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

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1 Introduction

Margaret S. Archer and Jonathan Q. Titter

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 disenchanted 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