

Chapter 9

The Morphogenetic Approach; Critical Realism's Explanatory Framework Approach



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Abstract Critical Realism, the philosophy of the social sciences used here is equally applicable to all such disciplines and accords no special place to economics. In fact there has been disappointingly little take-up of it by heterodox economists (notable exceptions in Britain being Tony Lawson and Jamie Morgan). The generality with which Roy Bhaskar advanced CR means that necessarily theorists in each discipline must develop their own explanations, although these will share the same philosophical 'under-labouring' as Bhaskar characterized his own contribution. Specifically, this involves common endorsement of the following:-

- (a) A rejection of Humean 'constant conjunctions' as a deficient, because empiricist basis for conceptualizing social reality and causality.
- (b) A stratified ontology of the social order, endorsing emergence and the causal consequences of the second or third-order interplay between emergent properties and powers. In turn this spells acceptance of upwards and downwards causality between strata.
- (c) A refusal to assign automatic priority to structure (or culture) versus agency when accounting for causation in the social domain.
- (d) A reliance upon CR's 'three pillars' for explanatory adequacy:-
 - Ontological realism
 - Epistemic relativism
 - Judgemental rationality

I will attempt to show how my own 'Morphogenetic/Morphostatic' explanatory programme usefully supplements the above with an interdisciplinary approach to accounting for change and stability in all social forms and institutions. This framework is obedient both to the four above principles but also provides a toolkit for those seeking to theorize about the development of particular social processes,

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practices and policies (and resistance to them) at any given $S^1 T^1$, wherever this is situated historically and geographically. In itself, the M/M approach is not a theory. Should some prefer to assign it to ‘methodology’, I would not object.

9.1 Philosophical Under-Labouring and the Need for an Explanatory Toolkit

Critical realists accept that the nature of social reality is such that its explanation requires the identification of the distinctive causal powers exercised at some given place or date. *This is the case for those processes that account for its social contours at any particular time; those that maintain a particular social configuration in being for some time; and those that transform its particular kind over time.* The difference between these mechanisms and those found in the natural order derives from the nature of the fundamentally different constituents of these two orders of reality.

Their difference also explains why ‘morphogenesis’ means something very different from in biology – where it is an entirely non-conscious process – than it does in social science. (The only thing they share is a common etymology). What is distinctive about social reality – or any section of it – is its being intrinsically, inherently and ineluctably ‘peopled’. Its ontological constitution is utterly *activity-dependent*, despite the fact that people’s thoughts and actions give rise to factors that are ‘not people’ – the most important of these being culture and structure.

Because of this I have argued along with Bhaskar that for any process to merit consideration as a generator of social change it must necessarily incorporate (i) structured human relations (*context-dependence*) because there is no such thing as ‘context-less action’ and calling it ‘situated’ makes no difference; (ii) human actions (*activity-dependence*) because even the most distant outcomes, such as GDP or Climate change in the Anthropocene would not exist without the continuous actions of people, and (iii) human ideas (*concept-dependence*) because activities like ‘voting’, ‘paying rent’ or ‘opening a bank account’ require that actors have some notion of what they are doing, however vague or misguided.¹ Necessarily, these three requirements make social theorising non-naturalistic, that is different from natural science. (As Roy Bhaskar often said, his *Possibility of Naturalism* could equally well have been called *The Impossibility of Naturalism*.)

A more familiar way of putting the above is that every theory about the social order necessarily has to come in a sack, SAC: it must incorporate Structure, Agency and Culture. The problem in hand will govern which of the three is accorded most attention and the acronym SAC is thus *not* a rank ordering of priority between the three elements. All are always indispensable.

¹ Roy, Bhaskar, 1979, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead.

During the last quarter of a century, the ranks of SAC deniers have swollen dramatically. As Porpora maintained in his recent book *Reconstructing Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach*,² the meta-theoretical stance of denial rests upon conflation of these three elements. Instead of distinctive properties and powers pertaining to structure, culture and agency, any pair is conflated with one another, thus ruling out examination of the (changing) interplay between them and its theorization.

When conflation rules the components of SAC are collapsed into only one ontological factor, which is given a proper name, whilst the existence of others is flatly denied. A relevant example in relation to the economy is Rom Harré's account of the 2008 financial crisis from his 'conversational model'.

Institutions are not ontologically basic, nor are any other seemingly structured entity-like beings. From the point of the conversational source model an institution is an appearance, an illusion presented by the relative stability of the flux of social acts that are constitutive of the then and there social reality. The need for a clear ontological viewpoint has been illustrated dramatically in the "collapse" of part of the "banking system" Talking that way distracts our attention from the reality, the flux of social acts performed by a loosely bounded group of active agents, following discourse rules that proved in the end to be incoherent. *There is and was no "banking system".* (2009 my ital.)³

Instead, the guiding metaphor is of 'flows' or 'liquidity' – which depends upon a prior dissolution of all three components of SAC. Thus, the leading trope of 'liquid modernity' explicitly depends on an eclectic combination of denials of 'structure' (replaced, for example, by theoretical assertions about 'de-structuring' in the work of Ulrich Beck), denials of 'culture' as anything more than what people carry in their heads, (endorsed by Dave Elder-Vass), and of 'agency', rendered fluid by notions of serial self-reinvention (Beck and Anthony Giddens), thus severing ties with personal and group 'identity', 'interests' and 'commitments' (if anti-humanism does not make all such notions irrelevant by reducing agents and actors to Latour's 'actants'). In consequence, the picture of the social order being shaped and re-shaped by groups seeking to advance their material interests, their ideal interests and who they are is obliterated by the imagery of fluidity. In turn, the liquid society cuts loose from struggles for domination and control (societal or sectional) and becomes literally ungovernable and uncontrollable, as conveyed by the images of the 'runaway', 'juggernaut' or 'risk' society (Beck and Giddens). This spells the demise of both central 'Command and Control', but also of the robust Social Movements dominant in the macroscopic changes of the last two centuries.

Perhaps it is helpful to delineate the structure of realist social theory as in the diagram below, in order to be clear about the nature of explanation in realism. Let me start with two bold statements. First, Social Ontology (Bhaskar's contribution) explains nothing. Second, neither does my Morphogenetic Approach explain anything. That does not mean they do no work in social theorizing. Indeed, we need

²Douglas, V, Porpora, 2015, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

³Rom Harré, (2009) 'Saving Critical Realism', J. Theor Soc Behav 39(2), 129–143.

both of them. To begin with everyone has a social ontology (including lay actors) consisting of those things they hold to exist and not to do so. We know that lay actors differ – some hold that ghosts exist, some that exorcism can eliminate them and most neither. The same is the case for social theorists.

Nevertheless, all theorists have a social ontology, whether implicit or explicit, which effectively defines the constituents of the social world. Therefore, the SO performs a role of conceptual regulation because it governs those concepts that are deemed admissible in description as in explanation – just as an atheist cannot attribute his well-being to divine providence. Although a social ontology explains nothing, it frequently excludes certain explanations, cast in ‘improper’ terms.

This was Bhaskar’s great contribution as he flags up in his posthumous book⁴; namely the task of rescuing ontology (how the world is) from epistemology (how we take it to be). He never for a moment claims that we have direct and infallible access to ‘how the world is’, including the social order that is ultimately of human making. Instead, his great philosophical contribution was to deny that we can answer this question in any science on the basis of empiricism (that which is available to us though data coming from our five senses). On that criterion, we will ‘perceive’ (smell, hear, etc.) something of what exists, but far from all that is in existence at the *actual or real levels*. If present at an event (a football match) a good deal of what happens will be inaccessible from anyone’s angle of vision. Yet, put these different perspectives together into some kind of generalized spectators’ view and such ‘actualism’ cannot reveal the unobservable but nonetheless real causal factors at work (for example, that key players have been bribed to lose the match). This is the level of the ‘real’ which exists and can be known only by its causal influence rather than by direct observation.

Matters are even more complex. Something may exist (the bribe) but its causal powers might not be exercised (the team cares more about winning than it fears subsequent retribution); powers may be exercised but not detected (perhaps a key shooter successfully fakes an injury), or exercised but not affect the intended outcome (the other team plays so badly that the bribe cannot prevent the bribed from winning). As researchers we have to deal with all of these ontologically variable scenarios. One consequence is that, unlike empiricism, we can rarely make predictions in the open system that is the social order – unlike the sterile laboratory – because nothing can prevent the intrusion of contingencies.

In itself, an SO tells no-one how to go about explaining anything. For this an explanatory programme is needed. That is what the Morphogenetic Approach is; the methodological complement of Critical Realism’s social ontology. The basic M/M diagram, supplies guidelines about how analytically to break up the material in hand to form the three temporal phases making-up a single morphogenetic cycle, which ends in either change or stasis and represents the start of the next cycle, viz <Structural and Cultural Conditioning → Social Interaction → Structural and/or Cultural Elaboration>. It is the investigator who contributes the material and problem to be explained and, if successful, produces what I have called a Practical Social Theory. The EP will have assisted in

⁴ Roy Bhaskar, (2016), *Enlightened Common Sense, The Philosophy of Critical Realism*, Abingdon, Routledge.

marshalling the SAC components to account for the ‘who’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘what’ of change, but it is the PST that does the explaining.



This means that PST plays a crucial role in the *development* of Critical Realism through *using* it in a substantive area of interest to the investigator. There are always such areas that have not previously attracted Realist research and this is necessarily the case because tomorrow’s social changes (morphogenetic or morphostatic) cannot yet have been investigated. Similarly, though contingently, there is generally a large tract of issues that have simply not been investigated at all. This is why the framing of a research question is one of the most and often the most important element of a research project; it is what fosters the development of Realist theorizing. It can do so by prompting modifications in the SO because our ontology cannot remain immune to how reality is discovered to be. (As illustrated every day in medical research). Alternatively, research findings can require adjustments in the Explanatory Programme.

Although all structural and cultural properties found to be salient in any society are continuously activity-dependent, it is possible through analytical dualism to separate ‘structure’, ‘culture’ and ‘agency’ to examine their interplay in order to account for the structuring and re-structuring of the social order. Fundamentally, this is possible for two reasons. Firstly, ‘structure’, ‘culture’ and ‘agency’ are *different kinds of emergent entities*⁵ as is shown by the differences in their properties and powers, *despite* the fact that they are crucial for each other’s formation, continuation and development. Thus, an educational system can be ‘centralised’, whilst a person cannot, and humans are ‘reflexive’, which cannot be the case for structures. Secondly, and fundamental to the workability of this explanatory methodology, ‘structure’, ‘culture’ and ‘agency’ operate diachronically over different time periods because (i) structure and culture necessarily pre-date the action(s) that transform them and, (ii) structural and cultural elaboration necessarily post-date those actions, as represented in the following diagram. It is this that distinguishes *analytical* dualism from philosophical dualism (Fig. 9.1).

Full significance is accorded to the timescale through which structure, culture and agency themselves *emerge, intertwine and redefine* one another, since this is the bedrock of the explanatory format employed in accounting for any substantive change in social forms.

It is entirely in the hands of the substantive researcher to judge where to start their explanatory project in time (and their T^l may differ historically from that of previous research, which might have stimulated their own work). In a similar man-

⁵ Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989, ‘People and society [...] do not constitute two moments of the same process. Rather they refer to radically different things.’ p. 76.

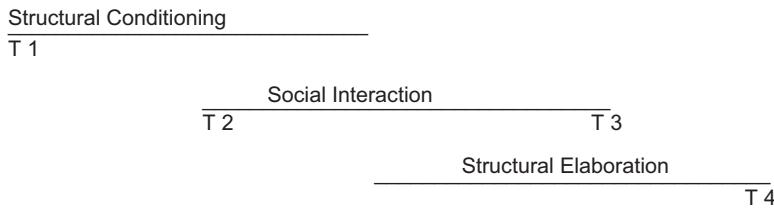


Fig. 9.1 The basic morphogenetic sequence

Margaret S. Archer, 1995, Realist Social Theory; The Morphogenetic Approach, Cambridge University Press, p.157

ner, the period between $T^2 - T^3$ in which groups vie with one another to shape some social form, organization, or practice can vary considerably from place to place depending on local circumstances. The EP needs to be treated as a flexible template. For example, one post-graduate had done a good study of the intricacies of local government decision-making over the 3 years of his registration, but came to me and complained that no notable changes had eventuated in this period despite considerable conflict between the groups involved. So be it, the struggles went on because the groups in question had locked in unresolved conflict, at least *pro tem*. Conflictual dynamics do not conveniently accommodate themselves to the duration of our grants! Conversely, it cannot be assumed that current forms and practices always pertained to the same nominal group, such as a profession throughout the individual careers of its members, which anyway would be of variable length. For instance, the referents of 'Company Director', 'Sales Manager' and 'Shop Floor worker' would have changed considerable, if still used, just as for Doctors and Teachers.

Most obviously, the same point pertains to T^4 , the explanandum in any theory or research focussing upon it. Given its activity dependence, every aspect of the social order is susceptible of change. Temporality is intrinsic to its constitution and so it must be in Realist social theorizing. Consequently, we must always be ready to recognize that ontologically change has occurred (although the 'when' will most likely vary with our research interests) and if it has done so significantly, it is time to start another morphogenetic cycle. The explanandum has altered, thanks to its 'activity dependence', so have the structural and/or cultural conditioning effects upon people and groups and consequently upon their concerns, vested interests and courses of action and most likely upon their outcomes. For instance, having spent many pages analysing the emergence of English State education as a decentralized system in my 1979 book⁶ (using two analytical cycles to do so), that structure morphed into something more centrally governed in the last three decades of the Twentieth century.

It follows that no social theory is eternal because what it purports to explain is often changing in some respect just as theories are advanced. The trope of 'liquid-

⁶Margaret S. Archer (1979), *Social Origins of Educational Systems*, London, Sage, reprinted 2013 by Routledge, Abingdon.

ity' had many defects, especially in relation to the global distribution of society's scarce material resources, but in addition it was presented as if it had eternal life. That is, no conditions were specified on which its continuation depended. Conversely, in the Centre for Social Ontology's current series of 5 volumes on *Social Morphogenesis*,⁷ we have been extremely cautious *not* to announce the advent of a Morphogenic Society, despite the empirical evidence of intensified morphogenesis in most social institutions almost everywhere. This was because the generative mechanism driving its manifestations (in my view, the synergy between financialized capitalism and digital technology)⁸) can combine with other mechanisms to produce a variety of new social formations. Moreover, even that statement has a proviso. None of those possible changes will eventuate unless the global emissions from fossil fuels are cut back to fewer than 2% as per the 2015 Paris agreement – for which it may not already be too late – nor will any concrete utopia be realized because the game will be over. 'Morphonecrosis', the extinction of social forms and processes is a very important extension that Ismael Al-Amoudi has added to Critical Realist theorizing and the total extinction of the human race would be its ultimate expression.

To realists, nothing social, whatever its origins, is self-sustaining, which is what *inter alia* distinguishes the social from the natural world. Only a myriad of agential 'doings' (including thinking, believing, and imagining) keep any given higher level social entity in being and render it relatively enduring. In other words, whilst ever something like the centralised French educational system lasts, then move a marker, second-by-second, from the system's inception until today, and each and every moment of its 'centralisation' depends upon agential doings (including intentional inaction).

However, this is not equivalent to some Giddensian notion that *every* such doing on the part of *everyone* somehow contributes to maintaining the whole (in this case, an institution).⁹ On the contrary, some doings are entirely irrelevant to sustaining centralisation (keeping a dog), some are more important than others, and it is only because further 'doings' exist in tension with one another that things remain the way they are (Catholic and now Muslim religious practices 'provoke' centralisation to exercise its powers in defence of the *laïcité* of education in the French Republic). Still further doings are intended to change the status quo, but have not yet succeeded in doing so.

⁷ Margaret S. Archer (ed.) (2013), *Social Morphogenesis*, (ed.), (2014), *Late Modernity: Trajectories Towards Morphogenic Society*; Margaret S. Archer, (ed.), (2015), *Generative Mechanisms Transforming the Social Order*; Margaret S. Archer (Ed.) (2016), *Morphogenesis and the Crisis of Normativity*; Margaret S. Archer (ed.) (2017), *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, all published by Springer, Dordrecht.

⁸ Margaret S. Archer, (2015), 'The Generative Mechanism Re-configuring Late Modernity', In Archer (ed). *Generative Mechanisms*, Ibid.

⁹ For example, as in his paradigmatic case of language: 'when I utter a grammatical English sentence in casual conversation, I contribute to the reproduction of the English language as a whole.' Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, Macmillan, London, 1979, pp. 77–8.

What the morphogenetic approach allows us to do is to avoid the synchronic banality and futility of asserting that if a relational property endures, this must be because of some net balance of sustaining agential doings at each moment in time (reminiscent of Merton's 'net balance of functional consequences'). Instead, in completing a morphogenetic cycle, by issuing in structural elaboration, not only is structure transformed but so is agency, as part and parcel of the same process – as the *double morphogenesis*.¹⁰ (This point entirely fails to be understood in Dépelteau's misleading discussion of what he calls 'co-determination theories').¹¹ As it re-shapes structural and/or cultural relations at any given T⁴, agency is ineluctably re-shaping itself: in terms of domination and subordination, of organisation, combination and articulation; in terms of its vested interests and these in relation to those of other agents; in terms of the new roles and positions that some occupy and others do not; and in terms of the novel situations in which all agents now find themselves, constraining to the projects of some and enabling to the projects of others,¹² yet of significance for the motivation of all.

In other words, at any given T⁴ something radical happens, not only to structure but also to agency. In cases of macroscopic change this affects the 'people' through transforming four 'parts' or levels of the social order: the systemic, the institutional, the role array and the positional (the life-chances of different sections of the population). Where the emergence of a significant economic change (at T⁴) is concerned, one of its immediate effects consists in re-dividing the population, not necessarily exhaustively, into those with vested interests in (economic) maintenance and change respectively, according to the situations in which they now find themselves – involuntarily for the majority of people. To characterise an interest as a 'vested' one is to associate it with a particular position, the implication being that if positions (roles, institutions) change, then so do interests. As Porpora puts it, 'among the causal powers that are deposited in social positions are interests. Interests are built into a social position by the relationship of that position to other positions in the system [...] actors are motivated to act in their interests, which are a function of their social position. Again, this doesn't mean that actors always with necessity act in their interests, but if they don't they are likely to suffer.'¹³ Thus, 'opportunity costs' are differentially distributed to different groups of actors for the same course of action – hence providing directional guidance *vis à vis* the course of action each group adopts. (These are termed 'situational logics of action' in the M/M approach).

However, equal attention needs to be accorded to Morphostasis, that is simultaneously to account for the *relatively* enduring nature of structures and cultures,

¹⁰ See Margaret S. Archer. (1995), *Realist Social Theory: the Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press p. 74 and Ch. 8.

¹¹ Dépelteau, François, 2008, 'Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency', *Sociological Theory*, 26:1.

¹² See *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 1–16.

¹³ Douglas V. Porpora, 'Four concepts of social structure', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 19:2, 1989, p. 208.

which, in turn, again serves to highlight the importance of the '*double morphogenesis*', or, in this case, its relative absence. A frequent difficulty with persuasive synchronic accounts – and I believe Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to be an instance in point – is how to explain that a given relationship between parts is *ever* susceptible of transformation (indeed, he himself relied upon *external* intrusions, in common with normative functionalism). Instead, the threat of the double morphogenesis reveals how the synchronic 'forces' (re-producing morphostasis) are an agential achievement, which is constantly threatened, rather than being ones conducive to eternal life for any social form.

To begin with, the losers in a struggle for institutional change do not quietly fade away but tend to fight on and may win concessions. Paradoxical as this might seem, morphostatic analysis cannot remain the same from one time interval to another. This is because the explanation of why something endures has to accommodate such changes in its constitution – changes that 'punctuate' morphostasis diachronically. In other words, an emergent entity (such as a capitalist system) can retain its key relational properties and causal powers (those still making it a version of capitalism), without it remaining unchanged, as with the advent of multinational production, then financialization and, finally, digitalization.

Similarly, to simplify greatly, these new characteristics of familiar institutions also *define new groups of losers*; those with more limited economic opportunities but aware of the widening income/wealth divides. All groups in these new situations have vested interests in bringing about transformation, though not of precisely the same kind. With even greater over-simplification, the crucial question for *endurance versus change* is: 'Can these groups work together?' This is an empirical question. What it means, however, is that we know where to look – and this is only contingently 'outside' – to explain why time is eventually up for that which was only *relatively* enduring. When we then address the break-up of the tense balance of forces that had consistently maintained morphostasis, we also know what to do next, and that is to examine the next (potentially) morphogenetic cycle. What happens to the economy if the combination of the political 'populism' engendered by those proclaiming themselves to be 'the 99%' succeeds in re-structuring the previous pit-props that politics had provided for economics since the advent of capitalism, despite the gradual redefinition that the Parties of constitutional democracy had undergone?

Throughout this account it has been maintained that structural 'conditioning' is necessarily *mediated by* (variable) agential responses to their circumstances. Without allowing for the personal powers of agents, it is impossible to explain the variability of their actions in the same circumstances. However, some question the notion of mediation itself. Thus, Manicas asks 'why postulate the existence of structure or culture as causally relevant if, to be causally effective, these must be mediated by social actors?'¹⁴ Since he leaves the question there, it is presumably held to be unanswerable. However, structure and culture could only be deemed causally irrelevant if what was being mediated was, in fact, invented then and there by actors whose own

¹⁴ Peter T. Manicas, *A Realist Theory of Social Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 72.

personal powers were entirely responsible for it. This ‘ban’ upon ‘mediation’ seems as untenable as holding that the wires bringing electricity into my house are entirely responsible for the working of my lights and electrical appliances and that the existence of a national grid and electricity generators are causally irrelevant.

This reflects a tendency among ‘weak’ realists to require some kind of instantiation of structure properties by agents before they are accorded any role in an explanation. In other words, far from their *impinging upon* agents, it is human subjects who literally bring them into play. Such a voluntaristic bias obviously provides rather better protection against being charged with reification. Examples would include John Searle’s¹⁵ notion of ‘the Background’, to which back-reference is made, for example, by listeners to disambiguate statements that require contextualization. Similarly, Manicas¹⁶ delegates structural and cultural properties to being ‘materials at hand’, without the capacity to exert causal powers but also, from his standpoint, without any explanation of why some are within easy reach of certain actors but out of reach for others. (It is thus unsurprising that Searle’s favourite social theorist appears to be Bourdieu, whilst Manicas’s book is a virtual repetition of Giddens: these two authors thus favouring the theoretical stance I have termed central conflation).¹⁷

9.2 Impatient ‘Innovative’ Responses and Their Deficiencies

Applying Critical Realism takes time. Some prefer to make a quick bid for fame, by advancing what are purported to be novel theoretical breakthroughs or announcing that they have ‘transcended’ some stubborn, unyielding problem (such as ‘structure and agency’, as bearers of different properties and powers, or ‘subjectivity and objectivity’, as indispensable for explanation but incommensurate). Frequently this takes the banal form that I term ‘Beyondism’ (coined and ridiculed by Bertrand Russell), because everything is in some sense beyond something else, including the Big Bang.

One of the most irritating is the supposed advent of new ‘turns’. When confronted with yet another last summer, I asked my Research Fellow how many he had encountered. Obligingly he told me that he had listed them and his total was 48. In the next 2 weeks, I added two more, bringing us up to 50. Since such ‘turns’ imply theoretical advances and not merely that particular empirical phenomena acquire sudden popularity, it seems to me that these generally entail one of the following fallacies in theorizing.

¹⁵ John Searle, (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*, London, Penguin, pp. 127–147.

¹⁶ Peter T. Manicas, *A Realist Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006. ‘[P]ersons are the dominant causal agents in society – even while, of course, they work with materials at hand’. p. 75.

¹⁷ For a discussion of ‘what I have termed ‘central conflation’, see my *Culture and Agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, chs. 2, 3 and 4. Also *Realist Social Theory*: Ibid., Chs. 3 and 4.

First, they assign automatic causal prominence to some otherwise uncontroversial social feature, a manoeuvre that may well traduce SAC (as the ‘cultural turn’ either dismissed structure or conflated it with culture). Conflation is always mistaken if it conceals real differences in properties and powers, as in that case. Elements of the ideational cultural corpus can be shared without loss of value,¹⁸ unlike structural properties dependent upon the division of society’s scarce material resources. Scarcity can only be characteristic of things ideational if it is artificially imposed (through, for example ‘intellectual property rights’ or patents or the deliberate withholding of education from certain groups).

Second, what assures any factor or feature of necessary dominance in the social order? ‘Discourse’ can indeed exert causal powers (note the replacement of ‘gender’ for ‘sex’ in United Nations documents and most media broadcasting). Usually, again, the answer is only conflation – as in ‘knowledge constitutive interests’ or the ‘power-knowledge’ amalgam. Their components do indeed exist but eliding them conceptually does not explain how they came to be conjoined. Certainly, the material basis of many interests encourages their bearers to scour the cultural archive for legitimatory resources, but it does not account for what ideas have been lodged there or which are selected from that array nor allow for human fallibility. Moreover, their elision occludes what was once usefully called ‘ideological conflict’ – useful because it retained the nexus between ‘interests’ and the ‘ideas’ deployed in the attempt to legitimate them in defensive or assertive action.

Third, some are simply tautological at best and imply a degenerative research paradigm at worst (as in the so-called ‘relational turn’ and its manifesto). What, a Realist would ask, is not relational? It is interesting and revealing simply to count the number of times that Bhaskar underlined how many of his key terms (in Chapter 2 ‘Societies’ of *The Possibility of Naturalism*) were qualified as ‘relational’. But to him, ‘relationality’ denoted real relations whose interplay generated emergent properties. This is light years from Emirbayer’s¹⁹ use of the term – as an emergence denier – where the link between human relations and social change (or stability) merely points to an endless list of indeterminate ‘transactions’ without the most basic specification of the conditions under which a ‘transaction’ was likely to be successful, on whose part and to what end. For this reason, when Pierpaolo Donati and I co-authored *The Relational Subject* (2015),²⁰ we distinguished ourselves from

¹⁸ As Thomas Jefferson put it “If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of everybody...Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.” (August 13th 1813 Letter to Isaac McPherson). http://presspubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_8_8s12.html

¹⁹ M. Emirbayer, (1997) ‘Manifesto for a Relational Sociology’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 103.

²⁰ Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret S. Archer, (2015), *The Relational Subject*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

‘relationism’ and insisted on our being ‘relational realists’, basing our whole argument upon properties and powers emergent from relationality.

Overall, it seems to me that alongside the above attempts to substitute these forms of ‘central conflation’ for Realist efforts to reclaim reality, there is a generalized move to reinstate epistemology over ontology, one whose philosophical implications are often not appreciated by their exponents. It is revealing to examine the list of contents of social science Journals or just to glance at the list of staff seminars offered in any semester, since both give persuasive evidence of the pervasiveness of dealing with ‘representations’ rather than tackling reality itself. Undoubtedly, this is easier and also complements the preference for visual media over written sources (with the average hours given to television viewing in the EU now approaching those of the working week). Imagery can be influential, but only if it is never forgotten that these are images of something real and react back upon it. Insisting to young women that Size 0 pictured an ideal body-image was eventually accepted by many fashion houses as objectively damaging to the health of female teenagers by contributing to anorexia and bulimia.

These are symptoms of epistemology regaining ground but, if I am correct, they also work in combination with real changes in academia and augment negative consequences for the social sciences. Entry to the profession has itself become vastly more competitive as more graduates with (ever) better first degrees enter into an objective contest with one another to continue in academic life. One laudable but defensive consequence is that they appear to act supportively and non-adversarially towards one another. It is rare in the seminars I regularly run in various countries to find participants challenging the views of their peers. Since the unveiled objective competition continues in the probationary years of those succeeding in gaining a university post, so this contradiction persists. Because they know the rules of the game (for example, the importance of citations), it is not infrequent to encounter articles in which sentences are almost unreadable given the number of brackets opened to reference the work of their peers.

Superficially, this appears charitable but I believe it has a very negative unintended consequence. Argument is out and assertion is in. Yet argument is indispensable in Critical Realism. In a nutshell it is central to its ‘third pillar’ – the exercise of Judgemental Rationality. Since we have no direct access to the ‘real’ in any domain then reality cannot arbitrate on our theoretical propositions. Hence we are condemned to live with the most convincing contender at any given time and the arbitrator between competing claims is the strength of one argument against others.

9.2.1 The Effect of Anti-realistic Evasions in the Current Global Crisis

When the Berlin wall came down, Peter Berger rightly complained about the silence of the sociologists; mute in advance of it and remaining so after it in terms of retrodictive explanation. Exactly the same reproaches can be levelled at our discipline for their

responses to today's crises, which are of even greater import and magnitude. Amongst the reasons for this temerity are the tendencies presented in the last section.

Climate Change is an obvious illustration of tardiness. In 1986 a NASA sponsored report that first published the Bretherton model, the part played by social activities was confined to a small black box on the outer periphery. The implication was not that 'we humans had created this problem; so we must solve it' and neither did the general public in the developed world take it that way. More depressing was again the silence of the sociologists. The ISSC's bibliographical analysis revealed in 2013 that a mere 3 percent of items dealing with global environmental change had been produced by sociologists in the preceding 20 years. Credit goes to the ASA's Task Force on Sociology and Global Climate Change for the publication of *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives*, but we had to wait until 2015 for Dunlap and Brulle's excellent volume.

Timorousness marked the sociological response to the whole gamut of interrelated crises, stemming from the economic crisis of 2008, through the application of austerity measures, the growth of jihadism and the closely linked migrant crisis, to the ultra-right's resurgence with nationalism and xenophobia threatening the institutions of the Western world (the EU, NATO and democracy itself); each one a threat to world peace and exacerbating increases in both social and system mal-integration at the most macroscopic level.

If one played at empiricism for a moment, I would hazard that more articles appeared about the representational significance of 'the veil' for Muslim women than about the social origins of terrorism. If one turned phenomenologist for a minute, I would cite an experience in the Vatican *Sala Stampa* in 2015, when a journalist asked me what to do about the thousands of migrants (those who managed to land in Greece). My response, namely that we needed a consolidated European fund for relief because this was not Greece's problem and neither was Lampedusa the graveyard of the Mediterranean. This was treated as unworthy of serious consideration. If one looked to the heirs of the old-left, they were still riveted upon the patrimony of historic social protests in modern dress, such as the 'indignation' of the ephemeral 'Occupy' movements. For example, Castells' exhaustive treatment in 2012 of their national manifestations, also lacked any account of how these could engage and integrate non-activists in the developed world, let alone in 'the rest'. What was missed by taking this focus were the disgruntled stirrings of populism and that the ultra-right wing political parties were already beginning to harness them.

Did Critical Realism in tandem with the Morphogenetic Approach fare any better? In a generic sense, they did, meaning that owing to maintaining the distinction between structure, culture and agency and upholding SAC, some of us had consistently warned that when low system integration and low social integration coincided in time, this constituted the prime condition for explosive social change. Yet, we could not claim originality for that valuable proposition, which was first advanced by David Lockwood in 1964.²¹ However, expecting an explosion and detailing its fall-out are different things and in the latter we certainly failed and

²¹ David Lockwood, 'Social Integration and System Integration', in G.K. Zollschan and W.Hirsch (eds), *Explorations in Social Change*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, pp. 244–257.

continue to do so. That can neither be understood nor forgiven (*tout comprendre n'est pas tout pardonner*) by pleading the impossibility of prediction in the open system that is the current global social (dis)order. Some were hanging on to the hope that a robust Third Sector could moderate the excesses of Market and State; some remained assured about the eventual evolutionary victory of collaboration and cooperation; and all were convinced that although morphogenesis would predominate over morphostasis, this could take a variety of different forms – given variations in SAC components and constitution in different parts of the globe. In a precautionary sense, we could hardly fail to be wrong there!

Yet why were we so prudential or positively pusillanimous? In part, because we had been brought up on the founding fathers, most of whose concrete utopias and dystopias had been not been realized (revolution, re-integration, and secularisation). In part, given we were more than a century of academic specialization further on also meant that none could feel confident of commanding global mastery of that portion of the literature we could even read. In part too, because of a sedulous Eurocentrism, which glued most of us to our familiar social institutions and their transformation, led us to discount the relevance of populism in, say, Latino politics. But, above all, we, like most in the Western world, simply did not believe that a globally explosive conjuncture could bring the whole social order, as we knew it, to its knees.

These are all plausible and probably contributory factors. But for Critical Realists they remain excuses. Had we clung to our macroscopic generative mechanisms and had we seriously explored SAC on the global canvas our contribution would not need excusing. The redemption of our theoretical approach can only consist in how, realistically, we conceptualise putting the pieces of our broken world back together.

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