Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism

Edited by
Ian F. Verstegen

Critical Realism: Interventions

Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism

Many have wondered about the similarity in name of American Critical Realism and the movement of the same name begun by Roy Bhaskar. The figure of Maurice Mandelbaum complicates the relationship, not only due to his career bridging the two movements but also his concern with traditional concerns of American critical realism (epistemology and philosophy of science) as well as the nature of society, the nature of social explanation, and naturalism.

This volume reflects both on Mandelbaum's own career and the relation of his thought to Bhaskar's critical realism. By examining Mandelbaum's commitments to phenomenology within critical realism, as well as his goal to enlighten social scientific and, above all, historiographical categories, it is possible to see how Mandelbaum went beyond the scientific realism of his predecessors. At the same time, a fruitful comparison with Bhaskar's and others' thought is undertaken by examining Mandelbaum's solutions to the problems of the ontology of sociology and social laws, the dynamics of cultural change and the overriding master narratives that govern late capitalism. By explaining Mandelbaum's scrupulous attempt to address the horrors of the twentieth century, it is possible to appreciate his significance for the twenty-first.

A timely and important book, *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism* is essential reading for all serious students of critical realism and twentieth century philosophy.

Ian F. Verstegen is an independent scholar living in Philadelphia. Trained in art history, he is an authority on early modern Italian art, especially the painter Federico Barocci, and his interests and publications extend to psychology, aesthetics, and philosophy.

Critical Realism: Interventions

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Preface

The idea of bringing together critical essays about Maurice Mandelbaum (1908–87) came about as the 100th anniversary of his birth approached. Fleeting interest in different communities eventually swelled up in and around the Bhaskar list serve. Thanks go especially to Christopher Lloyd, the pioneer in rehabilitating Mandelbaum, who was a champion of this project, and to Ruth Groff, Peter Manicas, and Doug Porpora for early discussions on American Critical Realism. The interest in the editorial committee of Interventions at Routledge gave a great boost of energy and the will to make a dream a reality. The months leading up to this book and the chance to talk to family members of Mandelbaum, and old friends like Lionel Gossman, Joseph Margolis, and Israel Scheffler has been a delight. To a pioneer in critical realist ways of thinking, we say Happy Birthday Maurie!

Maurice Mandelbaum at his High School Graduation, bound for Dartmouth, 1925.
Photo courtesy of John Mandelbaum.

Maurice Mandelbaum in the mid-1970s, from the book jacket of *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*.

Photo courtesy of Johns Hopkins University Press.

Reintroducing Maurice Mandelbaum, American critical realist

Ian F. Verstegen

In 1975 at the publication of Roy Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science*, Maurice Mandelbaum would have been 66 years old, a respected elder figure in Anglo-Saxon philosophy. No doubt he would have been receptive to the content of the work, and its successor, *The Possibility of Naturalism*.[1] But it is doubtful that he read these works, or those of the related writings of Rom Harré.[2] Probably, Mandelbaum was pleased by the turn toward Realism and away from the tides of logical empiricism, Ordinary Language and Common Sense Realism he had criticized throughout his career.

Mandelbaum's epistemological theories represent an example of American Critical Realism while Bhaskar created a new eponymous philosophy, through the combination of transcendental realism and critical naturalism; Mandelbaum is firmly a philosopher of the previous generation. Things become more confusing, however, when we regard his last book, published posthumously in 1987, *Purpose and Necessity in Social Theory*.[3] So familiar were the theories that Christopher Lloyd, a follower of the new Bhaskarian critical realism, could firmly call it an expression of the same philosophical spirit.[4]

This book is intended to introduce Mandelbaum to readers with interests in Bhaskarian Critical Realism (CR), which will be kept separate from American Critical Realism. That is, what explains the affinities and the differences? The chapters in this volume all seek to explore aspects of Mandelbaum's thought, always from the point of view of contemporary philosophy. They each do not principally reconstruct twentieth-century American philosophy, and certainly not Mandelbaum's intellectual biography. But they do juxtapose one system of thought with others, allowing in many cases an understanding of a neglected philosopher for the first time.

Because Mandelbaum's philosophy emerged from very different commitments from CR, it has different emphases, strengths, and weaknesses. Mandelbaum's brand of realism arose through a concern with historical knowledge and his emphasis on epistemology is in marked contrast to that of CR. His thought provides a welcome case of a remarkably cohesive body of thinking, independent of contemporary developments, that help us better understand some of the commitments that critical realism has already taken up and others it may take up more unexpectedly.

On critical realisms

There has been some debate on the exact relationship between the "two" critical realisms. While the tendency from the CR camp is often to dismiss the American predecessor, I think there are important similarities that cannot be glossed over.[5] "Critical realism" was first used in the modern era by Roy Wood Sellars (1880–1967) in his teaching and writing, most notably in his book of 1916, *Critical Realism: A Study of the Nature and Conditions of Knowledge*.[6] The group that clustered around Sellars was united in their opposition to naive realism and reaffirmation of a representationalist theory of knowledge. This group included Durant Drake, J. B. Pratt, A. K. Rogers, George Santayana, C. A. Strong, Arthur Lovejoy, and Sellars, each of whom contributed an essay to the volume *Essays in Critical Realism*, which cemented the coherence of "critical realism" as a philosophical movement.[7]

Sellars and others clearly understood critical realism as an epistemological theory that recognizes that knowledge is mediated. We do not, as in Naive Rrealism, have direct access to the world, nor, contra Idealism, is that world completely closed to us. As noted before, Bhaskar created CR as a combination of transcendental realism and critical naturalism.[8] In a sense, CR is a combination of a theory of physical science (realism) and an extension of that theory to social science (naturalism). The "critical" element does not relate to knowledge (and its mediated quality) at all. American Critical Realism would seem to be a far cry from the contemporary understanding of CR as an "underlabourer" for human emancipation.

But critical realism even in its epistemological guise argues against both imminent realism, usually the counterpart to "common sense" conservatism, and the idealism of relativism. The fact that there is a reality out there – people, resources, justice – and that we have imperfect but improvable access to it, is in the spirit of Bhaskarian critical realism. If we take especially Mandelbaum's example, we see that natural or social scientific structures can form transcendental entities of which we have mediated knowledge. In fact, Bhaskar stressed that (epistemological) fallibilism was a necessary concession to the critics of realism. This is a largely similar situation for both theories.

Now, if we turn to the ideological motivation to the two theories, we can expect vast differences. Bhaskar's CR is an extension of Marxist ideas and the ferment of 1968, complete with these social commitments. Bhaskar reasoned that the impasse in Marxism was due to a hermeneutic turn that frustrated a grappling with real, urgent social problems. This Marxist heritage is confirmed by later dialectical developments of the theory. Mandelbaum, instead, is very reticent and followed a careful path between the teeming ideologies current in the 1930s and 1940s.

The differences begin to diminish when we look at the work of the critical realist who influenced Mandelbaum most, Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967).[9] A founder of gestalt psychology but trained in physics (by Max Planck), Köhler had participated in the debates in Berlin of the logical empiricists and was a talented

philosopher in his own right. Köhler exerted a powerful influence on his younger colleague when he arrived at Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania) in 1936.[10] Köhler stressed how knowledge is mediated, but he had an extremely sophisticated way of talking about the primacy of human experience (epistemic priority) while stressing its foundation on physical facts (ontological priority).[11] This gestalt solution was furthermore founded on the idea that for physical and phenomenological realities to ultimately interlock, there has to be similarity (isomorphism). Hence, his search for "physical gestalten," states of physical objects of an adequate complexity to be fit for the complexity of the mind. In the end, this allowed Köhler to collapse the fact and value divide.[12]

To stay with the gestalt inspiration behind Mandelbaum's theories, we can note that to the classic demonstrations of perception were added pioneering extensions of gestalt ideas into social psychology by Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), Fritz Heider (1896–1988), and Solomon Asch (1906–96). The perceptual "figure" as it yields and is modified by the perceptual "ground" is a metaphor for social life. Lewin, who was a friend of Karl Korsch (1886–1961), was strongly concerned with the forces that inhibit cooperation and social harmony.[13] There is even a dialectical element to gestalt thinking, as when "gaps" and lacks of fitting call for completion. One gestalt author, J. F. Brown, even wed gestalt and Marxist thinking together, in his *Psychology and the Social Order*.[14]

Mandelbaum, to be sure, would never have called himself a Marxist because he would have felt that the speculative and critical, or what Alex Callinicos would call the way in which the Marxist "theory" and "philosophy" of history were presented, are too mixed.[15] But these examples should be adequate to show that the social imperative, so muted in Mandelbaum's writing, is not absent. In fact, rather than considering Mandelbaum an "analytic" philosopher his brand of gestalt realism puts him in the more comfortable company of gestalt figures associated with the New School for Social Research like Köhler, Asch, Hans Wallach (1904–98), Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007), and Aron Gurwitsch (1901–73).

So, what specifically does Mandelbaum bring to Bhaskarian Critical Realism? It is his emphasis on epistemology, which has been neglected by Bhaskar's strongly ontological brand of realism. Andrew Collier supposes that Bhaskar's desire to concede to hermeneutics and relativism by not stressing positivistic and reductivist naturalism too much explains his displacement of epistemology from a central position in his philosophy.[16] Although he made a strong case for convergence in science, this led Bhaskar to juxtapose his ontological realism against a strong fallibilism in knowledge.

Mandelbaum's question is: How do we have access to this reality? Epistemological arguments have entered into Bhaskarian CR through the convergence of findings in mature science but Mandelbaum points to humbler problems – the inscrutability of phenomenal experience in scientific observation and meta-epistemological problems. Bhaskar has noted the complementarity of the epistemic and ontic fallacies but undoubtedly put most emphasis on the former, since it consists in a neglect of ontology by taking our knowledge for what is. To be sure, Bhaskar has drawn attention to the Theory/Practice Inconsistency among

certain theorists.[17] Mandelbaum, in different ways, argues the case more strongly: we cannot take what we know to stand for *how* we know.

Interestingly, Bhaskarian CR is mostly interested in deep structural explanations, hence the affinity for Marx and Freud. These theorists obviously repressed most strongly individual lived experience. Here, Mandelbaum's interest in gestalt psychology is instructive. In stressing the phenomenological dimension, it forced us to see experience as normative so that no transcendental mechanism could be contrary to its working. Using the example of "objective relativism," Mandelbaum notes how philosophy tried to keep up to date with developments in modern science, particularly the idea that things consist in events and relationships, and consequently created analogous epistemological theories.[18] Thus, just as objects were formed of relationships, our knowledge of those objects was created by our relationship to the object-complex. It was "relative" to it. However, as Mandelbaum argued, if this is followed too far, we have no basis to know whether the original metaphysical idea is true. The fact that some knowledge is relative cannot be extended to all knowledge, otherwise it makes ontology impossible.[19] Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy forces us to leave open a space for ontology; Mandelbaum's version of the ontic fallacy forces us to leave open a space for knowledge. This is an interesting challenge for Bhaskarian CR to consider in its next phase of development.

A life in philosophy

Mandelbaum was born into the Chicago Jewish elite. His father, Maurice Mandelbaum Sr., was married to Ida Mandel Mandelbaum of the famous Mandel Brothers department stores.[20] The young Maurice attended the University of Chicago Laboratory School and then Dartmouth College (graduating in 1929), where he continued for his Master's degree (1931). He remained a year teaching as an instructor before following his Dartmouth mentor Wilbur Marshall Urban (1873–1952) to Yale, where Mandelbaum received his doctorate in 1936.[21] According to an old story told to me by Israel Scheffler, when Maurice Mandelbaum Sr. heard about his son's plans to study philosophy professionally he set out straightaway from Chicago to New York, where he enlisted the eminent Morris Cohen to dissuade him (unsuccessfully, of course). Urban was one of the first to discuss phenomenology and Ernst Cassirer's neo-Kantianism in America. It is difficult to gauge Urban's influence on the young Mandelbaum, but it must have been immense if he was his advisor for several years. Probably he lent a commitment to the symbolic richness of the products of the human mind in the midst of an acceptance of scientific realism.

Mandelbaum was three things: scholar, teacher and administrator. While he rose to the top of his profession, he always sought to promote his field and his colleagues. The historian Lionel Gossman wrote that he revered Mandelbaum, "not only because of his sharp intelligence and benign irony, and because he was a real philosopher . . . but because of the infinite kindness he had shown me since the day I arrived in Baltimore in the fall of 1958 and the friendship that had

grown up between us."[22] Indeed, such testimonials prove that Mandelbaum was an inherently social animal, recognizing his role as philosopher as an institutional position and exercising it accordingly.

Mandelbaum's belief in the enculturedness of individuals and futility of the romantic search for a genuine, authentic self was manifested in his efforts to teach and administrate. It is not inappropriate to consider his role in the profession when he watched the upheavals of American universities in the Vietnam War years and looked on with sympathy but regarded as futile the attempt of many to strip away societal roles.[23] Society would have to be transformed through a change in institutions, not through their complete abolishment.

Numerous American philosophers have expressed their debt to Mandelbaum for his role in professionalizing philosophy and bringing organization to the umbrella organization for American philosophers, the American Philosophical Association. He served as president (1962) but more importantly was chairman of the board for two long terms (1968–71, 1971–74). The great Kant scholar Lewis White Beck noted, "It was he who was primarily responsible for the maturation of the American Philosophical Association during the years of his chairmanship of its Board of Directors (and a few years before and after his term in office)."[24] Beck explains that:

> Often activity in a professional institution has little to do with contributions to the discipline it represents, and people who engage in the one often do not – generally, perhaps, have no wish to – have much to do with the other. Not so Mandelbaum. In fact, I find it hard to separate these two activities in his career, for to a singular degree the talents he exercised in the one were the same as those he employed in the other.

Mandelbaum's talents as philosopher and administrator (he was also chair of Hopkins' department for ten years, 1958–68) were founded on the same principles of clear argumentation and respect for an opponent's position. Beck explains that he was thus "able to engineer genuine meetings of minds. He was a model of reasonable fairmindedness, and a fine philosophical craftsman." It is tempting to think that one of the central tenants of his philosophy, the self-excepting fallacy (according to which one must not impute to others conditions one would not impute to oneself) applied to his academic life.

Mandelbaum taught for fifty years, at Swarthmore College (1934–47), Dartmouth College (1947–57, 1979–83) and finally at Johns Hopkins University (1957–78).[25] He trained dozens of PhD students. In teaching, Mandelbaum was most famous for the history of philosophy and philosophy of history. Referring to a seminar on nineteenth-century philosophy, the subject of Mandelbaum's *History, Man and Reason*, James Allard called Mandelbaum a, "discriminating and amazingly knowledgeable guide."[26] Mandelbaum used his organizational abilities to bring together interest in topics he felt to be important, like phenomenology and existentialism, and Spinoza.[27] He organized the Alvin and Fanny Blaustein Thalheimer Lectures that resulted in a series of important encounters on

emerging topics, like *Observation and Theory in Science* and the precocious grouping of a philosopher, historian and psychologist, Max Black, E. H. Gombrich, and Julian Hochberg, in *Art, Perception and Reality*.[28] He also relished teaching undergraduates, as a part of his mission, and never shunned the introductory course, also producing a widely used compilation of writings, *Philosophic Problems: An Introductory Book of Readings*.[29]

As a philosopher Mandelbaum received many accolades, including winning a Guggenheim grant (1946), giving the Paul Hurst Lectures at the American University (1960) and the Alfred Schütz lectures for the American Philosophical Association (APA; 1975). He was elected a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences from 1967–68, of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1973), and lastly spent 1985–86 at the National Humanities Center at Dartmouth working on his final book, *Purpose and Necessity in Social Theory*.

But Mandelbaum was never a glamorous thinker, never authoring a controversial thesis that created a furor in philosophy as the touch point for discussion. Mandelbaum was above all careful; his responses were well thought out and measured. He indeed has produced a couple of classic articles in the philosophy of history and social science – "Societal Facts" and "The Problem of 'Covering Laws'" – but generally his craftsman-like approach is best appreciated in critical reviews like those written about Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* or Haydon White's *Metahistory* whose minor clarifications could have devastating consequences.[30]

American Critical Realism

Mandelbaum's critique of both naive realism and existentialism was precisely directed against the attempt to limit the discussion of perception to logical analysis or experience alone, ignoring science. Something about the novelty of recent scientific advances had to be part of philosophical reflection. Invoking a more synoptic approach to philosophy, he could do no better than to refer to C. D. Broad's discussion of "critical" (rather than "speculative") philosophy.[31] Indeed, philosophers like Urban, Arthur O. Lovejoy and Broad were Mandelbaum's true models, resistant to logical and analytic narrowness on the one hand and continental "speculation" on the other.

Mandelbaum's place in philosophy is interestingly revealed in his heading of the commission that assessed the philosophy department of the New School for Social Research, the so-called "Mandelbaum report."[32] Still secret, it was intended to assess the state of a department beset by decline after the heroic years of Hannah Arendt (1906–75), Hans Jonas (1903–93), Alfred Schütz (1899–1959), and Gurwitsch. On the part of mainstream philosophy, there was analytic suspicion of the predominantly continental department. Apparently, Mandelbaum was deemed fair due to his historical and phenomenological grounding and his strong activity with the APA. A peacemaker, he and his team successfully assessed the department and filed the report. This episode explains his success

within the APA, which had seen warring between the dominant analyticians and the continentalists.

In his well-known paper criticizing Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance," Mandelbaum was extremely clear about the limitations he saw in the reduction of philosophy to language and analysis:

> It has come to be one of the marks of contemporary analytic philosophy to hold that philosophic problems are problems which cannot be solved by appeals to matters of fact. Thus, to choose but a single instance, questions of the relations between aesthetic perception and other instances of perceiving – for example, questions concerning psychical distance, or empathic perception, or the role of form in aesthetic perception – are not considered to be questions with which a philosopher ought to try to deal. In the second place, the task of the philosopher has come to be seen as consisting largely of the unsnarling of tangles into which others have gotten themselves.[33]

Mandelbaum would no doubt agree with a recent assessment of analytic philosophy as possessed of a *horror mundi*, a fear of the real world. This explains why it is obsessed with "a series of puzzles [which] have been mooted, flared up as trends, attracted a significant portion of graduate students, then died down again with no obvious solution having established itself and the world not much the wiser."[34] Mandelbaum appreciated the pure individuality of experience *and* the universalizable rigor of logic. This balancing act is emblematized in Mandelbaum's role as philosopher and historian.

"Critical" philosophy is not just broader than analytic philosophy, it is also opposed to the "speculative." The emphasis on "critical" problems is reflected in Mandelbaum's rejection of the term "social philosophy." It is, he wrote, "an agglomerate mass of empirical and normative questions, drawn from political theory, comparative government, 'philosophical anthropology,' and normative ethics" and continues that "I think it may reasonably be held that a Social Philosophy of the traditional type can only successfully proceed if it is founded upon an adequate analysis of the nature of the entities which constitute a society and of the types of relations which obtain among these entities."[35] This attitude is reflected in Mandelbaum's own *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* in which he decided that without understanding of the basis of our very acts of moral judging it was pointless to try to address even larger nomative issues.[36]

Nevertheless, Mandelbaum does believe that our philosophical efforts can lead somewhere. We can synthesize even if we do not actually create what has come to be called a "metanarrative." The main idea is that a system of thought – as for instance his main interest in historiography – must be based on history and not pure philosophical thought. The difference is brought out in a comparison of Mandelbaum with his close contemporary Karl Popper (1902–92). Popper, of course, had such a stringent view of science and society that the only possible course of action was *laissez faire*. Mandelbaum clarified both Popper's notion of an organic societal structure and developmental law concerning history. The result

is a richer picture of social science and the consequent hope in liberal progressivism. Philosophy truly becomes, as in the Bhaskarian case, an agent of imminent critique.

Michael Ermarth taught with Mandelbaum at Dartmouth College. His contribution is a fitting beginning to this volume, outlining as it does what he calls his elder colleague's "constructive gestalt," which answers the "destructive gestalt of twentieth-century intellectual crisis." Ermarth sees through Mandelbaum's sober philosophical distance and clear-eyed rigor to a reasoned response to intersecting intellectual and socio-political crises of the first half of the twentieth century. Departing from his two works that most clearly address nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual currents – *The Problem of Historical Relativism* and *History, Man, and Reason* – Ermarth constructs a retrospective meta-intellectual history to Mandelbaum's philosophically grounded intellectual history. Although framed in understated – even reticent – terms and concepts, Mandelbaum's thinking addressed a daunting constellation of radical crises (relativism, historicism, totalitarian ideologies, irrationalism, disillusion with Western progress and humanism, and sundry political messianisms), which he sought to answer with a constructive gestalt of his own. It takes, so to speak, a better gestalt to get the better of a harmful one. His special constellation of cogent answers deserves a careful contextual re-hearing and critical reassessment – especially now in the passing half-light of recent paradigms of human knowledge: postmodernism, new historicism, new uncentered globalism, and other recent "isms" and "wasms." Mandelbaum remains a powerful light-emitting – and reliably orienting – star in the changing constellation of modern master thinkers.

As noted, in Mandelbaum's youth there was vigorous interest in critical realism, represented especially by Roy Wood Sellars, Arthur Lovejoy, and others. But Mandelbaum's particular version of critical realism was strongly influenced by Wolfgang Köhler. Given Köhler's gestalt interest in both the natural scientific explanation of perception and desire to do justice to phenomenal experience, there was little chance that Mandelbaum would adopt just any straightforward representationalist brand of critical realism. Unlike other representative realists, who argued that we are in contact with the outside world via sense-data that partially resemble objects, Gary Hatfield shows how Mandelbaum stepped back from representative realism to a radical critical realism, the belief that "we do not have the right to identify any of the qualities of objects as they are directly experienced by us with the properties of objects as they exist in the physical world independently of us."[37] After releasing the expectation of contact with the transcendental world via resemblance, he argued instead that we grasp unitary, stable objects through our non-resembling qualia. Although his (and Köhler's) analysis of the metaphysics of mental content was underdeveloped, Mandelbaum's solution is instructive today, where the rush to apparent "realisms" has created implausible adverbial theories of epistemology that undermine realism because they operate on common sense presumptions, leaving out experimental science, a point also made by the critical realist Christopher Norris.[38]

Mandelbaum's theory of historiography is perhaps the most sophisticated