual action of subjects who move not ‘within’ cultural and social structures, but in ‘cultural’ and structural ‘environments’” (Bortolini & Donati, 1999, p. 313). At the same time, it also becomes evident how reflexivity, as understood by Archer, is not only a necessity induced by a certain (risky) environment on subjects but also a capacity for reorientation, for the formation of new forms of social action (Crespi, 1999), which manage risks and uncertainties according to new ways of life (Donati, 2009, p. 20).

In this sense, reflexivity can be understood as a process, a specific mode of production of social realities; a process historically and culturally situated and rooted in the researcher, in social actors, and in contextual and structural dimensions, but also as overcoming situations of discomfort based on specific reorientations of action, focusing on possible and concrete ways out (Donati, 2009, p. 20).

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