
INTERVIEWS

DOI: 10.14515/monitoring.2018.5.02

Правильная ссылка на статью:

Арчер М. С. Социологией должны заниматься заинтересованные люди // Мониторинг общественного мнения: Экономические и социальные перемены. 2018. № 5. С. 15—20. <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2018.5.02>.

For citation:

Archer M. S. (2018) Do sociology with interest. *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*. No. 5. P. 15—20. <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2018.5.02>.



M. S. Archer

DO SOCIOLOGY WITH INTEREST

DO SOCIOLOGY WITH INTEREST

Margaret S. ARCHER^{1,2} — *PhD, President; Professor*
E-MAIL: margaret.archer@warwick.ac.uk

¹ The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican

² The University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

СОЦИОЛОГИЕЙ ДОЛЖНЫ ЗАНИМАТЬСЯ ЗАИНТЕРЕСОВАННЫЕ ЛЮДИ

АРЧЕР Маргарет С. — PhD, президент, Папская академия общественных наук, Ватикан; профессор, Уорикский университет, Ковентри, Великобритания.
E-MAIL: margaret.archer@warwick.ac.uk

Professor Archer, first of all let us congratulate you on such a wonderful and inspirational presentation that you just had at the Session of the Former ISA Presidents here in Toronto. We were all impressed by your speech. You addressed the subject with openness, honesty, and high professionalism. We also want to thank you so very much for a conversation that you agreed to have with us. It will be published in the special issue of the *Public Opinion Monitor* Journal.

— Today you are a world-known distinguished sociologist. I doubt that there are professional sociologists who don't know your work. But if I may start our talk with a question about your past, can you tell in a few words what led you to study sociology?

— Well, imagine, I was fifteen, a school girl obviously, and I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Many professors, who became rather famous, were very happy to talk to a fifteen year old, it was great. So, we walked and we talked, because I was organizing it from one coast of England to the other coast, it is not so very far. So, I asked all the questions that I wanted to ask because we were not taught sociology, social theory, anthropology, none of that at school. And they were great, they had time, well, they had nothing else to do, it's true, maybe it was just another tutorial to them. I asked about Weber, I asked about Marx, I asked about Durkheim, those few people that I'd heard about at that age. These conversations changed my life. I had been prepared by my school to do English literature, go to Cambridge and spend rest of my days deconstructing «La Chanson de Roland». So that was the beginning. And it never stopped. I had to have a very big row with the school because they expected me to go to Cambridge; and I said, 'No, I'm going to LSE, London School of Economics, and I'm going to study sociology'. — 'Oh, our girls do not do things like that'. — 'This one does' was my response. I knew I'd made the right choice after a week at LSE and I never changed my mind.

— Is current sociology the same science as sociology at the time when you decided to dedicate your life and to be engaged in sociological theory?

— I hope, it's different because, I hope, other people have made it different, helped to make it different. Then it was very boring, particularly in England, it was like the bad old days in Russia. It was empiricist, you just counted things, observed things, treated your observations with the objective of correlating them and running regressions. The only thing, to tell you the truth, which I have never published is my PhD thesis, which is a model of empiricism. So, empiricism had to go. In terms of social ontology, we had to replace something better than sense data. I'm not saying sense data tells you nothing. It tells you, at least, that there are four people sitting around this table right now. But even the empirical statement that there are four people sitting around the table is not as self-evident as it appears. Two of you could be pregnant, in which case some people would argue there are six people sitting around the table. Or maybe one of you is having twins—seven people, both are having twins—eight people. So, a lot comes down to how we define things including what might look obvious things like who is here. I know it's an absolutely basic reply to make, but it is not self-evident. I know many laws in many different countries that treat a pregnant woman differently from a non-pregnant woman, even if both of them are guilty of the same offense under legal consideration, they would go to prison in different ways. It's a very simple example, but I've always loved simple examples because if you tell them to your students, they remember. Give them a formal definition, such as everything hinges upon the definition of personhood in this case, they would hold on to that for five minutes, and then it would just vanish.

— What do you think about professional sociological congresses? Say, if we look at the headings of professional sociological meetings organized by ISA and ASA in the last decade that we have prepared for you, do you believe these headings reflect actual developments in sociology or that real sociology goes in one direction and conferences in another one?

— Well, you can't give a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Take this one on your list. Part of its theme is 'Sociology on the move'. Well, I hope it has always been on the move, other-

wise it would be dead! Take this one too from 2014, 'Facing an Unequal World': we are always facing an unequal world for different reasons and confronting different kinds of inequalities. Then again, 'Sociological Research and Public Debate', has always been relevant. You could say in England there wouldn't have been such public debate unless there had been sociological research starting at the end of the nineteenth century on poverty, unemployment, unnecessary diseases people had... As for the American sociological association: the same goes for its theme in 2017; 'Culture, Inequalities and Social Inclusion across the Globe', there always have been concerns about this in Eastern Europe, including Stalin's 'nationalities policies'. 2015 is quite interesting because they actually put sexualities in the title. Is this some kind of recognition that it is something sociological to talk about? It wouldn't be apparent in the previous generation. Well, 2013, 'Interrogating Inequality: Linking Micro and Macro', you could have that at any time. Then there is an intriguing one, I don't know what it means — 'The New Politics of Community'. 'Worlds of Work' could have been done at any time...

I think I know what's behind your question. We sociologists are commentators on current changes in the world, in the social environment: always some wanted to be more than that but always to some extent we are just that. We are a part of the world, and we are moving too, so we have to be refining and developing theories the whole time. And there is a big difference between many theories and critical realism... Critical Realism is not a finished work that one person, Roy Bhaskar, gave us. He was a philosopher, and a very modest philosopher, who said «My job is to be a philosophical under-laborer for the social sciences». Effectively he was saying «Yes, I will conceptualize ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics for you, but it is you people, who need to go and do the research and put forward the specific theories about these particular social phenomena». Realism should always be developing because the nature of the open social order is by definition changeable. This is what social morphogenesis is for — it is neither philosophy nor grand theory but an analytical framework useful in the explanation of any new social problem or issue. If we ever treated C.R.'s origins as received wisdom, incapable of refinement and extension it would be dead. This was the fate of Marxism when coercively imposed in the former Soviet bloc, it became sclerotic and incapable of meeting social change. That problem now is demographic, namely the old guard, the old party members, still hang on to their orthodoxy and to their posts in universities, and they still teach their old orthodoxy. What do we do? Wait for them to die? Maybe. Sometimes it feels like that.

— **One particular question to you as a former President of the ISA: how are these titles are formulated? Who is responsible for a decision?**

— Usually it's the executive committee. Sometimes we agree and sometimes we fight when two themes seem very attractive, and we can't do both. Another question is why do we have such thematic titles when much of the time people ignore them... We expect the international social science council of the United Nations to support our conferences, but we know that we would not have financial support if we didn't give them a title.

— **You mentioned Marx, and this year is his 200 anniversary. What do you think about Marx and Marxists in contemporary sociology?**

— We will always be indebted to Marx in sociology, and we should admit it, I think, instead of regarding it as a 'dirty secret'. Bringing to the fore the forces and relations

of production, even though they change over time, still tells us a lot. If you really want to understand a given time, place and circumstances, have a look at these two things, don't forget them. And some of the many good ideas he gave us are now neglected... Ideology, for example. I think it's a wonderful concept but very few people are using 'ideology' these days, I still do, because I think he was absolutely right that culture and structure are two ontologically distinct things, distinguishable because of their different causal contributions. Why would you theorize about ideology if it merely reflected the material forces of production? As its mirror image it would add nothing to explanation. No, it's much more complicated in its role of linking material interests, material structures to ideas and vice versa in a manner which strengthens both. There is always a nexus between interests and ideas. And when groups of people are looking around for an idea to legitimate their vested material interests they 'raid the cultural cupboard' and from it they pull compatible ideas and link these ideas to others that suit them in their current context. So, the connection between interests and ideas is very, very important. Because genuinely few groups with vested material interests will adopt a set of ideas that are not congruent with them — otherwise they cut their own throats. Collectively — as political parties, unions, or voluntary associations and pressure groups we don't tend to do that, which does not mean that as activists we necessarily pick the best of ideas and certainly not that we use them to the best ends.

— If we can come back to sociology in general. Do you believe that we need it as a distinct kind of research — not social sciences, not migration studies but sociology as a specific discipline?

— We need it. And I believe the Morphogenetic Approach that you will have encountered in my books — which is not a theory but much closer to methodology — supplements the ontology of Critical Realism for sociologists. Both are essential, as is the third element, Practical Social Theorizing that offers specific explanations in the problem fields you have just mentioned. First, every social agent and actor has a social ontology. This is not optional, but it may be implicit or explicit. However, there is a damaging tendency in the West to reduce social ontology to social epistemology. The way things are can never be confounded with how we take them to be, believe them to be or want them to be. Take a recent example from the world football competition. Many said «Oh, wonderful! Britain, as it worked out, is going to play Croatia in the next round and that will be a walk-over». That was a belief. Well, you know how it ended. Croatia won. How we take things to be cannot be substituted for how they are. Nevertheless, we all have hopes, expectations and even wish-fulfillments about how things will be in everyday life but reality has the last word. If a young couple believes it has the income to service a heavy mortgage and even convinces the bank about this, it does not protect them from defaulting on their payments, the apartment being repossessed, and the couple becoming objectively less likely to be granted another one. We all have a social ontology, whether we like to say so or not. It does not explain very much. Of course, we would not be sitting here unless we believed that this terrace would carry our weight. Unless we had a certain set of beliefs, we could not get out of bed and go to work without assuming that the floor will carry us, the water will wash us, the coffee will wake us up and the food will get us going. But then in sociology we need an explanatory framework or approach to go further.

This is what the Morphogenetic Approach aims to do, it does not provide a basic ontology, but it says if you want to understand law, say, the law of property, which changes over time, or the rights of women that also change over time, any problem that you want to address, how do you go about it? Well, yes, people have written five hundred books on it, and you might get some ideas that way, but this does not move you very far along the track. So, my contribution in the morphogenetic approach is to break it down into three temporal phases: Structural/Cultural Conditioning — Social Interaction — Structural/Cultural Elaboration. We are always acting in a structural context. We couldn't be sitting here, at this nice hotel: probably the majority of the world does not have hotels like this. Now, I call it the conditioning context, you can call it the situation, it doesn't matter, but it is very important because it influences what we can do. I'll give you an example from today. I met an old friend, we had very little time, and we had a cup of coffee outdoors. That was not the ideal context, because of buses and traffic, and we could not hear one another. So, we grasped one or two things about what she had been doing, where she had been: you could catch one word, two or three, but not more. It happened in this example I'm giving you, that she had many things to do, official things to do this afternoon, and we only had half an hour. So, what did we spend this time doing? A little bit of diagnosing how bad the situation was for that conversation; then an attempt to fix the situation by yelling, and concluding this was all our interpersonal social interaction could be there. That was structural conditioning in this conversation's case. In the end we agreed it was hopeless, and we fixed a date tomorrow, when we could meet in quieter circumstances. And so, we get to structural elaboration. Well, structural elaboration, to start with is all about time. The structural elaboration will be tomorrow, not today, and we will meet in a place tomorrow, that will not be affected by conditions that existed today. Yet even that does not explain enough. You need practical social theory, it can be theories about conversation, or about conference themes, or about how we get married, or anything you like. This is the task of Practical Social Theory. Perhaps the decision for tomorrow was fallible because far too many of our mutual friends will be gathered there, so again the conversation will have to be postponed. But now we were dwelling not on having our conversation but on detecting a nearby place where we could have it. Practical Social Theorising is much the same; fallibility and revision until a new version seems to work.

— **Practical social theory? What do you mean by that?**

— Specific social theory, it does not have any heavy meaning to it, so it could be about health, education.

— **How would you characterize the main problem for sociology today? You mentioned empiricism at the time when you started your career, and now it's not in the mainstream, it exists but...**

— It's not dead yet.

— **Yes. But what is the main theme for sociology today?**

— There are many. One is all about structural conditioning that underlies it in academia. I'm very sorry for young people who are under pressures that we were never under. Pressures to publish very early, too early. While at the same time you are getting some teaching experience, and you're going to conferences. And it's just too much. A second year PhD student would be asked: «What is the impact of your research?»

It's crazy because the poor student has not done his research yet! How can it have an impact? That was one. The other is that people are not creators, they just hang on. You can see it very well at this conference and it's disappointing to me. People hang on to the theorists of the past, they won't let them die, they try to revive them, to reestablish them instead of looking at a problem straight in its face and asking 'what do we do about this?' What was good about the session of former ISA Presidents, was almost everybody was saying: 'What's wrong? What needs doing?', which is surprising because we come from different places, have different theoretical backgrounds, but I think we can see that we are all humanists. And yet nobody has written a humanistic sociology. Which is tragic.

— **To continue this line, would you recommend your young relatives to get major in sociology?**

— No.

— **Why?**

— Because as people they are not suited to it. One of my sons is a professional mountaineer, and the other is a professional engineer. They have no interest in abstract ideas of a sociological kind. Now, the different answer, if you raised the question 'Would you encourage young people to do sociology' — yes! If it really interests you. Without that flame don't do it, do something else.

— **If you were today a young researcher at the very beginning of your career what would you study, what would you look at as a researcher?**

— I couldn't have chosen a better one than I chose in France as a post-doc, namely why are the French and the British systems of education structured so differently, why do these differences remain (morphostasis) and with what causal consequences. So, I did two PhDs. This was a real research question and through trying to answer it. I began to conceptualize the Morphogenetic Approach. Sometimes they are not. Quite often I have students who ask me: 'Can I do PhD with you?' — 'Yes, on what?' — 'I want to work on gender' — or health, or the family, or whatever. And I say 'No, that's a field, it's not a research question'. What do you want to know about family or gender, or health?

— **Our last question: what are you working on now?**

— Oh, something fascinating. Artificial intelligence. One of the books will investigate «Can we be friends with an artificially intelligent robot?». It will involve philosophy, psychology and relational sociology. Technically, we are all enhanced human beings now and seem likely to become more so. Does this have to result in a 'war of the worlds' between biologically based and silicon based beings — as so many Hollywood movies presume? Instead I want to explore the possibility of a social order made up of humane beings, whatever their physical constitution.

— **Thank you very much indeed for the interview!**