

# THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

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The roots of sociology are relational (Donati 2011: 3), but the modern current of relational sociology either radically transforms classic theories or proposes a new language of social theory in order to tackle the complexity of processes taking place in the domains of culture and society. Distinctions and divisions both among and within American and European variants of relational sociology become apparent. The American orientation has become particularly visible after Mustafa Emirbayer published his *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* (Emirbayer 1997), which publicized certain issues from the agenda of many scholars representing the group known today as the New York School of Relational Sociology (Mische 2011: 81). The place of culture in this current of relational sociology is still debated. The central significance of this issue<sup>1</sup> naturally stems from the radical transformation of social network theory by Harrison C. White, who used it as a framework for his concepts regarding processes of communication, interpretation, and constructing meaning (Halas 2011; White 1992, 2008). The conversion of network theory into relational theory may be justified and desirable, but genuine relational theories of society that originated in Europe deserve particular attention, especially the robust theories of Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati, which have for some time been merging to a degree. Their cultural aspect will be the focus of this article.

The theme introduced here—the place of culture in relational sociology—alludes to the subtitle of Margaret S. Archer's important work *Culture*

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Mische has distinguished four approaches: networks as conduits for culture; networks as shaping culture or vice versa; networks of culture forms (concepts, categories, practices, narratives); networks as culture via interaction (networks as cultural processes of communicative interaction) (Mische 2011).

*and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Archer 1996 [1988]). This book exposed theoretical shortcomings in cultural thought<sup>2</sup> and supplied new tools that helped improve this imperfect state of affairs. It was, in a sense, a visionary step to focus on the theory of immanent cultural change, and thus on transformation; such an approach enables us to address the effect of the postmodern turn that concentrates on cultural praxis (Bauman 1999), where the resignification and deconstruction of the orders of cultural meanings is at stake.

The question “Where is culture?” pertains here to culture’s place in the particular variant of social theory known as relational sociology. The adjective “relational” refers both to the subject of sociological studies and to the epistemological perspective. The first question is followed by another, which can be formulated in Alfred Kroeber’s words: “What is the nature of culture?” (Kroeber 1952). This issue has been studied from many angles by countless thinkers and scholars, from Marcus Tullius Cicero to Thomas S. Eliot and from Matthew Arnold to Margaret S. Archer.

In my attempt to answer both questions posed above, I will initially follow Margaret S. Archer’s line of argumentation. This scholar upholds and extends her model of relational analysis, which she created on the grounds of the ontology and epistemology of critical realism. Thus, culture is treated as a domain or sphere of reality *sui generis*: an emergent entity that possesses specific properties and causal powers. Archer polemicizes with the contemporary standpoints that are defined as “relationist” and are opposed to the critical realist relational approach. Such a dispute is a sign of vigorous intellectual ferment and indicates that relational sociology is a robust scientific movement. Science studies relations rather than substances, as Ernst Cassirer and others have reminded us. Relationality is present in sociological theory in various forms,<sup>3</sup> but contemporary relational sociology configures sociological theory in a new way.

Rather than explain at length the relational theory of society, let us state what this theory is not. It opposes relationism in its many manifestations, i.e., “(...) reduction of the relation to mere lived experience or to process” (Donati 2011: 71). In other words, social reality cannot be reduced to processes without distinguishing between the components of social reality

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret S. Archer still believes (Archer 2015: 157) that the conceptualization of culture is lagging behind the fairly sophisticated conceptual framework relating to social structure. Thus, her critical appraisal indirectly pertains to newer attempts at creating culturally oriented sociological theories. Such attempts have been made by, e.g., Pierre Bourdieu, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Harrison C. White.

<sup>3</sup> Pierpaolo Donati has discussed this topic in detail (Donati 2011: 70–86).

and their relations as emergent phenomena. Relationists do not undertake analysis that comes “(...) from within social relations, their own internal constitution, and ultimately does not deal properly with the ‘nature’ of social relations” (Donati & Archer 2015b: 20).

Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati have developed their anti-relationist relational approaches<sup>4</sup> in sociology independently of each other over the course of four decades. The current merging of these approaches seems to open up new possibilities for the further development of theories and research programmes.<sup>5</sup> It is not my intent here to carry out a detailed exegesis or critique either of Margaret S. Archer’s theory or of Pierpaolo Donati’s. I will merely attempt to identify the most important problems associated with their relational conceptions of culture. I will first examine the concepts of the author of *Culture and Agency*, and then I will search for answers to the same two questions about the place and nature of culture in the theses of the proper creator of relational sociology—Pierpaolo Donati. Assuming, in accordance with these scholars’ declarations, that their approaches are mutually complementary (Donati & Archer 2015b: 16–17), I do not discount the possibility that their conceptions contain inconsistencies or even contradict each other in places. It must be emphasised that questions about the place and nature of culture posed in regard to this branch of realist relational sociology do not pertain to some random modern theory among a multitude of different theories. Rather, they refer to outstanding theoretical achievements that deserve particular attention because of at least four characteristics they exhibit: reconstructive and synthetic social theory, as well as humanistic axiology and transformational application. This theory is not a minimalist one, pursued within its own narrow niche. In the course of my analysis, I will draw attention to issues of symbolisation in the discussion of cultural and social relationality, and thus also to the question of whether analysing the processes of semiosis (Halas 2002) can be included within relational sociology.

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<sup>4</sup> A list of the basic assumptions that distinguish their approach from other versions of relational sociology can be found in Donati and Archer’s work (2015: 13).

<sup>5</sup> The publication, which contains selected papers by Margaret S. Archer, creator of the morphogenetic approach, makes it possible to gain an overview of this British scholar’s extremely prolific output. It also contains the scholar’s autocommentary (Brock et al. 2017). Pierpaolo Donati’s relational theory of society, which emerges from this researcher’s numerous works, has been presented in an unconventional way in a lexicon of relational sociology. This lexicon is a kind of guide, presenting an exposition of relational concepts, their place in Donati’s works, as well as their use and development by other scholars (Terenzi et al. 2016).

### **/// Analytical Dualism and the Relational Model of Culture**

The analytical model of social and cultural morphogenesis as a pivotal process of change activated by human agents is based on the assumption that reality in general is not homogeneous, and thus neither are the social and cultural domains: rather, they consist of layers or strata characterized by specific properties and powers of reciprocal influence that can be conceived as non-determinist causal factors. This model offers an explicit answer to the question “Where is culture?,” but the reply is much less simple than it seems at first glance. Culture is a part of SAC (SAC is an acronym that stands for “Structure,” “Agency,” and “Culture”); thus it is one of the constitutional layers of the social order, next to structure and agency (Archer 2015: 155).

Margaret S. Archer emphasizes that the order of these layers in the SAC acronym says nothing about their primary, secondary, or tertiary character (Archer 2015: 155). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that their order in the acronym is suggestive and that culture comes last of the three. We may also infer that structure, agency, and culture, as the building blocks of social order, are constitutive of phenomena belonging equally to the micro, meso, and macro levels of social reality where networks of social relations are born. Structure, agency, and culture, as units of the social order which are continually being remade through morphogenic cycles in time, are not actually distinct, as Douglas V. Porpora inaccurately states when discussing their ontological status (Porpora 2015: 159), but rather only relatively autonomous, since they are treated as separate only for the epistemological and methodological purposes of analysis.

Several questions come to mind regarding the possible relations between the three elements. First, it might be asked if these relations could be asymmetrical, i.e., if one of the layers could be, illustratively speaking, larger than the other two: when structure constrains and limits the operation of agency and the development of culture, or when agency is excessively exercised and subversive in regard to culture and structure, or when culture limits the properties of agency and determines structure. These rather speculative and yet not very complicated questions arise in regard to the conceptual model of SAC.

This analytical model is not intended to introduce hypostases. Margaret S. Archer rejects such accusations, denying that it reifies structure, agency, and culture, which together constitute an analytical toolkit to be used in research and in building a proper theory of morphogenetic changes

in a historical context. The reality to which the model refers is a reality of persistence or change, of reproduction or transformation, dependent on the forces of agency that act on structure and culture, and not without consequences for the agency itself, since it, too, undergoes changes during those processes.

It is no novelty today to find out that culture constitutes a part of all units of the social order, regardless of their scale: from interpersonal relations through social movements to organizations, states, or global corporations. However, while the presence of culture in all manifestations of social life may seem obvious and commonplace, one should not forget how surprising it once was to discover the existence of culture, to invent its notion, and to apply it to fields such as economics or politics, where no one expected to encounter its significant presence (Hall & Neitz 1993).

Margaret S. Archer's relational approach to structure, agency, and culture, which makes it possible to study their causal interplay, has proved exceptionally inspiring for the modern sociology of culture (Jacobs & Hanrahan 2005: 2) or, more broadly, for cultural sociology. However, the spectrum of this scholar's works that are perceived as most important (Brock et al. 2017) confirms that Archer's conceptualization of culture used to be oriented primarily toward the social theory that had been constructed over the past several decades, with a morphogenic society emerging on the horizon of late modernity (Archer 2013).

Although culture in Margaret S. Archer's theoretical landscape is emancipated and autonomous, not subservient to social structure, the primary aim of this concept is to uncover the mechanisms of social change. Culture does not act alone, automatically, but through the reflexive agency of actors who can articulate the principles of this morphogenic change, because they are conscious of its ideational orientation. The elaboration of the cultural conspectus of ideas is the other face of this process, although cultural morphogenesis and social morphogenesis need not be harmonized or coordinated (Archer 2012: 33).

Having realized that culture accompanies structure and agency in SAC, the question arises of whether it must inevitably always stay within SAC. If so, we would be dealing with a subtle, hidden form of sociology, which has been difficult to eradicate since it appeared so prominently in Émile Durkheim's concept of the social fact that engulfs all cultural phenomena. In other words, it is not without significance whether, like Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism, we define all cultural objects as in essence social

forms,<sup>6</sup> or rather give precedence to cultural reality over the social order, which embeds itself in that reality. Florian Znaniecki, whose viewpoint regarding culture and relationality should be revisited by contemporary sociologists, favoured the latter view in his humanistic sociology<sup>7</sup> (1919, second edition: 1983, 1934, 1952).

Having stated that all the elements of SAC coexist and remain in mutual interplay, resulting in reproduction (morphostasis) or change (morphogenesis) of the social order, one faces the problem of the power of agency with regard to structure, both social and cultural. Margaret S. Archer considers morphogenesis separately on two planes of relations: between social structure and agency and between cultural structure and agency. This is concisely presented as the interplay of structure and agency and that of culture and agency in time sequences. Douglas V. Porpora calls this a parallel analysis (Porpora 2015: 159, 172). Such parallelism in the model is intriguing in that it raises the question of whether social morphogenesis might have a cultural dimension as well, given the meaningful and symbolic constitution of social formations—social identities and boundaries notwithstanding; or whether it can be viewed as a secondary morphogenesis in regard to primary cultural morphogenesis and vice versa. This is an urgent question and the author of the theory has not omitted it. The problem of how to unify the theoretical analysis of structural morphogenesis and analysis of cultural morphogenesis has been a challenge and a goal from the very beginning. “[I]f structure and culture do have relative autonomy from one another, then there is interplay between them which it is necessary to explore theoretically” (Archer 1996: xxvii).

In parallel models of social morphogenesis and cultural morphogenesis, the mediation of these processes by agency certainly constitutes a common link or bridge. As Margaret S. Archer puts it, this should enable us to understand the intricacies of inter-penetration between structure and culture. In the model of the morphogenetic cycle, agency is articulated as socio-cultural interaction in the cultural domain and as social interaction in the social domain (Archer 2013: 7). Such a double conceptualization of agency—whether socio-cultural or just social—in parallel domains may be

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<sup>6</sup> As Margaret S. Archer comments, according to Bhaskar, e.g., books are social forms “and thus have the same ontological status as ‘structures,’ ‘organisations,’ ‘roles’ and so forth” (Archer 2015: 170).

<sup>7</sup> In a discussion regarding the place of culture in relational sociology it may be useful to recall the debate between Florian Znaniecki and Pitirim A. Sorokin regarding the relations between the cultural system and the social system, as well as agency (Znaniecki 1952). This debate serves as a reminder that modern disputes about the place of culture in social theory have their own history.

puzzling, since the interactions appear somehow different here, as the very terminology indicates. This theoretical puzzle could probably be solved if the broader (Weberian) and narrower (Simmelian) concept of social action, and thus also the broader and narrower concept of social interaction, were taken into account, as shown by the example of the cooperation of musicians as members of an orchestra performing a piece of music (socio-cultural interaction), or the cooperation of musicians as members of an orchestra when they organize a charity concert (social interaction) that is oriented to other social subjects.

Despite many advantages of this analytical dualism, which involves studying social morphogenesis and cultural morphogenesis respectively as parallel processes, there remains a problem with the ontology of human reality; in other words, with the essential issue of the relationship between social reality and cultural reality in the human world. We need to ponder whether culture always needs some social form or social organization and whether meanings within the stock of knowledge that constitute and maintain social order are not reason enough to consider social structures a subclass of cultural forms.

We will return to this issue while analysing consecutively some aspects of Pierpaolo Donati's relational theory of society with the fresh concept of meaningful social relations. Now, however, we will attempt to answer the urgent question about the nature of culture, as formulated in Margaret S. Archer's works. For the limited scope of this endeavour, only a general outline of the issue will be presented by reconstructing principal concepts, and pointing out some other puzzles to be tackled.

First of all, let us state what culture is not, as eloquently argued by Margaret S. Archer. This can be extracted quite clearly from the astute polemics she directed years ago at upholders of "the myth of cultural integration" and currently at "relationists" such as Mustafa Emirbayer or Dave Elder-Vass. This is a criticism of various versions of what has aptly been denounced as a variant of the fallacy of conflation. Paradoxically, as Margaret S. Archer has shown, the myth of cultural integration has promoted both downward conflation in functionalist and other theories, and the upward conflation visible in materialist Marxist approaches (cultural or social determination respectively), which turn all that is determined into an epiphenomenon. Generally speaking, the modern social sciences often treat culture as an epiphenomenon; thus, it occupies a much weaker position than social structure in theoretical reflections. The cultural turn and post-modern social theory have changed this optic, bringing culture to the fore

again, but in the mode of social constructionism, which promotes a central conflation. In the light of criticism directed at various modes of conflation, a number of concepts turned out to be flawed: the concept of a regulative culture code, of culture as a central value system, or on the other hand, of culture as an ideological conspectus of the dominant group—in other words, the concept of cultural hegemony, which is essential on an ideological battleground. Thus, despite a long-standing assumption commonly made by social scientists, culture is not a community of shared meanings, beliefs, and practices; it is neither homogeneous nor “consistent” in the ideational layer, nor shared on a consensual basis in the behavioural sphere.<sup>8</sup> More precisely, these are not defining features of culture, but rather, as Margaret S. Archer points out, only a possible, empirically changeable state of affairs. It must be noted here that various social subjects still cultivate ideological beliefs about the inestimable value of a community of shared meanings and practices. Myth and ritual, which forge social bonds, have not yet completely lost their solid status and melted in the postmodern atmosphere.

The integrative concept of culture, or rather of “cultures” (always plural), the symbolic borders of which are determined by common beliefs and practices, was typical for anthropology and has been in use at least since Johann Gottfried Herder, who criticized a universal concept of culture treated as a synonym of European culture (civilization), and who advocated the idea of cultural multiplicity. The myth of cultural integration does not permit adequate study of the dynamics of socio-cultural changes. One might add that it also laid foundations for the problematic politics of multiculturalism as a politics of differences and collective identities, addressed at groups that strive to maintain their cultural core or cultural canon. Up until now, this politics has had ambiguous results in terms of social integration.

Today, the struggle against all faults and limitations of the integrative concept of culture appears to have been already won on the theoretical plane where cultural fragmentation and cultural conflicts predominate, though the idea is not necessarily gone from common consciousness and in the field of politics oriented at cultural communities. This theoretical victory came at a high cost in the form of denying the autonomy of culture and structure by one-sidedly emphasizing agency: actions, practices, interactions, transactions, or performances playing with cultural meanings.

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<sup>8</sup> The integrative concept of culture returns in newer conceptions as well. Elder-Vass defines culture as “a shared set of practices and understandings” (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 108).

This is typical for various forms of radical interpretativism and situationism that appeared after the fall of functionalist Grand Theory, and later on were taken over by postmodern cultural praxis theory.

An attempt to polemicize from the standpoint of critical realism with theories that lead to a “central conflation,” where culture and agency are mutually constitutive, is simultaneously an attempt to polemicize with new forms of nominalism in social ontology. In regard to culture, this is critical cultural realism (culture as reality *sui generis*).<sup>9</sup> Thus, culture is not merely praxis, “culture in action” (or in interaction) situated in a short temporal perspective that is limited to the present.

Having established more or less clearly what culture is not, let us try to answer the question about the nature of culture in Margaret S. Archer’s morphogenetic theory in positive terms. This theory proposes to view culture as a realm of properties and powers that remain in constant interplay; in other words, a realm of cultural dynamics (Archer 1996: 101ff). Thus, the theory of cultural morphogenesis evokes an echo of the monumental orchestration of culture, society, and person by Pitirim A. Sorokin (Sorokin 1937–1941). It is important to emphasize first of all that the problem of cultural dynamics is a central one in the morphogenetic theory, since the nominal forms used in language to categorize reality appear to substantiate or even reify it (Elias 1978: 112). This affects the SAC model too, despite the author’s clarification, and it is necessary to keep in mind that the SAC model is only a toolkit to assist in the study of social and cultural dynamics.

Margaret S. Archer pronounced the relative autonomy of culture in the 1980s, advocating its emancipation from the subordination to social structure analysis. As important as this claim was, one must remember that for this sociologist, the social relevance of culture was of primary interest (Archer 1990), rather than cultural formation as such. In other words, the proposed conceptualization of the cultural domain was supposed to correct mistakes that stemmed from the inadequate treatment of culture in theories about the modern, post-industrial information society (Archer 1990). This conceptualization is supported by the broad implications of assuming the autonomy of agency and structure, both social and cultural. This has been discussed many times as a victory over the fallacies of con-

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret S. Archer has noted that when she first began to construct her theory of culture in 1985, no existing approach could be called “cultural realism” (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 95). It is worth recalling that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Florian Znaniecki discussed cultural reality *sui generis* on the theoretical level (Znaniecki 1919).

flation. In the case of the cultural domain, the proposed model of analysis excluded the downward conflation, upward conflation, and central conflation mentioned above; in other words, it excluded the possibility of a one-sided determinatory power operating either from the level of the ideational system or from the level of socio-cultural interactions, or even the possibility that both levels are co-constitutive (Archer 2015: 161–162).

The categories introduced by Margaret S. Archer to investigate the cultural realm encompass two levels, two types of components, and two kinds of relations on each level, as well as various possible relations between those levels. Analytical dualism consists in distinguishing and defining the Cultural System (CS) and the level of Socio-Cultural interaction (S-C). Their components in the model are, respectively, ideas (CS) and human beings or persons (S-C). The level of the Cultural System is ruled by logical relations and the socio-cultural interactive level by relations of causality rooted in human intentional agency. This analytic distinction enables the morphogenetic approach to culture, which is founded on three propositions:

- Ideas are *sui generis* real.
- The sharing of ideas is contingent.
- The interplay of ideas from the level of the Cultural System and the level of Socio-Cultural interaction leads to a new phase of the morphogenetic cycle, called cultural elaboration (Archer 2015: 163; Archer & Elder-Vass 2012).

Culture in a strong sense, so to speak, is thus described as the Cultural System. As the thinker states, it is approximately the equivalent of Karl R. Popper's "World Three," i.e., the world of objective knowledge, as opposed to material reality ("World One") and to psychical (mental) reality ("World Two").

When Karl R. Popper distinguished the material world, psychical world, and the world of objective knowledge, he described the Third World in the following way:

My main argument will be devoted to the defence of the reality of what I propose to call 'world 3'. By world 3 I mean the world of the products of the human mind, such as languages; tales and stories and religious myths; scientific conjectures or theories, and mathematical constructions; songs and symphonies; paintings and sculptures. But also aeroplanes and airports and other feats of engineering.

It would be easy to distinguish a number of different worlds within what I call world 3. We could distinguish the world of science from the world of fiction; and the world of music and the world of art from the world of engineering. For simplicity's sake I shall speak about one world 3; that is, the world of the products of the human mind (Popper 1978: 144).

In other theories, elements of Popper's World Three are referred to as cultural objects (Znaniński) or an objectified symbolic universe (Berger, Luckmann). Margaret S. Archer, in turn, refers to elements of World Three, interpreted as the Cultural System, as ideas. Because Karl R. Popper (unlike Florian Znaniński) did not distinguish the social world, which is so important in interpretative theories stemming from social phenomenology, this concept leads to difficulties when questions about the relationship between the cultural and the social come into play. The exegetic publication by Douglas V. Porpora examining Margaret S. Archer's theory is a telling example of this confusing ontological formulation. In his comparative interpretation of the concepts of Karl R. Popper and Margaret S. Archer, Porpora expands the Cultural System (World Three) to include social actions on the premise that they are also a product of the human mind. In a sense, such an interpretation ultimately subordinates the cultural system to the social system.

It is likewise significant that Popper uses the term 'product' to distinguish what resides in world three. Clearly, to the extent that all our actions are products of our minds, those of our actions that are distinctly social all reside in world three (Porpora 2015: 162).

Margaret S. Archer, who is known both for rigorous logic and for the refined style of her works, occasionally employs metaphors, e.g., when she depicts the Cultural System, or objectified culture, as a library or archive, or more precisely as their contents. Such metaphors bring to mind the concept of the "text," and subsequently also the concept of "reading"; both are of fundamental significance for the semiotics of culture, which employs the semiosphere, and for hermeneutics dealing with *Verstehen*. The analytic distinction between the Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural interaction proposed by the British scholar does not directly involve material culture,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The problem of material culture appears among the questions that create a framework for the discussion between Margaret S. Archer and Dave Elder-Vass about the nature of culture, the

while ideational culture is made prominent. However, the notion of material culture became important and visible after Margaret S. Archer investigated what she calls the practical order of tripartite human reality (three orders of reality)—natural, practical, and social. Interestingly, she rejects the dichotomy of nature and culture; the ranges of these concepts partially overlap, and that is where the practical order differentiates itself (Archer 2000: 162). However, there is no mention of a cultural order of reality outside the social order, the practical order, and the natural order.

Culture in the strong sense (the Cultural System) is ideational, whereas on the socio-cultural level it is used in various ways, since for people it is “a repertoire of ideas for construing the situations in which they find themselves” (Archer 2015: 155); in other words, a set of meanings which becomes part of their definition of the situation. This ideational world does not rest in peace, since in principle it is neither consistent nor free from cultural contradictions, although it may be elaborated in such directions.

Significantly, Margaret S. Archer does not directly address the issue of the binary cultural code (including, above all, the opposition between *sacrum* and *profanum*), which serves as the main frame of reference in the so-called strong programme of cultural sociology, initiated by Jeffrey C. Alexander, which also assumes the autonomy of culture but in its own theoretical mode (Alexander 2006). While some theorists of culture (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu or Alfred Schütz) have focused on classifications or typifications respectively, in the morphogenetic theory the cultural world of ideas<sup>11</sup> is researched from the angle of the logic of propositions, leaving aside such semiotic categories as “code,” “sign,” or “symbol.” In other words, the main focus is on logical relations of complementarity or contradiction between ideas, which represent a kind of “propositional register.”

The logic of culture, and thus the contradictory or non-contradictory nature of belief systems (Archer 1990: 17), which occupies a prominent place in the analytical framework under discussion, indicates the crucial character of the role that is ascribed to a cognitive map. Archer also uses the expression “propositional culture” in regard to the logic of the cultural system, and expands the analytical dualism to the concept of discursive

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autonomy of ideas in regard to human subjects, and cultural causality. That discussion includes a question about the role of material vehicles of cultural meanings that may be extended to the issue of symbolism (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 94).

<sup>11</sup> In discussion with Margaret S. Archer, Dave Elder-Vass has taken up the problem of the relations between representations and ideas; in other words, the problem of symbolism (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 101). He also raises the question of a broad spectrum of understanding in regard to ideas: the degree to which a text is open to interpretation (ibid.: 105).

knowledge, which is the emergent property of the users of an objective corpus of ideas (Archer 2000).

This argumentation pertains not only to propositions in a strict sense, but to any kind of objectified knowledge, which, according to Margaret S. Archer, is a “knowledge of propositions” also understood as the assumptions behind questions or imperatives, as well as in regard to artifacts or events, since such knowledge assumes the existence of relations between them or their parts, expressed by means of language (Archer 1996: 328). However, the main issue of interest is the ideational sphere; in other words, cognitive forms which are independent from knowing subjects, such as theories, doctrines and other forms of objectified knowledge.

At this point, we should consider another important feature of this theorizing, which assumes the rationality of the Cultural System in terms of truth and falsity (Archer 1996: 104) and overshadows the significance of other judgmental orders in the domain of ideas, such as moral (good and evil), religious (holy and secular), aesthetic (beauty and ugliness) and other axionormative criteria.

Another interesting question is the unity of the Cultural System; in other words, whether there is one single cultural system or multiple ones. The perspective can be either a holistic view of the cultural system (a single system) or a pluralistic view of many cultural systems and their continuous differentiation. Following in the footsteps of Florian Znaniecki and those thinkers who, like William James or Alfred Schütz, pointed out the existence of phenomenological plural reality (multiple realities), one might argue for a multitude of cultural systems in World Three (science, religion, art, technology, etc.) and a multitude of subsystems (a multitude of scientific theories, of religions, of aesthetic systems, of technical systems, and so on).

In answer to the pertinent question of whether one or many cultural systems should be taken into consideration, Margaret S. Archer responded firmly that her conceptualization only allows one Cultural System. It is this thinker’s way of addressing the problem of universality, or the possibility of the universal translatability of all ideas. According to this scholar, World Three or the Cultural System excludes the claim that people live in different cultures as in different worlds, without the possibility of translating the concepts inherent in those cultures (Archer 1996: 104). Ideas objectified in World Three of cultural knowledge are, at least potentially, universally accessible and understandable.

However, it seems (especially in the light of the current discussion undertaken by Margaret S. Archer with “relationists”) that apart from, or beyond the Cultural System (CS) and the level of Socio-Cultural interaction (S-C), which is also articulated as socio-cultural relations, a more general category of Cultural Reality appears: culture as a whole (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 96). The question remains open whether this culture is only a total sum of CS and S-C, or something more. One could add the acronym CRe (Cultural Reality) to the model (CR is an acronym that already refers to the ontology of Critical Realism, akin to the concepts of Margaret S. Archer). Cultural Reality contains all kinds of intelligibilia—everything that is meaningful and capable of being understood: “any item having the dispositional ability to be understood by someone—whether or not anyone does so at a given time” (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012). It should be noted that in the earlier work *Culture and Agency*, the Cultural System was already described as a system of intelligibilia.

At any given time a Cultural System is constituted by the corpus of existing intelligibilia—by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone (Archer 1996: 104).

It is worth noting that this wording is broader than the definition of a cultural system as a system of ideas ruled by propositional logic. Namely, it opens the possibility of introducing an analysis of the entire complexity of symbolic systems and their hermeneutics.

The systemic character of intelligibilia would stem from the system of language that expresses their significance. Thus, taking all this into consideration, the expression “cultural reality” may suggest a broader meaning for this term than merely the sum of CS and S-C. One might also suppose that intelligibilia, and thus that which is meaningful and understandable, can also include, e.g., signifiers of types of social actions, social relations, personality types or types of social organization. Cultural Reality (CRe) in the broad sense would not simply fit into the SAC, or into the social order. One might even argue that CRe could have a primary character in regard to the social domain, which embeds itself in the cultural domain, being socially meaningful in itself. When polemicizing with “relationists,” Margaret S. Archer clearly makes a stand against sociological reductionism, against the “remorseless exorbitation of our sociality” (Archer 2015: 179). She claims that not all “relations relevant to given sociological explanations are social in kind” (Archer 2015: 179).

The basic reason for directing “cultural reproaches” at “relationists” is the fact that they deny the autonomy of the cultural system. Conversely, Margaret S. Archer claims that the Cultural System is an emergent entity. It is the result of cultural elaboration in a constant historical process of Socio-Cultural interactions, during which, using various methods of action, people influence each other. The Cultural System does not exert a direct causal influence, but acts through reflexive mediations in the form of the ideational projects of human beings.<sup>12</sup> In this context, it is easy to see the importance of relational sociology in explaining the influence of the Cultural System (Archer 2015: 112).

It seems that Margaret S. Archer’s morphogenetic theory, although built with rigorous conceptual precision, remains open to interpretation in many ways. Hence, the question about the range of culture’s autonomy, and whether this autonomy is only an analytical assumption or rather something rooted in the ontology of Cultural Reality (not reducible to social order), remains open as well. Some of this thinker’s deliberations and auto-explications could indicate the second possibility, especially when she refers to culture as an “independent moral vantage point” (Archer 1990: 98).

Having discussed the general outline of the relational model of cultural morphogenesis, which is parallel to social morphogenesis, it is time to turn towards Pierpaolo Donati’s relational theory of society in a further search for the place and nature of culture in relational sociology.

### **/// Humanistic Reality and the Relationality of Culture**

In accordance with the morphogenetic approach presented above, Pierpaolo Donati emphasizes the importance of the relations between culture and agency in relational sociology.

Reclaiming the importance of subjectivity and culture, transmitted and re-elaborated by human action, as autonomous factors of change becomes the task of a relational perspective which reveals itself as more and more essential (...) (Donati 2011: 165).

However, in this approach, neither culture in general nor cultural processes are framed in clear and completely original terminology. Rather,

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<sup>12</sup> There are similarities here to the concept of ideational definitions of situations (Znaniecki 1952: 241–243).

the problems of the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction viewed from the morphogenetic angle are readdressed from the perspective of this thinker's relational sociology. Significantly, however, semiology and axiology—two widely accepted criteria of the cultural domain—permeate the conceptual framework of relational sociology.

Interestingly enough, Margaret S. Archer's cultural critical realism has its counterpart in the humanistic realism of Pierpaolo Donati. In this Italian scholar's approach, the issue of human reality and its full coverage is of central importance. This contrast between humanism and critical realist culturalism is, of course, an oversimplification to a certain degree, since Margaret S. Archer is also an advocate of humanism, as is shown clearly by her impressive work *Being Human*. However, I would like to draw attention to the slightly differing standpoints visible in the founding works for the two above-mentioned approaches: *Culture and Agency* and *Relational Sociology*, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Humanism has been mentioned from the beginning of this article as one of the promising features of relational sociology. An important issue at present is the specificity of a new approach, which Pierpaolo Donati contrasts with the currents known as classical humanism.

It would be a great mistake to believe that the premises of relational sociology are based on a naively optimistic view of humanity and on its simple affirmation. While reading the work of Pierpaolo Donati, one discovers that his standpoint is founded upon a deeply pessimistic interpretation of modern processes infiltrated by functional logic—processes that become reflected in post-human semantics or a trans-human system; new possibilities for the reproduction of the human race, detached from interpersonal relations, are just one example. Thus, relational sociology has to take up new challenges stemming from the relationships between man and society, as well as from a crisis of the old humanism (Donati 2011: 164). As Donati explains, the truly humanistic approach of relational sociology consists in the assumption that social forms differentiate “from the human” (Donati 2011: 122), whereas in the classic humanistic perspective all that is social was also understood as human (coincidence of the social and the human). Thus, Pierpaolo Donati introduces the concepts of human reality and human perspective on the ontological level and, respectively, humanism and the humanistic perspective assumed in relational sociology. The social order starts with the social relation as the molecule. The social relation is

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<sup>13</sup> For Florian Znaniecki, who formulated the concept of the humanistic coefficient, humanism and culturalism were broadly synonymous (Znaniecki 1934).

conceived as a unit of human reality *sui generis* and the relational approach “(...) retains within itself the relevance of the human perspective” (Donati 2011: 122). The social relation cannot be reduced either to the social system (structure) or to agency. Thus, relational sociology proves that the confrontation between humanism and anti-humanism in sociology is not obsolete, by asking: “What is there that is human within the social?” (Donati 2011: 24). In my view, this question can also be phrased differently: “What is there that is cultural within the social?”

Pierpaolo Donati’s relational sociology is strongly polemical—no less than Margaret S. Archer’s works. In particular, it is in definite opposition to the systemic-functional orientation, which has remained a significant presence under various forms ever since nineteenth-century functional organicism—“From Durkheim to Parsons, from Alexander to Luhmann” (Donati 2011: 144), despite opinions voiced in the past that it is obsolete or becoming so. Thus, realistic relational sociology has been constructed primarily as a response to the limitations of functionalism (Donati 2011: 144). Interestingly, Pierpaolo Donati highlights the importance of the problem of that which cannot be framed in functional terms in society but requires interpretation nonetheless (Donati 2011: 144). This resembles a transposed version of the criticism voiced against functionalism by symbolic interactionism. Relational sociology similarly assumes that meanings, which change over time, are a part of the cultural dimension—beyond the material, psychical, and social dimensions of reality (Donati 2011: 145).

Continuing our earlier reflections on the nature of culture and its place in morphogenetic theory, one can attempt at this point to determine, first and foremost, what culture is **not** in relational sociology. Generally speaking, following the criticism raised against functionalism by Pierpaolo Donati, one can say that culture cannot be brought down to a functional subsystem supporting the social edifice and controlling it. At this point, it is necessary to return once again to the issue of humanistic realism, which is a sort of critical realism too, and thus, in ontological terms, to the reality of what is human, specified as actions directed at values.

Critical realist theory leads the sociologist to understand why human people, in spite of anything else, pursue ‘values,’ in the sense that they tend toward given goals (usually a mixture of interests and identities) transcending things already given (Donati 2011: 117).

According to this perspective of humanistic realism, the concept of culture as images, myths, or ideologies merely mystifies human existence if it withholds “the enjoyment of human experience from people” (Donati 2011: 117).

Of course, neither should culture be perceived as a “set of values” that constitute a cultural tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, exerting a regulatory influence on the social order and on the repertoire of actors’ possible identities. Significantly, neither is culture an interactive process of establishing norms, the persistence or reproduction of which would serve to uphold cultural orientations (Donati 2011: 127).

Concepts that refer only to the surface or symptoms of modern processes of globalization, such as cultural homogenization or liquidity (Donati 2011: 211), are also criticized. However, the most striking feature of Pierpaolo Donati’s approach is the distance he maintains towards a long tradition of viewing culture as constraining—from Durkheimian collective representations to the dualistic cultural codes of Jeffrey C. Alexander—since, as he writes, “culture is also a relational matter” (Donati 2011: 5) that deserves further exploration.

Pierpaolo Donati initially analyses the relationality of culture in a different configuration and context than the SAC model and the analytic distinction between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction, although this morphogenetic model should prove relevant as well, when one takes into account the proclaimed complementary character of the discussed approaches on the grounds of critical realism. Like Margaret S. Archer’s Cultural System, culture also has a cognitive connotation for Pierpaolo Donati, but is interpreted differently. It appears in this thinker’s reflections on epistemological issues as the proposition of switching from a model presented in the form of a triangle to a rhombus or a quadrangle. This is obviously criticism directed at cultural constructionism; in other words, at the thesis that observed or observable reality is mediated by a conceptual framework of culture. Culture is not conceptualized in detail, apart from its above-mentioned cognitive function as a cognitive mediator (categories, models, cultural paradigms). Pierpaolo Donati postulates referring to what he calls ontological reality; in other words, to that which exists (**ex-sists**—that is, stands outside) independently of culture and of the observer’s subjective experience (Donati 2011: 101). Thus, the observer, culture, ontological reality, and that which is observed remain in complex relations with each other and can be depicted as the four vertices

of a quadrangle. In this way, culture also ceases to imprison the subject as both observer and actor (Donati 2011: 100).

The complementary premises of relational analyses conducted on the grounds of morphogenetic theory and relational sociology allow us to interpret culture in the epistemological scheme (quadrangle) proposed by Pierpaolo Donati as a cognitive toolkit in structures of morphogenesis that is constantly elaborated anew. Next, the complexity of social relations should be included in the most general epistemological framework of the relation between the cogitator and ontological reality, in which culture occupies such an important place because of its mediatory function.

It is worth noting that relational sociology is also, in a way, an interactional sociology. As Pierpaolo Donati clarifies, interactions between actors are “relations *in actu*” (Donati 2011: 114). They depend on existing socio-cultural structures, and thus on relations that have become stabilized during the previous stages (phases) of morphogenetic processes. These processes can be modified in the course of interactions. Thus, interactions are capable of modifying relations perceived as emergent phenomena.

However, the problem of culture appears as an “open issue” at this point (Donati 2011: 114). Pierpaolo Donati poses extremely important questions regarding the concept of the Cultural System in the morphogenetic scheme proposed by Margaret S. Archer. He remarks that: “To my

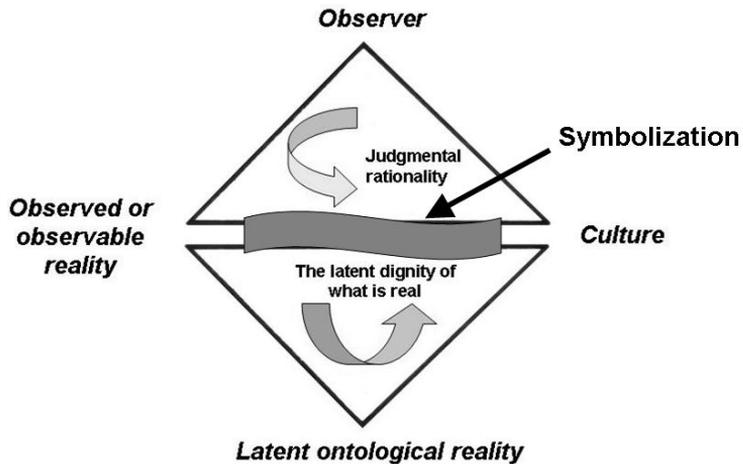


Figure 1. The epistemic quadrangle (observer—culture—observed reality—latent ontological reality) adopted from Donati (2011: 100) and modified by introducing symbolization.

mind, such an approach to culture is not fully adequate to critical realism” (Donati 2011: 114). He justifies this objection in the light of the proposed epistemological scheme—culture, which makes it possible to observe reality, is not just a system that contains more or less coherent concepts (ideas); it should also be viewed in terms of its relation to other vertices of the tetragon. The issue of processes of symbolization is directly raised at this point. Their presence and relevance in relational sociology have been of interest to me ever since the beginning of my reflections on the place of culture in relational sociology. It turns out that this issue is explicitly discussed in Donati’s work: “(..) culture works through complex processes of symbolization, since the observer attaches personal feelings and personal interpretations to symbols” (Donati 2011: 115).

Here, symbolism is by no means a carrier of irrationality. According to Donati, the morphogenetic process involves a process of symbolization in which various forms of actors’ rationality and their social relations become expressed. He postulates including the relational frame of symbolization within the morphogenetic model and interprets symbolization as the connection between two triangles (two parts) that make up the tetragon of epistemological relations.

Finally and fundamentally, we find processes of symbolization as an inherent part of the emergent reality of social relations. Symbols cannot belong solely to Karl R. Popper’s World Three—or the Cultural System. Their relational character cannot be limited to the possible logical (propositional) relations; symbolization is realized in social relations.<sup>14</sup> Drawing upon the ideas of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz, Pierpaolo Donati points out the relevance of appresentative symbolism: one that, unlike representative symbolism, refers to objects that are not fully present for the observer. Thus, it turns out that relational sociology also stimulates the development of the sociology of processes of symbolization (Gattamorta 2005; Halas 2002, 2008).

The analysis, reflections, and comments presented above leave no doubt that culture plays a key role and occupies a central place in rela-

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<sup>14</sup> A critical analysis of the theory of social relations, beginning with the concept of the social relation and its constitutive elements—as well as the changing semantics of social relations, involving cultural assumptions and implications—extends beyond the scope and aims of this text, which concentrates on the problems of the nature and place of culture in relational sociology. It can only be mentioned here that cultural features are immanent in the structure of social relationality and the so-called *refero* semantics of social relations openly evokes its symbolic dimension. “The referential semantic: understands social relations as *refero* (reference) or as referring something else within a frame of reference constructed by the symbolic meanings of different types and degrees of intentionality which are more or less agreed upon by the actors involved” (Donati 2011: 87).

tional sociology, which exposes the immense complexity of the nature of culture in human reality and still contains some puzzles or enigmas to be dealt with. As a concluding remark, it must be emphasized that relational sociology as a sociology of cultural processes should also be a sociology of processes of symbolization, and thus the “relational turn” undoubtedly also means a new conceptual elaboration of the “cultural turn.”

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### /// **Abstract**

Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati have independently developed relational approaches in the social sciences. Combining morphogenetic theory and the relational theory of society opens up new research perspectives. This article attempts to investigate relational conceptions of culture by answering two questions: one related to the nature of culture and the other to the place of culture in relational sociology. Assuming the complementarity of the theories of both sociologists, the possibility that their conceptions may be inconsistent or even contradict each other is not discounted. The article discusses the issue of symbolization and the presence of processes of semiosis within relational sociology. It is argued that apart from the Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural interaction assumed by Archer's analytical dualism, a more general category of Cultural Reality can be introduced. This theme is further discussed in the light of Donati's views on human reality; he postulates including the relational frame of symbolization. Analysis shows that culture occupies a central place in relational sociology. This article exposes the complexity of the nature of culture in human reality.

Keywords:

cultural morphogenesis, cultural reality, relational sociology, symbolisation, Archer Margaret S., Donati Pierpaolo

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