Something’s Missing In Gherardi’s Kitchen: Practice-Based Theorizing With A Dialectical Critical Realist Flavour

Stream 2: Objects and the Study of Organizations

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Abstract

In her introduction to a special issue of Organization Silvia Gherardi (2000) introduces the metaphor of a ‘kitchen’ to refer to a space where people of different theoretical positions converse to develop practice-based theorizing. Gherardi notes that present in this ‘kitchen’ are representatives from ‘activity theory (AT), actor-network theory (ANT), situated learning theory (SLT) and cultural perspectives to organizational learning (CP)” (2000, p. 212). Gherardi argues as a result “practice-based theorizing arises from multiple perspectives and negotiations, and how by so doing delegitimizes a univocal narrative of scientific authority” (2000, p. 219). The rejection of a univocal narrative of authority is well put, but perhaps more importantly Gherardi later lists the theoretical approaches to practice utilised by this approach to learning.

Phenomenology, social constructionism, and postmodernism are presented as contributors to the dishes served up for the public when, in Gherardi’s words, “we put on our professional identities for performing the symposium for the public” (2000, p. 220). Three things arise from this introduction; first the practice-based theorizing approach is presented as something like a ‘gourmet club’; second, that presentation of academic papers requires an adoption of a professional personae; third, and the focus of this paper, that the dishes served up for the public lack at least one important ingredient, the seasoning offered by Dialectical Critical Realism.

This paper argues that practice-based theorising, by adopting Gherardi’s focus on discursive practice being “the fundamental element in a practice-based theorising of knowledge” (2000, p. 221), runs the risk of encouraging a univocal narrative of scientific authority through the study of discourse alone. Although the importance of discursive practice is not negated here, this paper suggests that in order to research practice in an adequate manner we may need to go beyond discourse and investigate objects, both material and conceptual, that influence actual practice formation and negotiation. Consequently, this paper presents a study of practice informed by a dialectical critical realist position in an attempt to add to the menu offered by practice-based theorists by demonstrating how and why objects ‘bite-back’.

Introduction

Objects are funny things. They have become a central concern for the study of organizations in contemporary debate, as signalled by this stream. But, in order to understand the importance of objects in research we must ground arguments using specific examples. For this purpose I introduce practice-based theorizing as an exemplar of what is going on in contemporary organizational research, an approach described by Gherardi in the special issue of Organization (2000). Gherardi attempts to demarcate the study of learning and behaviour by focusing attention on actual daily discursive practice. Here it is argued that practice-based theorising, by adopting Gherardi’s focus on discursive practice being “the fundamental element in a practice-based theorising of knowledge” (2000, p. 221), runs the risk of encouraging a univocal narrative of scientific authority through the study of discourse alone. Although the importance of discursive practice is not negated here, this paper suggests that in order to research practice in an adequate manner we may need to
go beyond discourse and investigate objects, both material and conceptual, that influence actual practice formation and negotiation.

Gherardi indicates that practice-based theorizing has to date been developed through the employment of various approaches to research and knowledge. These include representatives from “activity theory (AT), actor-network theory (ANT), situated learning theory (SLT) and cultural perspectives to organizational learning (CP)” (2000, p. 212). What is immediately apparent, and indeed noted by Gherardi (ibid), is the domination of these approaches by phenomenology, social constructionist, and postmodernist research traditions.

To demonstrate the inclusivity of practice-based theorising Gherardi invokes the metaphor of a ‘kitchen’ where people of diverse beliefs meet and discuss matters of common concern, in this case knowledge and learning, before serving up their ‘dishes’ to an academic audience the following day (2000, p.220). Putting aside the implied private club aspect of this meeting, and the question of the perceived need to don professional images for the public consumption of their work, this amusing analogy demonstrates something worrying. This paper suggests that the research traditions currently employed by practice-based theorists only provide a partial and limited understanding of their topic. It is further suggested that glaring gaps in the literature are present which cannot be addressed by these research traditions as currently understood. Consequently, this paper advances an alternative approach to the study of organizations in the form of dialectical critical realism.

Before introducing this alternative approach it is necessary to indicate some of the limitations of discursive methodologies as demonstrated by Gherardi (1999) in an article that addresses Organizational Learning and Learning Organizations. Gherardi (1999) makes numerous faux pas when attempting to articulate a social constructionist argument. Firstly Gherardi states that “what is irreconcilable, in my view, is a realist ontology and a constructionist one” (1999, p. 105). The problem with this statement is the lack of a social constructionist ontology articulated by Gherardi when attempting to operationalise her argument. If we read the text closely we find that what Gherardi appears to refer to, in ontological terms, is the presentation of organizational learning as “a cultural object” (1999, p.102), then later as “a metaphorical operation performed by the researcher” (1999, p. 105). Gherardi then states that the matter of producing constructs that can be operationalised in empirical research or to produce empirical evidence “are problems that concern a realist ontology” (1999, p. 105), and later, that the problem for researchers is not one of producing effective knowledge but “rather to determine the amount of further knowledge yielded by the metaphor proposed” (1999, p. 105). According to Gherardi’s stated perspective several glaring problems are presented in this text, namely:

1. The ontological status of a metaphor – for is a metaphor not a construct and hence a concern for realist ontology?
2. Determining the amount of further knowledge presupposes existent knowledge and that knowledge may be assessed/assessable – curiously positivistic for such an anti-positivistic author.
3. That something must be independent of the researcher for the use of the metaphor device to yield some further knowledge (of it), and
4. That empirical evidence must be used or else what use could one put the metaphoric device to?

This paper suggests that Gherardi actually ontologically oscillates in her determination to reject the negatively positioned realist ontology in favour of a
constructionist one. Ontological oscillation, as described by Burrell and Morgan (1979) occurs where theorists often:

stress a highly subjectivist stance which denies the existence of social structures and concrete social reality of any form. Yet the attempt to operationalize their ideas within an empirical context frequently leads them to admit a more realist form of ontology by the back door (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 266).

Realist and constructionist ontology could be irreconcilable, as Gherardi suggests, but this may only be argued if, or perhaps when, an adequate constructionist ontology is presented. As others have noted (cf. Chia, 1997; Fleetwood, forthcoming) no constructionist ontology has thus far been articulated, but instead we have unacknowledged reliance on realist ontology in order to operationalise social constructionist epistemology. The claim that what is presented is constructionist ontology in Gherardi’s (1999) account is no more than a category error.

Gherardi is not alone in this ontological oscillation and occasional conflation of ontology and epistemology as Cunliffe (2002), another social constructionist demonstrates. In an argument to support ‘learning conversations’ in the production of managers as ‘practical authors’ Cunliffe states that:

in helping students create new readings of their experience, we create possibilities for change in everyday interaction and, little by little, this can undermine the structures and practices of domination (2002, p. 37, my emphasis).

Cunliffe then states that “both conventional and critical approaches focus on realities and systems existing independently from our own personal involvement, and use external or third party frames of analysis and critique” (2002, p. 39). Cunliffe argues that his represents outside-in reflexive and reflective analysis which should be rejected in favour of ‘inside-out’ where the practising manager reflects “from within the activity itself” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 40).

By making such a commitment Cunliffe is negating the possibility of her own approach, for if co-creating new readings of experience could, albeit over time, undermine the structures and practices of domination’ one must assume that they exist in the first place. Then, if we follow her suggestion, we would ‘reflect from within the experience itself’, and not engage post-experience with a third party in learning conversations as her respondents actually did. This interaction between the manager and the third party questions the conceptual rigor of ‘practical authors’ and ‘learning conversations’, for if we engage in the practice of conversation and are ‘helped’ to create new readings then surely at best we could only be considered co-authors. Furthermore the conversation, post-experience, is an example of outside-in reflection via third party conceptual frames and interpretations — precisely what Cunliffe seeks to oppose.

**Why are such errors made?**

To understand why such errors are made we first need to understand what these traditions represent. Thus we need to explore the philosophy of social science in relation to these approaches to understand their particular influence on our learning
about knowledge of reality. The following subsections are, as a result of the limitations imposed by this paper, in a sense superficial. It is not the intention to present a thorough review of these rich and complex philosophically informed research traditions but rather to indicate the objects of knowledge in each approach. To paraphrase Nietzsche this is philosophising with an axe and not tweezers. This is done for one specific reason only, namely to focus attention on the relative neglect of ontological discussion in each, and between, these traditions.

In an attempt to locate the following discussion of theoretical approaches to research in a language easily recognizable for discourse advocates this paper draws upon Gergen’s (1999) discussion of said research traditions, in addition to direct citation of prominent authors from each tradition. In addition to the three approaches mentioned by Gherardi (2000) this paper also includes constructivism in the spirit of inclusivity.

Phenomenology

According to Gergen (1999, p. 128) Husserl “proposed that all experience is intentional. By this he meant that our experiences are always directed toward or absorbed by some pattern (object, person, etc.) in the external world”. Gergen then argues that Schutz developed this approach to propose that “our experience of the world is governed by a natural attitude” (1999, p. 128), and that as a result of this our understanding of reality is guided by typifications, learned through language. Gergen provides an example of this by referring to the word ‘smile’. Thus learned ‘smile’ is used as a class name to categorise subsequent experience.

What is arguably most clearly demonstrated by phenomenologists is the focus on socially influenced subjective interpretation of objects. The focus is on epistemic grounds and does not address the reality itself, only our partial and shaded interpretation of aspects of it. According to Gergen (1999) phenomenologists are concerned with human experiences and that “phenomenological analysis holds subjective experience as its primary subject matter, it never fully gives up the individualist heritage” (Gergen, 1999, p. 129).

Consequently if we accept this, albeit limited, understanding of phenomenology in terms of a central focus then what is necessarily presupposed is the ontological commitment to reality (in terms of phenomena) independent of our knowledge claims. This realist commitment is however, not the focus for debate as indicated by Gergen.

Social Constructionism

Interestingly, as Gergen (1999, p. 139) notes, Schutz’s approach “plays a pivotal role in one of the first important books on social constructionism, namely Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality” (ibid). Whereas Schutz concentrates on the influence of biography on the construction of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann prefer tradition. However, the importance for this paper is actually demonstrated by Gergen’s partial quotation of the title of Berger and Luckmann’s seminal work. In case anyone needed reminding the actual title is “The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This creative reduction implies that the authors argue that all reality is socially constructed. They do not. They argue that our knowledge and understanding of reality is socially constructed thereby positioning social constructionism initially, and firmly, as an epistemology without a clearly articulated
ontology. The perhaps best known aspect of Berger and Luckmann’s treatise, and potentially the locus for confusion, is the objectification of subjective accounts of reality. One could argue that reality is thus ‘performed’, a strand subsequently taken up by Law and Singleton (2000).

Clarification is needed here for if we argue that the performative objectification of reality through socially influenced constructions creates reality we are partially correct. In terms of the reality of our discursive constructs we are performing reality. What we are not doing is performing all of reality, merely discursive reality which may then influence our treatment of other aspects of reality. We could argue that knowledge has ontological and epistemological aspects, ontological as in the existence of knowledge and epistemological in terms of different knowledge claims. If we reduce all reality to discursivity then we are prone to excess as such a reduction places factors that limit and encourage our constructs off the research agenda, as discussed in more detail later.

As in the case of phenomenology I argue that this approach actually presupposes and relies upon realist ontological commitments in terms of requiring an object to construct knowledge of, and also in terms of the relative independence of reality from our knowledge of it. Like phenomenology social constructionism, through focusing attention on our knowledge construction, places human beings as the central guiding element. As we shall see the ultimate example of such a trend is presented by the constructivist tradition.

Constructivism

Constructivism could be seen as being rooted in psychology and thus separate from constructionism’s base in sociology. In the context of this paper Cooper (1993) summarises constructivist thinking in relation to learning by comparing it against behaviourism and cognitivism. Cooper states:

“The constructivist….sees reality as determined by the experiences of the knower. The move away from behaviourism through cognitivism to constructivism represents shifts in emphasis away from an external view to an internal view…..external phenomena are meaningless except as the mind perceives them……constructivists view reality as personally constructed, and state that personal experiences determine reality, not the other way around” (Cooper, 1993, p. 16, my emphasis).

This perspective is endorsed by Wilson (1996) when discussing learning environments. Wilson defines learning environments according to constructivism as follows:

“A learning environment is a place where people can draw upon resources to make sense out of things and construct meaningful solutions to problems. Adding ‘constructivist’ to the front end of the term is a way of emphasizing the importance of meaningful, authentic activities that help the learner to construct understandings and develop skills relevant to solving problems” (Wilson, 1996, p. 3, my emphasis).

The central issue presented by Wilson is how could one decide if an activity is ‘authentic’ if we individually construct reality as we choose? This demonstrates a core issue with constructivist accounts in social science. If we were to accept the position that we construct reality as an ontological commitment, as implied by Wilson, then how could authority ever be discussed? Furthermore, if, as individuals, we were
to create reality as we decided based on our knowledge then what basis would our knowledge have beyond opinion?

Although constructivists stress the agency of people in constructing reality we should be careful in our interpretation. If constructivists mean that our knowledge is constructed then what becomes a central issue is what effects and limits our constructions. If it is only our own knowledge, and accepting Cooper’s argument that our ‘personal experiences determine reality and not the other way round’, then how do we explain events that occur that we have no knowledge of, and more importantly what could we actually have personal experiences of? What would be the personal experience of a meaningless phenomena, and would we even notice a phenomena if it had no meaning? Arguably our constructions must be influenced by something, therefore phenomena, even if viewed as meaningless, must exist independent of our constructions. If they were not independent then they would not be meaningless according to Cooper’s stated interpretation of constructivism. Therefore I suggest that constructivism is influenced ontologically by a commitment to external reality existing independent of our knowledge of it, including socially real phenomena even if viewed as ‘meaningless’.

Postmodernism

Best and Kellner (1997) state most clearly that “postmodern concepts are primarily conceptual constructs meant to perform certain interpretive or explanatory tasks and are not neutral descriptive terms that define pre-established states of affairs” (1997, p. 24). They continue by stating that “thus, one should be clear that when we are dealing with postmodern discourse, we are operating on the level of theory and need to make appropriate clarifications and distinctions” (1997, p. 24). If we accept Gherardi’s argument stated previously these commitments would locate posmodernism, as presented by Best and Kellner, as based on a realist ontology!

A single common factor may be identified in each of these approaches which necessarily limits their use. This single factor is the central position of human beings in each tradition. Phenomenology seeks to understand the human in the world, the social constructionists seek to understand the construction of knowledge through biography and or tradition, and the postmodernists critique and deconstruct our epistemic positions and knowledge claims.

What appears to be missing is a discussion of the nature of reality as relatively independent of our knowledge claims, yet serving as the basis for such knowledge itself. Initially this may appear to be a peripheral consideration for research but when we focus on our actual practice the importance of such considerations emerges. In the following section I discuss the practice of research as informed by discursive and postmodern influences.

**Raw materials and cooking up knowledge**

When conducting empirical research in social science we may suggest several tensions the researcher experiences when attempting to produce some form of knowledge, interpretation or understanding. The perhaps primary tension could be conceived as how to capture the complexity of reality in our accounts. Currently, thanks in no small part to postmodern and poststructuralist considerations, we have to account for change in our knowledge claims. With the rejection of the mechanistic
conception of reality as a starting point the question of change has provoked some authors to demand ontological assumptions that reflect this commitment, a move from a static conception of Being to a fluid Becoming. Perhaps the most vocal advocate Robert Chia, links the drive for a dynamic ontology with social constructionism, postmodernism and perhaps more indirectly, phenomenology.

Chia argues that the positivistic conception of language being “a relatively neutral ‘medium’ for expressing the nature of reality” (1997, p. 695) should be rejected for it implies that reality can be divided through readily apparent distinctions. If we want to take into account the alternative belief that “all things flow” (1997, p. 695) Chia advocates the adoption of what he describes as ‘intuition of mankind’. Citing Heraclitus, Leibniz, William James, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead, Chia proposes that everything from galaxies, electrons, human beings, amoebae, societies, and myths “exist only as a stabilized moment in an interminable process of becoming” (1997, p. 696). Following this Chia argues “there are no fixed entities, no ultimate terms, no essences” (1997, p. 696).

Although we may agree with Chia’s argument and reject the notion of fixed entities as a form of positivistic scientism, caution is required when taking the rejection of languages’ neutrality in expressing reality as a starting point as this may lead us up blind alleys. For example, Chia argues that “the regularities we detect mirror…. the very modes of thought we deploy” (Chia, 1997, p. 699). Here we have presented the notion that our minds determine regularities and not the objects themselves. What follows, if we accept this argument, is the suggestion that by changing the modes of thought we deploy we could change the regularities detected. Furthermore, such an approach can be identified in the discursive arguments of constructionists harking back to Hindess et al’s (1977) and Cutler et al’s (1977) work. Arguably Chia’s postmodern approach to research objects restates the earlier work of these discursivity advocates.

Although the debate is some 25 years old it is worth revisiting it in the light of current research trajectories, particularly in relation to the way practice-based theorists treat objects by overstating the agency of human beings in determining reality. In particular we may frame this debate according to the following question:

Do objects exist independently of thought and discourse yet correspond to thought in such a way that it can be said that knowledge is possible of such objects?

This question may appear to be priming two alternatives, (a) the rejection of a correspondence between reality and our knowledge, or (b) a response based in positivistic epistemology. Clearly Chia argues that objects do not exist independently of our thought if objects are seen as regularities, for as such they are presented as reflections of our modes of thought deployed. It is argued here that by attempting to avoid positivistic explanations, option (b) above, the current discourse advocates like Gherardi (2000) actually present a position identified by Skillen (1978) as discourse phenomenalism.

Discourse Phenomenalism

To demonstrate what Skillen (1978, p. 3) describes as discourse phenomenalism let us consider three perhaps well known and influential statements associated with the discursive turn in social science.
"What cannot be specified in theoretical discourse cannot be specified in extradiscursivity: it can be conceived only through that discourse or a related, critical, or complementary one" (Cutler et al., 1977, p. 229).

"This is not to deny forms of existence outside discourse but it is to deny that existence takes the form of objects representable in discourse" (Hindess et. al., 1977, p. 21)

"Objects of discourses are constituted in and through the discourses which refer to them" (Cutler et al., 1977, p. 216).

Each of the above may draw support from researchers within each of the aforementioned theoretical traditions, as even a cursory review of the literature would suggest. However, as Collier states "if it is denied that reality is representable in discourse, it is asserted that reality is unknowable, despite protestations to the contrary" Collier (1978, p. 21). Actually we could argue that Hindess et. al.'s commitment to objects of discourse being constituted in and through discourse negates any understanding of reality at all. If we accept this position then the discourse produced by Hindess et al contains the claims made, hence the things they 'refer to' are *ex hypothesi* constituted by the Hindess et al discourse. They cannot be referring to anything at all. Returning to Gherardi’s suggestion that organizational learning is a metaphor operationalised by the researcher then organizational learning is *ex hypothesi* constituted by Gherardi’s (or the researcher’s) discourse.

If we proceed according to such a position we may as well stamp out the fire and call in the dogs, as the hunt for knowledge would be over. Social science, indeed all science would be deemed pointless activity.

Collier (1978, p. 21) advances an alternative position by advocating ‘putting questions to nature’. We could put our *construction* of organizational learning to question - i.e. is organizational learning a metaphor or does it refer to some praxis? Such a position is informed by the work of Sarbin (1986) in narrative psychology, who argues that if the metaphoric quality of a term becomes submerged then the “as if” quality is lost to both the speaker and the listener leading to reification and “literal” treatment (Sarbin, 1986:5). If this is what Gherardi is cautioning, that organizational learning is merely a metaphor, then to substantiate such an argument some form of comparison is presupposed.

This may appear to imply that such a comparison, of the rhetoric and reality of organizational learning, relies upon some theory-independent observational statement against which to test our theories. If this were the case then this suggests that we would be inadvertently aligning ourselves with a positivistic epistemology, but Collier maintains it does not necessarily require us to do so. Specifically Collier (1978, p. 21) argues that:

> the 'replies' of nature are results of theory-determined procedures of enquiry, and will therefore originally be couched in terms of the theory, even if they lead to its revision or abandonment. But the *results themselves* are not determined by the theory, but by the structure of nature (my emphasis).

These replies from nature may be directly empirically observed, as in the case of theorising a sheet of ice being able to support your weight, only to find that you fall
through it, or indirectly through the perception of their effects. Bhaskar (1998) provides an example of indirect knowledge of real entities in the form of magnetic fields. Such magnetic fields may not be directly observable but may be inferred from the movement of a compass needle (1998, p. 73). Hence we may argue that our knowledge is influenced by numerous factors including, but not exhausted by, empirical observations. Numerous entities may be suggested indirectly through experience of their effects, and have been suggested by social constructionists themselves. We need only consider Gherardi et al’s (1998) notion of ‘situated curricula’ for such an example, unless of course Gherardi et al would have us believe that situated curricula are metaphors ex hypothesi constituted by their discourse.

This paper argues that if we follow Gherardi’s (2000) advice and focus on discursivity then we may, perhaps unknowingly, reproduce discourse phenomenalism thereby placing non-discursive considerations off the research agenda. An alternative is to explore a dialectic that does not relegate non-discursivity to the sidelines, but that accepts the interplay of non-discursivity and discursivity in an ontology of becoming. This alternative accepts Chia’s critique of the scientism of fixed being and the constructed nature of human knowledge without slipping into discourse phenomenalism.

**Introduction of dialectical critical realist seasoning**

Immediately we should note that dialectical critical realism is not a social theory but a philosophical approach to the study of social science developed primarily by Roy Bhaskar. The following section is little more than a thumbnail sketch of dialectical critical realism, although it serves the purpose of introducing the main tenants of this approach by focusing on objects. The central commitments that follow, if seen in conjunction, demonstrate an alternative approach to social science.

1. Stratified ontology

By making the commitment to a stratified ontology critical realists argue that we may describe, or consider, reality to contain different levels or domains (see figure 1). The reasons for such a position are copious and a full explanation would require more space than is available here. Accordingly this paper focuses on differentiation to explain the commitment, where differentiation derives from the observation that the world is differentiated. If the world is differentiated then we may infer that ‘laws’ and actions do not have uniform effects, and as such we may reject the positivistic claims for accurate prediction. If accepted then we may describe two layers of a stratified ontology where at one level we have actual events, and another level containing what caused the events themselves.

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Domains of reality (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 13)

Bhaskar (1975) describes the real as reality which incorporates but is not exhausted by the actual and the empirical. The commitment to differentiating between the actual and the empirical refers to the commitment that knowledge is constructed according to our perceptions, and that such knowledge is fallible. To explain this further Bhaskar introduces two fallacies through a critique of Humean (linear) causality.

In the *epistemic* fallacy, statements about being are be interpreted as statements about knowledge (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 6), where being is understood as perceived being, and something that is unperceived being a thing-in-itself at best (and neither real nor actual at worst). In the *ontic* fallacy, knowledge is analyzed as a direct, unmediated relation between a subject and being as demonstrated in positivistic epistemology. The ontic fallacy ignores the cognitive and social mechanisms by which knowledge is produced from antecedent knowledge, stressed heavily by social constructionist accounts, leaving an ontology of empirical knowledge events (raw perceptions) and a de-socialized epistemology (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 23, 253).

If we embrace a differentiation of actual and empirical then we may argue that our knowledge does not exhaust what is actually occurring at any point in time and space, and that our knowledge is influenced by cognitive and social forces.

2. Reality as an open system

The positioning of reality as an open system is required to argue for the trans-factual operation of universal laws, to overcome the weakness of the Humean concept of laws being tied to closed systems through the constant conjunctures of events. Once we discern open systems we allow for the possibility of generative mechanisms and structures existing independently of any particular pattern or sequence of events (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 14), required to justify the concept of a stratified ontology and the rejection of positivistic notions of prediction and direct unmediated knowledge. As a result of this commitment we can argue that causal laws endure and continue to operate where no conjuncture of events is forthcoming (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 33), allowing us to consider the *conditions* under which such laws operate.

In addition, the open systems perspective allows us to explore the range of, and connections between, sub-systems and the whole through the concepts of emergence and generative, rather than linear, causality. The implications for our explanations, considered in greater detail later, are such that in general closed systems must be experimentally established (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 33), and that the nature of interconnections must be adequately addressed before attempting to apply findings from closed system experiments to open systemic reality.

3. Emergence and emergent powers

The commitment to emergence may best be described using Bhaskar’s own example of human agency, where we should credit agency with “distinct (emergent) causal powers from the biological matter out of which the agents were formed” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 51). This resonates with Vygotsky’s commitment to unit analysis rather than ‘analysis into elements’ (Bakhurst, 1991, p. 69), as demonstrated in his explanation of the relationship between thought and speech. Vygotsky (1986) argues that a unit (*edinitsa*) is a “product of analysis which, unlike elements, retains all the basic
properties of the whole and which cannot be further subdivided without losing them” (1986, p. 5). Bakhurst further illuminates our understanding by drawing on Marx’s (1865/1968) discussion of the relationship between fire and water. If we deny emergence, particularly the emergence of causal powers (understood as the ability to do something), then any attempt to explain why water extinguishes fire would rely on the fire-quenching properties being possessed by the substances that compose it, namely hydrogen and oxygen. As Marx (1865/1968) notes “such an attempt obviously fails, since hydrogen burns and oxygen sustains fire” (1895, p. 206-7).

Bhaskar extends the commitment to emergence to include space and time by arguing that all changes are spatio-temporal leading to “two paradigms instantiated in reality: (a) they could be relata of a new (emergent) system of material things and/or (b) they could be new (emergent) relata of pre-existing systems of material things” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 53). The importance of this conception will be demonstrated later in conjunction with the following less articulated aspect of emergent, its inverse disemergence.

Disemergence relates to the “decay, demise or disjoint detachment of the higher-order level” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 53) from the lower order from which it emerged. We can understand this concept easily if we consider emergence in terms of (perhaps) the evolution of a species. The actual process of emergence is intimately related to critical realism’s commitment to causality as discussed below. In a later section I return to disemergence from a relational position, but at this juncture it serves to remind us that emergence does not necessarily mean a continuity of one level in terms of progression or trajectory but may involve rupture and separation also.

4. Generative causality

Following the commitment to open systems emergence Bhaskar argues that our world is “an open-system entropic totality” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 53) where events or results are “the provisional outcome of a heterogeneous multiplicity of changing mechanisms, agencies and circumstances” (1993, p. 53). Sayer states this commitment in terms of the focus on causal claims not concerning the relationships between discrete events (cause and effect) as this suggests linear causation, but “the causal powers or liabilities of objects or relations” (Sayer, 1992, p. 104). What is of note here is the statement that causal powers are not limited to objects but often inhere “in the social relations and structures” (Sayer, 1992, p. 105) which objects form, for example social structures. Sayer continues by arguing that:

the particular ways-of-acting or mechanisms exist necessarily in virtue of their object’s nature. The nature or constitution of an object and its causal powers are internally or necessarily related: a plane can fly by virtue of its aerodynamic form, engines, etc.......If the nature of an object changes then its causal powers will change too; engines lose their power as they wear out, a child’s cognitive powers increase as it grows. Therefore in positioning the existence of causal powers I am not invoking fixed, eternal essences (Sayer, 1992, p. 104)

One important aspect of Sayer’s statement is the link between causal power, internal relations and emergence. As is clearly articulated, as an object emerges, or changes, then the causal powers change also. Consequently we can argue that emergence influences the internal relations or structure of objects. This then has implications for the object’s ways-of-acting, or mechanisms, which would also change (emerge).
These interconnected commitments give rise to a dynamic conception of science and reality where “science is (vertically) in motion in a world (horizontally) in motion” (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 40). Following this, Bhaskar states that “in science there is a kind of dialectic in which a regularity is identified, a plausible explanation for it is invented, and the reality of entities and processes postulated in the explanation is then checked” (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 14). This does not presuppose positivistic knowledge of reality but rather, as stated earlier, that we may start with a proposition and then change this according to our research. This leads Bhaskar to a conception of science “in which it is seen as a process-in-motion, with the dialectic mentioned above in principle having no foreseeable end” (ibid).

However, if we return to objects in research we need to state clearly how such objects are conceived according to the central commitments illustrated above. Dialectical critical realism conceives objects to be totalities which may be suggested according to the commitment to natural necessity. Each of these points is discussed separately in order to clarify the relevance for research practice, before a summary draws the different aspects of dialectical critical realism together.

5. Entities as Totalities and Natural Necessity

Bhaskar (1993) argues that social life would be impossible without totalities by presenting various examples including a text, a physical structure and the semantic structure of a sentence (1993, p. 123). Furthermore, Bhaskar states that “not to treat such entities as totalities is to violate norms of descriptive and hermeneutic adequacy” (1993, p. 124). However, to be consistent with critical realist commitments to open systems and emergence we must consider entities as open partial totalities.

Partial open totalities can be seen as ‘unities of diverse determinations’ (Sayer, 1998, p. 127) but this does not mean that our knowledge claims are entirely accurate. If we consider the individual as an emergent social open partial totality then we can argue that an individual may be considered as structured, yet as a result of being “at least partially constituted by its geo-historical formation and context, is in open process, intrinsically and extrinsically, so that its form, elements and effects will be continuously configurationally changing” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 127).

Therefore objects may be described as changing yet able to be differentiated from other entities. How this is achieved relies upon the commitment to natural necessity, understood as what relations are necessary for the object to be what it is at any point in time and space, and not something else. If we return to the earlier example of water then we may describe water as necessarily structured H2O, with the possibility of further contingent relations being formed that may change this basic structure. If we apply this argument to examples drawn from social rather than natural science we may propose that societies are necessarily structured, yet continually changing. The influence, or causal power of society, by virtue of its changing nature, would also change over time and space. Hence research may ponder the changing nature of society without committing the error of scientism’s fixed object.

**How and why objects ‘bite-back’**.

From a dialectical critical realist perspective intransitive objects exist as open partial totalities that act “independently of our knowledge of them (except when we use our
knowledge to intervene), where knowledge is irreducible to what it is about and constitutes an object with its own level of social causality” (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 51-2). Knowledge exists as a real social object in the transitive dimension and is about real objects in the intransitive dimension, which exists independently of mental activity (Bhaskar 1986, p. 54). Thus transitivity represents the social character of science.

Objects resist any construction being imposed upon them as a result of their natural necessity, as understood as the specific composition of internal relations of their aspects. Research may ask questions of such objects but this does not mean that the ‘answers’ will be empirically detected/detectable. We may construct our knowledge of objects according to different experience of the object, as informed by our participation in traditions but this does not mean that we do so in an arbitrary way.

What Dialectical Critical realism brings to the party

To enable our discussion of objects dialectical critical realism offers a different discourse if you will, one where we may differentiate different modes or moments of reality within a stratified ontology where change is fundamental. This overcomes the limitations of discourse phenomenalism yet avoids positivistic epistemic commitments. Furthermore what dialectical critical realism brings is an alternative but complementary approach that may be employed in connection with the four research traditions mentioned earlier.

This could resonate with Activity Theorists who’s work is predicated on Vygotsky’s psychology, for as both Ilyenkov and Bakhurst note Vygotsky’s dialectical method resonates with Marx’s as does dialectical critical realism. By making the commitment to rejecting scientism’s fixed entities, and by rejecting positivism’s notion of direct and unmediated knowledge of reality dialectical critical realism could be developed in harmony with postmodern and social constructionist accounts by means of a clearly articulated ontological stance. The focus for subsequent research could remain in discursive debate but would be ontologically grounded, allowing researchers to explore not only the discourse but factors that influence discursive formation.

This does not mean that the only option for researchers is to adopt dialectical critical realism, but that in the face of immanent critique researches could make use of its compatible ontological commitments. Other ontological positions are undoubtedly available, or possible to develop, but at present such are not fully developed nor articulated in certain areas of contemporary research literature.

Although this paper demonstrates that dialectical critical realism has been allowed through the door of the party it remains to be seen if the spirit of ‘inclusivity’ extends from this conference. Whether dialectical critical realism will be welcomed into the kitchen or left isolated in the hallway depends on the dishes researchers want to produce and the taste of the chefs concerned. However, this paper suggests that without the ‘seasoning’ offered by dialectical critical realism many diners may leave unsatisfied.
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