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Exploring Cultural Relations In Global Societies: From Multiculturalism To Reflexivity In Relational And Morphogenetic Approaches

Abstract

This chapter examines the intricate relationships between society and culture, understood as distinct yet interdependent dimensions of collective life. Every society carries its own cultural repertoire, consisting of values, norms, practices and symbolic mediations that provide meaning and orientation to social actors. In contemporary contexts, however, processes of globalization and intensified exchanges among different communities have redefined the boundaries of culture, fostering the emergence of multicultural and transnational configurations. These dynamics contribute to the diffusion of a cosmopolitan outlook and a tendency towards cultural homogenization, while simultaneously generating countervailing movements of cultural particularism aimed at preserving specific identities and asserting the legitimacy of diverse cultural rights. Within this scenario, cultural communication is increasingly promoted as a space of dialogue and encounter between traditions. Its strength lies in providing a symbolic ground where different cultural perspectives can meet. Nevertheless, when confined to the mere comparison of communicative codes, values or rights, such dialogue reveals intrinsic limitations: it risks overlooking the deeper social relations that shape identity, belonging and recognition. This reduction leaves unresolved the challenges posed by interculturality and multiculturalism, as well as the tensions between identifying with one's own culture and being open to others. To address these issues, the contribution adopts the relational approach (Donati) and the morphogenetic perspective (Archer), which together offer a theoretical framework capable of reframing the culture–society nexus beyond the dichotomy of relativism and ethnocentrism. By

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focusing on the relational constitution of social life and on the morphogenetic processes through which cultural meanings are reproduced and transformed, these perspectives highlight the reflexive potential of cultural encounters. The analysis thus underscores the importance of recognition, acceptance and identity negotiation as key semantic dimensions for understanding cultural relations in complex societies.

1. Globalisation and cultural diversity: rethinking multiculturalism

Society and culture represent two closely connected dimensions, although they are not perfectly overlapping. Every society has its own culture, understood as the set of symbolic, material, and immaterial elements that hold particular value for the members of the community and contribute to defining the shared horizon of meanings (Melucci, 2000; Crespi, 2015). In this sense, culture is never an abstract or neutral reality, but the living expression of a social group, its practices and its systems of reference (Hałas, 2017).

However, the contemporary context, marked by increasingly pervasive processes of globalisation, necessitates broadening the classic definition of culture and complementing it with the concept of multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 2025; Wong, 2008). The latter refers to the coexistence of multiple cultural traditions in the same social space, a condition that increasingly characterises today's societies (Colombo, 2015). Talking about the role that culture plays in social life, therefore, means taking a broader view of the term: it encompasses not only values, norms and models of behaviour, but also rituals, representations and practices which, taken together, constitute the symbolic and normative fabric of a social context (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005).

In the age of globalisation, cultural relations are complex, multi-level processes in which trends towards homogenisation and differentiation are dynamically intertwined (Condorelli, 2018). On the one hand, there is the prospect of a 'global culture,' supported by the acceleration of exchanges and the growing interconnection between individuals and communities from different worlds (Lemert, 2021). This gives rise to a transnational and cosmopolitan horizon, capable of crossing the boundaries of individual social units and influencing their structures and practices (Gozdecka et al., 2014). On the other hand, however, these same processes reveal phenomena of cultural particularism, which aim to defend specific identities and reaffirm the legitimacy of differences (Johansson, 2024). Cultural globalisation, therefore, appears as an intrinsically ambivalent phenomenon: while it promotes dialogue and encounter, it also highlights tensions, resistance and identity claims (Modood, 2019).

Within this scenario, intercultural communication takes on a decisive role. It presents itself as a privileged space for mediation, based on dialogue and encounter between different perspectives (Cantle, 2016). Its strength lies in its ability to open up common ground, a sort of 'contact zone' where cultures can meet (Barrett, 2016). However, if confined to the communicative level alone, it risks revealing significant limitations, as it does not fully address the social and relational dimension of intercultural processes (Brahm Levey, 2012; Zapata-Barrero, 2024). The main difficulty lies in managing the boundaries between cultural belonging, multiculturalism and interculturalism, avoiding a reduction of the encounter to a mere comparison of communicative codes or a claim to rights, rather than the authentic construction of social relations (Meer & Modood, 2012; Mansouri & Elias, 2025).

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by proposing an analysis of the relationship between cultural representations, identity and intercultural communication processes. To this end, two fundamental theoretical approaches are relevant: the morphogenetic approach, developed by Margaret Archer (1985, 1996, 2013, 2024), and the relational approach, developed by Pierpaolo Donati (2009, 2011, 2018).

Both perspectives offer useful conceptual tools for overcoming the reductive alternative between cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, allowing us to restore complexity to the reflection on the link between society and culture (Archer & Morgan, 2020; Donati & Archer, 2015). The morphogenetic approach allows us to grasp the historical and structural dimension of cultural transformations, highlighting the mechanisms of change and adaptation (Archer, 2000, 2003). The relational approach, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of social bonds, everyday practices and dynamics of mutual recognition, showing how culture is constituted and transformed in concrete relationships between individuals and groups (Donati, 2012, 2016; Buys & Marotta, 2021).

The aim of this work is therefore to bring these two perspectives into dialogue, offering a critical reading of how culture is configured and reworked in an interconnected world. The analysis will focus in particular on the implications of globalisation for cultural processes, showing how they constantly move between homogenising forces and differentiating tensions, and how theoretical reflection can help to shed light on these dynamics (Mangone & Russo, 2025).

2. Beyond multiculturalism: the emergence of interculturalism

Contemporary complex society is characterised by structural cultural plurality, no longer confined to specific areas or territories, but widespre-

ad and transversal, made possible and accelerated by the processes of globalisation, digitalisation and human mobility (Gozdecka et al., 2014). This cultural complexity manifests itself in the coexistence – often in the same geographical space – of different worldviews, values, religious practices, lifestyles and symbolic codes (Colombo, 2015).

However, the mere presence of cultural diversity does not automatically lead to integration or mutual enrichment; what matters is the type of relationship established between different cultures and the social mechanisms through which they interact, influence, or repel each other (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005; Crespi, 2015).

Multiculturalism is a concept that posits, in a society where multiple cultures and communities coexist, it is essential for the survival and stability of this social form that coexistence be regulated by mutual respect, without direct or indirect assimilation into the dominant culture and group (Wong, 2008). The term multiculturalism is now used to describe the state of modern Western societies, defined precisely by the simultaneous presence of a plurality of different groups that serve as the basis for the identification, recognition, and orientation of their members' actions. The aim is to react primarily to the abstract nature of modern universalism, which, at least in this historical phase, has mistakenly believed that it can eliminate three main properties of community identity: its particularity, its difference, and its dimension (Savidan, 2010).

2.1. From static coexistence to cultural interaction

Cultural differences are not new, as it has always been an integral part of human history. However, the attention that must necessarily be paid to the diversity that characterises the population is different. In a globalised world such as ours, there is a pressing need to re-evaluate the link between individual freedom and the culture to which one belongs (Loh, 2022). This theme refers to the inevitability of contact between cultures, a contact that, in more or less conflictual terms, has always characterised human exchanges but which, in the post-modern globalised world, has taken on unpredictable dimensions as the possibilities for encounter/clash have grown both in terms of frequency and speed (Johansson, 2024).

The coexistence of multiple cultures, as envisioned by the concept of multiculturalism, therefore appears to be a significant challenge, especially for the most advanced societies (Kymlicka, 2025). This challenge relates to the concrete possibility of building a civil coexistence between people, despite their mutual differences. Of course, recognition and acceptance of others are essential elements without which phenomena such as racism and, as already mentioned, ethnocentrism arise.

The risk of multiculturalism is twofold: it can evolve into what has been defined as 'impotent relativism', i.e. a flattening of cultures, or it can lead to 'the presumptuous ethnocentrism of those who believe that only their own culture is truly valid' (Belardinelli, 2006, pp. 116).

However, this open contract leaves many doubts about the real possibility of total cultural relativism. In fact, paradoxically, the phenomenon of cultural relativism seems to lead in practice to an increasingly accentuated absolutisation of particular cultural definitions, to dogmatic forms that do not accept being questioned. Interestingly, every small particular culture wants to replace the previous dominant culture. An interesting example of this attitude is politically correct language, which, by exaggerating the use of language that is not discriminatory towards anyone, creates conflict even among minorities fighting against the same dominant culture. Overcoming this stagnation could then be part of a complementary vision of cultures, in which each culture limits the others but at the same time complements them (Modood, 2019).

2.2. Interculturalism as a dialogic alternative

The concept of interculturalism differs from multiculturalism in that the term itself 'refers more to a project than to a simple statement of fact; it presupposes the idea (and the commitment) to seek forms, tools and opportunities to develop constructive and creative dialogue and exchange' (Pinto Minerva, 2004, pp. 13). The basic concept is more dynamic than the more static concept of multiculturalism, as it involves the comparison of unequal ideas and different values originating from different cultures (Meer, 2016). Clearly, this refers to all the distinctive elements that characterise a culture, thus excluding the universal values mentioned above. However, this does not mean accepting the idea of cultural difference in a negative sense, but rather as an exaltation of it through 'a dialectical intertwining of exchanges necessary for mutual recognition' (Donati, 2009).

These statements aim to lead to the idea that the term 'intercultural' is more appropriate than 'multicultural', as the former, through the prefix 'inter', as Pinto Minerva argues, 'indicates the founding matrix of intercultural 'reciprocity', its fertile ground for negotiation and exchange, highlighting the richness and productivity of comparison' (2004, pp. 13). The prefix 'multi', on the other hand, when used in the multicultural sense, 'does not in itself imply a relationship and can serve as a theoretical backdrop for projects of cultural ghettoisation, cultural indifference or extreme cultural relativism that theorise the impossibility of dialogue' (Giaccardi, 2005, pp. 48).

Multiculturalism, although it has had the merit of promoting the recognition of cultural differences, has revealed significant theoretical and

practical limitations over time. As Meer and Modood (2016) observe, it risks being reduced to a policy of passive tolerance, incapable of generating authentic dialogue between different communities. In this sense, several scholars have pointed out that multiculturalism can lead to forms of symbolic segregation or ‘cultural ghettoisation’ (Zapata-Barrero, 2024), favouring parallel coexistence rather than the construction of a common space. Kymlicka (2018) has demonstrated how the multiculturalist model, although originally rooted in political liberalism, is now struggling to adapt to new forms of global diversity, characterised by migration, transnationalism, and fluid identities (Lemert, 2021). Faced with these challenges, authors such as Cantle (2016) and Levey (2012) have proposed interculturalism as an alternative paradigm, capable of overcoming the static and institutional approach of multiculturalism, instead valuing relationships, encounters and creative dialogue between cultures (Mansouri & Elias, 2025). Interculturalism, as Barrett (2016) notes, does not renounce the recognition of differences but integrates it with an orientation towards reciprocity and interaction, thus presenting itself as the most appropriate response to the cultural complexity of contemporary societies (Buys & Marotta, 2021).

This reflective research on the value dimension of intra- and intercultural experience, while on the one hand constituting a proper individual exercise in accounting for one’s own arguments and lifestyles, on the other hand, however, still fails to explain how a plurality of actors manage to find common ground (Donati, 2012).

The tension between unifying and differentiating forces is the fertile ground on which contemporary cultural dynamics develop (Condorelli, 2018). On the one hand, the need to integrate into a global network requires the adoption of specific shared models; on the other, the valorisation of historical roots and local experiences guides the creation of distinctive forms of identity (Savidan, 2010; Kymlicka, 2025; Mangone & Russo, 2025). This often-paradoxical interaction is at the heart of theoretical reflection that attempts to explain the transformations taking place in a globalised world.

This evokes intercultural communication as a mediating space between different cultural universes (Bennett, 2007; Colella & Grassi, 2008). The perspective of intercultural communication certainly has some merits, first and foremost that of affirming the existence of an intermediate space between complete understanding within each culture and total foreignness between cultures (Brahm Levey, 2012). In this way, it breaks away from the limits imposed on the idea, typical of cultural relativism, that a shared world is impossible due to the unbridgeable gap between total understanding, achievable only within the homogeneity of a cultural community, and foreignness—the total otherness between different cul-

tural communities. However, for the boundaries between the three domains – inter-, intra-, and multicultural – to be appropriately managed, the proposal must not be reduced to a purely communicational exercise (Zapata-Barrero, 2024).

In this context, Archer's morphogenetic approach is particularly appropriate, as it allows us to analyse how cultural structures evolve, including in response to external forces (Archer, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2024). At the same time, the relational approach offers an interpretation that focuses on the processes of interaction and negotiation, which are fundamental to understanding how identities are constructed and reconstructed in times of profound change (Donati, 2011, 2016, 2018; Donati & Archer, 2015).

3. Relational reason and interculturality: towards a new sociological perspective

3.1. Donati's critique of multiculturalism

Starting from a critique of the limits of multiculturalism and analysing the challenges still open to the intercultural approach, sociologist Pierpaolo Donati proposes a new interpretation based on 'relational reason' (2018).

The limitation that Donati proposes is that relating to the management of the three domains of intracultural, intercultural and multicultural, in which the first involves 'total identification of members with the culture to which they belong', the second 'cultural mediation as a possibility for limited translation and communication of one culture into another' and the third 'segmentation of cultural universes that do not communicate with each other' (Donati, 2009; Buys & Marotta, 2021).

The problem lies in understanding how we can move from total otherness to partial understanding, and then to complete understanding. The deficit seems to be related to the approach in terms of comparison between means and styles of communication, rather than between people (Barrett, 2016; Brahm Levey, 2012; Modood, 2019).

According to Donati (2008), multiculturalism is a symptom and manifestation of the crisis in West Liberal societies (lib-lab). They have produced a desertification of the connective tissue of society, immunising individuals from social relations by systematically removing their sense of belonging and connection, to the extent that Western culture itself has lost its internal integration.

Multiculturalism has clear limitations that emerge on several fronts: epistemological, ethical and political.

From an epistemological perspective, multiculturalism aspires to the promise of recognising identities, but in fact fails in its intent because it is based on epistemological relativism that aims to nullify any notion of truth, which is, in fact, the prerequisite for recognising identities (Archer, 1985).

A second limitation, from an ethical point of view, is the multiculturalist leitmotif whereby everything that is possible becomes permissible (ethical relativism). This makes it impossible to develop an ethic of co-existence.

A third limitation, from a political perspective, lies in the promise of tolerance generated by multiculturalism, a promise that is not fulfilled because one of the possible outcomes of multiculturalism is the development of intolerance. This happens because the multiculturalist perspective attributes to political power (the state) the task of maintaining peace through the monopoly of force, when reality tells us that this has not prevented wars from happening.

The most significant limitation that Donati sees in the multiculturalist option lies in the lack of relationality between cultures: multiculturalism is therefore blind to culture as a relational fact (Donati, 2012; Hałas, 2017).

According to Donati, it is therefore possible that the failures of multiculturalism will stimulate society to reflect on itself in order to become capable of expressing, in the words of Margaret Archer, ‘unity in diversity’ (Archer, 2000; Donati & Archer, 2015).

Donati discusses possible alternatives to multiculturalism and wonders whether interculturality is a solution. The concept of interculturality can help accommodate cultures with each other, facilitating a *modus vivendi* between them in the name of a principle of justice that recognises the unjust nature of exclusion (Donati, 2008a; Cante, 2016). The thesis is that the theory of interculturality has the advantage of emphasising the ‘inter’, i.e. what lies between cultures, but does not yet have the conceptual and operational tools to understand and manage problems in the public sphere when different cultures – ‘different’ in some respects and ‘diverse’ in others – express radically conflicting values (Zapata-Barrero, 2024; Mansouri & Elias, 2025).

The difficulties of interculturality stem from two shortcomings: insufficient internal reflection within individual cultures and the lack of a relational interface between cultures (between the subjects that bear them). Indeed, it neutralises them, because it addresses the value dilemmas inherent in sociocultural differences through criteria of ethical indifference (Gomasasca, 2004; Crespi, 2015; Loh, 2022). Such criteria nullify reflexivity and prevent individuals from understanding the profound reasons behind the life experiences of others. Rationality is emptied of its meaning and understanding capacity (Archer, 2003).

To move beyond the failures of multiculturalism and the fragility of intercultural discourse, a secular approach to the problem of coexistence between cultures is needed, one that can reinvigorate reason through a new semantics of inter-human difference/diversity. Donati proposes the development of 'relational reason', beyond the already known forms of rationality. Making reason relational may be the way forward in imagining a new configuration of society that is capable of humanising the processes of globalisation and growing migration (Colombo, 2015; Buys & Marotta, 2021).

The society that Donati calls 'post-modern' will be more or less human depending on the way and the degree to which it succeeds in expanding human rationality by articulating it in its inequalities, differences and diversities (Donati, 2016; Donati, 2018).

3.2. Recognition as a relational act

The possibility of going beyond the attempt at simple coexistence of cultures also involves reflection on a new semantics of recognition (of otherness and difference): in general, to recognise means to identify something by establishing a relationship of identity between one object, one perception, one image, and another (another), by means of a common characteristic that has already been identified (Donati & Archer, 2015).

The act of recognition in this sense involves a series of steps; attributing an identity means approving it, i.e. finding confirmation of its truth (Donati, 2008). Only recently have scholars focused their attention on the various meanings attributable to this type of recognition.

In summary, the latter is described based on three major semantics:

The semantics of identity: these describe recognition as grasping an object through the mind and thought, linking together images and perceptions that relate to it. It indicates discerning, identifying and knowing through memory, judgment and action. The recognition of cultural identity, therefore, occurs through the attribution of an identity.

The semantics of acceptance: these interpret recognition in terms of approval, i.e. considering an object, person or thing to be valid. In fact, it is one thing to identify something and another to accept it as true. In this case, recognising cultural identity means attesting to its truthfulness.

The semantics of gratitude refer to those who view recognition as a means of expressing gratitude, testifying that we are indebted to someone for something or for an action. The recognition of cultural identity, in addition to acknowledging and accepting it, is a gesture of gratitude for what it represents.

The three previous semantics remain essentially cognitive acts, while it is necessary to introduce a relational dimension. Beyond the classification

of modes of recognition, it is essential to consider the social process. In fact, real recognition only exists through the concrete activation of all the specified semantics: the absence of one of them would compromise recognition itself (Donati, 2018; Hałas, 2017).

As Donati observes, 'to recognise is to apply the guiding distinction of acceptance of the Other (their identity, their truth, and gratitude towards them) to what emerges in interaction with them and, in particular, over time, when change transforms the Other in such a significant way that I could fail to recognise them in their new form' (2008: 42).

So what becomes fundamental in the recognition of the Other?

Reflexivity. Only through a certain reflective activity is it possible to speak of recognition as a 'relationship of knowing again, of knowing by returning reflectively to what we thought we knew' (Ibidem: 43; Archer, 2003).

Starting from the relational dimension, recognition acquires further importance because it is from the relationship itself that the quality of the social fabric that characterises a society derives. The relationship of mutual recognition is the cornerstone, 'the elementary unit that founds sociality', in the various expressions in which sociality manifests itself. The recogniser and the recognised constitute generalised actors. Within recognition, there are not only two actors, but a multiplicity of subjects, both individual and collective. The differences that give subjects their identity can be traced back to the social rules of acceptance and exchange, as they are inherent in the relationships produced by society. Recognising the Other, therefore, corresponds to the recognition of a specific form of sociality (Donati & Archer, 2015).

The relational semantics attributed to the system of recognising cultural identities therefore offer new and important food for thought.

Firstly, it avoids the thesis of exclusivism, which affirms the presence of a single culture; it eludes the point of view of inclusivism, which attributes the same importance to various cultural forms; it escapes the theory of indifferent and neutralising pluralism, which sees cultural identity as something that a subject can choose to assume based on their preferences (Scocco & Crescenti, 2024).

Secondly, it highlights the great differentiation of cultural identities within a social system increasingly invaded by globalisation (Gozdecka et al., 2014; Mangone & Russo, 2025).

Thirdly and finally, it is capable of distinguishing between various forms of recognition by relating the different actors of recognition.

It is this type of recognition that can open up space for interaction between cultures, as it allows us to see that recognition is a relational activity that refers to relationships, rather than to simple objects or unrelated 'entities'. Recognition in relational semantics enables us to identify it as a

gift circuit, and in this sense, it requires a strong reflective activity. Recognition as a relationship (not a unilateral act) is a re-knowing, a knowing by returning reflectively to what we thought we knew but no longer recognise or do not recognise in all its depth or novelty. 'Relational reason' therefore offers a framework for rethinking intercultural dynamics.

4. Understanding intercultural complexity through morphogenesis

A further sociological perspective that contributes to understanding the complexity of these relations, with a focus on the dynamics of structure and agent over time, is offered by Margaret Archer's morphogenetic theory (Archer, 2013; 2024).

Margaret Archer's morphogenetic theory provides an additional effective theoretical tool for understanding the complexity of intercultural relations in contemporary society, analysing how cultural structures and social agents transform each other over time.

Contemporary society presents itself as a mosaic of cultures, religions, values and languages coexisting in the same social and institutional space. This reality, the result of global processes such as migration, transnational mobility and the digital circulation of symbols and meanings, requires sociological reflection that goes beyond simplistic interpretations of 'peaceful coexistence' or 'clash of civilisations' (Archer, 2003; Donati, 2016).

4.1. Culture, agency and structural transformation

In Margaret Archer's morphogenetic perspective, cultures should not be understood as rigid and immutable entities, but rather as dynamic cultural structures composed of a set of beliefs, norms and symbolic meanings which, although historically established, are susceptible to transformation (Archer, 1996, 2000; Hałas, 2017).

The morphogenetic model enables us to analyse how these cultural structures interact over time with social agents, which, in turn, can contribute to their reproduction or modification. In other words, cultures do not 'evolve' spontaneously, nor do they transform through simple contact: cultural change is the result of an interactive and temporal process involving structures and agents.

From this perspective, cultures are not closed or invariant systems, but open and stratified structures composed of elements that can come into tension with each other and interact with other cultures through relationships that are not always harmonious (Archer & Morgan, 2020; Donati, 2021). Archer distinguishes between the level of cultural ideas (emerging culture) and that of the social practices and institutions that

embody them. This allows us to recognise that culture is never unitary, but traversed by contradictions and margins of transformation.

This perspective also highlights the power asymmetries that underlie cultural relations: not all cultures enjoy the same symbolic recognition or equal access to the means of social reproduction. Dominant cultures tend to define the frameworks of public discourse, while minority cultures often find themselves having to negotiate their symbolic and material space. In this sense, Archer differs from more optimistic readings of multiculturalism, which often take for granted the possibility of a ‘fair dialogue’ between cultures, overlooking the structural inequalities and unresolved tensions that such dialogue entails.

In the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1996, 2022; Donati & Archer, 2015), pre-existing cultural conditions (T1) form the backdrop against which social action occurs. When two or more cultural systems come into contact – as happens in migration, historical colonisation processes, or contemporary multi-ethnic societies – a phase of interaction (T2-T3) is triggered, in which individuals and groups confront differences, negotiate their meanings, sometimes contest them, or reinterpret specific aspects of them. This interactive phase is decisive because there are no predefined outcomes: contact can lead to cultural hybridisation, conflict, assimilation, syncretism or segregation. Only later (T4), depending on the outcomes of these interactions, can the overall cultural system be transformed (morphogenesis) or preserved (morphostasis).

The novelty of Archer’s theory lies in recognising that cultural change is neither mechanical nor guaranteed, but depends on interactive dynamics and the agentic strategies activated.

This approach allows us to grasp the relational, processual and non-deterministic nature of intercultural relations. Cultures, as social structures, act as constraints and/or opportunities for the action of agents, but they can also modify them. In a complex society, therefore, the coexistence of cultures is never a neutral fact: it is the product of power relations, institutional practices, public narratives and, above all, the choices and actions of the social actors involved.

4.2. Reflexivity in intercultural dynamics

A key element in Margaret Archer’s theory is the role of the human agent as a reflective subject, capable of thinking critically about their own context, evaluating the options available and choosing a course of action. This approach represents an important departure from more deterministic views, in which individuals are passively shaped by culture or social structures. Archer emphasises instead the ability of human beings to po-

sition themselves in relation to the world in which they live, to question norms, to reinterpret traditions and, if necessary, to promote change.

The central point of Margaret Archer's thinking is that individuals are not simply shaped by the social or cultural structures in which they are immersed, but are reflective agents, capable of critically evaluating their context and acting intentionally to change it. In particular, in the theory of human reflexivity (2003).

In the case of intercultural relations, this reflexivity manifests itself powerfully: individuals are confronted with different symbolic and value systems and must continually redefine their identity, cultural boundaries and affiliations. Managing cultural difference is never a purely external issue, but becomes an integral part of identity processes: who am I in relation to the other? How does the other challenge me, enrich me or threaten me?

Morphogenetic theory allows us to analyse how agents, through their projects, choices and everyday practices, actively contribute to transforming or reproducing the cultural context. The forms of intercultural coexistence that we see in contemporary societies – from inclusive integration to symbolic segregation – are the result of agentive strategies, not social automatisms. This applies to both minorities who demand recognition of their culture and to members of the majority who can choose between openness to dialogue and identity closure.

In this context, Archer is critical of a certain multiculturalist rhetoric that conceives cultures as homogeneous containers to be respected as such. According to her, 'static' multiculturalism risks essentialising cultures, preventing individuals from negotiating their identities reflectively and creatively. In other words, when culture is conceived as a fixed set of values to be protected, people are prevented from transforming it, criticising it or rejecting certain aspects of it (Archer, 2000; Modood, 2019).

However, reflective agents do not act in a vacuum. Institutional structures, public policies and dominant social imaginaries mediate their choices. For example, a school system that values cultural diversity can facilitate students' critical reflection and promote a culture of mutual respect; conversely, a political discourse based on fear of difference can inhibit openness and encourage identity closure. Similarly, material conditions – such as available cultural or economic capital – can facilitate or hinder access to more complex modes of reflection.

Ultimately, agentive reflexivity is not just a theoretical element, but a fundamental key to understanding how intercultural relations take concrete form in everyday life. It is through the reflection and action of social agents that cultures truly enter into dialogue, transform or crystallise, and that complex societies find – or fail to find – ways of coexisting sustainably.

The morphogenetic approach proposed by Margaret Archer has the merit of overcoming both structural determinism, which reduces subjects to mere executors of cultural norms, and absolute relativism, which denies the possibility of understanding and dialogue between different cultures.

Instead of considering cultures as monolithic blocks in conflict or harmony, Archer invites us to look at cultural relations as open, historically situated processes that are deeply intertwined with the dynamics of social action (Archer, 1985; Donati, 2024).

This implies a sociological reading that is more attentive to the timing of cultural change, the role of subjective experiences in shaping culture, and the ways in which cultural structures are contested, reinterpreted, or reaffirmed. In a complex society, therefore, intercultural dialogue cannot be viewed as a simple exchange of traditions, but rather as a reflective and often conflictual process of co-creating meanings.

Finally, Archer's perspective suggests that the management of relations between cultures cannot be separated from political and social action aimed at recognising agents as active and capable of transformation. Promoting conditions that facilitate reflexivity – such as critical education, civic participation and public dialogue – means creating spaces where cultural complexity can be experienced not as a threat but as a resource for building more inclusive and aware societies.

The morphogenetic approach proposed by Archer has important implications for the sociology of culture and the study of complex societies.

First, it invites us to consider culture not as a given, but as a historical and social process in constant evolution, in which structures and agents co-construct themselves over time. This view diverges from static, functionalist, or culturalist approaches, which often reduce culture to a background variable or an unchangeable tradition.

Secondly, the emphasis on reflexivity allows us to value individual and collective agency, recognising that cultural change is never automatic, but the result of discursive practices, negotiations and conflicts. This is particularly relevant in a global context where identities are fluid, hybrid and often fragmented, but also subject to attempts at authoritarian and identitarian re-inscription.

Ultimately, Archer's theory is closely tied to the debate on multiculturalism. It challenges both radical relativism, which uncritically places all cultures on the same level, and assimilationist universalism, which denies the legitimacy of difference. Archer proposes a middle way: recognising cultures as open and transformable systems, not as inviolable blocks; valuing agents as subjects capable of criticism and change, not as passive bearers of traditions.

This position entails revising policies of coexistence: it is not enough to guarantee the formal coexistence of different cultures; it is necessary

to promote reflexivity, critical dialogue, and the possibility for everyone to negotiate their own cultural position. This also implies recognising conflicts as an integral part of the morphogenetic process, rather than as anomalies to be suppressed.

5. Integrating relational and morphogenetic approaches to cultural change

Cultural transformations cannot be understood as monolithic phenomena; rather, they must be analysed as the outcome of multiple interacting factors. The morphogenetic approach conceptualises change as a gradual process rooted in complex historical trajectories, in which structures acquire emergent properties that unfold over time. Conversely, the relational approach highlights the negotiated and communicative dimensions of interaction, wherein identities are continually redefined through engagement with others.

This epistemological complementarity indicates that, for a comprehensive understanding of cultural phenomena in a globalised context, it is essential to account for both structural-historical factors and relational-interactive dynamics. Such an integration enables the overcoming of reductionist perspectives, providing a framework capable of encompassing the complexity and multidimensionality of socio-cultural transformations.

In contemporary contexts, marked by increasing interconnection and fluid identities, an integrated perspective becomes indispensable. Only by combining historical-structural and relational-interactive dimensions is it possible not merely to analyse cultural phenomena more holistically, but also to develop strategies and methodologies for addressing the tensions generated by the interplay between homogenising and differentiating forces.

In conclusion, acknowledging the specificity of each culture requires avoiding two symmetrical pitfalls: on the one hand, a passive relativism that assumes all cultures possess equal value; on the other, an ethnocentrism that deems one's own culture uniquely valid. Respect for cultures different from one's own does not necessitate assuming their equal worth from all perspectives, nor presuming that intercultural dialogue occurs spontaneously or without conflict. Learning from cultural encounter is possible precisely because cultures both complement and limit one another; depending on the vantage point, one culture may in certain respects be considered superior to another.

Ultimately, the challenge lies in safeguarding the universalist aspirations inherent in every culture while remaining open to difference and

diversity, without succumbing to homogenisation. To affirm that all cultures have something meaningful to contribute does not imply that they contribute in identical ways; otherwise, cultural encounters and exchanges would lose their significance.

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