

Critical realism: interventions

Edited by Margaret S. Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie

Critical Realism

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Edited by Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie

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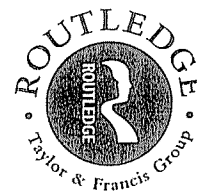
Bob Carter

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Rational Choice Theory
Resisting colonization

Edited by Margaret S. Archer
and Jonathan Q. Tritter



London and New York

HM
495
R37
2000

Contents

First published 2000 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2000 Margaret S. Archer and Jonathan Q. Tritter, selection and
editorial matter; individual chapters, the contributors

Typeset in Garamond by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rational choice theory: a critique / edited by Margaret S. Archer and
Jonathan Q. Tritter.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Rational choice theory. I. Archer, Margaret Scotford. II. Tritter,

Jonathan Q., 1965-

HM495 .R37 2001

301'.01—dc21

00-059244

ISBN 0-415-24271-1 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-24272-X (pbk)

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1 Introduction

Margaret S. Archer and Jonathan Q. Tritter

Rational choice could plausibly lay claim to being the grand theory of high modernity. Its metanarrative is fundamentally about the progressive rationalization of the West and then the rest of the world. Only insofar as global forces for disenchantment are massing can this theory take such giant imperialistic steps forward. Yet immediately we have to pause over cause and effect. Is it the case that the world is changing independently, in such a way that rational choice theory (henceforth RCT) is becoming increasingly appropriate for capturing its workings? Alternatively, is it rather the case that the growing influence of this approach in international economic and financial institutions, such as the OECD, the World Bank and the IMF, is now shaping larger tracts of the world in line with the theory?

This volume brings together a range of scholars who address different aspects of RCT. It has been spurred by a sense of the increasing influence of RCT upon explanations about society in a range of academic disciplines, and growth in its proclaimed relevance to local, national and global policy-making. RCT has underpinned the neoliberal reforms of the public sector in much of the Western industrialized world. With these reforms have come the rollback of the traditional social welfare state and withdrawal of its services.

The justification for applying RCT to policy-making continues to be the more efficient provision of services. This has resulted in the intended decline of expenditure by the public purse and instead cost-shifting to the grey sector. Thus the welfare services which we have come to expect as part of what is provided by the public sector are now increasingly dependent on altruistic acts of charity. The attraction of neoliberal reforms is readily apparent, but so are its problematic outcomes, and this is both the achievement and the threat of unquestioned application of rational choice theory.

The spread of neoliberalism raises the important question as to whether the progressive colonization of public policy by RCT is not in practice dependent upon it being supplemented by something antithetical to it, namely altruism and its practical outworkings – the voluntary creation of collective goods. Thus, for example, there has been an increase in the extent of services provided by charities and voluntary organizations that have