

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Jon Frauley and Frank Pearce**, eds., *Critical Realism and the Social Sciences: Heterodox Elaborations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 336 pp., \$65.00 hardcover (0-80209-215-2).

All the essays in this very useful collection display a high level of textual knowledge and analysis. Taken together they range across a broad range of topics of interest to both philosophers and social scientists. As the editors note, the essays can be grouped into four categories. The first set (Chapters 1–4), by the editors, Frank Pearce, Sergio Sismondo, and Garry Potter “outline and assess the crucial elements of the critical realist position” (p. 21). Although critical realism has other sources, for example, the work of Rom Harré, their attention is almost exclusively on Roy Bhaskar’s version. Both those who are and those who are not familiar with Bhaskar’s work will learn a good deal from these essays. Pearce pursues criticisms of Bhaskar’s version of social structure by Benton and Archer’s interventions on Bhaskar’s behalf, but given the date of publication, he was unable to consider more recent developments on this hotly contested topic.<sup>1</sup> Pearce aims to go beyond Bhaskar by drawing on “realist” insights of Durkheim. There are many tensions in Durkheim, to be sure, but might one argue that Bhaskar and other realists would find this to be a backward step? Sismondo’s essay is straight-out epistemology. To three broad categories regarding the nature of truth — realism, instrumentalism, and constructivism — he offers a fourth, deflationism, which denies that we can have a substantial theory of truth. His conclusion is a surprise, but not necessarily ill-placed in this volume: “to the extent that critical realism adopts a monolithic realism, it is adopting an ideological position that obscures other ways that truth operates. We should instead make room for realism and anti-realism” (p. 73). Perhaps all that is necessary is that the realist understanding of “true” is essential to science, or it might strike one as having one’s cake and eating it too. Some readers may not know that Bhaskar has most recently taken a

1. See Manicas, *A Realist Philosophy of Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Two recent issues of the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* (37[2 and 4]) 2007 provide an excellent overview of the current state of the debate. Nearly all the key writers and key texts are referenced therein. For Harré, see the Symposium on Rom Harré and *Social Structure* in *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(1) 2002.

turn to religion. For him (and those now following him) atheism is not the default position of a realism. Indeed, he suggests that it provides a ground for theistic belief. Finally, Potter finds serious “logical slippages in the argumentative chain,” and points to some serious dangers in this development for the critical realist project. Given the troubled state of our world, one could go further.

The second group of essays (Chapters 5–8), by Anthony Woodiwiss, Richard Day, Raymond Murphy, and Jose López “strive to show the ways in which realism(s) can be deployed to strengthen or supplement sociological inquiry” (p. 22). Woodiwiss is worried about an intellectual climate “wherein talking and writing about theory has come to be regarded as an adequate substitute for engaging in research and making theory” (p. 98). He includes here Derrida, the “standpoint epistemology” of much feminist theory, and remarkably, “today’s justly pre-eminent realist social philosopher, Roy Bhaskar” (p. 98). Woodiwiss argues that reflexivity, properly understood, is an essential moment in all inquiry. Instead of pursuing this, he provides a genealogy of the “discursive formation” of the current “solipsistic variant of reflexivity” (p. 101). Day also engages Foucault in arguing that critical realism’s conception of poststructuralist theory is “a straw figure” (p. 117). While acknowledging some serious interpretative issues, especially as regards the status of the “non-discursive,” Day aims to show that there is at least a latent realism in Foucault, and even in Lacan, Deleuze, and Guattari.

Murphy argues that for too many writers, “‘the social construction of nature’ reduces nature to discourse about it and obscures the effects of the autonomous dynamics of nature” (p. 143). He cites a good many useful analyses and offers that Latour provides critical tools for rethinking of the counterproductive culture/nature divide. One might put Sayer’s essay (Chapter 12) along side Murphy as arguing for another neglected aspect of this divide. He argues for “a qualified form of naturalism” reminiscent of Marx. A problem is the absence of a philosophical anthropology which recognizes features of humans which, as biologically rooted, are universal. Just as social constructionism has obscured the dynamics of nature, postmodern thought in particular has ignored the species-specific features of humans which are the basis of understanding both suffering and flourishing.

As with Sayer, the overemphasis of the cognitive is the complaint of López. It is one of the consequences of realist philosophy of social science that it is inherently emancipating: discovering that beliefs which are essential to the reproduction of a practice are false gives one good reason to try to alter that practice. López insists, however, that “the emancipatory model, developed thus far by critical realists, fails to address the

complex social processes involved in mobilizing social scientific knowledge to produce social change” (p. 162). This is, to be sure, a critical problem which remains unsolved. Foucault is advanced as contributing “decisively to making knowledge infra-structures theoretically and empirically available” (p. 167). On the other hand, no realist, it seems, would hold that having true beliefs about one’s social situation is sufficient to generate a politics.

The third set (Chapters 9–12), by Robert Albritton, Howard Engelskirchen, Hans Ehrbar, and Andrew Sayer aims to show how Marx, if properly understood, not only anticipated critical realism but can be deployed to reinforce critical realist philosophy of science. These chapters are not easy going, even with some modest knowledge of Marx’s *Capital*. All cut deep into the foundations of Marx’s theory. Albritton argues that “the self-reifying properties of capital give it a unique ontology” (p. 182). “This ontology ... enables us to achieve ‘complete’ objectivity at the level of the theory of capital’s ‘generative mechanism.’” But since more than the inner logic of capital is going on, “at more concrete levels of analysis only a degree of objectivity is possible.” The use of “objectivity” here is a bit puzzling, but one senses that more is at stake. Drawing on Aristotle and Richard Boyd’s defense of “social kinds,” Engelskirchen aims to provide a deeper response to Marx’s insistence that “Ricardo had not asked why labour takes the form of value in the first place” (p. 203). His complex argument seeks to show that “we may characterize the form of social labour that produces commodities as a natural kind and offer a real definition of it” (p. 202). If he is correct, the account enriches our understanding of the key role of value in Marxian political economy. Ehrbar shares some concerns with Engelskirchen, but it is not clear whether they would be in agreement on the central issue of value. Ehrbar also argues that the commodity was the correct choice for Marx’s starting point and that “Capital is a thoroughly dialectical work” even if “an untrained reader may not even notice it” (p. 233). For Ehrbar, Bhaskar’s notion of “sigma-transforms” provides the key.

Chapters 13–15, by Jon Frauly, Ronjon Paul Datta, and the collaboration of Howie Chodos, Bruce Curtis, Alan Hunt, and John Manwaring give a fresh reassessment of the relation of Foucault and Gadamer to critical realism. Both are seen to be much closer to a realist position than is generally noticed. For many readers, at least, the final three chapters will be the most interesting. It is sometimes charged that critical realists are innocent of recent developments in general philosophy, so it is interesting to see the attention and appreciation paid to “postmodernist” writers. More generally, for these writers, the current challenge is less

the continuing vitality of neopositivism in social science than the challenge of postmodernist thinking, especially Foucault.

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA

PETER T. MANICAS

**Peter Manicas** authored *A History and Philosophy of the Social Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) and most recently, *A Realist Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Explanation and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). His other interests are in social and political philosophy including his *War and Democracy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). [manicas@hawaii.edu](mailto:manicas@hawaii.edu)