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Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach by Margaret S. Archer; Culture and Agency. The Place of Culture in Social Theory by Margaret S. Archer
Review by: Lilli Zeuner
Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4201123
Accessed: 11/02/2015 23:20

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REVIEW ESSAY

Margaret Archer on Structural and Cultural Morphogenesis

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With this revised edition of Culture and Agency and the publication of Realist Social Theory, English sociologist Margaret Archer positions herself as an important contributor to sociological theory. The germ of the theoretical construction in her two new publications can already be seen in her very early works. The following is a short presentation of her theoretical construction. I place it in its context and mention a few points of criticism.

Structure and culture

In the Introduction to Realist Social Theory (1995), Archer presents her principles for social analysis, making it clear that there must be internal consistency between social ontology, explanatory methodology and practical social theorizing. In her view, any social ontology adopted has implications for the explanatory methodology endorsed, and in turn this methodology has implications for the guidelines to practical social theorizing.

Social realism and the principle of emergence are the ontological points of departure for Margaret Archer. In her concept of society, she makes it crystal clear that structure and agency must be kept separate – distinct from and irreducible one to the other. For both levels the principle of emergence applies, i.e. the principle according to which new properties can emerge on the basis of existing properties, which implies that emergence occurs in time, that the properties have relative autonomy from each other, and that they exert independent causal influences.

As a consequence of this ontological approach, Archer’s methodological approach becomes analytical dualism, which emphasizes the necessity of studying the interplay between two levels without conflating them, i.e. non-conflationary theorizing. This applies to the interplay between structure and agency as well as to that between culture and agency.

The principles of emergence and of analytical dualism lead Archer to develop the morphogenetic approach to the study of structure and culture. Morphogenesis has the character of a cycle which involves three phases, (1) structural or cultural conditioning, (2) social or sociocultural interaction, and (3) social or cultural elaboration.

Archer gives these basic ideas about social ontology, explanatory methodology and principles for practical social theorizing their clearest expression in her most recent book, Realist Social Theory, but they also form the basis of her earlier works.

Already in her major study of the emergence of the educational systems in England, Denmark, France and Russia, Archer utilizes these principles. Analytical dualism is introduced as a principle of separation between social integration and system integration (Archer 1979:33). Although she does not use the term morphogenetic cycle, she presents its three phases (ibid., p. 44). In fact, her entire analysis of the emergence of the four educational systems is based on two analytical cycles, one following the other. The first starts in mediaeval
Europe, when the Church owned and monopolized all education, and then moves into the emergence of state educational systems. The second cycle takes its point of departure in the elaborated structures created by the emergence of state educational systems, and then moves towards different patterns of change. The development which follows one cycle structurally conditions the following one.

This analysis of the emergence of the educational systems – and it is a most thorough and comprehensive analysis – constitutes Archer's most important historical contribution. Clearly, it forms the point of departure of her later theorizing concerning cultural and structural phenomena. It is worth noting that while Archer emphasizes the distinction between structural and cultural phenomena, she nevertheles sees them as phenomena developing in accordance with similar principles. Analytical dualism as well as the morphogenetic approach are applied to both types of phenomena (Archer 1995:179).

The theory of culture is developed in *Culture and Agency* (1988/1996), where analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach are brought out very clearly. Analytical dualism leads to distinguish cultural system from sociocultural interaction; this distinction is upheld while the analysis moves through the three phases of the morphogenetic cycle. At one level, the cultural system consists of logical propositions which may be either contradictory or complementary, while at the other level sociocultural interaction consists of matters of interpersonal cultural influence. The relationship between the cultural system and sociocultural interaction is the decisive factor influencing whether morphogenesis or morphostasis – elaboration or maintenance – prevails.

The starting point of cultural morphogenesis is cultural conditioning, understood as the ideas which at any given time have holders. Only if ideas have holders can they have any effect on agency. According to Archer, cultural conditioning is characterized by its logical relations. Are the items of culture contradictory or complementary? Contradictions will mould problem-ridden situations for cultural agents, while complementarities will mould problem-free situations. The cultural system thus creates a situational logic for agents. Archer exemplifies such cultural conditioning by utilizing the analyses of cultural phenomena of some of the founding fathers of sociology. In Durkheim's analysis of the development of educational thought in France, Christianity is tied to Antiquity in constraining contradictions. In Weber's analysis of Ancient China and India, religious beliefs are complementary with the economic ethos. Nevertheless, she emphasizes that cultural conditions cannot in themselves determine whether cultural change will take place. Change presupposes sociocultural interaction, and interaction will be characterized by attempts to protect or increase vested material interests. Thus, sociocultural interaction is determined by material interests.

Therefore, the decisive question becomes how the two levels of the cultural system and sociocultural interaction combine. It is of little value that the cultural system is riven with inconsistencies demanding change, if the distribution of power is such that any attempt at change can be suppressed. It is of no use either that the cultural system is characterized by complementarities which involve ample opportunities for adding new elements to the already existing cultural system, if the holders of power will not means to prevent this. In this way, the second phase of the morphogenetic cycle – sociocultural interaction, the use of power and the escape from power – is all-decisive for whether the outcome turns out to be morphogenesis or morphostasis.

According to Archer, it is possible under well-ordered sociocultural conditions to suppress changes for months, years or even centuries, but in the long run it becomes impossible. At some point in time a situation will arise where even the cultural elite will see its own interest in accepting the demand for a revision of culture in order to minimize inconsistencies, or a situation where it will be forced to accept new cultural items in order to uphold its position. Sooner or later the third phase of the morphogenetic cycle will become reality.

The theory of structure and the theory of the relationship between structure and culture are developed in *Realist Social Theory* (1995). Again, Archer advocates her principles of analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach. With them she moves through two parallel morphogenetic cycles, structural morphogenesis and cultural morphogenesis. She moves from conditioning via interaction to elaboration.

Seen in relation to *Culture and Agency*, Archer in *Realist Social Theory* primarily undertakes a theoretical elaboration of the second phase of the morphogenetic cycle, social or
sociocultural interaction. In this work, Archer points out that agency in itself must be analysed as a morphogenetic cycle. In order to develop this morphogenesis of agency, Archer establishes a distinction between (a) agents understood as collectivities with similar life chances, (b) actors understood as individual persons filling their given roles, and (c) persons understood as people with a personal and social self. Concerning agents, she further distinguishes between corporate agents, which have power and influence, and primary agents, which do not possess such power and influence.

The starting point for morphogenesis of agency is structural or cultural morphogenesis. Because of this type of morphogenesis, morphogenesis of agency takes place. One morphogenetic cycle leads to the other. With regard to the morphogenesis of agency it also implies that power relationships can long prevent restructuring among corporate agents. As long as an elite can keep its distance to the primary agents, no change will take place. The problem is that the primary agents with time will organize and thus become corporate agents. The consequence will be regrouping. Morphogenesis becomes reality. Double morphogenesis takes place.

Morphogenesis of agency produces yet another kind of morphogenesis, morphogenesis of actors. When agents regroup, an elaboration of roles will take place. The number of roles which can be attributed to persons will increase. This, too, is a morphogenetic process. Triple morphogenesis takes place.

Archer emphasizes, however, that agents as well as actors are anchored in persons. A person has energy and the ability to be reflexive and creative. This implies that a person can make choices. Therefore, morphogenesis of agency or of agents is not automatic. These processes are anchored in persons who can assess and choose.

Towards the end of Realist Social Theory Archer undertakes a unification of structural and cultural analysis. She raises the questions of how cultural factors find their way into the structural field, and of how structural factors find their way into the cultural field. She points out that the basic mechanisms of these processes are extremely simple. If a material interest group is in need of articulation, assertion or legitimation, it will look for a doctrine which it can exploit in order to further these interests. The problem is that as soon as it has done this, it will discover that it has plunged into the situational logic of culture. Not only this group, however, has now to relate itself to the advanced cultural struggles. This applies to all material interest groups which are in alliance with or in opposition to the former group. They, too, must attempt to make themselves visible and legitimate, but they must do so in the light of choices made by the former group. In this way sociocultural interaction penetrates the structural domain.

If an ideational group, advocating any kind of doctrine, has become associated with a particular material interest group in order to safeguard resources for its activities, it has thereby given up part of the universalistic form of its ideas. It must now submit to the particularistic interests pursued by the material interest group in question. There is a cost to finding a sponsor for one's cultural activities. The problem is that when one ideational group has safeguarded its resources by such an alliance, other ideational groups are forced to do the same. If other ideational groups are to avoid lagging behind in relation to the first group, they too must safeguard sponsoring for themselves from material interest groups. In this way, ideational groups are drawn into the power struggles taking place between the material interest groups. Structural interaction thus penetrates the cultural domain.

The last question Archer raises in Realist Social Theory is that of the relationship between theory and history. She characterizes her morphogenetic approach to cultural and structural analyses as an explanatory format. In her opinion, one should add analytical histories of emergence to this format. As an example of this type of analytical history, Archer points to her own analysis of the development of educational systems.

Archer has also touched upon this question in the Introduction to the anthology on Europe, which she edited in 1978 with Salvador Giner. Here, she makes the point that there must be a continuous scientific dialogue in which comparative study and theoretical formulation are inextricably intertwined. Her view is that empirical adequacy is the ultimate criterion of theoretical explanation (Archer in Giner & Archer (eds.) 1978:23–24).

The heritage from Lockwood and Buckley

Archer commences most of her works by systematically criticizing either sociology or
the philosophy of the social sciences, turning her principle of analytical dualism against them. In her opinion, representatives from both disciplines make themselves guilty of conflations. The two levels of analysis, which should be kept analytically apart, are conflated.

In her critique of sociological analyses of culture, Archer distinguishes between three types of conflations: upwards, downwards, and central conflations (1982, 1985, 1988/1996:25–96). In downwards conflations, represented by Sorokin (1957), Parsons (1951) and Levi-Strauss (1958/1969), it is assumed that cultural cohesion has the ability of producing sociocultural cohesion. In this way, the sociocultural level is treated as an epiphenomenon of culture. In upwards conflation, represented by Gramsci (1932/1975), Milliband (1969) and Habermas (1971), it is assumed that sociocultural cohesion has the ability to produce cultural cohesion, whereby culture becomes an epiphenomenon of the sociocultural level. In central conflation, represented by Giddens (1979), culture and the sociocultural level constitute one another, and are therefore perceived as inseparable. This precludes any two-way interplay between the levels.

Archer directs a similar critique against methodological individualism and methodological collectivism (1979: Chapter 5). In methodological individualism, represented by Watkins (1968) and Hayek (1973), the individual and the acts of the individual are attributed with all-decisive importance, implying that structural properties become the inert and dependent element. The consequence is downwards conflations. In methodological collectivism, represented by Gellner (1968) and Mandelbaum (1973), it is the other way around. Here, it is assumed that structural properties exert a deterministic influence in the regular occurrence of events, implying that the individual and the acts of the individual become derived phenomena, i.e. a subordination of agency. The consequence is upwards conflation.

In the revised edition of *Culture and Agency*, Archer has added a chapter with a critique of Jürgen Habermas' book *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981/1991–92; Archer 1988/96:288–315). Habermas develops his theory of communicative action on the basis of a distinction between social and system integration. So far, Habermas and Archer have common basic elements in their theories. Nevertheless, Archer raises a number of critical points against the theory developed by Habermas on the basis of this distinction. She criticizes Habermas, *inter alia*, for upholding the differences between the constitution of the lifeworld and that of the system instead of seeing the formal communalities between the dynamics of structure and culture. She criticizes him, furthermore, for distinguishing between lifeworld and system as two blocks instead of distinguishing between on the one hand the social system and the cultural system and, on the other hand, sociocultural interaction and structural interaction. The consequence of this lack of distinction is, in Archer's view, that culture becomes an unproblematic shared horizon. This means that Habermas still contributes to the myth of cultural integration. Finally, she criticizes Habermas's analysis for being a one-time historical account of the effects of lifeworld upon system and vice versa, instead of taking up universal processes. Consequently, system and lifeworld are considered as a single historical process of evolution. No possibility arises to study the interplay between the two levels of analysis.

Having criticized large parts of sociology and the philosophy of the social sciences for lack of analytical dualism, Archer takes her theoretical point of departure in David Lockwood's article "Social Integration and System Integration" from 1964. This short article – only 10 pages long – seems to be a decisive source of inspiration for Archer and her principle of analytical dualism. Already in her analysis of the development of educational systems, the inspiration from Lockwood's distinction between social integration and system integration becomes visible. Archer herself writes that she attempts to formulate her theory of cultural change on the basis of Lockwood's theory. Finally, Lockwood's theory is the main source of inspiration for the overall development of her theory in *Realist Social Theory*.

In this way, Lockwood's combination of conflict theory and general functionalism forms the point of departure for Archer's theory. The concept of social integration is applied to social and sociocultural interaction, while the concept of system integration is applied to the cultural and the social systems. Employing this dual approach, it becomes possible for Archer to develop her historical analysis and her general theory with analytical dualism.

The principle of morphogenesis and morphostasis is derived from Walter Buckley's systems theory. Although Buckley does not employ the significant trisectioning of the
morphogenetic cycle which Archer develops, he
does have a number of theoretical elements
which are later utilized in Archer's theory: the
idea of variety generated by the system itself, the
idea of tensions in the system and the idea of
transactional processes of exchange, negotiation
or bargaining (Buckley 1967:160). This
source of inspiration seems to have had a major
impact on all of Archer's works.

In her most recent book, Realist Social
Theory, a new source of inspiration is the
philosophy of Roy Bhaskar and the realist
school. The principle of emergence, in particu-
lar, is elaborated under the influence of Bhaskar,
who has developed the idea that a context
consisting of contradictions within and between
differentiated and stratified entities constitutes
the basis of emergence. Thus, on the basis of
contradictions one term arises out of the other.
Action leading to this development must,
however, take its point of departure in reflexivity
and judgement (Bhaskar 1993:303, 382, 397).
In this way, Archer bases the elaboration of her
own theory on Bhaskar's philosophy of develop-
ment.

The final source of inspiration to be
mentioned here is the philosophy of Karl Popper.
This inspiration becomes apparent in Archer's
definition of the concept of culture. The concept
Corresponds to Popper's definition of the third
world. In Objective Knowledge, Popper distin-
guishes among the first world being the physical
world, the second world being the mental world
and the third world being ideas in the objective
sense. The connection between the first and the
third worlds can only take place with the second
world as mediator between the two (Popper 1972/92:154–155). Thus, the third world
consists of ideas in the objective sense, as they
appear in books and other sorts of accessible
sources. These sources have an objective exis-
tence and are possible objects for human
thought. It is this objective world which Archer
congeves of as culture.

Continuity and originality

All Archer's works hitherto show sociological
thinking characterized by both continuity and
originality. The principles for social analysis
which Archer introduced in her early works still
characterize her theoretical thinking. Morpho-
genesis and analytical dualism follow her
through all her works. This does not mean
stagnation in Archer's theoretical thinking. On
the contrary, she has been able to elaborate
these principles through the process of includ-
ing still more sources of inspiration while
upholding a high degree of continuity.

At the same time, her theory expresses a
high degree of originality. Her distinction
between the cultural system and sociocultural
interaction is original. Her view of the structural
and the cultural domains as phenomena which
must be analysed according to the same
principles has not been suggested before. Her
focus on the logical relations of culture and on
the types of dynamism that spring from this is a
novel contribution to sociological thinking
about culture.

The result of this continuity and originality
is an impressive theoretical construction span-
ing the cultural domain, the structural
domain and their mutual relations. Archer
has succeeded in creating a theory, which –
despite its extensive area of validity – meets her
declared purpose: to develop guidelines for
practical social theorizing.

Nevertheless, in the following I criticize a
few aspects of her theoretical construction,
namely, her basic principles of theory construc-
tion, her uses of classical sociology and her
combination of theory and history.

Morphogenesis and analytical dualism

The first question I pursue has to do with the
consequences of the fact that Archer allows
herself to be inspired by such very different
sources. What happens to her theory? Is she
successful in adhering to the principles that she
herself establishes and which she criticizes
others for not observing?

Archer's two most important methodo-
logical principles are analytical dualism and
morphogenesis. Analytical dualism has its roots
in Lockwood's combination of general func-
tionalism and conflict theory. The principle of
morphogenesis has its roots in Buckley's sys-
tems theory. Analytical dualism leads to the
demand that structure and agency have to be
kept separate and analysed separately if an
understanding of their mutual interplay is to be
obtained. Over time, however, Archer has let
morphogenetic thinking and thereby the sys-
tems theoretical approach dominate in relation
to the interactionist approach. In her theory,
agency in itself becomes a morphogenetic cycle.
It becomes a part of the social system. The
question is whether this theoretical elaboration
is in contradiction with Archer’s principle of analytical dualism. One might say that the systems perspective encroaches upon agency and renders agency a part of the social system. Therefore, interaction and the conflict perspective are no longer seen as separate from the systems perspective. In this way, analytical dualism is not observed.

In Archer’s theory of culture another important combination occurs. Here, the methodological principle of analytical dualism is combined with Popper’s philosophy of science. According to Popper, one must distinguish among the physical world, the mental world and the world of objective ideas. It is the third world, the world of objective ideas, which forms the point of departure for Archer’s concept of culture. In Popper’s theory, however, it is a precondition that the mental world mediates between the physical world and the world of objective ideas. This mental world is by and large absent in Archer’s theory of culture. She lets analytical dualism, as developed on the basis of Lockwood’s article about social integration and system integration, apply not just to the structural domain, but also to the cultural domain. Certainly, this was not the aim of Lockwood’s article. For Lockwood, the aim was to develop a novel sociological perspective in which social integration and system integration were combined and it was directed towards the analysis of those societal elements which Archer labels structure. By assuming that culture and structure are governed by the same mechanisms, Archer transfers the mechanisms of the structural domain to the cultural domain. Thus she assumes that sociocultural interaction is determined by material interests. In her view, sociocultural agency takes place in order to protect or increase vested material interests. As a consequence, in her theory of the intersection between structure and culture, she reaches the result that a transfer of legitimacy from culture to structure takes place. For the structural world the most important result of cultural processes thus becomes its own self-legitimization. By applying analytical dualism to both structure and culture, Archer turns cultural processes into a mirror of structural processes. When material interests determine the cultural domain, this implies that this domain is subsumed under the structural domain. The autonomous dynamism of culture, in which mental processes mediate the relationship between objective culture and its material foundation, as in Popper’s theory, has been cut out in Archer’s theory. Instead, she lets vested material interests be the connecting link between objective culture and its material foundation. Thinking, then, does not become decisive for the development of culture. On the contrary, the material advantages of thinking become decisive for this development. In this way culture is subsumed under structure.

Situational logic and classical sociology

The next question I pursue has to do with the consequences of Archer’s combination of the concept of the cultural system and her utilization of the classical sociologists as examples. Is it possible on the one hand to claim that culture must be studied as a cultural system consisting of logical propositions, while on the other hand utilizing the cultural analyses of Durkheim and Weber? Is it possible on the one hand that cultural interaction is determined by situational logic and vested material interests, and on the other hand include cultural studies which focus upon the education of pupils and the cultivation of people?

In Archer’s theory of culture, Durkheim’s analysis of the development of educational thought is included as an example. In her exemplification of cultural conditions, labelled by her as constraining contradictions, Archer refers to Durkheim’s analysis of the contradiction between Christian beliefs and classical civilization (Durkheim 1938/77). Furthermore, when she argues for the particular kind of sociocultural interaction which can take place as a consequence of constraining contradictions, Archer bases her argument on this example. The holders of power in the Christian church had to attempt to limit the access to the classical texts. The problem was, however, that the early Christian texts held commentaries to the works of the ancients. Therefore, it was not possible in the long run to uphold this prohibition against studying the works of the ancients. The contradictions had to become visible.

In this way, Durkheim’s analysis becomes an example of a morphogenetic cycle in Archer’s theory. However, the aim of Durkheim’s analysis was not to study cultural change, but to analyse the cultivation of the individual under varying cultural conditions. Posing the question in this way means employing a completely different concept of culture from the one we find in Archer’s theory. Durkheim sees culture as a subject–object
relation. Culture has to do with the cultivating of people. It is characteristic that Durkheim is looking for a common culture. This culture consists of (a) cultural treasures such as literature, architecture, sculptures, etc. (Durkheim 1938/77:19); (b) common rules of action which enable social integration (Durkheim 1925/68:24); and (c) categories available for our thinking (Durkheim 1912/95:15). In Durkheim's analysis, culture is an asset available to us all, and it is this culture that each individual can incorporate. People can obtain linguistic skills, develop the capacity to think, obtain knowledge and wisdom and increase the predictability of conduct.

Archer can only utilize Durkheim's analysis as the basis for the development of her own theory by eliding the theory which lies behind Durkheim's analysis. Thus, she reduces Durkheim's analysis to examples. Durkheim's view of culture as cultivation of the thinking, the moral and the conduct of people, is clearly in opposition to Archer's view of culture as an objective world which can affect people by means of its situational logic and its ability to create material advantages.

Weber's analyses are also included as examples by Archer in her theory of culture. Here, the cultural conditions, which she labels concomitant complementarities, are exemplified. In his analysis of Ancient China and India, Weber (1948/70:396–444) shows how religious beliefs and their rationale for status distribution are complementary with the economic ethos. The kinds of sociocultural interaction which can result from this cultural conditioning are also exemplified by utilizing Weber's analyses. Here, Archer incorporates his analysis of the Chinese Mandarins. Over time, the cultural system in China had become characterized by a high degree of cultural density, implying that it could take a whole lifetime to acquire complete knowledge of this culture. From this, Archer deduces the problem that this very large investment by the individual would often not yield the expected material benefits to that person. When there is only room for a small elite, the consequence may be that many of the people who have in fact undertaken a major personal investment in education become social marginals. They can choose desertion and conjunction of the acquired culture with new items. The consequence must be migration and cultural change.

Weber's analyses, thus, are also utilized as an example of a morphogenetic cycle. Here, too, it was not Weber's aim to explain cultural change, although he fully recognizes that such change takes place. His aim is, quite the contrary, to study what kind of cultivation results from different types of culture. The question of the development of economic ethics is central to him. Like Durkheim, Weber sees culture as a subject–object relation. In his theory, culture is those segments of the world process which people have related to value ideas and which have thereby been given meaning and significance (Weber 1904–17/1949:76, 81). Culture is developed, consequently, by the relation of value ideas to the world process, and it gives meaning to life. Weber, too, sees culture as the cultivation of the individual. The individual must be cultivated by education. The problem, as he sees it, is that there is an advancement of cultural values and that education therefore becomes characterized still more by specialized examinations. The implication of this is that education no longer means real cultivation. Specialized training makes it impossible for the individual to possess the culture as a whole. As a consequence, the individual must strive towards cultural perfection all life through; this is, however, impossible. The individual is threatened by loss of meaning and there is, therefore, only one option: the selection of cultural values (Weber 1948/70:356).

Again it must be said that Archer can only utilize Weber's analyses as the basis of her own theory by eliding the theory of culture which his analyses are based on. She must reduce them to examples. There is a fundamental difference between Weber's view of culture as meaning created through the relation of value ideas to the world process, and Archer's very logical approach to the study of culture. For Weber, culture has to do with cultivating people, i.e. supplying them with an ethic which can give direction to practical conduct. For Archer, the sociocultural interaction is determined by material advantages which can be obtained by reacting to the situational logic.

The result of Archer's utilization of the classical sociological works becomes that she selects examples from these analyses. She exploits these examples to advance her own theory, while at the same time disregarding the fundamental views of culture by the classical sociologists themselves. She ignores their own theories and the lessons to be learnt from them. This creates a contradiction between the focus of Archer upon logic and power and the focus of
the classical sociologists upon cultivation, moral and ethics. The question is what this contradiction will mean for Archer's theoretical construction in the longer run.

**Format and analytical histories**

The last problem I take up is Archer's view of the relationship between theory and history. In the introduction to *Contemporary Europe*, she writes that theoretical formulation and comparative investigation must be intertwined. She advocates the view that the ultimate criterion of the theoretical explanation must be its empirical adequacy. Towards the end of *Realist Social Theory* she takes up once again the question of the relationship between theory and history. Here, she points out that her theory should be perceived of as an explanatory format which can form the basis of analytical histories of emergence. The question becomes the extent to which Archer succeeds in relating her own theory to history. The analytical history of emergence, which she adds to her theory in *Realist Social Theory*, is her own analytical history of the emergence of state educational systems. Beyond this, she bases her theory upon examples from the classical sociologists, but, as shown above, she elides their theories and thereby the analytical histories that they might contain. The problem is that Archer does not connect her theory of cultural morphogenesis with any analytical history of emergence. In this way, this part of the theory remains an explanatory format. Her fundamental view of culture and structure as phenomena which can be studied with similar analytical principles is not confronted with any analytical histories. Thus, we are not given any answer to the question of the entire theory's empirical adequacy. In this way, the theory remains a format.

**References**


