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## The time of the human: temporality and philosophical sociology

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Daniel Chernilo's (2014, 340) invitation to the project of philosophical sociology is eloquent and elegant: 'the questions that matter to sociologists are always, in the last instance, also philosophical ones'. Chernilo invites to see the philosophical underpinnings of sociological questions and the sociological dimension of philosophical questions, without conflating the particularities of each discipline. His invitation is surely welcomed, regardless of the specific reservations one may have about his general proposal (for other versions of 'philosophical sociology' see, for instance, Caillé and Vandenberghe 2016; Chanial 2011; Karsenti 2013; Vandenberghe 2017, 2018). Like Chernilo, we too mourn the seemingly progressive loss of the philosophical breadth in our discipline and find in 'idea of philosophical sociology' a place to gather and dwell.

Chernilo's project of a philosophical sociology is organized around three pillars. First, it tries to define what is the place for normative questions both in society and in social-scientific research. This amounts to taking seriously moral orientations of actors themselves and normative descriptions of social scientists. Second, there is the anthropological question. What exactly is that defines us as human? Third, there is the question of how does this contribute towards a universalistic principle of humanity. This is developed as an alternative to the focus on particularistic categories of class, race, gender and the like that predominates in contemporary sociological research. The normative, the human, humanity: this is Chernilo's defining triptych of philosophical sociology (see Chernilo 2016, 61–65; 2017, 1–10, 230–231). These three fundamental elements are explored through an investigation of the anthropological features that underpin the works of prominent twentieth-century sociologists and philosophers. As it unfolds, Chernilo's philosophical-sociological project aims deciphering anthropological features that are at the interface of the human and society to articulate substantive normative foundations that might operate as the grounds upon which sociology takes normative stances on, whilst better describing, empirical and historical social forms. Yet, towards the end of the project, as Chernilo (2017, 21–22) claims that it became apparent that these anthropological features 'speak about the *interplay* between human embeddedness and imagination'.

Although sympathetic to Chernilo's account, we believe he leaves an important line of inquiry unexplored that is the more pressing if we accept the centrality of imagination to the project of philosophical sociology. This line of inquiry involves social time. In particular, it involves the different modes of temporalization implicated in anthropological features and their contribution towards normative descriptions of, say, redemption or

utopia. In what follows we make a number of remarks of the modes of temporalization implicated in some of the anthropological features analysed in the book. Next, we consider their normative consequences. We focus on two key contributions: Hannah Arendt's notion of 'self-transcendence' and Margaret Archer's 'reflexivity'. This inquiry would expand, rather than displace, a notion to which Chernilo (2017, 4, 97, 204, 122, 231) recurs throughout the book: A human being is a creature who asks anthropological, existential and meaningful questions, *but also a creature who, by asking existential and meaningful questions, poses questions about human becoming, about (historical and biographical) time, including questions about the past and the future.*

## I

Arendt and Archer are hardly alone in emphasizing how human conduct and agency are temporally structured. Chernilo (2017, 92–97, 103–110; see also 2014, 347) offers a glimpse of how Talcott Parsons' multilayered concept of adaptation stands out in its consideration of how the present is structured by referring to telic problems, thus *projecting* human beings towards an image of the future, particularly regarding their lives as a *biological* and *organic* occurrence. Similarly, Charles Taylor (1989, 52) contends that the human is projected towards the future and that 'we must inescapably understand our lives [...] as a "quest"'. As strong evaluators, we ponder upon the meaning of life as a *biographical* occurrence. For Taylor (1985, 15–44; 1989, 3–24), to be human is to live in a space of moral questions and goods, and to shape meaningfully one's life through strong evaluations that articulate an ethical outlook. From this interlocking of identity, self and moral goods emerges another essential 'structural feature of a self' that concerns having a sense of the self that is that 'of a being who is growing and becoming', involving necessarily 'temporal depth' in which the moral contents of the strong evaluations 'project a future story, not just a state of the momentary future but a bent for my whole life to come'.

Furthermore, Taylor's (1989, 51, see also 39–52, 288–289; 2016, 291–319) strong evaluations not only temporally decentre the self forwards through future-projectivity, but also backwards through past-accountability, allowing to take the arrow of time up in 'a meaningful unity' with a narrative form of redemption, restoration, revolution, among others. The human is the being that by asking moral, socially posited questions gains access to forms of narration expressive of ethical outlooks that allow to shape both collective and individual stories. Moral orientation, temporal direction, ethical outlooks and temporal embeddings are intertwined in Taylor's concept of the human as a strong evaluator.

## II

Yet Charles Taylor is a philosopher, not a social scientist. Whenever Taylor attempts to analyse narrative forms inherent to ethical outlooks he turns to literature and poetry, rather than to oral history, life-stories or social-scientific empirical tool (see, for instance, Taylor 1989, 351–354, 382–390, 463–466). In contrast, the sociologist Margaret Archer incorporates critically some of the insights of Taylor's notion of the self in sociological operative concepts. While both agree that the self is bound to some concerns that are expressive and constitutive of its identity, Archer (2000, 225) rejects what she conceives

as Taylor's 'ethical intuitivism'. Instead, she argues that 'ultimate concerns' are elaborated through the personal device or mechanism known as 'internal conversation'. First analysed from a non-metaphysical perspective by the American pragmatists, an 'internal conversation' refers to a dialogue with ourselves through which we reflexively attain 'progressive articulations' of concerns and 'adequate characterisations' of social contexts, and of the relation between both.

Like Taylor, Archer argues that 'ultimate concerns' constitute the self in a specific temporal fashion. They involve, she emphasizes, 'both retrospective and prospective mechanisms'. They are, on one hand, translated into *projects* that articulate a *modus vivendi* defined by practices that are expressive of one's intended identity. On the other hand, their retrospective character is such that 'the past itself becomes transvalued' (Archer 2000, 243, see also 243-6). In short, the operations of the internal conversation 'project the "I" forwards and backwards over time and it is continuous' (Archer 2003, 113). This implicit rather dense temporal argument, and its normative consequences and contribution to a notion of humanity remains unpacked in Chernilo's interpretation of Archer's theoretical account of reflexivity and the internal conversation, except for small passing remarks on the temporal features of imagination (see Chernilo 2017, 186, 188).

Interestingly, when Archer resorts to the pragmatist concept of internal conversation in her work, she follows George Herbert Mead in emphasizing that the best way to understand it is as a dialogue between *phases* of the self. However, if for Mead (2011, 45-62) this involves a dialectical relation between the unpredictable 'I' and the more conventional 'Me', for Archer the internal conversation involves a triadic social-psychological mechanism involving a future self ('You'), a present self ('I'), and a past self ('me'). With this crucial modification, Archer is able to construe the 'internal conversation' as a personal time-travelling mechanism. It now allows the decentering of one's self temporally by objectifying one's future self as a 'direct object' to which the present self 'can address instructions' and sculpt through concerns, while also enabling oneself to take the position of the future self to shape the actions of the present self. In the latter case, 'the "You" anticipates the time at which it will become the "I" and indicates the self it seeks to become'. It opens the possibility for inner experimentation, imagination, rehearsal, deliberation, discernment, etc., without downplaying the role of past experiences and reflexive operations. It brings together the 'reflective, retrospective and prospective through a dialogue' (Archer 2000, 228, 233; see also Archer 2003, 71-74, 101, 108-116).

The internal conversation, nonetheless, would be 'redundant' if there was a given consensus in the dialogue or, as it were, a given linear continuity among the phases of the self. Temporal coherence between past, present and future is not a given but an achievement of the self. An achievement that, through dialogue, looks for the assent and consent of his future and past selves, then acquiring 'a workable degree of solidarity, which is what we mean by personal integrity or wholeheartedness' (Archer 2000, 231, see also 228-41). Archer's (2012, 10-46) empirical investigations focus on the 'modes of reflexivity' under the specific situational logic of opportunity and 'contextual incongruity' of what she has termed the 'morphogenetic society'. Alongside the different modes of articulating concerns, projects and 'stances' towards society, we find the 'fracture reflexives'. Already in *Being Human*, Archer (2000, 247) theoretically anticipated that the internal conversation 'cannot be conducted in present-tense' and that this phenomenon is associated with 'an absence of personal identity'.

Since fracture reflexives possess no strong personal identity enabling for ‘coordinated self-monitoring’ mechanisms with prospective and retrospective operations, social actors operate ‘solely in relation to the present’ (Archer 2012, 250–251). In relation to the past, ‘fracture reflexives’ are ‘rejecters’ of natal and previous contexts, thus feeling alienated from past experiences of socialization (see Archer 2003, 298–341; 2012, 249–291). In such situations, actors have a rather limited sense of the past incapable of informing a sense and image of the future, let alone able to offer the materials to make sense of the present, and thus cannot be said to be living under the sway of *habitus*. As Archer (2012, 279; see also 257–264, 279–290; 2003, 307–315, 333–341) explains, ‘if no previous event is seen to stand in any determinate relationship with what follows, the sequence of events is kaleidoscopic and its indeterminacy defies predictability’. Consequently, the present is experienced as ‘shapeless happenstance’ and ‘presentism’ emerges as a process of ‘depersonalization’ in which the interplay of self and society is not that of a subject-with-these-concerns within an objective context, but takes an ‘object-object outlook’ (Archer 2012, 266; 2003, 340).

The insight that derives from Archer (2012, 283–300) inquiries into ‘fracture reflexives’ is that certain social conditions preclude the possibility of solidarity between past, present and future self, and the actualization of the anthropological capacity of reflexivity leading to *eudaimonia*. In short, “‘presentism’ is structurally induced’ acting as ‘a blizzard that confines perception to what is close at hand’, thus impeding ‘continuous, concerted and concerned action’ and ‘making the future seem entirely contingent’ (Archer 2012, 283, 286, 289). What is at stake here are the social limitations to reflexivity and imagination, and their repercussions in the (biographical) life and becoming of a subject.

Furthermore, in a recent paper, Archer (2019) takes on the relations among ‘concrete utopianism’, critical realism and *eudaimonia*, as proposed by Roy Bhaskar. On the one hand, the notion of concrete utopianism might serve to *normatively describe* agentic enterprises in which reflexivity not only is informed by ‘grounded hope’ and, hence, oriented towards non-actualized, yet realizable, possibilities (Archer 2019, 2–3). More importantly, concrete utopias feature a crucial temporal signature in which *transition* towards the imagined future goes hand in hand with a *struggle* against forms of ‘obtrusive actualism’, i.e. ‘the stubborn endurance of institutions, power and vested interests from the past whose influence still suffuses the present’ (Archer 2019, 6). On the other hand, the future-orientation of ‘concrete utopianism’ acknowledges the moral orientation of actors themselves, since images of the future are formed through *normative imagination* rather than strategic projection. Imagined futures of ‘concrete utopianism’ arise in the margins of ‘anormative (or bureaucratic) regulation’ (Archer 2016) or ‘the time of money’ (Esposito 2011), whose functionalization of time displaces ‘utopian energies’ by contracting rather than expanding possible futures (Nassehi 1994). Instead, they arise suffused with meaning through a normatively dense process of imagining new social forms and ways of life that have to be enacted *in* and *against* the present and its temporalities.

‘The idea of imagination’, Chernilo confides in an interview with David Beer (2018, 284), was an aspect ‘only touched in passing and [that] became apparent [...] after the publication of the book’. With the foregoing remarks, we attempted to address the idea of imagination and its purchase on temporal existence over against, yet without downplaying, social embeddedness while emphasizing its normative dimensions. In contrast to the time of physics in which events relate just by efficient causal relations, social time is

meaningfully shaped and is constructed through the anthropological capacities of actors and their instantiation within social forms.

### III

Chapter 2 in *Debating Humanity* – suitably entitled ‘Self-Transcendence’ – is one of the most fruitful engagements with Arendt’s existentialist philosophy with a view to extract lessons for the contemporary social sciences. Which lessons are these? First, there is much to be learned from Arendt if one wishes to go beyond materialist approaches, from behaviourism to positivism, from functionalism to present-day intersectionality. Second, one needs to go beyond Arendt’s own famous distrust of sociology if we are indeed to reconcile her philosophy with sociology today. After all, there is implicit in her work an ‘action-based’ conception of the emergence of society that is perfectly compatible with some of the best sociological traditions, including, for instance, Simmel’s theory of sociation. Given the stated aim of *Debating Humanity*, which involves the articulation of a ‘universalistic principle of humanity’, Chernilo’s close reading of Arendt becomes particularly significant. After all, it is around the idea of ‘self-transcendence’, which he traces back to two of Arendt’s (1958; 1978) most well-known works that such a universalistic principle can begin to take shape. In what follows, we discuss these lessons as to bring out the theme of ‘imagination’ that is implicit in Chernilo’s engagement with Arendt.

Let us begin with Arendt’s trenchant criticism of utilitarian and positivist ideas in the social sciences of her day. The background for this criticism is the shift towards modernity. In modern societies, she argues, the human condition undergoes a profound transformation in at least three respects. First, whereas in pre-modern times contemplative life was considered superior to active life, in modernity the opposite is true: ‘deeds rather than speech, technology rather thinking, have taken centre stage’ (Chernilo 2017, 82). Second, whereas in the past politics was conceived of as the sphere where man could express his autonomy and freedom and the household was the space where domination prevailed, now, under modern conditions, the public-private dichotomy has been reversed: the private sphere is now where freedom and self-realization occur, whereas politics are increasingly the realm of power and domination. Third, these changes have primarily impacted the human condition itself, i.e. ‘More than the instrumentality of *homo faber*, she contends, what has truly triumphed in modern society is *animal laborans* and the reproduction of life itself’ (Chernilo 2017, 83). This is, as Chernilo rightly notes, a key element in Arendt’s criticism of the social sciences. Social scientists, she believes, believe they have succeeded in explaining *homo faber* whilst in fact it is *animal laborans* that is more important in modern societies.

Arendt’s criticism still rings true today. Mainstream approaches in the social sciences consider discussions of a putative ‘human essence’ metaphysical and speculative, and rightly so. Yet they also tend to reduce the human to the social. The human capacity for empathy, for instance, is equated with the sharing of concrete life experiences. This makes mainstream approaches lose sight of the human (or anthropological) dimension of empathy. Thus conceived, Chernilo (2017, 76) explains, empathy

requires that we creatively imagine what are the conditions others may be going through so that we can envisage their possible rather than their actual judgements. The fact that we can

exercise this competence of comparing actual and possible judgements depends on our human ability to recognise each other as human beings rather than on whether we have experienced similar situations.

By contrast, approaches such as intersectionality are based upon on the rejection of such withdrawal, which is seen as a negation of one's authentic identity and cultural bonds. There are good reasons to think, however, that intersectionality has much to gain from operating with a less materialist, more enlarged conception of human empathy. In rigour, if it is to be conceived as a *critical* social theory (Hill Collins 2019), intersectionality needs such a notion. Without it, the very possibility of critique is curtailed. As Arendt (as cited in Chernilo 2017, 77) seminally put it, it is empathy that enables social agents to 'judge affirmatively or negatively the realities they are born into and by which they are also conditioned'. To reduce human empathy to common experiences is to deprive agents (and theorists alike) from the possibility of criticizing themselves, one another, and the world around them.

However, if one is to fruitfully engage with Arendt, it is exactly around notions such as empathy and self-transcendence that one should be looking to, including those invested in more critical modalities of social inquiry. This brings us to the second lesson from Chernilo's encounter with Arendt. With Chernilo, we too believe there is much for contemporary sociologists to learn from her theorization of categories such as self-transcendence, beginning or imagination.

Let us begin with self-transcendence. This is a term that Chernilo introduces to refer to Arendt's theorization of the 'human capacity with which we look at others and ourselves as if from an external position; self-transcendence as a form of withdrawal from the world but which is only possible to humans as eminently worldly beings' (Chernilo 2017, 64). This human capacity is anthropological. That is, it does not change over history or across cultures. As a property 'that belongs to the species as a whole in all times and places', it enables Chernilo to lay the foundations for his 'universalistic principle of humanity' that is meant to function as an alternative to the more particularistic categories used in the social sciences – class, nation, gender, race and the like (Chernilo 2017, 65).

The human condition is a condition marked by paradox. We are living beings that, though part of a world inhabited by other beings and things, have nonetheless the mental ability to withdraw from that world '*without ever being able to leave it or transcend it*' (Arendt cited in Chernilo 2017, 65, his italics). Amongst the capacities human agents exercise in *vita activa*, action and speech are more fundamental than labour and work because while we can pursue our existence *qua* humans without the latter, the same cannot be said of the former. To act, for Arendt, means to begin something that is truly new. Arendt's reconstruction of beginnings is the linchpin of her version of *Existenzphilosophie* of the shared world of human institutions and interactions. Conceptually, it is articulated around the principle of 'natality', 'man's pre-eminent experience' since 'in possessing a principle of beginning, he is able to give meaning to his birth' (Bowen-Moore 1989, 23). The principle of natality is one of the pillars (plurality is the other one) upon which the human condition is built. The freedom to start something wholly new, in particular, gives human beings the extraordinary capacity to reverse the rigid linearity of the time's arrow, over against the past and its irreversibility as well as the future and its unpredictability through the 'power to forgive' and the 'power of promise' (Arendt 1958, 236–

247; see also Ricoeur 1983). Yet this ability to withdraw from the world in which we live without ever leave it or transcend it is only possible due to our capacity to imagine alternative courses of action.

Imagination, then, is closely associated with our capacity to act (i.e. to begin something new) and of self-transcendence (i.e. to look at ourselves from an exterior perspective). At this point, Arendt's reading of Kant becomes important. According to Kant, self-transcendence and imagination coincide in that human agents are able to adopt an exterior position towards themselves insofar as they can observe themselves from different standpoints. This observation, however, is not actual but imaginative in that it entails 'comparing *our* judgment with the *possible* rather than *actual* judgments of others' (Kant cited in Chernilo 2017, 75). This notion of 'enlarged imagination' as an impartial, detached and abstract relation with the world goes back at least to Adam Smith's writings on 'sympathy' and had a breakthrough with G. H. Mead's postmetaphysical rendition in the first decades of the twentieth century. This places Arendt – and Chernilo – right within a centuries' old tradition of social thought that explores a universal sense of moral sympathy as a core feature of critical rational thinking. But not only thinking, if by that one means a purely abstract mental activity. Precisely because when one begins to think one is able to transcend the limits of one's life span and material conditions, thinking as a form of self-transcendence brings with it the reconciliation of *vita activa* with the *vita contemplativa*: 'whenever I transcend the limits of my own life span and begin to reflect on this past, judging it, and this future, forming projects of the will, thinking ceases to be a politically marginal activity' (Chernilo 2017, 78–79). In a rather critical passage, Arendt (1993, 323) makes explicit the political and even existential connections of imagination, self-transcendence, acting, with her more abstract category – and arguably life-long intellectual concern – of understanding:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective [...] until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact [...]. Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have.

This idea of 'enlarged imagination' as a central human capacity is not only politically potent. It is also a powerful reminder of how description and normative judgement can be brought together in a way that is potentially fruitful for social scientists. The problem with the theories used by social scientists is not that they are wrong but that they can become true. Indeed, the problem is not that they offer inaccurate descriptions of social life but that their impoverished, instrumental descriptions colonize human conduct and mind, shaping these at their image. The more a social theory becomes influential, the more this becomes a problem. The performative character of social scientific thinking has been, of course, a hot topic of research in various quarters of the social sciences. But this is seldom accompanied by a humanist concern with the implications of the self-fulfilling character of social theories. This is, in effect, Chernilo's main takeaway from his discussion of Arendt in *Debating Humanity*. The idea of self-transcendence, once seen in connection with the concept of beginning and the capacity for imagination, is Arendt's main contribution to a universalistic conception of humanity, the heart and soul of his project for a philosophical sociology.

It is worth noting that, on her anthropological and political writings, a concern with temporality runs across and transpire the issues at hand (see, particularly, Arendt 2006). The series of aforementioned reversals of the modern age are inseparable from an original process-character concept of history that arises from the substitution of 'making for acting' that allows for history to be seen as 'made' and open the room for instrumental approaches to the future seen in different versions of Progress (cf. Arendt 1958, 220–235; 2006, 17–90). Within particular socio-historical configurations of the human condition, anthropological categories and capacities are instantiated. Thus, concepts of history, with fully fledged temporal implications, shape self-transcendence, 'enlarged imagination' and action without exhausting their almost infinite modes, forms and logics.

#### IV

In sum, although we do not necessarily subscribe to all of Chernilo's proposals we share with him the belief that sociology has much to gain from a deeper, more systematic engagement with philosophy. We need to thank him for pushing sociologists to pose difficult questions about the fundamentals of our discipline. In fact, one seldom finds finer attempts to think through these thorny issues than in *Debating Humanity*.

We also see much promise in his critical questioning of the particularistic categories that form the bread and butter of the bulk of sociological research today, either as singular attributes (e.g. class/race/gender analyses) or as overlapping categories (most notably in intersectional analyses). Of course, to replace this for yet another category, albeit more fundamental, may not succeed in resolving all the problems faced by social scientists. After all, the problem may well reside in our very use of the concept of 'category' to refer to class, race, gender and the like, with all its implications in terms of constancy and rigidity, instead of conceptualizing these as processes. Perhaps the way forward is to conceptualize nation, class, etc., as positions within more general social processes. These processes are inevitably structured, and unfold, in time and space. And social positions are occupied by concrete historical agents who are meaning-making, rational creatures capable of imagining different worlds, temporalities and socio-political arrangements. The human capacity of imagination, in turn, is the key to help us bring about such worlds, temporalities and arrangements. For, to be human is to live in the present, but not at the mercy of its immediacy: our many anthropological capacities reflect the systematic ability to bracket off and transcend immediacy by looking (from) outwards, but also (from) forwards and backwards.

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