Introduction to Critical Realist Social Science

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The sociological perspective developed in this presentation is based upon my PhD dissertation. The following excerpt may assist interested readers in further understanding the perspective developed here. The excerpt does reference some concepts developed in other parts of the dissertation and as such may not be clear to readers unfamiliar with those concepts. In any case, however, I believe this material may be helpful in assisting readers to recall some of the points made in the presentation.

Critical realism (CR) is a philosophy of science developed by Roy Bhaskar. CR argues that scientific endeavors always assume that *the world must be a mind-independent reality (in this sense, it is realist), but that the mind-independent reality is mediated (but not determined) by human language and sociality (in this sense, it is critical)*. This generally entails commitment to three philosophical principles: 1) ontological realism, 2) epistemological relativism, and 3) judgmental rationalism (Wight, 2004). First, *ontological realism* is "the belief that the objects of scientific discourse exist independently of that discourse" (p. 202). CR distinguishes or decouples ontology from epistemology, that is, it distinguishes the objects one studies from how one knows what they know about those objects. CR recognizes the need to qualify this philosophical principle when it comes to social science given the fact that social objects are always concept-dependent. Yet we can say even of social scientific objects that they exist independent of our theories about them "even if once such theories are articulated they may well causally affect the objects they attempt to describe and explain" (p. 202). I appreciate how Regev (2002) articulates this: "Knowing that a phenomenon is a cultural construct does not diminish the reality of its existence" (p.253). While I have no reason to believe Regev formally prescribes to CR as a philosophical position, this is a very CR articulation of a commitment to ontological realism even in social science. "There were social objects long before there were departments of social science" (Wight, 2004, p. 202).

CR's second philosophical principle is *epistemological relativism*, which is "the claim that all epistemological claims are temporally and spatially located" (Wight, 2004, p. 202). CR's commitment to ontological realism is often interpreted as a kind of naïve realism which does not recognize the ways in which language constructs experience and interpretation of reality. But this second principle serves as a corrective to such naïve assumptions about a one-to-one correspondence between what is known and how it is known by humans. It recognize that "all epistemological discourses emerge in particular times and locales. As such, there is no means of providing an a priori privileging of any particular epistemological claim" (p. 202).

The third principle is *judgmental rationalism*. This principle follows importantly from the other two. Even though CR is committed to epistemological relativism, this is not to say that all epistemological claims are equally valid. We can judge between competing truth claims because what we claim to know about (i.e., ontology) has a separate and independent existence from our knowledge of it. In theory, some articulations of reality will be closer to it than others. Judgmental rationalism denies that all discourses are equally good, but not in the sense that some discourses therefore possess "absolute truth." Rather, CR views the relative merit of various judgements in terms of "epistemic gain":

> Truth claims are not assigned or denied the status of absolute truth in this process, but judged in terms of "epistemic gain", the movement from a problematic position to a more adequate one within a field of available alternatives…. What critical social science most needs is effective public spheres both to ground its critique and to put into place the open relationship between theory and social practice that it calls for. Epistemic gains, more adequate understandings of the social in service to emancipation, can arise from that process. This is especially significant in the late modern context of increasing social fragmentation and complexity…. In this process…[CR is not] in the business of "prescribing" alternative practices…but rather helping to clear the ground for those engaged within a social practice to seek the changes they want, by clarifying obstacles to change and possibilities for change. So, an appropriate metaphor for the role of contemporary intellectuals is that of "interpreters" (rather than "legislators")… "translating" between language games establishes links between practices and helps clarify problems and potentials for change. (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 34)

We are able to use reasons to adjudicate between competing theories about reality even while recognizing all discourse as socially contingent. "Although epistemic relativism must be accepted – that all discourses are socially constructed relative to the social positions people are in – this does not entail accepting judgmental relativism – that all discourses are equally good" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 8). Judgmental rationalism, on the other hand, distinguishes between good or bad constructions of reality in terms of their fit with reality (p. 136). The type of epistemological pronouncements needed to support an argument will differ "depending on the nature of the judgment under consideration and the nature of the object under study" (Wight, 2004, p. 202).

Having now elaborated the basic concepts in Bhaskar's CR philosophy of science, I can now turn attention to his application of those concepts in a robust CR social theory. Bhaskar works out the social scientific implications of his philosophy of science in his book *The possibility of naturalism* (1979/2005). The challenge here is the problem of naturalism in social science. How can we investigate social objects when we ourselves are social objects? This involves two issues. First, the goal of social science is to understand societies and peoples. This requires "that we must first know what kinds of things societies (and people) are before we can consider whether it is possible to study them scientifically" (Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p.14). Yet, second, social sciences

> deal with a pre-interpreted reality, a reality already brought under concepts by social actors, that is, a reality *already brought under the same kind of material in terms of which it is to be grasped* (which is the only possible medium of its intelligibility). So that…the human sciences stand…to their subject matter in a subject-subject (or concept-concept) relationship, rather than simply a subject-object (or concept-thing) one. (p.23)

Or, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) state the case

To include epistemological questions concerning the validity of sociological knowledge in the sociology of knowledge is somewhat like trying to push a bus in which one is riding. To be sure, the sociology of knowledge, like all empirical disciplines that accumulate evidence concerning the relativity and determination of human thought, leads towards epistemological questions concerning sociology itself as well as any other scientific body of knowledge…. In this the sociology of knowledge plays a part similar to history, psychology and biology, to mention only the three most important empirical disciplines that have caused trouble for epistemology. The logical structure of this trouble is basically the same in all cases: How can I be sure, say, of my sociological analysis of American middle-class mores in view of the fact that the categories I use for this analysis are conditioned by historically relative forms of thought, that I myself and everything I think is determined by my genes and by my ingrown hostility to my fellowmen, and that, to cap it all, I am myself a member of the American middle class? (p.25)

Social science has historically approached the problem of naturalism through two major philosophical families: positivism and constructionism. Positivism accepts the premise that natural law is discovered through simple observation unmediated by conceptual model building and envisions social science as the application of natural scientific methods to social and personal objects (most commonly in variable research and behaviorism (Smith, 2010)). Since our participation in social and personal affairs renders this view of social science unlikely, many social scientists tend to fall under the broad category of constructionism. Constructionism recognizes that social and personal objects are complex and always function in open environments which cannot be experimentally controlled in the same way as natural objects. It therefore denies the ability to discover real social and personal entities and focuses attention on subjective meanings.

Bhaskar points out, though, that both traditions tend to accept the basic premise of (philosophical) empiricism as characteristic of natural science. They fail to recognize that actual science does *not* operate on empiricism's philosophical premise that a constant conjunction of events is the necessary and sufficient condition for causal law. Bhaskar's insight at this point is that since science proceeds on the assumption that the real world, while apprehended by human subjectivity, is nonetheless verifiable through experimentation, social science need not choose between the positivist and constructionist extremes. Domains, stratification, emergence, and antireductionism are all relevant to social science. Social theories are not predictive since social objects operate in uncontrolled, open systems. But they have descriptive and explanatory power which may be useful for emancipatory purposes (by revealing false consciousness about oppressive narratives).

Bhaskar's social theory begins by asking what kind of things people and societies are, that is, it begins by asking ontological questions about people and societies before asking epistemological questions about how we can know about these entities (Collier, 1994, 1998). In other words, what is the relationship between psychology and sociology, between individual agency and social structure? "One of the central challenges in the social and psychological sciences at the present time is how to promote a theory of human agency while at the same time taking account of the impact of social structure"

(Houston, 2001, p.849). Given the principle "the nature of the object determines the form of its possible science" (Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p.3), CR must begin here, by understanding the nature of psychological and social objects and their relationship.

CR sees people and societies as ontologically distinct, but mutually dependent, entities. So we begin with the recognition that social and human sciences are distinct but related disciplines. My focus here is primarily on the nature of society and its relationship to human agents. Readers interested in a more in-depth CR psychology may consult Smith (2010, 2015). At this point, however, I focus primarily on the question of what society is.

For CR, society is not primarily a collection of people (individualism) or even groups (collectivism). Both individualism and collectivism hold to the idea "that facts about societies, and social phenomena generally, are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals" (Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 29), whether individual people or groups. Rather, CR (like Marx) adopts a relational conception of society.

Sociology is not concerned, as such, with large-scale, mass or group behavior (conceived as the behavior of large numbers, masses or groups of individuals). Rather it is concerned, at least paradigmatically, with the persistent *relations* between individuals (and groups), and with the relations between these relations (and between such relations and nature and the products of such relations). In the simplest case its subject-matter may be exemplified by such relations as between capitalist and worker, MP and constituent, student and teacher, husband and wife (Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 31).

A relational conception of society therefore focuses on the relationships within society. A husband is only a husband in relationship to a wife, a student is a student in relationship to a teacher, a worker is a worker in relationship to an employer, etc. Sociology is concerned with examining those relationships and with how those relationship interact with other relationships such that the "latticework of relations constitutes the structure of 'society'" (Collier, 1994, p. 140).

If people and societies are ontologically distinct but mutually dependent, "we need to know how these two kinds of being (social and personal being), of which neither can exist without the other, can be governed by two kinds of law, and how these different laws are themselves related" (Collier, 1994, p. 141). This is a key question for both the psychological and social sciences, one which has been perpetually contemplated by sociologists in particular. Bhaskar put forward a model of the relationship between social and personal being which he calls a "transformational model of social activity" (Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 27). He sets forth this model in distinction from three other social models which I will refer to as the constructivist, structuralist, and dialectical models. Bhaskar himself uses different terms for the first two, but I use these terms to maintain consistency with a related component in my discussion about critical discourse analysis. The important thing to note here is that the three alternative models discussed below each account for some facts and are embarrassed by other facts related to social and personal being.

The first model might be associated with individualism or humanism. I am calling this model the constructivist model. Bhaskar calls it "the Weberian stereotype" or "voluntarism". It is based on social explanation which "sees human agency as

everything" (Collier, 1994, p. 141). The constructivist model can be visualized as follows (adapted from Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 34).

Society

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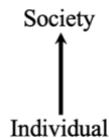
Individual

The image visualizes individual human actors as generating society, constraining the structure society takes through individual and group agency. The model recognizes that there are no social structures apart from the human people and groups who create them. Social structures do not engage in conscious activities. Any time society appears to be moving in a direction or demonstrating a trend, it is the human actors involved who are responsible for that activity.

The second model might be associated with collectivism. I am calling this model the structuralism model. Bhaskar calls it "the Durkheimian stereotype" or "reification." It is based on social explanation which "sees social structure as everything" (Collier, 1994, p. 141). The structuralist model can be visualized as follows (adapted from Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 34).

Society

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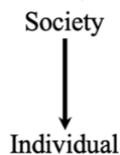
Individual

The image visualizes social structures as generating individuals and groups, constraining individuals within the parameters of their social location. The model recognizes that what happens in society happens because social structures are what they are. The different roles individual actors play in society are a function of social structures, not the individuals who inhabit them.

> And this is not just a matter of enabling conditions; the social position one occupies largely *determines* what one does: a worker must work, a seller must sell. And the social structure largely determines the developmental tendencies of that society…. In general, facts about human agency don't tell you why people do different things from one epoch to another, while facts about social structures which differentiate those epochs do. (Collier, 1994, p. 142)

The first two models both account for some facts while neglecting others. The constructivist model attributes everything that happens in society to human agency and focuses attention on activity, motivation, deliberation, etc. of individual actors or, perhaps, groups. Social structures, if they are acknowledged at all, appear as unreal and unnecessary constraints to human decision making. There are actions, but no conditions on those actions. The structuralist model, on the other hand, attributes everything that happens in society to structures and processes. Human agency becomes unimportant for social explanation as it is merely an effect of the structure. The structuralist model may even view human agency as an epiphenomenon of the structure, with any consciousness of human agency being an illusion which serves the purposes of moving the structure forward. There are conditions, but not actions.

Since both models account for some facts while neglecting others, we need an approach which accounts for both. The dialectical model is a third approach which Bhaskar attributes to Peter Berger. Berger and Luckmann (1966) themselves would probably embrace this attribution given the fact that their social theory is an application of "Durkheim…though [they] have modified the Durkheimian theory of society by the introduction of a dialectical perspective derived from Marx and an emphasis on the constitution of social reality through subjective meanings derived from Weber" (p. 28-9). They clearly see their approach as a mediating position:

> Durkheim tells us: "The first and most fundamental rule is: Consider social facts as things." And Weber observes: "Both for sociology in the present sense, and for history, the object of cognition is the subjective meaning-complex of action." These two statements are not contradictory. Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning. And, incidentally, Durkheim knew the latter, just as Weber knew the former. It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity and subjective meaning that makes its 'reality *sui generis*', to use another key term of Durkheim's. The central question for sociological theory can then be put as follows: How is it possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities? (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.30)

The dialectical model can be visualized as follows (adapted from Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 35).

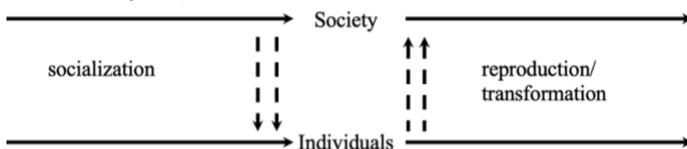Society   Society

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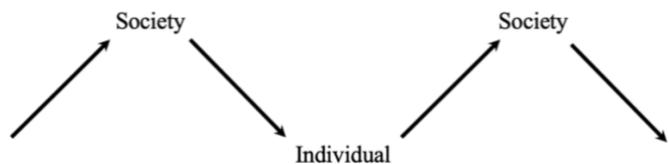
Individual

This image visualizes a dialectical process wherein society pre-exists and constrains individual actors who in turn recreate and modify society. This model sees a relationship between human agency and social structures wherein human agency creates social structures which in turn impose conditions for human agency. The process begins with the fact that one of the ways in which humans negotiate daily problems is through a "stock of knowledge" which includes "recipes for the mastery of routine problems" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 57). Pragmatically, once a person has developed the necessary knowledge to address a routine problem, they do not need to relearn new ways to address that problem when they encounter it again. What is more, as social animals, people learn to address problems by seeing other people address the same or similar problems. This continues over time as new generations adopt and transform behaviors. Through a process of habitualization, human behaviors are repeated for efficiency to the point that those behaviors become institutions which constrain human behavior. New generations are constrained by the institutions into which they are socialized, but also transform those institutions in subtle or dramatic ways such that the institutions are altered in subsequent generations. Bhaskar's image of the dialectical model appears to nicely capture this process, as does the following quote:

> The objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity…. The institutional world is objectivated human activity, and so is every single institution. In other words, despite the objectivity that marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby acquire an

ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it. [This is] the paradox that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product…. It is important to emphasize that the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one. That is, man (not, of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the producer. Externalization and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process…. *Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*…. An analysis of the social world that leaves out any one of these three moments will be distortive. One may further add that only with the transmission of the social world to a new generation (that is, internalization as effectuated in socialization) does the fundamental social dialectic appear in its totality. To repeat, only with the appearance of a new generation can one properly speak of a social world. (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.78-9)

In many ways, the dialectical models seems to capture what is important from both the constructivist and structuralist models. But Bhaskar questions the linear nature of this account. While it is true that society makes people and people make society, they do so in different ways (Collier, 1994). Baskar is concerned here that while the constructivist model does not take society seriously and the structuralist model does not take human agency seriously, the dialectical model conflates the two and thus fails to distinguish between the different ontological status' of each. "People and society are not…related 'dialectically'. They do not constitute two moments of the same process. Rather they refer to radically different kinds of thing" (Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 36). Individuals and societies are not part of a single social/psychological process, but are distinct and separate entities with properties and generative mechanisms of their own. "The total social process is not a single linear sequence of causes (some social, some individual), but rather the interaction of two distinct kinds of entity, societies and people" (Collier, 1994, p. 145).

The optimal social theory will therefore incorporate an interaction between two distinct entities with their own properties and methods of investigation which are, simultaneously, mutually dependent. This is the approach which Bhaskar seems to capture in his transformational model of social activity (TMSA). The TMSA can be visualized as follows (adapted from Bhaskar, 1979/2005, p. 40).

The image visualizes two analytically distinct but "mutually ontologically dependent" (Collier, 1994, p.145) entities. Society imposes itself upon individuals in a constant socialization process compelling the parameters of possibility for individual action. Individuals, however, reproduce or transform society through their actions. Individual agency creates social structure, while social structure constrains the parameters of individual agency. Both actions and conditions of action are fully realized in a simultaneous moment of mutual dependency. Individuals do not create society but are rather confronted by society which imposes itself upon them through socialization. At the same time, society

does not exist apart from individuals who moment by moment recreate or transform social structures. There is no society without individuals and no individuals apart from society. To borrow Berger and Luckmann's way of stating the case, "man's specific humanity and his sociality are inextricably intertwined. *Homo sapiens* is always, and in the same measure, *homo socius*" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 69). But these two entities are distinct objects of inquiry with methodological approaches to understanding them consistent with their nature.

The concept of emergence helps to illuminate how people and society can be analytically separate but mutually dependent. Society is an emergent entity distinct from, dependent on, and formative of individuals. At the same time, human beings cannot be understood apart from the social environments of which they are a part, environments which are themselves emergent structures both ordering and ordered by humans. People "are radically dependent upon the social for their existential *development* and flourishing, but persons are *not* dependent on the social for their *ontological* personal being" (Smith, 2015, p.11). The one is understood best through psychological investigation informed by the insights of sociological theory and the other through sociological investigation informed by the insights of psychological theory. This is theoretical justification for studying people and society as distinct but mutually dependent entities.

These are difficult and complicated issues. One the one hand, culture and sociality are the product of human persons, a product of human thought and intentionality and existentiality. On the other hand, society has independent existence apart from the thoughts and intentions of any human person or group of persons. There is no such thing as society apart from the human persons from which it emerges. At the same time, society is a separate, emergent entity with powers to impose itself upon all those human persons from which it emerges. It is a product of human thought that simultaneously constrains human thought. It is a product of human intentionality and volition which in turn constrains the possibilities of human behavior. It is a product of human love and pleasure which in turn defines and imposes parameters on what constitutes love and pleasure as well as how they are experienced and by whom. Bhaskar's point about the dialectic approach is that these things do not function in a linear fashion but are simultaneously produced by human persons and produce human persons.

While Bhaskar's discussion provides an extremely esoteric, technical language for articulating a reality which is difficult to hold in our thoughts and practically impossible to discuss with language. As such, it is valuable. But it is also very esoteric and difficult to grasp apart from extensive study and a technical vocabulary. It is interesting that everyone has a personal, vested interest in the dynamics of the relationship between human persons (in that we are all persons, whatever that is) and human society (in that it is emergent from and essential to personhood yet something different than personhood). It is difficult to speak clearly about that relationship, but CR helps to do so a little more clearly.

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