

## **You Spin Me Round: The Realist Turn in Organization and Management Studies\***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Social science, including the sociology of science itself, could benefit from greater reflexivity about its own conditions of production . . . and critical realism could do well to explore this currently underdeveloped side of its philosophy and methodology of social science. (Sayer, 2004, pp. 13–14)

Michael Reed (2005) invites a reflection upon the nature, relevance and consequences of taking a (critical) realist turn in studies of organization and management. Taking this turn, he suggests, provides ‘a coherent ontological rationale and causal-explanatory method for identifying underlying structures and mechanisms . . . [which] . . . generate observable events and outcomes that may or may not be actualized in specific historical contexts and social situations’ (p. 1637). With regard to advancing studies of management and organization, Reed attributes to critical realism<sup>[1]</sup> the capacity to ‘fundamentally redefine both the nature of the “explanatory task” . . . and the contribution that explanatory knowledge can make to our understanding of and participation in emergent socio-organizational forms’ (p. 1632).

Reed positions the nature and direction of the realist turn in relation to the paths of two, prior theoretical movements: positivism and constructionism. The former is distinguished by its empirical realist ontological foundations and positivist epistemological scaffolding (p. 1623). Positivism, Reed argues, has found itself ‘subjected to an excoriating post-structuralist/postmodernist critique’ (p. 1623) arising from a linguistic/discursive turn underpinned, according to Reed, by a distinctive, constructionist ontology. Critical realism, on Reed’s account, marks a

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distinctive, third turn for management and organization studies. This turn rejects empiricism where causality is 'synonymous with a relationship between discrete events' (p. 1630); but it also insists that explanation 'cannot be reduced to rhetorical or linguistic constructions that have no reference to or anchoring in an independently existing world' (p. 1637).

The case Reed makes for a critical realist turn – what we will term a 'third way' (see also Danermark et al., 2002, p. 202) – is undoubtedly attractive, but perhaps deceptively so. Take, for example, the sections where Reed seeks to revive and reaffirm the authority of classic studies (e.g. Bendix, 1956; Braverman, 1974; Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988, cited by Reed, p. 1636) by implying that these had Critical Realist credentials. This assignment may lend the authority of these studies to the claims of critical realism. But it also suggests that the 'turn' is hardly new. In the form advocated by Reed at least, the (critical) realist turn may offer little that is innovative.

In this commentary, we ask Mike Reed and others who may be attracted to critical realism: in what sense does critical realism offer a 'new direction'? And in what direction does it aspire to take us? Our questions are basic ones but they are intended to go to the heart of the distinctiveness and value attributed by Reed to critical realism: its (critical) realist ontology, relativist epistemology and clear-cut methodology.

## **DID WE MISS A TURN? CRITICAL REALISM IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES**

We find it useful to distinguish 'Critical Realism' from 'critical realism'. Critical Realism is an intervention within a discourse that is *primarily attentive to* issues of ontology and epistemology. In contrast, critical realism *involves a more or less conversant association of* other forms of analysis, including some within the field of management and organization studies (e.g. versions of 'critical discourse analysis'), with the evolving *episteme* of Critical Realism (see also Callinicos and Bhaskar, 2003; Morgan, 2004). The principle value of an engagement with Critical Realism, we suggest, comes from the stimulus it can give to reflection upon key ontological and epistemological issues – issues that are of great importance to debates within, and the development of, management and organization studies (MOS). More specifically, we recognize the contribution Critical Realism may make to invigorating a process of grappling with the controversial, problematical and insistent quest/ion of/for the real – a concern and contribution that is generally undervalued or even unrecognized within MOS. Critical Realism can assist in opening-up deep-seated issues in the philosophical standing of social and organizational analysis. Our commentary on Reed's 'Reflections' is intended as a contribution to this grappling process.

What, then, is the current standing of Critical Realism within MOS? It has been a smouldering presence (e.g. Clark, 2000; Mingers, 2000; Mutch, 1999; Willmott,

2000) that has intermittently flared up into open advocacy and debate of its propositions (e.g. Tsoukas, 1994; Willmott, 1996). Very rarely, however, has Critical Realism been embraced openly or consistently by students of management or organization. Citations of key critical realist texts, let alone their careful exposition, are scarce. As an indicator, there is no reference to Roy Bhaskar, the principle architect of Critical Realism, in the (very thorough) index of Clegg, Hardy and Nord's (1996) *The Handbook of Organization Studies* (in which a contribution from Mike Reed is included).

May we conclude, then, that Critical Realism, and the critical realist turn, is of marginal importance to the study of management and organization? Well, yes, if the test of significance is a count of the citation of leading authorities (e.g. Bhaskar) in the bibliographies of articles published in MOS's most revered journals (or even the less revered, come to that), or in the depositories that overview the state of the field. It is also difficult to detect significant traces of the language of Critical Realism – 'transitive', 'intransitive', 'transfactuality', 'retroduction' 'epistemic fallacy', etc. in MOS. This invisibility presents some difficulties for Reed's argument that MOS is displaying 'all the external signs and internal symptoms of entering a new phase of intellectual development and re-orientation' (p. 1624) guided by a realist turn. Should we, then, simply dismiss Reed's pitch for critical realism as hyperbole that, perversely, lacks 'realism'?

Well, no, obviously not entirely, or there would be little more for this commentary to consider. The observation that Critical Realism has yet to show any widespread influence upon MOS does not necessarily imply that Reed's 'Reflections' are undeserving of attention. Our interest in Critical Realism resides in its contribution to stimulating reflection upon the competing 'domain assumptions' (Gouldner, 1970, cited in Reed, p. 1621) that underpin the production of knowledge about management and organization. We are neither advocates of critical realist analysis, nor opponents aligned to either of the traditions – positivism and constructionism – with which critical realism is counter-posed. We are interested in Critical Realism's ontological questioning and to its role and contribution as meta-theory. That is why we take seriously Reed's advocacy and exposition of a (critical) realist turn in MOS. If MOS is taking a '(critical) realist turn' (p. 1629), as outlined and commended by Reed, we are concerned to better understand the status of the claims that are made in the name of Critical Realism, their rigour and their distinctiveness. We explore these concerns in the following sections.

## **SPINNING THE CRITICAL REALIST WORLD: HOW DO YOU KNOW?**

The critical realist turn, as presented by Reed in a set of points (pp. 1629 et seq), is distinguished by its claim to provide a clear, unambiguous ontology, which tells us how, or what, the world is. Within its stratified or layered ontology, there are,

at the deepest level, 'underlying structures and mechanisms'. These are understood to possess 'causal powers' that 'generate observable patterns of events and outcomes' (p. 1630) or 'shape events and regularities at a surface level' (p. 1630). The first, most basic, question that follows from this is: 'how do you know that this is the way the world is?'

Arguments developed by Critical Realists to support their ontology are largely absent from Reed's 'Reflections'. This makes it difficult for anyone unfamiliar with the seminal texts of Critical Realism to appreciate the basis of critical realist analysis. In effect, we are required to take on trust – that is, uncritically – the conclusions reached by the gurus of Critical Realism – Tony Lawson and Margaret Archer, as well as Roy Bhaskar.

What, then, do we find when we turn to the source texts of Critical Realism? We discover that Bhaskar developed his position – initially characterized as 'transcendental realism' – through a critique of empirical realism and idealism. Bhaskar's argument is based on the premise that something called science exists; and that in order for science to exist, the world/reality – social as well as natural – 'must' be ordered in a particular, stratified way – that is, with mechanisms as casual powers governing the level of events (the actual) and experience (the empirical) (Bhaskar, 1998c, pp. 18, 41; Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998, p. 3; Danermark et al., 2002, p. 18). As Bhaskar (1998c, p. 29) puts it: 'it is a necessary condition for the occurrences of science that the world exists and is of a certain type'.

We would welcome greater discussion of the transcendental arguments underpinning Critical Realist propositions within MOS. If this ('philosophical') task is defined as external to critical realist analysis undertaken within the ('empirical') sphere of management studies, or at least is only very loosely coupled to it, then perhaps a less abstract, yet nonetheless, urgent, question could be posed. It is a question that is voiced by Bhaskar and Lawson (1998, p. 4) who ask: 'Why, in particular, should opponents of any transcendental realist conception [of management and organization] be convinced by Bhaskar's choice of premises for his argument?'

Bhaskar's premise is that there is something called science, so it is reasonable to ask: what is 'science'? Could it be that science is the privileged metaphysical ground on which to base the claim that the world is by necessity what critical realists say it is? Such epistemic absolutism is rejected by Critical Realism as science is understood to be a social product (Bhaskar, 1998a, p. xii). So, the answer must be that science does not occupy any privileged metaphysical ground. From Popper to Kuhn to Feyerabend, philosophers of science have argued that scientific endeavour is not a neutral and asocial activity. In his 'Reflections', Reed also clearly subscribes to this view, conceiving of science as involving processes of abstraction and creative modelling that are theory-laden and, more broadly, are a product of socio-historical and discursive practices. 'All theoretical descriptions, explanations and

evaluations', Reed writes, 'are grounded in knowledge generating and diffusion processes that are temporally and spatially located in historical and social settings' (p. 1632). If this is accepted, then, we are led to ask: in what sense can *this* understanding of science – conceived as a contested and open, ever changing, terrain – provide persuasive grounds for asserting that reality is ordered in the way claimed by Critical Realists?

Our own understanding of how this circle is squared is that the premise is made plausible by the 'demonstration' given in Bhaskar's analysis of experimental activity (see Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998, p. 4). The 'intelligibility of experimentation' (see Bhaskar, 1998c) is what engenders confidence in the proposition that the world is made up of mechanisms which work as generative powers to render manifest what is empirically observable.<sup>[2]</sup> It is this 'intelligibility' that lends credibility to the view that empirical realities are constituted by mechanisms that govern observable and testable events. This allows a necessary and universal knowledge *a posteriori* (Bhaskar, 1998a, p. xiii; see also Bhaskar, 1998d, p. 48), to be *guaranteed*, yet, at the same time, to be *fallible*. This, it seems to us, approximates to an 'as if' proposition in which there is a suspension of disbelief in its necessity that, when questioned, is met by an acknowledgement (or admission) of its possible fallibility. It is not easy to reconcile claims of necessity with those of fallibility.

The claim to intelligibility implicitly relies upon a centre that acts to produce its coherence and sense. But, as we have noted, this belief is simultaneously confounded by the understanding that scientific knowledge is theory-laden, constructed and therefore 'fallible, contested and revisable' (p. 1632). In this framing of science, intelligibility is understood to be realized in a certain practical community of scientists (and many others, of course, including funders, politicians, pundits, etc) who are more or less immediate participants in the process of scientific enquiry. Yet, critical realists are adamant that the guarantor of intelligibility is the way the world is (see Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000a). Something (like an experiment) is intelligible because it captures the mechanism that makes 'it' – in this case, the experiment – what it is (see also Sayer, 1992, p. 70, cited in Danermark et al., 2002, p. 25). This is a truism, i.e. an axiomatic view, that demands acceptance *a priori*. As such, it shows the deadlock encountered in ontologizing the real – that is, the claimed ability to tell us exactly what the real world is.

## THE POSSIBILITY OF RETRODUCTION

How might a critical realist respond to our questions? He/she might suggest that we have failed to recognize, or have misunderstood, how Critical Realist reasoning is *retroductive*. Retroduction, not deduction or induction (or indeed abduction) is the foundation of the critical realist research strategy. Critical Realists differentiate their stance from approaches that depend upon some 'metaphysical absurd-

dity' (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998, p. 4) – for example, the idea that 'what reality is' can be deduced from the process of scientific discovery or method. Critical Realism is based instead upon the retrodution of underlying structures and mechanisms from the observation of 'surface' events and regularities. Retrodution is not a logical demonstration in the traditional sense of the world. Unlike deduction, for example, it does not provide logically necessary analysis; and, unlike induction, it does not provide conclusions that, in given circumstances and following a specific method, are highly probable. Retrodution is, rather, a non-necessary process of inference. For this reason, it offers no basis for anything that is necessary and universal. Retrodution can offer reasonable, plausible descriptions and analyses of the world. Yet, as we have seen earlier, it is precisely necessity and certainty (*a posteriori*) that is claimed by critical realists. In anticipation of this difficulty or 'limit' (which we understand in Hegelian terms, as in Laclau, 1996, p. 37), advocates of Critical Realism ready themselves to play their get-out-of-jail, 'fallibility' card, which acknowledges that all knowledge, including Critical Realism and critical realist analysis, is 'contested and revisable' (p. 1632). Yet, at best, the fallible *episteme* (an intriguing oxymoron) is embraced when one converts to Critical Realist axioms and accepts the reasoning these axioms make possible, together with the consequences for analysis that may flow from their adoption.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that we are hostile to claims of necessity. Following Laclau (1990), for example, we would argue that necessity is given in a structural and meaningful totality (which, incidentally, Laclau calls discourse). In no way do we support vacuous statements – such as everything is a contingent (unstructured) state of flux. Rather, our concern is to highlight the deadlock that we believe to be ignored, or skated over, in Critical Realism.<sup>[3]</sup> And, at a more obvious level, to point out that it is unclear what the status of contingency and necessity is in critical realism.

We are pointing here to the *coherence in contradiction*<sup>[4]</sup> that underwrites Critical Realism, an issue that is unthematized, and therefore unaddressed, by its proponents. In Critical Realism, the question of 'how do you know?' is re-spun as the question 'why is the world the way it is?'. Its answer is that the world is like that because science would not exist if it were otherwise. Despite having difficulties with Critical Realism, we value its potential to open up discussions that have not been particularly prominent in the field of MOS: What is science? What is real? And perhaps we can propose other substantive questions such as: why is managerialism re-articulating education and other public services? Critical Realism's insistent interrogation of ontological questions is highly stimulating even if it is also problematical. We have some views, which we sketch later, on how such questions can be explored, but this commentary is not the place to discuss these in detail. We turn now to explore another aspect of Reed's reflection that is of further help in eliciting an answer to our question: 'How do you know the world is the way you say it is; and why should we believe you?'

**ROUND BABY: SCIENCE AND EXPLANATORY POWERS**

An alternative response to our questioning would be to invert our question by stating that our position falls foul of the 'epistemic fallacy'. This accusation is directed at analysis that is held to collapse ontology into epistemology – by answering ontological questions of *being* with forms of *knowledge* of it – resulting in the 'reification of the fallible products of social science' (Bhaskar, 1998a, p. xii).

Gergen is the principal butt of Reed's epistemic fallacy accusation – which is surprising as, on Reed's own account, Gergen's version of constructionism is silent on its ontology. In Gergen's (1994) thinking, there is no conflation of epistemology with ontology as there is a resolute refusal to provide, or speculate on, ontology. 'Constructionism', in Gergen's words, 'is ontologically mute. Whatever is, simply is' (Gergen, 1994, p. 72, cited in Reed, p. 1624). Gergen's constructionism leaves ontological presuppositions unspoken, and he (like many others) does not deal with the paradoxes of this stance. But it does not follow from the identification of shortcomings in Gergen's constructionism that a satisfactory resolution of the relationship between questions of ontology and epistemology is achieved in the Critical Realist differentiation/combination of a positive (i.e. has a specific content) transcendental realist ontology and epistemological relativism. In common with other positions, a deadlock which Critical Realism cannot escape is the impossibility of making statements about the world without simultaneously making epistemological commitments, and vice-versa, as we have seen earlier in the discussion of the 'intelligibility' of the experiment. The point, then, is not that one should avoid such conflation but, rather, that the distinction is (im)possible, even with all (or one should say *because of* the inescapable) proviso and bracketing that might be imagined and embraced.

Where, then, does this leave us? It is certainly possible to agree with Reed that there is more to science than historical and social constructions. Heidegger, Lacan and many others have already discussed this without arriving at a Critical Realist cosmology. There are positions that owe much to Lacanian thinking, for example, those which emphasize that discourses (including the ones of different scientific communities) 'fail', and, in this respect, they are not-all. What they share is the understanding that discourses recurrently strive to touch or capture some (impossible) kernel but are repeatedly frustrated. Tripped up and dislocated, the moment of capture eludes them. Such impossibility, some would argue, is the condition of existence of everything we know, including any ontology of the social that we might presuppose, might deem credible or agreeable, and might endeavour to perform and secure.

Some of those who have considered how there is more to science than constructions have pointed out, for example, that modern science follows its paths as an unquestioning, and careless drive which is deaf to the motives, problems, doubts, etc. that are created, or addressed, for 'humanity', 'technology', 'develop-

ment' etc. (see Zizek, 1997). So, in grappling with the question of science it could be argued that exactly because there is something about science that eludes and contaminates its constructions, the claimed attempt to keep something called science going – which seems to be the prime inspiration and commitment of Critical Realism (see also Willmott, 2005), at least in Bhaskar's formulation – is at once heroic and needless. We accept that science cannot be reduced to the discursive practices through which it is produced. But this does not mean that the world is stratified in accordance with the tenets of Critical Realism. Even less can it legitimize (p. 1631) critical realist analysis and its methodology. This brings us to a consideration of the explanatory powers that are attributed to critical realism by its adherents, including Reed.

### **ROUND BABY, RIGHT ROUND: METHODOLOGICAL PRESCRIPTIONS AND EXPLANATORY POWERS**

It is claimed that Critical Realism has greater explanatory powers than other research strategies. This is because of the (retroductive) reasoning on which its research strategy is based, and also because

it is possible, indeed necessary, to assess competing scientific theories and explanations in relation to the comparative explanatory power of the descriptions and accounts that they provide of the underlying structures and mechanisms that generate observable patterns of events and outcomes. (p. 1630)

Retroduction, Reed argues, is better than the abductive logic employed by postmodernists and constructionists (p. 1630 et seq). Reed does not mention that the notions of retroduction and abduction were developed by Charles Peirce, one of the founders of American pragmatism, who, to our knowledge, did not consistently differentiate these terms. This prompted us to consider how the difference attributed to retroduction and abduction is maintained; and why and how constructionism and realism are said to be differentiated along these lines. Since Reed's discussion of the distinction between retroduction and abduction is brief, we turned to the text – Danermark et al.'s *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* – that he identifies as the principle source of his understanding.

There we found that retroduction is conceived to be closely connected to abduction, even to the extent that, in concrete research practices, they are almost indistinguishable (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 96). Danermark et al. also argue that general, non-necessary inferences (unlike deduction and induction) are common in the social sciences and transverse different 'meta-theories'. If we adopt Reed's categorizations, then the presence of retroduction would extend to postmodernism and ethnomethodology as well as critical realism. In Danermark et al.'s assessment, analysis exemplifying a retroductive strategy includes the work of Haber-



mas, whom they classify as a realist, and Bauman who is identified as a postmodernist (Danermark et al., 2002, pp. 98–9). How, then, does the assessment of Danermark et al., whose discussion of retroduction Reed commends, square with his claim that retroduction is allied to critical realism, whereas abduction is characteristic of constructionism? If, retroduction is not specific to Critical Realism how can it provide the basis for justifying the superiority of the explanatory power attributed to critical realism and its methodology?

So far, we have taken seriously, but not uncritically, the suggestion of ‘a (critical) realist turn’ within MOS by scrutinizing its three main propositions: critical realist ontology, relativist epistemology and a clear-cut methodology. A number of issues place in doubt Critical Realism’s ontological and methodological certainties and associated recommendations. These issues, we have argued, render the claimed ‘new direction’ problematic, not least because the path of development is (always) constructed, as we sought to show with our questions, on a fractured and shifting ground. Nonetheless, if articulated and elaborated, and without smoothing over its fissures, Critical Realism may provide a stimulating contribution to thinking through the future possibilities for development of studies of management and organization.

In the remaining sections of our commentary, our focus shifts to consider more closely the implications of the ‘(critical) realist turn’ for the development of MOS. We approach this questioning by interrogating the proposed application of Critical Realism within the field of MOS before, finally, reflecting upon how this field is represented by advocates of Critical Realism.

### **CRITICAL REALISM IN THE FIELD OF MOS: RE-TOOLING, STRUCTURE/AGENCY AND OTHER MATTERS**

In his ‘Reflections’, Reed introduces us to what Feyerabend (1975) has termed a ‘translation’. Since, in Critical Realism, there is no equivalent to ‘organizational forms and practices’, some ‘conceptual retooling’ (p. 1634) is proposed to render these phenomena congruent with Critical Realist precepts, principles and commitments. The work of re-articulating these categories and concepts that are ‘domain specific’ is in its infancy. The concept of organization, for example is most usefully approached, Reed argues, as referring to an ‘*intermediate level of social structuring* through which more basic or primary level activities are co-ordinated and controlled; activities that are achieved in relation to and conditioned by macro-level social structures’ (p. 1634; emphasis added). Our difficulty with the proposal is that, despite its innovative departure from Critical Realism, no acknowledgement or justification of the introduction of this additional level is offered.

Silence on the rationale for the introduction of the ‘intermediate level’ is unsatisfactory as its status (as well as the other levels that are summoned upon – micro/macro) is unclear in relation to Critical Realism’s ontological prescriptions

as well methodological stance. It is also difficult to dispel the sense that Reed's concept of 'organization' retains and endorses a standard textbook view, in which its credibility is vouchsafed by a scalar metaphor that differentiates 'the social' into a series of quasi-autonomous 'levels' extending from the individual/group to society. We shall return to this point. For the moment, we wish to comment briefly on an issue where critical realism aspires to make a major impact in MOS – 'the "structure/agency" problem or dilemma' (p. 1632).

The key Critical Realist contribution to the structure-agency debate resides in its insistence upon keeping structure and agency ontologically as well as analytically separate (p. 1632). Any conflation is understood to result in an unbalanced emphasis upon agency so that the influence of its conditioning by structure is inadequately appreciated; or, conversely, conflation exaggerates the influence of structure so that the role of agency in reproducing and transforming structures is neglected. If one accepts these ontological and analytical bearings, then a clear, knowable and rigorous elaboration of *both* structure and agency and *their interrelation* must be provided.

Here we consider more specifically the issue of agency. It is noteworthy that Critical Realism and critical realists have comparatively little to say about agency, even in contributions that aspire to fill this void (e.g. Archer, 2000, 2003). In critical realist analysis, and in Reed's discussion especially, there is an acknowledgment of the agency of the individuals or groups who mobilize 'resources and skills' (p. 1633) to engage in practices and reproduce/transform structures. It is notable, for example, but also unsurprising that Reed concludes, quoting Benton and Craib (2001, p. 132), that 'the solution to the structure/agency problem . . . involves a commitment to the reality of social structures' (p. 1633), without mention of any commitment to, or elucidation of, agency. At most, agency is conceived to involve 'power struggles' associated with 'opportunities for agential creativeness' (p. 1633), but the basis of such 'creativity' and process of making/identifying 'opportunities' is obscure.

On the face of it, there is a significant discrepancy between an avowed concern to avoid the conflation of agency with structure and an endorsement of the privileging of structure over agency as exemplified in the quotation from Benton and Craib (see above). Here we ask: is it possible to offer an explanation of this seeming inconsistency that potentially risks the very conflation of agency with, or at least its subsumption to, structure?

Given the dominance of a dualistic mentality which tends to polarize forms of analysis (Willmott, 1993), it might be assumed that our questioning of Critical Realism is symptomatic of a rejection of the basic premise of structuralist analysis: that the actions of agents are conditioned by some Other that has been theorized variously as 'society', 'context', 'circumstance', etc. That, however, is not the case. Our distance from Critical Realism is not calculable in terms of divergent views about the conditioning of action. For example, we have no particular diffi-

culty in accepting Archer's contention that 'the *conditions* under which *experience* is possible to agency (observing a cherry tree in England depends on its prior importation from China . . . or owing rent depends upon antecedent relationships between landlords and tenants)' (Archer, 1998, p. 196). The difference, we suggest, is more adequately represented in terms of *how* the conditioning of action is theorized. Critical realists begin from a sense of certainty about the *necessary* existence of 'structure' and 'agency' (see earlier) – 'critical realists posit both human beings and social structure as the two prime objects of knowledge for social science' (Lopez and Potter, 2001, p. 5 quoted by Reed, p. 1633; see also our earlier discussion of retrodution). The effect is to produce a seemingly authoritative body of knowledge or truth, albeit with a self-affirming fallibility. In contrast, we are inclined to emphasize the *hegemonic* status of these terms.

If the actions of human beings are not entirely consciously determined then, the Critical Realist argument goes, a concept of structure as being independent of action is necessary and justified in order to explain those actions. Following this logic, structures are conceived as 'causal mechanisms that shape the emergence, elaboration and transformation of different organizational forms and practices' (p. 1633); and, as we have noted, the practices comprising organization are understood to form an 'intermediate level of social structuring' whose content is conceived to be 'achieved through a range of, often contradictory and conflicting, institutional logics and forms' (p. 1634). Here, once more, it is worth noting the privileging of structure and the marginalization of agency, despite recurrent protestations to the contrary.

### **CRITICAL REALISM AND THE FIELD OF MOS: ON CONSTRUCTIONISM, THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPASSE AND THE POLITICAL**

The history of intellectual development in MOS is presented in Reed's 'Reflections' as a series of 'turns' that form a sequence. The third turn is said to herald 'a new phase of intellectual development and re-orientation' (p. 1624) guided by Critical Realism, which aspires to identify the generative mechanisms (e.g. 'structures') that can account for observed events (e.g. 'actions'). Use of the metaphor 'turn' constructs the reality of management and organization studies as 'a series of intellectual inversions, reversions or redirections' in which the entire field is conceived to move from one phase to the next, with each turn correcting the limitations of its predecessor.<sup>[5]</sup>

Reed's account of the development of MOS would seem to offer an apolitical notion of knowledge and its production,<sup>[6]</sup> despite telling the political story of how Critical Realism overcomes the limitations of constructionism. In Reed's account and elsewhere (see Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000a; Fleetwood, 2005), the insistence is on the virtues of Critical Realism that are primarily counter-posed against the shortcomings of an earlier, constructionist turn. The basic argument is pre-

sented as one of progress through a series of phases that produces, and presumably terminates (albeit with the proviso of fallibility) in, Critical Realism.

Reed's way of accounting for the field's development licences the view that the 'social constructionist programme has *dominated* organization and management studies over the last two decades' (emphasis added). Leafing through back issues of the leading journals in the field – in which we include the more pluralist *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies* and *Human Relations* in addition to the more methodologically constricted *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Journal* and *Academy of Management Review*, we detect some pluralization of the field but also a continuing dominance of empirical realism. Moreover, all too often, when the work of contemporary constructionists (e.g. Gergen) is made the object of discussions that are intended to elucidate the critical realist position, there is no consideration of the primary sources, and critiques of those sources. We agree that questions must be asked of constructionism. We are wary, however, of sweeping or simplistic generalizations and strawmanning (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2005). So, in the remaining paragraphs, we sketch what we believe to be important philosophical issues that have dogged MOS. We can, of course, only signal these here, knowing that they demand a more extended and nuanced treatment.

Let us suppose that what follows are constructionist statements: there is no meta-language (or meta-theory); there is no zero-point where our knowledge of reality captures 'reality'. 'Reality' is constructed as there is no objective, grounding point outside of the social constructions of reality. In other words, there is no escaping the signifier, as the predicate of 'reality is . . .' (whatever the research strategy or reasoning for establishing the predicate), is a signifier. This predicate will require other signifiers to be explained, which will require other signifiers, and others and so on. The Critical Realist position is that there must be a reality in the first instance upon which, or out of which, the constructions are based. Reed cites Austin on this point. This is reasonable. But Critical Realists then ontologize this point as a positive statement about 'reality itself', adding that their accounts of reality (see also Fleetwood, 2005 and its different categorizations of what 'real' is) are fallible but, of course, less fallible than others, as a consequence of how reality is, as we noted earlier. It is this last step that is implausible to us.

There are two aspects to the issue of what we are taking to be constructionist statements (see also Stravarakakis, 1999). The first aspect is that the statements are uttered from a position of meta-language at its purest (see Zizek, 1987, p. 33). The claim that knowledge cannot capture the truth of reality is a statement that, contradictorily, asserts a truth. The second aspect is that, as Critical Realists also point out, an externality is summoned up in such constructionist statements that is a 'beyond constructions'. But, and this is where we hesitate to enter the cosmology of Critical Realism, when this outside is made positive, it becomes problematic. For, in the moment in which we make it positive (e.g. we ontologize the structures

that comprise reality as for critical realists), we enter the terrain of coherence in contradiction (see earlier). This outside, as many contemporary thinkers have argued, is an impossibility, and it is theorized only as the limit, the failure, the breakdown of any attempt to tell us what the predicate of 'reality is . . .' beyond the play, and illusion, and 'catch' of the signifier. This is what, in Lacanian terms, is called the Real. Negativity, in other words, can be considered the condition of possibility of what we commonsensically call reality. In sum, the epistemological failure becomes the ontological condition of the (im)possibility of the social. Far reaching are the consequences of this thinking in the field of political and social theory for a renewed notion of hegemony and ideology (see Laclau, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Žizek, 1989) that enables us to approach and study and participate in changing the organization of the current social order.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this commentary, we have sought to address the thinking underpinning Reed's commendation of 'a (critical) realist turn' by posing a series of questions stimulated by his arguments that it provides a clear and unambiguous ontology, relativist epistemology and superior explanatory power, and thus supersedes earlier, positivist and constructionist, phases of development in MOS. We have also considered Reed's proposals for 'translating' Critical Realism into the field of management and organization studies, and thereby turning it in a new direction. While we are ultimately unpersuaded by Critical Realism, we have endeavoured to respect and take seriously its concerns, which for us signal the recurrent, insistent quest(ion) of the Real. It is a quest to which we have tried to contribute constructively by embracing and articulating a view of the Real that offers an alternative to the notion of reality developed by Critical Realism and applied in critical realist MOS. Specifically, we have considered some of its central concerns relating to constructionism, the impasse of knowledge and the political.

Our questioning has 'turned' around Reed's idea of a 'turn' which, as he notes is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1995) as 'to give a new direction to' or 'take a new direction' (p. 1621). This characterization suggests to us a positive image of a turn. In Reed's advocacy of critical realism, the new direction is commended as a 'third way', or phase, that learns from, and avoids, the excesses of positivism and constructivism/postmodernism (or substitute your own favourite categories). But Reed also notes another dictionary definition of 'turn' as 'to inverse or *reverse*' (p. 1621; our emphasis); and it is the trace of this meaning that we detect in his proposed new direction. In 'Reflections', the turn tends to become a reversal where Reed reverts to a familiar, structuralist conception of organization in which a series of classics (Bendix, 1956; Braverman, 1974; Dalton, 1959) – of highly diverse methodological pedigree – are summoned for inclusion in the panoply of critical realist studies.

We share Reed's regard for these classic contributions to MOS but it is relevant to note that his attention to these studies extends beyond 'mere' appreciation to commend them as inspiration, and perhaps as models or at least prototypes, for critical realist analysis:

the task for critical realist inspired study of organization and management is to retrieve and renew this classical *explanatory focus* on changing organizational forms and discursive technologies – within the material conditions and social structures taking shape in contemporary *political economies*. (p. 1637; emphasis added)

We have argued that the favoured '*explanatory focus*' is, to say the least, problematic as Reed's argument does not provide anything that is specific to critical realism or to Critical Realism even if it is consistent with both. It is also unclear why the distinctive conceptual apparatus and ontological stance of Critical Realism is so strongly associated with, or present within, classical studies (which presumably lacked this apparatus?). If there is little difference, why is Critical Realism needed? If there is a difference what is it, and why is it not clearly identified? In a very similar vein to Reed, we note Ackroyd and Fleetwood's (2000b, pp. 5, 19) assessment's that realism has been 'present, if often in part implicit, in a good deal of writing in management and organization studies for some time . . . there is much more work that is implicitly realist in the field of management and organization studies that which is implicitly or explicitly postmodernist'. We do not disagree with this except that, crucially, we would follow Bhaskar in drawing a distinction between *empirical* realism, in which there is a reduction of the real to the empirical, and *critical* realism that refuses this reduction. Many of the contributions to Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000a; see also Thompson, 2004, especially pp. 58–9) do not come close to meeting the transcendentalist requirements of Critical Realism.

The linguistic turn served to problematize the presuppositions of empirical realists as exemplified in much structuralist analysis. Following this turn, it becomes more problematical to treat the notion '*political economies*' (see above quote), for example, as a taken-for-granted. 'Political economy' needs to be re-articulated as it can no longer be maintained as an immutable, but rather vacuous, concept. This re-articulation that, to borrow Reed's expression, is productive of 'domain specific' notions – such as politics of production, resistance, etc – is in progress.<sup>[7]</sup> In this commentary, we have deployed some of the thinking that has inspired this re-articulation, but this commentary is not the place to undertake such domain-specific work. Nonetheless, it is relevant, and potentially helpful to those who are interested in such re-articulations, to signal some of the sources of inspiration. Theoretical elaboration has been undertaken by a number of the authors whose work we have referenced, including Laclau and Mouffe and Žižek. We would include also the emerging work which engages critically with the autonomist tradition (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004) and also the work of geographers and economists,

such as J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick and R. D. Wolff (2001), etc. The re-articulation is also occurring within social and political movements – for example, in the anti-globalization movement, as exemplified in the ‘social forum’ in which there is experimentation with alternative forms of organizing. These re-articulations refuse any mythologizing of a classic period when ‘structure counted’ because structure has never ceased counting, even if (or, better, precisely because) it is decentred from the outset.

Critical realism, we believe, could be deployed to enhance the philosophical literacy of MOS, with respect to central questions of ontology and epistemology, and to inform empirical studies with this awareness. In commending such a move, we are conscious of the dangers of creating a wave of ‘ontological correctness’ – a possibility that is indeed provoked when criticisms are based on the claim that opponents have an ambiguous or unclear ontology’, as in Fleetwood (2005).<sup>[8]</sup> And this is certainly not what we would invite or subscribe to. But we believe that a sustained elaboration of the Critical Realist critique of positivism in the field of organization theory, for example, could provide a valuable counter to the welter of empirical realist analyses that continue to flood management journals and teaching materials. This would at least make a refreshing change from the repetitive critiques of analysis associated with the so-called ‘linguistic turn’. Such a re-orientation would also be more consistent with the position originally developed by Bhaskar in 1978. Coupled to, yet beyond this, it is also relevant to appreciate that Bhaskar has recently remarked upon how the gulf between his critical realist work and notions of alterity, negativity, etc is narrower than is normally assumed (Laclau and Bhaskar, 1998). An engagement with such concerns and their relevance for advancing critical realist analysis in MOS would be highly worthwhile.

The danger is one of critical realism in MOS passing up an opportunity to learn from Critical Realism instead of invoking it to anoint and regenerate classical analysis as a model for the contemporary study of organizations. As the quote from Sayer that opens this commentary suggests, reflexivity is not a strong suit for critical realists, and a reluctance to explore Critical Realist thinking, rather than simply invoking it to defend established forms of analysis, may be symptomatic of this weakness.

## NOTES

\*We wish to thank colleagues in DOWT at Lancaster University and the participants in the seminar on social ontology at Cambridge University for their insights and support in discussions of issues explored in this paper.

[1] The term ‘critical realism’ derives from the elision of Bhaskar’s (1975) transcendental realist philosophy of science and his later critical naturalist philosophy of social science (Bhaskar, 1979), as explained in Bhaskar (1998a).

[2] To invoke the intelligibility of experiments already accepts that there is such a thing as ‘intelligibility’ that is uncontested, obvious and self-evident. In other words, ‘intelligibility’ is presented as a *universal* and necessary mode of comprehension that articulates a *particular* epis-

temological commitment. Implicitly, it demonstrates the (im)possibility of making ontological claims without simultaneously making epistemological ones, and vice-versa. It signals how undecidability is always already involved in establishing an ontological positivity and epistemological purity.

- [3] Traces of the same tension regarding ontological and epistemological claims, including those proposing necessity and fallibility, are likewise evident in the Critical Realist distinction between ‘transitive’ and ‘intransitive’ objects of knowledge. ‘*Transitive*’ objects include theories, paradigms, etc which are ‘artificial’ (or artefacts of human enquiry) as they are ‘fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day’ (Bhaskar, 1998c, p. 16). Such objects are historically, and some would say discursively produced. ‘*Intransitive*’ objects, in contrast, are not produced by human beings. They are the real structures, the mechanisms, etc that, for Critical Realism, are the objects of science. Such objects are ‘in general invariant to our knowledge of them . . . They are not unknowable . . . But neither are they in any way dependent upon our knowledge, let alone perception, of them’ (ibid, p. 17). Yet *knowledge* of intransitivity somehow escapes its own condition of transitivity – an incongruous state of affairs that is reconciled only, perhaps, by invoking the fallibility ‘get-out’ clause.
- [4] See Derrida (1978, p. 279).
- [5] Of course, whether it makes sense to conceive of the development of organization and management studies in terms of phases of development, rather than say the flow of concurrent streams of thought that wax or wane in credibility and support over time, does not detract from the merit of representing the field as a plurality of competing and evolving traditions of analysis. An alternative to conceiving of development in terms of ‘turns’ and associated ‘phases’ is to think of the process as comprising a parallel series of *particular* attempts to represent a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with all such attempts. Each attempt to capture what lies ‘beyond’ has its adherents; one can maintain that there are also those (arguably) non-foundationalist traditions of thought which are not preoccupied with this attempt to ‘capture’ anything. As Critical Realism acknowledges, the epistemological limitation is inescapable. Yet critical realists insist on producing positive statements on the way the world is; this ontology becomes the ground on which they assert that their knowledge is fallible, yet less fallible than others. Others accept, and have endeavoured to thematize, the deadlock – the impasse in which Western thinking has stalled: that of reaching out to knowing the truth and it being foreclosed to our direct experience and thinking. Each attempt remains particularistic. Even when it ostensibly incarnates the universal, it does not escape being a particularity (see Butler et al., 2000). This is inevitably subject to challenge as a consequence of the antagonism or impossibility that always infects any totalizing attempt. Whatever hegemonic grip a particular knowledge claim comes to exert, its hold is precarious. Other particularities surface that feed off its limits, and themselves aspire to provide a more complete representation of the totality.
- [6] See Contu (2005) for an extended discussion on CR, knowledge and its political implications.
- [7] By in-progress we mean the work developed along the very diverse lines of elaborations discussed in the conclusions of this commentary that has been explored in a number of recent PhDs whose contents are in the process of being converted into books and journal articles, hence becoming available to a wider audience. Referees of this work, much of which is not following a traditional path, will be aware of its distinctiveness. Using information and communication technologies, it is extending the audience, the participants and the forms of scholarly work in ways that, at least to a certain extent, subverts the elite model of publishing in our field. We are thinking here of electronic journals such as *EJROT* and *M@n@gement* and, in particular *Ephemera* and the book series that is being launched.
- [8] For us the imperative is not, or not only, to, ‘clarify your ontology’ but also to ask: what do you make of, and how do you deal with, its coherence in contradiction. This is for us what opens up to the political.

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First, to provide an exposition of the 'realist turn' in contemporary organization and management studies. Second, to assess th.Â  
Overall, the paper concludes that the 'realist turn' creates a significant intellectual opportunity and space in which the historical sociology  
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Studies. A. Contu, H. Willmott. Political Science, Sociology.Â NGOs management and the value of "partnerships"™ for equality in  
international development: What™s in a name? A. Contu, E. Girei. Sociology. With regard to advancing studies of management and  
organization, Reed attributes to critical realism [1] the capacity to "fundamentally redefine both the nature of the "explanatory task" . . .  
and the contribution that explanatory knowledge can make to our understanding of and participation in emergent socio-organizational  
forms' (p. 1632).Reed positions the nature and direction of the realist turn in relation to the paths.Â SPINNING THE CRITICAL  
REALIST WORLD: HOW DO YOU KNOW?The critical realist turn, as presented by Reed in a set of points (pp. 1629 et seq), is  
distinguished by its claim to provide a clear, unambiguous ontology, which tells us how, or what, the world is.