The Reflexive Imperative and Social Change

Margaret S. Archer

Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne
Switzerland
Reflexivity and its Variations

- Reflexivity: ‘the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa.’

- The dominant type of Reflexivity varies with the nature of social formations.

- BUT it is always indispensible – ‘No Reflexivity, no Society’
  [It mediates the conditional influence of structural /cultural influences upon the courses of action we take]
Dominant Modes of Reflexivity

**Communicative Reflexives**
Those whose Internal Conversations need to be completed and confirmed by others, before they lead to action

**Autonomous Reflexives**
Those who sustain self-contained Internal Conversations, leading directly to action

**Meta-Reflexives**
Those who are critically reflexive about their own Internal Conversations and critical about effective action in society

**Fractured Reflexives**
Those who cannot conduct purposeful Internal Conversations and thus design purposeful courses of action
A brief history of Reflexivity: Dominant Modes have social conditions

- Traditional social order → ‘contextual continuity’ → Communicative Reflexivity

- Modernity’s social order → ‘contextual discontinuity’ → Autonomous Reflexivity

- Morphogenetic social order → ‘contextual incongruity’ → Meta-Reflexivity
Morphostasis, Routine Action and Low Reflexivity

CULTURE

(T1) Cultural conditioning

Socio-cultural interaction

(T2) (T3)

Cultural Reproduction

(T4)

STRUCTURE

(T 1) Structural conditioning

Social interaction

(T2) (T3)

Structural Reproduction

(T4)
Modernity prompted the growth of Reflexivity, but was restrained because -

- Involved only a *minority of the population* who promoted ‘contextual discontinuity’; the majority continued with traditional Routine Action

- Slowness of modernization; allowed some re-establishment of routinization, e.g. W.C. urban communities, despite the ‘great age of ideological debate’ + social mobilization reaching out to all

- Struggles were *sectional and participation optional* – not all were affected
‘Reflexive Modernization’
and ‘a life of one’s own’
Beck

- ‘institutionalised individualism is becoming the social structure of the second modern society itself’. (p.xxii)

- ‘with the emergence of self-culture, it is rather a lack of social structures which establishes itself as the basic feature of social structure’. (p. 51)

- Agents cannot act ‘in a rational and responsible manner, that is with reference to the possible consequences’. (p. 48)

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Individualization, 2002)
Morphogenesis and Reflexive Action

CULTURE

- Cultural (T1) conditioning
- Socio-cultural interaction (T2) (T3)
- Cultural elaboration (T4)

STRUCTURE

- Structural (T1) conditioning
- Social interaction (T2) (T3)
- Structural elaboration (T4)
Nascent Morphogenesis

- Morphogenesis less restrained by morphostasis

- The generative mechanism for variety to stimulate more variety starts to engage

- Those features of Modernity preserving ‘contextual continuity’ weaken quickly

- ‘Contextual incongruity’ for (nearly) all prompts reflexivity of (nearly) all
‘Habitus’ peters out in the new millennium

- ‘Habitus’ can maintain a homology between personal dispositions and structured positions *only* in relatively unchanging fields.

- The new millennial games require a deliberative approach; they cannot be ‘embodied’.

- Change becomes too rapid for inter-generational socialization.

- ‘Habitus’ *depends* on a history of cultural and structural morphostasis because it guides Routine Action.
Reflexivity and the Current Crisis

- Recall that Reflexivity was introduced to explain HOW Social Structure was mediated by Human Agency

- As the social order has become more morphogenetic we are still taking about Global (Finance) Capitalism

- Modes of Reflexivity themselves change with the Contextual Incongruity it spreads:
  - Communicative Reflexivity declines
  - Autonomous Reflexivity is stable
  - Meta-Reflexivity increases
  - Fractured Reflexivity increases

HOW do these changes affect responses to the current crisis?
Reflexive Responses to the Crisis

- Decline of Communicatives spells a decline in social integration

- Autonomous are not declining: finance capitalism has its supporters – with faith in ‘Corporate Social Responsibility

- Meta-reflexives support a Civil Economy – but the OCCUPY groups have not framed an alternative (are they opposing Wall Street or austerity?)

- Fractured, (Expressives) grow as victims of low social integration, adding ‘protest potential’ but articulating an alternative