

Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism

Patrick Baert

Copyright © Patrick Baert 2005

The right of Patrick Baert to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2005 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 0-7456-2246-1

ISBN: 0-7456-2247-X (pb)

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

Typeset in 10½ on 12pt Times
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Popper's *Views on Natural and Social Science* is one of the exceptions: the second part of the book is a summary of Popper's philosophy of social science and gives a comprehensive overview of how others criticized, adopted or adjusted his views. Simkin's strength lies in elaborating the link between Popper's views and that of some leading economists, but the drawback of his approach is that, as a one-time colleague of Popper and a life-long friend, he remains uncritical of Popper's views. In contrast, Gregory Currie and Alan Musgrave's edited collection, *Popper and the Human Sciences*, contains some critical contributions. The large bulk of the articles in that book focus on Popper's political theory, but Alan Chalmers's and Peter Urbach's articles tackle issues in the philosophy of the social sciences. The link between Popper and economics is further developed in Neil de Marchi's edited collection *The Popperian Legacy in Economics*. Popper's criticisms of Marxism provoked a long-drawn-out controversy, and Maurice Cornforth's *The Open Philosophy and the Open Society* is a cogent defence of Marx's theory of society against Popper's fierce criticisms.

4

Critical Realism

Introduction

With the demise of logical positivism and critical rationalism in the second half of the twentieth century, both the natural and the social sciences faced a philosophical vacuum. There were, schematically speaking, two responses to this void. Some philosophers accentuated what they saw as the relativist implications of Kuhn's work. They maintained that the pursuit of *the* successful scientific method is a wild-goose chase, something that can never be achieved successfully. Their point was not that positivism and falsificationism were misguided about the nature of this method; rather it is simply a Sisyphean task to try to establish this universal algorithm in the first place. This view was introduced by Paul Feyerabend in his provocative *Against Method* and, subsequently, articulated more subtly by Richard Rorty.¹ Others dismissed this position as unnecessarily defeatist and dangerously irrational. While they agreed that logical atomism and falsificationism were flawed, they maintained that it is still worthwhile to attempt to make explicit the method which most successful scientific activities, in the social or natural sciences, have in common. Previous philosophies of science asked the right question; they answered it wrongly. They were right to pursue the issue of demarcation between science and non-science, but they were mistaken about how to go about finding those boundaries.

Taking the latter position was braver than might appear at first glance. Faced with both the recurrent failures of subsequent forms of naturalism and the early signs of a postmodernist bandwagon, it was quite audacious to postulate that there is a single method of inquiry after all, one that it is applicable to both social and natural sciences. So when, from the 1970s onwards, some academics, presenting themselves as realists or critical realists, tried to salvage the naturalist project while taking on board that knowledge is a social construct, it was, indeed, a bold step to make, and one worthy of careful consideration. Not that it has received a lot of coverage since its arrival. Or, more

precisely, it did, but not in mainstream philosophical circles. Although critical realism is by any account a philosophical doctrine, most strait-laced philosophers have been remarkably indifferent to it. With its attention to social theory and its penchant for holistic reasoning, critical realism was regarded as well outside the contours of mainstream analytical philosophy. It did catch the attention of sociologists, and also, more unexpectedly, of a group of historians, social psychologists and economists. Sociologists felt that realism, in contrast to logical positivism or critical rationalism, represented more veraciously the methods which they employed. Also, the realist attention to social theory struck a chord with the sociological community, especially because some of the realist views on social theory, such as the transformational model of social action, were remarkably close to significant theoretical developments within sociology.² In particular, critical realism provided a philosophical base for those sociologists who had been schooled in Marxist structuralism or in evolutionary theory. The impact of realism in the other disciplines has been more moderate. Influenced by the Annales School, some historians saw realism as a foundation for their non-positivist approach that breaks with the *histoire événementielle* (the history of events or of great personalities who shaped the past). Several psychologists regarded realism as a base for a new methodology that treats people as self-steering and rule-employing individuals; others used it to defend psychoanalysis. Finally, heterodox economists see realism as a philosophical support for their disenchantment with mainstream economics and its preoccupation with quantification, deductivism and econometrics.

Critical realism has not been around for very long. Among the intellectual ancestors of the movement are Mary Hesse and Rom Harré. By the early 1960s, they had drawn attention away from Hempel's logical deductive view of scientific theories and pointed instead at the role of models and analogies.³ Harré has since moved away from his early commitment to realism, is increasingly showing affinity with a social constructivist and discursive agenda for the social sciences, and has of late distanced himself from what he calls the 'critical realist crowd'.⁴ Roy Bhaskar, initially Harré's pupil, wrote two texts that are now considered to be cornerstones of the critical realist doctrine. They are *A Realist Theory of Science*, first published in 1975, and *The Possibility of Naturalism*, which came out four years later.⁵ The former develops a transcendental argument to promote a realist approach to science; the latter uses this philosophy to discuss the nature of social science. Around the same time Russell Keat and John Urry wrote *Social Theory as Science* with similar ideas to Bhaskar's.⁶ Since the 1980s a number of social scientists have further developed these ideas, among whom are Margaret Archer and Ted Benton in social theory, Derek Layder, Peter Manicas, Andrew Sayer and William Outhwaite in the philosophy of the social sciences, Tony Lawson in the methodology of economics and Christopher Lloyd in history.⁷ Gradually, aligned contributions

to the philosophy of science, such as those of Nancy Cartwright, were integrated within a critical realist framework. In psychology early work by Harré and Paul Secord attempted to merge realist philosophical insights with a Wittgensteinian social psychology; later D. Will would use critical realism to defend psychoanalysis against positivist criticisms.⁸ From the mid-1980s onwards, critical realists such as Roy Bhaskar and Andrew Collier explained how their doctrine is a philosophical platform for a Marxist view of society; others followed on from this and argued that critical realism is a plausible base for a feminist critique.⁹ Around the same time, a group of scholars around Harré started to explore the link between his realist agenda and a selectionist theory of social change.¹⁰ A similar evolutionary research programme also underscores Geoff Hodgson's contributions to economics and David Harvey's to sociology; both tried to merge insights from chaos and complexity theory with critical realism.¹¹ In the course of the last decade Bhaskar extended his project by elaborating on the relationship between realism, dialectics and, more controversially, Eastern philosophy.¹² This latest journey has to some extent split the critical realist camp: some disciples regard his *From East to West* as a deviation from the original creed, while others are more sympathetic.¹³ But this does not mean that critical realism is facing a crisis. Since the early 1990s a Centre for Critical Realism has been founded, and an annual conference is being held. The realist position is well represented in academic journals, especially (though certainly not exclusively) the *Journal of Social Behaviour* and the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. If anything, critical realism seems very much in the ascendant.

In spite of Bhaskar's esoteric language, it is not difficult to see the appeal critical realism has had for social researchers. The new creed purports to establish social research as a *scientific* endeavour, in many respects on a par with the natural sciences, and it manages to do so without relying on a heavily discredited deductive-nomological outlook.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, it does so while providing a long overdue cogent critique of positivist epistemology, and, significantly, one that avoids the looming spectre of relativism. In contrast with poststructuralism, which conceives of knowledge as forever entangled in (and unable to transcend) intricate power relations, critical realism reaffirms the emancipatory status of the social sciences. If properly conceived (i.e., carried out according to realist principles), the social sciences not only provide superior explanatory devices, but also help free people from previous constraints.¹⁵ They may not be a sufficient condition for emancipation but they are necessary for it. So critical realism asserts both the scientific and the critical potential of social research, and therefore provides a welcome boost for the morale of social researchers, especially at a time when their activities have come under criticism. In addition, critical realism seems to confirm what a lot of social scientists are already doing. With the exception of highly descriptive forms of research and possibly mainstream economics, there are

remarkably few pieces of empirical social research that are not somehow endorsed by the realist perspective. Structural Marxism is rehabilitated, so is psychoanalysis.¹⁶ After being treated as a poor second to the natural sciences, now the social sciences are told that many of their practitioners have been getting it right anyway.

Realism, reality and causality

The first question that needs to be addressed is in what sense, if at all, is critical realism 'realist'. It is realist in both a strong and a weak sense of the word. It is realist in a weak sense in that it assumes that there is an external reality that exists independently of people's descriptions, and, in particular, of the conditions under which people gain access to it. It is realist in a strong sense in that it assumes that scientists are, in principle, able to gain access to this reality; though critical realists acknowledge that scientists can be mistaken in their assertions on this score. So, for critical realists, it is blatantly erroneous to say that there is no such thing as reality, or to argue that we cannot possibly gain access to it. It is equally misleading to regard theories as merely instrumental devices or acts of rhetoric. Those statements are, for critical realists, unfortunate shades of the spectre of postmodernism, a doctrine which most of them despise vehemently.¹⁷ The realism advocated by critical realists is a metaphysical or transcendental one in that it tries to assess what the nature of reality must be for successful scientific, experimental practices to be possible. In this respect realists are indebted to Immanuel Kant's treatment of David Hume's empirical stance. Kant agreed with Hume that all scientific knowledge ought to be based on sense experience, but he continued with a transcendental argument by asking what *a priori* categories must exist for a coherent explanation of sense experience to be possible. Note that critical realists turn Kant's reasoning upside down: the realist question 'what must reality be like for science to be possible?' is substituted for the idealist 'what must the categories be like for science to be possible?'. While there are a few critical realists who take a more overtly Kantian position,¹⁸ most of them would indeed side with Bhaskar when he describes his transcendental argument as distinct from Kant's idealism. They would point out that they avoid what they describe as the 'epistemic fallacy' – that is, the assumption that ontological issues can be reduced to epistemological ones.¹⁹ Rather than arguing that what we can know to exist depends on what we can know, realists advise that we infer what the world must be like from the existence of scientific knowledge. In short, critical realists pride themselves on avoiding the pitfalls of both radical empiricism, according to which reality can only be attributed to entities that are immediately accessible to observation, and transcendental ideal-

ism, according to which reality is only accessible to people as an individual or social construction.²⁰

To validate their realist credentials critical realists draw a distinction between 'transitive' and 'intransitive' objects of knowledge.²¹ Transitive objects of knowledge are like Aristotle's 'material causes', tools available to the researcher, such as previously established facts, or antecedent methods and theories. Intransitive objects refer to the 'real' events, structures and mechanisms that make up the world. Examples are planet rotations, molecular structures, fertility rates and suicide patterns. They all exist independent of people's knowledge of them.²² Bhaskar then points out an interesting asymmetry. While it is possible to conceive of the existence of intransitive objects without people's knowledge of them, it is infeasible to envisage the production of knowledge about intransitive objects without the use of transitive objects. Scientists indeed rely on formerly established cognitive tools in that they regularly employ analogies with and models of familiar phenomena to account for novel ones. For instance, blood circulation has been articulated in terms of a hydraulic model or society in evolutionary terms. It is now possible to rephrase the differences between critical realism on the one hand and transcendental idealism and empiricism on the other. Critical realism is at variance with transcendental idealism in taking the objects of knowledge to be intransitive as opposed to transitive, and it opposes empiricism in treating the intransitive realm as layered, not simply limited to the instantly observable. In other words, while transcendental idealism erroneously downplays the fact that there is a reality unmediated by cognitive or discursive practices, empiricism fails to attribute reality to those layers that are not immediately observable.

Realists react against what they describe as a 'Humean conception of causality'.²³ I will not discuss the extent to which the realist depiction of a 'Humean concept of causality' corresponds to Hume's concept of causality. Suffice it to say that this is a point of contention, and that even some self-proclaimed realists doubt whether Bhaskar's depiction of Hume as an anti-realist is correct.²⁴ Let us for the sake of argument follow Bhaskar's reconstruction. According to Bhaskar's depiction, the Humean view assumes that the empirical content of a statement concerning a causal relation is merely a statement about the regular succession of events or states of affairs of one type (the cause) by events or states of affairs of another type (the effect).²⁵ Concretely, the observation of regular conjunctions between two discrete events is both sufficient and necessary to claim that there is a causal relationship between the two. People might invoke mechanisms to account for how the regularities are brought about, but this is only because of people's psychological disposition, not a move that can rationally be defended. This explains why the Humean notion of causality is sometimes referred to as the 'regularity theory' of causality or the 'successionist view'.²⁶ It stipulates that

whenever event (or states of affairs) x occurs then event (or states of affairs) y occurs, or, in a probabilistic form, y is likely to occur. From a realist point of view, the Humean notion of causality is flawed for various reasons. First and foremost, regularities of this kind are extremely rare in nature. They tend to occur only in closed systems, such as the solar system. Closed systems are characterized by internal and external closure, the former referring to the absence of any changes to the internal workings of the system, the latter to stability in the relationship between the system and factors that may interfere with its workings. While these conditions can be created artificially, they are rarely met in reality. This would impel Humean philosophers to take the outlandish position that there are hardly any laws (besides those of astronomy) or, worse, that there are no laws, outside closed systems. To take the former position is to question the value of science. To take the latter implies a contradiction in terms because laws are, by definition, universal.²⁷

Furthermore, this Humean view of causality conflates description and explanation: a causal explanation ought to go beyond the mere observational level and account for how the observed regularities were produced. Another way of expressing this is to say that the Humean notion of causality makes it difficult to distinguish between accidental and necessary regularities or, in W. E. Johnson's terminology, between 'universals of law' and 'universals of fact'. Accounting for how the regularities have been produced necessitates hinting at mechanisms, structures or powers that generate the regularities; and, crucially, these mechanisms do not have to be immediately observable. This generative theory relies on a notion of 'natural necessity', which explains change or stability of phenomena in terms of their intrinsic features.²⁸ Take, for instance, the case of a rock breaking glass. It is possible to argue that the rock caused the glass to break, and indeed whenever a rock hits glass it tends to break. But realists insist that the glass broke because of its internal structure. From a realist point of view, to account for the impact of the rock is to point out the molecular make-up of the glass, and the rock merely triggered off the mechanism. Of course, powers or mechanisms are potentialities that are not necessarily exercised, and it is not the case that exercised powers are always manifest in any outcome. That is why laws are interpreted 'normically' and scientific statements as 'transfactual' – not counterfactual.²⁹ That is, the laws indicate not what *would* happen, but what actually *is* happening although possibly not immediately observable. They are actualized in the laboratory or other closed systems, but may *not* be reflected in a regular sequence.³⁰ For critical realists, therefore, constant conjunctions are neither necessary nor sufficient to talk about a scientific law.

Based on their transcendental argument, realists subscribe to what they coin a stratified notion of reality. This notion attributes reality to three distinct levels or domains.³¹ The domain of the actual refers to the patterns of events that take place, whereas the realm of the empirical refers to people's percep-

tions or observations of these events. For instance, unemployment, productivity, suicide or mortality rates are to be found at the level of the actual, but their measurements by social scientists belong to the empirical realm. It is the third level, however, that acquires importance in the critical realist creed. For it lies in with the latter's view of the scientific objects as not only intransitive but also structured. While the intransitive nature of reality means that scientific objects exist independently of people (infra), realists also talk about the 'structured' nature of reality, meaning that the scientific laws designate, not events, but underlying mechanisms that exercise powers. The domain of the real refers precisely to the underlying structures or mechanisms that generate events. Mechanisms operate in various scientific areas. Take a psychologist who refers to the death instinct, a linguist to a linguistic structure and a sociologist to society's tendency to equilibrium. These are underlying mechanisms; none of them is immediately observable, but each is alleged to be real and to affect the surface level. Two qualifications ought to be made. First, to postulate this philosophical ontology is not to make any commitment to a scientific ontology. That is, while this philosophical ontology stipulates the existence of mechanisms and structures beneath the observable surface, it does not specify further the precise nature of these entities. To speculate about them is the task of the various sciences – not philosophy. Second, from the realist conviction that there is an intransitive dimension to science (that is, that mechanisms exist independent of people's knowledge of them) it does not follow that every scientific attempt to uncover the real necessarily leads to valid assertions regarding the nature of the underlying mechanisms or structures. Nor does it necessarily follow that theories are becoming increasingly isomorphic with reality. Realists are fallibilists in that they acknowledge that, however persuasive the evidence provided, a scientist or a community of scientists can hold erroneous beliefs about their research object.³²

The stratified notion of reality postulates the possibility of a lack of synchrony between the three levels. So the realm of the actual might be out of sync with the empirical in the case that people's perceptions or observations do not match the events. Or alternatively, the actual and the deep might be out of sync, for instance when other structures counteract the effect of a particular structure, which is therefore not manifest in any outcome. This tends to happen in open systems, where various generative mechanisms interfere with one another.³³ Most systems found in nature are open, and therefore the actual and the deep are frequently out of sync with each other. Scientists often artificially create relatively closed systems in order to identify a particular underlying mechanism. They use experiments to control for the other mechanisms that otherwise would have intervened, and by doing so they are able to test hypotheses regarding the nature and effect of the mechanisms under investigation. But outside these artificial settings, systems tend to be open, other mechanisms are interfering, and it follows that a perfectly adequate

explanation does not necessarily imply the ability to predict. The postulate of symmetry between explanation and prediction (the belief that to explain is to predict and vice versa) is therefore to be abandoned.³⁴ For instance, take a falling leaf, which obeys the law of gravity. According to the law of gravity, the leaf would fall to earth in a straight line according to the parameters set out in the law. In reality, the leaf is unlikely to fall in this way because other mechanisms, such as aerodynamic forces, are counteracting the gravitational pull.³⁵ This example shows that there is a lack of synchrony between the underlying mechanism (gravitational pull) and the observable manifestations at the surface level. It also shows that, because of the openness of the system (the existence of other mechanisms that interfere with the effect of the law of gravity), knowledge about the existence of the law of gravity does not allow for accurate predictions. While this may not apply to a closed system such as the solar system, it does apply to most systems, the social system certainly being one of them. Because people have genuine choice, social systems are open systems. It is therefore not surprising that economists have been remarkably unsuccessful in discovering event regularities. Because choice is real, knowledge of the workings of the social realm does not guarantee predictive power. Again, testimony of this is the recurrent failure of economics to establish itself as a predictive science.³⁶

Creative scientists at work

Few philosophies of science systematically explore creativity, the process by which scientists proceed to develop novel theories or theories about previously unexplored phenomena. Realists are a welcome exception in this regard. It has already been mentioned that they pay attention to the social structure of science and, in particular, to the fact that scientists employ previously established facts and theories in order to explain new phenomena. This brings the realist notion of 'retroduction' to the foreground. Retroduction sums up the way in which knowledge depends on 'knowledge-like antecedents'.³⁷ Distinct from both induction and deduction, it indicates the process by which researchers account for new phenomena through analogies with phenomena with which they are already familiar. By doing so, the scientist endeavours to uncover mechanisms, structures and powers underneath the instantly observable surface level. For instance, Darwin's evolutionary theory was based on his knowledge of domestic breeding and Malthus's theory of population, while these insights into biological evolution, in turn, allowed Durkheim, in *The Division of Labour*, to develop his theory of societal change. Or, drawing upon the work of Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss employed analogies with linguistic structures to account for non-linguistic, social phenomena such as myths or kinship. More recently, Niklas Luhmann employed insights from Maturana

and Varela's autopoiesis, initially a theory from biology, to account for the self-referential nature of society. Through retroduction theoretical entities are invoked, the reality of which can be inferred from the observation of their effects. For instance, although it is not possible to observe electricity as such, it can be detected through an electroscope. Likewise, radioactive materials can be identified through a Geiger counter.³⁸

The prescriptive dimension of critical realism is now coming to the foreground. Scientific theories ought to indicate deeper mechanisms that go well beyond the Humean surface level. Theories ought not to be seen as simply logico-deductive devices; they are the outcome of a creative process in which the unfamiliar is apprehended through analogies with the familiar. Scientists ought subsequently to use empirical research to test the existence and causal power of the alleged mechanisms. Besides empirical validity, however, Bhaskar and Lawson suggest another criterion to decide between theories: that of explanatory power. Scientists ought to prefer theories with high explanatory power instead of those with less. There is some dispute among critical realists as to what explanatory power means, but most would agree that it indicates how wide a range of significant empirical phenomena has been 'accounted for', 'illuminated' or 'covered'.³⁹ The wider the range, the greater is the explanatory power, and the greater the explanatory power, the more desirable is the theory. So, a theory T_b is preferable over T_a if and only if T_b manages to explain most phenomena explained by T_a , plus some other significant phenomena that T_a does not manage to explain. There is some ambiguity as to what 'most' and 'significant' mean in the previous sentence,⁴⁰ but the gist of the argument is clear: theories with a broader scope are preferable. As far as the social sciences are concerned, this prescription is not inconsequential. Whereas Popper regarded the all-encompassing nature of the theories of Marx and Freud with great suspicion, Bhaskar et al. consider the very same feature as a plus. This is not to say that critical realists necessarily wish to abandon the falsifiability criterion. Empirical testing remains a central methodological theme, and from this most critical realists would infer that theories ought to be empirically refutable. In practice, however, they seem less concerned about falsifiability (or, indeed, degrees of falsifiability) than about explanatory power.

As mentioned before, many critical realists are practising social scientists. Among self-declared critical realists are various economists, geographers, psychologists, historians and sociologists. This is maybe not surprising because initially critical realist philosophy had paid a lot of attention to social science and social theory, and in turn social scientists contributed to the realist doctrine. In contrast with several philosophers of science, such as Popper or Lakatos, whose knowledge of the social sciences is minimal and, if existent, limited to economics, Bhaskar and fellow realists have a sophisticated understanding of both the practice of social science and the theoretical and method-

ological considerations that accompany it. Their philosophy is meant to be a guide for the social rather than the natural sciences. Like Popper, however, critical realists defend a naturalist position. They want to demonstrate that, at some level, the social and the natural sciences employ the same method, and that therefore the idea of social science is not a fiction. Their point is that most anti-naturalists, such as Peter Winch, have made the crucial mistake of adopting a positivist view of science. Realists acknowledge that social researchers do not operate in a positivist fashion, but insist that natural scientists do not either. So Winch is right to point out that the regularity notion of causality is alien to social research but wrong in taking it as intrinsic to the practice of natural science. Once a realist notion of science is substituted for the positivist one, a qualified naturalism becomes a distinct possibility. Like the natural sciences, the social sciences attempt to uncover underlying social structures or mechanisms to account for observed 'demi-regularities'. Demi-regularities or 'partial regularities' are imperfect patterns, but patterns nevertheless. 'Women tend to be paid less than men for the same kind of work' or 'Protestants commit suicide more than Catholics' are examples of demi-regularities. They are typical of open systems, in which various mechanisms interfere with each other and in which perfect regularities are scarce. Demi-regularities allude to the existence of a mechanism or, indeed, of several mechanisms.⁴¹ I mentioned a *qualified* naturalism because Bhaskar acknowledges three differences between the social and the natural sciences. As opposed to natural structures, social structures do not exist independently of the activities they affect, nor do they exist independently of people's conceptions. They are also subject to change to a far greater extent than natural structures.⁴² It would also be an error to interpret Bhaskar's naturalist outlook as a *carte blanche* for reductionism, as if the social realm can be interpreted in natural science terms. Like Durkheim and Bourdieu, critical realists tend to assume that, while laws applicable to more simple domains of reality also affect more complex ones, the latter cannot be reduced to aggregates of the former. Every domain has a complexity of its own that cannot be captured simply by laws of a lesser order. As much as it would be a gross error to reduce the biological world to the workings of chemicals, or the chemical to physical mechanisms, there are emergent properties to the social that cannot be addressed by any combination of the other sciences. Bhaskar's holistic outlook also excludes individualistic explanations because they too fail to pay sufficient justice to the exclusivity of the social.

Contributions to social theory

Critical realists such as Bhaskar also contribute to social theory. They try to avoid both societal determinism and voluntarism. The former downplays the

role of human agency; the latter makes the opposite error. Both have in common that they erroneously oppose society and agency as if social structures preclude agency. For Bhaskar society is a precondition, not an impediment, for agency. In turn people's agency makes for the reproduction and transformation of society. Bhaskar calls this 'the transformational model of social action' according to which social structure is both the medium and the output of people's agency.⁴³ There is thus no creation *de novo*: like sculptors, only able to create something out of the materials available to them, individuals can only exercise agency by relying on structure. In Aristotelian terms, the individual acts as efficient cause and structure is material cause. Think of the sculptor again: the artist, not the clay, is able to initiate activity but the kind of clay that is being used affects the shape of what is being produced.⁴⁴ To what extent this contribution is innovative is a different matter, especially given that some realists acknowledge that other theorists expressed remarkably similar views earlier.⁴⁵ Those who are familiar with Giddens's structural theory may have noticed that the transformational model resembles his 'duality of structure', according to which structure is both medium and unintended outcome of people's actions.⁴⁶ Like Giddens, critical realists tend to portray people as continuously monitoring themselves and able to do so because of tacit, practical knowledge about the workings of social life.⁴⁷ So, for Lawson, besides the discursive conscious and the unconscious realm, the mind operates at a tacit level as well, also referred to as the level of practical consciousness, and it is precisely the complex interplay between this tacit dimension and self-monitoring that accounts for the unintended reproduction of structures. It should be added, though, that not all realists are as sympathetic to Giddens's theory as Lawson is. For instance, Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach implies a strong criticism of Giddens and, indeed, a milder one of Bhaskar. *Pace* Giddens's focus on the synchronic reproduction of structures, Archer points out that, while structure predates agency, structural elaboration or reproduction post-dates people's actions. As opposed to Giddens's fallacy of 'central conflation', Archer makes an effort to distinguish clearly structural conditions and people's agencies, and the lapse of time is central to her account of change and transformation of society. 'Structure necessarily predates the action(s) which transform it.' Also, she pays particular attention to how different structures will set different conditions and therefore lead to different effects.

There is another difference with Giddens's structuration theory. Influenced partly by the later Wittgenstein, Giddens's notion of social structure refers to shared rules and resources that are recursively implicated in people's activities. Although critical realists are also indebted to Wittgenstein and Winch, they tend to describe structure in terms of social positions. The nature of these positions is independent of the people who occupy them. For instance, students come and go, but the position of student remains more or less the same.

Likewise, a landlord might have different tenants through time, but the position of tenant is unaffected by the changes. Each position remains unaltered in that the rights and obligations, which accompany each, will be unaffected by the change in personnel. Critical realists tend to pay particular attention to 'internally related' as opposed to 'externally related' relations. In the former, positions are what they are because of the relationship between them, whereas in the latter each entity is independent of the relationship with the other. An example of an external relationship is the relationship between commuters: they are what they are independent of their relationship. In contrast, a landlord is what they are by virtue of their relationship with a tenant, and vice versa. The same applies to the relationship between teacher and student, parent and child, master and slave, and so on. Critical realists point out that a huge amount of relationships are internal, and that they are of tremendous importance for social analysis. They are significant because they embody inequality and power differentials. Each position goes hand in hand with historically given interests and resources. These interests and resources constitute an 'objective reality' that is bound to affect present and future strategies.⁴⁸

There is a final difference with Giddens. He is sceptical of the usefulness of evolutionary thinking in sociology. His point has always been that the differences between the social and the natural world are so large that evolutionary models do not provide the same explanatory power in the social realm as they do in the natural world.⁴⁹ The explanatory gains are minimal. Critical realists have, on the whole, been far more sympathetic towards evolutionary analogies. Influenced by Richard Dawkins's interpretation of Darwin, Rom Harré has been one of the first committed realists to draw attention to the fruitfulness of evolutionary forms of explanations and Bhaskar has been following him in this regard.⁵⁰ Both have been particularly interested in Dawkins's notion of the meme as a social equivalent to the gene. But it is especially in economics that critical realists have taken on board the relevance of evolutionary thinking. Geoff Hodgson's *Economics and Evolution* has been crucial in this respect, because he has drawn attention to the importance of complexity theory and chaos theory for economics and the other social sciences, and he has managed to summarize these new developments within a coherent frame of reference.⁵¹ In a similar vein Lawson's *Reorienting Economics* introduces a model in which both positive and negative feedback loops occupy a central position. For Lawson, the transformational model of social action is perfectly compatible with this viewpoint.⁵²

Application: British politics

Critical realists have been particularly prolific at a theoretical level, but they have traditionally paid less attention to empirical research. Recently, however,

some attempts have been made to demonstrate the usefulness of the new creed for social research. One such example is Bob Carter's *Realism and Racism*, which studies issues concerning ethnicity and race from the perspective of critical theory, although the book is more a contribution to social theory than an empirical study, questioning as it does the analytical usefulness of the concept of race.⁵³ In a similar vein, Carter and New's *Making Realism Work* is devoted particularly to demonstrating the implications of critical realism for methodology and empirical research in the social sciences.⁵⁴ More immediately linked to empirical research is Fleetwood and Ackroyd's edited collection *Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies*, which explores the relevance of realist social theory and methodology in the domain of organizational theory and business studies.⁵⁵ Perhaps the most influential empirical research, from a critical realist perspective, is *Postwar British Politics in Perspective*, written by David Marsh and his colleagues at the University of Birmingham.⁵⁶ The sheer impact of the book and the clarity of exposition make it worth discussing in detail.

The authors argue that most work on post-war British politics has been superficial, atheoretical and ahistorical. Embedded in positivist epistemology, most of these writings remain at the surface level, dealing with various political events and political actors. Authors dealing with British politics tend to overemphasize the role of individuals, exemplified in the huge amount of literature on Margaret Thatcher's personality and leadership style. This approach provides useful empirical detail, but fails to lay down a sophisticated theoretical framework that would make sense of the multitude of recorded phenomena. Most of these writings on post-war Britain focus on specific political or social cases, but without putting them into a broader historical context. For instance, by focusing on the period Thatcher was in office, numerous books fail to account for the structural factors that contributed to her rise and success. In short, the literature on post-war British politics presents a plethora of facts but little theoretical work to account for them.⁵⁷

In this context, Marsh et al. argue that a critical realist perspective is called for. They take a strong anti-positivist stance, maintaining that a proper explanation goes beyond the surface level of events and actions. They also plead for an interdisciplinary approach, which recognizes that various mechanisms can come into play, ranging from the economic to the cultural, some reinforcing each other, others cancelling each other out. The realist viewpoint also pays particular attention to the interplay between structural factors and individual agency. The relationship between structure and agency is portrayed as dialectical. On the one hand, agents cannot help but face or rely on structures. The structures are, to some extent, given and external. On the other hand, individuals also interpret and affect the structures. They can act strategically and reproduce or change structures, but any change is always accompanied by

some element of continuity. We have to be wary, therefore, of any simplistic account of change in terms of neatly demarcated periods.⁵⁸

This perspective is very well exemplified in the discussion of the successive Thatcher governments. The authors spell out the specific structural context in which Thatcher rose to and maintained power. They take a historical perspective and avoid one-sided analyses. One such partial explanation for the rise and popularity of Thatcher is the view that she presented a coherent response to Britain's economic crisis. The authors also reject the discontinuity thesis: that is, the assumption that Thatcher knew from the very beginning what Thatcherism was about, and that her first years in office were radically different from what preceded them. Marsh et al. employ an evolutionary viewpoint, emphasizing that Thatcherism was always changing and evolving in response to various inputs. These inputs ranged from crises in modern capitalism to New Right ideology. The authors explore how the particular economic and political situation in the UK and worldwide in the 1970s and 1980s provided particular challenges to and constraints on the Thatcher governments. From the late 1970s onwards, subsequent British governments were faced with a weakening of US hegemony and a global crisis of the Fordist modes of economic regulation. The responses of the governments were limited by the declining economic and political role of Britain in the world. Before Thatcher came to power, the Keynesian consensus was already limited because of the ongoing attempts to take care of the financial market of the City of London and to preserve the value of the pound. As such, Thatcherism did not constitute such a radical break with the past. Thatcher's responses – notably privatization, monetarism and management reform – were initially inconsistent and random. Only during Thatcher's third term and the Major government did these solutions achieve more consistency and higher levels of sophistication.⁵⁹

In the post-Thatcher era, both the Conservative Party and Labour focused a lot of energy on issues concerning party management, and image and style. This can be explained by broader structural transformations, which go well beyond Britain. With the collapse of Soviet-style communism, politics has entered a new 'post-ideological' era: most mainstream parties are liberal democratic and agree on key issues. Centre-left and centre-right parties increasingly embrace a similar neo-liberal agenda, rejecting the social democratic orthodoxy of the earlier period. This post-ideological shift has two major consequences. First, with very few political parties differing substantially, political agents need to compete at the level of image and 'governing competence' rather than ideology. The focus of New Labour on image can be seen as an active, strategic response to these new challenges and constraints. This manifests itself in a more prominent role attached to 'spin doctors'. Second, with political parties having lost their traditional positions, there is an increasing likelihood of dissent and splits within each party. This explains the extent to

which Europe (and, in particular, the Maastricht Treaty) became such a divisive issue within the Conservative Party during the 1990s.⁶⁰

However enticing their view on post-war British politics, it is not entirely clear why Marsh et al. need the intricacies of critical realist philosophy to justify their work. To underpin this historical account, a theoretical discussion of the relationship between structure and agency would have sufficed. The further commitment of Marsh et al. to the other aspects of the philosophical programme of critical realism does not seem to add much. Moreover, any persuasive historical explanation manages to create the right balance between agency and structure, focusing on the way in which central actors make decisions in the face of structural constraints and selective pressures. Contrary to what Marsh and his colleagues suggest, other historians, writing about the same period, have done this as well and with considerable success. The authors of *Postwar British Politics in Perspective* have a tendency to put up straw men, suggesting grotesque stereotypes of other historical accounts. Very few competent historical writings about this period of British history comply with the crude positivism suggested by Marsh et al.

Evaluation

Critical realism tries to develop a normative model in that it presents guidelines about how social science ought to be conducted and how it should not be done. It occasionally justifies itself on the basis that it constructs these directives, and so the question whether it is successful in accomplishing this mission becomes an important issue indeed. As already mentioned, the task in hand is twofold: it is not simply to do with informing social researchers about the right kind of procedures but also apropos warning them where not to go. Realists are moderately convincing as far as the former category is concerned – the positive instructions, that is. They have clear instructions as to how researchers should proceed. Starting with observed stylized facts, they ought to use analogies and metaphors in order to develop plausible hypotheses about the mechanisms situated at the deeper levels of reality. These hypotheses will eventually be tested empirically, and the more explanatory power these hypotheses have, the better for us. But realists are less informative when it comes to lessons that contradict certain research practices or that at least suggest something different from what has been done hitherto. With the exception of economics, most mainstream social research complies with the intricate procedures suggested by the realist agenda. Critical realists often point at the spectre of positivism, the extent to which social research has been impregnated with the remnants of logical positivism. But this is not entirely correct. It is simply not the case that contemporary social researchers are satisfied with a mere recording of regularity conjunctions; they look for mecha-

nisms that account for *how* the regularities are brought about. Critical realists articulate that which most social researchers have been doing for a very long time.⁶¹

Another problem with the realist perspective is its reduced notion of knowledge acquisition – its diminished sense of the multitude of types of knowledge available to the human investigator. Critical realists tend to regard the aim of social science is to explain and depict the outer world as accurately as possible, and there is little attention to other reasons why people might feel motivated or inspired to investigate their social surroundings. They do occasionally mention self-emancipation and societal critique but it is unmistakable that their philosophical and methodological investigations are geared, not towards those aims, but towards explanatory power and faithful portrayal. Critical realists adopt a limited view of what knowledge can be about partly because they are caught within a 'scientific' perspective, by which I mean a view in which a particular model of the natural sciences looms large over any investigation into the nature of knowledge acquisition. It is in this respect that critical realism resembles the philosophical doctrines against which it reacts in that Hume's empiricism, Hempel's logical positivism and Popper's falsificationism all share a scientific bias too. It is of course true that, in contrast with these philosophical positions, Bhaskar et al. suggest a different notion of what science is about, or a distinct view of what scientific explanation means in the natural sciences. But their overall outlook is not very different from say Hume, Hempel or Popper in that they still operate with a notion of knowledge acquisition set within the restricted contours of how some natural sciences operate.

Even if we were to accept this limited notion of knowledge acquisition, it is not entirely obvious whether the critical realist agenda would enable explanation or depiction to be achieved at all. Given its own premises, it remains unclear how the critical realist guidelines will enable the social researcher to uncover the various mechanisms and powers that are not immediately accessible to observation. One of these assumptions is that most systems are open systems and that social systems are among them. This notion of open systems has initially been used to criticize the regularity notion of causality, according to which the regular conjunction between phenomena is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for causality. Realists rightly point out that, once we acknowledge the openness of most systems, the regularity notion breaks down because there might be a lack of synchrony between the deep and the observational realm. So we cannot rely on the observational realm to infer law-like generalizations of the kind that hard-core empiricists purported to identify because of the openness of systems and therefore the fact that various mechanisms interfere with the observational level. But if this is the case, then it is equally problematic to expect social researchers to be able to gain access to the deeper level in the way in which realists claim they can, for references

to the empirical realm would be contaminated by the interferences of various mechanisms or powers. Likewise, the critical realist reliance on demi-regularities and stylized facts seems odd given their insistence on the lack of synchrony between the observable and the deep. It is remarkable that critical realists do not acknowledge the far-reaching consequences of their own presuppositions. If they are right in claiming that most systems are open in the way in which indeed social systems are, and if scientists operate according to the principles of critical realism, then it follows that most scientific explanations cannot be properly justified philosophically. This is, of course, not necessarily a sufficient reason for dismissing their cognitive validity, but it would imply a far more sceptical position than the one adopted by critical realists.

Critical realists have a tendency to put up straw men so as to strengthen their argument and hint at its revolutionary nature. They thereby simplify the views of others and possibly stereotype them, placing diverse theoretical positions under the heading of one ideal-typical construction. One example of this is the way in which Bhaskar opposes voluntarism and determinism or, in sociological parlance, action-orientated and structure-orientated theories. For Bhaskar, the former goes back to Max Weber's individualist position, the latter to Durkheim's collectivist outlook, and both present an incomplete and ultimately unsatisfactory picture. Therefore, the juxtaposition needs to be transcended if we are to represent the social more comprehensively and accurately. The problem with Bhaskar's argument is that very few theories would lend themselves to belonging to either of those extreme categories. Most theories are more sophisticated than either type, recognizing and honouring the sheer complexity and ambiguity of social life and the intersection between the social and the individual. Surely, the theoretical perspectives of Georg Simmel, G. H. Mead or Talcott Parsons cannot be reduced to either voluntarism or determinism. Parsons's point was precisely to integrate some of the fruitful insights of Weber about purposive action with the sobering truths of more systemic approaches, and he subsequently managed to do so by linking the pattern variables (which represent choice) to his functional analysis (which represents systemic constraint). Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity in postulating that there is a contradiction between approaches that emphasize individual agency and those that stress structure, because there are at least two ways in which either agency or structure can be accentuated. We might be holding a methodological position or making an ontological assertion, and one does not necessitate the other. It is perfectly possible to believe in methodological individualism while holding on to ontological collectivism, and vice versa. Bhaskar's tendency to conflate the two makes his argument considerably less compelling.⁶²

Bhaskar's attempt to transcend the opposition between voluntarism and determinism reveals another unspoken presupposition that characterizes his

thought and indeed that of most critical realists. The assumption is close to what Dewey called the 'spectator theory of knowledge'.⁶³ Critical realists implicitly adopt the spectator theory of knowledge in that they assume that the aim of social research is to map the social world as accurately and completely as possible. While prediction is no longer considered a plausible aim on account of the incurable openness of most systems, what is now at stake in research is the mirroring of the outer world. This notion of the social researcher as a would-be cartographer fuels the desire to go beyond both 'one-sided' and 'incomplete' perspectives, to recognize that there is not just action but also structure, and to realize that where there is society, there is also agency. It also underscores the urge to point out that structures are not simply constraining but also enabling, that they are not just an impediment for people to do something, but also at times help them to accomplish things and exercise agency. And it is the very same notion of cartography that underlies their attempts to pay attention to insights from hermeneutics. Given the pre-interpreted nature of social reality, the capturing of people's meanings and beliefs is regarded as a prerequisite for a reliable representation of what is going on in the social realm, and it is precisely because positivist methods purposefully ignore the meaningful dimension of social life that they will ultimately fail to depict truthfully. But the spectator theory of knowledge is problematic on several levels. Firstly, while it makes perfect sense to see language and knowledge as some of the sophisticated tools which the human species employs so as to adjust itself to the external world, it would be far-fetched to argue that people's cognitive functions had been altered so much that they are now able to mirror the world and represent it as it really is.⁶⁴ In chapters 5 to 7, it will be argued that it is more fruitful to conceive of knowledge acquisition as a way of coping with, rather than copying, the external world. So knowledge ought to be seen as active rather than representational – an action rather than a picture. Secondly, rather than seeing the interpretative method as a stepping stone towards unravelling previously unacknowledged mechanisms and gaining access to hitherto inaccessible levels of reality, it makes more sense to treat interpretation and understanding in the way in which Gadamer wrote about them. The Gadamerian view of understanding will be explored in subsequent chapters, but it is worth mentioning here that one of its implications is that culturally specific presuppositions are a *sine qua non* to any act of interpretation, and that therefore it is misleading to defend the interpretative method on the basis that it would facilitate the representation of social things as they really are.

In what follows I will be developing this non-representational view of knowledge further and, in doing so, will adopt a position that is very different from, if not diametrically opposed to, the realist view of science. I will draw on American pragmatism, a philosophical tradition that is in many respects antithetical to realism. One of the central ideas of my proposal is that,

in the light of recent philosophical and historical insights, the search for a methodological strategy which supposedly unites the social and the natural sciences becomes increasingly tenuous. Pragmatism heralds a new direction in social research, in which knowledge is no longer conceived as mirroring or depicting the outer world, but rather as intimately related to practical achievements. Critical theorists have been particularly receptive to pragmatism; Jürgen Habermas relied heavily on Peirce, Mead and other pragmatists. Therefore, the next chapter deals with critical theory and pays attention to the way in which it has incorporated pragmatism. This sets the stage for the discussion of Rorty's ideas in chapter 6 and for my outline of a pragmatist philosophy of the social sciences in chapter 7.

Further reading

Among the predecessors of the realist movement are Mary Hesse and Rom Harré; their interest in the role of models and analogies struck a chord with critical realists. To get acquainted with Hesse's ideas, I suggest her *Forces and Fields* and *Models and Analogies in Science*. Harré's *An Introduction to the Logic of the Sciences* explored similar themes. Roy Bhaskar is one of the leading members of the critical realist movement, and both his *A Realist Theory of Science* and *The Possibility of Naturalism* are regarded as foundational texts. The first of these proposes the outline of a realist philosophy of science; the second presents a realist view of the social sciences. Both books are a difficult read mainly because of Bhaskar's elusive prose rather than the complexity of the arguments presented. Those struggling with the texts might find solace in the fact that Bhaskar's most recent books are even more impenetrable and that Andrew Collier's *Critical Realism* is a remarkably simple introduction to Bhaskar's thinking. An equally accessible, though less systematic, exposition of realism can be found in Peter Mamicas's *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. Lawson's *Economics and Reality* might be even more appropriate for those unacquainted with the critical realist literature. Large sections of the book deal with economics, but chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6 constitute an excellent introduction to critical realism. For those interested in a more advanced introduction, Lawson's *Reorienting Economics* follows on from the previous book. For an introductory review of the relationship between realism, critical theory and hermeneutics, see Outwaite's *New Philosophies of Social Science*, an outstanding overview, though I remain sceptical of the way in which Outwaite wants to merge Habermas's consensual theory of truth with a realist notion. For a convincing articulation of the realist critique of the Humean notion of causality, see Haré and Madden's *Causal Powers*. Another contribution to the philosophy of science that is close to critical realism is Nancy Cartwright's *How the Laws of Physics Lie*. Realist views on social theory are expressed in Keat and Urry's *Social Theory as Science*, Bhaskar's *The Possibility of Naturalism* and Archer's *Realist Social Theory*.