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“...the point is to change it”: Critical realism and human geography.

A paper for Dialogues in Human Geography

Abstract

This paper picks up themes discussed in Cox's 'Notes on a brief encounter: critical realism, historical materialism and human geography'. I argue that perhaps the encounter was more complex than Cox allows. At core Cox underplays, or marginalises, the discussion of causality and dismisses the significance of ontology stressing instead epistemology. The paper makes a case for another reading of the debate, one that has continuing significance.

“...the point is to change it”¹: Critical realism and human geography.

A paper for Dialogues in Human Geography

9.12.12

Andy C Pratt

Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries

King's College London

Andy.pratt@kcl.ac.uk

My apologies to the poor reader as we are cast back into an historical moment of philosophical turmoil in the late 1980s (Harvey, Thrift et al. 1987; Cox and Mair 1988; Cox and Mair 1989; Duncan and Savage 1989; Lovering 1989; Walker 1989) . It may help to bear in mind that both points of view under discussion were engaged in a bigger struggle for the heart of the geographical discipline pitched against the spectre of positivism that had been normative for the previous decade. So, the fact that we are focusing here on an internal debate of what are – in the wider sense – quite similar positions is surprising. However, with this caveat the debate is revealing; it is revealing in how we tend to view epistemology as prior to, or in favour of, ontology: a debate never far away.

Kevin Cox has engaged in a useful task of trying to make sense of an old debate – the tensions between critical realism and historical

geographical materialism in human geography, as he did in his previous contributions with Andrew Mair (see above). I write as somebody who has found both traditions of use. However, I feel that Cox finds dualisms where I can see a potential dialectic between the traditions. I would stress that I am not suggesting that there is a 'compromise' here (*pace* Giddens), but a true dialectic. Moreover, I am concerned that he narrates a partial story of critical realism, that had its moment, and then only within the discipline of geography. For me, this points to a wider issue of the production of knowledge within geography.

Cox reviews the debates, seeks to clarify differences and highlights questions about abstraction, causation and the distinction between internal and external relations. On balance, he judges historical geographical materialism to have got it right. My concern is in part with the certainty of position taking in this essay. I do not find that Cox's version of academic history accords with the record. For Cox there appears to be one Marx, and, albeit slightly fuzzy at the edges, one Critical Realism. Clearly, Marx changed position and emphasis through his writing career. Moreover, most of the authors cited as key protagonists in this debate have at one time or another drawn on the same key passages in Marx's Grundrisse on abstraction (Marx and Nicolaus 1973), albeit they conclude different points. Critical realism is also a developing position. So, the heritage is more various, and less definitive.

The point, I think, is that Critical Realism and (Geographical) Historical materialism seek to do different things with contrasting

emphases. Marx was using philosophical tools to sharpen an analytic lens with which to view capitalist societies. With the knowledge thus produced he sought to mobilise workers to challenge a system not operating in their interests. There is a huge debate about the nature of Marx's philosophising and social and economic explanations: there is clearly little consensus here, despite shared positions. Epistemologically, and politically, his work is incredibly valuable.

In this sense, critical realism is similar to my interpretation of Marx's aims. It however is more explicitly rooted in philosophy, especially a philosophy of science (Bhaskar 1975). Realism is philosophical tradition with a long history (Harré 1972; Harré 1986). Simple versions of realism underpin empiricism, and sustain the common sense use of the term 'realist' (somebody who sees things 'as they are', which is another way of expressing a normative view). The relevant iteration for our current debate is scientific realism. Roy Bhaskar – the progenitor of critical realism – deploys it as an 'under labourer'. In his view all Marxists should be realists, but not all realists are Marxists. Bhaskar's work draws on a lineage of philosophical debate about realism (s), in particular to challenge to positivism and empiricism (faulting a successionist model of causation, and nominalist ontology). He has a developed position on the application of this philosophical critique to both the sciences and the social sciences (which is when he adopts the 'critical' modifier to realism)(Bhaskar 1989). In sum, he glosses his position as ontologically bold, but epistemologically timid. Andrew Sayer (1984) took Bhaskar's work and tried to work it through as a methodology for the social sciences, and in particular in economic geography².

Interestingly, David Harvey's academic career embraced, and then rejected, positivism as a philosophy in favour of historical materialism (Harvey 1969; Harvey 1973). Harvey, I would characterise, is ontologically and epistemically bold. However, the ontological boldness is relatively unexamined leading him open to charges of structural determination and totalising. Totalising, not in the sense that Cox seeks to defend (to be a total explanation) but totalising as in everything being equally related to everything else. Critical realism's position on causality offers a sympathetic critique of established materialist positions here through the differentiation of necessary and sufficient conditions of causal processes. The extent that Harvey avoids such charges appears related to his use of a form of historical materialism within which the social and cultural have significant play (Harvey 1989). Ironically, it is in the empirical that this is deployed selectively to create powerful accounts of urbanisation, although I have never been convinced as to their ontological status: that is the account of why one information source, or process, is prioritised over another.

We can contrast yet another position, that of Anthony Giddens (1981; 1984)(who also roots his analytical journey in the Grundrisse, and deploys a social transformation epistemology: structuration). Structuration is different again from Bhaskar's 'Transformational Model of Social Activity': Giddens is epistemically bold, and ontologically weak (or non existent)³.

So, I am in accord with Kevin Cox on the fact that the philosophy is a key point: abstraction, causality and the nature of social relations. However, I would contest what I read as a rather closed or limited interpretation of these issues that prioritise epistemology. I am saddened in that Cox seems 'stuck' in the debate about 'localities' he uses to signify the 'battle of ideas' he seeks to identify. Critical Realists such as Sayer, as Cox points out, view space as a product of processes: not as a 'thing' which would amount to a chaotic conception, the sort of nominalist account commonly found in positivism.

Although this debate is framed in Cox's account as one of 'space', I think an available interpretation was that it was as much about the state or economic processes. For example, it was, contra Cox, the struggles over the local state that animated pioneering critical realist analyses about local state restructuring, regional policy, urban politics or housing politics (which then produced uneven spatialities). It was the production of difference through the actually existing social relations under particular conditions. The positing of space as (mere) context simply puts us back in the normative empiricist camp – a position that most forms of radical geography have sought to distance themselves from. There is not opportunity here to expand on this point, but the contingent relations in critical realism are not simply 'context' as some critics like to suggest. Surely, no historical materialist would argue against the idea of situated struggles: outcomes that are manifest at certain times under particular conditions?

Cox, in expounding of his position, sadly not an exceptional one, offers an insight into theory and philosophy that has tended to be marginalised in mainstream geography; where it is included, it is of a survey variety, and safely imported into Geography shorn of its history and (and dare I say it, context). It is interesting to note that debates about critical realism still play a role in heterodox economics, and in sociology, and philosophy, even if, apparently, they have been forgotten by geographers in search of the next 'big idea'. This raises, for me, another issue: the 'faddishness' of geography. I think that it should cause us to reflect upon the particular conditions of the academic production of knowledge. However, I am a 'realist'⁴ enough to recognise that this increased turnover in the 'market in ideas' that young entrants to the academic labour market need to insert themselves in, is not a chance affair. Nor, is the definition and boundaries of disciplines (increasingly tightly policed in the era of national research assessment exercises). This is a debate for another time, but, as I have suggested, it is not unrelated, in fact it is constitutive of this problem.

I would concur with Kevin Cox that these debates repay forensic examination; sadly, we are often presented with stereotypical positions that undermine such attempts. I am not suggesting that there is some mythical 'third way' where all positions can be resolved, they cannot. Rather the call is to sharpen our understanding of the precise nature of disagreements so that we can all improve explanation and refine concepts. In the case of Geographical Historical Materialism and Critical Realism, both have added insight and depth of analysis. Both have encouraged scholars

to critically engage with empiricism and positivism, and to develop challenging accounts of the world, and, in their various ways, shaped the discipline of geography (and the rest of the social sciences).

Let me return to method, the sub-title of Sayer's book, and the focus of Massey and Meegan (1985) and the concern to attend to engaged research generated by debates about critical realism (Pratt 1995; Yeung 1997). Bhaskar argues for an epistemically open project, and I think that we can make a good case for a continuing engagement of critical realism with (slightly) more recent post-structuralist accounts (which are often incorrectly counterpoised to critical realism). For example, there are common concerns and tensions in forms of discourse analysis and work on actor network theory⁵ (Pratt 1991; Pratt 1996; Pratt 2009).

My plea would be for researchers to resist the dualist urge and to instead engage in careful and open critique with existing and new philosophical traditions, drawing upon a continuing engagement with 'older' positions. Of course, historical materialism is one such tradition. One would hope that both it and critical realism should be strengthened, and in this case, geographical explanation too, through engagement. I would hope that critical realism (or any other philosophical position) would give us a critical insight into argumentation and methods and ultimately help us theorise, explain, and act in different ways. Although we may settle on different philosophical positions the touchstone of the university is surely that we enable students and colleagues to honestly and robustly seek to

justify and defend, or accede, to forensic questioning from a range of viewpoints.

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¹ With apologies to Marx (1845) Theses on Feuerbach

² See my account of Sayer's contribution (Pratt, A. C. (2010). Andrew Sayer. Key thinkers on space and place. P. Hubbard, R. Kitchin and G. Valentine. London, Sage: 352-358.), and of Critical Realism's position in geography Pratt, A. C. (2009). Critical Realism/Critical Realist Geographies. International encyclopedia of human geography, Volume 2. R. Kitchen and N. Thrift. Oxford, Elsevier. **2**: 379-384.

Importantly, we should not take a geo-centric view here, the debate has ranged across the social sciences: Johnson, T., C. Dandeker, et al. (1984). The structure of social theory : dilemmas and strategies. Basingstoke, Macmillan, Layder, D. (1990). The realist image in social science. Basingstoke, Macmillan, Layder, D. (1993). New strategies in social research : an introduction and guide. Cambridge, Polity, Archer, M. S. (1995). Realist social theory : the morphogenetic approach. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Archer, M. S. (1996). Culture and agency : the place of culture in social theory. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Lawson, T. (1997). Economics and reality. London, Routledge, Archer, M. S. (2002). Solving the problem of structure and agency by developing realist social

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³ See Pratt, A. C. (2009). Critical Realism/Critical Realist Geographies. International encyclopedia of human geography, Volume 2. R. Kitchen and N. Thrift. Oxford, Elsevier. **2**: 379-384.
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⁴ Of course, I am using the term ironically here; but it illustrates that this is the way that realism deployed in mainstream international relations for example.

⁵ Echoing the point made by Allen, J. (2012). "A more than relational geography?" Dialogues in Human Geography **2**(2): 190-193.