

Jeroen Van Bouwel
Ghent University
jeroen.vanbouwel@ugent.be

The devision of labour in the social sciences versus the politics of metaphysics
Questioning critical realism's interdisciplinarity

Abstract

Some scholars claim that Critical Realism promises well for the unification of the social sciences, e.g., Unifying social science: A critical realist approach in this volume. I will first show briefly how Critical Realism might unify social science. Secondly, I focus on the relation between the ontology and methodology of Critical Realism, and unveil the politics of metaphysics. Subsequently, it is argued that the division of labour between social scientific disciplines should not be metaphysics-driven, but rather question-driven. In conclusion, I will therefore defend a question-driven pluralism as a guide for interdisciplinarity.

1. Unifying social science from a critical realist perspective

The Critical Realist perspective was born out of a vigorous critique on the positivist conception of science. It pleads for the reorientation of social science, unveiling the *epistemic fallacy* committed by positivists. This is the fallacy that transposes what is an ontological matter into an epistemological matter; a failure to adequately sustain the distinction between ontology and epistemology, resulting in the relative neglect of ontology. The *positivist* social scientist analyses statements about being solely in terms of statements about knowledge, and thus reduce ontology to epistemology. Therefore, as a reaction to this neglect, it is 'opportune to develop a perspective on the way that social reality is' (Lawson 1997, 154).

Hence, after the unveiling of the epistemic fallacy, the focus should be replaced on ontology. Central in the focus on social ontology, then, figures the transcendental argument for social structures, elaborated by Roy Bhaskar. He derives an account of a metaphysics of science by enquiring what the world must be like before it is investigated by science, and for scientific activities to be possible. Bhaskar's transcendental realism defends the existence of social structures and society as follows:

'(...) conscious human activity, consists in work on *given* objects and cannot be conceived as occurring in their absence. A moment's reflection shows why this must be so. For all activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms. Thus consider *saying*, *making* and *doing* as characteristic modalities of human agency. People cannot communicate except by utilizing existing media, produce except by applying themselves to materials which are already formed, or act save in some other context. Speech requires language; making materials; actions conditions; agency resources; activity rules. Even spontaneity has as its necessary condition the pre-existence of a social form with (or by means of) which the spontaneous act is performed. Thus if [as previously argued] the social cannot be reduced to (and is not the product of) the individual, it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all' (Bhaskar 1979, 34).

This argument is used to establish that 'the social cannot be reduced to (and is not the product of) the individual, it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all' (Bhaskar 1979, 34). Bhaskar had formulated an argument about underlying mechanisms and structures in the *natural* sciences as well. This argument could, however, not be directly transferred from the natural sciences (in which scientists are able to acquire knowledge of underlying mechanisms at work via experimentation) to the social realm; some substantial modifications were necessary, as experimentation in social sciences is rare. So the 'proof' of the existence of structures in the social realm provided by the transcendental argument for social structure, is not analogous to the argument from experiments in the natural sciences. The argument from experiments starts from a widely accepted and successful practice (or method of investigation), while the argument for social structures starts from a (folk) social theory.

Nevertheless, Bhaskar's ontological framework (including, e.g., the *Transformation Model of Social Activity*) becomes a distinctive feature of the Critical Realist contributions to social science. Using a common (unified) ontological view of social reality across the different social sciences, the Critical Realist contributions promise the unification of the social sciences.¹ The growing amount of social scientific literature employing Critical Realism, e.g., the work of Margaret Archer in sociology, Tony Lawson in economics, Heikki Patomäki in political science, etc., might strengthen Critical Realists in their conviction that social science moves towards unification and its optimal state. I will, however, argue in this article that a unification using Critical Realism would lead the social sciences to a suboptimal state.

2. The politics of metaphysics

The Critical Realist unification starts with Bhaskar's *a priori* or necessary truth concerning social ontology based on a (questionable) transcendental argument; the existence of social structures is based on a transcendental derivation as quoted above (rather than on a careful mix of observation and induction, starting from empirical research and taking into account social scientific practice).² I do not want to argue that social structures (or other ontological aspects of the Critical Realist's stance) do not exist, but that the way it has been defended by Bhaskar and Critical Realism in general, is problematic, just as it has been problematic in earlier attempts to impose preconceived ontological ideas in the (philosophy of the) social sciences (e.g., Watkins 1973). The attempt to justify the claim that the world has indeed the form argued for in transcendental realism does not convince (or, better, does not convince me more than other stands in the unending battle of metaphysical intuitions we experience in the philosophy of the social sciences). Moreover, as the ontological choice made by Critical

¹ This point was, i.a., made by Christopher Lloyd (1993, 1995) and another version of it can be found in this volume, in the paper *Unifying Social Science: A Critical Realist Approach*.

² Bhaskar's transcendental argument has been criticized by, i.a., Boylan & O'Gorman 1995; Cottrell 1998; Parsons 1999.

Realism does have an impact on methodological options, I want to warn for an *ontological fallacy*: taking an *a priori* ontological stance that transposes or reduces epistemological and methodological matters into an ontological matter. Analogous to the *epistemic fallacy* it points at a failure to sustain adequately the distinction between ontology and epistemology, that is, a failure to deal with both ontology and epistemology in a non-reductive way.³

Whichever starting point we prefer in studying the social world, we will always adopt some ontological assumptions (it is unavoidable and necessary). With Critical Realist applications however, the ontological assumptions are 'proven' to be true *a priori*, and this raises serious doubts on whether they will at all be revised.⁴ Secondly, starting from the Critical Realist ontology has some methodological consequences that are insufficiently spelled out. The methodological consequences of Critical Realist's ontology seem to follow 'automatically', and hence do not have to be spelled out. There is a lack of attention paid to the form of explanations and to methodology in general. Margaret Archer (1995, 159), for instance, couples her ontological realism with a methodological realism, but does hardly develop this last one.

If one is convinced that the relation between the individual and the structure is correctly described by (a version of) the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA), one will not consider explanatory theories that are not in line with TMSA, e.g., Rational Choice Theory, but that might provide good (and better) answers to *some* explanation-seeking questions. These answers would be considered (at least) incomplete by Critical Realists. Due to Critical Realism's lack of reflection on the usefulness of different forms of explanation in the social sciences and on pragmatic aspects of explanation, good and useful explanatory information will be lost (cf. Van Bouwel 2004a; Weber & Van

³ Wade Hands (1999, 181) has been pointing at the risk of an *ontological fallacy* as well.

⁴ If so, who decides, when and how to do that? Diachronic, 'uncoordinated' revisions (in the different fields) might undermine the unification, which is based on a common ontological framework.

Bouwel 2002).⁵ The focus is on ontology (and their convictions of how the social world *really* is), at the expense of methodology.⁶ One should be wary of the heavy metaphysical furniture imposed by Critical Realism, and of its *politics of metaphysics*.

3. The division of labour in the social sciences

Discussing the possible ways to divide labour in the social sciences, many terms have been introduced: interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinarity, unidisciplinarity, postdisciplinarity, cross-disciplinarity, non-disciplinarity, mono-disciplinarity, etc., and terms to characterize the power balances: imperialism, colonialism, isolation, integration, etc. The central problems to be solved are - given the plurality we find in the explanatory practice of social scientists: **(a)** to what degree should we integrate the plurality of theories, methodologies and forms of explanation; **(b)** what is the purpose of integration or what drives the integration?

Starting with the latter question **(b)**, the integration can be theory-, method- or problem-driven (cf. Shapiro 2002), or, I would like to add, metaphysics-driven. A good example of a theory- and method-driven integration is the so-called *economics imperialism*, which tries to unify the social sciences based on neo-classical economics and applying rational choice theory. Another theory-driven unificationist project is Wallerstein's *world-systems analysis* (grouped around the concept of *historical system*, cf. Wallerstein 1991). Critical Realism is an example of metaphysics-driven unification (driven by the politics of metaphysics). I have been defending that the integration of the social sciences should be

⁵ I do have to mention, however, that Tony Lawson (1999) does recognize that the context and explanatory questions at hand do affect the explanatory practice, but he considers it as a second-order issue and does not acknowledge the consequences these pragmatic factors might have on the form of explanation, as I argue in Van Bouwel (2004b). In the same article, I show how the Critical Realists' *discours* (about how they want CR to be) does not always fit with the positions they actually defend.

⁶ I do not claim that they do not pay attention to methodological issues at all, but that the arguments formulated against other theoretical perspectives, start from ontology. E.g., Tony Lawson (2003, 21) in his critique of *mainstream* economics states explicitly: 'My argument is ontological. I do emphasise this.'

problem- or question-driven (e.g., Van Bouwel 2004a), aiming at efficiently answering (explanation-seeking) questions.

Answering the first question (**a**), then, i.e. to what degree should we integrate the social sciences, can be done by stressing the need for unification (and a form of unidisciplinarity), or by cherishing plurality. The question-driven approach opts for the second, but is, nevertheless, critical to the current disciplinary division of the social sciences. It does encourage us to cross -or institutionally dismantle- disciplinary borders in order to find the best answer to an explanation-seeking question. Rather than driven towards unification, it is driven by a quest for the best answer, maximally using (and comparing) the plurality of theories, methodologies and forms of explanation present in social scientific practice. Hence, it cherishes plurality and claims that pluralism is optimal for the social sciences as the different forms of explanations, theories and methodologies provide us with different kinds of useful explanatory information; depending on your motivation or knowledge-interest, one of these different kinds of explanatory information is the most apt.⁷ Defending a theory-, method- or metaphysics-driven unification (like Critical Realism) would imply that some (useful) forms of explanation would be lost, and wanted kinds of explanatory information would become unavailable to us, hence some explanation-seeking questions would not, or inefficiently, be addressed.

4. Conclusion: Question-driven pluralism guiding interdisciplinarity

Unifying social science under the banner of the *a priori* Critical Realist ontology (and its methodological implications) does not seem the right way to overcome the intellectual division of labour in studying the social world. Its politics of metaphysics does not take into account the plurality of knowledge-interests (and the difference these imply in the explanatory information that is required), neither the plurality of existing forms of

⁷ We have defended this point in a more detailed and technical manner, in: Van Bouwel & Weber (2002), and Weber & Van Bouwel (2002). In these articles we make the idea of 'best answer or best explanation' more explicit and elaborate a framework for explanatory pluralism.

research and explanation in the social sciences. Useful explanatory information would get lost if the social sciences were unified in a Critical Realist framework.⁸

As an alternative, I have sketched a *question-driven interdisciplinarity* that will make maximal use of the plurality of existing forms of explanations and theories in different disciplines (depending on the question at hand) and cherish explanatory pluralism, rather than following an imposed (a priori) ontological framework which narrows down the use of existing forms of explanations and replaces it for an all too demanding standard of explanation, neglecting the impact of knowledge-interests and pragmatics. The dialogue and interaction between disciplines is then driven by the questions and problems at hand, not by the need to 'prove' that one's convictions concerning metaphysics, theory or method are superior (in all situations) and should be the basis for unification.

References

- Archer, Margaret (1995) *Realist Social Theory: the Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhaskar, Roy (1979) *The possibility of naturalism*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Boylan, Thomas A. & Paschal F. O'Gorman (1995) *Beyond rhetoric & realism in economics: Towards a reformulation of economic methodology*. London: Routledge.
- Cottrell, Allin (1998) 'Realism, Regularities, and Prediction.' *Review of Social Economy*, LVI (3): pp. 347-355.
- Fleetwood, Steve (ed.) (1999) *Critical Realism in Economics: Development and Debate*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Useful explanatory information that gets lost, is, e.g., the information obtained from explanations formulated in the Covering Law Model (CLM). This form of explanation provides us with specific explanatory information needed in order to answer *some* explanation-seeking questions in the best possible way (Weber & Van Bouwel, forthcoming). CLM is, however, not embraced by Critical Realists, e.g., Lawson (2003, 143): 'the reliance on "deductivist" explanation/prediction (...) is an error', and Lawson (1997, 36): 'we must embrace a very different conception of explanation to the deductivist covering-law model.' See, as well, Lawson (1997, 16-17).

- Hands, D. Wade (1999) 'Empirical realism as meta-method: Tony Lawson on neoclassical economics.' In: Steve Fleetwood (ed.) pp. 169-185.
- Lawson, Tony (1997) *Economics & Reality*. London: Routledge.
- Lawson, Tony (1999) 'Critical issues in economics as realist social theory.' In: Fleetwood (ed.) pp.209-257.
- Lawson, Tony (2003) *Reorienting economics*. London: Routledge.
- Lloyd, Christopher (1993) *The structures of history*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Parsons, Stephen (1999) 'Why the "transcendental" in transcendental realism?' In: Fleetwood (ed.) pp.151-168.
- Patomäki, Heikki (2002) *After international relations: Critical realism and the (re)construction of world politics*. London: Routledge.
- Shapiro, Ian (2002) 'Problems, methods, and theories in the study of politics: Or what's wrong with political science and what to do about it.' *Political Theory*, 30 (4): pp. 596-619.
- Van Bouwel, Jeroen (2004a) 'Questioning structurism as a new standard for social scientific explanations.' *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 1 (2): pp. 204-226.
- Van Bouwel, Jeroen (2004b) 'Explanatory pluralism in economics: Against the mainstream?' *Philosophical Explorations*, 7 (3): pp. 299-315.
- Van Bouwel, Jeroen & Erik Weber (2002a) 'Remote Causes, Bad Explanations?' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 32 (4): pp. 437-449.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel (1991) *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Watkins, John (1973) 'Methodological individualism: A reply.' In: John O'Neill (ed.) *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*. London: Heinemann, pp. 179-184.
- Weber, Erik & Jeroen van Bouwel (2002) 'Can we dispense with structural explanations of social facts?' *Economics & Philosophy*, 18: pp. 259-275.
- Weber, Erik & Jeroen van Bouwel (forthcoming) 'Assessing the explanatory power of causal explanations.' In: Petri Ylikoski & Johannes Persson (eds.) *Rethinking Explanation: Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*.