Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies

Edited by
Steve Fleetwood and Stephen Ackroyd

Also available as a printed book see title verso for ISBN details
Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies

Critical realism has become increasingly important in the way organisation and management is being studied. This book argues for an alternative to the prevailing ontology and shows how positivism and its empirical realist ontology can be abandoned without having to accept strong social constructionism.

*Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies* applies critical realism in four ways. First, in the removal of meta-theoretical obstacles that hinder the development of fruitful theoretical and empirical work. Second and third, as a meta-theoretical tool with which to develop appropriate methodological and theoretical frameworks which can then be used to inform appropriate empirical work. And finally, all of this is applied across a broad range of subject areas including critical management studies, accountancy, marketing, health care management, operations research, the nature of work, human resource management, labour process theory, regional analysis, and work and labour market studies.

**Steve Fleetwood** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School where he teaches Employment Relations and HRM. His publications include *Hayek's Political Economy, the Socio Economics of Order, Critical Realism in Economics: Development and Debate; Realist Perspectives on Organisation and Management* (edited with S. Ackroyd); *Critical Realism and Marxism* (edited with A.Brown and J.M.Roberts).

**Stephen Ackroyd** is Professor of Organisational Analysis and Head of the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School. He is a member of the British Academy of Management Council (BAM) and a Fellow of the Society for Advanced Management Studies (SAMS). He has published widely in the fields of organisational analysis and organisational behaviour.
Critical realism: interventions
Edited by Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Nick Hostettler, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie

Critical realism is one of the most influential new developments in the philosophy of science and in the social sciences, providing a powerful alternative to positivism and postmodernism. This series will explore the critical realist position in philosophy and across the social sciences.

**Critical Realism**
Essential readings
*Edited by Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie*

**The Possibility of Naturalism, 3rd edition**
A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences
*Roy Bhaskar*

**Being and Worth**
*Andrew Collier*

**Quantum Theory and the Flight from Realism**
Philosophical responses to quantum mechanics
*Christopher Norris*

**From East to West**
Odyssey of a soul
*Roy Bhaskar*

**Realism and Racism**
Concepts of race in sociological research
*Bob Carter*

**Rational Choice Theory**
Resisting colonisation
*Edited by Margaret Archer and Jonathan Q.Titter*

**Explaining Society**
Critical realism in the social sciences
*Berth Danermark, Mats Ekström, Jan Ch.Karlsson and Liselotte Jakobsen*
Critical Realism and Marxism  
*Edited by Andrew Brown, Steve Fleetwood and John Michael Roberts*

Critical Realism in Economics  
*Edited by Steve Fleetwood*

Realist Perspectives on Management and Organisations  
*Edited by Stephen Ackroyd and Steve Fleetwood*

After International Relations  
Critical realism and the (re)construction of world politics  
*Heikki Patomaki*

Capitalism and Citizenship  
The impossible partnership  
*Kathryn Dean*

Philosophy of Language and the Challenge to Scientific Realism  
*Christopher Norris*

Transcendence  
Critical realism and God  
*Margaret S. Archer, Andrew Collier and Douglas V. Porpora*

Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies  
*Edited by Steve Fleetwood and Stephen Ackroyd*  
Also published by Routledge

**Routledge studies in critical realism**  
Edited by Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Nick Hostettler, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie

1. Marxism and Realism  
A materialistic application of realism in the social science
  *Sean Creaven*

2. Beyond Relativism  
Raymond Boudon, cognitive rationality and critical realism
  *Cynthia Lins Hamlin*

3. Education Policy and Realist Social Theory  
Primary teachers, child-centred philosophy and the new managerialism
  *Robert Wilmott*

4. Hegemony  
A realist analysis
  *Jonathan Joseph*

5. Realism and Sociology
6. Critical Realism
   The difference it makes
   *Edited by Justin Cruickshank*

7. Critical Realism and Composition Theory
   Donald Judd

8. On Christian Belief
   A defence of a cognitive conception of religious belief in a Christian context
   *Andrew Collier*

9. In Defence of Objectivity and Other Essays
   *Andrew Collier*

10. Realism Discourse and Deconstruction
    *Edited by Jonathan Joseph and John Michael Roberts*

11. Critical Realism, Post-positivism and the Possibility of Knowledge
    *Ruth Groff*

12. Defending Objectivity
    Essays in honour of Andrew Collier
    *Edited by Margaret S.Archer and William Outhwaite*
Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies

Edited by Steve Fleetwood and Stephen Ackroyd

LONDON AND NEW YORK
## Contents

*List of illustrations* \hfill x  
*Notes on contributors* \hfill xi  
*Preface* \hfill xv  

**Editors’ introduction: critical realist applications in organisation and management studies**  
STEVE FLEETWOOD AND STEPHEN ACKROYD  
*Foreword: why critical realism?*  
ANDREW SAYER

### PART I  Meta-theory: critique and development

1. **An ontology for organisation and management studies**  
   STEVE FLEETWOOD  
2. **Brands, boundaries and bandwagons: a critical reflection on critical management studies**  
   PAUL THOMPSON  
3. **Idealism and ideology: the Caterpillar controversy in critical accounting research**  
   PETER ARMSTRONG  
4. **The ontology of work: social relations and doing in the sphere of necessity**  
   JAN CH.KARLSSON  
5. **Human resource management and realism: a morphogenetic approach**  
   DENISE THURSFIELD AND JOHN HAMBLETT

### PART II  Methodology: critique and development

6. **Methodology for management and organisation studies: some implications of critical realism**  
   STEPHEN ACKROYD  
7. **Future directions in management science modelling: critical realism and multimethodology**  
   JOHN MINGERS
8 Temporally embedded case comparison in industrial marketing research
DEBBIE HARRISON AND GEOFF EASTON
179
9 Theorising networks from a critical realist standpoint: the discovery of power and contextual issues within and outside ‘networks’
ALEX FARIA
193
10 Competence theories
CLIVE LAWSON
214

PART III Substantive contributions

11 Working in teams: ethnographic evidence from two ‘high performance’ workplaces
RICK DELBRIDGE
235
12 Humour and subversion in two call centres
PHIL TAYLOR AND PETER BAIN
250
13 Tracing the effects of a hospital merger
RUTH KOWALCZYK
272
14 The moral management of nursing labour power: conceptualising control and resistance
CAROLE AND PETER KENNEDY
293
15 I say tomato, you say tamato: putting critical realism to work in the knowledge worker recruitment process
ANTHONY HESKETH AND PHIL BROWN
309

Index of names
327
Index of subjects
337
Illustrations

Figures

1.1 Reproduction and transformation of structures 38
6.1 Realist explanation 140
7.1 Habermas’s three worlds 168
7.2 The context of interventions 171
13.1 A practical realist approach to research 273
13.2 Potential ways for the Trust to achieve its objectives 277
**Tables**

6.1 Development of approaches to philosophy of social science 130

6.2 Comparison of the characteristics of positivism, hermeneutics/phenomenology and critical realism 139

7.1 Framework for mapping methodologies 172

8.1 Context-mechanism-outcome 185

8.2 A revised CMO configuration 186

8.3 Multiple periods for one case 188

8.4 A single period for two cases 191

9.1 Representations of time and corresponding types of unit of analysis 202

15.1 Selection methods used by organisations when recruiting staff 310

15.2 An example of the selection criteria used by a case study organisation 315
Contributors

Stephen Ackroyd is Professor of Organisational Analysis and Head of the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School. His current research is concerned with strategic change in large British companies, particularly those still involved in manufacturing, and the impact of the new public management on the public sector professions, particularly doctors and nurses in the NHS. His interest in the philosophy and methodology of social science is of long standing. He is author of a textbook on methodology, and editor, with Steve Fleetwood, of Realist Perspectives on Management and Organisation, which was published by Routledge in 2000. His other recent books include Organisational Misbehaviour (Sage, 1999), written with Paul Thompson, and The Organisation of Business (Oxford University Press, 2002).

Peter Armstrong graduated in Aeronautical Engineering in 1960. After seven years in industry, he took a Master’s degree in Sociology at the University of Bath and saw active service as a sociologist in the ‘Chemco’ studies of the early 1970s. Subsequently his career drifted into the indirection typical of those simultaneously enthralled by sociology and repelled by what is produced in its name. Best known nowadays for his work in critical accounting, Peter found himself at one point occupying a chair in accounting at the University of Sheffield. He is now Professor of Management at Keele University, where his recent inaugural lecture was devoted to a trashing of that subject. His current research is on the interaction between heavy cycling and heavy drinking.

Peter Bain lectures in the Department of HRM at the University of Strathclyde, and worked in the engineering and car industries before entering the groves of academe. Areas in which he has researched and published include occupational health and safety, workplace technological change and contemporary developments in trade unionism. A lead applicant in a joint Scottish universities project researching work in call centres and software development, funded under the ESRC’s ‘Future of Work’ programme, he has also studied work and employment relations in call centres in the UK, as well as in the USA, the Netherlands and India.


Rick Delbridge is Professor of Organisational Analysis at Cardiff Business School. His research interests include the role of shopfloor workers in contemporary manufacturing and attempts to revitalise the trade union movement. Rick is author of Life on the Line in Contemporary Manufacturing (Oxford University Press, 1998) and
co-editor of *Manufacturing in Transition* (Routledge, 1998, with James Lowe) He is co-editor (with Ed Heery) of the Routledge series Studies in Employment Relations. Rick is a Cornishman whose hobbies of supporting Derby County and playing golf are both sources of great exasperation!

**Geoff Easton** is Professor of Marketing in the Management School at Lancaster University. His publications include *Managers and Competition* (Blackwell, 1993, with G.Sherman, R.Burrell and C.Rothschild), ‘Marketing: a critical realist approach’, published recently in the *Journal of Business Research*, and *Industrial Networks: A New View Of Reality* (Routledge, 1992), of which he was co-editor (with B.Axelsson). The title of the last of these was meant to be ironic when it was first published but it has taken on a new resonance in recent years. Geoff’s research is mainly in the area of interorganisational exchange relationships and industrial networks. Currently he is focusing on issues of the everyday behaviour of marketing managers in organisational markets and the use of complexity theory simulations to model complex markets. This work involves mainly case research and his interest in critical realism stems from the way it can be used to defend this form of research from its detractors.

**Alex Faria** lectures in Strategic Decision and Marketing Strategy at the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration. He is also a researcher for the National Council for Scientific Research in Brazil, and co-editor of the *Interdisciplinary Review of Marketing* (an electronic journal). His current research concentrates on marketing strategy and decision-making processes. Other research interests include strategic management and organisation studies. He enjoys playing football and his main hobby is celebrating World Cups won by the Brazilian team.

**Steve Fleetwood** spent many years as an amateur and professional racing cyclist before grey hair and a general lack of pace demanded a change of career. A degree in Social Studies at Liverpool Polytechnic was followed by an MPhil and PhD in the Department of Economics at Cambridge University—where he first encountered critical realism. Steve is now Senior Lecturer in the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School, where he teaches Employment Relations and HRM. His publications include *Hayek’s Political Economy: the Socio-economics of Order* (Routledge, 1995), *Critical Realism in Economics: Development and Debate* (Routledge, 1999), *Realist Perspectives on Organisation and Management* (Routledge, 2000, co-edited with S.Ackroyd) and *Critical Realism and Marxism* (Routledge, 2002, co-edited with A.Brown and J.M.Roberts). As well as articles on philosophy and methodology of science, he has also written on Marxist political economy and labour economics. He is currently in the process of drafting a book on the nature of labour markets.

**John Hamblett** is a Senior Lecturer in HRM at Leeds Business School. For three years he was an ESRC Management Teaching Fellow at that institution. The focus of his current research interests concerns the changing relationship between the organisation of work, the political organisation of the working class and the idea of education. His publications include ‘The tools of freedom and the sources of indignity’ (with Denise Thursfield and Rick Holden; in McGoldrick et al., *Understanding Human Resource Development*, Routledge, 2002), a defence of critical realism in the research of human resource development issues, and ‘Other voices’ (in *Human Resource Development International*, co-authored with Denise Thursfield), which represents the preliminary
findings of an ongoing research project on the Plebs League. John has just bought a new bike and is sworn to getting fit.

Debbie Harrison is an Associate Professor at the Norwegian School of Management BI, Oslo, Norway She has published articles and chapters in books on network responses to environmental change, relationship dissolution, path dependence, case studies and critical realism. She has published in Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Business Research and Technology Analysis and Strategic Management. Her current research focuses upon resource interaction in business networks.

Anthony Hesketh is Lecturer in the Department of Management Learning at Lancaster University Management School. His research primarily focuses on the political economy of human resource management. Current projects include investigating the political economy of the UK north-south divide (with Bob Jessop) and a growing preoccupation with the measurement of performance inside organisations generally, and with the business process outsourcing of human resources in particular. Recent publications include Playing to Win: Managing Employability in the Knowledge Economy (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Jan Ch. Karlsson is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Working Life Science, Karlstad University, Sweden. His publications are concerned with the concept of work, modern work organisation, class and gender in everyday life, and critical realism and methodology in the social sciences. He is co-author of Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences (Routledge, 2001). Among his greatest feats he counts having caught a pike of 16 kilos, a perch of 1.7 kilos and a pikeperch of 6.4 kilos. And he thinks that anyone who has learned how to keep warm in Oslo should go to Karlstad to improve their skills.

Carole and Peter Kennedy lecture in Sociology and Social Policy in the School of Law and Social Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University. Carole’s main research interests include the sociology of health professionals and the modern history of the organisation of alternative medicine in Glasgow. Peter is currently managing editor of the journal Critique. He has research interests in Marxism and social change and transformation, as well as the contribution of critical theory broadly defined to an understanding of disputes inherent to the philosophy of social sciences.

Ruth Kowalczyk is a Lecturer in the Management Science Department at Lancaster University. She completed a degree in Management Science at Lancaster and has recently finished her PhD, which focused on the management of intensive care units. Her past experience as a nurse has led to her prime research interest being in health care. In this area she is particularly interested in resource management, performance management and the management of change. Other research interests include integrating hard and soft methods and realism. She enjoys good food, fell walking, sewing and reading, and now has ‘a life’ after completing her PhD.

Clive Lawson graduated from Cambridge University in 1983. After spending several years as a professional musician he then returned to Cambridge to pursue a PhD in industrial relations. The PhD quickly turned to methodology and philosophy of science issues when it became clear that standard economic theory was unable to deal satisfactorily with institutions and organisations. He then spent some years as a Research Fellow in the ESRC Centre for Business Research working on the clustering of high technology firms and on technology consultancies, whilst also publishing
extensively on institutionalist economics and critical realism. His current research is on the philosophy of technology. He is currently banned from riding his bike for health reasons!


**Andrew Sayer** is Professor of Social Theory and Political Economy and Head of the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. His books include *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (Routledge, 2nd edition 1992), *Realism and Social Science* (Sage, 2000), *Radical Political Economy: A Critique* (Blackwell, 1995), *Microcircuits of Capital* (Polity, 1988, with K. Morgan) and *The New Social Economy* (Blackwell, 1992, with R. A. Walker). The last three of these are substantive studies informed by a critical realist approach. When the work-load permits, Andrew enjoys cycling in the Lake District with Steve Fleetwood.

**Phil Taylor** is a Senior Lecturer in Industrial Relations in the Department of Management and Organization at the University of Stirling. Areas of recent research and publications include call centres, employment relations in micro-electronics, occupational health, student part-time employment, trade unions and HRM, the white-collar labour process and prison privatisation. Current call centre research includes projects on health and safety, outsourcing to India and trade union organising. He is a lead member of an Economic and Social Research Council ‘Future of Work’ project based across three Scottish universities investigating the meaning of work.


**Denise Thursfield** is a Lecturer in Human Resource Management at Hull University Business School. Her research interests are in the area of skill and human resource development. More recently she has been conducting historical research into independent working-class education and the Plebs League. Her publications include *Post-Fordism and Skill: Theories and Perceptions* (Ashgate, 2000) and ‘Mutuality, Learning and Change at Work: The Case of Employee Led Development’ (2001, co-authored with John Hamblett) in *Employee Relations*. She enjoys watching Leeds United struggle to remain in the premiership!
Preface

_Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies_ is motivated by two beliefs: one positive and the other negative. The positive belief is that critical realism has much to offer in the analysis of Organisation and Management (O&M). Evidence for this is provided not only in the following chapters where contributors have rooted their theoretical and empirical work in critical realism to good effect, but also in the growing number of critical realist inspired articles found in the O&M studies literature. The negative belief is that a great deal of current O&M studies is committed to one of two inappropriate ontological positions. The first is the _empirical realist_ ontology which privileges empirical, observable phenomena and sponsors positivist and scientistic-orientated analysis. The second is the _strongly social constructionist_ ontology which privileges, often to the exclusion of all else, discursive, linguistic, or other semiotised phenomena. This ontology sponsors much postmodernist or poststructuralist orientated analysis—although not all analysis carried out under these labels is committed to this _strong_ social constructionist ontology. Be that as it may, the recoil from abandoning positivism appears to have ‘catapulted’ many postmodernists and post-structuralists into substituting one inappropriate ontology for another and could easily take O&M studies down an alley as blind as the positivist one from which it has struggled to escape. Such a trajectory would be tragic given that critical realism can provide an ontology that allows positivism and its empirical realist ontology to be abandoned without having to accept strong social constructionism.

Apart from two chapters dedicated to ontology and methodology respectively, _Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies_ is not about critical realism _per se_. Rather it is about putting critical realism to work in four senses. First, as an underlabourer, that is in the removal of meta-theoretical obstacles that hinder the development of fruitful theoretical and empirical work. Second and third, as a meta-theoretical tool with which to develop appropriate methodological and theoretical frameworks which can then be used to inform appropriate empirical work. And finally, all of this is applied across a broad range of subjects areas including critical management studies, accountancy, marketing, health care management, operations research, the nature of work, human resource management, labour process theory, regional analysis, and work and labour market studies.
Editors’ introduction

Critical realist applications in organisation and management studies

Steve Fleetwood and Stephen Ackroyd

The present work, *Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies*, is a sequel to our earlier collection on the application of realism to this field, which was entitled *Realist Perspectives on Management and Organisations* (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). It is a measure of how far things have changed in the popularity of critical realism in the field of organisation and management studies (O&MS) recently that, in just the few years intervening since the turn of the millennium, it is now common to find researchers and writers expressing an attachment to, and respect for, critical realism. When assembling the first volume, there were a few important papers already published in the field of O&MS that were written from a critical realist point of view. But, to make up an adequate quota for a book or readings, we also had to include chapters which, though clearly realist in general approach, did not explicitly acknowledge a connection with traditional realism or its more recent, critical version. The present volume, by contrast, is a collection of academic work that is entirely new. It is work that has only recently been completed and which, almost without exception, aligns itself with a critical realist philosophical position. The wealth of material now available, written from a critical realist position, means that there were many papers for the editors to choose from to produce this volume of recent work.

There is, in fact, a significant intellectual movement now going on in the field of organisation and management studies (O&MS), in which the philosophy of critical realism is being more and more widely appreciated and put to use. This has been developing for some time, and is part of a wider intellectual movement in society and culture where similar emphases are being affirmed. These developments are, at least in part, in reaction to the radical scepticism and relativism that have been the fashion in much contemporary thinking. In some areas, of which O&MS is definitely one, this movement is concerned with reconnecting with particular traditional assumptions about this subject area and using the ideas of critical realism to deepen and extend more traditional ideas. We take the view that realism has been, for many practitioners during the last century, the orthodoxy in O&MS and related fields. Historically, studies which take an implicitly realist point of view constitute a continuous strand of research which has, only in the last two decades, tended to be devalued and sidelined by authors espousing the fashionable doctrines of post-structuralism and postmodernism—although we do recognise that it is possible to subscribe to these doctrines without simultaneously subscribing to a strong (and anti-realist) social constructionist ontology. Thus, in our view, in the field of O&MS, the movement towards critical realism connects with, adds to and reaffirms a realist emphasis that is already in existence. What is novel at the
present time is that more and more writers and researchers are explicitly recognising the importance and value of the philosophy of critical realism as an alternative to both scientism and positivism and to postmodernism and post-structuralism, and using it as a reference point and source of inspiration for their work. The present collection is drawn from the best of this recent work.

Considered in some ways, the lurch into postmodern and post-structuralist O&MS, which first developed in the 1980s, was unexpected. Such movements typically emerge and develop vigorously when there is the dominance of extreme forms of scientism, reductionism and positivism. But it can hardly be said that, in Western Europe at least, scientism and positivism were dominant modes of discourse, and they had not been for some time. In the late nineteenth century belief in the efficacy of science was in the ascendant and there was a tendency to try to apply (what were assumed to be) the techniques of natural science everywhere. However, it is also true that by the first decades of the twentieth century the movement of reaction to scientism and positivism was growing strongly, and at this time we have both the development of the first effective social science disciplines and the development of a recognisable philosophical realism.

It is true that there have been strong advocates of positivism in the twentieth century, but, in the first few decades of that century, the foundations for a powerful critique and rejection of scientism were laid in the existentialist and phenomenological movements. By the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century, positivism and scientism were no longer as strong as they once had been, and had been confined to particular enclaves within particular disciplines. The field of O&MS illustrates this general point as well as any. Some pockets of research in the field of O&MS, operational research or econometrics, for example, have been totally dominated by positivism for decades without serious questioning from the inside or challenge from external critics. But the views of academics in these areas were by no means universally accepted and the critique of positivism had been strongly represented in social science in general (Giddens, 1974) and O&MS in particular (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980) for some time. In Britain and much of continental Europe, in O&MS, positivism had been on the back foot for decades. Not content with this, there arose a widespread movement to press the critique of scientism further, to cover many branches of study, including those in which it was neither dominant nor oppressive.

However, the majority of scholars and researchers operating in O&MS have never been naively certain that social science can easily arrive at true accounts of the world, as positivists suggest. Nevertheless, it was widely argued by postmodernists and post-structuralists beginning in the 1980s that objectivity (see Fleetwood in this volume) in the study of human affairs is impossible. Thus, many supposedly radical exponents of O&MS turned to relativism and down an alley as blind as the positivist one from which the subject area had, laboriously but effectively, struggled to escape in earlier decades. In the enthusiasm for radical critique, it has been forgotten by many (if they ever knew) that philosophical realism provides a viable alternative to positivism and naive realism (according to which true accounts of the world are readily available), and extreme relativism on the other (according to which the very possibility of ever arriving at a true account is denied due to the strong social constructionist ontology adopted).

Yet the work of such large groups of researchers in O&MS as those studying the labour process, or institutional writers of various kinds and the regulationists, is all
informed by realism and/or their views imply realist conceptions of the subject matter. Indeed, there are contributions to this volume that show obvious continuities with the work of earlier generations of scholars. Though they are concerned with the contemporary workplace, with call centres and change in high-tech sectors of the public services for example, such studies show clear continuity with the work of earlier generations of scholars. Although it is obviously very important, providing a basis on which empirical research can be extended and develop new and exciting insights, is not the only reason for advocating critical realism in O&MS, as we will now argue.

This is not a work in which it would be appropriate to give extended coverage to the nature of critical realism itself. Nevertheless, we do include a very compact and intelligible general account of the position and its applicability to social science in the foreword by Andrew Sayer, as well as general, orientating essays at the start of the first two substantive sections of the text. As Sayer argues in his inimical way (this volume and 2000) and a number of other writers affirm (Archer et al., 1998), critical realism postulates a world external to the knowing subject, but also holds that gaining even partial access to that world is not straightforward. This is so for a number of reasons, not least of which is because we cannot gain access to the world independently of the concepts we use. Nevertheless, realism not only suggests a specific point of view concerning what exists (a view on ontology) but also how to assemble knowledge of it (epistemology). As has been demonstrated before, realism allows positivism and its empirical realist ontology to be abandoned without the researcher having to accept extreme forms of relativism and its strong social constructionist ontology. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that some contemporary critical realist writing is preoccupied with the criticism of relativist writing, and its implications. Nevertheless, we have tried to avoid the sterile process of critique being met with counter-critique, in favour of showing that critical realism has direct relevance to practice in O&MS in a variety of dimensions.

In general, the value of critical realism (or any philosophy of research, for that matter) to research and knowledge creation is not direct, or, as Sayer describes it, ‘loose’. We must think of critical realist philosophy as serving the researcher, much as a labourer serves a craftsman, by helping to do general preparatory work or clearing obstacles that stop work or make it more problematic than it needs to be. Thus critical realism can deal with general conceptual problems, such as how to think about subject matter, what the objectives of analysis are, what is an effective and/or an adequate explanation using such subject matter, and so on. Second, critical realism can function as a meta-theoretical tool with which to help develop appropriate theoretical frameworks and methodological procedures. Third, once it is developed, a new theory can be used, with support from critical realist ideas, to inform effective empirical work. Finally, critical realism encourages the making of connections across a broad range of subject areas, encouraging synthetic understanding as opposed to more and more specialist knowledge. Critical realism is not itself a finished doctrine that may be simply used or applied; the philosophy itself is being actively developed at the same time as the social and other science it describes and informs. Ensuring that philosophical developments in critical realism are continually and iteratively, updated in tandem with developments in theory methodology and empirical work guards against the possibility that we simply read off method, theory and empirical claims from a pre-ordained philosophical schema. Incidentally, the relationship between empirical knowledge and other dimensions of
thought is a problem facing all thinkers and it will not be addressed by ignoring philosophical presuppositions.

Following these general guidelines, in the body of the present volume, we suggest that there are three areas in which critical realist ideas have been found to be of particular relevance to O&MS by researchers and scholars in recent years, and, after the foreword by Andrew Sayer, the book is divided into three sections along these lines:

• In the first section, we include essays which point to the relevance of critical realism in meta-theory and theory formation. Here it is shown that critical realism illuminates the ways in which researchers may fruitfully orientate themselves to the field of O&MS, and ways which are less than helpful. The relationship of critical realism as philosophy and general ideas to social scientific theory is indistinct; theory is certainly not deducible from realist doctrine. Nonetheless, realist philosophy is undoubtedly an important source of ideas feeding the creative imagination of the theorist, and indicating likely sources of bias and error. This is the only section of the book in which critique of alternative ways of thinking is given much scope.

• In the second section of the book, we give consideration to the ways in which critical realism suggests the appropriateness of changes in emphasis and practice in research methodology from what has been done in the past. Critical realism does not show a preference for either quantitative or qualitative methods, holding that neither is inherently superior. On the contrary critical realist researchers see the relevance of both kinds of data, and point to the need for the creative combination of both kinds of data in illuminating causal mechanisms. In this section it is shown that there is much more discretion in the choice of research technique and in the use of data than scholars have so far acknowledged, and that theoretical considerations are very important in shaping both the directions of research and the specific interpretation given to research information. Here it is shown that critical realism leads to the consideration of not only new ways of thinking about research, but of new ways of utilising existing research techniques and methods. Realist-inspired research methodology combines different methods of investigation to good effect. It is suggested that critical realism allows the development of new ways of opening out wide areas of O&MS for study in ways not previously envisaged.

• In the third section of the book, we include examples of new substantive social science research written from a critical realist point of view. In some of the examples included here there are obvious continuities with kinds of organisational research that have traditionally been practised in O&MS. Other chapters are examples of applied research looking at workgroups, such as professionals and semi-professionals, and at applications such as recruitment and selection, that are very far from the traditional modes of empirical work in this field. The point is that insightful research continues to be done from a realist point of view.
References


Foreword

Why critical realism?
Andrew Sayer

Introduction

Critical realist philosophy offers an alternative both to the spurious scientificity of positivism and to idealist and relativist reactions to positivism.¹ In this foreword, I shall sketch key features of critical realism and suggest how they might be important for research in organisation and management studies. This is a difficult task, not only because critical realism itself needs at least a book-length introduction on its own, but also, as we shall see, because the relationship between philosophies and substantive social theories is loose rather than tight. This foreword will therefore necessarily be telegraphic in style, cutting many corners and offering citations where further discussion can be found.

What is realism?

Contrary to what many assume, realism does not claim privileged access to the real world: it rejects such ‘foundationalism’. Its most basic claim is simply that there is a world which exists largely independently of the researcher’s knowledge of it. This independence implies not simple, direct access to the world but a more difficult relationship. Our knowledge of the world is always in terms of available descriptions or discourses, and we cannot step outside these to see how our knowledge claims compare to the things to which they refer. It is the experience of the fallibility of our knowledge, of mistaking things and being taken by surprise, that gives us the realist conviction that the world is not merely the product of thought, whether privately or socially ‘constructed’. But it is also this experience which suggests that although it is always mediated by and conceptualised within available discourses, we can still get a kind of feedback from the world. In the realm of practice, not just anything goes: wishful thinking rarely works. At least part of the world is accessible to us, though, as we have noted, always in a mediated way.

Social constructions

Of course, the social world is ‘socially constructed’, so how can realism’s basic proposition about the independence of the world hold in social science? We need first to take a critical look at what ‘construction’ might mean here, and to consider how it works
out over time, and ask ‘construction of what, by whom—actors or researchers?’ There is a difference between construal and construction, or between making a mental construction of the world and materially constructing something. Construals or interpretations of the world can contingently inform material constructions, including practices and organisational forms. Once such social phenomena are constructed, they gain some degree of independence from their original constructors and from subsequent actors. If social scientists’ knowledge is fallible, so too is lay knowledge, and hence deliberate social constructions may fail or only succeed partially. Thus, a university is a social construction based upon a set of ideas, but it is always something more than the latter, and some aspects of actual instances may be quite different from the ideas which informed them. Similarly, an employment contract is not merely a social construction, but an incomplete or only partly successful one, in that on its own, it cannot ensure the effects it is intended to produce, but depends on other non-contractual conditions, particularly trust and certain shared assumptions and social norms. Discourses are not mere reflections of material circumstances, but nor are material circumstances mere instantiations of discourses. Discourses are shaped through practice, in particular, through material and socio-linguistic contexts which have their own properties or tendencies, inherited from previous rounds of social construction or ‘structuration’.2

Construal and construction may merge in acts of communication, such as conversations, but even then there is an iterative process developing over time, in which what has just been constructed (for example, a comment made within the terms of a certain managerial discourse) is re-construed by others. Just as with any other process of change, how far particular construals change that discourse is constrained and enabled by the properties and circumstances of what is being changed, which are generally not of actors’ own choosing. The social phenomena that confront us today are mostly the product of activities carried out before any current observations we make, and while it is occasionally possible for researchers to influence what they study, the latter phenomena are mostly others’ constructions, and not necessarily intended ones at that. Management researchers may be more likely to influence the social constructions that they study than most social scientists, but this of course presupposes that there are practices or constructions which exist independently of those which they can influence. Social constructions therefore fit with our general realist principle.

Truth

Mention of the idea of fallibility of knowledge inevitably raises the issue of truth. There is only space here to make a few brief comments: first, that the concept of truth is itself complex and is an attempt to characterise a certain kind of relationship between knowledge and its objects, though objects are generally what they are regardless of researchers’ knowledge.3 Realists don’t have to assume that the truth of statements, theories or discourses is an all-or-nothing, absolute matter. The relationship has an emphatically practical character, so that we may prefer to talk of degrees of practical adequacy and of progress in terms of ‘epistemic gain’ rather than establishing absolute truth about some situation once and for all, whatever that might mean (Sayer, 2000a: Chapter 2).
Often, amongst non-philosophers, merely raising the issue of truth can promote a kind of stultifying blanket scepticism about all knowledge. This is self-undermining, for to doubt anything in particular (A), we need provisionally to accept the adequacy or truth of other propositions (B) which we use as grounds for our doubts about A. And truth is not always a problem. We make judgements about the truth of propositions every time we cross the road (is there a car coming?), and if someone gets it wrong and is run over, then that again shows that the world is not merely a product of thought. While there are some matters where it is hard to imagine ever settling on an account that is likely to escape counter-evidence and argument, there are some propositions (for example, that our blood circulates in our bodies) whose truth it is hard to imagine ever being refuted.

At any particular time, there will always be matters about which we are uncertain and where we have difficulty in choosing among alternative accounts. But we should beware of exaggerating or at least mis-characterising dissensus in social science; many such alternative accounts in social science are not straightforward, mutually exclusive rivals, but emphasise different aspects of complex, many-sided processes. I personally do not think it too much to argue that there is something to learn from each of Marx, Weber and Foucault regarding modern organisations; to be sure, such a position could lead to an eclectic combination of contradictory or incommensurable ideas, but there may be ways of avoiding such contradictions by modifying aspects of any of the contributing theories. Any totalising ambitions of such theories—and all three of the above are susceptible to such ambitions!—would need to be dropped first before such non-contradictory syntheses could be developed, but critical realism need hold no brief for imperialist approaches to theorising anyway. Personally, my hunch is that much of the dissensus in social science is attributable to theoretical imperialism and reductionism (conditions to which critics of ‘grand narratives’ are definitely not immune!), and a chronic tendency to under-estimate the concrete or many-sided character of social phenomena.

Finally, regarding truth and dissensus, it should also be noted that where theories are in contradiction, that implies they have something in common over which they can contradict one another. The problem of incommensurability has often been exaggerated, for it is common for researchers to be able to understand apparently incommensurable theories; in any case incommensurability of discourses only matters if the rival discourses are about a common referent, otherwise their differences may be no more of a problem than the differences between tennis and football (Bhaskar, 1979).

**Ontology**

Almost all theorists are what might be called ‘minimal realists’ in that they acknowledge that the world includes things which can exist independently of any knowledge of them. This inference that there is something ‘other’ to our knowledge is again based on the resistance which we sense from the world. However, if we think about what must be the case for this experience of resistance and for the possibility of failure of intended practices, then it can be seen that we must go beyond minimal realism. This is because for the world to make a difference, so that some attempted practices work and others do not, and hence that the world is neither merely a product of wishful thinking or ‘discourse’ nor universally resistant or indifferent, it must itself be differentiated. If it
were undifferentiated, then it is hard to imagine how the same practices could work under some conditions and not under others, or how anything in particular (such as catching a cold, getting arrested or getting a pay rise) could happen to us. Particular practices can make a difference, and this must depend on how well they accord with the differentiated properties of the world, social and natural. This relationship is of course inherently difficult to characterise (hence the problems of both correspondence and conventionalist theories of truth), but that does not mean that there is no such relation.

Critical realists go still further and argue that the world is not only differentiated, but ‘stratified’; that some kinds of objects, for example biological phenomena, are ‘emergent from’ their constituents (chemical and physical processes, in this case). In turn, certain interactions of biological processes may allow the development of another stratum of emergent properties which we may want to call social or cultural. In other words, from certain conjunctions or interactions of objects, new emergent properties develop which are irreducible to those of the objects on which they depend. Language, par excellence, illustrates this emergence, as new discourses arise through the generation of new meanings which are irreducible to those of their constituents. Faced with such emergence, we must study emergent properties ‘at their own level’ rather than treat them as reducible to their constituents. ‘Higher strata’ objects may react back on lower strata objects, as when humans develop agriculture or contraception, but such interactions are always via processes at the level of the stratum being changed. Thus humans do not change ecosystems just by activating their social powers of being able to develop a discourse of agriculture, they change them by using their physical, chemical and biological powers according to their (social) ideas. Interactions such as these do not contradict the basic asymmetry which is the diagnostic characteristic of emergence: chemical processes can exist without biological processes, but not vice versa; biological processes can exist without social processes, but not vice versa.

Theorising and necessity

Theorising is often seen as beyond the scope of philosophical comment, usually on the grounds that it is an inherently ineffable activity, involving imaginative leaps which elude reconstruction. For critical realism, theorising certainly involves imagination—usually in the deployment and development of metaphors, analogies and models—and also abstraction—selecting out one-sided aspects of phenomena in order to focus upon their characteristic properties and conditions of existence (cf. Lewis, 1999; Fleetwood, 2002). While, as Max Weber suggested in his ideal type methodology, researchers select elements which are important to them in value terms, we don’t select them only according to our value orientation; we also construct them according to ideas about relationships, selecting those elements which we think have to go together to produce the effects of interest, as opposed to things which merely can go together but don’t have to. The attempt to distinguish between ‘can’ and ‘must’, contingency and necessity, coupled with the search for better metaphors and models for representing the world, is central to theorising in social science.

This highlights a key feature of critical realism, its imputation of necessity (natural or real rather than ‘logical’) to objects; i.e. while there are many contingent relations in
which an object X can stand, that is relationships which are neither necessary nor impossible for its existence as X, there are some which are necessary conditions of its existence as an X. Thus capitalist firms have to operate with money, employ wage-labour, accumulate capital, etc. to remain capitalist firms, but simply as capitalist firms, it is contingent whether they use this or that managerial philosophy, British or non-British, black or white, workers, and whether their business is based on call centres, hotels or steel mills. Of course, these latter relationships may make some important differences to what happens, and have their own additional necessary conditions of existence, which any concrete study of capitalism would need to analyse, but in theorising we are typically involved in making such distinctions between objects’ necessary features and the various forms which they can contingently take. It should be noted here that the necessity is not merely a matter of logic or definition; for example, the ability of landlords to charge rent is not merely a product of the way the concept of landlord is defined but rather a consequence of their possession of land which others who lack land need to use. Definitions often represent these natural (here including social) necessities by setting up logical or conceptual necessities, but the latter’s force derives from what they represent, not mere linguistic convention.

The confusion of this kind of necessity with logical necessity usually comes about through overlooking how and why definitional truths are constructed and why they come to have any practical adequacy in making sense of the world. We may sometimes create logical necessities in the form of definitional truths to try to represent what we believe to be natural necessities, as when we make the molecular structure of water part of its definition, though, of course, like the shape of the earth, the structure and properties of water do not depend on humans conceptualising it in any particular way (Harré and Madden, 1975:48; Harré, 1972). Our conceptualisation—in this example drawing upon molecular theory—remains a fallible way of making sense of such things. To imagine that the world—or water, bureaucracy, patriarchy or capitalism—have whatever properties they do because of the way researchers conceptualise them is a strange intellectualist conceit.

The production of change

Necessity is also central to the critical realist approach to causation, or the explanation of what produces change. Whereas both positivists and many anti-positivists assume that causation is about regularities amongst events, to be sought out by treating social systems as closed, critical realism argues that causation is more plausibly treated as based on causal powers or liabilities (susceptibilities) possessed by objects, whose existence and exercise is not dependent on regularities among events. Thus, by virtue of their hierarchical structure, their systems of rules, and information recording and storage, bureaucracies have the power to routinise and process large volumes of standard decisions in little time. By contrast, their powers of flexibility and adaptability in dealing with diverse, novel inputs are limited by these structural characteristics. In both cases the causal powers and liabilities derive from the structure of bureaucracies, including their insertion into larger structures such as the social division of labour, and their
internalisation into smaller ones, particularly the dispositions and ways of thinking of workers and clients.\textsuperscript{7}

Causal powers are dependent on the nature of objects or structures of which they are properties. However, it is contingent whether they are exercised at any particular time or place. Thus an organisation may have the power to fire workers, but for the most part it may not need to exercise this power. When it does try to exercise it what ensues will depend on the context in which they contingently operate: whether workers are strongly organised, whether employment legislation constrains what can be done, whether unemployment is high, etc. Because of these contingencies, the effects of the activation of the causal power need not be regular. While regularities may be interesting and sometimes helpful for making observations, they are not essentially related to causation. What makes things happen has nothing to do with whether social scientists have plenty of regular instances to observe and quantify. To explain how a causal process works we are likely to need a qualitative description of the causal powers present (both the key ones of interest and those of contextual phenomena) (Sayer, 1992). The process of identifying what causal powers\textsuperscript{8} are active in a given situation is called retroduction and, of course, there are usually several jointly responsible for particular events.

The methodological implications of this are huge, for it implies that social research should place much more emphasis on conceptualisation and description than positivism assumes, and that the search for regularities through quantitative analysis becomes relatively downgraded (though not redundant). Critical realism implies that we need to distinguish between generalisation, which is about finding out how extensive certain phenomena are, and may give little explanation of what produces them, and abstraction and retroduction, which are needed to explain what produces particular states and changes, but which do not necessarily indicate much about their distribution, frequency or regularity. Both are needed in social science, but their differences imply a reconsideration of many common views of the respective roles of surveys and case studies, which see the former as explanatory and the latter merely exploratory or illustrative (Sayer, 1992: Chapter 9, 2000b:19–26).

**Interpretive understanding and causation**

A further distinctive feature of critical realism is that it rejects the extremes of both methodological naturalism—the view that the methods of the social sciences are or should be identical to those of natural science—and anti-naturalism—the view that they have nothing in common. This opposition has traditionally crystallised around the opposition of causal explanation and interpretive understanding or erklaren and verstehen. The former is assumed by naturalists to be universally applicable, and by anti-naturalists to be restricted to natural science. The latter—understanding—is dismissed by naturalists, but anti-naturalists view it as all that social studies require. Understanding, like reading, is not a matter of being able to identify what caused (produced) a particular text but of making sense of its meaning. It is therefore indispensable in all science since scientists or researchers have to understand one another. However, meanings do not merely externally describe social phenomena but internally influence their nature, as our discussion of social construction acknowledged. In social science, this concept-
dependence of social phenomena means there is therefore a ‘double hermeneutic’ rather than merely a single one as in natural science. While critical realism endorses this point, it rejects the inference, which anti-naturalists draw from it, that causation is irrelevant to social science. On the contrary, simply because societies involve change, and we have to account for that change, we have to attempt to identify what causes (produces) it.

This implies that it is not a matter of either causal explanation or interpretive understanding but one of using both in social science. However, critical realism argues that they are not merely co-present but interrelated, albeit asymmetrically. This is because communication itself produces change, at least in terms of what happens in listeners’/readers’ heads, and often in prompting new kinds of thinking and action; indeed language would be redundant if it changed nothing. Particularly in the field of studies of management, where management discourse is now given such extraordinary prominence, it would be absurd to deny its causal efficacity.

Following Bhaskar (1979), critical realists argue that reasons can operate as causes, that is be responsible for producing a change. This is an unfamiliar notion in that it is a non-physical notion of causation (though there are physical changes associated with reasoning in the brain of course), but when someone tries to persuade us that we are wrong to make this argument by giving us reasons, they in turn presuppose that offering reasons can be causative. This applies, as in the physical sciences, irrespective of whether there are regularities for us to record. The causal efficacy of reasons depends on them being understood in some fashion, but not necessarily just in a single fashion. Thus, management’s exhortations to workers may meet with a variety of responses. The fact that they might be construed differently by different individuals and hence do not form part of constant conjunctions or event regularities does not mean that they have no (causal) influence on behaviour (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994).

Crucial though this issue of reasons as causes has been in the philosophy of social science, it remains seriously incomplete. For it evades the question of the specific nature of ‘reasons’ and how they come to motivate action. In particular, it ignores the semiotic character of reasons and, in some cases, treats them as simple, singular triggers of action. Yet reasons are diffuse and hard to identify unambiguously indeed, it would be better to think of them as emergent elements in more extensive networks of concepts, beliefs, symbols and linguistic constructions. They presuppose languages, intentionality, particular concepts and prior understandings and interests, intertextuality, conventions of inference and evidence, and so on. In addition, if we reflect more broadly upon what kinds of discursive features and events can bring about changes in behaviour (if only at the level of how people think), we notice that it is not only reasons that change what we do. We may be influenced more by the tone (e.g. warmth, hostility) or imagery of a speech than by any reasons that may be given. We therefore need to go beyond the reasons-as-causes argument, important though it is, to examine the nature of semiosis more generally and its place within the overall logic of the social (Fairclough et al., 2002). Awareness of these complexities surrounding the discursive production of effects may prompt doubts about the confidence we might put in any particular analyses, but against this we should remember we routinely overcome these problems in everyday practical communication indeed the successful reproduction of complex organisations presupposes their resolution.
Critical realism recognises that reasons and other discursive phenomena may be causally efficacious—so critical realism is compatible with a recognition of the importance of managerial and other discourses in organisations. However, in accordance with its general account of causation and causal powers, it notes that (a) it is contingent whether these causal powers are activated; and (b) and if they are, the effects depend on conditions, such as the properties of other discourses, motivations and interests. Thus, rather than use a crude, black and white distinction between the denotative and performative properties of discourses, in which they either externally describe or ‘construct’ phenomena, we can recognise that discourses can be performative, but don’t have to be, and that intended social constructions vary in their completeness and success.

**Science as a social activity**

Social science is a social activity, influenced by its social relations and conditions of production, but as with any production, it is not free from constraints of practical adequacy, and it is vulnerable to empirical refutations which are not reducible to changes in fashion or power relations in the scientific community. Social science, including the sociology of science itself, could benefit from greater reflexivity about its own conditions of production, particularly, as Bourdieu demonstrates, its scholastic relationship to its subject matter and its tendency to project this relationship onto its subject matter (Bourdieu, 2000), and critical realism would do well to explore this currently underdeveloped side of its philosophy and methodology of social science. As should be particularly clear in management research, the actors and activities under study are mainly concerned with getting things done, and not with study and academic reflection.

**Why critical realism?**

*Critical* realism offers a rationale for critical social science, that is one that is critical of the social practices it studies as well as of other theories. Bhaskar (1986), in particular, has argued that social science has an emancipatory potential. Social practices are informed by ideas which may or may not be true and whether they are true may have some bearing upon what happens. Thus, gender relations are generally informed and reproduced through beliefs that gender is innate rather than a product of socialisation, so that the disadvantages suffered by women are seen implicitly as natural too. Social scientists who merely reproduced this explanation uncritically in their own accounts so that they merely reported that gender was a product of biological difference would fail to understand gender. To explain such phenomena one has to acknowledge this dependence of actions on shared meanings while showing in what respects they are false, if they are. If social scientific accounts differ from those of actors then they cannot help but be critical of lay thought and action. Furthermore, as Bhaskar argues, to identify understandings in society as false, and hence actions informed by them as falsely based, is to imply that (other things being equal) those beliefs and actions, and indeed any conditions which tended to encourage them, ought to be changed.
Many terms in social science in everyday usage are simultaneously both descriptive (positive) and evaluative (normative), such as ‘domination’, ‘subordination’, ‘exploitation’ or ‘development’. They are not merely expressions of approval or disapproval; they indicate that particular circumstances are present, and that there is something good or bad about the objects themselves in relation to human needs. There is something contradictory and frustrating about ‘cryptonormative’ accounts of social phenomena which use such terms without making clear what is wrong with or good about their objects.

Critical realism’s determinedly critical stance contradicts the common taboo in contemporary social science against normative judgements. Against the view that it is a threat to objectivity, I would briefly note the following points:

1 Having and articulating normative views about social phenomena may lead one to misrepresent them but it does not necessarily lead to this. It is possible to accept that the world is other than what one would like it to be—indeed if it weren’t, normative judgement would be redundant! It is precisely because ought does not entail is that we make such judgements. Here it is important to distinguish two different senses of ‘objectivity’ which are all too often conflated, with disastrous results: objectivity in the sense of value-freedom is not necessary for objectivity in the sense of truth-seeking or telling (Sayer, 2000a:58–62).

2 ‘Is’ and ‘ought’ are not always distinct and do not always correspond to matters of fact and opinion respectively, particularly where we are concerned with needs; if a researcher claims that high levels of stress at work are bad for workers, do we merely say that that’s merely the researcher’s opinion or feeling which has no bearing on the facts, or do we argue about whether their claim is true or untrue?

3 Normative judgements are not reducible to subjective dispositions unrelated to the differentiations of the world. It would not make sense to say when confronted with two identical objects or practices that one was good and the other bad: it only makes sense to do so if the objects or practices are different in some respect (Norman, 1998). Valuations are about something—they are therefore not object-neutral and merely a property of subjects.

4 Normative matters are not beyond the scope of reason and antithetical to it; indeed their consideration is likely to make us reconsider—or if you prefer, deconstruct—common binaries of reason and emotion, fact and value.

It might seem that freedom and emancipation require a refusal of, or escape from, necessity or causation, and that real freedom lies in being able to redescribe ourselves and the world through new discourses. But the freedom to redescribe ourselves is worthless, unless the discourse is performative, that is causal. For changes in discourse to be causally efficacious or successfully performative, and not just accidental, we must know something about how the determinations we want to avoid work and how they can be subverted, blocked and replaced by more wanted, perhaps novel, determinations, and we must make appropriate causal interventions. Without causality any concept of responsibility, agency or freedom is meaningless, for we can only be responsible for what we can influence (Bhaskar, 1989:163–4). ‘It is not a matter of disengaging ourselves from the world so that it gets no grip on us—for by the same token, we would get no grip of it’ (Collier, 1994:192–3). Idealism or anti-realism makes discourse both
inconsequential and all-powerful: inconsequential because it refuses to acknowledge that it can be causal and that its causal efficacy depends on how it relates to extra-discursive processes; all-powerful because it also makes it seem that we can re-make the world merely by redescribing it.

Critical realists are only beginning to think through the further normative implications and aspects of realist philosophy, but in the meantime, quite simply, one wonders what is the point of social science and the justification of academic labour subsidised by the general public if it is lacking in any normative implications?

**Critical realism and positivism**

It will be apparent that critical realism opposes relativist, idealist and strong social constructivist tendencies in social science. But on all of the matters I have discussed, critical realism also opposes positivism: its empiricist epistemology based on apparently theory-neutral observation; its confusion of matters of ontology with epistemology, as in its equating the world with what can be observed; its flat, unstratified ontology which cannot comprehend emergence; its assumption of universal closed systems and its Humean view of causation as constant conjunctions, which leads it to encourage researchers to view the search for empirical regularities as the goal of science; its contemplative, unpractical view of the relationship between knowledge and its objects; its unqualified naturalism and its incomprehension of interpretive understanding; its indifference to the nature of science as a social activity; and its subjectivist conception of values which leads it to confuse objectivity in the sense of value-neutrality with objectivity in the sense of truth-seeking.10

**Critical realism and social theories**

Critical realism is a philosophy of social science, not a social theory, like Weberianism or public choice theory. Like any philosophy, while it includes recommendations of how we should think and approach substantive subjects, it does so only in very broad terms. Some theories may be closer to critical realism in form than others, for example Marxism more than liberalism, though the latter can to some degree be construed in realist terms (Fleetwood, 1995), and it even has emancipatory potential (Nussbaum, 1999). In any case, no philosophy can guarantee the truth of substantive research done according to it. For example, critical realism’s insistence on the distinction between causal powers and their exercise doesn’t tell us which causal powers actually exist or what they will do when they are exercised. Social theories may therefore be consistent with critical realism, or indeed any philosophy of science, and yet turn out to be untrue—indeed they could meet the formal requirements (e.g. regarding explanatory forms) and yet be nonsense. In view of this, it is naive and unreasonable to expect critical realism, any more than any other philosophy, to provide a litmus test for distinguishing true from false or better from worse social scientific accounts. What it can do is provide guidelines for researchers grounded in ontological and epistemological arguments that avoid the pitfalls of positivism on one side and idealism and relativism on the other. There has only been
space here to hint at what these involve but references have been given to literature which provides elaboration.

In conclusion I would like to comment further on the relationship between critical realism and social theories associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism.

First of all, the distinction between philosophies of social science and social theories implies that it is inadvisable to reject postmodernist and post-structuralist approaches as incompatible with critical realism, simply on the grounds that they are frequently non-realist. This is not only a matter of the virtues of encouraging criticism and openness to alternatives. It is also because theorists may or may not invoke or appeal to a particular philosophy or method-ology, and even when they do it is common for them to diverge from it unknowingly in practice. Realist elements are common in a wide range of social theory, including much that is written by authors who would not count themselves as realists. Thus it is not only self-professed realists who talk of ‘causal mechanisms’ or who generally assume that the things they study are not dependent for their existence on how researchers conceive of them. Some post-structuralists refuse the concept of causation. However, since for realists a cause is whatever produces change, then in writing about substantive subjects such as the rise of new forms of management discourse and practice no-one can avoid referring to such matters, even though they may not recognise them as causes. In our everyday lives, we treat causal processes not simply as regularities but as the exercise of causal powers in which effects depend on contextual conditions: we don’t, for example, expect the use of a new management technique in firms to have an identical impact on workers regardless of whether they are managers, secretaries, fitters or cleaners. Thus, given the heterogeneous character of social theory and the unavoidability of at least some elements of realism, it would seem unreasonable to reject approaches which are self-consciously non-realist or even anti-realist, for realist elements and assumptions are unlikely to be suppressed altogether. In this context it is interesting that Richard Marsden has provided a realist interpretation of Foucault in relation to the labour process and value (Marsden, 1999).

Instead of rejecting theoretical ideas out of hand merely because their advocates have provided non—or anti-realist ways of framing them at a meta-theoretical level, we can often recast them—albeit against the intentions of their authors—in realist form, and eliminate certain problems and contradictions that attend non-realist approaches. Thus concepts such as performativity, governmentality and capillary power, which are likely to be valuable for analysing organisations, can all be theorised in a realist way which avoids the kind of identity thinking which assumes that discourses and their effects correspond. We can accept that discourses can be performative, and note that this implies they produce change. Whilst this is a causal process, it is not one involving event regularities, since it can fail as well as succeed in producing the intended effects. The Foucauldian idea of power as productive rather than merely repressive fits well with the critical realist account of causal powers. The concept of governmentality and the useful metaphor of capillary power highlight forms of power which are dispersed rather than highly concentrated, and which operate partly through processes of internalisation and self-discipline by actors rather than mere external pressure. In realist terms we can acknowledge that causes can be internal as well as external, that all objects have causal powers or liabilities of some sort, and that sometimes these may not be so unequal as to produce highly concentrated sources of power (in the sense of domination or power over
others) but multiple, dispersed sources. Even where, in Foucauldian style, there appear to be no particular sources of power that might be identified, it could be an emergent property of combinations of numerous elements. By such simple reconstructions we can avoid the need to invoke the peculiar (and meaningless?) notion ‘that power is present in its effects’.

Similarly, Foucauldian ideas of power and resistance are again better reinterpreted within a critical realist approach. Even compliance presupposes resistance. If humans were totally plastic they could not be compliant with particular managerial or other discourses (even leaves-in-the-wind need to have certain properties, including resistances, so that they can catch the wind to be blown around): just as friction is both a condition of, and a resistance to, movement, so the acquisition/possession of certain dispositions or powers, some of which are typically extra-discursive in origin, or the product of different, earlier rounds of discursive influence, is a condition of compliance with as well as opposition to something like an audit regime. The metaphors of the ‘constitution’ or ‘construction’ of ‘subjects’ or bodies have rhetorical power as ‘exagger-concepts’, but they can easily encourage a kind of lazy thinking which assumes all-or-nothing processes of creation ab novo, when what is normally involved is a gradual, partial and contested process of influence, interpretation and modification of already ‘constituted’ objects/subjects with pre-existing causal powers. It is surely particularly important for studies of management and organisations to be able to distinguish a number of positions ranging from, at one extreme, mere parroting of elements of managerial discourses without any change in behaviour or ways of thinking, through to complete ‘capture’ by them at the other extreme.

Regarding Foucault’s notion of ‘regimes of truth’, while this is self-undermining and idealist (Foucault, 1977, 1980; Sayer, 2000a:40–9), his insights into the way discourses can influence the social world, including how actors see it, make more sense within a realist approach which recognises that the effectivity of discourses is not self-guaranteed but depends upon their having some degree of practical adequacy. This in turn depends upon their relationship to properties, some of which their objects possess independently of the discourses. Not just any objects can be shaped into self-disciplining subjects; they must be the kind of objects which can be shaped thus, for example capable of acquiring dispositions, learning and internalising norms. Success in producing such subjects depends on the relationship between the assumptions made by the discourses or putative regimes of truth and the properties (including existing self-understandings) of their objects/subjects, which will determine whether they succeed in having any effect. In these ways, one can again avoid the tendency to treat what should be empirical questions of the extent of influence of discourses into a priori invocations of the ‘constitution of subjects’.

Finally, as regards postmodernism, this is such an indeterminate term, and one that has been applied to very diverse ways of thinking, that it would be unwise to dismiss it out of hand. Even though there are nihilist variants, there are other tendencies, which are not merely (again) capable of realist reconstruction (for example, Christopher Norris’s realist reading of Derrida), but which I believe realists would do well to take more seriously, such as scepticism towards categorical ways of thinking (Norris, 1991; Sayer, 2000). In keeping with this last point, it would be singularly unhelpful for critical realists and postmodernists to assume that their positions are simple opposites with battle lines
already drawn. Not least because consistent relativism and anti-realism are unsustainable, there are not only complex tangles of disagreements but of actual or potential agreements still to explore here. I hope that the contributions in this collection will serve as invitations to further debate.

Notes
1 Critical realism’s primary founder is Roy Bhaskar (e.g. 1975, 1979). While his work is an extremely important contribution to philosophy, it has become more inaccessible since the 1970s. For accessible commentaries and further contributions see, for example, Archer (2000), Benton and Craib (2001), Collier (1994), Keat and Urry (1975), Sayer (1992, 2000b) and Stones (1996).
2 For realist commentaries and debates on ‘structuration’ or structure-agency relations, see Archer (2000), Bhaskar (1979) and Stones (2001).
3 What things are, or what is the case, or what is true of them regardless of whether we know it, is termed ‘alethic truth’, as distinct from the issue of whether any propositions we make about those objects are true.
4 For example, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) acknowledge this, but then, peculiarly, proceed to argue that particular objects are ‘discursively constituted’, as if things like water, rocks, schools and states would themselves change simply if we chose to discursively constitute them differently, in other words purely as a product of wishful thinking.
5 Linguistic capacities are emergent properties of certain complex biological organisms. Note how this stratified ontology contrasts with the flat ontologies of behaviourism and actor network theory. The latter’s treatment of non-human, non-social processes as equivalent to social processes flattens the difference between them (see Benton and Craib, 2001:69–73). It is also important to avoid reducing humans to their social characteristics, or to imagine that sociality is restricted to humans (Benton, 2001).
6 See Sayer (2000b) for a discussion of this process of theorising in relation to bureaucratic organisations and gender.
7 As Stones (2001) argues, we should not assume that structures are always large and external to actors, but recognise that some structures reach within ‘agents as knowledgable or memory traces’ or, as I would add, as dispositions of the habitus related to the differentiations of actors’ habitats (position within social fields), as theorised by Bourdieu (1998).
8 Critical realist terminology is a bit imprecise, and it is also common to talk of ‘causal mechanisms’ here instead of causal powers. The meanings are very close but causal or generative mechanism are perhaps more suggestive of the way of working of these capacities or powers.
9 To acknowledge that most social phenomena are concept-dependent is not to imply, in idealist fashion, that they are dependent on concepts alone, for it takes more than thinking to produce social institutions and practices.
10 There are other contrasts with positivism too; for example, critical realism opposes positivism’s ‘logicism’—its treatment of logical relations (which concern relationships between statements) as crucial for the explanation of causal relations (which involve the relationships between things), and hence its failure to note that causal explanations have to identify causal powers or mechanisms. Related to this, positivism denies natural necessity, mistaking the contingency of the relationship between statements and the world for contingency among objects and processes in the world itself (Bhaskar, 1975; Harré and Madden, 1975).
References

Of the three areas of into which we have classified recent contributions by critical realists in this volume, this one, which is concerned with meta-theory, could pose problems for some readers. It is widely understood that realists place special emphasis on the importance of developing theory, and suggest that much depends on developing adequate concepts and building theories. The generative mechanisms that are so important to the critical realist view of effective explanation are primarily grasped by formulating theoretical accounts of these mechanisms. Hence, there is a special approach to theory proposed by realists and, because of this, extended discussion of the nature of theory and how it should be used is only to be expected in a book of this kind. Consistent with this, concern for theory and the importance of its role is a recurrent theme in this book. As has been suggested in the Foreword to this volume by Andrew Sayer, for example, critical realist philosophy provides guidelines about the necessary form of theory. But, in this section, a more general concern than with theory is indicated: here is a suggestion that critical realists are concerned about something called meta-theory. But what is meta-theory and why should it be regarded as important?

In a nutshell, meta-theory designates any ideas or areas of general thought or argument that are beyond or outside of theory. Unfortunately, there is not an agreed terminology with which to discuss such matters, and this is a potential source of problems. Different disciplines tend to approach this area with their own special categories and assumptions. Philosophers use the category metaphysics and propose specialised subject areas within this: among these the more important are ontology, epistemology and ethics. By contrast, political scientists tend to conceptualise what lies outside of theory as ideology or different kinds of political ideas, while anthropologists propose and use the notion of culture. In general then, the idea of meta-theory is handy as a non-disciplinary category that refers to everything in the realm of thought outside theory and empirical work. Nevertheless, in general terms, meta-theory is important because realists tend to think their way through whatever is outside theory in particular ways, and tend to disagree acutely and systematically with other writers on O&MS (particularly those postmodernists and post-structuralists who presuppose a strong social constructionist ontology) on the way to understand the relationship of theory to other elements of thinking.

One of the issues that divides other thinkers from realists is the kind of assumptions they bring to the conception of the relationship between theory and other kinds of