Chapter 2

Deconstructing Archer’s (Un)Critical Realism

Peter Doak

Introduction

This chapter responds to Margaret Archer’s (2004) manifesto for admitting transcendence into theoretical “models of man.”1 It begins by situating Archer’s insistence within the critical realist perspective (Archer, 1995), a central premise of which is that, contra the “epistemic fallacy” of positivism, not all that exists can be empirically observed. While realism avoids the erroneous reduction of the ontological to the empirically verifiable, it opens up a space for non-observable entities to exert causation, and it is this space that Archer (ab)uses to admit God by way of a philosophical “back door.” While potentially philosophically sound, echoing the introductory analysis of this volume, I suggest that the model of man she proposes is not only non-sociological, but is, in fact, anti-sociological in that it posits causal dynamics which transcend the social. In Archer’s terms, man is too often erroneously reduced to being solely “the gift of society,” or a savvy and “opportunistic bargain hunter” (Archer, 2004: 64–65). She thus proposes to break with both hyper-constructionist and rational actor conceptualisations to depict a being who is neither an over-socialised cultural dope (Garfinkel, 1967; Archer, 1984: 100) nor homo economicus. While realism correctly draws attention to the deficiencies of such reductionist theorizing, it is difficult to see how the model of man proposed by way of tonic – the transcendental “Man of Faith” (Archer, 2004: 67), who derives his ultimate concerns from God – is anything more than, at best, a common-sense construct and, at worst, an obfuscation (or vindication) of the power structures which so often buttress such constructs. Specifically, because transcendental “man’s” world is (potentially) “ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces” (Berger, 1967), which presumably do not correspond to the normal dynamics of class, race, and ethnicity, his world seems beyond the scope or remit of sociological scholarship. This implies, theoretically, that social action is unchecked and unencumbered by normal sociological dynamics and is deeply suggestive that Archer’s

1 Echoing Archer’s acknowledgement, the usage of what was a current term does not imply authorial endorsement.
sociological imagination is subordinate to her situation in the religious field, illuminating her habitus, rather than casting light on the people she purports to theorise. The chapter moves on to suggest God's intervention in the world is profoundly socially determined. Because Archer's God is entirely situated and historically specific – contra the suggestion of ontological realism – the force described is ultimately and entirely a social construct. Because of a fundamental misrecognition of this situatedness, Archer's account falls short of satisfying the realist goal of providing "relatively better explanations" (Smith, 2010: 111) and fails to offer a sociological alternative to the assumption that religion, like all social phenomena, is socially constructed. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of Archer's intervention for sociology more generally.

Realist Ontology

Archer's call to admit transcendence into models of man draws heavily on established inferences of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1976; Archer, 1995). The purpose of this section is not to offer an exhaustive overview of critical realism but, rather, to draw attention to important strands of critical realist thought which inform the argument under consideration: emergence, ontological realism, anti-positivism, and truth.

Critical realism is “critical” in so far as it rejects the supposedly dominant paradigms of the natural and social sciences, positivist empiricism, and social constructionism respectively, and seeks to occupy a radical centre within this cleavage. The intertwined central assertions of critical realism concern the ontological reality of much of the world, which exists simultaneously outside of human consciousness, and, crucially for what follows, cannot be reduced to that which is empirically verifiable. Critical realism thus necessarily involves a “remorseless critique [of] empiricism” (Archer, 2004: 63), directed towards an inherent epistemic fallacy, namely, the positivist conflation of ontology (that which is) with empirical verification (that which is observable). Due to this collapse, positivism is charged with reducing reality to the level of the observable and therefore rendering the unobservable (but real) beyond scientific (empirical) enquiry. Crucially, this implies empiricist enquiry is doomed to neglect much of that which is real – and much of that which exerts causation, a negation realists deem fatal. Constructionism is critiqued on the grounds that it prioritises epistemology to the detriment of ontology and that it too is guilty of reductionism (with the social being generative). Critical realism objects to strong versions of constructionism which posit reality per se as socially constructed; instead, realists literally interpret Berger and Luckman's (1966)