

Critical Naturalism or the Naturalization of the Social: a Dialectical Critique of Bhaskar's Philosophy of Social Science

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[Some] determinations will be shared by the most modern epoch and the most ancient. No production will be thinkable without them; however, even though the most developed languages have laws and characteristics in common with the least developed, nevertheless, just those things which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity—which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and the object, nature—their essential difference is not forgotten. The whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations lies in this forgetting.

Marx, *Grundrisse*

The loss of memory is a transcendental condition of science.
All reification is a forgetting.

Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

According to Roy Bhaskar, the fundamental problem within the philosophy of social science centres on the degree to which society can be studied in the same way as nature. In *The Possibility of*

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Naturalism—through a critique of both positivism and hermeneutics—Bhaskar attempts to delimit the terrain for a limited or critical realism in a manner similar to Kant's efforts to ascertain the limits of pure reason (Cf. Kant, 1934). Bhaskar's critical realism agrees with positivism as to the essential unity of scientific logic and with philosophical hermeneutics in terms of its sensitivity to the specificity of its object of inquiry.¹ In this paper, I propose to outline the rudiments of Bhaskar's bold attempt to elaborate a critical naturalism, before subjecting it to a critical interrogation. The question I wish to pose is the following: does social scientific naturalism, however critical, *naturalize*, and hence ontologize, social relations?

Critical Naturalism

Bhaskar's critical naturalism, based on a transcendental realist ontology and a corresponding epistemology, attempts to chart a middle path between positivism, on the one hand, and hermeneutics on the other. Bhaskar makes the somewhat dubious claim that despite the differences between the two positions, in terms of their substantive methodological approaches to the study of society, they are both based on an empiricist ontology; that is to say, both discourses consider the "real" to be that which is immediately given to sense-perception and experience.² Against such an empiricist ontology, Bhaskar argues emphatically that the "real" must not be conceived of in immediate terms; reality is not comprised of the phenomenal or surface forms which present themselves to sense-perception. Rather, reality consists of the underlying, *transcendental* conditions of possibility for such forms. It is in this manner that Bhaskar endeavours to distinguish his transcendental realism from the empiricist realism of positivism and

1. This attentiveness to the specificity of the object is the cornerstone of Aristotle's science of politics. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues, against his mentor Plato, that "Our account of this science will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the *subject-matter* allows; for the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all discussions, any more than in all products of handicrafts" (emphasis added). For the Aristotelian influence on hermeneutical approaches to the social sciences, see Taylor (1985a) and Gadamer (1975).

2. This is a dubious characterization because hermeneutics, quite unlike positivism, holds that the object is never given in an unmediated way to sense-perception. Rather, it is *always already* interpreted and constituted through language.

hermeneutics.

This distinction between the transcendental ontological structure of objects and their empirical forms is made clearer still by Bhaskar's distinction between the "transitive" and "intransitive" dimensions of objects. The latter constitute the possibility conditions of science; they are the necessary causal relations which hold independently of the knowledge of them. Thus the intransitive dimensions of objects are analogous to Kant's conception of noumena—the *Ding-An-Sich* (or thing-in-itself)—though, for Kant, these were not knowable. In Kantian discourse, the noumenal forms thus constitute a fundamental limitation to the aspirations of "pure reason". Similarly, in Bhaskar's view, there exists an ontological gap between causal laws and their empirical manifestation which is overlooked by positivism and hermeneutics alike. The transitive dimension of social objects are historically contingent, they are constantly in the process of transmutation. While this dimension of social objects falls under the rubric of philosophical sociology, the intransitive dimension constitutes the subject-matter of philosophical ontology. Here, it is possible to detect a close resemblance between Bhaskar's formulations and the base-superstructure metaphor within historical materialism; this is a relation to which we will return below. In Bhaskar's view, it is imperative to establish a distinction between the necessary and contingent dimensions of the object in order to avoid reducing being to thought.

It follows from this that science is the production of knowledge of the intransitive dimensions of objects. Scientific method consists of "the *movement* at any one level from knowledge of manifest phenomena to knowledge of the structures that generate them" (Bhaskar, 1979: 17). Objects of scientific inquiry are never merely given empirically nor are they "determinate chunks of the world". Rather, they are real structures whose actual presence and appropriate concept must be generated by the theoretical and experimental work of science. In order to study societies and people, we must know what kinds of things they are in order to attain scientific knowledge of them.³

Bhaskar thus poses the following question: what properties do soci-

3. Now this is an obvious paradox—one which Bhaskar inherits from Kant. In Hegel's view, this Kantian injunction—"to know before we know, is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus not to venture into the water until he has learned to swim" Hegel (1975).

eties and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us. In contrast to Kant, whose "transcendental deduction" moves from the object to its subjective conditions of possibility, Bhaskar does the exact opposite. He begins with the subjective facticity of scientific knowledge and then deduces the possibility conditions of that knowledge which are located in the object. This is precisely the difference between Kant's critical idealism and Bhaskar's critical realism. For Kant, the transcendental possibility conditions inhere in the knowing, constitutive subject.⁴ For Bhaskar, in contrast, the object is, in light of its intransitive dimensions, transcendental. Bhaskar's task is thus to do for the object, what Kant does for pure reason or transcendental subjectivity in his first critique. That is to say, he must show that

not only in explanations in the domains of the human sciences (and psychological) predicates are irreducible (which is consistent with a transcendental idealist interpretation of their status), but that a realistic interpretation of social scientific (and psychological) theory is in principle acceptable; that is that some possible objects designated by social scientific (and psychological) theory are real (Bhaskar, 1979: 18-19).

Bhaskar goes on to delimit the properties of societies and individuals and their interrelation. He singles out three models for consideration, subjects them to a critique, and then posits a model of his own. Model I is Weber's theory of social action, in which social objects are constituted by intentional or meaningful action. In Bhaskar's view, this model is undermined by its voluntarism insofar as it accords primacy to the agency of atomistic individuals in the constitution of society. Model II is Durkheimian theory which, in contrast to the Weberian approach, understands the social totality as possessing a life of its own, standing over and above the individual. What characterizes this model is a reification of the social. According to Bhaskar, these two antinomic models to a large extent structure the field of social the-

4. This is what Kant means when he refers to his "Copernican revolution" in metaphysics. It establishes the primacy of the subject, in opposition to the primacy of the object in both rationalism and empiricism.

ory—the various schools of phenomenology, existentialism and even Marxism are variations on these two themes.

The third model is what Bhaskar calls the “dialectical model” and is represented by the work of Peter Berger and his collaborators. This model attempts to synthesize the antinomic poles represented by Models I and II. In the dialectical model, there exists a circular relationship—as opposed to the linear logics of Weberian and Durkheimian discourses—wherein society forms the individuals who themselves form society. In this view, it is not possible to characterize the social structure apart from the human activity that produces it. Berger’s Marxist-Hegelian model implies that there is a qualitative difference between social and natural facts.⁵ The social is an objectification of the man, while man is the internalization of the consciousness of the social.

At first glance, argues Bhaskar, the dialectical model appears to account for both the subjective or internal aspects of society as well as its objective or external dimensions. The respective problems of voluntarism and reification in Weberian and Durkheimian social theories are thereby avoided. On closer inspection, however, this model is revealed to be seriously flawed. In Bhaskar’s words “in seeking to avoid the errors of both stereotypes, Model III succeeds only in combining them” (1979: 42). People and society *are not*, according to Bhaskar, dialectically related, “they do not constitute two moments of the same process. Rather they refer to radically different kinds of thing” (1979: 42). This, of course, has to do with the distinction between transitive and intransitive dimensions of the social. While individuals comprise the historically-contingent or transitive dimensions of the object, society, as a totality, constitutes the intransitive or transcendental dimensions of the object of social science.

The fundamental weakness of the dialectical approach is that it postulates that men make or create society through action. However, according to Bhaskar, it is only accurate to state that men transform or reproduce *what is already made*. Social life cannot therefore be reduced to the creative activity of the individual; society is, rather, a

5. Such a separation shows up most clearly in the work of Lukacs in which there is a qualitative split between history and nature. This is arguably a violation of Marx’s constant emphasis on the metabolic relation between humanity and nature. Cf. Marx (1977:133-34; 1978). For a critique of Lukacs, see Adorno (1982).

necessary condition for any intentional action at all (1979: 43). This is what Bhaskar calls the “transformational model” of society which is symbolized by the analogy of the sculptor who must work only with the materials and tools available to him.⁶ Bhaskar’s “transformational model” incorporates both a notion of the “duality of structure”⁷ as well as a conception of the “duality of praxis”. “Society”, according to Bhaskar,

is both the ever-present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is conscious production, and (normally unconscious) reproduction of the conditions of production, that is society (1979: 43-44).

Bhaskar therefore makes a sharp distinction between the genesis of human actions which lies in the reasons of individuals, on the one hand, and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities on the other. This is a distinction, then, between the social and the psychological sciences paralleling Kant’s distinction between the transcendental and empirical subject. Though society is a necessary condition for intentional action, and vice-versa, unlike the dialectical model which conceives of this relationship in circular terms, in Bhaskar’s model, ultimately, since the social pre-exists individuals it is the transcendental ground for the latter.

Marx’s Critique of Political Economy

As alluded to earlier, Bhaskar’s critical realism bears marked affinities with Marx’s critique of political economy which is presented in its most systematic form in *Capital*. Geras argues that there are two theoretical foundations on which Marx’s “science” rests (Geras, 1972: 285-86).⁸ The first is based on a conception of the task of scientific discourse *per se*, it deals with the concept of *scientificity*. For Marx,

6. This is an Aristotelian analogy.

7. Bhaskar acknowledges the influence of Giddens’ “structuration” theory on his own transformative model.

8. Bhaskar compares his own critical realism favourably to Geras’ interpretation of Marx’s critique of political economy. As shall be made clear below, it will be suggested that Geras’ reading of Marx points in a direction opposite to that of Bhaskar’s.

this concept is premised on a dualism between appearance and reality; if no such dualism existed, the notion of science would be superfluous. The task of science as such is to move from the level of appearances to the underlying reality concealed by it. This understanding of science is as applicable to the study of nature as it is to political economy for, as Marx states,

a scientific analysis of competition is not possible before we have a conception of the inner nature of capital, just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are not intelligible to any but him who is acquainted with their real motions, motions which are not directly perceptible by the senses (cited in Geras, 1972: 285).

According to Geras, this conception of scientificity is hardly satisfactory for it provides no concrete justification as to why it is equally applicable to the *critique* of political economy; it does not, in other words, explain why there exists such a rupture between the essence of social relations and the form in which they appear to the subject. Geras argues that

taken on its own, this answer is not entirely satisfactory. It makes of Marx's primary methodological injunction—to shatter the obviousness of immediate appearances—an abstract procedural rule which must form part of the equipment of every science regardless of the content of that science, of the nature of the object of study (1972: 286).

Hence, this first theoretical foundation, does not specify how the nature of the object of social science must also be premised on an anti-nomic relationship between sense-perception and cognition.

In Geras' view, it is the second theoretical foundation—the doctrine of “commodity fetishism”—which establishes precisely the conditions of possibility of the antinomic structure of the understanding within the particular mode of production characterized by generalized commodity production. The essence of fetishism is that it constitutes a disjunction between social relations and the manner in which they are experienced by its agents. The commodity, in its abstractness, conceals the

fact that it is the objectification of human labour power, the embodiment of social relations of production. Hence, the fetishization of commodities gives rise to a frame in which social relations *take on the appearance* of relations between things. Fetishism is ultimately a thingification or a misrecognition of human powers. As Lukacs (cf. 1971) and Adorno (cf. 1982) have argued in very different ways, this process of reification of the social process is reflected at the level of thought. The antinomic relation between real social relations and the form in which they appear to sense-perception, finds its reflection in the “antinomies of bourgeois thought”. It is reflected, for instance, in the Kantian antinomies—between transcendental and empirical subject, fact and value, is and ought, phenomenon and noumenon, form and content, etc.—which establish the finitude of human understanding. This antinomic structure, reflective of the diremptions of capitalist social relations, is *universalized* and is said to characterize the limits and possibilities of human reason *per se*. It is precisely this type of thinking that thinkers from Fichte to Gramsci have attempted to overcome.

Turning our attention back to Bhaskar, we can see that there exists a very close similarity between his critical realism and Marx's first or universal conception of science. Both discourses agree that science as such is premised on an asymmetry between being and thought, essence and appearance. The *modus operandi* of science is to move from the level of manifest content, to the latent structures which give rise to it. The real cannot, therefore, be understood as immediacy, but is, rather, that which makes possible manifest phenomena. The relation between philosophical sociology and philosophical ontology—the former dealing with the “transitive” dimension of objects and the latter dealing with the “intransitive” dimension of objects—has as its analogue Marx's base-superstructure metaphor. It is important here to emphasize that in this context, base is understood as production in general. The production and reproduction of social life is thus a transcendental condition of possibility of human existence. This dimension of the social is irreducible and therefore intransitive. The particular forms in which social relations of production manifest themselves are, in contrast, historically contingent. As Bhaskar states, “although it can be

established a priori that material production is a necessary condition of social life, it cannot be proved that it is an ultimately determining one" (1979: 53).

The Naturalization of the Social?

Despite the similarities between Bhaskar's method and Marx's conception of science, there are also considerable differences. Insofar as Marx grounds his social science on a specific understanding of commodity fetishism, he, by extension, limits its scope. Marx's concept of social science is fundamentally dialectical, as opposed to transcendental (for the difference between dialectical and antinomic methods, see Hegel's critique of Kant in Hegel, 1977), for it makes provision for its own self-overcoming, its own negation; that is to say, Marxist theory is hermeneutically linked to praxis. This is precisely what Anthony Giddens means when he asserts that social science, by its very nature, participates in a "double hermeneutic": social science emerges within a historically and philosophically delimited social field and subsequently has determinate, material effects on that horizon (Giddens, 1982: 1-17).

It is the aim of Marxist theory to contribute to the revolutionary overcoming of the conditions of its own existence as such—capitalist social relations. For instance, in the "Postface" to the second edition of *Capital Vol. I*, Marx states that

in its rational form (the dialectic) is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary (Marx, 1977: 103).

Because dialectical method is based on the dynamic unity of form and content, not only is the object conceived as being vulnerable to negation, but so too must dialectical thought give way to its own nega-

tion (Adorno, 1973).⁹

Marxist theory thus demonstrates (despite positivistic interpretations) a hermeneutical sensitivity to the specificity of its object. As Geras makes quite clear in his critique of Althusser's hypostatization of the antinomy between science and ideology, Marx leaves open the possibility of a reconfiguration of the relationship between manifest and latent content in a post-capitalist social order. Geras reminds us that "Marx anticipates a social formation where, precisely, men will control their relations of production, rather than being controlled by them, where they will, therefore cease to be functionaries and bearers" (Geras 1972: 291). In other words, in this post-capitalist social formation the antinomy between science and ideology, latent and manifest content, will be radically reconfigured.

Geras' critique of the binary oppositions within structuralist Marxism is equally applicable to critical naturalism. Bhaskar takes a *particular* understanding of science which is suited to a *specific* object and *universalizes* it. Hence, the relationship between the transcendental and the empirical is hypostatized and, ultimately, naturalized; it is shown to inhere in the very structure of societies as such. Because it is based on a *forgetting*¹⁰ of its own situatedness within specific social relations¹¹, Bhaskar's critical realism ultimately does not serve as an adequate propaedeutic for ideology critique, but, rather, merely perpetuates a reification which bears the marks of those relations.

As Marx indicates in the *Grundrisse*, bourgeois political economists reify capitalist social relations precisely because—in their forgetting of the historicity of social relations—they universalize the particular. As we have suggested above, this is precisely what we see in the

9. G. A. Cohen makes a similar argument, although from radically different premises, when he suggests that Marx's social science makes provision for its own "withering away". See Cohen, (1978b).

10. This is one thing that Bhaskar has in common with Geras. Geras does not believe that the overcoming of reification has anything at all to do with anamnesis. In his critique of Berger's and Pullberg's suggestion that at the heart of alienation is a forgetting, Geras argues, in a rather simplistic manner, that "What [the agents] themselves 'forget' is that, if forgetfulness were all that was involved, a reminder should be sufficient to deal with the constituent problems of alienation" (1972: 292). He seems not to think that there exists an even deeper relation between memory and historicity.

11. Ironically, Bhaskar (1989) more recently sets his critical realism in polemical contrast to the "New Reality" propagated by *Marxism Today*.

Critique of Pure Reason, in which Kant universalizes the cognitive limitations of human relations as they existed at a particular historical moment. Just as Kantian philosophy must be historicized, Bhaskar's philosophy of science can be said to be applicable *only as a method* to a particular object—capitalist society—in which there does exist a rupture between manifest and latent content. Bhaskar is quite right in emphasizing that the task of science is to push beyond the level of manifest content, in order to arrive at its underlying or latent possibility conditions. However, when this method is universalized as a philosophy of social science *per se*, it betrays its own emancipatory intent; it eternalizes the specific relation between essence and appearance, science and ideology. Despite Bhaskar's attempt to incorporate Aristotelian insights into his discourse, he fails to pay attention enough to the particularity of the object. His critical naturalism therefore demonstrates far more affinities with positivism in its emphasis on the unity of scientific method. Because it refuses to acknowledge its own historicity¹² and the possibility of its own dialectical negation, critical naturalism actually contributes to a reification of the social. It does not admit of the possibility of a structure of scientific consciousness of a qualitatively different nature in a post-capitalist social formation in which the direct producers are not estranged from the products of their labour-power. A necessary condition of the philosophy of social science, in contrast with Bhaskar's critical naturalism, is a *remembrance* of its own embeddedness in social and political struggles.¹³ As Adorno once wrote, the conception of truth is inextricable from the creation of a true society.

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12. In his seminal article, Max Horkheimer (1972b) argues that this ability to reflect on its own historicity is what distinguishes "critical" from "traditional" or bourgeois theory.

13. Dorothy Smith (1990) argues that in the Communist Manifesto, rather than detaching the reader from the historical moment, Marx and Engels situate her in the very process of struggle itself.

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