



# The ersatz realism of critical realism: A reply to Porter

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## I.

Biblical exegesis refers to the scholarly methods used for the investigation and determination of the meaning of sacred texts. The goal, sometimes known by the Latin phrase *sensus plenior*, is to demonstrate the additional deeper meaning, intended by the author, but not always appreciated in certain over-literal and simplistic interpretations of key passages. Unsurprisingly, since some form of ‘Holy Spirit’ is often considered to have inspired the divine text, the task of exegesis has proved controversial, resulting in rival schools of thought on how ‘authentic meaning’ is to be established (Hayes, 2007).

I was reminded of these altercations in reading Porter’s (2015) critique of my critique (2013) of some of Bhaskar’s (1979) ideas on how research should be conducted in complex, open, adaptive systems. For the record, Porter’s exegesis can be found in volume 21(1) of this journal. His ire is targeted at a small section of Chapter 4 of my *Science of Evaluation*, the overall purpose of which was to rebut a wide range of fallacious propositions, Bhaskar’s included, on how get to an empirical grip on complexity. Let us rejoin the discussion with a little textual deconstruction of Porter’s tale. The *dramatis personae* are as follows: Bhaskar, of course, is the muse; Porter is the wise interlocutor; Pawson is unlettered in critical realism and thus sadly inclined to those over-literal and simplistic interpretations. The narrative structure is basically for Porter to interrogate the passages I have extracted from Bhaskar’s texts and then counter them with additional quotations from the same works, thus revealing my misunderstanding of the *sensus plenior*.

Whilst I’m a little unsure that I really want to win this battle of expositions, since it requires more wrestling with Bhaskar’s prose, it clearly behoves me to try and try again. In my original remarks, I didn’t really have room to address the underlying problem for evaluation researchers who choose to seek guidance in Bhaskar’s work. The fundamental difficulty is that Bhaskar was a philosopher, writing for philosophers about philosophy, with the consequence that he

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had little command of the conduct of empirical research (natural science or social science). What textual evidence might I adduce for this proposition?

Indeed dialectical critical realism may be seen under the aspect of Foucauldian strategic reversal of the unholy trinity of Parmendean/Platonic/Aristotlean provenance; of the Cartesian-Lockean-Humean-Kantian paradigm, of foundationalisms (in practice, fideistic foundationalisms) and irrationalisms (in practice, capricious exercises of the will-to-power or some other ideologically and/or psycho-somatically buried source) new and old alike; of the primordial failing of western philosophy, ontological monovalence, and its close ally, the epistemic fallacy with its ontic dual; of the analytic problematic laid down by Plato, which Hegel served only to replicate in his actualist monovalent analytic reinstatement in transfigurative reconciling dialectical connection, while in his hubristic claims for absolute idealism he inaugurated the Comtean, Kiekegaardian and Nietzschean eclipses of reason, replicating the fundamentals of positivism through its transmutation route to the superidealism of a Baudrillard. (Bhaskar, 1994)

How should we interpret this paragraph? Some see it as a virtuoso passage with the maestro demonstrating his pansophical grasp of the history of western philosophy. Others have detected a hint of mischief – is not the bravado here intended satirically, a post-ironic attempt to mock the playful pretensions of post-modernism? I could not begin to say – but what is clear is absence from Bhaskar's overview of critical realist agenda of anything to do with the practice of empirical research.

## 2.

We now come to the real bone of contention between Porter and Pawson. Put bluntly, I maintained and still maintain that the realism in critical realism is ersatz. The guiding impulse is actually transmuted to a form of transcendental idealism. Tentative, corrigible inquiry into workings of the real gives way to normative assertion about what must be real. I have explained this feat of prestidigitation in detail in the passage in dispute here (Pawson, 2013: 61–71). In brief, Bhaskar (1979: 59) deems experimental inquiry impossible in social science and seeks an 'analogue and compensator' in theoretical, a priori reasoning (he terms this 'essentially apodeictic argument'). This manoeuvre allow him to start with a philosophical question and then to pass off a philosophical answer as a mode of empirical inquiry. Let me quote further from the relevant texts.

The *Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) announces its quest on page 17: 'What properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?' We thus start in high metaphysics with the study of existence itself – what there is and what there is not. Bhaskar ventures on to discover his answer in a particularly authoritative text: '*Capital* may most plausibly be viewed as an attempt to establish what must be the case for the experiences grasped by the phenomenal forms of capitalist life to be possible; setting out as it were, a pure schema for the understanding of economic phenomena under capitalism, specifying the categories that must be employed in any investigation' (1979: 65). Note the two 'musts' here – huge claims rattle along in the space of a sentence. Marxism supplies for us the transcendental categorical scheme we need to grasp the essential features of capitalist society *and* it provides the conceptual toolkit to be employed in empirical inquiry. The power of a priori reasoning does not stop here, moreover, for it then permits the move from explaining what-is-the-case to prescribing what-ought-to-be-the-case (1979: 81):

If, then, one is in possession of a theory which explains why false consciousness is necessary, then one can pass immediately, without the addition of any extraneous value judgements to a negative evaluation of the object (generative structure, system of social relations or whatever) that makes that consciousness necessary (and *ceteris paribus*, to a positive evaluation of action rationally directed at the removal of the sources of that false consciousness).

This is what there is. This is what you need to know about it. This is how you should feel about it. For some this three-step storyline possesses breathtaking brilliance: for me it is malevolent masquerade. Without attempting to uncover the *sensus plenior* in *Capital*, I'm not moved to imagine that it must be read for its critical realist ontology. Marx's texts have been interpreted, with equal stubborn confidence, as technological-determinist (Cohen, 1978), as post-structuralist (Althusser, 1969) and even as post-modernist (Carver, 1998). Above all, I am totally unconvinced by the heads-I-win, tails-I-win empirical residue left in the wake of the transcendental theory. Should the proletariat strike or protest or collectivize then it is good for the soul and good for the theory. Should they partake of opiates or opiates of the masses or a reality TV, then it is deeply to be regretted but still good for the theory. Magill (1994: 130) captures the hollow centre of the categorical argument here: 'critical realism, like dialectical materialism, becomes a means of saying what is right and what is wrong without having to do the hard work in explaining why'.

### 3.

Porter is correct about one element in Bhaskar's writing. Alongside the categorical claims, there are occasional assertions about the need for empirical verification. Bhaskar, apparently, wants to proclaim the explanatory power of a priori, apodeictic reasoning whilst at the same time deeming it fallible. How does he square the circle? Bhaskar's chronicle takes the form of an abstract, top-down conceptual scheme for orchestrating social inquiry. Throughout, he 'validates' his prescriptions by comparing them advantageously to the parallel efforts of other philosophers. Nowhere does he provide an account of when and how this substantive research should be conducted. More crucially, there is no word on how and to what extent these empirical labours are considered to have the capacity to revise or falsify the prevailing theory.

So what is the role of the call to enter the field? To comprehend this one needs to follow closely the narrative structure of the nods to empirical observation. They are invariably couched alongside *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal) or *mutatis mutandis* (with the necessary modifications) clauses that are used to moderate the transcendental truths. Bhaskar makes frequent use of these devices, as for instance: 'we can certainly derive technical imperatives from theoretical premises alone (subject to a CP clause)' (1979: 83). In short, transcended inquiry has revealed these truths, and they are indeed true – other things being equal. The furtive rider protects the authority of the a priori claim – it acknowledges that empirical enquiry *could be* used to check whether modifications are needed to apply the theory to concrete situations. The door is merely left ajar for empirical research but without any indication of how we might pass through it.

I am hardly the first to pounce upon Bhaskar's questionable use of the *ceteris paribus* clause (e.g. Hammersley, 2002). Interestingly, considerable concern is expressed within the critical realist camp, with Lacey (1998) expressing doubt about whether the CP clause 'saps

explanatory critiques of their emancipatory potential'. The clearest rebuttal, however, is to be found in the words of Topper (2005: 270):

These [CP] clauses enable him [Bhaskar] to defend his formal and categorical claim by providing a net that contains and assimilates all the complex, contextual considerations that are central to almost any concrete questions of social or political action. If, however, these considerations are not really eliminated but are instead inconspicuously relocated in *en passant* phrases, then it is not clear what epistemic or practical purpose the categorical claim serves.

Here then is the rationale for evaluation researchers to give critical realism the widest berth. The outcomes of social interventions depend minutely on the contingencies of implementation and the specificities of context. These complexities are central to our business and not something that can be pushed aside in a Latin afterthought.

#### 4.

All of the above discussion, alas, is still entangled in philosophical arm-wrestling and thus carries the potential to reach into infinity. Perhaps, a more effective way to test out my thesis that critical realism smuggles in normative assertion in place of empirical evidence is to examine some substantive research done in its name. Lest I be accused of selecting a straw man here, the obvious candidate for inspection is Sam Porter. His 'Critical realist ethnography' (1993) paper is an evocative, ethnographic study of racist beliefs, acts and utterances in a medical setting. Here is a critical realist bothering to get his hands dirty – in this instance in some dirty business in ward routines. Transcripts record some nurses agitating – 'who does he think he is, coming over here from the arse end of the world and telling us who were born and raised here what to do' ... 'they may treat women like that in Pakistan but I don't see why he should get away with it here'.

Porter did not, however, encounter wall-to-wall abuse. Racism, he argues, will usually only be manifested in circumstances which the racist actor regards as auspicious for its display. In many hospital settings it is suppressed by professional ideology. Racist beliefs are often filtered out in favour of professional modes of interaction. Thus he also catches nurses saying: 'Why didn't you say something?' ... 'It would be unprofessional' ... 'It's not all his fault' ... 'When he first came he had a hard time of it.'

Thus far we have an exemplary but highly familiar illustration of the importance of context. Unsurprisingly, we learn that racist sentiments are much more likely to be expressed in the private rather than the public sphere. This is all perfectly in line with the basic constructs of critical realism *and* realist evaluation, in which it is assumed that causal forces are liabilities and not laws, and whether they fire or not depends on local circumstances.

But Porter wants to go much further – he seeks to convince readers that racism is the enduring, endemic social form. To demonstrate this he ditches empirical evidence and calls on some familiar philosophical idioms: 'racism is structural phenomenon, displaying both relational power and ontological depth'. Bhaskar is, of course, quoted to this end – 'specific ideologies are associated with specific practices, which in turn are associated with structural positions'. In short, racism is the underlying reality, which is muted in the very specific context of professional nursing. But where is the evidence for this grander claim? One could just

as easily argue that medicine has enduring, universalistic norms and that the racist outbursts are just that – aberrations from pre-existing, historic forms. The celebrated principles of medical ethics, after all, carry venerable and widespread command: the respect for autonomy – *voluntas aegroti suprema lex*; beneficence – *salus aegroti suprema lex*; non-maleficence – *primum non nocere*; justice in the distribution of scarce health resources – *iustitia* (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001).

Porter's empirical data (tiny transcripts and fragments of field notes) are quite incapable of distinguishing between these two interpretations. He does so instead by retreating to headquarters and by parachuting in a priori, apodictic claims. Actors, we are instructed, do not have discretion in choosing which structures to obey or ignore. Rather, and here he quotes from the canons of Bhaskar, 'it is possible to hierarchically rank structures in terms of their explanatory significance for any specific event'. This is simply not good enough. If racism tops professionalism in the health service, then this needs to be demonstrated and explained. Painstaking investigations are required of racism at the institutional level – what exactly is its imprint on recruitment, management, training, supervision, admissions, etc.? I pass no judgement on the outcomes of the non-existent inquiry here – but simply note, with Hammersley (2000: Chapter 5), that exactly the same *absence* is characteristic of the work of other critical researchers making seemingly authoritative claims on the 'deep racism' of the schooling system (e.g. Connolly and Troyna, 1998). They are declarations of faith rather than fact.

## 5.

We now come to Porter's assertion that realist evaluation 'conflates agency and structure under the rubric of mechanism'. As an alternative he recommends Archer's (1995) critical realist sociology, which acknowledges that 'they (agency and structure) are analytically separable and temporally sequenced'. Under this charge the *dramatis personae* is changed. I am grandmother and the zestful Porter is teaching me to suck eggs. The *Science of Evaluation* includes a ringing endorsement of Archer's reasoning on this very point (Pawson, 2013: 5). I use her ideas on temporal sequencing in precisely the manner that Porter urges. The things we study as evaluators – policies and programmes – are inserted into pre-existing structures, which are themselves fluid and changing. I am pleased to see that Porter (2015: 77) recognizes interventions as 'consciously created by agents with the aim of altering the interpretations and actions of other agents' for this is precisely how Tilley and I described them on the original exposition (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 75). There we set down evaluation's first 'axiomatic challenge' – identifying the range of mechanisms which have sustained the perceived societal problem and examining the range of mechanism inherent in the intervention, with the aim of investigating whether the latter are capable of overturning/counteracting/transforming the former.

Another distinctly temporal and thus 'unconflated' tenet of realist evaluation is the endorsement of the notion of emergence. In *The Science of Evaluation*, I charge realist inquiry with the task of 'mapping the potential emergent effects, long-term adaptation, societal changes and untended consequences associated with the programme' (Pawson, 2013: 42). Take the usage of CCTV in crime control as a simple example. In the 1970s, when VCR technology became available, it was sensible enough to conduct realist inquiry by searching and sifting through the *mechanisms* through which such cameras might work. In 2015, with 2 million

cameras installed in the UK, the surveillance apparatus has become the surveillance society. We now are confronted with a pre-existing *context*, in the face of which criminal activity has learned to adapt (not to mention the impact of the sentinel structural gaze on many other perfectly legal forms of activity).

Porter correctly recognizes my reluctance to concede explanatory power to the structural sphere. He on the other hand wants to emphasize the generative power of ‘material, cultural and jurisdictional resources’. This objection simply overlooks another basic axiom set down in the first text – investigation of ‘the social and cultural conditions necessary for change mechanisms to operate’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 77). I have, in short, always maintained that structural resources are pivotal in understanding policy outcomes – but I have opted for different terminology and chosen to call them ‘contexts’. I have done so because it is not just ‘big structures’ that enable or constrain the outcomes of social interventions. Context is layered. Sometimes it is pre-existing, macro economic conditions that need to be auspicious to forward a policy. Sometimes it is institutional norms that need to be supportive to enable change. Sometimes it is cultural practices that need to be consonant with a new programme. Sometimes it is the prevailing interpersonal relations that need to be favourable for an intervention to work. Realist evaluation is not prone to giddy optimism, of course, for it is usually the case that one or other (or more) of these contexts is out of kilter with the ambitions of an intervention.

This more flexible understanding of how structures act on agency allows for much more nuanced investigation. It requires the researcher to investigate those contextual resources that are likely to be especially pertinent to a specific inquiry. Rather than starting with pre-given, macro-structural conditions, it demands careful thought on the part of the researchers to generate hypotheses on exactly what it is that constrains or enables change. Thus, for instance, if I was investigating the mixed fortunes of traffic calming schemes, I wouldn’t expend too much effort on capitalist modes of production and might well make contextual comparisons involving diverse locations with different road layouts and traffic volumes. If, by contrast, the inquiry was about how forms of late western capitalism are giving way to Chinese state capitalism, I might well examine the former’s self-imploding, too-big-to-fail institutions and their material capacity to defy regulation (Acharya and Cooley, 2011) as well investigating as the commanding force of the latter’s discipline commissions and their re-embrace of some ancient cultural traditions (Coase and Wang, 2013).

In summary, I would submit the understanding of the ever-mutating, open-ended, zig-zag relationship between structure and agency is very little different in the hands of critical realism and in the more analytic variants of realism that I prefer. The crucial difference lies in our understanding of the explanatory significance of these ontological principles. For me, the study of social ontology is substantively opaque. It tells us about the *kinds of things* that need to be included in empirical inquiry but not the *actual things* that make a difference. Thus I prefer to begin inquiry with ‘theory elicitation’ identifying and exploring specific mechanisms, contexts and outcomes: critical realists start and end with the presumed reality of the ‘structures of last resort’ – like class oppression, racism and patriarchy.

## 6.

Realist evaluation, Porter notes, subscribes proudly to ‘piecemeal social engineering’ and this unmasks it, oh calumny, as pawn in the establishment order. How should I respond to

this charge about my Whitehall-pandering, contract-grubbing, ‘technocratic consciousness’?. A thought about the inadvisability of stone-throwing for greenhouse dwellers springs to mind. With colleagues in his School of Nursing and Midwifery, Porter has recently published a review of assessment tools to measure the needs of care-givers of cancer survivors (Prue et al., 2015). The conclusion is as follows:

All assessment tools require further psychometric testing. For research purposes, the use of the SPUNS (with its acceptable, test-retest reliability) appears the most appropriate; although its length may be of concern for clinical use; therefore, the shorter SCNS-P&C is more suitable for use clinically. At present, the NAFC-c demonstrates a great potential in both the research and clinical environment: however, it requires further psychometric testing before it can be fully recommended.

I leave readers to vote on whether such findings contribute, in Porter’s terms, to: i) the ‘emancipation of human potentialities’ or ii) ‘technocratic devaluation of lifeworlds’.

Another surprising example, given critical realism’s valorization of generative causation, is his research on how to improve recruitment to randomized controlled trials (Porter et al., 2014). In this instance, he investigates reasons for laggardly rates of participation in an RCT to ascertain if improvisational music therapy improves communicative skills in young people with mental and behavioural disorders. The research itself consists of an elegant CMO analysis, uncovering the primary mechanisms (education, facilitation, audit and feedback) and the major contexts (professional culture and organizational support) that will improve recruitment. But to what end? It is hard to think of a more unlikely destination – the use of realist inquiry to nurture standardizing, positivistic, black-box investigation.

I am unable to decipher Porter’s lapses into ‘technocratic consciousness’ here, but the more significant point is to rebut his claim that realist evaluation and realist synthesis are blind to ideological concerns and to wider political and social forms. Realist evaluation does not hunker down in the face of politics. Neither does it join in the slanging match. The task is to analyse rather than to assert how the wider contextual forces will impinge on policies and programmes. It treats assumptions about capitalist hegemony, oppressive structures and so on as hypotheses to be investigated.

For example, the tobacco industry might be expected to fight all smoking control legislation tooth and claw. Yet, in the case of proposed legislation in the UK on banning smoking in cars carrying children, a little empirical scrutiny reveals tobacco companies declaring support for such prohibition. The motivation here is hardly beneficence, or heaven forbid, non-maleficence. Tobacco’s support for this particular ban is rooted in previous, bruising lawsuits, which released companies from indefinite compensatory claims in exchange for a ban on any action, direct or indirect, to market to children. Contemporaneous evidence, incidentally, also demonstrates that those with a deep ethical concern for developing well-being and human capacities (i.e. the tobacco control lobby) were decidedly economical with the truth in making claims about the extreme toxicity of in-vehicle smoke (Pawson et al., 2011).

In short, conducting inquiry in highly politicized areas leads realist evaluation to examine the *realpolitik* rather than automatically relating outcomes to essential underlying structures. Power plays play out in an unpredictable, emergent fashion and mapping their local, internal dynamic is crucial. I might also mention that smoking control can be considered one of the great gains of piecemeal social engineering. The interventions mounted in its name are, moreover, theory-based. The theories in question, however, are not abstract pronouncements about

transcendental processes – rather they are testable, middle-range theories about gradual ‘denormalization’ of the smoking habit.

## 7.

I arrive at some concluding remarks. What are we to make of critical realism? As the saying goes, ‘you pay your money and you make your choice’. I was initially impressed by Bhaskar’s first work (1978) because of its brilliant exposition of the generative causal explanation *within* experimental science. In this brief note we have also seen critical realism as philosophical grandstanding, as explain-all Marxism, as depth ethnography, and as a diagnostic tool for sustaining positivist inquiry. There was no space, fortunately, for Bhaskar’s final foray into ‘Transcendental Dialectical Critical Realism’ (2000). With this turn, even the faithful have recoiled in horror at the founder’s chiliastic thoughts on reincarnation and his unthinkable discovery of an ‘incense-saturated, New-Age God’ (MacLennan, 2000).

If researchers want to be politically partisan – then by all means they should be so (though I’m less sure about militant stones thrown from ivory towered safety). If researchers feel cowed by a mass of philosophical flummery then it is about time they developed a bit of backbone. But if they want to conduct meaningful empirical inquiry and most certainly if they want to do realist evaluation – then a modest, intelligent and sceptical commitment to the principles of objectivity and value neutrality must remain the goal.

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