Is Critical Realism Really Critical? In the United States, if not throughout North America, the school of critical realism is not very well appreciated. Though the many writings of Roy Bhaskar and Rom Harre are known, to a degree, there has been very little engagement with the fundamental concerns of the movement. Though much is to be learned from these two philosophers (who see realism in somewhat different ways), to my tastes, Margaret Archer should also be on the short list of those North Americans ought to read; and there is no better place to begin such a reading than with Being Human: The Problem of Agency.
Over here, one hears word of the sad state of higher education in the UK. Still, the British system supports centers of focused research and teaching to an extent one seldom finds in North America. For every sad story (like the recent closing of the Birmingham program in Cultural Studies), there are happy stories of new and exciting ventures, of which Anthony Elliott’s Centre for Critical Theory at the University of the West of England, Bristol is but one. The Centre for Critical Realism in London, and its several institutional tendrils, is another. Margaret Archer of the University of Warwick plays an important role in the work of diffusing critical realism’s agenda. If Harre is the movement’s senior diplomat, and Bhaskar its now ripening younger promoter, one might say (without diminishing the importance of the other two) that Margaret Archer is among critical realism’s elegant work-horses (to mix metaphors in a dangerous, if apt, way). Apart from being a co-founder in 1997 of the Centre for Critical Realism, and editor of its journal, Archer has been publishing important books since 1971 well before Roy Bhaskar’s 1975

A Realist Theory of Science (generally considered, most insistently by the author himself, as the locus classicus of the movement). Bhaskar and others (in concert with Harre and Paul Secord, founders of The Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior) eventually extended their philosophical concerns from a philosophy of science critical of classical ontologies and modern hermeneutics, to include questions of the social and human sciences (which questions were, in the late 1970s and 1980s, central to debates on the social foundations of science then associated with Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Paul Feyerabend) Archer, trained in the social sciences both at the London School of Economics and the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, has made her intellectual contributions to the movement in this latter regard. If Archer’s edited collection, Critical Realism: the Essential Readings (Routledge 1998), is her contribution to the diffusion of the movement’s ideas, then Being Human: The Problem of Agency is surely one of the most important of her contributions to social theory.

Archer considers Being Human the third of a trilogy, after Culture and Agency (1998) and Realist Social Theory (1995). One gets an idea of its goals by noting the four linked themes offered by the book’s Table of Contents: 1) modernity and the debate over modernity’s idea (and ideals) of the human, 2) self, self-consciousness, and the practical, 3) emotions, personal identity, and the interior dialogue, 4) (and most to the point of the book), the emergence of social identity. Even so sparse a listing as this indicates that Being Human deals with the central concerns of social theory. Those unfamiliar with critical realism might not realize that the same list embodies elements of the on-going conversations between the critical realists and the sociological and labor left of which a principal is Tony Giddens’ structuration theory (not to mention his reputed influence, for better or worse, on Tony Blair’s third way politics). Structuration theory, of course, aims to somehow get around the dichotomies
of neo-classic metaphysics of which, for social theory, none are more besetting than objectivism/subjectivism which transpose sociologically into structures/actors (or agents). Critical realism, important to add, pursues an homologous, if not analogous, goal to defend a realist epistemology of the transcendental subject, without lapsing into the classic dichotomies of early modern metaphysics. This is not the place to describe the desiderata either of structuration theory or critical realism. But, for social theorists in all fields, the stipulation of their shared interests is a good way to appreciate Archer’s position, which is beautifully summarized near the end of Being Human:

The ‘inner conversation’ is how our personal emergent powers are exercised on and in the world natural, practical and social, which is our triune environment. This ‘interior dialogue’ is not just a window upon the world, rather it is what determines our being-in-the-world, though not in the times and the circumstances of our choosing. Fundamentally, the ‘inner conversation’ is constitutive of our concrete singularity. However, it is also and necessarily a conversion about reality. This is because the triune world sets us three problems, none of which can be evaded, made as we are. It confronts us with three inescapable concerns: with our physical well-being, our performative competence and our self-worth. The world therefore makes us creatures of concern and thus enters through three separate doorways into our constitution. Yet we react back powerfully and particularistically, because the world cannot dictate to us what to care about most: at best it can set the costs for failing to accommodate a given concern (318).

The philosophical and human concerns of this book, and of the critical realist movement of which it is part, are, in a word beautiful, even inspiring, while also brilliantly worked through.

But are they quick to the very social realities from which they take their ideas and to which they direct their energies? For one, you might ask “Who’s we?” Critical realists, like philosophies generally, tend to stipulate a Human WE, the very Being of this book’s tender attentions. But one need only venture for a moment into the real conditions of existence of the world’s painfully real colonized regions, to meet beings for whom “the world dictates” so mercilessly that the very idea of their ability to “react back powerfully” would be laughable were if not that so many are crying over the babies lost to civil strife, AIDS, and starvation. Within (or at least alongside of) the critical realist movement, there are those who struggle with the Who’s we? problem. One fine example is the feminist theorist and philosopher, Alison Assiter. Her Enlightened Women (1998) is a marvelously subtle argument that puts forth the
'epistemological community’ as a way of asserting social realism without sacrificing social differences. Assister is among feminist theorists, and others, who turn realism into a critical tool against overly-general realisms that take the Human-We too literally.

So, is critical realism really critical, enough? Yes in some ways; no in others. Among other ventures, critical realism has become, over the last two decades, a robust social ethic. Books like Archer’s *Being Human* provide Us with a generous Ethical Ought to which any number of We/s might aspire. If critical realisms like Margaret Archer’s come short of the very realism of the Social Is for which they exist in the first place, they also begin to show the way back to a social humanism that acknowledges the impoverishment of modern liberal thought. Others, like myself, who will remain outside their fold, still can learn a great deal from them.