

Justifying Sociological Knowledge: From Realism to Interpretation*

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In the context of calls for “postpositivist” sociology, realism has emerged as a powerful and compelling epistemology for social science. In transferring and transforming scientific realism—a philosophy of natural science—into a justificatory discourse for social science, realism splits into two parts: a strict, highly naturalistic realism and a reflexive, more mediated, and critical realism. Both forms of realism, however, suffer from conceptual ambiguities, omissions, and elisions that make them an inappropriate epistemology for social science. Examination of these problems in detail reveals how a different perspective—centered on the interpretation of meaning—could provide a better justification for social inquiry, and in particular a better understanding of sociological theory and the construction of sociological explanations.

The problem with disputing reality is that one has to rediscover it. Within the theoretical discourses concerned with justifying sociological knowledge, this is the problem of postpositivism: Outside of giving in to relativism, solipsism, or nihilism, we need some account of the nature and purpose of sociological theory and research. In the last 40 years, a new set of epistemic discourses has emerged to fill the void left by the implosion of the positivist philosophy of science. These discourses offer new justifications for sociological knowledge, and new approaches to the task of explaining social action.

Herein I examine in depth one such conceptual formation—realism—and propose another as a feasible alternative—interpretivism. I present both as structures of thought according to which a postpositivist empirical sociology is possible, but whose understanding of the contours of sociological explanation and the nature of sociological theory are at odds with each other. My intent is both descriptive and prescriptive, and thus my language slightly colored; after reconstructing and criticizing sociological realism, I point to the manner in which interpretivism could remedy and move beyond its problems and ambiguities.

In contrasting these two epistemologies, I draw upon a long-standing dispute in social science (the *methodenstreit*, see Calhoun 1998; Frisby 1976; Manicas 1987: 124–35; Habermas 1988; Oakes 1988; Hall 1999), and re-articulate certain familiar oppositions—between the naturalist ambition for sociology and a more humanist concern with subjectivity, for example. But while the general landscape of the argument runs at least as far back as the classics (Is sociology a science? If so, in what way? If not, what is it?), the particular claims presented are contemporary. The epistemic discourse of realism originated in the theoretical turmoil of the 1960s, matured via a generation’s worth of social theory, and has now entered the core of the discipline via recent debates in the major empirical research journals of American

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sociology (Kiser and Hecter 1991; Quadagno and Knapp 1992; Skocpol 1994; Boudon 1998; Calhoun 1998; Goldstone 1998; Kiser and Hecter 1998; Somers 1998; Mahoney 1999, 2004; Sica 2004). Interpretivism has a less coherent recent history, but arguments for interpretation in social science reach back to the era of the classics (and in particular the work of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Wilhelm Dilthey), have played an important role in methodological disputes since the overthrow of the orthodox consensus, and are generally associated with the aftermath of another product of 1960s turmoil—the “cultural turn” (White 1985; Rabinow and Sullivan 1988; Alexander and Smith 2003).

For the philosophy of science, realism represents a response to the post-Kuhnian crisis of scientific rationality—a way to conceptualize the empirical responsibilities and causal claims of natural science outside of positivism (Bhaskar 1989a:11–65; Bhaskar 1994:18–36; Godfrey-Smith 2003; Manicas 2006:1–41). In sociology, however, realism splits into two coherent and identifiable formations: strict and reflexive. The former proposes a clear and distinct sociological naturalism dedicated to theoretical unity, hypothesis testing, and explanation via universal social mechanisms. The latter offers, instead, a naturalism mediated by several long-standing concerns of social theory (e.g., agency, ideology, and the historical trajectories of Western modernity). Reflexive realism thus proposes a historicized conception of mechanism, considers the role of knowledge in constituting social structure, and makes an ontological distinction between society and nature. Nonetheless, I argue, both strict and reflexive realism are based upon highly problematic premises and arguments, in particular their conception of theory as social ontology and their insistence on an epistemic break between the investigator’s scientific knowledge of the social and the subjectivities and meanings that are extant in the research subjects’ social context.

The split between strict and reflexive realism, and the latter’s frequent, insistent claims to have broken the shackles of unnecessary scientism, tend to obscure the way in which interpretive sociology can offer an autonomous, conceivable—indeed more realistic—way to study social life. Interpretivism is based in a set of philosophical arguments for the possibility of sociological knowledge that are quite different from those that frame realism. They derive from the tradition of hermeneutic argument in social theory, and are augmented by the theoretical and empirical work of cultural history and cultural sociology. Research that takes subjectivity and/or culture as central to sociological investigation is now commonplace, if also controversial. Herein, I intend merely to show how certain interpretive arguments can offer counterpoints or alternatives to the major philosophical problems and ambiguities of realism. Thus, I will suggest a move toward “layered interpretivism” that investigates the following as a route to sociological explanation: (1) intelligible subjects’ reasons for action, (2) structures of signification and meaning (culture), and (3) “objectivized” artifices of human labor as themselves possessing a meaningful logic.

In this article, I give examples of sociological explanations that fit the molds of strict realism, reflexive realism, and interpretivism, and I reference a great deal of work in meta-theory and sociological theory that bears upon epistemological questions. However, it is not my ambition to give a comprehensive review of the theoretical literature, or to summarize the empirical research that has been conducted under this or that epistemological umbrella. Rather, my concern in this article is with the theoretical logic of the abstract arguments that outline the very possibility of studying society, which thus have consequences for how we go about conducting ourselves as theorists and researchers.

REALISM

According to the realist view, theory in social science grants conceptual access to the fundamental social relations that determine the course of history and the boundaries of social action. Social structures are seen as more fungible, historically variant, but not fundamentally different entities than natural objects and natural forces, at least in the following sense: efficient causal mechanisms can be discovered in each to which observable events can be attributed, and the description of these mechanisms can be generalized to other cases. The theorization of these mechanisms also allows a fundamental break between the scientific investigator's view of social reality and the view of everyday social actors (who may suffer from ideological distortion, false impressions, and common-sense opinions). The scientist, by using the specific language games and traditions of research of sociology, discovers and directly comprehends these structures and the manner in which they produce social outcomes.

The realist approach in sociology appropriates and transforms the model of natural scientific realism, so it is necessary to take a brief detour through the recent intellectual history of that philosophical movement. Scientific realism is an extensive and burgeoning set of philosophical arguments that has its roots in Cartesian rationalism, and takes its contemporary form in the foundational texts of Rom Harré, Roy Bhaskar, Hilary Putnam, and Grover Maxwell's paper on "The Ontological Status of Theoretical Entities" (Maxwell 1962; Harre 1963; Harre and Secord 1972; Harre 1975; Putnam 1975, 1981, 1983, 1987; Bhaskar [1975] 1997, 1998b; also see Cartwright 1983; Salmon 1984). Realism has become a central (if controversial) focus of both the philosophy of natural science strictly understood (Leplin 1984; Cortois 1995; de Regt 1995),¹ and of more generalized discussions of human knowledge (e.g., Putnam 1978; Collier 1981; Eagleton 1990). It has formed the basis of a recovery of rationality for natural science and thus its defense against postmodern skepticism and the political accusations of cultural and science studies. For this reason, in both natural and social scientific discourse, realism often positions itself against both positivism and postmodernism (Morrow 1994; Sayer 2000:29–104; Cruickshank 2003; Groff 2004:135–42; Lopez and Potter 2005).

In scientific realism, it is the development of substantive ontologies of the world—mechanisms like gravity, light propagation, and electromagnetism—that forms the core of scientific theory (Harre 1975; Aronson et al. 1995; Bhaskar [1975] 1997; Manicas 2006:1–41). Scientific realism expands the scope of what science can claim as real beyond that which can be or had been observed by proposing a deep ontology of the world. It thus distinguishes between the real (the ontological level of structures and causal mechanisms), the actual (that which occurs in the world and is potentially open to observation), and the empirical (that which is observed and brought within scientific knowledge as fact). Thus gravity is real, but not actual or empirical, and furthermore, since other real mechanisms may counteract it, its workings may not be actualized in certain cases, making empirical evidence of its workings impossible to come by in the strict positivist sense of constant conjunctions or regularities. Thus, scientific realism separates itself clearly from the "actualism" or "phenomenalism" of positivism and other forms of empiricism (Bhaskar [1975] 1997:24–30, 56–62).

Though this affirmation of the "real" as a part of scientific explanation may seem intuitive, it constituted a radical philosophical break from positivism at the time of

¹It is important to note than in this context, "anti-realism" often signifies a new empiricism (e.g., van Frassen 1980).

its instantiation (for a good narrative account, see Godfrey-Smith 2003). In allowing scientific explanations to include and discuss causality and unobservables, this move invites a myriad of difficulties for the kinds of analytic philosophy that characterized the philosophy of science in the Anglo-speaking world in the middle of the 20th century (Ayer 1952; Hempel [1948] 1965; Nagel [1961] 1979). But ironically, by claiming a *larger* scope and *higher* stakes for scientific knowledge (i.e., by proposing that science can extend its conceptual reach to that which we cannot see, and rely fundamentally on a metaphysical term—causality—that has been philosophically problematic since Hume), it manages to overcome some of the problems that positivism faced, both internally (see Salmon 1989) and from post-Kuhnian critics. For realism claims to account for the social construction of scientific knowledge at the same time as providing affirmation of its efficacy and rationality by characterizing *scientific knowledge* as transitive and socially produced, but the *real referents* for scientific knowledge as intransitive structures that exist independent of observation and irregardless of their comprehension in this or that scientific paradigm.

This separation is accomplished by relying upon the tripartite distinction introduced above. Real structures are the underlying generative mechanisms and processes that scientific theory references and that explain the behavior of things in the world. Actual events are that which comes to pass in the world (in which some mechanisms may counteract others, as in when a table disables the action of gravity on a glass and thus produces the outcome of its nonmovement), and empirical facts are those events that are observed by humans and (potentially) brought under the scope of scientific knowledge. Thus “facts” are indeed transitive and socially produced in the sense that they require humans to experience and process them, but *real structures* are not, and hence science retains a real referent, and thus its intelligibility and rationality.² How does science know that the structures it is referencing are, indeed, real? This is an obvious but important question, and in the case of natural science the answer depends upon two arguments, one about human agency and scientific experiment, and the other about the transcendental referents of scientific theory.

Realism begins with the question: What must the world be like if scientific experiment is to make sense?³ In answering this question, scientific realism incorporates the insight, common to philosophical traditions on both sides of the Atlantic, that scientific knowledge involves human intervention in the world (Habermas 1971; Von Wright 1971; Hacking 1983; Apel 1984). The recognition of this is commensurate with the idea that, historically speaking, scientific knowledge involves a break with animism and other “magical” worldviews; science locates animation in human action, and mechanism in the world of nature (Habermas 1985:43–75). It is a premise of the rationality of scientific experiment that, separate from the human agency that arranges an experiment, there must exist real entities that, when triggered, exert causal force in a mechanistic fashion (Boyd 1990; Bhaskar [1975] 1997). The purpose of the creation of closed systems in experiments is to isolate and identify these entities.⁴ Thus experiment, as controlled human interaction with the world, serves as a guarantor for and constant check upon the propositions of theory.

²The difference between an intelligible practice and a rational practice may be a significant one. In sociological appropriations of realism, however, this difference is often glossed over, and Bhaskar is ambiguous on this point. For a clear-minded critique of the problems this elision creates, see Benton (1981).

³Bhaskar writes: “The intelligibility of experimental activity presupposes not just the intransitivity but the structured character of the objects investigated under experimental conditions” (Bhaskar [1975] 1997: 33).

⁴Thus as Von Wright puts it, it makes sense to distinguish between “doing things and bringing about things” (1971:66).

Secondly, if these entities—real structures—are to be the basis of scientific knowledge and enable both communication between paradigms and, ultimately, the determination of the superiority of certain theories and explanations, then they must exist over and above the world of human knowledge and subjectivity. This is to say that they must be transcendental, not in the idealist sense, but in the ontological, realist sense that they exist separate from their conception inside human subjectivity (and, in particular, the form of human perception, conception, and intervention called science). In other words, there would still be gravity in the universe even if there were no humans on earth to theorize it, and this means that there are transcendental, extra-linguistic guarantors for natural scientific knowledge. Then, we can say in a formal sense that, though our substantive and specific knowledge of mechanisms and their action may shift as scientific knowledge changes, as long as science is based upon the interaction with the natural world, it will have an unchanging basis for what its theoretical terms *attempt* to reference, and a test for the correctness of its theories, namely, the ability to predict and control the outcome of natural processes.

Sociological Realism

Realism has become influential in sociology in a variety of ways. It is evident in the social ontologies of the action and structure debate (Archer 1982; Giddens 1984; Cohen 1989; Archer 1990; Sewell 1992), in attempts to make interaction theory and ontological individualism the basis for scientific sociology (Collins 1981), in attempts to justify critical Marxism and Hegelian dialectics as simultaneously a science of society and a philosophy of human freedom (Bhaskar 1993), and in attempts to suggest that rational choice and purposive action theory is the only feasible basis for sociological explanation (Coleman 1986; Kiser and Hecter 1991). The array of sociological realisms forms the basis for a sort of ethos or sensibility, one formed in the crucible of post-Kuhnian uncertainty and the specter of relativism, that is dedicated to the rational potential of science and often includes the new hope that, this time, the philosophy of natural science will be able to include sociology. But in terms of the precise epistemological underpinnings of social investigation, realism in sociology can be divided into two positions: *strict* and *reflexive*.

Strict Realism

Strict realism makes reference to transcendental mechanisms in its explanations, is confident that careful adherence to scientific logic will overcome the lack of experiment in sociology, and relies exclusively on the ontological claims of general theory to set research programs. Strict realists, moreover, are comfortable talking about determinative and efficient causality, integrate “history” as a question of the scope conditions for the action of causal mechanisms, and view “agency” either as a philosophical nonissue concerning free will, or as simply a question of whether individuals, as decisionmakers, should be the central mechanism by which outcomes are explained in certain cases (Mahoney 2004:468–73). As a result, this version of sociological realism has a quite clear understanding of what the epistemological logic of sociological theory and sociological explanation should be. Theory uncovers the basic properties of social life. A good explanation is parsimonious, transcendental, and testable. Objective explanations are thought to refer directly to a social reality whose existence is ahistorical, whose efficacy is determinative, and whose workings

are mechanistic. Furthermore, theory becomes—or should become—increasingly unified. As Peter Hedstrom writes:

A focus on mechanisms tends to reduce theoretical fragmentation. For example, we may have numerous different theories (of crime, organizations, social movements or whatnot) that are all based upon the same theory-within-the-theory, that is, they all refer to the same set of mechanisms. (Hedstrom 2005:28)

An excellent contemporary example of a strict realist sociological explanation is Randall Collins's *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (1998). In that massive work, he uses the single “general theory of interaction rituals” to explain the course of intellectual and philosophical developments throughout all of human history. Interaction ritual chains are defined in a strictly ontological fashion, completely separate from history and geographic location, as having certain “ingredients” (a group of at least two people, an overlapping focus of attention, a common mood or emotion) that in turn produce certain “social effects” (intensified mood, the development of moral obligations, and the increase in emotional energy). This theory is used, then, to “explain” and retroactively predict the substantive content of intellectual production, which intellectuals will “be remembered” (Collins 1998:58), and the actual thinking of individual intellectuals themselves (“the predictability of thinking” (Collins 1998:49) and “the inner lives of intellectuals” (Collins 1998:51)). In his epilogue, Collins performs an intentionally Cartesian derivation of the “sociological cogito,” which forms the basis for his version of sociological realism (Collins 1998:858–81). This follows upon Collins's earlier idea of “translating all sociological concepts into aggregates of microphenomena” (Collins 1981:987), with the addendum of “three pure macrovariables: the dispersion of individuals in physical *space*; the amount of *time* that social processes take . . . and the *numbers* of individuals involved” (Collins 1981:989).

Of course, there are strict realist explanations that place their ontological bets elsewhere. The generative and explanatory aspect of the social can be taken to be conscious and interested rational actors, system equilibrium, or class exploitation, to mention just a few candidates. But the epistemological principle of strict realism is the same: ontological argument establishes the basic causal mechanism or causal structure, which is then linked through various bridging assumptions and scope conditions to its “testing” through evidence (Mahoney 2004:465–68).

It should be clear that what this epistemology gains in cleanliness, it loses in plausibility for many sociologists—there is no serious attempt inside strict realism to include contingency, agency, history, or culture in social explanation. Actors are at best important input-output mechanisms, and it becomes difficult to ask social-historical questions about the origins and social contexts of certain “mechanisms”—one can only ask if they are operative in certain cases, and with what initial conditions. All of the big Weberian questions for sociology—Whence modern rationality? What is the internal logic of the historical shift between different types of legitimate domination? What is the role of worldviews in guiding action?—are answered *in advance* by the positing of universal mechanisms. Reflexive realism attempts to remedy these problems.

Reflexive Realism

In a series of theoretical essays, the historical sociologists George Steinmetz and Margaret Somers have distanced themselves from what I have here called strict realism

and Somers calls theoretical realism (Somers 1998; Steinmetz 1998, 2004). They share with the intellectual movement of *critical realism* (based primarily in Britain) an expanded concern with history, agency, and culture. Thus Margaret Archer argues that society is “inseparable from its human components because the very existence of society depends in some way upon our activities” (Archer 1995:1; also see Vandenberghe 2005). Roy Bhaskar insists that society is “mediated through intentional human agency” (Bhaskar 1979:102), and argues consistently that social activities are “concept-dependent,” and that “meanings cannot be measured, only understood” (Bhaskar 1979:59).

This group of sociologists, other social scientists, and philosophers of social science⁵ has made in an explicit, theoretical fashion a set of arguments that characterize the emergent epistemological self-consciousness of many postpositivist researchers in sociology who remain committed to empirical research and theoretically aided sociological explanation. This sort of research rejects the scientific ambitions of strict naturalism represented by thinkers like Hedstrom and Collins, preferring instead to mediate the new philosophy of science with the immanent knowledge claims in qualitative sociological methods and the substantive theoretical debates that derive from the classic research traditions of social theory (Marxism, Weberianism, etc.). In this formation, the appropriation of realist philosophy of science is much more *reflexive*, in the sense that specifically sociological and historical problems are made to speak back to realist epistemology, and the possibility of naturalism is considered a problematic rather than an imperative. Some further textual evidence from the leading proponents of this emergent formation is instructive here.

Steinmetz differentiates his own version of “critical realism”—derived from his reading of the philosopher Roy Bhaskar—from formal positivism, the “watered-down” positivism that is widespread within “U.S. sociology, psychology, and political science,” and from strict realism, which he calls theoretical realism. This last formation, Steinmetz notes, “deploys its causal entities within general covering laws and abhors conjunctural causation or contingency” (Steinmetz 1998:173). Steinmetz does admit that Bhaskar’s critical realism shares certain similarities to strict scientific realists (something Hedstrom admits as well (2005:24)), but then remarks that he finds in Bhaskar the capacity to consider more fully questions of epistemology for social science, as opposed to merely asserting a single strong ontology of the social and proceeding from there to mechanistic explanations. And, indeed, there is a strong sense in Bhaskar’s writings and in the work of other critical realists that social reality is “emergent” or even “constructed” in some sense of these terms (Collier 1994:138–51; Sayer 2000:81–104; Danermark et al. 2002:56–59; Cruickshank 2003b:103–13). Furthermore, in Bhaskar’s work and in the theory and research of many other reflexive realists, a distinct ontological difference between the social and the natural is posited (Keat and Urry 1982:228–50; Bhaskar 1989a:44–65; Collier 1994:137–261; Carter and New 2004:1–20). Concepts are a part of social reality, and thus social structures “do not exist independently of the agents’ conceptions of what they are doing in their activity” (Steinmetz 1998:181). So, Steinmetz writes with conviction that “the codetermination of social structure by social knowledge thus introduces an obligatory reflexivity into the social sciences” (Steinmetz 1998:181).

Furthermore, Steinmetz also argues for a “greater space-time specificity of social as opposed to natural mechanisms, such that even the underlying tendencies they ground

⁵In particular Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson, and Justin Cruickshank; see Collier (2005:344–55) for a brief discussion of the directions taken by critical realism from Bhaskar’s original interventions.

may not be invariant across more than a limited period or territory” (Steinmetz 1998:182) This is a key point in reflexive realism; it is not a coincidence that the split between strict and reflexive realism is most explicit—and extensively debated—in historical sociology (see Manicas 2006:103–25, 171–85). In the philosophy of Bhaskar, this historicity of mechanisms is comprehended via the “irreversibility of ontologically irreducible processes, comparable to entropy in the natural sphere,” which “entails the necessity for concepts of qualitative rather than merely quantitative change” (Bhaskar 1998:46).

All of this produces, in reflexive realism, an openness toward questions of historical contingency, a consideration of the role of knowledge and discourse in social life, and an engagement with theories of agency. Nonetheless, reflexive realism maintains a commitment to an ontologically stratified social reality that is divisible into real, actual, and empirical levels, and in which mechanisms can be found at the level of the real. It also thus maintains an approach to the social committed to the objectivity of social life—not in the sense of its universality or timelessness, but in the sense of its exteriority to both actors and investigators. For actors, mechanisms have an ontological reality that is unavoidable and constraining. For investigators, these same mechanisms provide the core referent for theory and explanation. This ontological position then demands as the *sine qua non* of investigation the fundamental “epistemological break” that Bourdieu described thus:

Just as the physical sciences had to make a categorical break with animist representations of matter and action on matter, so the social sciences have to perform the epistemological break that can separate scientific interpretation from all artificialist or anthropomorphic interpretations of the functioning of society. The schemes used by sociological explanation have to be tested by being made completely explicit in order to avoid the contamination to which even the most purified schemes are exposed whenever they have a structural affinity with ordinary language schemes. (Bourdieu et al. 1991:24; for a discussion of Bourdieu as a realist, see Potter 2000)

Though he has not participated in the recent epistemological debates concerning historical sociology, Michael Mann’s explanation of the French Revolution is a good example of reflexive realism in action, particularly since his work as a whole was the subject of such harsh criticism from the strict realists Kaiser and Hechter.⁶ Mann works from his well-known typology of power (ideological, economic, military, political) that does not dictate a singular, strict ontology in the sense favored by Collins and Hedstrom. Rather, it is a framework for studying, from the perspective of “power organizations” (Mann 1993:6), the formations of different groups, at different historical moments: “Classes were not ‘pure’ but were also defined by ideological, military, and political forces” (Mann 1993:167). Thus, Mann develops an account of five power actors who are indigenous to that historical moment in French society: the specifically courtly old regime, the wealthy bourgeoisie, the petite-bourgeoisie

⁶Kiser and Hecter originally wrote, “Mann’s explanation of variations in state autonomy, like Skocpol’s, is too incomplete and vague to yield precise empirical implications” (Kiser and Hechter 1991:19). Calhoun noted in response that: “The illustration Kiser and Hechter offer, based on studies by Skocpol and Mann, considers variations in state autonomy as a question abstracted from historical context. Contrast this to studying the development of the modern state as a historically specific process (which indeed both Skocpol and Mann do)” (Calhoun 1998:851 n. 4).

centered on the sans-culottes of Paris, a highly religious peasantry obsessed with freedom from privilege, and an ideological elite that differed from the (later) Russian scientific Bolsheviks in a meaningful way: “they came out of the Enlightenment as a fusion of religion, science, philosophy, and the arts . . . There was an ideological causal chain from the church to Enlightenment academies to ‘Republic of Virtue’” (Mann 1993:194). He then details the rising and declining relevance of these groups to the shape of the French state and society through the course of the revolution, and pays close attention to the contingencies, accidents, and “institutional particularities” therein. He thus synthesizes a great deal of evidence and theoretical debate about this single episode in history in terms of a schema that does not determine in an *a priori* manner the collective actors or the nature of their relationships. We are a long way, indeed, from transcendental mechanisms. On the other hand, Mann’s work pines for reduction and parsimony, a classic norm of scientific explanation; power organizations “determine the overall shape of society” (Mann 1993:6).

In empirical work, the split between strict and reflexive realism may work itself out as a continuum, but we can now identify the opposing poles of the realist continuum, in terms of their position on fundamental issues in social science: mechanisms, ideology, the purpose of theory, and explanation.

	Strict Realism	Reflexive Realism
Mechanisms	Transcendent (strong ontology)	Historically and geographically specific
Ideology/knowledge/discourse	Beliefs and preferences of agents	Partially constitutive of social structure
Purpose of sociological theory	Social ontology	Social ontology
Explanation	Primarily deductive, hypothesis testing	Intersection of theory and inductive historical work

The Structural Ambiguities of Reflexive Realism

There is no disputing the pragmatic effectiveness of reflexive realism in freeing sociological theory and research from the chains of positivism or the imposed naturalism of strict realism, while retaining a commitment to empirical study and the development of sociological explanations. As Steinmetz writes in reference to critical realism, what I have termed reflexive realism “allows social scientists who are attracted to cultural theory and complex conjunctural forms of explanation to defend themselves against being lumped together into undifferentiated categories of ‘postmodernism’ or ‘eclecticism’” (Steinmetz 1998:183). Furthermore, as Steinmetz notes in another article, the idea of concept dependency as a unique feature of social relations forms a meeting point of critical realism, hermeneutics, and poststructuralism in the social sciences (Steinmetz 2005:283).

However, while the utility of reflexive realism for expanding the feasible plain of rigorous sociological research toward the problems of culture and historical contingency is undeniable, as a set of philosophical justifications for and descriptions of sociological argument, the reflexive realist position possesses certain deep ambiguities. I believe

these ambiguities are “structural” in the sense that they are inherent to the intellectual project of providing a realist philosophy of social science, and thus supersede any given piece of reflexive realist theory or research. Ultimately, these ambiguities will not be only philosophically troubling—they will, in the end, fetter both the capacity for sociology to produce empirical truth and sociology’s self-understanding. Here, I divide the core arguments of reflexive realism into three—ontological theory, the pragmatics of research, and the epistemic break—and take issue with each of them.⁷

Ontological Theory

It is not clear that if the mechanisms that reflexive realism looks for are space-time limited and concept-dependent, that the same transcendental-ontological arguments that justify the realist argument for natural science apply. What does it mean to do *ontological* theory if every formation that is examined and used in explanation is the product of historical contingency, dependent upon actors’ agency, and relative to its cultural context? How can one maintain the distinctions between the real, the actual, and the empirical as the foundation of social science if the nature of social reality is partially contingent upon cultural formulations? How does one maintain the transcendental-realist justification for scientific knowledge—the division of the world into intransitive referents of scientific theories and the transitive human-produced theories—when the objects of social inquiry are produced by social agents with subjectivity?

To avoid these awkward questions, reflexive realism makes a crucial elision. It equates the truism that a great deal of what the social scientist studies exists (or existed) separate from the individual social scientist’s own thought about it—or even from the more collective production of knowledge about it—with the division, made by scientific realism, between animate human action and inanimate nature. This latter is essential to the transcendental argument for the rationality of natural scientific experiment, but it is not an argument that holds for social science. This problem—equating the existence of the social outside of the investigator’s head with the ontological gap between thinking humans and a mechanistic natural world—runs through sociological realism like a red thread.

To make this clear, it is useful to distinguish between the precise conception of *ontological theory*, according to which abstract theoretical terms directly reference social entities and their powers and properties, and the more general notion of ontological discourse or *ontological claims-making*, according to which social scientific acts of writing attempt to describe or explain an aspect, piece, or part of social reality, to “say something about something.” Undoubtedly, the reflexive realists are correct to deny that postpositivism necessitates a solipsistic and relativistic sociology that can no longer make claims about the world. But this does not mean one should commit to the idea that sociological theory references ontological entities possessed of properties and causal powers. There might be other ways of saying something about the world, and of explaining social action! The realist justification of social science—even in its mediated, reflexive form—is based upon a philosophy that has outlined the conditions for knowledge from the perspective of the relation between the experimenting human subject and the ontologically secure natural object. This is

⁷Also see the criticisms in Magill (1994), Kemp (2005), and King (2004:68–85).

in contradiction with the fundamental research interests of the reflexive realists—to make room in sociological explanations for culture, history, agency, and so on.

The Pragmatics of Research

This recalls the fact that the realist philosophy of science is based not only upon the ideal of ontological theory but also upon a philosophical account of the pragmatic relationship between the researching subject and the researched object, which is to say, the pragmatics of scientific experimentation. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of the realist account of natural science is its ability to integrate interventionist arguments about the role of human agency in the production of scientific knowledge into an anti-conventionalist account of science as knowledge of and about the world. Scientific realism uses with particular acuity the distinction, made by Von Wright, between “doing things” and “bringing about things” (Von Wright 1971:66), wherein the latter refers to the triggering of causal mechanisms and natural processes that proceed inanimately. Thus, Bhaskar writes that “experimental activity in natural science not only facilitates (relatively) decisive test situations, it enables *practical access*, as it were, to the otherwise latent structures of nature” (Bhaskar 1979:59, emphasis in original). The point here is that, though there may be all kinds of conventional, social, or “transitive” processes at work in terms of the formulation of theories of the world, and even in the decision that an experiment has ended (Galison 1987), the natural sciences have in their interaction with the natural world and their design of instruments, experiments, and material technologies a *practical test* as to the correctness of their theories—whether or not the experiment or technology *works*, which is to say, whether it allows the prediction and control of nature.⁸ The question, then, for reflexive realism, is how are we to philosophically justify social scientific knowledge without the help of the pragmatic guarantor of knowledge that is controlled experiment?

Bhaskar recognizes explicitly that “the malleability achieved in the laboratory may provide an invaluable component in the process of scientific discovery that the social sciences, in this respect, will be denied,” but goes on to write of critical realism that “our analysis of the relational and ontological limits will yield an analogue and a compensator respectively for the role of experimental practice in discovery” (Bhaskar 1979:59). Before moving into Bhaskar’s proposed compensator, it is worth pausing to acknowledge that the search for the analogue and compensator for the pragmatics of experiment in natural science is a defining feature of the last 150 years of social theory. In almost all sophisticated, reflexive attempts to render social investigation scientific, some version of the “pragmatic out” whereby the correct interpretation or explanation of a given human phenomenon can be determined by action-in-the-world is developed. Among these we could tally the Freudian principle that the correct interpretation of a dream is that that cures the patient, Popper’s call for “piecemeal social engineering” based on small experimental government programs (Popper 2002a:58–64), and the long-standing Marxist tradition of *praxis* wherein the

⁸Habermas describes this as well in relating the “approach of the empirical-analytic sciences” to a “*technical cognitive interest*” (1971:308, italics in original): “In controlled observation, which often takes the form of experiment, we generate initial conditions and measure the results of operations carried out under these conditions. Empiricism attempts to ground the objectivist illusion in observations expressed in basic statements . . . In reality basic statements are not simple representations of facts in themselves, but express the success or failure of operations” (1971:308).

meeting point of revolutionary action, historical teleology, and theoretical analysis is the guarantor of truth.⁹

The reflexive realist argument represents a less grand, more strictly epistemological argument for a “pragmatic compensator” for social science. It is necessary, in this case, to go directly to the urtext of reflexive realism, Bhaskar’s *The Possibility of Naturalism*, to comprehend the ambiguous logic of this argument, though it is referenced approvingly in many subsequent realist works (e.g., Collier 1994; Steinmetz 1998; Engholm 1999:25–26; Hartwig and Sharp 1999:19; Sayer 2000:18). Bhaskar’s argument is that society already contains a flawed conception of its entities within itself—concepts exist in society that describe social conditions to some extent before the scientific investigator arrives on the scene. These concepts provide compensation for the lack of experiment in social science. In Bhaskar’s original formulation, “just as a social science without a society is impossible, so a society without some kind of scientific, proto-scientific or ideological theory of itself is inconceivable . . . Now if one denotes the proto-scientific set of ideas *P*, then the transformational model of social activity applied to the activity of knowledge production suggests that social scientific theory, *T*, requiring cognitive resources, is produced, at least in part, by the transformation of *P*” (Bhaskar 1979:61).

How does this transformation $P \rightarrow T$ take place? For Bhaskar, it takes place through a theoretical act of “retroduction” that, he claims, is similar to the transcendental argument about the possibility of scientific knowledge.¹⁰ This requires some explanation. Just as realism argues philosophically from the existence of (intelligible, rational) scientific knowledge to the existence of a world about which scientific knowledge speaks, so sociological realism argues from the existence of conceptualizations of social relations to those social relations themselves. Collier cites this argument as “Roy Bhaskar’s central positive contribution . . . to the methodology of the social sciences: the idea that a great part of their theoretical work will consist in transcendental arguments from premisses familiar from social practice” (Collier 1994:166–67). Steinmetz also points to this argument about sociological argument—that it moves from proto-scientific concepts and phenomenological experiences to the generative structures that produce them—as providing the warrant for considering extant concepts within society as the compensator for the lack of controlled experiment (Steinmetz 1998:181–83).

Yet let us examine this argument a little more closely. Recall that the transcendental-realist argument for the existence of an ontologically deep (natural) world of causal processes depended on the *intelligibility and rationality* of scientific knowledge and experiment—otherwise we could argue from any sort of knowledge to what it implies exists (from belief in witchcraft and its practice (spell-casting) to the existence of demons, for example). But, as is clearly indicated by Bhaskar’s reference to the proto-scientific or even ideological nature of the extant concepts of social relations that exist inside society, these are by no means rational—indeed, just the opposite. Bhaskar’s favorite example of this kind of argument in social science is

⁹Though Bhaskar and other critical realists do have a close relationship to Marxism (Collier 1988; Creaven 2000; Brown et al. 2002; Joseph 2002) and have elaborated a sophisticated conception of ideology-critique (Bhaskar 1979:83–101), and much has been written about Marx as a scientific realist *avant la lettre* (Keat and Urry 1982:96–114; Benton 1977:138–99), the “compensator” for the lack of experiment in social science claimed by reflexive realism can be considered in its specificity for a more precise notion of what is at stake for sociological explanation.

¹⁰Specifically, Bhaskar argues that the transcendental argument from scientific knowledge to the conditions for its existence is a species in the larger genus of retroductive argument (Bhaskar 1979:64).

Marx's *Capital*, which he says, establishes "what must be the case for the experiences grasped by the phenomenal forms of capitalist life to be possible" (Bhaskar 1979:65). In other words, it argues "retroductively" from social consciousness to social being. It is highly tendentious to suggest that this kind of argument in social science—a classic realm of theoretical dispute—proceeds with the same formal, transcendental purity as the philosophical argument from scientific experiment to the conditions of its intelligibility/rationality, namely, the existence of natural entities with causal powers. This analogy, upon which so much of sociological realism depends, between the transcendental argument for the possibility/intelligibility/rationality of science and the sociological argument concerning the real mechanisms responsible for social concepts and phenomenal experience, is an incredibly strained one.

The Epistemic Break

The problems become even more bewildering when we add the third key realist argument to the mix. Realism also insists that its scientific theories represent a fundamental epistemic break from other forms of discourse that circulate in society because it has a grasp of the ontology of the underlying structures of society that differentiates it from all other claims to knowledge. This is implicit in all of Bhaskar's claims about the transformation of proto-scientific concepts into scientific ones.¹¹ The problem, though, is that if the concepts of realism represent a fundamental epistemic break from other concepts circulating in society, how is it that these other concepts can serve as the pragmatic compensator for the lack of experiment in social science? What, exactly, is the process by which this transformation of proto-scientific concepts into true concepts of the real takes place?

The answer, of course, is "theory." But what Bhaskar's example of Marx's *Capital* shows so well is the *contingency* of sociological interpretation, rather than its necessity or ontological certainty. Can we seriously argue that *formal argument* will take us from actors' conceptualizations of society to the scientific theory of the social reality that underlies these experiences and conceptualizations—especially when they might be *false conceptualizations*? It is rather the case that the "underlying reality" that we are all supposed to argue back to from the phenomenal forms it produces is constantly disputed and reinterpreted in the turmoil of social theory and social explanation. As John Hall remarks ironically with regard to realism, "realists do not agree with each other about the reality (e.g., of 'intelligence,' 'class conflict,' 'industrialization,' 'kinship') that supposedly is knowable . . . realism is hard put to offer the social ontology that it would claim to warrant" (Hall 1999:48).

¹¹Bourdieu is a classic realist in this sense, who "aims to make possible a science of the dialectical relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them" (Bourdieu 1977:3). His theory of practice is designed to accomplish the objective relegation of "native theories" to proto-scientific status, inside a schema of explanation guaranteed by real scientific theory: "the informant's discourse owes its best-hidden properties to the fact that it is the product of a *semi-theoretical* disposition, inevitably induced by any learned questioning" (Bourdieu 1977:18). For Bourdieu, then, "native theories are dangerous not so much because they lead research towards illusory explanations as because they bring quite superfluous reinforcement to the intellectualist tendency inherent in the objectivist approach to practices" (Bourdieu 1977:19). Instead, Bourdieu expects his scientific theory of field and habitus to *comprehend* the objective, relational conditions that structure social action, and to *create* the intellectual conditions under which knowledge of the reality of social life is possible.

FROM REALISM TO INTERPRETATION

I would propose a simple reason why ontological theory is inappropriate for sociology, the pragmatics of experiment cannot be replaced by a reliance on proto-concepts and retroductive argument, and the supposed epistemic break of scientific theory is belied by its own pluralist disputes about the nature of social reality. That is this: Both the social life under study and the construction of sociological theories and explanations of social action are shot through with problems of conceptualization and signification—that is, problems of meaning. What realism fails to acknowledge is that the “concept-dependency” of sociological explanations is not reducible to the role of proto-scientific or ideological theories that exist in society, which are then superseded by real scientific theory, or even to the role of “knowledge in society.” It is, rather, that the construction of sociological explanations is continually dependent on both meaning-in-society and upon sociological theory as itself a contested meaning-structure with a contingent relationship to the reality it studies—and neither of these can be reduced to some more real or elemental set of social forces. Sociological explanation emerges from the intersection of two active meaning systems, and thus cannot avoid the problem of interpretation—by ontology, pragmatics, or an illusory “scientific break.”

Ultimately, the wager of reflexive realism is that all of the peculiar aspects of social life—culture and concept-dependency, historical open-endedness, agency, the fact that social science is itself a social formation—can be integrated into the structure of sociological knowledge, but that, nonetheless, the fundamental ideal of scientific theory can be maintained. This ideal insists that while the “proto-scientific” concepts that exist in society are supposed to be *of practical use* in realist sociology, the ultimate goal is *not only* their supercession, *but also* their denigration, as the true scientific theory of social life is developed. But at some point, this ontological point of view must be seen as itself an epistemic discourse, more of an artifact of scientific consciousness than an imperative of social reality. It may, in fact, be a highly unrealistic conception of what social science does, and how it can hope to know its object of study, and build explanations of social action.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to develop the outlines of an alternative set of justifications for sociological knowledge by working out from these criticisms of realism toward an alternative, interpretive approach to sociological explanation. It would of course be ideal to just point to a clear and distinct intellectual formation of “interpretivism” as a philosophy of social science, to contextualize and support the criticisms of realism I have developed above. But though many forms of discourse—philosophical and sociological—have contributed to an interpretive understanding of the nature of social science, “interpretivism” as a way to conceive the empirical responsibility and explanatory ambition of social science does not have the same clear status and recognition in philosophy and sociology as does “realism.”¹² This issue is further complicated by the fact that critical realism has self-consciously articulated an appropriation and supercession of hermeneutics, beginning with Bhaskar’s critique of Winch and Wittgenstein (Bhaskar 1979:169–203) and his naturalist appropriation of the idea of reasons as causes (Bhaskar 1979:102–52), and carrying through to several recent attempts to articulate a realist approach to social symbols and discourse (e.g.,

¹²Both realism, as a philosophy of natural science, and critical realism, as a codified social theoretical perspective with consequences for sociological research, are relatively clearly delimited. See, for example, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (Archer et al. 1998) or *A Dictionary of Critical Realism* (Hartwig 2007).

Collier 1998; Nellhaus 1998; Fairclough et al. 2002; Pearce and Woodiwiss 2005). Yet, at every turn, critical realists can be found attacking discourse-oriented or “constructivist” social theory as unable to comprehend and use for sociological explanation the ontological reality of social structure and social causation (e.g., Carter 1998; Cruickshank 1998; Patomaki and Wight 2000).

It is not my intention or my desire to catalogue the (in some cases quite productive) tensions within realism as an intellectual movement, or to offer a final word on the strained, disputed, and thus highly reflexive way in which critical realism has maintained itself as “naturalist.”¹³ Rather, I want to explore how placing the interpretation of meaning at the center of the operations of the social sciences entails and enables a break from the most fundamental aspects of realism—strict or reflexive—and thus also promises an overcoming of the epistemic contradictions contained therein. As I indicate in footnotes along the way, each of the three pillars that make up what I call a “layered interpretive sociology” has been claimed, at one point or another, as the “hermeneutic aspect” of realism. My argument in the main text, however, is that these arguments entail an abandonment of the realist perspective for social science in favor of a thoroughgoing interpretive perspective that no longer claims that “the human sciences can be sciences *in exactly the same sense*, though *not in exactly the same way*, as the natural ones” (Bhaskar 1979:203, emphasis in original; see also Steinmetz 1998:181).

The interpretive perspective rests on two basic premises. The first is an *explicitly weak* ontology of human nature and social life. Reflexive realism moved, to a certain degree, in this direction, by embedding its mechanisms historically. But interpretivism takes plasticity as the fundamental aspect of human nature, and thus begins with a sense of the radical variance and historical arbitrariness of different social formations. The second premise is the idea, mentioned above, that social scientific research has as its most fundamental dynamic the intersection of two meaningful social worlds—that of the investigator and the investigated. Thus the meaning-problems of social science always involve at least two systems of signification of variable coherence, whose construal of the world is arbitrary and conventional. To make knowledge claims, then, social science must work from the intersection of these two contexts to develop an increased comprehension of the world of the investigated.

How is this knowledge to be achieved? I would propose that social science consists of a layered set of interpretations, centered around the comprehension of social meaning. It takes as its starting point the subjective content of social action—the orientations of individual actors—that should be rendered intelligible and coherent in any attempt to construct sociological explanation. It then moves out from actors’ subjectivities to the supra-individual structures of meaning in which this action is embedded, and that actors use to frame their experiences and reasons for action—that is, culture. Because culture provides both the basis for individual subjects to render experience coherent, and the frame through which more “objective” social structures come to influence action, this step is the key pivot for any explanation. However, the structures of the social that appear to actors as external constraints would not be excluded from interpretive explanation. Rather, in addition to the consideration of how motivated actors perceive these structures, the externalities of social life would also

¹³It is a well-known anecdote that Bhaskar once commented that he could have titled his 1979 book *The Impossibility of Naturalism*, and indeed there are deep ambiguities in Bhaskar as to whether this reflexive naturalism is constituted by a fundamental ontological break between the natural and social worlds or by a recognition of the psychological and social worlds as emergent from, and thus irreducible to, their physical aspects.

be interpreted as referring to a set of meanings—as possessing their own historically specific logic of meaning.

This is only a brief summary. I want to elaborate these points into the beginnings of a justificatory discourse for sociological knowledge by articulating how a sociology based around social meaning would avoid or amend the problematic aspects of the realist philosophy of social science.

From the Pragmatics of Experiment to the Intelligibility of Subjective Experience

Let us begin with the idea of the pragmatics of experiment and the corresponding argument for the “pragmatic compensator” in social science. As I discussed above, the intelligibility/rationality of natural scientific experimentation is the starting point for the realist philosophy of natural science. In social science, “retroduction” from extant concepts and experiences in society to the social mechanisms that generate them is supposed to compensate for the fact that social science lacks experiment as a way to interact with its object of study. How would interpretive sociology remove social science from this deeply problematic analogy, and remedy its conception of itself?

From an interpretive perspective, the “pragmatics of research” would be reconceived as the project, inherent in any attempt to explain social action, of rendering other subjectivities intelligible. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, and I would propose that several qualitative methodologies are designed explicitly for this task, including ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviewing. But the philosophical basis for this possibility is much more general. It is this, a key point for any interpretive sociology: *The subjects of social science have the same essential capacities for coherent thought and intentional action as the investigator does. Thus, insofar as people act in a way that “makes sense” to themselves (or deviates in a discernable way from sensible action), it is possible for the investigator to come to an understanding of their action.*

This is the axiom of intelligibility, an argument for the weak rationality of subjectively oriented action. Thus Weber opened *Economy and Society* with an argument in which he posited rationality *not* as the basis for an ontology of human action, but rather as a heuristic starting point for interpretation (specifically, see Weber 1978:6–7).¹⁴ The investigator makes an assumption of weak rationality as the basis of what Donald Davidson called “the principle of charity” for interpretation. What does this entail? It entails that the investigator orients herself to an understanding of the coherence and workability of her subjects’ motivations and assignments of meanings to the world.¹⁵ Thus rather than arguing “retroductively” from the experience of actors to the social conditions that, separate from this experience, created it, one develops a sense of the reasons actors had for actions.

In arguing in this manner, furthermore, we work from the philosophical position that reasons are causes—but taken in an anti-naturalist direction.¹⁶ This

¹⁴This is of course an extensively debated point, and the nature of Weber’s action typology—as well as the relationship between his conception of rationality and sociological methodology—is generally the subject of debate (e.g., Hollis and Lukes 1984; Habermas 1985; Kemp 2003). Here I mean only to focus on a very weak criterion of purposiveness and coherence as the methodological basis for the project of interpretation.

¹⁵It is important to note, at this juncture, that Davidson has a primarily coherence-based theory of truth (Davidson 2006a).

¹⁶Bhaskar, of course, devotes his chapter on human agency in *The Possibility of Naturalism* to the idea of reasons-as-causes. In a series of arguments he insists that this disables *verstehende* sociology (Bhaskar 1979:108–09) and furthermore, that “to grant causal status to reasons necessitates no exemption to (or

idea—Davidson’s most radical claim, which separates him from most analytic philosophy and from realist social science—relies on the following two-step argument. The description of the reason for an action is logically independent from the description of the action. The re-description of one in terms of the other constitutes an explanation, which though it refers to a different class of causes —“mental events”—than do explanations in natural science, nonetheless has the same linguistic format. Thus when we re-describe the way a man was injured by saying “he was burned,” or when we re-describe a man turning left at a traffic light to get to Denver, we are, in both cases, providing causal explanations.

However, because of the irreducibility of mental events to physical phenomena, and because of their reliance upon systems of meaning, such causal explanations cannot be grouped together or assimilated into scientific laws. Thus Davidson carefully separated causal explanation of actions from a predictive theory of action, fiercely denying the possibility of the latter.¹⁷ In entering into the intelligible reasons an actor has for acting, we can come to singular causal statements that explain his or her action, even if we cannot systematize these statements into an accurate predictive theory of his or her action, nor can we synthesize these reasons-as-causes into a singular metaphysical causal paradigm that integrates neuroscience, psychology, and sociology (e.g., Bhaskar 1979:124–37).

Davidson’s arguments, which are articulated in the abstract, individualist idiom of Anglo-American analytic philosophy, fit in with the long-standing emphasis within hermeneutic and phenomenological social theory on the subjective experience of actors as a key to sociological explanation. One can find versions of this argument in Dilthey (1976), Schutz (1967), Berger and Luckman (1967), and Garfinkel’s conceptualization of the “routine grounds of everyday activities” (Garfinkel 1964). But interpretive sociology has often shied away from the concept of cause for the very reason that it is associated with scientific generalization. Davidson’s point is exactly the opposite. The intelligibility of action is an essential ingredient to any attempt to comprehend and explain the human world, and efforts to systematize this intelligibility into sociological laws (e.g., Collins 1989) are artifacts of naturalistic ambition.

The point of this—for the purposes of this article—is that the principle of charity in interpretation articulates a conception of social scientific “pragmatics” in direct contrast to the pragmatics of experiment and interaction with the natural world that, for so many philosophers, retains the possibility of natural scientific rationality in a post-Kuhnian era. Realist philosophy of science is, in this regard, based upon a philosophical articulation of the subject-object relation, while the interpretive perspective relies on the pragmatics of the subject-subject relation as its basis for social science. Yet far from the relativism this is sometimes taken to imply, this actually serves a basis for the possibility of a *verstehende* sociology, based upon the intelligibility of human subjectivity.

break in) natural laws. Indeed intentional human actions may best be regarded as setting initial and boundary conditions for the operation for physical laws; and reasons, when they are efficacious, for the operation of neurophysiological ones” (Bhaskar 1979:114). For another version of this, naturalist, “one world” thesis, see Searle (1997).

¹⁷Davidson writes: “Generalizations connecting reasons and actions are not—and cannot be sharpened into—the kind of law on the basis of which accurate predictions can reliably be made . . . what emerges, in the *ex post facto* atmosphere of explanation and justification, as *the* reason frequently was, to the agent at the time of action, one consideration among many, *a* reason . . . [a reason as a cause] provides a model neither for a predictive science of action nor for a normative account of evaluative reasoning” (Davidson 2006b:33).

From Ontology to Locality

Thus subjectivities, in their intelligibility, form one basis for the possibility for a hermeneutics of social action—we presuppose that, in a broad sense, what people do is “understandable” to them, and thus is potentially understandable to us. However, this proposition is dependent for its feasibility on the willingness of the investigator to recognize “context.” This is to say that the principle of hermeneutic *charity* whereby one gives the benefit of the doubt to the research subject—assuming that they, in some sense or another, are being coherent and intelligible—requires as a counterpoint the hermeneutic *will* of the interpreter, which is to say the willingness to do the work of immersion, excavation, or exegesis necessary to place the actions and utterances of other people in enough of a meaningful social context that their intelligibility can indeed be processed by interpretation.¹⁸

The idea of situating action in a meaningful social context is another point of departure from realism. It directly contradicts the realist idea that the purpose of theory is to produce social ontology—an ambition that repeats, in an epistemological register, the desire to contrast subjective, contingent action with objective, determinant structure.¹⁹ The idea of a supraindividual set of meanings and symbolic structures that are neither contained in individuals’ intentions nor “objective” and external—in other words, the idea of culture—insists that the leap from action to external structure is theoretically misguided, and the realist argument for theory as social ontology is epistemologically naïve.²⁰ For, from an interpretive perspective, the problem with social ontology as a theoretical goal is that it ignores how social ontology as social fact in the world is continually worked up through the frames of culture, which are arbitrary and conventional. Thus the very nature of the social in a given time and space—essential, surely, for sociological explanation—requires the work of meaning-interpretation. The relationship of action and structure cannot be established in advance, and mechanisms cannot be posited outside of the local comprehension of structures of social meaning. Thus as Clifford Geertz wrote, “the thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is . . . but what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said” (Geertz 2000a:10).

Ontologies of the social do not make good sense—or at least, not good explanations—of social action because structures of the social are separated from the investigator not by the subject-object divide but by the chasm of meaningful difference that separates the investigator-subject, suspended in the meaningful world

¹⁸Davidson notes that “the redescription of an action afforded by a reason may place the action in a wider social, economic, linguistic, or evaluative context” (Davidson 2006b:28), but does not carry this insight forward. Concerning the relationship of reasons-as-causes to sociological analysis as a whole, Bhaskar makes exactly the inverse argument from that I am making here. He takes “reasons-as-causes” as implying the necessity of an ontological science of psychology, which then provides the “agentic” complement to his ontology of society and social structure (Bhaskar 1979:102–52).

¹⁹In this regard, it is illuminating to examine the distance that the originator of scientific realism, Rom Harré, put between himself and the social scientific realism of Bhaskar and critical realism more generally. Harré strongly discourages the realist aim to treat social structures as entities with causal power—in other words, to theorize social structure ontologically. This has become evident in many of his recent articles, but see in particular the symposium in Volume 5, Issue 1 of the *European Journal of Social Theory*, “Rom Harré on Social Structure and Social Change” (Carter 2002; Harré 2002a, 2002b; May and Williams 2002; Strydom 2002).

²⁰Of course, Bhaskar and other realists argue extensively that they take fully into account the cultural or linguistic “context” of actions. In Bhaskar, however, this comes in an explicitly epistemological, not ontological register, wherein he admits the necessity of cultural context for the investigator to properly identify an action (Bhaskar 1979:108).

of sociological theory, from the investigated-subject, suspended in culture. Both are subject to the arbitrary and conventional nature of meaning as a system of signification. Thus when we examine the collective frames through which subjects work to make the social world intelligible, in “reading” culture as an ensemble of texts, or in comprehending the historical trajectories and labored reproduction of social forms, we are required to address ourselves to *locality*, in the sense articulated by Geertz: “an attempt to come to terms with the diversity of the ways human beings construct their lives in the act of leading them” (Geertz 1983a:16)

Locality is not a geographic measure but an analytic imperative to consider the idiosyncrasies of meaning and their consequences for social action. We cannot assume we know, in full and in advance, the form and content of social life, hypothesized in theory and tested in the field—we have to tentatively use our theories to begin to interpret a social space, shuttling back and forth between our abstractions and the evidence of meaningful social experience. Thus, both Geertz’s thick description of the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 2000b), and Michel Foucault’s sweeping reconstruction of the “epistemes” of classical and modern thought (Foucault 1970)²¹ constitute exercises in locality—they are attentive to historical and cultural difference in their effort to reconstruct patterns of meaning that explain certain behaviors.

The point is to respect the autonomy of meaning-formations as possessing their own logic, and thus as requiring interpretation so as to place actions in their proper context. In doing so, we examine the contingent creation of social ontology through structures of signification and their institutionalization on the ground. If the ontological is locally determined by meaning, the goal of sociological explanation is to get inside the various layers of social meanings. This requires the tools of theory, mobilized not to achieve an epistemic break with the meanings of the social world, but to bridge the gap of meaning, and articulate how certain actions, done for certain reasons, are part of a larger whole, which actors may or may not see.

Thus from the interpretive perspective, sociological *theory* is not ontological in the sense of establishing a unified, abstract account of the fundamental mechanisms according to which social life works—or even in the more modified sense of using the distinctions between real, actual, and empirical to articulate the underlying mechanisms for a given historical period. It is true that sociological *explanations* are ontological in the sense of making truth claims about aspects of the social world. But theory does not gather together a set of social entities, expressed in the abstract, whose powers of causality are triggered when the conditions are right. Rather, sociological theory is the highly reflexive and open cultural frame for research activities, a set of conceptual tools that aids the process by which the investigator comes to comprehend the meaning-worlds of others. The actual reconstruction of how these meanings work themselves out in a given set of social structures and social actions under examination must, while using theory as a guide, always reference the meaningful particularities of the case itself—the epistemic orderings that all social objects always already have.

This perspective on what sociological theories are and do resonates with certain existent aspects of sociological research and debate that cannot be accommodated by the scientific-realist model, no matter how sophisticated it becomes. First, it makes

²¹Here, we must differentiate the early work of Foucault (the “archeological” Foucault) from his middle period (the “genealogical” Foucault). The early Foucault retained the concept of experience (Foucault 1988), deciphered and decoded meanings based on extensive empirical evidence, and attested to the possibility of a study of public discourse as an autonomous meaning-formation (Foucault 1994:xvii).

sense of the pluralistic and free-floating way in which research *uses* theories. The common question “what theory are you going to use?” grates upon the scientific-realist ambition to get sociology out of its “preparadigmatic” stage and into the stage of “normal science.” Sociological theories seem to have more lives than either a scientific norm of falsifiability (Popper 2002b) or the realist contention for “judgmental rationality” (Bhaskar 1979) would suggest, and seem to coexist in opposition to each other continuously in a way that is not entirely resolvable by reference to empirical evidence—or even to presuppositional logic. Social-scientific research is always, it seems, in revolutionary upheaval. And yet, these theories do not need to resolve the revolution into a single bureaucratic structure to continue to “develop,” or to continue to be useful to researchers. Indeed, sociologists seem to have lost patience with theoretical Napoleons.

This is *not* because sociological theories are at their root only normative commitments—a contention often made in the anti-science understanding of social theory (e.g., Seidman 2003), and frequently lampooned by strict realists (e.g., Hedstrom 2005:12–14). Rather, it is because (good) sociological theory does not identify social entities in an ontological manner, but mediates the meaning-worlds of the investigator and the investigated. And so the ultimately arbitrary and conventional nature of the meanings at work in the context of the investigated subjects means that for sociological theory to do its job, it must accept an unending plurality of “theories of” (theories of civil society, of scientific rationality, of colonialism . . .), and a great deal of reflection upon itself and its own norms and practices (“meta-theory”), so as to prime the investigator with the tools to mediate the chasm of meaning between the investigator and investigated. That this is the ultimate task of theory suggests that is not a break from the world of the investigated, but a connection and comprehension of it, which is the definitive epistemic posture of interpretive investigation and explanation.

From the Epistemic Break to the Depth Hermeneutics of Social Formations

In realism, the relationship between investigator and investigated is that of the “epistemic break.” But if theory is used in the manner suggested above—not to reduct from phenomenology to ontology, but to re-describe actions in terms of their reasons, and to situate reasons and motivations in the holistic terms of patterns of discourse—then the ideal of an epistemic break also must be discarded in favor of a sense of the tension between an outsider’s and an insider’s meaningful experience that produces new knowledge—between what Geertz called “experience-distant” and “experience-near” concepts (Geertz 1983b:57). This means that sociological knowledge is not dependent upon an “epistemic break” but rather a depth investigation of meaning, an exegesis of intention and context that renders subjects intelligible and cultures comprehensible.

In realism, of course, the epistemic break relies upon scientific ontology for its stable certainty. The classic trope of sociological irony—“they know not what they do”—is achieved through reference to the separate structures of the social, scientifically conceived. Thus, for example, to gain the leverage of a “structural perspective,” Skocpol dismisses the content of ideology: “it cannot be argued . . . that the cognitive content of the [revolutionary] ideologies in any sense provides a predictive key to either the outcomes of the Revolutions or the activities of the revolutionaries . . . ideologically oriented leaderships in revolutionary crises have been greatly limited by existing structural conditions, and severely buffeted by the rapidly changing currents of

revolutions” (Skocpol 1979:170–71; for a clear explication of Skocpol as a realist, see Gorski 2004:22–28, esp. 27).

In interpretivism, on the contrary, the intentions and constructions of actors are placed into a coherent web of supra-individual meaning. This can include both the apprehension of codes and narratives—cultural frames—that are not immediately obvious to actors, and an understanding of objective structures or *externalities*. But constraining, external structures are not conceived of ontologically, or mechanistically. Rather, those structures that appear to actors as external are considered as *objectivized* structures, which thus have their own historical trajectory and must be interpreted as presupposing their own meaningful logic. No matter how objective—in the sense of external, unchangeable, and coercive—a set of social structures appear to the actors immersed in them, from a strict epistemological perspective they are artifices of human creation, built on the material-biological substrate of human existence, dependent in the last instance upon meaning for their shape. Reflexive realism, of course, recognizes “social constructionism” in this sense. Yet it fails to see that this requires even more interpretive work to comprehend the meaningful logics of externalized structures, and their interactions with the contested meanings of culture, which mediate the access of acting subjects to their external constraints.

Thus the social sciences require a continual investigation of the meaning to which objectifications refer, that is, an analysis of the internal, meaningful relations between externalities and signification. The workings of externalities must also be considered in their radical difference, historical flux, and arbitrary and conventional construction. This was Wilhelm Dilthey’s fundamental argument, taken from Hegel, about the objective aspects of social life. Dilthey insisted that though “structural systems” (Dilthey 1976:192) are “embedded in the context of nature” (Dilthey 1976:191), they nonetheless demand interpretation, for “this objectification is always related, in understanding, to experience in which the person [the investigator] becomes aware of his own inner life and capable of interpreting that of others . . . every fact is man-made, and, therefore, historical” (Dilthey 1976:192).

Thus in considering these aspects of social structures (markets, political hierarchies, bureaucracies . . .), the task of the investigator is still an *interpretive* one, for two reasons. First, though actors may not explicitly assign meaning to a given set of “externalities,” insofar as these externalities are ultimately dependent upon human action and are artifices of human creation, they presuppose and enact a meaningful logic of some sort—and the investigator must reveal this. And, second, when such objectivized structures intersect with subjectivity, this occurs through the grid of culture. Interpretivism thus insists on *the historicity and cultural specificity of externalities*.

Sociological Interpretation: Some Examples

To carry home these three points, in the remaining space I would like to consider some examples of work in interpretive sociology, which form a direct counterpoint to realist research. The overarching point of interpretivism is that the “objects” of social scientific research should be seen less as objects requiring ontological theorization than as fabrications of human action, which have an “inner,” meaningful logic to them. The classic case of this is “culture,” the centerpoint of interpretive explanations, which defies ontological categorization, as many commentators have

noted.²² But I have also made the point that the “objective” structures of the social should be studied, in all of their efficacy and constraining capacity, from an interpretive perspective as well. Thus, let us take up the classical sociological objects of “market” and “class,” not to deconstruct them into nothingness, but rather to show how an interpretive approach to them produces a quite distinct form of theorization and explanation than does the standard realist approach, which the mere mention of these terms usually evokes.

We can use an example from economic sociology to make clear the interpretive argument for the historical and cultural specificity of externalities. A classic example of a “noncultural” structure is a market, defined simply as a situation “in which goods and services are sold to customers for a price that is paid in money (a generalized medium of exchange)” (Fligstein 1996:658). Fred Block has made clear the way in which economic sociology, and in particular his *historical* approach to economic sociology, differentiates itself from the more naturalistic approach to markets of neoclassical economics. The latter rests upon two central theoretical assumptions. First, that “the economy is an analytically separate realm of society that can be understood in terms of its own internal dynamics” (Block 1990:21). And, second, “the assumption that individuals act rationally to maximize utilities” (Block 1990:22).²³ To build a theory this way, one must assume that “markets” insofar as they do exist, are ontologically all of the same class, and can be theorized in this manner.

Block takes precisely the opposite approach, not denying the existence or efficacy of markets, but rather reformulating the concept of the “embeddedness” of markets in social relations (Granovetter 1985) to theorize their constant dependence upon highly variable “background conditions.” These include legal rules and the manner in which they are enforced, nonmarket work produced by women or slaves, and “the beliefs held by economic actors” (Block 1990:31). Thus, he writes that “while there is a temptation to imagine that these beliefs are simply a reflection of self-interest, the reality is that they can shape perceptions of self-interest themselves” (Block 1990:31). The point is that the given logic of a given market depends upon such historically contingent “background factors” to the point that referring to markets in an ontological manner in abstract scientific theory is less than useful. He gives the example of the relation between accounting practices and markets:

the core distinction economists make between investments and current expenses is inherently problematic . . . many specific expenditures combine purposes—they are oriented both to long-term growth and to achieving immediate objectives, and there is no obvious way to measure the weight of these two components. Nonetheless . . . Accountants must have a rule for deciding on such cases . . . Since they cannot capture the actual combination of purposes in the specific expenditure, however, whatever rule they decide on will ultimately have an element of arbitrariness. (Block 1990:32)

²²This is the central point of the discussion surrounding Ian Hacking’s Foucaultian studies, and his theoretical essays (Hacking 2002), wherein he introduces the specifically oxymoronic and ironic concept of *historical ontology*, intended to upend the idea that philosophy can serve as a source for ideas that stand outside history. Thus he writes that: “Historical ontology is about the ways in which the possibilities for choice, and for being, arise in history. It is not to be practiced in terms of grand abstractions, but in terms of the explicit formations in which we can constitute ourselves . . . whose trajectories can be plotted . . . Historical ontology is not so much about the formation of character as about the space of possibilities for character formation that surround a person, and create the potentials for “individual experience” (Hacking 2002:23).

²³There are significant debates with economics about whether these assumptions are ontological or instrumental, but it is indisputable that neoclassical economics uses a naturalistic theory of markets.

“Systems of accounting,” he continues, “are built up out of these somewhat arbitrary conventions, which serve to create the appearance of certitude out of ambiguity and complexity” (Block 1990:32–33). The consequences of the logic of a given accounting convention for government accounts and the lives of millions can be quite significant. Yet, Block points out: “It is only very rarely that anyone questions these findings or examines the conventions that might have produced that particular ‘social fact’” (1990:32–33).

Block’s anti-ontological theory of markets could hardly be accused of reducing economic action or market structure to a different “object”—social structure, culture, networks, or whatever. It is rather that his conceptual method—the regime of justification that sits behind his capacity to make explanatory claims, and his ability to clearly recognize the reality of markets and their consistent efficacy over large swaths of space and time—is markedly different than the realist mode that is dependent upon the positing of entities with properties. Thus when he endeavors to explain a set of social actions or even a large-scale social transformation (e.g., from industrialism to postindustrialism), he comprehends markets as constructed and construed by actors with variable subjectivity and possessed of cultural frames of reference. As a result, his account of markets unveils the historical specificity and contingent dimension to these externalities, whose efficacy comes not from their inherent “social being” but rather the strictness with which actors carry their construction and maintenance forward.

If markets have been a favorite reference point for strict realists, then perhaps “class” has been a meeting point for the reflexive realism. The theorization of the ontology and ideology of class formation shows all of the expanded concerns with history and culture that mark the reflexive break from strict realism, if also the tendency to return to a core set of mechanisms, embedded in a single theoretical narrative, in explaining class formation (Somers 1992). Here, too, there is an interpretive response, which can exemplify all three of the interpretive points I made earlier—the comprehension of subjectivity, the turn to locality and culture, and the understanding of externalities as historically and culturally specific.

In *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, William Sewell, Jr. proposes a new explanation of the emergence of class consciousness and worker solidarity in 19th-century France. We also find in his work the full-blown project of interpretive explanation.²⁴ Sewell takes the culture of the workers—the structures of meaning that code their understandings of labor and solidarity—as his core concern. But he also renders individual subjectivities intelligible and carefully examines the historicity and meaningful aspects of the externalities (structural obstacles) navigated by the French workers.

The explanation is thus centered upon the reconstruction of a historically situated meaning structure—the “corporate idiom”: “Derived from the usages of corporations of the old regime and worked out in opposition both to the claims of the masters and to the proprietary individualism imposed by the state, this corporate idiom expressed and informed the workers’ aspirations for a moral community of the trade” (Sewell 1980:194). Sewell traces both the origins and internal evolution of this meaningful logic—codified and executed originally in the guilds of the old regime and eventually in the workers revolution of 1848. And thus it was “by developing a corporate

²⁴This is in contrast to Sewell’s later, theoretical work, especially his “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation” (Sewell 1992), which takes on a much more ontological, realist cast in attempting to establish the fundamental relationship between structure and action.

vocabulary that workers found their own voice in the early years of the nineteenth century” (Sewell 1980:194). Yet Sewell refuses a singular or monolithic account of the corporate idiom. At each step in his explanation he considers how the subjects he is studying made sense of their world by combining, managing, and merging different idioms. Thus he shows in detail how the Parisian *sans-culottes* combined “revolutionary sentiment and support for corporations” (Sewell 1980:93), such that even the most radical calls for the abolition of privilege (in the *cahiers de doléances*) maintained the necessity of corporations. Sewell *also* examines how the workers’ corporate idiom, and the workers’ consciousness, intersected with a key externality—the law.²⁵ Yet, as he compellingly shows, this externality has its own meaningful referent—Enlightenment liberalism.²⁶

The power of Sewell’s interpretation cannot be traced to his giving up nomothetic social science for the ideographic position of the historian. It is rather that by identifying the “corporate idiom” as an immanent meaning-structure, he has moved beyond this opposition, as Weber did in his reconstruction of the spirit of capitalism as a “historical individual” (Weber 2002:13–37). He eschews neither history nor theory: again and again, Sewell explains events by drawing together meanings and motivations with theoretical acuity. Thus he explains a set of social events, not by hypothesizing and testing a parsimoniously designed set of social mechanisms, but rather by inferring the structures of social meaning construed workers’ identities, interests, and motivations (the corporate idiom) and those meanings that, objectified in various social institutions, structured their field of opportunities (Enlightenment liberalism, particularly its legal variant). These meaningful logics are examined in their difference and historical locality, resulting in the central counterintuitive finding of the book: contrary to the assumptions of many 20th-century leftists, 19th-century workers’ socialism was derived from a pre-Enlightenment form of discourse and practice: the guilds.

CONCLUSION

As epistemological positions on the justification of sociological knowledge and the mode by which sociological explanations are constructed, realism and interpretation have one key similarity. Both of them reject the empiricist argument that observable events and constant conjunctions are as far as we can go, philosophically speaking, in claiming rigorous knowledge of the world—social or natural. Instead, they both insist on the possibility of comprehending that that must be inferred from what is observed and recorded as fact—indeed it is what cannot be surmised by induction that, in both cases, renders sociological explanation possible. Both, furthermore, rely on social theory to accomplish this leap beyond the empirical to that that enables us to explain social action. Thus both realism and interpretivism are “depth” epistemologies, rejecting both the positivist and postmodern contentions that interpretation beyond the “surface” of social life is metaphysical nonsense.

²⁵For example, he writes, “what was a regulation for the good of trade to workers was a violation of the liberty of industry in the eyes of the law” (Sewell 1980:194).

²⁶Thus, for example, Le Chapelier’s law of 1791, which directly attacked the continuing existence of corporations (after this issue having been passed over in 1789), relied for its passage not on an anti-worker sentiment, but on the idea that “no intermediary body could stand between the individual—now armed with his natural rights—and the nation—now the repository and guarantor of natural rights and the sole arena for the exercise of public will” (Sewell 1980:91).

However, realism accomplishes this turn to depth via the transfer of an ontological philosophy of natural science to the social realm. The prescriptive reorientation of theory and explanation that results has certain essential ambiguities and problems, as I have tried to show. Ontological theory (perhaps attractive because of the way that it saved the rationality of natural science against its attackers), is inappropriate for the social realm because of the role of meaning in the construction and execution of social life—the arbitrary and conventional nature of signification renders ontological theory moot, and explanations necessarily local. The endless search for a pragmatic compensator to scientific experiment also, I argue, distorts any theoretical account of sociological research. Instead, I suggest, the continual need to make sense of other subjects—the requirement of hermeneutic charity—should be the basis for any account of research pragmatics. Finally, realism’s naturalism, no matter how reflexive, invests it in an epistemic break as foundational of social scientific knowledge. Instead, I suggest that even the most external, “objective” structures should be comprehended from the “inside-out,” in terms of their historicity and cultural specificity. This radical interpretive project—to understand the meaningful logic of externalities—renders the basis for an epistemic break problematic, since even those structures that confront actors as coercive forces, or that work without actors’ conscious knowledge, are to be interrogated and interpreted in a hermeneutic process of comprehension.

The ultimate goal of this interpretive shift is to reframe the possibility of sociological knowledge in a way that recognizes the cultural turn and its related intellectual movements as empirical accomplishments in the development of explanations of social actions in history. From an interpretive perspective, sociological inquiry requires that the investigator get inside the inner meanings by which his or her subjects live their lives. The production of knowledge about other social actors always takes place via a meaningful connection between the investigator’s subjectivity and those that he or she studies. This means that explanations are necessarily more local, and depend upon theory to enable the comprehension of cultural difference, so that actions can be explained as part of a larger, meaningful whole. That these wholes can stretch far and wide, and be executed with striking and fearful precision, does not remove them from the realm of human creation, and thus of human mind and experience. Thus their investigation cannot, and should not, mirror the investigation of nature. For most of its history, the naturalist imperative has been a burden sociology could neither bear nor throw off. But this historical trajectory, like others, is produced by social actions, and so it is subject to contingency, and open to reinterpretation.

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