Organising for Alternative Futures: From the Philosophy of Science to the Science of Human Flourishing

What are the limits of influence for a philosophy of science? The last conference for the *International Association for Critical Realism* asked the question 'How can we organise for an alternative future?' The implicit assumption within this question is that critical realism, with its specific contribution to the understanding of the ontology of the natural and social world, enables researchers to ask questions not only about what is, but also of what could be. In addition to offering a resolution to the limitations of the philosophy underpinning what might loosely be described as `positivist  and `idealist´ traditions, the resolution itself (i.e. a conception of reality that is stratified into the real, actual and empirical; the proposal that causal powers exist and can endure without acting; resolutions to issues of structure and agency that make space for human reflexivity whilst maintaining the importance of structural powers that shape socioeconomic history) has, within it, the insight that what is in being is neither always necessary, nor impossible to change. This implies that offering a causal explanation of a situation, context, mechanism, organisation, policy, market or economy is more complete if we have also considered the alternatives to the status quo. Indeed, critical realism enables researchers to ask searching questions of what other possible futures or states of affairs might exist.

As we write this introduction we are faced with an ever-increasing set of economic, environmental, social and political challenges that, on the face of it, cannot be met through existing ways of organising. One of the editors recently attended a seminar on the effect of a two degree rise in global temperature (the minimum hoped for) on sea levels around the world. The 'new map' of the coastline was sobering. It predicted that large areas of highly populated coastal land will be engulfed. It is difficult to argue against the view that changing our practices is entirely necessary, and yet the means to achieve this appear to be evading both theoretical and practical consensus. The challenges do not stop here. We are also faced with a growing economic disparity between the richest and poorest people on the planet. A recent report from Oxfam[1] suggested that the wealthiest 85 people on the planet now have the equivalent wealth to the bottom fifty percent. At the same time state education, in the United Kingdom at the least, is lacking sufficient funds to provide opportunities to all social groups, not to mention access to higher education being further restricted through the introduction of higher costs for tuition.

These challenges suggest that it is just as important for academic research to address these questions of change now, as it was when the industrial revolution first began in the area surrounding the University of Nottingham - the venue for this year's conference. Before introducing the articles that have embraced this call for understanding how to organise for an alternative future, we would like to sketch out why critical realism (in all its phases) offers researchers a meta-theoretical framework that not only deepens our potential to offer causal explanations of existing phenomena but also equips us with the means to ask: how might something be otherwise? We will, furthermore, make the case for why doing this, as part of all social science research projects, can enrich our causal explanations. In other words, we'd like to propose that considering alternative futures can be an important method for developing accurate causal explanations and theories of the present.

Critical realism and social change

Bhaskar's (1975) philosophy of science arose from asking the question: What must the world be like in order for science, as we understand it, to be possible? He suggested that because it is not possible to identify correlations and causation through experimental activity, there must be underlying causal mechanisms enabling the events (*qua* variables) being measured. As these correlations may not endure outside of this experimental

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[1] 'Working for the few: political capture and economic inequality'. Oxfam briefing paper January 2014. Downloaded from:http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-working-for-few-political-capture-economic-inequality-200114-summ-en.pdf

activity (they require scientific work in order to be identified) the causal mechanisms that lead to them must be considered separate from the events they generate. In other words, causes have essential properties that operate continuously, regardless of any immediate effect – i.e. they operate transfactually. Causal mechanisms therefore govern events. This leads to one of the central tenants of critical realism: that the social world must be stratified into at least three domains: the domains of the real (or deep); the actual; and the empirical. Drawing on the work of Bhaskar, one of us (Fleetwood 2011) recently elaborated on this conception of casual powers - and tendencies:

> powers…can be exercised, in operation, in play, endure without activity; lack motion; be dormant, be quiescent, be held in abeyance, lack motion, be un-dynamised and so on…I suggest, then, that we fasten on the term 'exercise' and use it consistently.

> powers…can be exercised without being actualised, realised, fulfilled, manifest, in motion, or dynamised. Sometimes powers are exercised and, in addition, are also actualised, realised, fulfilled, manifest, acting, in motion, or dynamised… I suggest, then, that we fasten on the term 'actualise' and use it consistently. [2]

When it comes to human action, causal powers can exist in a number of states: (a) as un-exercised powers (i.e. powers that a person can develop); (b) as an exercised power (i.e. powers a person possesses, but is not using); and (c) as actualised powers (i.e. a person puts their powers into action). Actualised powers may, or may not be observed by others, or may or may not be ignored by them. So for example, an un-exercised power refers to all the capabilities a person might be able to develop but are yet to do so. Whether or not these capabilities do develop, is contingent upon the agent´s interaction with the social world.

These insights are well known and have provided critical realist scholars with a unique and powerful set of philosophical tools with which to conduct their research. Importantly, though, it presupposes that the social world we study is only one of many possible configurations of causal powers, i.e. the social world we inhabit is a contingent one. It also does not follow that it is a world without necessity; the causal powers that make up the social world cannot be anything other than what they are – e.g. the power to be creative is a power human beings have, necessarily. However, whether or not these powers are exercised, actualised, have effects and these effects are perceived, is contingent. This logic leads to three important conclusions for critical realist researchers: (i) when we are conducting research into any phenomenon we must remember it may contain as yet un-exercised causal powers that we must seek to uncover; (ii) the full set of exercised powers of a phenomenon of interest may not yet be actualised in the form of action; and (iii) even when a causal power is exercised, actualised and is having effects, we may not perceive these effects, or we may mis-perceive them.

All this has profound consequences for conducting research which, we would argue, are yet to be fully translated into critical realist informed empirical research. Let's take the study of creativity as an example. If we are interested in the creative powers of a particular social group and this particular social group is found to have less actualised causal powers compared to another group we can begin asking questions of the social structures (mechanisms, norms, rules, laws and other social phenomena) that have enabled and constrained both of these social groups. In other words, we must consider the possibility that there is nothing inevitable about a group having less of their creative powers actualised. To make the most of critical realism, we must ask questions of why an alternative configuration, or future, is not currently in operation for these social groups. Clearly, then, considering the alternative future state of a group, or indeed any thing, is a critical element in the process of developing a causal explanation of it.

Whilst this is not a new insight, it is yet to be explored and translated as fully as it might be. Considering the alternative possibilities an individual, group, or social structure might already contain, or potentially contain, or that may lie unperceived or mis-perceived, has not been widely promoted within critical realist research method texts. Yet, paradoxically, when we reflect upon what it is that we actually do when conducting re-

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[2] Fleetwood 2011, 87-8

search, we must already be considering alternative possibilities. We already have some kind of proto-method for doing this, even if we rarely articulate it. How, then, do we identify this proto-method, and elaborate upon it, for future generations of critical realist researchers. Such is the task motivating this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Realism*.

Our argument, as editors introducing this special issue, is deceptively simple. Considering alternatives is not just one of the many methods we have at our disposal, it is an essential one for developing more sophisticated causal explanations. We would, therefore, like to make the case for considering alternative futures as not only important for the theoretical understanding of the social world but also as an additional, and essential, tool with which to conduct our research. To use this philosophy to build a picture of which alternative futures enable more people to develop, exercise and actualise their causal powers, more of the time: from philosophy of science to the science of human flourishing. But of course, such an argument will only partially convince, if we as 'serious' scholars remain content to stop at the level of mere 'consideration'. What is needed too is action – and this is a theme that resonates strongly throughout the papers included in this issue. Another theme to come through clearly in the selection of papers from the conference is the broad range of critical realist ideas and theories included, covering all three main phases of the philosophy.

Central to dialectical critical realism (DCR), for example, is its foundational interest in absence, including what isn't here (yet), as well as the conceptual means to further unpack the relationship between being and becoming. Bhaskar's conception of the dialectic as an 'inner urge that flows universally from the logic of elemental absence (lack, need, want or desire)', is useful to such thinking. But he also reminds us of its very real spatial and temporal contextualization, noting that it 'manifests wherever power[2] relations hold sway. It is the heartbeat of a positively generalized concept of freedom as flourishing and as autonomy and as reason. It is irrepressible.'[3] Bringing some reflexivity to this irrepressible 'pulse of freedom', we might note in passing that each of our individual research projects, whatever they entail, can be conceived of as driven by informed desire, experienced as an absence or lack of some kind.

This special issue's focus on the 'future' is timely for a number of reasons. First, the very notion of *time* is one that runs through critical realism in all its phases, whilst warranting more detailed scrutiny. Critical realism itself, of course, has developed over time, such that the insights of meta-Realism (for example co-presence) and DCR (such as (2E) negativity) have the potential to be enfolded back onto original critical realism (notably, perhaps, the TMSA, morphogenetic approach, and emergence). Otherwise, as T.S. Elliot reminds us:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
> What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.
> (*Burnt Norton*).

Our task is to inhabit this 'world of speculation' such that alternative futures we might have been previously blind to, become possible. Second, this focus on the future is timely because it resonates with deeply felt concerns about the nature of the world in the present. A strong underlying theme of the conference is of a world in crisis, whether financial, environmental, economic, political or aesthetic. In their various ways, all five of the papers that follow address perceived absences, lacks, needs and wants, and in doing so make a contribution towards *better* alternative futures for all.

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[3] Bhaskar 1993, 299.

The collection

In the opening paper of the special issue, Steve Fleetwood deals with alternative futures in the form of future labour markets. Much existing orthodox economics is capable of doing little more than generating relatively uninteresting (theoretically and practically) predictions about (e.g.) fluctuations in wage or unemployment rates. When it comes to analysing future changes in the *institutional fabric* of labour markets, changes that might fundamentally transform the life chances of labour market agents, orthodox economics has, literally, nothing to say. Indeed, the *conceptual apparatus* (i.e. theory, meta-theory and model) of orthodox economics is incapable of dealing with (present and future) institutions and, therefore, future labour markets.

Fleetwood then goes on to develop an alternative perspective on labour markets. He takes the existing body of knowledge referred to as the `*socio-economics of labour markets*´ (SELM), and augments it with critical realist (CR) meta-theory, creating the $SELM^{CR}$ perspective. This, he argues, is capable of dealing with (present and future) institutions and, therefore, future labour markets. He puts this perspective into action to (a) construct an alternative model of labour markets, and then (b) to use this to consider the possibility of fundamentally different future labour markets, based on *Basic Income (BI)* – i.e. a monthly income paid to each individual citizen and, therefore, universal; would be paid as a matter of right not privilege; would have no work requirement, or no means test; would be independent of current employment status – i.e. willingness to seek work, past work history, income from other sources, race, gender, sexual orientation, `marital´ status and household composition.

At the heart of the $SELM^{CR}$ perspective are labour market agents whose plans and actions are causally conditioned by the socio-economic phenomena (structures, mechanisms, rules and norms) they draw upon. This opens a conceptual space for thinking about conscious deliberation, unconscious habit, and the evolution of preferences due to *positive* aspects of work that a BI scheme would involve. And this in turn opens a space for thinking about the possibility of designing and promoting a *positive* work ethic, as part of a LM based on BI. This positive work ethic, which exists as an exercised, but as yet unactualised, power or tendency, could be actualised by the intervention of stake-holders prepared to change existing socio-economic phenomena. Fleetwood shows that unlike the orthodox economic perspective, the $SELM^{CR}$ perspective allows us to define, explain, elaborate upon, theorise and carry out research into the socio-economic phenomena associated with the future design and promotion of a *positive* work ethic and, therefore, for future labour markets based upon BI. An enquiry into what future labour markets might look like, then, requires something like the $SELM^{CR}$ perspective.

In the second paper in the collection, Dave Elder-Vass asks: How can we organise for a better future? He approaches this question via the notion of *giving*, in two senses: as a set of existing social practices, and as an element in a set of economic alternatives. Giving plays an important role in the contemporary economy, but this has been obscured by the perspectives of both mainstream economics and Marxist political economy. Traditionally different sections of the left have advocated two routes to improving the organisation of our economy: reformist tinkering with capitalism on the one hand, or seizing the state to impose revolutionary change on the other. Neither of these, Vass argues, is a viable path to a radically better economy. Instead, he wants to think about improving the economy by thinking about the gift economy. Recognising important features about the gift economy helps to break down some important obstacles to thinking more openly about alternative futures, such as the Marxist concept of *modes of production*.

Whilst Elder-Vass does not elaborate, it is clear that his paper is built firmly on critical realist foundations such as the TMSA, morphogenetic cycles and norm circles. The paper begins by highlighting two facts: the contemporary gift economy is both extremely large and extremely significant socially; and that the gift economy has been badly neglected by the social sciences. Giving is an economic activity in much the same sense that exchange is an economic activity, and producing to give is an economic activity in much the same sense as producing for sale. And when we look at the vast range of provisioning activity that occurs in contemporary society, we soon find that an enormous proportion of it occurs outside the commodity economy. The kind of activities Elder-Vass has in mind are: charitable giving, volunteering, blood and organ donation, ritual gifts on birthdays and other occasions, assistance to friends, neighbours, co-workers and indeed unknown

passers-by, bequests, the creation of digital resources that are then freely shared with others on the Internet and, perhaps most importantly, sharing of resources and caring labour within the household.

This links to an important argument from J.K. Gibson-Graham, who has suggested that both mainstream economics and the Marxist tradition have contributed to a highly distorted view of the economy – a view that ignores the major role that giving and other non-capitalist practices play in our economy already and as a result stunts our imagination about alternative futures. Elder-Vass connects this to the interesting and important work of Erik Olin Wright on envisioning real utopias. He uses this to argue that gift-oriented economic practices could play a significant part in such futures. Wright's work helps to open up that process of imagining alternatives, partly because it implies a movement away from the monolithic conception of modes of production that has dominated left thinking about the economy for far too long.

Once we recognise both the diversity of our actual economy and the diversity that would still remain in more desirable alternatives, we need to go beyond Wright and think more flexibly about future alternative economic forms. The most promising future alternative economic form, Elder-Vass argues, involves not the replacement of a monolithic capitalism with some other monolithic alternative, but rather a changing mix of already-diverse economic practices. Elder-Vass refers to this as *complexes of appropriative practices* and offers it as an alternative or supplementary concept with which to imagine future ways of organising the economy.

Following these articles is a paper introducing a 'real(ist)' notion of authenticity, by Nick Wilson. This work explicitly draws on all three phases of critical realism Original critical realism (OCR), (DCR) and MetaReality) in its task of exploring whether and/or how we can/should manage authenticity. Discussions of authenticity are notoriously problematic, not least because it is necessary to ask - authentic to what? Wilson notes that critical realism has so far failed to engage with this subject in any substantive way, despite its contribution to our understanding of such related terms as the self, human agency, freedom etc. Nevertheless, the article draws fruitfully on Bhaskar's dialectical work in particular, arguing that individuals are always engaged in the process of striving (however fallibly) to be authentic to their 'ultimate concerns' and, perhaps more controversially for some, that our journey towards our ultimate concerns can be 'managed' through reflexive internal deliberation. The paper asks not only about what is present but also what is missing, absent or possible.

Through comparing what professional classical musicians working in the field of 'authentic performance' of early music actually do, to what they could, should or might be able to do, this causal explanation is enriched. If the work ended there, an important contribution would have been made in itself but the power of using critical realism to underpin research is that it enables this work to speculate on what authenticity, and its management can become in these alternative futures, and what sorts of skills, behaviours and practices (notably creative constraints, courage and phronetic wisdom) we might need to take us there. For Wilson, managing real(ist) authenticity is shown to lie at the core of any 'possible' transition theory for human flourishing.

In the fourth article in the special issue, Leigh Price combines an analysis of causality with an analysis of education policy. The starting point is the philosophy of David Hume. Indeed, it is almost impossible to overstate the influence that Hume´s work on causality still has on social scientists. Hume maintained that, philosophically speaking, there was no difference between exiting a room out of the first floor window or using the door. Nevertheless, Hume's reason and common sense prevailed over his scepticism and he advocated that we should always use the door. We are, however, currently living in a world which is more seriously committed to the Humean philosophy of empiricism than he was himself and, because of this, the potential to act inappropriately is an ever present potential. Price considers how Hume's ideas on causality have detrimentally affected our ability to both arrive at, and to use, research to improve human well-being. She illustrates this via an example of what is, arguably, an incorrect yet supposedly scientifically sound claim in education policy: that absenteeism causes poor school attainment.

Educational policy on school absenteeism is based on correlations which are assumed to be causal, but whose causality is mistrusted - even by the researchers who report them. Instead of basing educational policy on reified facts, in this case the reified but questionable 'fact' that absenteeism 'causes' low attainment, Price suggests that we base our policy on a transfactual, interdisciplinary theory whereby low attainment is caused by: poverty; social inequalities; and personal circumstances such as natural ability, family structure and psychology.

Using the brief, yet powerful example of research into moon rocks, Price shows how mainstream science uses transfactuality despite the presence of an implicit empiricist aversion to it. She then goes on to suggests that it is the honesty, integrity and stoicism of British educational professionals that, perhaps paradoxically, leads them to trust research based upon correlations to guide their action. They are, effectively, exiting out of the first floor window rather than using the door. This is a significant barrier to our ability to organise future educational policy.

The final article in the special issue deals with a fundamental problem for organizing alternative futures, namely the difference between *knowing* and *doing*: It is one thing to recognize that we need alternative ways of organizing the future; it is quite another to move on to the next step and actually engage with these ideas in a practical way. Evans' paper focuses on the difficulty of getting people to care about climate change. As we are ruefully reminded, the human species might be intelligent enough to recognize its own extinction, but apparently not clever enough to do anything about it. In this paper the author explores how a particular community arts programme works with individuals' internal conversations enabling some participants to move beyond seeing climate change as an 'abstract and distant' problem, and to take action. Central to the exploration is the idea of 'conversation', both our individual internal conversations (after Archer) and the collective conversation(s) that emerge(s). Reminding us of the kind of practical wisdom necessary to live with real(ist) authenticity (Wilson, this issue), Evans emphasizes the gap that can exist between what people know about something affecting their ultimate concerns (in this case climate change) and what they actually do about it. With its penetrating analysis of the internal conversation this paper offers some practical clues as what can be, and needs to be done.

The paper offers two main contributions for future work on alternative futures. Firstly, it highlights the potential of Archer's internal conversation as an effective methodological framework for monitoring the influence of a change-oriented intervention and the emergence of a collective conversation. Secondly, it goes on to present a model of community engagement that could, potentially, be extended to other 'wicked' issues. This raises more profound questions concerning just how one 'builds a community' or 'creates a space' for communication, such that there is a genuine 'platform for action'. The ability to care is highlighted as absolutely central to any such engagement.

Conclusion

In the end, of course, whether or not critical realists and others choose to organize for alternative futures is not only dependent upon whether they care enough about absenting some kind of present lack, want, need or desire that exists in the present, it also seems to require new theoretical understanding of the social world. To this extent, critical realism offers a philosophical framework that enables those sufficiently motivated to begin developing alternatives.

Bibliography

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