

ROY BHASKAR

RECLAIMING REALITY

A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

by Mervyn Hartwig



Reclaiming Reality

‘Bhaskar has provided what is, arguably, the most comprehensive, the most rigorous and the best available account of the sciences, both natural and social.’—Gerry Webster (*Biology Forum*, 1989)

‘Breathtaking in the scope and power of its immanent critique of contemporary philosophy.’—Andrew Sayer (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 1990)

‘Bhaskar has fashioned a wholly new context for argumentation about social ontology... His work merits enormous critical attention in all the human sciences.’—John Shotter (*History of the Human Sciences*, 1991)

‘Contains perhaps the finest brief historical and methodological assessment in English of the major issues in Marx’s philosophy.’—Michael Sprinker (*New Left Review*, 1992)

Originally published in 1989, *Reclaiming Reality* still provides the most accessible introduction to the increasingly influential multi-disciplinary and international body of thought, known as critical realism. It is designed to ‘underlabour’ both for the sciences, especially the human sciences, and for the projects of human emancipation which such sciences may come to inform; and provides an enlightening intervention in current debates about realism and relativism, positivism and poststructuralism, modernism and postmodernism, etc.

Elaborating his critical realist perspective on society, nature, science and philosophy itself, Roy Bhaskar shows how this perspective can be used to undermine currently fashionable ideologies of the Right, and at the same time, to clear the ground for a reinvigorated Left. *Reclaiming Reality* contains powerful critiques of some of the most important schools of thought and thinkers of recent years—from Bachelard and Feyerabend to Rorty and Habermas; and it advances novel and convincing resolutions of many traditional philosophical problems.

Now with a new introduction from Mervyn Hartwig, founding editor of the *Journal of Critical Realism* and editor of *A Dictionary of Critical Realism*, this book continues to provide a straightforward and stimulating introduction to current debates in philosophy and social theory for the interested lay reader and student alike. *Reclaiming Reality* will be of particular value not only for critical realists but for all those concerned with the revitalization of the socialist emancipatory project and the renaissance of the Marxist theoretical tradition.

Roy Bhaskar is the originator of the philosophy of critical realism, and the author of many acclaimed and influential works including *A Realist Theory of Science*, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, *Plato Etc.*, *From Science to Emancipation*, *Reflections on meta-Reality and Interdisciplinarity* and *Climate Change* and was the founding chair of the Centre for Critical Realism. He is currently a World Scholar at the University of London Institute of Education.

Classical Texts in Critical Realism

Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom
Roy Bhaskar

A Realist Theory of Science
Roy Bhaskar

Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation
Roy Bhaskar

Plato Etc
Roy Bhaskar

Reclaiming Reality
Roy Bhaskar

Forthcoming:

Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom
Roy Bhaskar

Reclaiming Reality

A critical introduction to
contemporary philosophy

Roy Bhaskar

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2011.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of
Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks
please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.

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writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-84331-2 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN: 978-0-415-56+370-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-45493-3 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-84331-4 (ebk)

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Introduction

Reclaiming Reality brings together Roy Bhaskar's main writings in the philosophy of science and social science, other than those that assumed book-size form, during the period 1975–1989. As its Preface explains, three of the pieces (Chapters 2, 4 and 9) had not previously been published, a fourth (Chapter 1) is a significant development of a previously published piece, and the other chapters are slightly revised versions of journal articles and a chapter for a book. The last—Chapter 8, 'Rorty, Realism and the Idea of Freedom'—was destined to be expanded and developed into Section One ('Anti-Rorty') of *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*. Since I have been commissioned to write a separate introduction to that book, I will not comment on the substance of this chapter here.¹

The contents of *Reclaiming Reality* thus span the main phases of development of the Bhaskarian system of philosophy down to the dialectical turn (which got decisively under way in 1990 or 1991): transcendental or scientific realism, critical naturalism and the theory of explanatory critique, including ideology-critique, which together comprise what has come to be known as original or basic or first-wave critical realism. The book stands in a similar relation to first-wave critical realism as *Plato Etc.* does to the second wave; it both recapitulates the first wave and significantly fleshes it out in several areas. It accordingly contributes to the realization of the tripartite project Bhaskar set himself at Oxford in the late 1960s to produce a realist philosophy of (α) science and (β) social science that simultaneously functions as and engenders (γ) a critique of the philosophical ideologies that stand in the way of human freedom. Its presentational structure mirrors the architectonic of that project, except that the specific critiques generated at (α) and (β) are grouped with (α) or (β) rather than as separate products at (γ). Thus (1) Chapter 1, which addresses Bhaskar's overriding concern as a philosopher, the project of human emancipation, and serves as an introduction to the volume, is followed by (2) [α , γ] chapters on the philosophy of science and the critique of philosophical ideologies of science (Chapters 2, 3, 4). Next (3) [β , γ] come chapters on the philosophy of social science, the theory of explanatory critique, and the reassessment of Karl Marx as a critical naturalist and an associated critique of the Marxist tradition (Chapters 5, 6, 7). This is followed by (4) [γ] a critique of a major contemporary irrealist philosopher, Richard Rorty (Chapter 8). Finally, (5) an overview essay on critical realism serves to round the book off (Chapter 9). In what follows I comment on (1)–(3) and (5) sequentially, holding over commentary on (4) for a subsequent occasion. For a more detailed and contextualized account of the development of the Bhaskarian system during this period, readers are referred to my introductions to *A Realist Theory of Science* and *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (hereafter *Realism and Emancipation*) and Bhaskar's recent book with me on *The Formation of Critical Realism*.²

(1) The aim of the book as a whole is 'to *underlabour*...for the sciences, and especially the human sciences, in so far as they might illuminate and empower the project of human

emancipation' (p. xv, original emphasis). This involves reclaiming reality '*for itself*' and *from* the ideologies that usurp, deny and obscure it (my emphasis).³ The introductory chapter, 'Critical realism, social relations and arguing for socialism' was developed initially in collaboration with a number of other philosophers and social theorists in the 'philosophy workshop' of the Chesterfield conferences, of which Bhaskar was the convenor. These conferences, which were held annually from 1987 to 1989 in Tony Benn's constituency (Chesterfield, in Derbyshire) and were overtly political, brought together socialists from all over Britain.⁴ Bhaskar's address to the 1988 Chesterfield conference, of which Chapter 1 is an expanded version, is the most explicit statement of his views on the political implications of critical realism during the period we are considering, organized around the theme of winning 'the intellectual high-ground' for 'a new...socialist enlightenment' (p. 1).⁵ While this might incline readers who are of a different political persuasion to dismiss Bhaskar's philosophy, this would be a mistake if they cannot rebut Bhaskar's argument, presented in Chapter 6, that, while human concerns and interests necessarily enter into the philosophical and social scientific process, playing a major role in, for example, the selection of topics for research, they do not necessarily affect the factual status of results: the only value that *necessarily* enters into the findings of philosophy and science is commitment to the norm of truth, a commitment that is intrinsic to what a fact, properly understood, is. Thus we need not preface our search for truth with our politics, rather our politics can flow from our search for truth; contrary to 'Hume's law', values are not science-free. The implication is that those who are really committed to truth, hence explanatory critical social science, will end up espousing a socialist politics, where 'socialist' is understood in a broadly eudaimonistic way as centrally involving universal free flourishing.⁶ Such a tendency is arguably in clear evidence today in the science of climate change, which points both to the falsity of belief in the absence of a significant human contribution to global warming and to the social causes of this falsity. A key index of flourishing will be whether basic human needs are being met, and the chapter makes it clear that such needs include for Bhaskar not only physical but also 'higher-order psychological (mental) or spiritual needs such as for respect or self-development' (p. 7), suggesting that the very distinction between basic physical and other needs resonates with a nature/society split.⁷ Bhaskar's first published deployment of the concept of 'concrete utopianism' not coincidentally makes its appearance in Chapter 1 (p. 6), for he first started using this concept explicitly in the Chesterfield workshops and related discussions in an effort to induce Labour politicians to devote less energy to winning power and more to considering what they would actually do if they won it. The concept was to play a pivotal role in Bhaskar's articulation of emancipatory axiology in *Dialectic* and, in embodying a notion that emancipation is always also self-emancipation, it points forward to the emphasis in the philosophy of meta-Reality on the importance of self-change as a means for effecting transformative social change.⁸ Chapter 1 also initiates a critique, resumed in Chapter 9, of the 'new realism' or 'empiricism' that had come into vogue in Labour circles in the 1980s, that is, the 'unthinking materialism' that is another name for positivism that Bhaskar had warned about in *Realism and Emancipation*, which—along with 'the new idealism' or poststructuralism (see pp. 180, 188, 191, 207–8 [n. 27])—was 'empt[ying] the social world of any enduring structural dimension' (p. 3) and playing a vital role in the 'demarxification' of social theory and philosophy in the UK, France and elsewhere.⁹ It includes, too, the

first published reference to Margaret Thatcher's slogan, 'Tina' ('there is no alternative'), which in *Dialectic* was conjoined with the theory of the compromise formation articulated in *Realism and Emancipation* to form the concept of the 'Tina compromise formation'.¹⁰

(2) Chapter 2, 'Realism in the natural sciences', a revised version of a 1979 conference paper, was published for the first time in *Reclaiming Reality*. It offers a lucid account of (the arguments for) transcendental realism and the associated critiques of positivism and transcendental idealism, as elaborated in *A Realist Theory of Science*. For the most part a summary of the earlier account, it adds to it both by the elegance of some of its formulations (for example, 'in the intellectual grid within which philosophical ideas are produced, the human-dependence of knowledge (its social nature) and the human-independence of the world (its transcendently real character), appear in empirical realism as the human-dependence of the world (its empirical nature) and activity-independence of knowledge (its asocial character)' [pp. 22–3])¹¹ and by explicitly introducing, mainly in the area of ideology-critique, new concepts developed in *The Possibility of Naturalism and Realism and Emancipation*, including fetishism (of constant conjunctions and closed systems), ontological depth, reification (of atomized facts), and superidealism, and briefly arguing a mandate for philosophy to critique, not just philosophical ideologies for and of science, but the practice of science itself for its lack of scientificity (p. 25; see also p. 183). Chapter 3, originally published in 1975, complements the critique of philosophical ideologies of science in *A Realist Theory of Science* with a devastating but constructive critique of the work of Gaston Bachelard and Paul Feyerabend (and the school of Karl Popper from which the latter hails) organized around its failure to give explicit recognition to the necessary distinction between the transitive and intransitive objects of science, a failure that issues in an implicit empiricist ontology (empirical realism) and individualist sociology. Feyerabend's critique of science in the name of freedom is shown to be inimical to freedom, a 'philosophy of flower power' posited on the Kantian dichotomy of spirit and nature; for 'we can only be as free as our knowledge is reliable and complete' (pp. 35–6). Bachelard's basically correct emphasis on the rupture between scientific and ordinary experience is shown to go hand in hand, in the absence of an intransitive dimension, with a psychologistic and superidealist understanding of science as having "no object outside its own activity"¹² (p. 45), an understanding that lacks a theory of ideology and cannot sustain the intelligibility of scientific experimentation and discovery. Finally, Chapter 4 (a revised version of a paper presented to the British Sociological Association in 1976) offers a very clear résumé of the critique of positivism elaborated in *Realism and Emancipation*, Bhaskar's most detailed exercise in ideology-critique (metacritique₂) and the crucible in which the theory of the Tina compromise formation and thence of demi-reality was forged;¹² readers who have little stomach for the complexity of the extended account would be well advised to substitute this chapter, at least in the first instance. It includes a definitive analysis of the fact form that clearly distinguishes the positivist from a critical realist concept of a fact (pp. 60–2).

(3) First published in the year before *The Possibility of Naturalism* appeared, Chapter 5 adroitly summarizes Bhaskar's philosophy of social science and indeed, revised a decade later, incorporates some minor improvements in formulation. The next chapter examines

the connections between explanation in the social sciences and human emancipation. First published in 1980, in its revised form it incorporates a summary account of the relevant arguments published six years later in *Realism and Emancipation*, including a streamlined version of the inference schemas that take us from facts to values and theory to practice; an account that, taking its cue from Marx and Jürgen Habermas, prefigures the theorization of emancipatory axiology and the pulse of freedom in *Dialectic* (see especially pp. 107–14). After the publication of *The Possibility of Naturalism* Bhaskar set himself the goals, on the one hand, of bringing the tripartite project he had embarked upon in the late 1960s to a satisfactory conclusion and, on the other, of dialectically developing and deepening critical realism, which lacked an adequate theory of absence, hence of change and process; an explicit overall theory of truth; and a developed ethical theory and emancipatory axiology. Remedying these lacks entailed, inter alia, settling philosophical accounts with G.W.F.Hegel and Marx. As part of this work Bhaskar penned ten entries for the *Dictionary of Marxist Philosophy* in the early 1980s,¹³ three of the most important of which—on dialectics, materialism and the theory of knowledge—are reproduced in Chapter 7. These essays, which reassess the mature Marx as a critical realist, are remarkable for the way in which they pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the various strands of the Marxist tradition, indicating an extraordinary command of the field and providing the reader with a means for the steady navigation of otherwise somewhat bewildering seas. Thus the entry on materialism, for example, which focuses on practical materialism, rigorously distinguishing it from ontological, epistemological, historical, and scientific materialism, ordines its critique around transcendently necessary distinctions between objectivity (intransitive dimension) and two senses of objectification (transitive dimension), as illustrated in Table 1. Of all the figures in the Marxist tradition after Marx and Frederick Engels, Theodor Adorno emerges in the most favourable light from the Bhaskarian critique. The entry on materialism touches on one of the pressing issues of the present day, ecological crisis, criticizing the tradition of Marx for emphasizing the way in which humans appropriate nature to the neglect of ‘the ways...in which, so to speak, nature reappropriates human beings’ (p. 131)—a topic already broached in Chapter 1, which raises the issue of absolute natural limits to social production (p. 6; see also Chapter 8, p. 176). Much of the material in these entries was subsequently incorporated into *Dialectic*.

Table 1 Objectivity and objectification

(α) objectivity or externality as such (intransitive object of knowledge)	(β) objectification as the <i>production</i> of a subject (transitive object of knowledge)	(γ) objectification as the <i>process</i> of the reproduction or transformation of social forms (the transitive dimension or process of knowledge production as such)
(β)= (α) traditional materialism (Engels, Lenin, Della Volpe, reflection theory)		
(α)= (β) epistemological idealism (Lukács, Gramsci, Kolakowski, Schmidt)		
(γ)= (β) individualism, voluntarism, spontaneism (Sartre)		
(β)= (γ) determinism, reification, hypostatization (Althusser)		

Note. ‘=’ signifies a tendential reduction; thus ‘(β)= (α) ’ means ‘the tendential reduction of (β) to (α)’

(4[5]) The final chapter, ‘What is critical realism?’, based on an address to the 1988 *Realism and the Human Sciences* conference, was published for the first time in *Reclaiming Reality*. As an address to the burgeoning critical realist movement within the academy, like the address with which the book opens it is of some ethnographic interest, and in addition provides a lucid overview of first-wave critical realism. The *Realism and the Human Sciences* conferences, which were held at various places in the UK from 1983 to 1994, were part of a deliberate strategy to counteract tendencies toward the marginalization of critical realists in the academy—critical realism after all defended the rationality of science at the very time when it was coming under sustained and widespread attack.¹⁴ Bhaskar’s address orientates itself decisively against the dominant positivist and instrumentalist ideology of science as a means of prediction¹⁵ and control—what the postmodern critics of science are really against—in favour of a realist understanding of its goals as ‘explanation and enlightenment’ (p. 185, cf. p. 187). It also contains an illuminating brief explication of Bhaskar’s method of transcendental critique, whereby positive transcendental arguments for realist positions simultaneously function negatively as transcendental refutations of irrealist ones, issuing in immanent critiques (p. 182). The address ends with the fundamental message of the book, and indeed, of Bhaskar’s work as a whole: explanatory critical science is an indispensable, though not the only, means for achieving a socialist or eudaimonistic society of free flourishing.¹⁶

Mervyn Hartwig
February 2010

Notes

- 1 Roy Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, with an introduction by Mervyn Hartwig (London: Routledge [1991] 2010).
- 2 Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, with an introduction by Mervyn Hartwig (London: Routledge, [1975] 2008); Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, with an introduction by Mervyn Hartwig (London: Routledge, [1986] 2009); Roy Bhaskar with Mervyn Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism: A Personal Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2010), chs 2–6. Andrew Collier’s *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994) remains an excellent introduction to the works of this period, notwithstanding that it did not have the advantage of the perspective afforded by the subsequent development of dialectical critical realism and the philosophy of meta-Reality; as of course does *Reclaiming Reality* itself.
- 3 See also Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, ch. 9, ‘Critical realism in context’, 144.
- 4 See Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 112. Tony Benn (1925–) was a prominent leader of the Labour Left from the late 1970s to his retirement from Parliament in 2001.
- 5 For Bhaskar’s recent assessment of the political implications of critical realism see Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 205ff.
- 6 In Bhaskar’s subsequent works, the concept of socialism by and large gives way to that of eudaimonia, not just because the former has been tainted historically by actually existing socialism and social democracy, but because eudaimonia is the more inclusive concept.

- 7 For a contrary view, see Alison Assiter and Jeff Noonan, 'Human needs: a realist perspective', *Journal of Critical Realism* 6(2) 2007:173–98. Cf. the discussion in Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 110–11.
- 8 See Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 111–13, 163–5.
- 9 See Bhaskar, *Realism and Emancipation*, 308; Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 127. Bhaskar's reference to poststructuralism as an 'idealism' sometimes raises eyebrows in view of the professed 'materialism' of many poststructuralists but, insofar as it espouses actualism and foreswears depth-realism, poststructuralism is clearly a form of subjective or anthropo-idealism on Bhaskar's definition (cf. Heideggerian anthropo-ontology). See also, especially, the discussion in Bhaskar, *Realism and Emancipation*, 237–8, n.9.
- 10 Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 115–16.
- 11 This is 'the "great anthroporealist exchange"', in which 'a naturalised...science is purchased at the price of a humanised nature' (Bhaskar, *Realism and Emancipation*, 23).
- 12 See my introduction to *ibid.* The fact that Chapter 4 of *Reclaiming Reality* is based on a paper presented in 1976 suggests that the essentials of the critique of positivism published in 1986 were already present in the manuscript Bhaskar submitted as a DPhil thesis in 1971, *Some Problems about Explanation in the Social Sciences* (subsequently called *Empiricism and the Metatheory of Social Science*). See Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 22, 33, 42–3.
- 13 R.Bhaskar, 'Contradiction', 'Determinism', 'Dialectics', 'Empiricism', 'Idealism', 'Theory of knowledge', 'Materialism', 'Realism', 'Science' and 'Truth' in T.Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, [1983] 1991).
- 14 See Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, vii–viii, 145–6, 220–1. These conferences were the precursors of the International Association for Critical Realism conferences, sponsored initially by the Centre for Critical Realism, that have been held annually since 1997.
- 15 Since this orientation, together with the impossibility of decisive test situations in the social sciences, is sometimes taken to mean that Bhaskar rules out prediction per se in the human sciences, it should be noted that this chapter, on the contrary, stresses it: 'this does not rule out conditional predictions in social science. Moreover a powerful explanatory theory will be capable of situating possibilities long before they are manifested; so that theory retains a prognostic function in the social domain' (p. 186).
- 16 See also especially Bhaskar with Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, vii–viii.

Preface

The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity: but everyone must not hope to be a Boyle, or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr Newton, with some others of that strain, it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge.¹

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.²

The essays collected in this volume all seek to *underlabour*—at different levels and in different ways—for the sciences, and especially the human sciences, in so far as they might illuminate and empower the project of human self-emancipation. They attempt, that is to say, for the explanatory-emancipatory sciences today, the kind of ‘clearing’ of the ideological ground, which Locke set out to achieve for the prodigious infant of seventeenth-century mechanics. Such sciences, which only partially and incompletely exist, will not only interpret but help to change the world. But they will do so rationally only on the condition that they interpret the world aright.

These essays seek only to reclaim reality for itself. To reclaim it from philosophical ideologies—such as empiricism or idealism—which have tacitly or explicitly defined it in terms of some specific human attribute, such as sense-experience, intuition or axiomatic ratiocination, for some or other restricted—individual or group—interest.

The perspective which allows us to reclaim reality for itself I call ‘critical realism’. This is introduced in Chapter 1, where I discuss the so-called ‘new realism’ currently in vogue in some erstwhile socialist circles. Chapter 2 shows how the critical realist, or as I have also called it the transcendental realist, account of natural science can be derived by an immanent critique of the dominant contemporary philosophies of science. Chapter 3 considers the work of two of the most influential philosophical schools of the twentieth century: those inaugurated by Karl Popper in the anglophone and by Gaston Bachelard in the francophone world. Chapter 4 illustrates the way in which a philosophical system such as positivism can act as an ideology for science and other social institutions, including those of the capitalist economy. Chapter 5 outlines my philosophy of social science, which I call critical naturalism. On it, social objects can be studied scientifically like natural ones—but only on the condition that we accept a realist (non-positivist, non-conventionalist and non-idealist) account of science and respect the specificity of the subject-matter of the social sciences. In Chapter 6, I develop the implications of the transcendental realist and critical naturalist philosophy for projects of human self-emancipation. It is an argument which will recur throughout this book that depth-explanatory human sciences, of the sort that Marx

inaugurated but did not complete, are a necessary but insufficient condition for projects such as that of socialist emancipation. Chapter 7 looks at the central themes, traditions and problems of Marxist epistemology, including the highly charged concepts of the dialectic and of materialism. In Chapter 8, I engage in a critique of the work of Richard Rorty, whose *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*³ must be one of the most influential philosophical books of the post-war period. In Chapter 9, I round off the themes of the book and correct some of the emphases of Chapter 1.

All but the first, fourth and last of the chapters have been published before, but these are mostly relatively inaccessible. The chapters may be read in any order, but the neophyte in philosophy should be warned that Chapters 4 and 6 are qualitatively more difficult than the others—so they should be skipped, perhaps, at a first reading. Chapter 9 as a resumé of the argument of the book could usefully be read much earlier. Newcomers to philosophy should try to grasp the flow of the argument, if they become bemused by a particular step. This may involve going on (or back) a paragraph, section or even chapter until things start to ‘fall into place’.

This book should be seen as an attempt to start, or rather continue, an argument, not to conclude one. It leaves loose ends and threads. Some, I hope, the reader will pick up and pursue for her—or himself. Others I intend to pursue in a companion volume of essays on recent and contemporary Marxist philosophers and the post-structuralists and post-modernists, provisionally entitled *Philosophical Underlabouring*. The critique of Rorty is expanded and broadened in my forthcoming *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*;⁴ as the argument of Chapter 7 will be set in its full historical and philosophical context in my book on *Dialectic*.

Chapter 1 is a development of an *Interlink* 7 (June 1988) article for the 2nd Socialist Conference at Chesterfield, which I expanded for the July 1988 Conference of Socialist Economists Annual Conference at Sheffield. I am indebted to my original co-authors, Chris Arthur, Ted Benton, Gregory Elliott, John Lovering, Peter Osborne and Hilary Wainwright; to discussions with many others including Jeremy Beale, Robin Blackburn, Mary Kaldor, Laura Marcus, Doreen Massey, Jenny Taylor and William Outhwaite; and to helpful debates at the two conferences. Chapter 2 comprises an address given to the 6th International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science at Hanover in August 1979. It is reprinted by kind permission of North-Holland Publishing Company and L.J.Cohen and his fellow editors. Chapter 3 was first published in *New Left Review* 94, 1975. Chapter 4 was originally given as a talk to the British Sociological Association ‘Sociology of Science Study Group’ at the London School of Economics in February 1976. Chapter 5 was first published in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 8(1), 1978. It is reprinted by kind permission of Basil Blackwell. Chapter 6 was first published in *Radical Philosophy* 26, 1980, and is reprinted by permission of the Radical Philosophy Collective. The three articles which comprise Chapter 7 were first published in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Ed. T. Bottomore et al., Blackwell 1983. They are reprinted with corrections here by kind permission of Basil Blackwell and Tom Bottomore. Chapter 8 was first published in *Reading Rorty*, Ed. A. Malachowski, Blackwell 1989, and is reprinted here with grateful thanks to Basil Blackwell and Alan Malachowski. Chapter 9 is based on a talk I delivered at the 4th Conference of the Standing Conference on Realism and the Human Sciences in Bristol

in September 1988. It has benefited considerably from the stimulating discussions we had there. It covers some of the same ground as my 'Postscript to the Second Edition', *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Harvester Press, 1989.

Acknowledgements of a more personal kind are also in order. Thanks are due to Sue Kelly for secretarial help. I am also extremely grateful to Colin Robinson and all at Verso for their patience and the prompt and efficient production of this book. Above all, I would like to thank Hilary Wainwright for constant encouragement and incessant argument.

Roy Bhaskar
November 1988

1

Critical Realism, Social Relations and Arguing for Socialism

Enlightenment is man's release from self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in the lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own reason!—That is the motto of enlightenment.¹

1 Philosophical Underlabouring

I take it that whatever our politics, in the narrow party or factional sense, socialists can agree that what we must be about today is the building of a movement for socialism—in which socialism wins a cultural-intellectual hegemony, so that it becomes the enlightened common-sense of our age. My use of the phrase 'enlightened common-sense' is deliberate. In a capitalist world and a bourgeois society, socialism will never be simple sense. But what we can hope to aspire to is the dawning of a new enlightenment, a socialist enlightenment which will stand to some future order of things, as the eighteenth-century bourgeois enlightenment stood to the American Declaration of Independence, the French revolution and the overthrow of colonial slavery for which it helped to prepare the cultural ground. If this is our project as socialist intellectuals—to win the intellectual high-ground for socialism—then it should be clear why we need to take philosophy seriously.

We need to take philosophy seriously because it is the discipline that has traditionally underwritten both what constitutes science or knowledge and which political practices are deemed legitimate. Indeed it could be argued that many of the confusions current on the left, exemplified by the acceptance of a series of false dichotomies, such as between fundamentalism and revisionism, individualism and collectivism, or scientific analysis and moral criticism, stem from unwittingly following utterly inadequate philosophies of science and society. Thus, among radical-chic intellectuals the dominant intellectual 'fashionmeter' has swung from the idealist structuralism and post-structuralism of the seventies and early eighties to the empiricist so-called 'new realism' of the mid and late eighties. Those who have resisted the pull of these fashions have nevertheless lost confidence in the face of them. My aim in this essay is briefly to develop the implications of a more adequate philosophy of science and society for socialism—where philosophy is conceived, in Lockean fashion, as an underlabourer for science and projects of human emancipation and, in Leibnizian mode, as an analyst and potential critic of conceptual systems and the forms of social life in which they are embedded—as part of the longer-term project of capturing the intellectual high-ground. An indication of the extent to which the right—echoed in the

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labour movement—has managed to seize this ground is that it has not only succeeded in achieving political dominance; it has, under the guise of the ‘new realism’, even appropriated the very concept of reality and realism for itself!

2 Critical Realism Versus ‘New Realism’

The so-called ‘new realism’ merely reflects and accommodates to the new and rapidly changing surface forms of contemporary capitalist society at home and abroad. Vaunted as a belated adjustment to the facts of political life, the ‘new realism’ is actually an empiricist or empirical realism. It is a form of realism which fails to recognise that there are enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events. In other words its realism is of the most superficial sort.

It should be appreciated that all philosophies, cognitive discourses and practical activities presuppose a realism—in the sense of some ontology or general account of the world—of one kind or another. The crucial question is: *what kind?*² The scientific, transcendental and critical realism which I have expounded conceives the world as being structured, differentiated and changing. It is opposed to empiricism, pragmatism and idealism alike. Critical realists do not deny the reality of events and discourses; on the contrary, they insist upon them. But they hold that we will only be able to understand—and so change—the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events or discourses. Such structures are irreducible to the patterns of events and discourses alike. These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable pattern of events; they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences.

Social phenomena (like most natural phenomena) are the product of a plurality of structures. But such structures may be hierarchically ranked in terms of their explanatory importance. Such an approach allows us to avoid the pitfalls of both crude determinism (for example, of an economic reductionist sort) and undifferentiated eclecticism. Thus in order to understand the growth of militarism one must take into account both the dynamics of the international economic order and the political conflicts between nation states (and their blocs) and their interaction. It is worth noting that a hierarchy of explanation prioritizing the economic level need not involve the collapsing of the autonomous organizations of different groups of oppressed people (although it may have implications for their strategic perspectives).

Realism is not, nor does it license, either a set of substantive analyses or a set of practical policies. Rather, it provides a set of perspectives on society (and nature) and on how to understand them. It is not a substitute for, but rather helps to guide, empirically controlled investigations into the structures generating social phenomena. And from this critical realist perspective we can now see the swingometer of intellectual fashion as having lurched from the hyper-structuralist view of people as the mere effects or dupes of structures over which they have neither knowledge nor control to the ‘new realist’ view which effectively empties the social world of any enduring structural dimension, making, as Raymond Williams put it, ‘long-term adjustments to short-term changes’.

3 Understanding Social Relations

Over the last century, popular, academic and political thinking about society has tended to gravitate towards one or other of the poles of a crude polarity between individualism and collectivism. Thus classical social theory has swung between the individualism and voluntarism of utilitarianism and Weberianism on the one hand and the collectivism and reification involved in organicist and Durkheimian social thought on the other. At a political level, the former found expression in liberalism, and the latter in labourism (and Stalinism).

Realists argue for an understanding of the relationship between social structures and human agency that is based on a *transformational* conception of social activity, and which avoids both voluntarism and reification. At the same time they advance an understanding of the social as essentially consisting in or depending upon *relations*. This view is in opposition to both atomistic individualism and undifferentiated collectivism.

According to the transformational understanding of social activity, the existence of social structure is a necessary condition for any human activity. Society provides the means, media, rules and resources for everything we do. Far from it being the case that, in Mrs Thatcher's dictum, society doesn't exist, the existence of society is a transcendently necessary condition for any intentional act at all. It is the unmotivated condition for all our motivated productions. We do not create society—the error of voluntarism. But these structures which pre-exist us are only reproduced or transformed in our everyday activities; thus society does not exist independently of human agency—the error of reification. The social world is reproduced or transformed in daily life.

All social structures—for instance, the economy, the state, the family, language—depend upon or presuppose social relations—which may include the social relations between capital and labour, ministers and civil servants, parents and children. The relations into which people enter preexist the individuals who enter into them, and whose activity reproduces or transforms them; so they are themselves structures. And it is to these structures of social relations that realism directs our attention—both as the explanatory key to understanding social events and trends and as the focus of social activity aimed at the self-emancipation of the exploited and oppressed.

On this transformational and relational conception, society is a skilled accomplishment of active agents. But the social world may be opaque to the social agents upon whose activity it depends in four respects, in that these activities may depend on or involve (a) unacknowledged conditions, (b) unintended consequences, (c) the exercise of tacit skills, and/or (d) unconscious motivation. Accordingly, the task of the social sciences is to describe what social processes (for example, the buying and selling of labour power, the extraction of surplus value) must be going on for a Stock Exchange crash or some other manifest phenomenon to be possible.

Society then is the ensemble of positioned practices and networked interrelationships which individuals never create but in their practical activity always presuppose, and in so doing everywhere reproduce or transform.

On this approach, while social structures are dependent upon the consciousness which the agents who reproduce or transform them have, they are not reducible to this consciousness. Social practices are concept-dependent; but, contrary to the hermeneutical tradition in social science, they are not exhausted by their conceptual aspect. They always have a

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material dimension. This is an important consideration, as reflection on the prevalence and impact of the phenomena of hunger, homelessness and war upon so much of human history shows. Moreover for critical realism the social world, being itself a social product, is seen as essentially subject to the possibility of transformation. Hence it is intrinsically dynamic and irreducibly geo-historical, a situated and distantiating process. Understanding the social world as a (spatial) process should not lead to an exaggerated emphasis on particular fluctuations (for example as in some of the more apocalyptic conclusions drawn by some of the left at the time of the October 1987 Stock Exchange crash—a crash which equally the ‘new realist’ right could neither foresee nor comprehend).

4 Implications for Socialism

Transforming society towards socialism depends upon knowledge of these underlying structures. The world cannot be rationally changed unless it is adequately interpreted. But there are problems.

First, because social systems are intrinsically open and cannot be artificially closed, our criteria for the empirical testing of social theories cannot be predictive and so must be exclusively explanatory. This means, for instance, that Marxist economic theory cannot be held to have been falsified by the failure of any predictions it might have been used to generate; equally it can only be confirmed or corroborated (and rationally developed) by reference to its explanatory power in illuminating a range of historical and contemporary data. (Of course a powerful explanatory theory will allow us to make conditional predictions about tendencies which may manifest themselves in the future.) Speaking substantively, I think it is vital to conceive Marxism as a research programme, initiated by Marx but no more completed by him than Copernicus completed the revolution in thought which Galileo, Kepler and Newton developed, and Einstein and quantum theory have radically transformed this century.

Second, social theory and social reality are causally interdependent. This is not to say that the social theorist ‘constructs’ social reality. But it is to say that social theory is practically conditioned by, and potentially has practical consequences in society. Indeed, critical realism suggests that social theory is non-neutral in two ways. It always consists in a practical intervention in social life and sometimes (other things being equal) it logically entails values and actions. In these circumstances, the standard fact/value and theory/practice distinctions break down. Thus if we accept Marx’s critique of political economy, which is also a critique of the illusory or false consciousness which capitalist society generates, we may—indeed must—pass immediately to a negative evaluation of those structures and to a positive evaluation of action rationally directed to changing them. (This is of course not to imply that the misleading way capitalism manifests itself is the sole or main reason for being a socialist. This will turn on capitalism’s failure to meet human needs and aspirations. It is rather to highlight the way in which a critique of a theory in the social world may often involve an explanation of the reasons why it is believed and a critique of the circumstances in which its belief appears plausible, that is, in which the theory is credible.)

From the critical realist perspective, contrary to the tradition of contemporary social democracy, socialist emancipation depends on the transformation of structures, not the