

Peter T. Manicas

A Realist Philosophy of Social Science: Explanation and Understanding

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Postmodernist critiques of positivist social science have often elicited a response along the following lines: “I would still call myself a positivist yet in the description of what you have been referring to as positivism I do not recognize myself at all in terms of either my practices or my beliefs.” People who subscribed to a meta-theoretical naturalism — the credo that social science scientificity, understood in terms of natural science scientificity, was both possible and worth striving for — frequently responded to critical attacks upon the philosophical foundations of their disciplines with indifference. They kept up their positivist practices in the new “post-positivist” era. Their opponents then frequently concluded that they were philosophically unreflective, unimaginative number-crunchers; and the already existing, foolish theoretical opposition between quantitative and qualitative methodologies was further entrenched.

The excitement attached to such postmodernist meta-theoretical debates gradually dissipated over the years in the ongoing mutual incomprehension of entrenched positions. There were (and are) a number of reasons for this sad state of debate. Perhaps the most salient, however, is that the postmodernist critique of positivist social science was, and is, completely inadequate. It is only telling with respect to the most naïve of positivist practices and has most often been exceedingly naïve in its own understanding of science as well.

At the same time as this incommensurate discourse trundled along, however, the necessary thorough critique of positivism was being produced, a critique that captured the errors and preserved the insights of both sides. Ironically, the realist school of thought which produced these insights — Critical Realism — was often mistakenly labeled empiricist and existed largely outside the awareness of both positivists and post-modernists. This book could easily have been titled “A Critical Realist Philosophy of Social Science” (instead of simply ‘realist’) as it sits squarely in the developing tradition of that school of thought.

Critical Realism could be said to have been initially launched by Roy Bhaskar with the publication of *A Realist Philosophy of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979). His critique of empiricist philosophy of science went much deeper and farther than any other to date. Subsequent work in the CR school of thought added further detail and depth to this critique; this book continues that process, as well as reiterating the fundamentals of the critical work done by Bhaskar, and before him by Rom Harré.

If Bhaskar could be said to be the “Father of Critical Realism”, Harré could rightly lay claim to the title of Grandfather; and the book seems more philosophically indebted to him than to Bhaskar (indeed, the cover of the paperback edition contains a laudatory blurb by Harré). Bhaskar and Harré represent two important positions in an ongoing set of important debates within (and outside) Critical Realism, over the existential status and putative causal power of social structures. One of the stated goals of this book is to clarify this issue, which it does by taking a strong position and providing a compelling argument for it. In so doing, Manicas manages to negotiate a middle position between Bhaskar and Harré.

One position in the ongoing debate is that social structures are emergent existential entities in their own right, and as such are capable of producing social forces with causal power. Harré, however,

would argue that social structures are essentially discursive constructs. Collective entities are wholly agent dependent for their apparent effects. Manicas straddles these two positions. He accords social structures an existence that cannot be reduced to discourse but sides with Harré with respect to their agent dependency and lack of independent causal efficacy.

This issue is not the only one upon which critical realists disagree but it illustrates quite well this school of thought's demand for rigorous consistency between meta-theory, methodology and more substantive theory. The manner in which Manicas handles it also displays one of the great strengths of this book. He connects the ontological issue of collective entities in an interesting way with the work of more middle range theorists of structure. The evaluation of the theories associated with the concepts 'habitus' and 'structuration' (belonging to Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens respectively) logically lines up with the meta-theoretical position referred to above. His actor-dependent meta-theory forces him to prefer Giddens over Bourdieu, and while I myself disagree with Manicas here, his engagement with the issue is interesting and quite persuasive.

The strength of the book is much more than mere consistency however; it also lies in the manner in which Manicas *applies* his meta-theory to a wide range of theoretical and practical issues that arise in the social sciences. Like the structure/agency debates, these issues have all been examined in considerable detail by others. For example, he looks at J.S. Mills' ideas about comparative analysis in historical explanation in relation to the work of Theda Skocpol; he examines the methodological strengths, and more particularly the limitations of multiple regression analyses; and he re-appraises rational choice theory and markets. All of these, and the other examples looked at in the book have in common a clear, philosophically-grounded analysis that sheds new light upon them.

A Realist Philosophy of Social Science is well-written and clear. The knowledge required by the putative audience for this book is not excessive. That said, the subject matter possesses an inherent difficulty, which years of teaching in this area have shown me is not easily overcome. Thus, I think most undergraduates would find this work a hard go (though a rewarding one, if they put the necessary effort into it). On the other hand, both graduate students and professors will find the book an invaluable engagement with, and lesson in the importance of the philosophy of social science.

Garry Potter

Department of Sociology
Wilfrid Laurier University
gpotter@wlu.ca

Garry Potter is the author of *The Bet: Truth in Science, Literature and Everyday Knowledges* and *The Philosophy of Social Science: New Perspectives*.

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