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## **Interests and Structure in Dualist Social Theory:**

### **A Critical Appraisal of Archer's Theoretical and Empirical Arguments**

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**Abstract:** This article evaluates the structural conception of interests developed by Margaret Archer as part of her dualist version of critical realism. It argues that this structural analysis of interests is untenable because (i) Archer's account of the causal influence of interests on agents is contradictory; and (ii) Archer fails to offer a defensible account of her claim that interests influence agents by providing reasons for action. These problems are explored in relation to Archer's theoretical and empirical work. I argue for an alternative account of interests that focuses on agents' understandings of their interests and problems with these understandings.

**Keywords:** Interests, Structure, Dualism, Critical Realism, Archer

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#### **1. Introduction**

In this article I will critically assess the arguments put forward by the important contemporary critical realist thinker Margaret Archer (1995, 2003, 2007) about the

place of interests in social analysis. There are at least four good reasons to undertake the task of appraising Archer's ideas on interests. Firstly, Archer has come to be a prominent and well-referenced theorist, but little critical reflection has been directed at the place of interests in her mode of analysis, despite it being an important component of her work. Secondly, evaluating Archer's account of interests allows us to get critical purchase on her account of structure as well because of the connections that she draws between the two. Thirdly, as Archer doesn't just theorize interests but uses them in her empirical analyses, her work helps us to consider the benefits or otherwise of a critical realist analysis put into practice (Archer, 2003, 2007). Fourthly, evaluating a form of interest analysis located within a prominent mode of social theorising helps us to reflect on the more general question of how the analysis of interests should be conducted in social science.

Before getting into the details of Archer's analysis it will be useful to situate her arguments further. Archer is a key exponent of the philosophy of critical realism. Critical realism emerged initially out of criticism of positivist and idealist accounts of natural science, which were accused of failing to give the 'reality' of natural scientific objects an appropriate place in analysis (Bhaskar, 1975). By contrast, the key early realist Roy Bhaskar argued that natural scientific objects are real entities that have the power to influence events because of their internal structure. In arguing that questions about the nature of reality were legitimate ones, critical realists defended the value of ontological debate, that is, reasoned analysis of the fundamental building blocks of the natural and social worlds. It is particularly in relation to the

latter that critical realists have offered extensive arguments (see for example Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 1992; Archer, 1995). One important realist move has been to critique 'reductionist' positions which they see as failing to give appropriate consideration to the role of various ontological elements in generating the social world, including social structures, cultural structures, and agents (Bhaskar, 1979; Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010). Critical realist arguments have often been framed as contributions to the structure/agency debate, with realists joining others in arguing that this division needs to be maintained and elaborated on rather than transcended (e.g. Mouzelis, 2000). The division between structure and agency is important to understanding Archer's analysis of interests because Archer sees interests as a feature of 'objective social structure', and as having a character and influence upon agents which is not reducible to agents' own understandings. As I will argue in the next section, Archer's approach to interests is importantly different from subjectivist, constructionist and pragmatist accounts which do not see interests as 'real' properties of the social world that can be identified and justified independently of agents' understandings.

Because Archer's analysis of interests is based in critical realist ontological arguments, the article is going to assess her claims in two contexts: in relation to debates about social ontology and in relation to social scientific analyses of the concept of interests. The overall argument of the article will be that Archer fails to convincingly defend her realist account of interests, and I will also argue that a problem-solving (or pragmatist) alternative is preferable. To criticize Archer's approach, I will focus largely on Archer's ontological arguments, contending: (i) that

Archer's own treatment of interests as structural is inconsistent, and ends up undermining her insistence that structural interests necessarily have an influence on social life; (ii) that Archer is unable to sustain her claim that agents' interests have a determinate character no matter what the goals and understandings of those agents are. Having made these arguments I move, in the final section, to consider the significance of these points in relation to social scientific accounts of interests. The key argument there is that Archer's realist approach to interests should be rejected in favour of a pragmatist alternative which allows criticism of actors' interest conceptions but insists on the need to locate and justify such criticism in relation to actors' own understandings. I also consider the consequences of the criticisms developed for debates about social structure, and I argue that the difficulties with Archer's structural account of interests give support to those who criticise dualism and reject dualist notions of structure.

## **2. The Analysis of Interests and Archer's Ontology**

The first part of this section situates Archer's analysis of interests in two ways: firstly, in relation to other social scientific theories of interests, and then in relation to the ontological ideas that are central to critical realism. I then go on to describe how Archer applies her approach to interests in empirical research. Starting with social scientific accounts of interests, I want to begin by agreeing with Steven Lukes' view that when we refer to an outcome being 'in the interests' of actors, we are making a claim about which outcomes are beneficial for actors to realize (see Lukes, 2005: 37). Moving on from this point we can see that one useful way to classify theories of

interests<sup>1</sup> is to distinguish approaches on the basis of their answers to a pair of questions: Can actors' understandings of their interests be mistaken? If so, how is this possible?

The first answer to these questions that I want to consider is the view that although actors might be mistaken about how to realize their interests, they cannot be wrong about their interests as such. On this approach, it is in the interests of actors to have their preferences realized, and these preferences cannot be wrong or misguided (for critical discussions see Benton, 1981; Lukes, 2005). Actors may be mistaken about the strategic course of action that can satisfy their preferences, but their preference for one outcome rather than another cannot be adjudged to be misguided, as preferences are a purely subjective matter. Thus this first approach to interests might be considered 'subjectivist' in character.

A second type of approach to interests can be called 'social constructionist', insofar as it conceives of agents' interests as constituted in meanings developed through a process of social interaction (Barnes, 1995; Woolgar, 1981; Wendt, 1999).

Defenders of social constructionism take this insight in different directions in relation to the question of whether actors can be mistaken about their interests. However, in my view, a consistent reading of social constructionism implies that actors cannot be shown to be mistaken about their interests. To draw out further a point that Woolgar (1981) makes: if one takes seriously the social constructionist view that meanings are contingent, and construct a self-consistent and self-validating account

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<sup>1</sup> For another approach to classifying interests see Mathiowetz (2008).

of the world (see for example Barnes, 1982), then it does not make sense to claim that actors can be 'mistaken' about their interests. On this view, actors' interest claims are part of the constitution of their world, and there are no cracks in this world of meaning that can be exploited to make a justified critique of these claims.

Both the subjectivist and the social constructionist account of interests imply that actors' evaluations or preferences about what is a desirable outcome for them cannot be subject to justified critique. By contrast, the third and fourth approaches I want to consider here suggest that actors' interest-beliefs can be justifiably critiqued. Defenders of the third account, which can be described as a 'problem-solving' or 'pragmatist' account, argue that actors might be pursuing preferences and values that are not beneficial to them, are not in their interests to realize (see Ron, 2008; Holmwood, 1996). This, of course, raises the question of how such a critical perspective can be justified. Unlike constructionists, problem-solving theorists believe that actors' understandings are rarely, if ever, self-consistent and self-validating. As such, they see themselves as able to identify problems and limitations of actors' beliefs, and put forward evidentially-justified but fallible arguments about the values and preferences it would be better for agents to attempt to realize. Problem-solving theorists suggest that a reasoned dialogue about interests is possible in which agents might be persuaded to change the values and preferences they are attempting to realize, having been exposed to arguments about what is problematic about their current values and preferences. Whether such arguments can ever be justified is certainly an issue for defenders of the

problem-solving approach, and I will discuss this further in the final section of the article.

The final approach to interests that I want to mention is put forward by those who are rather more forthright about the possibility of agent-error, and Archer's work falls into this category. On this 'realist' view, agents' preferences and evaluations about what is in their interests might be incorrect insofar as they do not map on to their 'real' or 'objective' interests. This view has associations with Marxist traditions of thought (cf Balbus, 1971), but a well-known formulation which is less tightly linked to these traditions is that of Lukes (2005). Whatever the differences of Archer's approach to Marxist thought, the claim that agents may misrecognize the interests that inhere in their 'objective' structural positions places her in this realist camp. When characterising this realist approach to interests it is relevant to note a division within it. On one side of the division are those, such as Lukes, who do not treat real interests as causal influences on behaviour in themselves, but as only influencing actors if they are recognized by those actors and incorporated into their framework for action. Indeed, this is crucial to Lukes' argument because he is interested in analysing the way in which power stops actors from pursuing their real interests, that is, from being influenced by them instead of by misconceptions (Lukes, 2005: 37-8). On the other side of the division are those who treat real interests as a causal influence on the behaviour of actors (for discussion see Hindess, 1986). Archer's approach falls into the latter camp, in that she sees the structurally-based interests of actors as having their own causal influence on what happens in the social world.



In the remainder of this section I want to consider how Archer uses critical realist arguments to justify her emphasis on the reality and causal influence of interests.

It is not quite precise enough to label Archer a critical realist thinker because, like other schools of thought, critical realism is not unitary in character, and proponents are divided between those who see social structures as existing at any time only because of contemporaneous human activity and conceptualizations (see Outhwaite, 1987; Manicas, 2005) and those who argue for a clear dualistic division between structure and agency (see Porpora, 1987; Creaven, 2000). Archer is in the second camp, and makes a clear distinction between structure and agency, arguing that social structures have a reality and causal power that is, at any particular point in time, independent of the activities and understandings of actors in the social world (Archer, 1995). Archer refers to her approach as 'analytical dualism', arguing that events in the social world are influenced by objective social and cultural structures, on the one hand, and subjective agents, on the other (Archer, 1995; see also Porpora, 1993).<sup>2</sup> Archer places interests on the structural side of this dualism, seeing them as a feature of 'objective social structure' that exercises an influence on, but does not determine, what happens in the social world.

To understand Archer's argument that interests are structural in character, we need to explore further what critical realists mean when they say that structures have a reality and causal power. Following Bhaskar, entities like social structures are

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<sup>2</sup> To say that Archer's position is dualist is not to deny that she upholds the view that a rich array of ontological elements are at play in the social and natural worlds. Rather it is to characterise her position as arguing that one important dynamic in the social world is between two different elements, structure and agency.

understood to have an internal configuration that gives them the causal power to influence events that occur (Bhaskar, 1975). The term 'influence' rather than 'determine' is worth highlighting here, as realists argue that events that occur may be produced by the interaction of more than one structure, that is, influence. For dualists such as Archer, social structures are entities which have the 'emergent property' of being able to exercise a causal influence upon social events (Archer, 1995: 174). At any given time they have the power to exercise an influence in a way that is 'not dependent upon current activities nor influential because of their contemporary conceptualization' (Archer, 1995: 148). The need to emphasize that this independence is 'present-day' arises because Archer sees actors as being able to reconstruct structures through their activities, meaning that the future causal power of a structure is potentially shaped by contemporary action. Importantly, as we will see, Archer argues that the causal influence of social structures operates through 'conditioning' what agents can pursue; structures condition 'different courses of action for those differently placed, by supplying different reasons to them' (Archer, 1995: 201). As to what exactly a social structure looks like, Archer offers an account of three types of structure – positional structures, roles, and institutions (Archer, 1995: 185-8). For our purposes, the most important of these is positional structure, which is a set of differentiated locations in society's distribution of resources, some locations being advantaged and others being disadvantaged (Archer, 1995: 185-188).

As we would expect from a thinker with dualist commitments, Archer also wishes to give agency an important role. Archer argues that agents have subjectively-based values, the most important of these being their ultimate concerns, which shape the

projects that they pursue (Archer, 2003: 141-143). It is only in relation to these concerns that structures have an impact:

‘...our subjectively defined concerns, and especially our ultimate concerns, act as a sounding board for our reception of and response to the objective situations that we confront. Situations do not directly impact upon us...’

(Archer, 2003: 139)

Archer also argues for the reflexivity and creativity of agents, their ability to reflect on structural conditions, and the possibility that they will respond creatively to these conditions. Archer contends that by reflecting on structures and responding creatively to them ‘[c]onditional influences may be agentially evaded, endorsed, repudiated or contravened’ (Archer, 2003: 131).

It is within this dualist framework that we can position Archer’s account of interests. As mentioned above, Archer’s analysis of interests places them on the ‘objective’ side of the divide between objective structure and subjective agency. In this article I want to draw together under the category ‘structural interests’ both what Archer refers to as ‘vested interests’ and those situational prompts which provide objective rewards or penalties. It will be easier to justify this move once I have explained Archer’s approach to both elements. Archer’s analysis of vested interests is laid out in *Realist Social Theory* (1995). In this work, Archer doesn’t directly define what she takes an interest to be, but reconstructing her arguments we might state the following: positions in social structure have either objective benefits or costs

inherent in them. Where there are objective benefits, the position supplies occupants with a vested interest in behaviour that protects these benefits; where there are objective costs, occupants of the position have a vested interest in changing their social position to avoid these (Archer, 1995: 203-9). Perhaps more unusually, Archer argues that:

‘agents’ vested interests are objective features of their situations which, it will be maintained, then predispose them to different courses of action and even towards different life courses’ (Archer, 1995: 203)

In other words, Archer here presents structural interests as ‘out there’ in social structure, encouraging agents to act in certain ways.

For Archer the basis of vested interests is in scarce resources; however, interests are not promoted by increasing the absolute level of such resources owned but are ‘concerned with relative advantages’ (Archer, 1995: 204). A standard example offered by Archer is that those who are born into a situation of social privilege have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and thus maintaining their (relative) wealth; whereas those who are born into a disadvantaged family have a vested interest in changing their social position (or indeed the structure of social positions more generally) (Archer, 1995: 185).

The other aspect of Archer’s analysis that I want to draw under the category of ‘structural interests’ emerges more clearly in *Structure, Agency and the Internal*

*Conversation* (2003). From this book onwards, Archer largely focuses on social mobility, suggesting that moves up the socio-economic scale bring objective rewards/bonuses to actors, and moves down the socio-economic scale bring objective penalties (see for example, Archer, 2003: 185; Archer, 2007: 191). These come to be treated independently of whether such a move takes the individual out of the bottom half of the wealth distribution and into the top half, or vice versa (see for example Archer, 2007: 192). Although Archer doesn't use the language of interests to describe them, the concepts of objective rewards and penalties are clearly used in analogous ways to 'vested interests'. Crucially, as with vested interests, these are structural aspects which provide a reason for actors to act in certain ways, to pursue rewards, and to avoid penalties. Thus I would argue that it is reasonable to include these structural and situational prompts, as well as 'vested interests', under the category of 'structural interests'. In all cases, Archer's analysis suggests that the structural position and circumstances of actors gives them a reason to act in one way rather than another.

Of course, given that Archer argues for the importance of incorporating both structure and agency into analyses we need to consider how she sees structural interests as relating to the thoughts and decisions of agents. As we might expect, Archer wants to see interests as conditioning, but not determining, the actions of agents (Archer, 1995: 205). This conditioning comes about because objective costs accrue to actors if they fail to promote their structural interests. For example, if a wealthy person decides to give away all of their money to charity then they face the cost of losing their privilege in society's distribution of resources. Archer argues that

this doesn't mean that no-one will ever engage in such an action. But it does mean that they pay an objective price if they do so (Archer, 1995: 205-8).

Once we gather together Archer's accounts of vested interests and of objective rewards and penalties under the category of structural interests we can see that the analysis of such interests is crucial to her overall project. Interests are one of the central ways in which social structures are understood to exercise an influence on agents, and, in Archer's later work, much of the discussion is about how agents respond to these structured opportunities and disadvantages (Archer, 2003, 2007). Indeed, although Archer argued in *Realist Social Theory* (1995) that roles and institutions are key aspects of social structure, these barely feature in her later work, whereas frequent reference is made to the way in which social structure provides objective rewards or penalties to situated agents.

To see the place that Archer gives structural interests in practice, we can consider the extended empirical analyses developed in *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (2003) and *Making Our Way through the World* (2007). These works pursue the laudable goal of combining ontological theorizing with empirical analysis.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical parts of these works are dedicated to developing an account of reflexivity that pays particular attention to the 'internal conversation', a form of reflection which Archer sees as mediating between agents and their social

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<sup>3</sup> That Archer's later work attempts to connect theory and research should have been acknowledged in Kemp (2005).

circumstances.<sup>4</sup> The empirical parts of the works introduce and explore a typology of different kinds of reflexivity which Archer developed centrally through qualitative interviewing, although this was supplemented in the later work by questionnaire-based research. On the basis of the interviews undertaken in *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Archer argued that she had discovered three functional types of reflexivity – communicative, autonomous and meta – and one type of thinking in which reflexivity is limited more or less severely - fractured. Archer's view of the adequacy of this typology was broadly reinforced by the interview and questionnaire research on which *Making Our Way through the World* is based, although she does tweak aspects of her earlier analysis. For example, Archer comes to argue that individuals call on a range of forms of reflexivity in their lives. However, she also contends that we can usually classify individuals into one category by identifying which is the dominant mode of reflexivity that they exercise (Archer, 2007: 94). Although Archer presents a range of stimulating data and analyses, what is relevant to us here is the way that she calls on structural interests in analysing her interview data. Space precludes me from discussing how this works in all four of Archer's categories of reflexives, so I will focus here on communicative reflexives. Even with this restriction, I will only be able to offer a brief discussion of a much richer analysis.

Communicative reflexives, as may be apparent from the name, do not engage in lengthy solitary reflection on the issues that they face, such as questions of what

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<sup>4</sup> Archer's arguments about the character of the 'internal conversation' are undoubtedly worthy of serious theoretical attention. However, given the focus of this article on interests, I will not be considering them here.

educational trajectory to follow, what form of employment to seek, and where to live. Rather, they prefer to discuss them with others, particularly friends and family, not trusting their own thoughts. According to Archer, the typical result of this tendency is that 'proposed courses of action are reduced to more modest proportions' (Archer, 2007: 166). Archer suggests that communicative reflexives 'actively reduce their ambitions' and have a tendency towards 'waiting upon contingency' that results from their inclination to share any plans they have with familiar others in the local context (Archer, 2007: 165-6). Intertwined with a reliance on friends and family as partners to reflect on their life courses is the strong value placed on such relationships by communicative reflexives (Archer, 2003: 169). Although Archer reports that many of the individuals across different groups of reflexives nominate family as being of great importance to them, she also contends that communicative reflexives have a qualitative commitment to family that is stronger than those who do not share this as a dominant mode of reflexivity (Archer, 2007: 279). Thus, as agents, the ultimate concern that shapes their projects is to promote and protect the quality of their relations with friends and (especially) family.

For our purposes here, the crucial aspect of Archer's account is her analysis of the structural interests of communicative reflexives and their response to these putative interests. In essence, Archer argues that communicative reflexives act in a way which does not promote their structural interests. Archer suggests that where opportunities present themselves, communicative reflexives could achieve a 'wholly objective bonus' by successfully engaging in projects to achieve upward social



mobility (Archer, 2003: 184-5). And in some cases, Archer suggests that communicative reflexives have been presented with such possibilities. However, she argues that, as a result of the exercise of their agency, communicative reflexives generally do not pursue their structural interests, and instead 'actively shun objective enablements to social advancement' (Archer, 2003: 350, 198-9). The reason why communicative reflexives do not pursue their structural interests, according to Archer, is because they are subjectively committed to the priority of family and friends in their lives. On Archer's interpretation, communicative reflexives believe that if they commit too much time to work, or indeed any other pursuit, relations with family and friends will suffer. Thus their interpretations and priorities as agents lead them to act against their putative interests. Having outlined Archer's position at some length, I now want to turn to critically evaluating it.

### **3. Criticising Archer's Account of Structural Interests**

In this section I want to engage critically with Archer's work by identifying two important, and interrelated, problems with her arguments. The first is a contradiction between Archer's insistence on the important causal influence that interests have, and her argument that interests may have no influence whatsoever on what actors do. The second problem is that Archer's account of interests as structures independent of agents' understandings cannot be upheld.

*Interests as causal influences that may not influence*

We have seen already that Archer makes quite strong claims about the impact of structural interests on actors. For Archer, vested interests are the way in which positions in social structure influence people, and of such positions, Archer states:

‘...those which are acquired involuntaristically profoundly affect both what is sought and what can be achieved through even the most heroic acts of voluntarism’ (Archer, 1995: 203)

So here Archer is stating that positions that actors haven’t chosen, and the structural interests that inhere within them, ‘profoundly affect’ what they seek, an even stronger statement than the earlier cited remark that interests ‘predispose’ actors to different courses of action. These are bold words. However, I would argue that both theoretically and in her empirical accounts, Archer undermines these claims.

This undermining is apparent, theoretically, in Archer’s discussion of the objective costs and penalties on action. As we have seen, Archer argues that the interests inherent in structural positions make certain courses of action less attractive because of the objective costs associated with them. Archer argues that such structural conditioning should be understood as ‘a supply of reasons for action’, contrasting the emphasis on ‘reasons’ with the idea that structures should be understood as ‘forces’ (Archer, 1995: 209). Despite this contrast, Archer initially argues for the force of these reasons on all actors, stating:

‘...as they [actors] weigh them in the balance, [objective] costs and penalties tip the scales in one direction, meaning that countervailing concerns would have to be strong enough to outweigh them.’ (Archer, 1995: 209)

Here, Archer is suggesting that structural costs and penalties have an intrinsic influence on *all* agents’ decision-making by tipping the scales one way, no matter what their subjective priorities are. The reference to the possibility of countervailing concerns makes it sound as if Archer is arguing that the influence of structure may or may not be counterbalanced by the influence of agency.

However, Archer also implies that agents can fully suspend the structural influences in question, stating:

‘It is agents alone who do the weighing, who assign values to the weights of incommensurables...’ (Archer, 1995: 209)

The implication of this argument is that objective costs and penalties do not necessarily ‘tip the scales in one direction’ for all actors. After all, if agents are assigning ‘values to the weights’ then the ‘objective’ weights that Archer presents as tipping the scales may be assigned a tiny or null value by agents. On the basis of Archer’s own claims, then, it is quite plausible to find that actors will treat structural reasons as weighing nothing, as having no weight. This would occur, for example, when actors have no subjectively defined concern with ‘improving their lot’ through social mobility, and thus find the reasons supposedly provided by their social

structural interests to be irrelevant to their concerns, as not influencing them in the slightest.

This interpretation of Archer's views is backed up by her claim about structurally-supplied reasons that 'as with any reason, agents have to find it good' (Archer, 1995: 209). It is surely the case that if agents do not find a reason good, they can simply ignore it in their deliberations, allowing it to have no influence on them. As such, Archer here undermines the idea that structural interests would necessarily be expected to exercise some influence on what actors do. Archer tacitly consents to the undermining of her claims about the influence of structural interests in those moments where she emphasizes the subjective basis of agents' values.

Archer's treatment of interests in her empirical work similarly undermines her bolder claims about the influence of structural interests. For example, in her analysis of the three types of healthy reflexive thinkers, we can see that, for Archer, only members of one of the three groups, the autonomous reflexives, are actually motivated to act in the way that Archer sees as consistent with their structural interests (Archer, 2003: 349-351). And when it comes to communicative reflexives, Archer certainly presents little or no evidence of their postulated structural interests 'predisposing' them towards seeking social mobility, let alone profoundly affecting what they seek after. She comes to argue the following about social structural influences:

'In fact, there is only a negative story to tell about the encounter between communicative reflexives and constraints or enablements, precisely because

the former systematically *evade* the latter over their life courses. In completing the sequence <concerns → projects → practices>, these subjects conceive of no occupational projects that activate either the constraints or enablements associated with the employment structure.' (Archer, 2007: 191. Archer's emphasis)

Thus the supposed interests of communicative reflexives have no influence on them. In making this kind of argument, Archer strongly undermines her former claim that structural interests exercise a general causal influence.

Critical realists tend to think that the kind of criticism I have put to Archer's approach can be defused by reference to a non-Humean account of causal relations in which causes *influence* actual outcomes rather than determining them. On this interpretation, Archer would be taken as saying that the objective structure of interests *influences* what Communicative Reflexives seek to do, predisposing them in certain ways, but does not *determine* it. Such a response would have two weaknesses. Firstly, Archer does not give any indication that communicative reflexives have been predisposed (influenced) towards social mobility but have wrestled themselves round to an alternative set of values. Secondly, and more fundamentally, Archer's own presentation is very clear: communicative reflexives are not predisposed towards a particular direction of action by their structural interests because they evade them. Thus Archer's analysis does not actually present the situation as one of dual causal influence. Rather, on Archer's account, it is the agential causal powers of communicative reflexives that explain the projects that are

undertaken and valued. And this is not a quirk of her empirical analysis – as mentioned above, the theoretical grounds for this are laid out in Archer’s arguments about agency and the process of agential weighing of courses of action. Thus Archer’s theoretical account of structural interests allows that agents may give structural interests no weight. As Archer analyses the situation, we do not necessarily have two causal influences; rather, in certain circumstances, the agent can render the structural interests entirely non-influential.

This problem with Archer’s analysis reflects wider issues with dualist analyses that have been identified by John Holmwood and Alexander Stewart (1991). Holmwood and Stewart argue that dualist approaches typically attempt to combine into one framework two elements which are defined in a way which precludes their combination into a consistent whole. On the one hand, dualists want to include structural elements which are argued to delimit possibilities for action in a way which applies to all actors. On the other hand, dualists want to include agency into their framework, which is understood to involve the creative or reflexive ability to cancel out, and thus act inconsistently with, structural inputs. As Holmwood and Stewart point out, given these elements it is hardly surprising that dualists get into difficulties with their understanding of structure: it is required to be both a determinate influence on all action and, in cases where agency is exercised, to not be a determinate influence. The result is that ‘the category of structure fails as an explanation of all the behaviours to which it should apply’ (Holmwood and Stewart,

1991: 89).<sup>5</sup> Strikingly, Holmwood and Stewart's work was published prior to the works of Archer discussed here, and yet, because the structure of her thought is a dualist one, their critique is applicable and insightful.

*Structural interests cannot provide reasons by themselves.*

This first criticism indicates that Archer's own emphasis on the role of agents' values in social life undermines her claims about the influence of structural interests on what they seek to do. The second, related, criticism I want to make questions Archer's approach further by criticising her idea that structural interests, operating as causal influences, can be identified separately from agents' goals and understandings. We have seen that, for Archer, the structure of interests operates as a causal influence by providing 'reasons' to agents (Archer, 1995: 201). Archer's discussion of what she means by this is limited. But if we look at the way Archer uses the term, it is apparent that she sees reasons as positive motivating factors, which provide a stimulus for agents to act in one way rather than another. Thus, for Archer, structural interests provide reasons for action insofar as social structural conditions provide a positive motivating factor influencing agents to take a particular direction of action. For example, Archer would see the structural interest inherent in a privileged place in the distribution of wealth as a factor that positively motivates an actor to engage in strategies to maintain the status quo. For ease of discussion, I will refer to a structural configuration with interests inherent in it as a 'situation'.

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<sup>5</sup> In relation to a critical realist approach, the point would have to be slightly reformulated to say that the category of structure fails to *contribute* to the explanation of all the behaviours to which it should apply.

To my mind, Archer's account hits two difficulties. The first of these arises from the role that agents' understandings play in motivating their actions. The point here is that the situation that an agent faces does not seem to have a direct motivating role; rather it is only agents' understandings of this situation that can motivate their action.<sup>6</sup> It might be the case that Bob is likely to get promoted if he plays golf with senior managers; but this state of affairs doesn't, in itself, provide motivation to Bob. It is only if he understands it right (and has the necessary goals, see below) that this situation provides a positive motivating factor. If Bob believes that playing golf with senior managers will actually harm his promotion chances, then the situational opportunity will not be motivating for him, and thus will not have a causal influence on him. Archer seems to allow for this kind of possibility when she states that agents can fail to recognize their interests (Archer, 1995: 206). But she does not work this through to see that situations and the structural interests supposed to be inherent in them cannot, therefore, directly provide reasons, and motivation, to agents. It is, rather, an agent's understanding of a situation that can be part of the motivation for action.<sup>7</sup> Thus, structural interests, as Archer characterizes them, cannot be a direct causal influence on the formation of agents' projects.

The second difficulty arises from the fact that Archer wishes to treat the characteristics of certain structural situations as a 'positive motivating factor'

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<sup>6</sup> This argument has analogies with Barry Hindess's point that interests should be understood as conceptions, rather than as determined by their social location (Hindess, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Realists might argue that the entity itself has a part to play in belief formation; that the situational chance for self-promotion plays a part in forming an individual's beliefs about the situation. I would accept that point, but one would have to be a direct realist to claim that situations impress their properties on agents in an unmediated way. More plausible is the claim that agents interact with situations (or learn from the interactions of others) and form theoretically mediated and fallible beliefs about them. And this doesn't permit the direct supplying of reasons from social structure to actor.



independently of the goals of the agent. But it seems much more plausible to argue that whether or not a situation is a 'positive motivating factor' depends on the goals of the agent. Let's take an example that relates closely to Archer's concerns.

Imagine that Jane is trying to decide whether or not to go to university.

Incorporating the correction required by the first criticism, the Archer-style claim would be: because Jane believes that going to university will promote social mobility this provides a reason (positive motivation) for Jane to go to university. However, I would argue that neither the situation in itself, nor the agent's belief about the character of the situation, tells us whether or not it is positively motivating. It is only when beliefs about the situation are combined with certain goals that the result is positive motivation to act. So it would only be if Jane had the project of promoting her social mobility that her beliefs about university study would give her a reason to attend. If Jane didn't want to be socially mobile, her beliefs about the university's capacities wouldn't be a reason for her to attend.

How serious are these difficulties for the cogency of Archer's approach? I would argue that both points undermine Archer's attempt to characterise the causal influence of structural interests as reasons. Firstly, such influences become indirect – it is not the structural situation itself that exercises an influence on what agents do, it is their understanding of it. Secondly, whereas Archer wishes to characterize structurally-based interests as reasons that are independent of agents' goals and values, this cannot be done. There are no goal-independent reasons; only goal-dependent ones. As Archer argues, goals are pursued because of their contribution to realizing the values of an agent. This means that structurally-based interests only

provide positive motivation to act in a certain way when they are consistent with a particular goal and a value-commitment that requires that goal for its realization. These arguments push the initial criticism of Archer's approach, offered above, even further. The earlier argument was that Archer allows that agents may ignore the reasons that derive from structural interest structures entirely. This argument suggests that Archer cannot even characterize these structural interests independently of an understanding of agents' goals and values.

#### **4. Conclusion: Towards an Alternative Analysis**

If these criticisms stand, Archer's analysis of interests as structural causes looks seriously problematic. As I have suggested throughout this article, Archer's account of interests is fundamentally linked to her dualist ontological arguments, and in this concluding section I want to briefly consider the wider ramifications of these criticisms for Archer's dualist approach. In doing so I will be considering the consequences of the earlier critique for Archer's defence of the notion that structure has an existence, character and causal influence that is independent of the understandings of agents. Secondly, I want to give some indication of what I would consider to be a preferable alternative approach to the social scientific analysis of interests.

Starting with the issue of structure, I suggested in the previous section that Archer's account of structural interests is not consistent with her claims about the independent causal influence and character of structural elements. Archer allows that structural interests may have no influence whatsoever if agents' subjective

values do not make them relevant. The generality of Archer's views on agency suggest that *any* structural element may have no influence on the social world, as is apparent in Archer's already cited remark that:

'[c]onditional influences may be agentially evaded, endorsed, repudiated or contravened' (Archer, 2003: 131).

This remark strongly implies that the conditioning influence of structure can be entirely irrelevant to agents because they can evade it or even repudiate it, that is, simply refuse to recognize this 'influence' or have any dealings with it. As Archer's argument implies that the influence of any structural element, including roles and institutions, may be repudiated by actors, it is hard for Archer to evade Holmwood and Stewart's critique that the concept of structural influence in dualist thought is undermined by the role given to agency (Holmwood, and Stewart, 1991).

In my view, aspects of the second criticism that I offered of Archer's account of structural interests can be similarly generalized to other elements of her structural account. Archer sees roles and institutions as operating through a conditioning influence on what agents do. However, as with structured interests, it is hard to see how this influence can have a determinate character and shape independent of agents' understandings. The way Archer conceptualizes the matter, it is as if all agents at a particular time are influenced by a role to share a single conception of that role, which they might then decide to diverge from in various agential ways (see Archer, 1995: 186-8) . However, it is not clear how this first step occurs: how the

single conception of the role is embedded into and unified across the minds of agents at a particular point in time before they decide how to respond agentially to it.

These remarks offer some sense of how the criticisms offered in the previous section of the article can be expanded to question Archer's wider analysis of structure. But I want to finish here with some more positive thoughts on how an alternative analysis of interests might proceed. Instead of social scientists treating interests as 'real' and as having a causal influence on actors, I want to recommend that social scientists focus both on actors' understandings of their interests and the potential limitations of these understandings. This orientation is consistent with my emphasis on the importance of actors' understandings and goals in analysing interests, and would involve trying to grasp which outcomes actors see as promoting their interests, as beneficial to them, and which they see as contrary to their interests. One immediate consequence of taking this point of view is that it encourages social scientists to consider a wider range of outcomes as potentially 'in the interests' of actors than those identified by Archer. Thus, it may be that agents see it as in their interests, as beneficial to them, to maintain strong social relationships. Such identifications need to be taken seriously by social scientists.

As I have already implied, however, giving attention to agents' understandings of their interests does not require that these understandings are uncritically accepted. Thus, although agents' understandings of their interests are being given an important role here, I want to advocate a problem-solving/pragmatist approach

rather than a constructionist view, and retain the idea that criticism of agents' interest accounts can be justified (see Holmwood, 1996; Ron, 2008). On this approach, social scientists can assess agents' interest accounts for problems and inconsistencies, and, if these can be identified, social scientists can propose alternative accounts which are justified insofar as they resolve these problems. These problems and inconsistencies can be found either in agents' understandings of which courses of action will further their goals or in agents' understandings of which goals are best for them. The first of these is a fairly familiar instrumental mode of critique which could be accepted even by those defending a subjectivist account of interests. An agent might believe that last-minute intensive cramming is the best way to prepare for an exam and achieve their goal of gaining entry to university. By contrast, the social scientist may be able to indicate the problematic memory-outcomes that result from cramming, and put forward a persuasive case that a longer period of less intensive work is likely to produce results which will promote the agent's goal more successfully. However, as noted in Section 2, this mode of critique is limited to addressing agents' understandings of how to realize their interests, rather than offering an assessment of their interests per se.

The second type of critique suggests that the evaluations by agents of the outcomes it is in their interests to pursue may be problematic and subject to justified criticism. This is the more fundamental mode of critique for distinguishing interest theories, because neither subjectivist nor consistently constructionist accounts permit this mode. However, there are social scientific precedents for it. For example, one way to interpret aspects of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is to take it as

identifying problematic conceptions of interests which identified the appropriate goal for American women in the 1950s to be that of a provider of care for husbands, children and sofas (among other things). Friedan argues that pursuing this goal generated difficulties for women – the malaise and depression which Friedan famously referred to as the ‘problem with no name’ – and should be replaced with a goal of self-realization in which women utilize their full capacities by contributing to meaningful work in the public sphere. Although much more could be said about this kind of case, it does suggest the possibility of identifying problems with agents’ goals, their conception of what it is in their interests to achieve, and giving a justified critique of them.

One advantage of the problem-solving approach that I am advocating is that it discourages social scientific analysts from imposing an account of interests on agents which implies that these agents are acting against their own interests despite no problematic outcomes being identified for them. In my view, such impositions are an unintended consequence of Archer’s approach and this is most clear, again, in her treatment of communicative reflexives. In *Making Our Way Through the World* Archer argues that communicative reflexives are oriented in their lives towards self-sacrifice and self-abnegation (Archer, 2007: 97, 175, 178-9). A central reason for this characterisation is Archer’s contention that throughout their lives communicative reflexives cut down their occupational projects to promote their concern with their families (Archer, 2007: 175). Read through the lens of Archer’s interest account the decisions and action of communicative reflexives may seem to be sacrificial. But Archer admits that communicative reflexives do not see things this way:

‘...although fully self-aware about what they have objectively foregone...subjectively they will not entertain this as sacrificial action – because they believe that the outcome has been beneficial and resulted in all-round contentment.’ (Archer, 2007: 175)

In my view, Archer’s attribution of a sacrificial orientation despite the denials of communicative reflexives is a product of her imposition of a narrow view of interests. If we take the agents’ understandings of their interests seriously, we can see that the actions communicative reflexives take are oriented to realizing the outcomes that they value, close family and friendship relations, rather than being sacrificial in character.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth being clear that it is not the very idea that agents may not be acting in their interests that I am rejecting. As I have suggested, the problem-solving approach recommended as an alternative does not argue that actors’ views of their interests must be accepted on their own terms. However, it does suggest that to legitimately contest these accounts it must be possible to identify problems and inconsistencies for actors on their own terms, and this is what Archer does not do with communicative reflexives. There are some possibilities in the case just considered that a pragmatist social critic could explore: perhaps communicative

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<sup>8</sup> To try to clarify this point: I am not suggesting that Archer sees no value in inter-personal relationships. Rather, what I am suggesting is that her analytical apparatus does not permit her to identify the pursuit of relations with friends and family as in the interests of Communicative Reflexives. Rather, her mode of analysis pushes Archer to see such a pursuit as involving a ‘sacrificial’ orientation on their part, despite what the actors actually report.

reflexives are pursuing a goal that is not best for them (although they generally report being contented, as Archer notes in the quote above); perhaps they could have achieved social mobility without jeopardising family and friendship relations; or, more fundamentally, perhaps it is in the interests of communicative reflexives to promote social change such that they can experience positive relations with friends and family without this resulting in social disadvantage. However, from a problem-solving perspective, a persuasive case would need to be made to identify problems located within the understandings and experiences of communicative reflexives, rather than contrary interest-attributions being ungrounded in such problems.<sup>9</sup>

To sum up, it might be useful to return to the four reasons that I gave for evaluating Archer's work on interests. The first reason was that Archer's analysis of interests was under-appraised, and I have, in response to this, engaged in an assessment which suggests that there are serious problems with her approach. I have suggested that Archer's treatment of structure and interests is unsatisfactory, insofar as it fails to sustain her idea that interests are a significant causal influence on the social world that can be characterised independently of the understandings of contemporary agents. The second reason was that the notion of interests is closely connected with the notion of structure in Archer's work, and appraising the former helps to give some critical purchase on the latter. Although I haven't been able to discuss Archer's wider notion of structure in great detail, I have suggested that it may well share the problems that were identified with Archer's account of structural interest. The third

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<sup>9</sup> Archer developed her account of the internal conversation in dialogue with the pragmatist ideas of Mead and Peirce, but she clearly intends to offer a realist, rather than a pragmatist, account.



reason for engagement was that Archer uses the notion of interests in her empirical analysis, and considering this work helps us to assess the value of a critical realist approach to empirical research. In this article I focused particularly on Archer's analysis of communicative reflexives, and suggested that it was unsatisfactory in its treatment of the interests of this group. Of course, this is only one example of critical realist empirical work, and so even if the criticisms offered here are accepted, we should not be over-hasty in generalizing from the analysis. Finally, I suggested that there is a general social theoretical issue of how best to analyse interests in social science, and I have made some positive, problem-solving-based suggestions regarding this in the final section. My claim is that instead of thinking of interests as causal influences that may not influence, social scientists are better off thinking of interests as characterisations of what it is beneficial for agents to do, and working at grasping agents' conceptions of their interests and identifying problems that these conceptions might have. If problems are identified, social scientists can potentially make a positive contribution to the social world by offering solutions that help actors to better understand and realize their interests.

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