REALISM AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
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PART I

INTRODUCING CRITICAL REALISM
Realism – or at least the ‘critical realism’ that I want to defend – is not what many people think it is. Many suppose that realism claims a privileged access to the Truth and thus involves a kind of ‘foundationalism’. But such claims are inconsistent with realism, for if the defining feature of realism is the belief that there is a world existing independently of our knowledge of it, then that independence of objects from knowledge immediately undermines any complacent assumptions about the relation between them and renders it problematic. What reason have we for accepting this basic realist proposition of the mind-independence of the world? I would argue that it is the evident fallibility of our knowledge – the experience of getting things wrong, of having our expectations confounded, and of crashing into things – that justifies us in believing that the world exists regardless of what we happen to think about it. If, by contrast, the world itself was a product or construction of our knowledge, then our knowledge would surely be infallible, for how could we ever be mistaken about anything? How could it be said that things were not as we supposed? Realism is therefore necessarily a fallibilist philosophy and one which must be wary of simple correspondence concepts of truth. It must acknowledge that the world can only be known under particular descriptions, in terms of available discourses, though it does not follow from this that no description or explanation is better than any other.

In starting this book in this way, turning the tables on anti-realists, I am of course getting my retaliation in first, because I am aware that in certain quarters, ‘realism’ is synonymous with a form of naive objectivism, claiming unmediated access to the Truth. This misconception prevents realism getting a hearing. At the same time, I am also wary of naive supporters of realism who assume that it will indeed guarantee the production of true knowledge, when the independence of the world from our knowledge and the entrapment of knowledge within discourse imply the impossibility of any such guarantees.

Yet once such misconceptions are removed, I believe it can be shown that realism (particularly the critical realism pioneered by Roy Bhaskar) offers great promise for social science and theory. Critical realism provides an alternative to several philosophical and methodological positions which have been found wanting. Firstly, in the philosophy of natural science, realism offered a third way between empiricism and positivism on the one hand and the relativism that followed in the wake of Kuhn and Feyerabend’s assault on conceptions of science as a cumulative foundationalist enterprise on the other. Secondly, in the philosophy and methodology of social science, critical realism provides an alternative to both hopes of a law-finding science of society modelled on natural science.
methodology and the anti-naturalist or interpretivist reductions of social science to the interpretation of meaning. By simultaneously challenging common conceptions of both natural and social science, particularly as regards causation, critical realism proposes a way of combining a modified naturalism with a recognition of the necessity of interpretive understanding of meaning in social life. For realists, social science is neither nomothetic (that is, law-seeking) nor idiographic (concerned with documenting the unique). Thirdly, with respect to debates around modernism and postmodernism, it opposes the reductionism and closure of some overly confident ‘modernist’ kinds of social science, evident in the determinism and flattening of difference common in some versions of grand narratives, and in the a priorism of neoclassical economics. Such approaches radically underestimate the openness, contingency and contextually variable character of social change. On the other hand, it rejects a defeatist strain of postmodernism which assumes that the absence of certainty, regularity and closure, means that hopes of reliable knowledge claims and scientific progress must be rejected (Stones, 1996). Accordingly, critical realism seeks to avoid both scientism and ‘science-envy’ on the one hand and radical rejections of science on the other.¹

The chapters of this book are offered as realist contributions to debates on social theory and the philosophy and methodology of social science that have been prominent in the last two decades. While they are largely an attempt to apply and develop critical realist angles, at certain points I shall make criticisms of critical realism itself, particularly with regard to its account of critical social science. Although I have attempted to adopt a critical realist approach to my substantive work in social science – mainly in industrial and urban and regional studies and political economy (Sayer, 1995; Morgan and Sayer, 1988; Sayer and Walker, 1992) – I have not included any of this material in this collection, apart from drawing some examples from it in Chapter 1.

Insofar as this is a book of critiques, I should perhaps point out that I am more interested in ideas than who might have authored them and more interested in their evaluation than in their history. By and large I therefore avoid questions of how particular authors are to be interpreted. In many cases the ideas are not drawn directly from major theorists but are ones I have frequently encountered in discussions. In addition, as is common in philosophy, what follows may even include some lines of argument over which no-one claims authorship, but which nevertheless are interesting possibilities in themselves. One of the main sources has been discussions with research students in social science, especially those I have taught on courses in the philosophy of social science and social theory. I realize that engaging directly with the most prestigious authors would bring me more cultural capital, but they have had plenty of attention already, and utility is more important than prestige, even where its exchange value is lower.

A recent minor theme of debate in philosophy and social theory has concerned the role of logic and metaphor and rhetoric in science and philosophy (for example, Nelson et al., 1987; Norris, 1997; Mäki, 1993). Although these elements are often presented as opposed, critical realism takes a both/and rather than an either/or position regarding them. Both lay and scientific thought requires not only logic but metaphors and associational thinking. Scientific and philosophical
discourses are rhetorical in the broad sense of involving persuasion, but that does not necessarily cancel out their dependence on logic and reduce them to a form of linguistic arm-twisting. Philosophy proceeds by making connections and distinctions. In the essays that follow, I, of course, deploy metaphors, rhetoric and associational thinking but I also try to work out what entails what, what is a non-sequitur, which conditions are necessary, which sufficient; more simply I attempt to distinguish rigorously between *can* and *must*, *all* and *some*, *often* and *always*. Following a philosophical argument is like negotiating a complex, twisting route through dense networks of streets. There are many opportunities for wrong turnings – unjustified inferences. One can take a wrong turning just by misreading ‘can’ as ‘must’, or ‘some’ as ‘all’. Distinctions, especially in the form of dualisms or binaries, are regular targets of scepticism today, but whether they are good or bad is an *a posteriori* matter, and we can hardly avoid interrogating them logically – in terms of what they entail and don’t entail – as well as in terms of their associations and metaphorical qualities. Simply to note the presence of binaries or dualisms does not constitute an argument until one explains what is problematic about the instances in question. Similarly, that a distinction can be deconstructed does not necessarily totally undermine it; it may just elaborate and qualify it. That a distinction is fuzzy is not necessarily fatal. Some of our most useful distinctions – like that between night and day – cannot be drawn sharply, but most of the time we have little difficulty with them. In other words my main aim in these essays has been to argue, to get beyond a sound-bite approach; if they are reciprocated with counter arguments I shall be happy.

It may help to situate the essays which follow if I offer a brief personal interpretation of the context in which critical realism has developed. Inevitably it will reflect my own situation within Britain. It is not intended as an overview; others are likely to have had different experiences.

The institutional context in which I began my first research was the University of Sussex, whose commitment to interdisciplinary studies forced me out of my early disciplinary parochialism in human geography and allowed me also to teach the philosophy of social science. This gave me free rein to explore the aftermath of the major debates in the philosophy of science of the 1960s and 70s – the conventionalist assaults of authors, such as Kuhn and Feyerabend, on empiricist philosophy of science, and the anti-naturalist approaches of interpretivism or hermeneutics in the philosophy of social science. This was also the context in which critical realism first developed in Britain in the mid-1970s, where the work of Rom Harré and particularly Roy Bhaskar, and others such as Russell Keat and Ted Benton, offered an alternative to empiricism and conventionalism in the philosophy of natural science, and to positivism and interpretivism in the philosophy of social science.

I started out with critiques of positivism, especially its expectation that the social world could be shown to be a composite of a number of behavioural regularities which would eventually be described by social laws akin to those of natural science. The empirical context was the prosaic one of studies of the development of urban and regional systems (Sayer, 1976). In attempting to develop an understanding of these that was both dynamic and spatial, it slowly
dawned on me that social systems were necessarily open, and that they evolved rather than equilibrated, not least because people have the capacity to learn and change their behaviour. Consequently I realized the goal of finding rough regularities, let alone laws, to describe social systems, was a pipe dream. At the same time, realist philosophy was beginning to challenge the regularity or successionist theory of causation, and to analyse the explanation of change in open systems, so that it became clear that abandoning hopes of finding regularities in no way meant abandoning explanation.

From the late 1960s through to the early 1980s, the rise of the new Left revived some distinctly grand and modernist theories of capitalist societies. The world was to be seen in terms of grand structures while pluralism was associated with the much-despised liberalism, unable to see the structural wood for the interest-group trees, a tendency now – amazingly – inverted, with pluralism being associated with the intellectual avant garde and structuralism being seen as passé (McLennan, 1996). Particularly in its Althusserian form, structuralism exuded an extraordinary scientistic arrogance, later deservedly punctured by E.P. Thompson’s withering attack in his unfortunately-titled *The Poverty of Theory* (Thompson, 1979). Much was excluded by those ostensibly all-embracing, all-explaining discourses – notably gender, race, sexuality and much of lived experience; here the rise of feminism, anti-racism and post-colonialism have challenged the old new Left with devastating effect.

There were also within the Marxist Left further reactions against homogenizing and reductionist tendencies, notably from Raymond Williams, of whose work nuance, complexity and sensitivity to local, lived experience were hallmarks. Many of those – myself included – who tried to apply Marxist theory empirically found that in confronting the social world in its concrete, that is, many-sided, forms, they had to develop more open, context-dependent and plural accounts, within which Marxism might have been an important ingredient but no longer a totalizing theory. In urban and regional studies and industrial studies, this was associated with an increasing concern with differentiation, most strikingly evident in Doreen Massey’s influential *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (Massey, 1984). This insisted on the enormously differentiated ways in which capitalist uneven development works out in practice and was critical of the reductionism of what later became branded as ‘grand narratives’, although ‘grand analyses’ would have been a better term since they generally neglected to tell stories and instead just absorbed empirical material into their pre-existing categories and frameworks (Sayer, 1981a). The focus on differentiation and pluralism might now sound familiar in relation to postmodernism and poststructuralism, but for many of those involved in this research, all this happened largely independently of their emergence. In some ways, critical realism, with its focus on necessity and contingency rather than regularity, on open rather than closed systems, on the ways in which causal processes could produce quite different results in different contexts, fitted comfortably with these developments. Realists expect concrete open systems and discourses to be much more messy and ambiguous than our theories of them and do not consider that differentiation poses a threat to social science.
Many reacted to reductionist accounts by shifting to middle range theory and empirical studies, for example from Marxist theories of accumulation to analyses of the institutional forms present in particular capitalist societies (Sayer, 1985). This meant a greater openness to diverse empirical and theoretical influences, but what was and remains ambiguous about these middle range theories is whether they were intended to leave behind more abstract social theories or whether they were meant to build on them even if they don’t acknowledge them (Sayer, 1995).

Another significant current within social studies which was critical of modernist social science prior to the rise of postmodernism and the turn to discourse was hermeneutics or interpretivism. These had developed a sophisticated philosophical critique of naturalism – the doctrine that the social world could be understood in the same way as natural science – and had theorized about the interpretation of texts and ‘constitutive meanings’ (for example, Schutz, Taylor, Winch, Ricouer). These represented a different source of criticism of positivism from that associated with Kuhn and Feyerabend. At the same time there was a largely sympathetic critique of interpretivism’s tendency to reduce social life wholly to the level of meaning, ignoring material change and what happens to people, regardless of their understandings (for example, Fay, 1975; Giddens, 1976). Critical realists argued that while interpretative understanding was an important and necessary feature of any social science, it did not mean that there was no scope for causal explanation.

In my neck of the academic woods, and probably many others too, all this happened before ‘postmodernism’ began to be discussed. This arrived mainly from across the Atlantic, out of architecture and the new dialogue between literary studies and social theory. This exchange, along with the more general turn to language and discourse, was useful in exploring the similarities and relations between literature and social science. Language could not continue to be taken as transparent and unproblematic by the philosophy of science; discourse and textuality needed to be taken seriously.

Postmodernism has also encouraged a more critical view of key categories of social thought, especially the ways in which binary distinctions or dualisms typically obscure connections, hierarchy and differences, and apparently comprehensive syntheses suppress the experience of certain groups, while concealing the identity of those whose particularistic stories they actually do express. Fundamental philosophical issues have been raised regarding the character of discourse, the limits of reason, and the question of truth. What the implications are of such developments for critical realism and social science is controversial: for the ‘defeatist postmodernists’ they imply relativism, idealism and a rejection of the ambitions of social science; for others they point to a renewed social science which is conceptually cautious and more reflexive about both its implicit philosophy and methodology and its social and political coordinates. My sympathies lie with the latter view.

Differentiation is not the same as difference, interpretivism is not the same as discourse analysis, liberal pluralism is not the same as postmodern pluralism. These apparently similar concepts have different provenances and associations, but the parallels between them are intriguing. What is important to note, especially
given the preoccupation in social science with novelty, is that some important critiques of modernism in social science predated postmodernism and did not share its predominantly idealist character.

If I have mixed feelings about postmodernism, there is one ‘post’ I feel committed to unreservedly – ‘post-disciplinary studies’; indeed, since the late 1970s I have identified with social science rather than with a particular discipline. Disciplinary parochialism, and its close relative disciplinary imperialism, are a recipe for reductionism, blinkered interpretations, and misattributions of causality. The essays which follow reflect this post-disciplinary outlook. Several of the chapters have appeared before in journals. For the most part I have left these largely unaltered and, with the exception of changes needed to make them accessible to a broader and more contemporary audience, I have kept points made in hindsight to the section introductions. There are a few points of overlap but I have left some of these in order to retain the separateness of the essays.

I offer two kinds of introduction to critical realism. The first straightforwardly sets out some of the key features which bear most directly on the character of social research, leaving more fundamental epistemological issues to be addressed later. Given the growing number of books on critical realism and social science I do not attempt a comprehensive overview of its positions and philosophical defences here. Part II involves critical realist responses to many of the concerns which have characterized postmodernist tendencies in social science. In particular, Chapter 2 – ‘Realism for Sceptics’ – addresses a wide range of fundamental doubts which are typically raised about the whole enterprise and may serve as a more appropriate introduction for those coming from a postmodernist position. The other chapters in Part II deal with issues such as grand narratives, cultural relativism, essentialism and social constructionism. Part III addresses some issues which first arose in the 1980s concerning the role of space in social theory. Part IV addresses arguments that social science must necessarily be critical of the societies it studies and presents a case for integrating normative theories into social science.

**Further Reading on Critical Realism**

Both the term ‘critical realism’ and the philosophy it names were introduced by Roy Bhaskar, building on earlier work in realist philosophy of science, particularly that of Rom Harré. I would especially recommend Bhaskar’s first two books, *A Realist Philosophy of Science* (1975, 1979) developing ‘transcendental realism’ for natural science, and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979, 1989) on the philosophy of social science. Neither of these is easy to read, but they are accessible compared to his later work and they provide an indispensable grounding for approaching subsequent books, such as his 1989 critique of Rorty. Andrew Collier’s *Critical Realism* (1994a) provides a more accessible and not uncritical introduction to Bhaskar’s work. Harré’s realism is less elaborate and leans more towards social constructionism in social science. I would recommend his excellent introduction – *Philosophies of Science* (1972).

As regards the implications of critical realism for social science, in addition to my own *Method in Social Science* (1992), I would recommend Rob Stones’
Sociological Realism (1996); Tony Lawson’s Economics and Reality (1997); Margaret Archer’s Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach (1995); Caroline New’s Agency, Health and Social Survival (1996); Harré’s Social Being (1979), Personal Being, (1983) and Physical Being (1994); and Alison Assiter’s Enlightened Women (1997). With the exception of Stones’ book most of these have little to say directly about postmodernism. However a prolific realist critic of idealist and relativist variants of postmodernism is Christopher Norris (1990; 1993; 1997). At a more substantive level concerning social theory I would also recommend the work of Norman Fairclough (1992), John O’Neill (1994, 1998), Kate Soper (1995a), and concerning methodology in empirical and evaluation research, the work of Ray Pawson (1989) and Pawson and Tilley (1997).

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Notes

1 In relation to the much-publicized hoaxing of the avant-garde journal Social Text by Alan Sokal, I find myself wanting to reject not only the charlatanism that he intended to expose but the naïveté and overconfidence of Sokal’s own position (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998; Osborne, 1997; Robbins, 1998).

2 Although there are many affinities between critical realism and Marxism, the former does not entail the latter. Thus the work of quite anti-Marxist writers, such as Hayek, have been argued to contain realist elements (Peacock, 1993).

3 This shift was no doubt related to the declining political influence of Marxism.
4 One of the peculiarities of these developments, was the blindness of the critics of orthodoxy working in the philosophy of natural science, such as Kuhn and Feyerabend, to the hermeneutic character of scientific knowledge, even though it would have helped their case.

5 For example, while many consider Derrida to be unmistakeably postmodernist and anti-realist, the realist Christopher Norris defends him from both his postmodernist disciples and modernist critics (Norris, 1991).
Key Features of Critical Realism in Practice: A Brief Outline

In this chapter I want to introduce critical realism by sketching some of the features which distinguish its approach to social science. There is of course a growing philosophical literature presenting and debating critical realism and rival philosophies and discussing its implications for social science. Rather than attempt to summarize such literature I will restrict myself to realism’s key features, merely indicating some of the philosophical arguments in its favour. Those who are curious about epistemological issues associated with realism and want to know how it responds to sceptical positions, such as those of postmodernism, are recommended to start with Chapter 2.

We begin with some implications of the basic realist thesis of the independence of the world from our knowledge, introduce some features of critical realism’s ontology (or theory of what exists) including its distinctions between the real, the actual and the empirical, its account of the stratification of the world and of the nature of emergent properties. We then move on to its distinctive view of causation, its inclusion of an interpretive dimension to social science, and its endorsement of the project of critical social science, that is, a social science which is critical of the social practices it studies. In the second part of the chapter we turn to realist approaches to empirical research and a brief discussion of examples from practice.

The Transitive and Intransitive Dimensions of Knowledge

We have already noted the basic realist tenet concerning the independence of the world from our thoughts about it. This relates to a fundamental distinction made by Bhaskar (1975) between the ‘intransitive’ and ‘transitive’ dimensions of knowledge. The objects of science (or other kinds of propositional knowledge) in the sense of the things we study — physical processes or social phenomena — form the intransitive dimension of science. The theories and discourse as media and resources of science are part of its transitive dimension, though as part of the social world they can also be treated as objects of study. Rival theories and sciences have different transitive objects (theories about the world) but the world
they are about – the intransitive dimension – is the same; otherwise, they would not be rivals (Collier, 1994a, p. 51). When theories change (transitive dimension) it does not mean that what they are about (intransitive dimension) necessarily changes too: there is no reason to believe that the shift from a flat earth theory to a round earth theory was accompanied by a change in the shape of the earth itself. Things are a little more complicated regarding the social world for it is socially constructed and includes knowledge itself and it therefore cannot be said to exist independently of at least some knowledge, though it is more likely to be past knowledge than that of contemporary researchers. When researchers change their minds it is unlikely to produce a significant change in the phenomena they study. For the most part, social scientists are cast in the modest role of constructing rather than ‘constructing’ the social world.

This distinction between intransitive and transitive dimensions of science implies that the world should not be conflated with our experience of it, and hence that, strictly speaking, it is misleading to speak of the ‘empirical world’ (Bhaskar, 1975). Critical realism should therefore not be confused with empirical realism – equivalent to empiricism – which identifies the real with the empirical, that is, with what we can experience, as if the world just happened to correspond to the range of our senses and to be identical to what we experience. Nor should critical realism be confused with literary realism, as the former acknowledges and highlights the conceptually-mediated or theory-laden character of experience whereas the latter ignores it.

The Real, the Actual and the Empirical

Empirical realism treats the world as consisting of observable atomistic objects, events and regularities among them, as if objects had no structure or powers, and in particular, no unobservable qualities. Critical realism distinguishes not only between the world and our experience of it, but between the real, the actual and the empirical, defining these in a special way (Bhaskar, 1975). When critical realists refer to ‘the real’ this is not in order to claim privileged knowledge of it but to note two things. First, the real is whatever exists, be it natural or social, regardless of whether it is an empirical object for us, and whether we happen to have an adequate understanding of its nature. Secondly, the real is the realm of objects, their structures and powers. Whether they be physical, like minerals, or social, like bureaucracies, they have certain structures and causal powers, that is, capacities to behave in particular ways, and causal liabilities or passive powers, that is, specific susceptibilities to certain kinds of change. In the transitive dimension of science we try to identify these structures and powers, such as the way in which bureaucracies can process large volumes of routine information very quickly, in virtue of their structure (hierarchical organization, specialization and filing systems, etc). Similarly, individuals, in virtue of their physical make up, socialization and education, are able to work; indeed, they have this power even when they are currently unemployed and idle. Realists therefore seek to identify both necessity and possibility or potential in the world – what things must go together, and what could happen, given the nature of the objects.
Whereas the real in this definition refers to the structures and powers of objects, the actual refers to what happens if and when those powers are activated, to what they do and what eventuates when they do, such as when the bureaucracy’s powers are activated and it engages in activities such as classifying and invoicing, or the previously idle person does some work. If we take the example of the Marxist distinction between labour power and labour, the former (the capacity to work) and the physical and mental structures from which it derives, is equivalent to the level of the real, while labour (working), as the exercise of this power, and its effects, belong to the domain of the actual.3

The empirical is defined as the domain of experience, and insofar as it refers successfully, it can do so with respect to either the real or the actual though it is contingent (neither necessary nor impossible) whether we know the real or the actual. While we may be able to observe things such as the structure of an organization or a household, as well as what happens when they act, some structures may not be observable. Observability may make us more confident about what we think exists, but existence itself is not dependent on it. In virtue of this, then, rather than rely purely upon a criterion of observability for making claims about what exists, realists accept a causal criterion too (Collier, 1994a). According to this a plausible case for the existence of unobservable entities can be made by reference to observable effects which can only be explained as the products of such entities. Both natural and social scientists regularly make such claims. For example, many linguists have inferred the existence of generative grammar from the ability of speakers to construct novel but grammatically correct sentences.

A crucial implication of this ontology is the recognition of the possibility that powers may exist unexercised, and hence that what has happened or been known to have happened does not exhaust what could happen or have happened. The nature of the real objects present at a given time constrains and enables what can happen but does not pre-determine what will happen. Realist ontology therefore makes it possible to understand how we could be or become many things which currently we are not: the unemployed could become employed, the ignorant could become knowledgeable, and so on.

Stratification and Emergence

In distinguishing the real, the actual and the empirical, critical realism proposes a ‘stratified ontology’ in contrast to other ontologies which have ‘flat’ ontologies populated by either the actual or the empirical, or a conflation of the two. Thus empirical realism assumes that what we can observe is all that exists, while ‘actualism’ assumes that what actually happens at the level of events exhausts the world, leaving no domain of the real, of powers which can be either activated or remain dormant. Furthermore, critical realism argues that the world is characterized by emergence, that is situations in which the conjunction of two or more features or aspects gives rise to new phenomena, which have properties which are irreducible to those of their constituents, even though the latter are necessary for their existence. The standard physical example of this is the emergent properties of water which are quite different from those of its constituents, hydrogen and
oxygen. In the same way, social phenomena are emergent from biological phenomena, which are in turn emergent from the chemical and physical strata. Thus the social practice of conversing is dependent on one’s physiological state, including the signals sent and received around our brain cells, but conversing is not reducible to those physiological processes. Reductionist explanations which ignore emergent properties are therefore inadequate (Bhaskar, 1975).

However, while we don’t have to go back to the level of biology or chemistry to explain social phenomena, this does not mean the former have no effect on society. Nor does it mean we can ignore the way in which we react back on other strata, for example through contraception, medicine, agriculture and pollution. As we are increasingly reminded these days, but as Marx made clear in the Theses on Feuerbach in referring to ‘sensuous human activity’, we are embodied beings, and the interaction of the social with the physical needs to be acknowledged.5

In the social world, people’s roles and identities are often internally related, so that what one person or institution is or can do, depends on their relation to others; thus, what it is to be a tutor cannot be explained at the level of individuals but only in terms of their relation to students, and vice versa. The powers which they can draw upon depend partly on their relations to one another, and to relevant parts of the context, such as educational institutions. Social systems commonly involve ‘dependencies or combinations [which] causally affect the elements or aspects, and the form and structure of the elements causally influence each other and so also the whole’ (Lawson, 1997, p. 64). Internal relations fall outside the ontological grids of positivism, which systematically misrepresents society by presenting such phenomena as reducible to independent individuals or atoms. At the same time we can be affected by things whose existence and position is only contingently or externally related to our own existence, by chance encounters. Individual biographies are crucially influenced by such accidents.

In virtue of the remarkable sensitivity of people to their contexts – which derives particularly from our ability to interpret situations rather than merely being passively shaped by them – social phenomena rarely have the durability of many of the objects studied by natural science, such as minerals or species. Where they are relatively enduring, as many institutions are, then this is usually an intentional achievement, a product of making continual changes in order to stay the same, or at least to maintain continuities through change, rather than a result of doing nothing. Consequently, we cannot expect social science’s descriptions to remain stable or unproblematic across time and space; hence a preoccupation with conceptualization is entirely to be expected and certainly not a sign of scientific immaturity.

Causation

One of the most distinctive features of realism is its analysis of causation, which rejects the standard Humean ‘successionist’ view that it involves regularities among sequences of events (Harré and Madden, 1975; Bhaskar, 1975). We have already prepared the ground for the realist interpretation in making the distinction between the real and the actual, where we introduced the concept of
causal powers. Objects are, or are part of, structures. ‘Structure’ suggests a set of internally related elements whose causal powers, when combined, are emergent from those of their constituents. Thus, hierarchical structures might enable delegation, division of tasks, surveillance, and efficient throughput of work.

Whether these powers are ever exercised depends on other conditions – in the case of unemployed workers, whether they need to provide for themselves, whether there are any jobs, etc. When causal powers are activated (as when the worker works), the results depend again on other conditions (the kind of context, tools, etc). Social processes are also typically dependent on actors’ interpretations of one another, though much can happen which is unacknowledged or unintended too.

Consequently, for realists, causation is *not* understood on the model of regular successions of events, and hence explanation need not depend on finding them, or searching for putative social laws. The conventional impulse to prove causation by gathering data on regularities, repeated occurrences, is therefore misguided; at best these might suggest where to look for candidates for causal mechanisms. What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening. Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions.

Moving in the other direction, explaining why a certain mechanism exists involves discovering the nature of the structure or object which possesses that mechanism or power: thus the teacher’s power to mark pupils’ work depends on his or her knowledge and qualifications and on being accepted by the school and public as legitimate; the price mechanism depends on structures of competitive relations between profit-seeking firms producing for markets, and so on. Again, the dependence of social structures on, inter alia, shared understandings is evident in these examples, in terms of the acceptance of the teacher’s right to teach, and the public’s understanding of the meaning of money in the case of price competition.

In other words, instead of the positivist model displayed in Figure 1.1, realism views causation as shown in Figure 1.2 (page 15).

Despite the arcane character of this kind of philosophical reconstruction, many mechanisms are *ordinary*, often being identified in ordinary language by transitive verbs, as in ‘they built up a network of political connections’. In both everyday life and social science, we frequently explain things by reference to causal powers.

Consistent regularities are only likely to occur under special conditions, in ‘closed systems’. The conditions for closure are first that the object possessing the
causal power in question is stable (the intrinsic condition), and second that external conditions in which it is situated are constant (the extrinsic condition) (Bhaskar, 1975). Such ‘closed system’ conditions do not occur spontaneously in the social world or indeed in much of the natural world, though often natural science can artificially produce them in experiments. In the ‘open systems’ of the social world, the same causal power can produce different outcomes, according to how the conditions for closure are broken: for example, economic competition can prompt firms to restructure and innovate or to close. Sometimes, different causal mechanisms can produce the same result: for instance, you can lose your job for a variety of reasons. Such regularities as do occur in social systems are approximate and limited in duration and are usually the product of deliberate efforts to produce them, through devices such as disciplinary regimes, for example, regarding the start and end of the working day, and machine-pacing of work.

Because events are not pre-determined before they happen but depend on contingent conditions, the future is open – things could go in many different ways. Yet when looking back at changes and explaining them, it is easy to imagine that what did happen was always the only thing that could have happened; hindsight can sometimes be a dubious benefit. One of the temptations of social explanation is to suppress acknowledgements of the fact that at any instant, the future is open, things can happen differently, because once something does happen it is closed.

There is more to the world, then, than patterns of events. It has ontological depth: events arise from the workings of mechanisms which derive from the structures of objects, and they take place within geo-historical contexts. This contrasts with approaches which treat the world as if it were no more than patterns of events, to be registered by recording punctiform data regarding ‘variables’ and looking for regularities among them.

We noted earlier that the same mechanism can produce different outcomes according to context, or more precisely, according to its spatio-temporal relations with other objects, having their own causal powers and liabilities, which may trigger, block or modify its action. Given the variety and changeability of the contexts of social life, this absence of regular associations between ‘causes’ and
'effects' should be expected. The causes and conditions of any particular social change tend to spread out geographically and back in time from the point at which it happened. This is particularly marked in social change because of memory. What actors do at a given time is likely to be affected by dispositions which were ‘sedimented’ at some earlier stage, often in different places. In this sense, the past and other places (now absent) are present in the here and now (Stones, 1996, p. 49). Just how much difference context makes cannot be specified at the level of ontology, for it depends on the nature of the processes of interest; as we show in Chapter 6, the latter range from the chameleon-like to the relatively context-independent or indifferent.

Frequently, two or more objects which are contingently related in the sense that each could exist without the other, are brought into contact and interact (i.e. causally influence one another). Once this has happened, certain further, new mechanisms may arise. This is sometimes called, rather confusingly, ‘contingent necessity’. Thus it is contingent whether a football team is amateur or professional, but once it goes professional, then new conditions and demands necessarily come into being, such as increased need for income to cover the pay of its employees, whether it be from ‘gate-money’, spectators, gifts or advertising. Again, it is contingent whether it raises money by becoming a public company, but if it does, then according to the rules governing shareholders’ rights, it becomes susceptible to the influence of shareholders and the threat of takeovers.

Typically, social scientists are dealing not only with systems that are open but ones in which there are many interacting structures and mechanisms. This creates the risk of attributing to one mechanism (and its structure) effects which are actually due to another. Many of the controversies of social science are about such problems, such as that regarding the respective roles of capitalism and patriarchy in accounting for the fact that women’s pay is significantly lower than men’s. This problem of identifying causal responsibility in complex open systems can best be dealt with by either studying examples which provide contrasts in aetiology, such as the absence of an otherwise common condition, or by asking a series of characteristically realist questions:

What does the existence of this object/practice presuppose? What are its preconditions, e.g. what does the use of money presuppose (trust, a state, etc.)?
Can/could object A, e.g. capitalism, exist without B, e.g. patriarchy? (This is another way of sorting out the conditions of existence of social phenomena.)
What is it about this object which enables it to do certain things: e.g. what is it about professional associations that makes them able to bid up the salaries of their members? Is it their specialized knowledge, their restrictions on entry into the profession or their domination by men? (Naturally, there may be several mechanisms at work simultaneously and we may need to seek ways of distinguishing their respective effects.)

Note these questions are about necessity, not regularity. They help us to distinguish between what can be the case and what must be the case, given certain preconditions. They involve counterfactual, rather than associational thinking; that is they are concerned not merely with what happens to be associated with
what, for that may be accident, but with whether the associations could be otherwise. Thus capitalism might always, regularly, be found with patriarchy, but it doesn’t follow from this that they have to co-exist as mutual pre-conditions. Patriarchy pre-dates capitalism, and it might be argued that capitalism could exist in a non-patriarchal society (Sayer, 1995). In answering these questions, much depends on how we conceptualize the objects (for example, what do we mean by capitalism and patriarchy and what is included in these?). Asking these realist questions forces us to sharpen our conceptualizations. So if we are uncertain about whether a relationship between A and B is necessary or contingent (that is, neither necessary nor impossible), asking this requires us to specify what it is about A or B that we want to interrogate regarding the status of their relations.8 Pursuing these questions about the conditions of existence of our objects of study is fundamental to theorizing in social science (Sayer, 1992; 1995, Chapter 2).

Such judgements are fallible of course; it remains contingent whether we know necessity or contingency, but then no philosophy of science can promise ‘a royal road to truth’ and critical realism is no exception.9 To some extent, researchers tend to ask such questions intuitively, regardless of whether they think of themselves as realists. However, in practice, I would suggest few researchers pursue such questions far. Moreover, orthodox philosophy of science and methods teaching actively discourages them by prioritizing the search for regularities, and prediction, regardless of the status of the regularities. As we shall see shortly, this has disastrous consequences for research.

**The Interpretive or Hermeneutic Dimension**

Critical realism acknowledges that social phenomena are intrinsically meaningful, and hence that meaning is not only externally descriptive of them but constitutive of them (though of course there are usually material constituents too). Meaning has to be understood, it cannot be measured or counted, and hence there is always an interpretive or hermeneutic element in social science. This is most obvious in ethnography and discourse analysis, but it is also required though often unnoticed even in the analysis of systems such as market economies, since they too presuppose that actors understand one another’s actions. This means that critical realism is only partly naturalist, for although social science can use the same methods as natural science regarding causal explanation, it must also diverge from them in using ‘verstehen’ or interpretive understanding.10 While natural scientists necessarily have to enter the hermeneutic circle of their scientific community, social scientists also have to enter that of those whom they study. In other words, natural science operates in a single hermeneutic while social science operates in a double hermeneutic. These circles imply a two-way movement, a ‘fusing of the horizons’ of listener and speaker, researcher and researched, in which the latter’s actions and texts never speak simply for themselves, and yet are not reducible to the researcher’s interpretation of them either.

Meanings are related to material circumstances and practical contexts in which communication takes place and to which reference is made. So while we can endorse much of hermeneutics, realism insists a) on the material commitments and
settings of communicative interaction, and b) on the presence of a non-discursive, material dimension to social life. Although it is common to see natural science as having all the advantages in that it has some scope for experiments and deals with objects lacking in intrinsic meaning, one can also look upon social science as having a compensatory advantage, namely that since social phenomena are dependent on actors’ conceptions of them, we already have ‘internal access’ to them, albeit a fallible access (Bhaskar, 1979).

While realism shares with interpretive social science the view that social phenomena are concept-dependent and have to be understood, unlike interpretivism it argues that this does not rule out causal explanation, a) because material change in society has to be explained too, and b) because reasons can also be causes, in that they prompt us to do things, think differently, etc. In other words, it poses a wider conception of causation than is customary, in that it does not assume that all causes must be physical. At first sight this may seem disconcerting, but its denial is absurd, for it would entail the causal irrelevance of reasons (Bhaskar, 1979; 1989), as if, for example, when we put a cross by someone’s name on a ballot paper, this had nothing to do with our reasoning regarding politics and candidates.

Actions always presuppose already existing resources and media, many of which have a social dimension that is irreducible to the properties of individuals; hence speaking presupposes a language, a language community, as well as material resources such as vocal chords or other means of making intelligible sounds; starting a bank account presupposes banks, money, and rules governing lending and borrowing. That those resources and social structures are themselves a product of actions (no structures without actions) does not mean that structures and actions can be collapsed into one another. Once one looks at them in time – remembering that they couldn’t be anything other than temporal – then it becomes clear that actions presuppose an already existing set of structures including shared meanings, though these owe their existence to the fact that at any earlier time (t-1), people reproduced or transformed them through their actions, which in turn were constrained and enabled by structures existing from time t-2 (Archer, 1995).

**Why Critical Realism?**

Critical realism offers a rationale for a critical social science, one that is critical of the social practices it studies as well as of other theories. Bhaskar in particular, has argued that social science has an emancipatory potential (1986). Social practices are informed by ideas which may or may not be true and whether they are true may have some bearing upon what happens. Thus, gender relations are generally informed and reproduced through beliefs that gender is natural rather than a product of socialization, so that the disadvantages suffered by women are seen implicitly as natural too. Social scientists who merely reproduced this explanation uncritically in their own accounts so that they merely reported that gender was a product of biological difference would fail to understand gender. To explain such phenomena one has to acknowledge this
dependence of actions on shared meanings while showing in what respects they are false, if they are. If social scientific accounts differ from those of actors then they cannot help but be critical of lay thought and action. Furthermore, as Bhaskar argues, to identify understandings in society as false, and hence actions informed by them as falsely based, is to imply that (other things being equal) those beliefs and actions ought to be changed (see Chapter 7).

Realism and Empirical Research Methods

Compared to positivism and interpretivism, critical realism endorses or is compatible with a relatively wide range of research methods, but it implies that the particular choices should depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it. For example, ethnographic and quantitative approaches are radically different but each can be appropriate for different and legitimate tasks – the former perhaps for researching say a group’s norms and customs, the latter for researching world trade flows. Perhaps most importantly, realists reject cookbook prescriptions of method which allow one to imagine that one can do research by simply applying them without having a scholarly knowledge of the object of study in question.

The objects that social scientists study, be they wars, discourses, institutions, economic activities, identities, kinship or whatever, are concrete in the sense that they are the product of multiple components and forces. Social systems are always open and usually complex and messy. Unlike some of the natural sciences, we cannot isolate out these components and examine them under controlled conditions. We therefore have to rely on abstraction and careful conceptualization, on attempting to abstract out the various components or influences in our heads, and only when we have done this and considered how they combine and interact can we expect to return to the concrete, many-sided object and make sense of it. Much rests upon the nature of our abstractions, that is, our conceptions of particular one-sided components of the concrete object; if they divide what is in practice indivisible, or if they conflate what are different and separable components, then problems are likely to result. So much depends on the modes of abstraction we use, the way of carving up and defining our objects of study (Sayer, 1992, Chapter 3). Unfortunately, the bulk of the methodological literature on social science completely ignores this fundamental issue, as if it were simply a matter of intuition. Thus many kinds of social research operate with categories used in official statistics even though they are often based on bad or incoherent abstractions. Take the category ‘services’, for example, as in ‘the service sector’, which is sometimes expected to identify activities that have something in common and behave similarly, when of course it embraces economic activities as diverse as transport, hairdressing, tourism, insurance and catering and therefore are highly unlikely to do so. Not surprisingly, the category cannot bear the explanatory weight many researchers have been tempted to put upon it – for example services as the basis of ‘post-industrial society’ – and the conclusions of such research have therefore been inconclusive and/or misleading. It is, as Marx put it, a ‘chaotic conception’. No amount of sophistication in research methods
can compensate for such sloppy abstractions. Only if we give greater emphasis to problems of conceptualization and pursue the kinds of realist questions outlined earlier are we likely to avoid such pitfalls.

As we noted earlier, given the presence of multiple systems and causes in the things we study and the possibility of different causes producing the same effects, there is always a risk of misattributions of causality. Recall our earlier example of explaining the power of professional associations; it is easy to think of several possible mechanisms – the operation of a closed shop, the advantages deriving from specialist expertise, patriarchal power, the deference of the general public, and so on. There may be more than one mechanism operating in concert of course, but this is what we have to sort out if we are to make sure we are not misattributing causal responsibility. To do this requires abstraction, and a research design which is geared to identifying such possibilities.

Where researchers are concerned with discourses and the meaningful qualities of social practices, understanding these is not a matter of abstraction followed by concrete synthesis, but of interpretation. However, realists would add that to interpret what actors mean we have to relate their discourse to its referents and contexts. It also needs to be remembered that social reality is only partly text-like. Much of what happens does not depend on or correspond to actors’ understandings; there are unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions and things can happen to people regardless of their understandings.

Research design also requires thought about how we abstract. This can be illustrated by reference to the differences between extensive and intensive research designs (see Table 1.1 and Sayer, 1992, Chapter 9 for a fuller discussion.) These have different purposes but may be complimentary in some research projects. Traditionally, outside anthropology and perhaps history, extensive methods have been assumed to be the norm for social research. These search for regularities in the belief that large numbers of repeated observations will give us relations that are significant. One identifies a population and defines groups taxonomically, on the basis of shared attributes (for example, white women over 60; houses worth less than £50,000), and seeks quantitative relations among the variables. This ignores or does not directly address the causal groups in which particular individuals (persons, institutions, etc) are actually involved, that is the groups or networks of specific people, institutions, discourses and things with which they interact.

An intensive approach would start with individuals (again not necessarily individual people), and trace the main causal (including discursive) relationships into which they enter and study their qualitative nature as well as their number. It might not be possible to define these causal groups at the outset of the research, indeed discovering them and studying how they operate might be a key component or objective of the research. As the name suggests, extensive research shows us mainly how extensive certain phenomena and patterns are in a population, while intensive research is primarily concerned with what makes things happen in specific cases, or in more ethnographic form, what kind of universe of meaning exists in a particular situation. Note, however, the extensive/intensive distinction is not identical to the survey-analysis/case-study or ethnography
Intensive and extensive research have complimentary strengths and weaknesses as Table 1 suggests. Intensive research is strong on causal explanation and interpreting meanings in context, but tends to be very time-consuming, so that one can normally only deal with a small number of cases. Nevertheless, contrary to a popular assumption, the validity of the analysis of these cases and their representativeness in relation to large numbers are entirely separate matters; the adequacy of an analysis of a single case need have nothing to do with how many other such cases are in the population.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
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<tr>
<td>How does a process work in a particular case or small number of cases?</td>
<td>What are the regularities, common patterns, distinguishing features of a population?</td>
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<td>What produces a certain change?</td>
<td>How widely are certain characteristics or processes distributed or represented?</td>
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<td>What did the agents actually do?</td>
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<th>Relations</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
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<td>Substantial relations of connection.</td>
<td>Formal relations of similarity.</td>
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<th>Type of groups studied</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
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<td>Causal groups.</td>
<td>Taxonomic groups.</td>
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<th>Type of account produced</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
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<tr>
<td>Causal explanation of the production of certain objects or events, though not necessarily representative ones.</td>
<td>Descriptive ‘representative’ generalizations, lacking in explanatory penetration.</td>
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<th>Typical methods</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
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<tr>
<td>Study of individual agents in their causal contexts, interactive interviews, ethnography, qualitative analysis.</td>
<td>Large-scale survey of population or representative sample, formal questionnaires, standardized interviews. Statistical analysis.</td>
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<th>Limitations</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
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<td>Actual concrete patterns and contingent relations are unlikely to be ‘representative’, ‘average’ or generalizable. Necessary relations discovered will exist wherever their relata are present, for example, causal powers of objects are generalizable to other contexts as they are necessary features of these objects.</td>
<td>Although representative of a whole population, they are unlikely to be generalizable to other populations at different times and places. Problem of ecological fallacy in making inferences about individuals. Limited explanatory power.</td>
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<th>Appropriate tests</th>
<th>Corroboration</th>
<th>Replication</th>
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cases there are. Extensive research tells us the extent or quantitative dimensions of certain properties and relations, but these are not necessarily causal relationships and its explanatory value is minimal. Attempts to use it as a way of generating explanations are undermined by its implicit successionist theory of causation, evident in its dependence on finding regularities in punctiform data. Significantly, statistical explanations are not explanations in terms of mechanisms at all, merely quantitative descriptions of formal (not substantial) associations (Sayer, 1992).

To drive home the difference between extensive and intensive research, imagine some Martian researchers who had never seen a human body before and set themselves the task of understanding how it worked. Those of the Martians who were extensive researchers would take a random sample of specimens from all over the body and look for empirical regularities among them, claiming that this would give a ‘representative’ picture from which it was safe to generalize. The intensive researchers would start at a particular point – it might not matter where – but follow up the connections of the organ or part in question to other parts of the body, building up pictures of the body’s structure and systems. Of course, it is clear that the intensive researchers would be most likely to yield explanations of the body’s mechanisms, and they would not be too bothered by accusations that their work was unrepresentative of the body as a whole. Extensive research, informed by a successionist theory of causation and hence aiming to find regularities among atomistic events or variables, seeks out mainly formal similarities and differences rather than substantial connections. Intensive research seeks out substantial relations of connection and situates practices within wider contexts, thereby illuminating part-whole relationships.

**Examples of Realist Research**

I now want to give some brief examples of a realist approach in practice in social science.

The first, is from the research of Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley on the evaluation of public policy programmes such as crime prevention measures (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Evaluation research is somewhat specialized in the range of questions it asks but that makes it a rather more simple kind of example of realist research than most and hence a good place to begin. Pawson and Tilley first set out a realist critique of the orthodox, quasi-experimental approach to evaluation. This is based on the search for regularities, comparing outcomes in control groups and experimental groups. In effect, it assumes a closed system in which a regular relation is expected between the cause event (the implementation of the programme) and its effects. It therefore assumes a ‘successionist’ theory of causation. In fact programmes are always introduced into open systems. Both the conditions for closure noted above are violated, so that any regularities are unlikely to last: the programme itself is unlikely to be stable, since it depends on how actors interpret and implement it (the intrinsic condition), and the context in which it is implemented is variable and dependent on other actors’ response to it. Not surprisingly, the success rate of this orthodox approach in providing lessons
which can be applied to other situations is dismal, and disillusionment has been widespread. By contrast, a realist approach assumes open systems and a generative model of causation in which the outcomes of the activation of mechanisms (e.g. crime prevention programmes) always depends on specific contexts. The policies always work through actors’ perceptions and choices, and whether people respond appropriately depends on many possible circumstances which are likely to vary within and between cases, and which researchers should try to identify. Hence, contrary to the standard view of evaluation research, it is not a mechanical application of standard tools in which concrete knowledge of the phenomena being studied and previous research is irrelevant; rather scholarly knowledge of the subject is crucial, coupled with research on the particular applications and contexts.

Progress in terms of cumulative knowledge is unlikely to come from replication of orthodox quasi-experimental studies in the hope of producing universally applicable findings in terms of empirical regularities between programmes and outcomes. Instead, it needs intensive research, repeated movement between concrete and abstract, and between particular empirical cases and general theory.

In the example of crime prevention programmes, criminals have capacities and make choices to commit crimes. The policy programme embodies mechanisms such as surveillance and security measures which are intended either to deactivate the criminal’s behaviour or block its realization when activated. (Note that despite the mechanical metaphor, it is fully acknowledged that they can be activated by actors’ reasons.) How both sets of mechanisms work, if at all, depends on contextual conditions in which the crime and the programme are situated. Thus, for example, the success of programmes to solicit information from the public will depend on the local culture, whether it is highly privatized or relatively communal, and so on. The research therefore aims to identify and explain various combinations of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes, and given the openness and complexity of social systems, the list of possibilities is likely to be long. No mechanism or set of mechanisms, especially not those of the programme, is to be taken as a ‘black box’. Their identification is not a matter of finding more specific regularities, clusters of statistical associations, for to do so would not explain the mechanisms but merely redefine the problem. Explanation requires mainly interpretive and qualitative research to discover actors’ reasoning and circumstances in specific contexts – not in abstraction from them. Answering quantitative questions about the number of actors and other relevant phenomena with specific attributes may also be of interest but that is rather different from understanding the mechanisms.

This is a limited instance of realist explanation since it focuses primarily on how, and under what circumstances – if any – policy mechanisms can block mechanisms such as criminal acts, rather than on the structures and circumstances from which the mechanisms derive. Nevertheless, a critical realist analysis could go beyond this to address such matters, indeed that is what the explanatory model suggests.

A second example, based on research with Kevin Morgan (Sayer and Morgan, 1986; Morgan and Sayer, 1988), was concerned with explaining the differences
in performance of firms in the same industry within and between regions. The economic development of a country is invariably highly uneven, with different regions varying not only in terms of rates of growth or decline but in the types of economic activity they contain. This is the case even within a single industry operating in many regions. Attempts to explain this are normally approached through extensive research by treating firms as members of taxonomic groups, such as the electronics industry, in the hope of finding regularities in their behaviour, such as a correlation between employment growth and the availability of cheap labour. Such regularities are rarely found because of the openness of such systems. A common response to this is to disaggregate the population into more specific categories – in this case, consumer electronics, components and defence electronics, etc. Insofar as these categories correspond to different kinds of firm operating under different conditions, this may help clarify what is going on, but however small the categories or taxonomic groups, they are still dealing with parts of open systems in which both the key actors and their environments are changing continually.

At an early stage we switched from extensive research to intensive research, starting with key firms and situating them within their causal rather than their taxonomic groups. Two firms in the same taxonomic group – say consumer electronics – might operate in quite different causal groups, interacting with different institutions under different conditions. Tracing out these connections to wider causal groups increased the information load but actually made explanation much easier – it was like switching the light on – because we were explaining behaviour by reference to the concrete conditions in which they were situated, not by reference to a formal similarity to other firms in their taxonomic group. Thus, for many firms, cheap labour was not a consideration because they did not use unskilled labour, and the productivity and effectiveness of their skilled labour was more important than its cost, since they competed mainly by introducing new products and services rather than lowering the price of established goods. Moreover, in some cases, technical change altered the significance of cheap labour over time by automating it out of existence. Both the firms and the environment in which they operated changed over time, and the operation of the mechanisms depended on actors’ interpretations, sometimes contested ones, so that it was important to find out how actors understood their situation. Consequently there was little sense in expecting to find enduring empirical regularities, yet using an intensive approach, asking qualitative questions about key relationships and how mechanisms work, explanations were not hard to find.

It was possible to investigate most of the major firms in the regions of interest in this manner, so at the end we could claim not only to understand a few cases but the main trends. As in the previous example of evaluation research, context was crucial; extensive research is indifferent to context because it is based on a model of quasi-experimental research in which contexts are homogenized.

Those who assume that extensive research methods are the only legitimate ‘scientific’ approach often suppose that intensive research must lead to results that are unique and of purely parochial interest, and not generalizable. However, causal groups are not necessarily local; indeed in this research they involved
global networks and markets which extensive research, with its claims to produce ‘representative’ results, usually ignored. In looking at objects in their taxonomic groups, one gets a representative picture of a kind, but as our Martian researcher example showed, the population of which it is representative may just be an artefact of the research, cutting across the causal groups relevant to actors. By situating actors in causal groups, intensive research provides a window onto larger entities, showing how the part is related to whole; hence it need not be of purely parochial interest.

Narratives of historical change present more demanding problems for social research. An interesting critical realist work in this context is the review of studies of postwar British politics presented by Marsh et al. (1998). Their purpose is to expose and discuss some standard problems that arise in developing narratives of political change. Above all they criticize reductionist or one-sided accounts which attempt to explain the whole in terms of a single part or theme, such as the decline of the British economy in terms of an anti-industrial culture, or Thatcherism in terms of Mrs Thatcher’s personality and style. Such reductionism invariably results in a misattribution of causality and a smuggling in of elements of other contributory processes under the banner of the selected part. In contrast, Marsh et al. advocate multidimensional accounts based on a synthesis of major significant elements, each of which is analysed abstractly and then combined in a movement back towards the concrete, tracing their evolution and interaction over time and space. The synthesis has to be more than a collection of factors and significant events; an account has to be given of how the various elements actually articulated.

Typical problems are suspect abstractions, such as the assumption that the state relates to the economy externally, when the state is itself a major economic actor, and a neglect of the way in which the elements identified in these abstractions evolve, changing their powers. Thus, regarding the latter problem, Marsh et al. criticize analyses of Thatcherism which treat it as fixed and unified, indeed, merely identifying a set of ideas and movements under a single name like Thatcherism may involve at best heroic assumptions, at worst a fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

Historical narratives also have to relate satisfactorily the ideational and the material. Ideas, ways of thinking, political paradigms can all produce change. For example, some commentators argue that globalization is not so much an inexorable force impinging on national governments but a discourse used by those governments to reduce their responsibilities. Whether such discourses can become effective in producing change depends on their practical adequacy, on how they relate to the constraints and opportunities of the context in which they are proposed. As realists, Marsh et al. do not reduce globalization to nothing more than a discourse, but argue that at least in part the discourse is dealing with something real. Similarly, it is not enough to cite the will and actions of key individuals and institutions as sufficient for producing change, because their effectiveness depends on how they relate to wider discourses and to the shifting and uneven possibilities of the context. Here Marsh et al. endorse the ‘strategic relational approach’ of Jessop (1990) regarding how actors, actions and contexts articulate.
We need to know not only what the main strategies were of actors, but what it was about the context which enabled them to be successful or otherwise. This is consistent with the realist concept of causation and requires us to ask the kinds of realist questions about necessary and sufficient conditions noted earlier, so as to decide what it was about a certain context which allowed a certain action to be successful. Often the success or failure of agents’ strategies may have little or nothing to with their own reasons and intentions.

Agency and structure also have to be articulated. There are approaches which emphasize agency and are relatively silent on structure; much archival research falls into the trap of reducing the relevant context to the interactions among key actors, ignoring such matters as economic change and changes in public opinion, and the structures within which agents act. Conversely, agents are written out of some accounts of Britain’s postwar development; for example, accounts which frame the subject in terms of Britain’s ‘Anglo-US’ model of capitalism, with its short-termism, high dividends, continual threat of takeovers and low levels of investment. Like so many partial accounts, this identifies something important but it leaves out political actors and is essentially economistic. Marsh et al. show that it is not unusual for narratives to shift between treatments of the historical past which are overwhelmingly structural, and accounts of the recent past and present which are voluntaristic. That this is easily done and can still seem persuasive shows both the power and dangers of narratives (see Chapter 6).

Social change is evolutionary – path-dependent yet contingent, shaped by legacies yet affected by contingently related processes or conditions. Thus the weakness of the British economy in the early 1970s, which derived from long-standing deficiencies such as underinvestment, poor marketing, lack of training and exposure to competitive markets, was exposed by the contingent event of the 1973 oil shock following the Yom Kippur War. Behaviour is both selective and adaptive; once again, we need to understand what it is about both its subjects and its contexts that enables particular outcomes.

Marsh et al. also draw attention to the problem of scale and boundaries in such studies. Too many analyses of postwar British politics have ignored the international setting, both in terms of connections to change elsewhere and of the presence of similar developments in other countries, such as the rise of neoliberalism. This problem is equivalent to that noted in our previous industrial studies example of defining causal groups in that it concerns the definition of the range of phenomena that are causally relevant to the development of the subject of interest.

These are just some of the problems of developing narratives of social change and an indication of a realist approach towards them. I shall have more to say about narrative in Chapter 6. Brief though the discussions of these examples have been, I hope they are sufficient to demonstrate some of the key features of critical realist research.

**Conclusion**

These then are some of the bare bones of a realist methodology. Many researchers operate in these ways intuitively, at least part of the time, though it is easy to stop
short once one has found common associations among phenomena, without pursuing questions about their status. Many are led away from a realist approach by the hegemony of positivist methodology, with its disregard of problems of conceptualization and abstraction and its successionist theory of causation. Even research which rejects positivism may stop short of a realist approach if it rests content with finding associations among phenomena of interest without questioning whether they are associated necessarily or contingently.

A common aspect of all critical realist research is the priority given to conceptualization and abstraction, for how we ‘carve up’ and define our objects of study tends to set the fate of any subsequent research. Realists seek substantial connections among phenomena rather than formal associations or regularities. In explaining associations, they seek to distinguish what must be the case from what merely can be the case. Explanation of the social world also requires an attentiveness to its stratification, to emergent powers arising from certain relationships, and to the ways in which the operation of causal mechanisms depends on the constraining and enabling effects of contexts. Realists also recognize the concept-dependence of social phenomena and the need to interpret meaningful actions, though since reasons can be causes, this is not something separate from or alternative to causal explanation.

In sketching these features of realist research I have left on one side many fundamental issues such as the nature of signification, truth, objectivity, the situated nature of knowledge, and many others. These are discussed at length in Chapter 2.

Notes

1 This objection is discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

2 Strictly speaking, these are features of what Bhaskar termed ‘transcendental realism’, which is primarily a philosophy of and for natural science (1975). Critical realism, is a variant or development of this concerned with social science.

3 Language exists at both the level of the real - as generative grammars and vocabularies - and the actual - as speech. (Personal communication - Norman Fairclough).

4 Some accounts of these concepts give the impression that the domain of the empirical can only refer to or express a subset of the actual, and not the real, so that structures and powers are treated as unobservable. Unactivated powers or potentials are obviously not observable, but the structures in virtue of which they exist may be (the idle workers’ body, for example); observability is not restricted to what changes or moves, for at least some structures can be observed.

5 The complexity of the implications of this combination of embodiment and emergence is especially important for sorting out some of the problems raised in the recent debates about essentialism (Chapter 4).

6 Not all social structures are big or supra-individual, like bureaucratic structures or class structures. There are also intra-individual and internalised structures, such as cognitive structures.

7 Imagining that it does is an example of what Bhaskar terms an ‘epistemic fallacy’, in that it transposes what is an ontological matter - concerning what exists (causes) - into the epistemological matter of how we develop reliable knowledge, for example by requiring repeated observations (Bhaskar, 1975).

8 Some critics of realism have complained that it is not always clear whether a relationship is necessary or contingent. This is sometimes the case, but where it occurs it shows that we have yet to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the situation in
question, and further work on conceptualization of key objects may be necessary before we can decide whether the elements are internally or merely externally related. Like any philosophy of science, the role of critical realism is just as ‘an underlabourer and occasional midwife’, as Bhaskar puts it, not a substitute for substantive theory and research. Further confusion may have resulted from a slippage between two different senses of ‘contingent’, that is, as ‘neither necessary nor impossible’, and ‘dependent’, as in x is contingent upon y. While it is possible to combine these two, virtually opposed meanings, I prefer not to, and I restrict my use of the word to the first of these two senses. One can do this while recognizing that all phenomena, whether contingently related or not, have their respective causes and conditions: contingent does not mean ‘uncaused’.

9 Some critics seem to expect otherwise. Thus Archer (1987) cites my statement that it is contingent whether we know necessity or contingency as if that was a fatal problem for realist philosophy.

10 It seems to me that Bhaskar’s concession to anti-naturalism is played down unnecessarily, as if there was some loss of status in departing from the methods of the natural sciences (Bhaskar, 1979). The hermeneutic dimension is minimized too in Andrew Collier’s account of realism (1994a, p. 247–8), indeed he comes close to denying that meaning is constitutive of social practice. This is unfortunate as it weakens realism’s appeal for those whose main research efforts are in interpretive work. For realists, methods have to be appropriate to their objects, and there is no need to cling to naturalism more than is appropriate. For the fullest realist analysis of the interpretive dimension of social science, see Stones (1996).

11 The role of referents is often overlooked in postmodernist discussions of signification so that meanings appear to have no connection to them - see Chapter 2.

12 This research followed in the tradition of industrial research established first by Massey and Meegan (1982). For a debate regarding the relative appropriateness of intensive and extensive methods in relation to similar topics, see Keeble (1980) and Sayer (1982). For a more recent and excellent example of a realist approach in the same research field, see Nick Henry’s work on industrial districts (Henry, 1992).

13 Many basic statistical methods were largely developed in experimental studies (for example, of horticulture) where these conditions could be artificially produced.

14 Similarly, they reject as a recipe for misunderstanding the ideal of an instrumentalist explanation of the kind common in neoclassical economics which prioritizes parsimony in explanation.

15 To some extent the emphasis given to structure or agency depends on the kind or research question being posed (see Stones, 1996).

16 The dangers of ignoring the path-dependent character of development, as if any society could reach a specific state from any starting point, are evident in the ruinous failure of shock-therapy marketization in Russia.