Introduction

In this book I attempt to sustain a single proposition, namely that for the first time in human history the imperative to be reflexive is becoming categorical for all, although manifesting itself in only the most developed parts of the world. This thesis does not rest upon any form of sociological Kantianism. There is no 'ought' attaching to intensified reflexivity and no stern voice of duty urging increased reflexive deliberation.

Instead, the thesis is that the emergence of a new conjuncture between the cultural order (ideationally based) and the structural order (materially based) is shaping new situational contexts in which more and more social subjects find themselves and whose variety they have to confront – in a novel manner. This is the practical consequence and manifestation of nascent morphogenesis. What each and every person has to determine is what they are going to do in these situations. Increasingly all have to draw upon their socially dependent but nonetheless personal powers of reflexivity in order to define their course(s) of action in relation to the novelty of their circumstances. Habits and *habitus* are no longer reliable guides. The positive face of the reflexive imperative is the opportunity for subjects to pursue what they care about most in the social order. In fact their personal concerns become their compasses. Its negative face is that subjects can design and follow courses of action that are inappropriate to realising their prime social concerns and whose negative outcomes rebound upon them.

As in the first two books of this trilogy,[1] reflexivity is defined as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa'.[2] The imperative to engage in reflexive deliberations (which may also involve interpersonal as well as intra-subjective exchanges) derives, quite simply,

[1] Margaret S. Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, and *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[2] For a fuller discussion see Archer, *Making our Way through the World*, 'Introduction', above definition p. 4.

from the absence of social guidelines indicating what to do in novel situations. It is tempting to write 'in new games', but for the fact that not even the constitutive rules let alone the regulative ones are fully formed. Indeed, it will be agential reflexive deliberations and the actions stemming from them that are ultimately responsible for formulating such rules – for as long as they last. This will also be of shorter duration as morphogenesis engages increasingly.

Already it is necessary to enter a caveat. In *Making our Way through the World*, I defended the proposition 'No reflexivity; no society'.[3] That statement must be clearly distinguished from the present thesis about the reflexive imperative. The argument that any social order depends upon the exercise of human reflexivity rests on three counts. Firstly, that reflexive first-person awareness is indispensable in even the simplest society because without it, no rule, expectation, obligation and so forth could be incumbent upon anyone in particular without the 'sense of self' that is needed to bend such injunctions back upon oneself and know if the cap fits or not. Secondly, traditional practices require reflexive monitoring for competent performance, for coping when things go wrong and for meeting unexpected contingencies. Since all social life is lived in an open system, the very workability of tradition depends upon resort to reflexive ingenuity in order to cover unscripted eventualities, which often entail the elaboration of tradition itself.[4] Thirdly, traditional guidelines may be in conflict with one another because there is no guarantee that all norms are complementary at any given time. When they are not, as was the case for Antigone (torn between conflicting obligations to her king and her brother), only she could decide reflexively in which cause to act. All three points are under-girded by Garfinkel's demonstration that even the smooth accomplishment of everyday routine interactions involves a 'reflexive accounting', which makes this a constitutive feature of social life itself.[5] Nevertheless, this is universal reflexivity, which is part and parcel of being a member of society, and not the extended reflexivity that is the subject of this book.

'No reflexivity; no society' is also premised upon no culture ever being so comprehensive and coherent in its composition and no structure ever being so commanding or consistent in its organization as to maintain an enduring form of social life without making constant resort to the reflexively derived actions of its members. This is one major difference between

[3] Archer, *Making our Way*, pp. 25–29.
[4] For example, the traditional Massai initiation rite into male adulthood entailed killing a lion. When the Kenyan government banned lion killing, the 'continuation' of this tradition required elaborative ingenuity.
[5] Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1984.

my own position and that of the proponents of 'reflexive modernization' for whom the intensive and extensive practice of reflexivity is a newcomer, only arriving on the scene during late modernity. Despite that, it is important to ask what else distinguishes the present argument about the reflexive imperative from what has come to be called 'the extended reflexivity thesis',[6] given that each is held to apply to the current period. The 'extended reflexivity thesis' is associated with Ulrich Beck and his collaborators, and maintains that 'in reflexive modernity, individuals have become ever more free of structure; in fact they have to redefine structure (or as Giddens puts it, tradition)', meaning that much greater demands are placed upon personal reflexivity to make a 'life of one's own'.[7] The answer to what differentiates the two positions is 'just about everything', beginning, as is already implicit, with Beck, Giddens, Lash and Bauman portraying the relationship between traditionalism and reflexivity as effectively a zero-sum one.[8] However, it is the following two differences that are crucial.

Firstly, in *Reflexive Modernization*, 'extended reflexivity' is presented as the direct counterpart of 'the demise of structure'. It is social destructuration that enables reflexive, narrative, serial and kaleidoscopic self-reconstructions by newly 'individualized' people. This is part and parcel of these authors conceptualizing late modernity as a period in which structures 'dissolve' into 'flows', structured groupings fade into 'zombie' status, differences in life chances yo-yo with increasing speed and what had once been structurally enduring now melts into 'liquidity'. Most 'liquid' of all is the free flow and endless recombination of ideas. Not only is culture itself viewed as (now) being unstructured, but the ideational domain comes to override any other in shaping social life. Hence, the assertion that, '[with] the emergence of a self-culture, it is rather a *lack* of social structures which establishes itself as the basic feature of the social structure'.[9]

On the contrary, I maintain that the general intensification of reflexivity (and the different modes of internal conversation through which it is practised) is directly related to mutually reinforcing changes in cultural

[6] See, for example, Matthew Adams, 'Hybridizing Habitus and Reflexivity', *Sociology*, 40:3, 2006, 511–528, where the phrase is used repeatedly.
[7] Ulrick Beck, 'Preface', in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994, p. 177.
[8] My critique, of the 'central conflationary' theoriszation of *reflexive modernization*, will not be repeated here. See Archer, *Making our Way*, pp. 29–37.
[9] Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, London, Sage, 2002, p. 51.

and social structures. Specifically, it results from an unprecedented acceleration of morphogenesis in these two spheres simultaneously, rather than from the diminished importance of structure, that is, the diminution of its properties and powers to the advantage of an increasingly influential but formless culture. The effects of the 2007 banking crisis on other social institutions has rendered the structures involved, their interdependencies and causal powers sufficiently transparent to undermine any conviction that 'destructuration' has occurred. Rather than disappearing, the workings of finance capital had been partially and deliberately occluded.

Secondly, and more starkly, the reflexive imperative is *not a thesis that is tied to* modernity refusing to look beyond its 'project' – not to late modernity, not to high modernity and not to Second Wave modernity. The times (and places) examined are much the same in the two theses, that is, from the late eighties when the launch of the World Wide Web coincided with the expansion of multi-national corporations and the deregulation of finance markets. However, the onset of nascent morphogenesis, generated by human agency and working through nothing but human agents – singular and collective – points beyond modernity to the potential for its transcendence. What seems unique about this latest historical cycle of modernity is that it appears to be giving way to a morphogenesis that is increasingly unbound from its morphostatic fetters. My ultimate aim – one that will not be completed in this volume – is to ascertain whether or not the concurrence of morphogenesis in the realms of structure, culture and agency announces the advent of a thoroughly morphogenetic society.[10]

This book begins the upward journey from the micro to the macro level by considering this reconfiguring of the social order in relation to society's members.[11] However, the effects examined are limited to their impacts upon collectives of people and, in turn, to aggregate outcomes for social institutions in the new millennium. Although such effects point to a transformation of civil society *inter alia*, this investigation can do no more than gesture towards new possibilities for the taming of modernity's two Leviathans – the State and the Market. Nevertheless, even to look towards a horizon where modernity may be transcended as the distant result of today's nascent morphogenesis, is to be carried light years away from resignation to the future of the social order as nothing more than 'institutionalized individualism'.[12]

[10] This is the research project just launched by the *Centre d'Ontologie Sociale* at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne.

[11] For the stages in the development of my 'morphogenetic approach' in social theory, see Margaret S. Archer, 'The Trajectory of the Morphogenetic Approach: An Account in the First-Person', *Sociologia: Problemas e Práticas*, 54, 2007, 35–47.

[12] Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, p. 2.

In short, the two theses about 'reflexive modernization' and the 'reflexive imperative' have entirely different theoretical starting points, they meet briefly and in superficial accord about the recently enhanced importance of reflexivity, but their destinations and modes of analysis are poles apart.

The acceleration of morphogenesis and the extension of reflexivity

This book is closely related to its predecessors, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* and *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*, but it also links upwards to the institutional and cultural structures that were coming into being at the start of the new millennium. It looks forward to the elaboration of these structures at the hands of the young subjects (aged roughly 18–22) upon whom the empirical part of this study is based. The trilogy shares the same historical backcloth against which it is maintained that agential reflexivity increases in scope and range over time. It does so because, at the most macro level, the structural and cultural orders shift over recorded history from (i) an era of lasting social stability, generated by structure and culture mutually reinforcing morphostasis in one another, to (ii) the long period, coterminous with modernity, during which morphogenesis in one order gradually induced it in the other, with increasingly disruptive consequences for the population in general, to (iii) the current period of rapid social transformation deriving from the positive reinforcement of cultural morphogenesis by structural morphogenesis and vice versa. In other words, structure, culture and agency, each of which is relatively autonomous and possesses its own distinctive emergent properties and causal powers, are necessary to the existence of one another in a given form but simultaneously account for their combined elaboration. Together they 'make history'.

In sociological terms, the 'making of history' means that periods of stability – as opposed to mere quietude – are analysed as morphostatic, that is, with reference to relations that tend to preserve or maintain a system's given form of organization or state. Conversely, morphogenesis derives from those processes that tend to elaborate or change a system's given form, structure or state.[13] Both generative mechanisms are entirely

[13] These concepts were first introduced into social theory by Walter Buckley, *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1967, pp. 58–59. Buckley focuses upon 'system-environment exchanges'. Instead, my own use of these concepts places the emphasis upon internal relations. See also Magoroh Maruyama, 'The Second Cybernetics: Deviation–Amplifying Mutual Causal Processes', *American Scientist*, 5:2, 164–179.

and continuously activity-dependent. It is agency that generates both morphostasis and morphogenesis and, in turn, these very different relationships between components of the social system exert causal powers only by working through social agents. Where reflexivity is concerned, the key process through which societal morphostasis or morphogenesis influence the subjectivity of the populations in question is identical to the way in which any structural or culture property exerts an influence on human subjects, even if it is not perceived to do so. That is, by shaping the situations in which they find themselves, ones that are neither of their making nor choosing because they pre-date the agents in question.[14] Reflexivity has been advanced as the process mediating the effects of our circumstances upon our actions.[15] Our internal conversations define what courses of action we take in given situations and subjects who are similarly placed do not respond uniformly.

Morphostatic configurations, those whose effects are structurally and culturally restorative of the *status quo*, exert this causal power through shaping everyday situations into ones that represent 'contextual continuity' for subjects. The recurrence of these situations means that members know what to do because their repetition over time also means that appropriate courses of action have been defined intergenerationally – perhaps to the point of becoming tacit knowledge – and are readily transmitted through informal socialization. Conversely, thoroughly morphogenetic figurations would shape nearly all everyday situations as ones of 'contextual incongruity', where past guidelines become more and more incongruous with the novel situational variety encountered. Increasingly, each subject has to make his or her own way through the world without established guidelines – a process which cannot be conducted in terms of tacit knowledge or as 'second nature', but necessarily by virtue of internal deliberations. Between these extremes lies the vast majority of recorded history – that is modernity. Its hallmark was the simultaneous circulation of negative, structure-restoring feedback and positive, structure-elaborating feedback for structural, cultural and agential properties and powers. The precise forms taken describe the contours of the multiple modernities that have been historically distinguished.[16] As modernity

[14] See Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, chapter 6, and *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 195–229.
[15] See Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, pp. 130–152.
[16] For example, see Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzak Sternberg (eds.), *Comparing Modernities: Pluralism versus Homogeneity. Essays in Homage to Shmuel N. Eisenstadt*, Leiden and Boston, Mass., Brill, 2005.

advanced, these disjunctions constituted 'contextual discontinuity' for wider and wider sections of the population in any country.

The main proposition about the 'reflexive imperative' can be formulated with greater precision and placed within this broader historical panorama as follows: *the extensiveness with which reflexivity is practised by social subjects increases proportionate to the degree to which both structural and cultural morphogenesis (as opposed to morphostasis) impinge upon them*.[17] This is not the statement of a Humean constant conjunction (or correlation coefficient) because the main concern is to explain *how* the (objective) macroscopic features of social configurations have an effect upon the (subjective) mental activities of their members, at the micro level. Neither is this a statement about social hydraulics, that is, one conceptualizing social forces as pushes and pulls, which affect subjects willy-nilly, thus reducing them to 'passive agents'. Nor is it the final statement of the main proposition because it says nothing about *the modes of reflexivity* that predominate under given circumstances. It is these *changing modalities of reflexivity* that constitute the main concern of the present book. This begins to be unpacked in the first chapter, and it is the recent change in the dominant mode of reflexivity coming to be practised, along with the decline of those associated with earlier social configurations, that signals the restructuring of late modernity and the potential for its transcendence.

The study focuses exclusively upon the period from the late 1980s onwards, examining how the increasingly morphogenetic changes underway reshaped the situational contexts in which the new generation of 'active agents' grew up and with what effects for the making (and breaking) of the modes of reflexivity they developed and practised. The development of any reflexive modality is explained as a product of the formula 'social context + personal concerns'. In shorthand, its first term can be condensed into the differences between 'contextual continuity, 'contextual discontinuity' and 'contextual incongruity', which characterized the experience of growing up for different cohorts and sections of the population during the broad periods distinguished above and discussed in the following chapter. This means that a closer examination of young people, of their natal contexts and of their constellation of concerns (which give them their personal identities), will tell a great deal about their judgements upon the current institutional array because these always underlie the attempts of subjects to identify and attain social positions through

[17] For those who defend the durable influence of habit or habitus, counter-arguments are provided in Margaret S. Archer, 'Routine, Reflexivity and Realism', *Sociological Theory*, 28:3, 2010, 272–303.

which they can realize their ultimate concerns (which give them their social identities).[18]

It will, however, tell only part of the story about their subsequent impact upon it, through their *aggregate tendency* to seek and to shun particular positions within the array of roles currently available to them and their reasons for this. The full story also needs to include collective action through which groups expressly organize and articulate aims for the transformation or defence of the social order or particular parts of it. Nevertheless, the present study has something to contribute here, too, by documenting the connections between the modes of reflexivity practised and the proclivity or reluctance of their practitioners to engage in political involvement, participate in social movements and to associate themselves with new organizational initiatives – albeit at the individual level.

The present study

The crucial question in terms of its implications for a possible morphogenetic society is 'does the nature of reflexivity remain unchanged' amidst these social transformations and opportunities for social subjects to be transformatory? The previous two studies have necessarily been mute on this topic because all data was collected at one point in time. For example, it was impossible to answer two of the most frequently asked questions: 'Do or can people change their dominant mode of reflexivity over their life courses?' and 'Can 'fractured reflexives' recover and regain some governance over their lives?' The current data should be able to supply some answers because it is longitudinal. The subjects are all the undergraduate students who took the foundation course in sociology at the University of Warwick during the Autumn of 2003, with thirty-six volunteers from among them being interviewed in depth once a year during their bachelor's degree.[19] This means that for the first time it is possible to say something about the making and breaking of human reflexivity over time.

However, there is something of more pressing interest about these students who entered university in 2003. Of course they are not representative of their age cohort. As students in Britain they have been selected for entry, they are much better educated than average, and they chose Warwick as much as it chose them, picking it, they tended to say, because of its image as a university for the future. They are, for the most part,

[18] See Margaret S. Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 283–305.
[19] Please consult the Methodological appendix for further details about the population.

extremely articulate and this is exactly what was required – young people who could be informative about what otherwise must remain entirely speculative.

What makes them of absorbing interest are their dates of birth. These are young adults who were born and grew up in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Their births were coterminous with structural and cultural morphogenesis entering into synergy with one another, their natal environments were shaped and shaken by its initial impacts and their schooling was the earliest that could have registered the spawning new opportunities open to them. They are the first generation to grow up with the computer as a standard feature in the home and the first for whom going online was the readiest source of information. Now, in their early twenties, they confront the transforming social landscape that I will be trying to describe with their help. They are seeking reflexively to make their way through the world but also, as will be seen, some of their internal conversations are agential deliberations about remaking the social order. Sadly, too many of them also become casualties of the process. In consequence, this is not a utopian book and neither does it hold out prospects of that indeterminate state called 'adaptation' for our one complex, global, social system that may currently herald morphogenetic society.

1 A brief history of how reflexivity becomes imperative

Does reflexivity have a history? It seems that, like language, upon which reflexivity depends – without being entirely linguistic – it must have a pre-history. That is, there must have been a time before which *homo erectus* or his kinfolk had learned to speak and to be capable of mentally reflecting about their intentionality. In other words, there was a before and an after. What is not obvious is whether or not 'afterwards' was a long, continuous and unfinished process of constant elaboration, or if reflexivity's biography consisted of distinct and discontinuous periods. Another way of putting the same question is: does human reflexivity show distinct variations in the modes through which it is practised and, if so, were such modalities subject to change over time in response to changing historical circumstances?

A difficulty arises in posing the question in this way, namely, that it would be acknowledged in some disciplines but not in others. On the one hand, in psycholinguistics and as early as 1934, Vygotsky was calling for a 'history of reflexivity'.[1] Certainly, his appeal resulted in very little take-up but not, it seems, because his request was unintelligible or unacceptable. It appears more likely that what accounted for the lack of response was the need for considerable historical probing and bold conjecturing at precisely the time when it was safer for his Russian collaborators to confine themselves to laboratory work and to seek political cover behind 'scientism'. On the other hand, Western social theorists have shared the same reluctance to respond to Vygotsky's call. Instead, their common denominator has been to regard *reflexivity as a homogeneous phenomenon*. Either people exercised it or they didn't but, when they did they were engaging in much the same kind of practice and for much the same kind of reasons. At most, they could do so more or less, as in what has recently become known as 'the extended reflexivity thesis'.[2]

[1] Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1964 (1934). His call was for a 'historical theory of inner speech', p. 153.
[2] For example, the phrase is used repeatedly in Matthew Adams, 'Hybridizing Habitus and Reflexivity', *Sociology*, 40:3, 2006.