1. AN ONTOLOGY FOR ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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This collection is motivated by two beliefs: one positive and the other negative. The positive belief is that critical realism, and especially its ontology, has much to offer in the analysis of organisation and management. Evidence for this is provided not only in the following chapters where contributors have rooted their theoretical and empirical work in critical realism to good effect, but also in the growing number of critical realist inspired articles found in the organisation and management studies literature.[1] The negative belief is that much current organisation and management study is *committed to one of two mistaken ontological positions*: the *empirical realist* ontology in which positivist orientated analysis is rooted; and the *social constructionist* ontology in which postmodernist or poststructuralist orientated analysis is rooted. Despite contributions that postmodernism and poststructuralism have to offer, the recoil from (correctly) abandoning positivism appears to have 'catapulted' postmodernists and poststructuralists into substituting one mistaken ontology for another. If unchecked, this could easily take organisation and management studies down an alley as blind as the positivist one from which it has struggled to escape. This would be tragic given that critical realism can provide a viable ontology of organisations and management, allowing positivism and its empirical realist ontology to be abandoned without having to accept a social constructionist ontology.[2]

This introductory chapter opens with an attempt to clarify some of the ontological ideas, terms and concepts central to critical realism, whilst making it clear that critical realism is not positivism by another name. The second part of the chapter concretises the discussion a little by discussing social structures, positioned-practices, powers, mechanisms, configurations and tendencies by exemplifying them via a brief discussion of labour process theory.

1. Clarification of terms and concepts

Over the past few years, when introducing critical realism to various audiences, similar comments and objections vis-à-vis ontology come up time after time. Many (although not all) of these comments and objections are based upon a misunderstanding of the ideas critical realists actually hold. The following section, therefore, engages with some of the more common comments and objections in an attempt to clarify them and remove as much misunderstanding as possible.

Ontology

The term ontology refers to the *study* or *theory* of being not to being itself. To have an ontology is to have a *theory* of what exists. It is thus misleading to write things like: 'entities that really exist are ontological, or have ontological status' or some such. This is a subtle, but important point, so let us pursue it a little. Chia and King criticise the 'refusal, amongst organizational theorists to acknowledge the necessarily *ontological character of language'* (2001: 312 emphasis added). The term 'ontological' is used here to mean something akin to 'real' or 'existing'. It would be more precise to write about those who 'refuse to acknowledge the causally efficacious role of language'. Potter's (1998: 38) claim that the term 'ontological discourse' is an oxymoron is intelligible only if the term ontology is used to mean something that is real and non-discursive. If, however, we take discourse to be real (I will argue below that discourse is *ideally* real), then to have a discourse appertaining to ontology, such as a theoretical statement about what exists, is perfectly acceptable.[3]

Note finally that the moment we make a claim referring to being, to something that exists, (such as a word, a text, an organisation, patriarchal relations, a computer the planet Venus or whatever) we have presupposed an ontology - even if it is implicit or completely unrecognised. Ontology is, therefore, non-optional.

Real and reality

Whilst the terms 'real' and 'reality' are crucial if a discussion of the ontology of O&M studies is to make any headway, these terms are almost always used in a manner than invites confusion and ambiguity. Consider a couple of examples.

The mainstream approach to organization theory was premised, however, not simply upon a positivist epistemology, but also upon a realist ontology, according to which organizations are conceived of as objective entities akin to natural phenomena…as existing 'out there' in the real world.

(Hancock & Tyler 2001: 65)

Mainstream organization theory assumes and takes for granted the existence of organizations as material entities 'out there' in the world…Cooper, Degot and others challenge the entitative, ontological status of organizations.

(Westwood & Linstead 2001: 4)

Leaving aside the ambiguous reference to 'mainstream' approaches and theories, these comments illustrate that (an unqualified) realism is often associated with an ontology wherein organizations, structures and so on, are conceived of as entities akin to natural phenomena or as having 'entitative, ontological status'. This is misleading. *Critical* realists do not reserve the term 'real' for things that are material, physical or 'entitative'. They do *not*, for example, think that mountains, buildings, computers and kidneys are real but ideas, beliefs, concepts, language and discourse are non-real. So what do critical realists mean by the term 'real'? *Something is real if it has an effect or makes a difference*. Since entities like mountains and discourses clearly make a difference, in the sense that they cause human beings to act in ways they would not in the absence of these entities, then mountains and discourses are real. Entities like fairies are not real, although entities like the *discourse* of fairies is real: if people think fairies are real, they may undertake actions such as trying to photograph them.[4]

Entities and their identification

Critical realists often make claims to the effect that an entity can exist independently of our *knowledge* of it. I prefer the term 'identification' to 'knowledge' because the former encompasses the latter and allows us to avoid ambiguities surrounding the activities of *knowing, observing* and *socially constructing*.

Ambiguity can arise from the claim that an entity can exist independently of our *knowledge* of it because empiricists, claiming all knowledge is derived from observation, argue the following: any entity that cannot be observed, cannot be known about and we have, therefore, no warrant to claim that it, or certain of its characteristics, exists (*c.f.* Fleetwood 2002). Arguments like this, however, commit the 'epistemic fallacy', that is, they collapse ontological concerns into epistemological concerns whilst not noticing that something has gone awry in the process. What exists disappears from the analytical field as it is collapsed into knowledge of what exists.

Ambiguity can also rise from the claim that an entity can exist independently of our *knowledge* of it because postmodernists and poststructuralist often deny that entities are *independent.* For them, entities are socially constructed and hence *dependent* on us in the sense that they are dependent upon our discourse, language or whatever. But notice that some odd things begin to happen. If a person or community socially constructs an entity, then in a curious way that person or community must also observe it, and have knowledge of it and its characteristics – if not, any discussion about it would be impossible. The entity constructed and observed by that person or community is 'their' entity, an identity 'for them'. Moreover, from postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, since no-one outside that person or community can deny the existence of 'their' socially constructed/observed entity, or any of its characteristics, then any knowledge the person or community has must be privileged. Ironically, perhaps, postmodernists and poststructuralists end up on similar terrain to empiricists, implying that observation (albeit *not* of an independent entity) gives privileged access to knowledge. In this case, the 'epistemic fallacy', has a twist to it. Ontological concerns are still collapsed into epistemological concerns; what exists is still collapsed into our knowledge of what exists; but now our knowledge of what exists is collapsed into whatever we socially construct/observe.

In many cases people are knowledgeable in the sense that they know *tacitly*. They may know *how* to perform a particular work task but they cannot explain how they do it. They know 'how' but they don't know 'that' as Ryle put it (*c.f.* Fleetwood 1995:

chapter 7). When, for example, rules of the workplace (such as knowing the appropriate work-pace to adopt in various circumstances) are known *tacitly* it is misleading to say they 'exist independently of our knowledge of them'. They exist independently of *articulable* knowledge, but not of *tacit* knowledge.

In short, then, claiming that an entity can exist independently of its *identification* allows us to sidestep some of the ambiguities surrounding *knowing, observing* and *socially constructing*.

Concept mediation

There is no theory neutral observation, description, interpretation, theorisation, explanation or whatever. There is, in other words, *no unmediated* access to the world: access is always *mediated.* Whenever we reflect upon an entity, our sense data is always mediated by a pre-existing stock of conceptual resources, which we use to interpret, make sense of, understand, what it is and take appropriate action. This stock may be individual (e.g. a subjective belief or opinion); and/or social (e.g. an accepted theory, perspective, or social norm); and/or rooted in practice (i.e. the result of previous encounters with entities other than ourselves). When, and if, entities do become the focus of human beings reflection, then, we may say they are *conceptually mediated*.

What critical realism is *not*

One stumbling block facing those attempting to introduce critical realism to organisation and management studies is the widespread belief that whatever realism is, it is associated with positivism – or related discourses such as empiricism, scientism, science, scientific objectivity, structuralism, structural functionalism, foundationalism, modernism, Enlightenment thinking, 'traditional' and 'mainstream' approaches to organisation and management studies and so on.[5] The next section demonstrates that this belief exists and why it is mistaken.[6]

Organisation and management literature is plagued by the association of a, typically, *unqualified* realism (i.e. not *critical* realism, *naïve* realism, *empirical* realism or *scientific* realism) with positivism. Jackson & Carter (2000: 49) associate an unqualified realism with (positivist orientated) practices such as the measurement of social phenomena like 'motivation to work, leadership, commitment, satisfaction, efficiency, potential, psychological types, and so on'.[7] *Critical* realism is, of course, hostile to many such measurement practices. Linstead (2001: 227) identifies the 'realist approach…orientated towards 'objective' organizational, commercial and economic interests, whether bowing to the laws of physics or the logic of the market'. This associates realism with natural science and the search for laws. *Critical* realism, of course, explicitly denies that such laws exist in the social world. Boje *et al* (2001; 138-147) associate realist narratology with 'experimental manipulation' and 'narratives as measures; narratives with rating scales'. *Critical* realism, of course, denies the validity of experimental manipulation in the social sciences and criticises measures and scales of this kind.

Often, a body of theory is firstly associated with positivism, modernism (or whatever) and secondly associated with realism. If the reader subsequently associates this body of theory with *critical* realism the latter becomes associated with positivism or modernism. In the following comments, modernism and positivism are associated with Marxism and Labour Process theory. All that is necessary is for the reader to associate Marxism and Labour Process theory with *critical* realism for the latter to be tarred with the brush of positivism and modernism.[8]

> …given the modernist assumptions embedded in organizations and the rather dogmatic and exclusionary character of dominant research traditions of either a positivist or a Marxist bent.
>
> (Alvesson and Deetz 1998: 185)

Labour Process theory did not reject science *per se*, but grounded itself within a Marxist notion of science as a potentially liberating force…A Marxist inspired

approach to organization theory represented…only a partial break from...positivist epistemological assumptions and a realist ontology…

(Hancock and Tyler 2001: 69)

Now some commentators are aware that realism comes in more than one form. Gergen (1998: 147) for example, opens a recent essay with the words: 'In important respects, the drama of social constructionism was born of its opposition to a form of realism embodied in the dominant order of positivist/empiricist science'. Unfortunately, however, not only does the rest of the essay fail to distinguish between *forms of realism*[9], the usual conflation of realism and positivism or empiricism is evident. In one place he writes of the 'experimental manipulation…warranted by realist discourse' (*ibid* 154). Whilst he usually dichotomises (unqualified) realism and constructionism, in another place he makes a slip and writes of the warfare that characterises 'empiricists and constructionists', missing realism or conflating it with empiricism by default. He then adds a list of those who are 'set against empiricism – discourse analysts, feminist theorists and culture critics among them' (*ibid*: 149). Not only are critical realists not included in this list, surely Gergen cannot be unaware that there are critical realist discourse analysts; realist feminist theorists; and culture critics.

Let me state the following for the record. *Critical realism is not synonymous with discourses such as naïve realism, empirical realism, positivism, scientism or other associated empiricist paraphernalia: in fact, it is antithetical to these discourses.* Those who continue to make them synonymous, at least without offering an argument, have failed to understand *critical* realism.

Modes of reality

I avoid use of the unqualified term 'real' where necessary, and qualify it by taking into account its *mode of reality*. Whilst many things are real, they are real in different ways or *modes*. Confusion often arises from not recognising, or not specifying, the different modes of reality. It is possible to identify (at least) four modes of reality, or

four different ways in which real entities may be differentiated, albeit with some overlap: *material, ideal, artefactual* and *social*. I will elaborate upon these in turn in a moment, after considering a couple of examples where confusion reigns. [10]

Comments such as: 'social problems have their feet planted firmly in the *material world of social structure*' (Burr 1998: 24, emphasis added) elide the distinction between material and social phenomena. Writing about 'the relationships between discourse and 'reality'' (Keenoy 1997: 835) misses the point that discourse is (ideally) real. Shenhav and Weitz (2000: 377) give us the confusing phrase: '*people's objective reality is unreal*' (emphasis added). According to Chia:

> Social objects and phenomena such as 'the organization', 'the economy', 'the market' or even 'stakeholders' or 'the weather', do not have a straightforward and unproblematic existence independent of our discursively-shaped understandings.

> (Chia 2000: 513)

This is confusing because whilst an organization is a social object, the same cannot be said for the weather. Moreover, the weather itself is *not* dependent on our discursively-shaped understandings – although it may be dependent on our *actions* such as the inappropriate burning of hydrocarbons. Our *understanding* of the weather, by contrast, is a social object and is, by definition, discourse dependent. Let us explore the four possible modes of reality and see how a more nuanced ontology might alleviate some confusion.

Materially real

The term 'materially real' refers to material entities like oceans, the weather, the moon and mountains that can, and often do, exist independently of what individuals or communities do, say, or think. Clearly, in some cases materially real entities are affected by our actions, hence my use of the term 'overlap' mentioned above (*c.f.* Schmidt 2001). Weather systems may be affected by our inappropriate burning of hydrocarbons and the surface of the moon was affected by our landing upon it, but

these acts are contingent: materially real entities would continue to exist even if humans disappeared. In some cases, it might be more appropriate to classify what seem, at first blush, to be materially real entities as artefacts – e.g. a quarry. Whilst much will depend upon the context, the category 'materially real' allows us to handle those entities that do exist independently of what we do, say, or think.

Whilst materially real entities *can* exist independently of our identification of them, often we *do* identify them, whereupon we may refer to them as *conceptually mediated*. Note, however, that the act of mediation does not alter their material status: their materiality is augmented by a conceptual, perhaps a discursive, dimension.

Ideally real

The term 'ideally real' refers to conceptual entities like discourse, language, genres, tropes, styles, signs, symbols and semiotised entities, ideas, beliefs, meanings, understandings, explanations, opinions, concepts, representations, models, theories and so on. For brevity I refer to entities like these as *discourse* or *discursive entities.* Discourse or discursive entities *are real* because they have effects; they make a difference. [11]

Ideally real entities may or may not have a referent and the referent may be ideally or *non*-ideally real. Discourses about the management of knowledge have, as their referents, ideal entities such as knowledge and non-ideal entities such as people. Discourses about women being less intelligent than men have no referent at all. It is worth emphasising here that having no referent does not mean discourses have no cause.

Whilst critical realists claim there is more to the world than discourse, this should not be taken to suggest that they think discourse is irrelevant: far from it. Reed (2000: 529) for example, notes that discourses such as financial audit, quality control and risk management, are 'generative mechanisms' with 'performative potential'. Consider the example of skill and gender. In some cases, female workers possess skills similar to those possessed by (comparable) male workers. Sexist discourse not only draws our attention to 'womens' skills, it draws our attention to them in ways

that present them as being of a lower skill level. And of course, once these skills are discursively downgraded, discrimination in the labour market and the workplace often follows. Postmodernists and poststructuralists would say that these downgraded skills are *socially constructed,* and the point is well taken. I refrain from using the term 'socially constructed' only because it carries too much unwanted baggage. Working alongside this discourse, however, are extra-discursive factors that also cause discrimination. Many female workers simply do not possess skills similar to (comparable) male workers. There are various reasons for this such as women's restricted access to jobs where skill attainment is possible. This is often caused by intermittent labour market activity which is, in turn, caused by the requirements of child and/or dependent care. In this case, the lower skill level is not caused by sexist discourse, but by extra-discursive, socially real factors.

In the foreword, Sayer makes an important distinction which parallels what I am getting at here, namely a distinction between *construal* and *construction.* To construe is to interpret some (non-ideal)[12] phenomenon and make a mental image *of* that phenomenon – in my terminology this is referred to as a discourse. This is a different activity than making or constructing that phenomenon itself – although the two may be necessary for practical action. Clearly, once discourses, or construals exist, they can contingently make a difference to the world outside our imagination; they can contingently effect materially, artefactually, and socially real entities, including practices and organisational forms. Hence construals, or discourses in general are real – see Thursfield and Hamblett's use of Archer's notion of Cultural Emergent Properties (CEPs) in chapter 9 of this collection. I will return to this notion below.

Whilst discourse makes a difference, *not all* discourse makes a difference and we often need to consider whose discourse counts? When the Governor of the Bank of England alters his language then a significant part of the extra-discursive world alters – e.g. the price of Sterling may rise and some UK firms may cease trading. But when an obscure academic like Steve Fleetwood alters his language, it alters very little.

The following comment from Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2002) not only gives a flavour of contemporary critical realist thought on ideally real entities (in this case semiotised entities), but also demonstrates that critical realists are not naïve 'table

thumpers'[13] and can deal with non-material entities – without, it must be said, collapsing the materially, artefactually, and socially real into the ideally real as social constructionists tend to.

> Semiosis (the making of meaning) is a crucial part of social life but it does not exhaust the latter. Thus, since texts are both socially structuring and socially structured, we must examine not only how texts generate meaning and thereby help to generate social structure but also how the production of meaning is itself constrained by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structure. For example, an interview is a particular form of communication (a 'genre'…) which both creates a particular kind of social encounter and is itself socially structured, for example, by conventions of propriety, privacy and disclosure, by particular distributions of resources, material and cognitive. In short, although semiosis is an aspect of any social practice… no social practice… is reducible to semiosis alone. This means that semiosis cannot be reduced to the play of differences amongst networks of signs (as if semiosis were always purely an intra-semiotic matter with no external reference) and that it cannot be understood without identifying and exploring the extra-semiotic conditions that make semiosis possible and ensure its effectivity. We therefore reject the Foucauldian-inspired conflation of discourses and material practices.

Artefactually real

The term 'artefactually real' refers to entities like cosmetics, computers or the hole in the ozone layer. In an interesting paper, Reckwitz (2000: 207) refers to entities like these as 'quasi-objects'. Computers are a synthesis of the physically, ideally and socially real. Because entities are *conceptually mediated* we interpret them in various, and often diverse, ways. Violins may be interpreted as musical instruments or as table tennis bats. But unless we are prepared to accept that any interpretation (and, therefore, subsequent action) is as good as another, that interpreting a violin as a table tennis bat is as good as interpreting it is a musical instrument, then we have to accept that there are limits to interpretation. And these limits are often established by the materiality of the entity itself. Whilst critical realism is, in this and similar contexts,

materialist, the recognition that material entities are *conceptually mediated* guards against any vulgar materialism.

Socially real

The term 'socially real' refers to practices, states of affairs or entities like caring for children, becoming unemployed, the market mechanism, social structures and organizations. Socially real entities are *social* in two senses. First, like ideally real entities, they contain not one iota of materiality: we cannot touch, smell or hold a social entity. Second, and more importantly, they are social because they are dependent on (some) activity for their *existence,* that is, for their reproduction, and transformation: they are *(human) activity dependent.* Whilst this will be elaborated upon in section 3, it is worth emphasising here that socially real entities like social structures should not be conflated with conceptually real entities like theories or explanations *of* social structures. Socially real entities may be the subject of discourse, but they have an extra-discursive dimension and so are irreducible to discourse.

I will come back to this point in a moment. But before I do, it is crucial to grasp one fundamental point here. *Socially real entities like social structures are not reducible to discourse* (or other ideally real phenomena) and this sets the critical realist ontology apart from social constructionist ontology.

Recognising a distinction between socially (and materially and artefactually) and ideally real domains, allows critical realists to recognise the complex way in which discourse is related to extra-discursive phenomena, without collapsing the latter into the former, or confusing them in various ways. Not recognising this distinction, social constructionists like Westwood & Linstead (2001: 5) have little choice but to reduce the socially real to the ideally real, or in this case, structure to discourse, writing: '[o]rganization is a structure, but only when structure is recognized to be an effect of language'. Others make even stronger claims:

> For poststructuralists, it is the explanation itself that creates order, gives
> structure to experience. *Structure is the meaning given to experience.* Structure
> is immanent in the subject not in the object, in the observer not the

observed…Poststructuralists conclude that there are no real structures that give order to human affairs, but that the construction of order – of sense making – by people is what gives rise to structure. *Structure is the explanation itself*, that which *makes* sense, not that which *gives* sense. It follows from this that structure cannot be seen as determining action because it is not real and transcendent, but a product of the human mind.

(Carter and Jackson 2000: 41 & 43, emphasis original)

A thoroughgoing exposition of why social constructionists are mistaken in collapsing extra-discursive entities like social structures into discursive ones cannot be undertaken here (*cf.* Fleetwood 2002). Instead, what I offer is a clarification of what exactly critical realists think about socially real entities in the hope that it clarifies matters.

If socially real entities like structures and organizations really were epiphenomena of discourse, then we could change them by changing the discourse: we could talk[14] ourselves into a completely different set of social structures. There would be no need, for example, for women to be segregated horizontally in the labour market; segregated vertically in the firm; or to suffer any form of employment related discrimination if only we refrained from engaging in those discursive practices that produce and reproduce discriminatory employment patterns. This 'solution' is, of course, unlikely to work because extra-discursive practices (such as the requirements of child and dependent-care) are also in operation alongside discourses practices, and the former can only be changed by practical activity – which does not mean changed discourse plays no role.

Confusion often arises when the relation between socially and ideally real entities is broached – even if this terminology is not used. Take, as an example, a theory. In one context a theory can be an expression *about* a socially, artefactually or materially real entity (i.e. ideally real entity) whilst in another context it can be a social entity *sui generis* (i.e. a socially real entity) as well. Suppose, in the first context, we have a theory about patriarchal structures. The theory and the patriarchal structures are different things. The theory is *about* the structures; the theory expresses, reflects, or

captures, *in thought*, some of the characteristics of the patriarchal structures. The theory, the ideal entity, is *epistemic*: it constitutes knowledge. The patriarchal structures are *ontic*: they exist independently of this knowledge. Critical realists refer to ideal entities like theories as *transitive* entities or as existing in the transitive domain. Thus can we account for changing (transitive) knowledge about a *relatively* unchanging (intransitive) phenomena – the term 'relatively' is a device for preventing the (mis)interpretation that intransitive entities are necessarily unchanging or fixed. In a second context, however, the *theory* of the patriarchal structures can itself become an entity to be analysed – i.e. used to generate knowledge. The theory, (whilst still being *about* patriarchy), is now *also* an entity in its own right. In this context, the theory is ontic: it exists independently of any subsequent knowledge the analysis generates. In this context, the theory has become an intransitive entity, existing in the intransitive domain. We now have a theory (or theories) about a theory.

Thursfield and Hamblett (chapter 9 in this collection) are alert to the role ideally real entities can play and do so via Archer's notion of Cultural Emergent Properties (CEPs) which they explain as follows:

> CEPs belong to the strata of ideas, theories and beliefs and are independent of cultural agents (people). Relations between cultural agents are causal and maybe contingent. So, for example, X may or may not persuade Y of the truth of Xs beliefs, or X may or may not succeed in manipulating Y…CEPs are objective and are the product of previous generations of thinkers and the causal relations pertaining to those thinkers. Following their emergence, CEPs have a life of their own in that they exist regardless of whether current agents comprehend them or not.

Having the ontological sophistication to recognise that an ideally real entity (a CEP) such as a theory can be transitive or intransitive depending upon context, prevents the common mistake of supposing that the mere creation or construction (in social constructionist parlance) of a theory means it will have an effect. Whilst there are times when theories impact upon the world there are also times when they have no effect. The very fact that 'thinking does not make it so' demonstrates this.

Objective and subjective

The terms 'objective' and 'subjective' are often used in confused and confusing ways. In this section, I try to disambiguate these terms by adding a fourth dimension to Sayer's three-fold distinction and identifying 'objective' and 'subjective' 1,2,3,and 4.

- Objective$_1$ means value-neutral or impartial as in 'I personally don't stand to gain or lose from this situation, so I can perhaps give a more objective account of it'. Correspondingly, subjective$_1$ means value-laden or partial, as in 'I've known her as a friend for years so my views on her are subjective'.

- Objective$_2$ means something taken to be objectively known or true. Correspondingly subjective$_2$ implies that something is 'not true' or is 'merely a matter of opinion'.

- Objective$_3$ refers to objects, to the nature of things independent of their identification by humans, as in 'the objective properties of capital'. This corresponds to subjective$_3$ which refers to subjects and concerns what we think about something such as the 'subjective experience of class.'

- Although I would never use the terms in this way, it is common to find objective$_4$ referring to material entities and, correspondingly, subjective$_4$, which refers to social or human entities. 'Mountains are objective, whilst working activity is subjective'.

It is not difficult to see how, if these different meanings of objective and subjective are conflated, confusion follows. Let me give one example.

> [B]oth scientific and human relations thinking implicitly relied upon a dualistic ontology which sharply delineated the subjective and objective domains of reality. That is they were both grounded in the metaphysical belief that the domain of the human subject and the material environment were both separate and hierarchically ordered.

> (Hancock 1999: 158).

Whilst Hancock is criticising scientific and human relations thinking, and with this I have no quarrel, he uses the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' in a misleading manner. Hancock has a two-fold distinction:

i) The objective domain or 'domain of the material environment' refers to objective phenomena like the commodities produced by this working activity.[15] This equates to the $objective_4$ domain.

ii) The subjective domain or 'domain of the human subject' which refers to subjective phenomena like working activity. This equates to the $subjective_4$ domain .

Translating Hancock's ideas into my terminology and describing his two-fold distinction as follows, reveals why it is misleading. Hancock's schema has too few categories and so cannot correctly differentiate between different entities. First, it does not take different modes of reality into account. When, quite legitimately, Hancock tries to differentiate between working activity and commodities, he cannot do so on the grounds that working activity is a *social* entity and a commodity is a *materia*l entity. He has little option but to differentiate them on the grounds that commodities, as material entities, are $objective_4$ (which they are) and working activity is $subjective_4$ (which is misleading) for the following reason. Second, Hancock's schema cannot differentiate between objective and subjective moments of the one entity, in this case, working activity. When we are referring to the nature of things or activities independent of their identification by humans, working activity can be regarded as $objective_3$. Your working activity can, for example, exist without it being identified by certain others. When, by contrast, we are referring to how a worker, a group of workers, or a social analyst conceptualises working activity, then working activity can be regarded as $subjective_3$.

Human activities and socially real entities

I mentioned above that ideal, artefactual and social (but not material) entities are all *social* in the sense that they are (*human) activity dependent* – the term 'human' is dropped from now on for ease of exposition. To say, however, that entities are activity

dependent fails to clarify just which humans are and are not involved; which human activities are and are not involved; and when (i.e. the temporal location) these activities occur. The following draws upon Archer's (1998) work.

Which activities are not involved?

The claim that entities can exist independently of their identification implies that *not all* human activities are required for their existence. Entities such as class structures, patriarchal structures and tacit rules do not have to be identified in order to exist. An individual does not have to identify the constraints that gender places upon them, or others, in order for those constraints to be operational. Entities such as explicit rules and laws, by contrast, do have to be identified in order to exist. To say, of those entities where it is appropriate to do so, that they exist independently of their identification does not mean that such entities are *not* activity dependent. It merely means that they are not dependent upon the specific activities involved with identification. Not all activities are involved when claiming that entities are activity dependent.

Which humans are involved

The term 'our' in the phrase 'entities exist independently of *our* identification' often leads to confusion because we fail to differentiate between 'us' as social analysts and 'us' as those we study, that is, human actors (*c.f.* Lewis 2000: 261).

- An entity may exist independently of its identification by social analysts *and* actors. We (i.e. *all* human beings) may not have discovered it. Institutional racism has only recently been discovered, but clearly it existed prior to its discovery.
- An entity may exist independently of its identification by social analysts, but *not* independently of actors. Actors may have known about institutional racism for many years before social analysts discovered it.
- An entity may exist independently of its identification by actor A but *not* by actors B, C,….Z. Actor A may have just started a new job and is unfamiliar

with the *explicit* rules of the workplace, but her workmates are obviously familiar with them.

- An entity may exist independently of its identification by all actors but *not* by social analysts whose research aims precisely to tease these things out. Tacit rules of the workplace are drawn upon in order that action takes place, but the actors involved do not identify these rules.

In short, to recognise that certain entities are activity dependent does not imply that *all of us* are involved in their reproduction or transformation. When, for example, I am reproducing the structures of Lancaster University Management School, you may not be involved in that reproduction, yet you may still be affected by it when you read this paper.

Which human activities are involved?

In order for social entities to exist, a range of activities is required. These activities are *always* practical and conceptual, and very often (but not always) discursive. For a business organisation to exist, actors must perform a range of activities such as: clocking on and off; carrying out instructions from supervisors; working at an appropriate pace; identifying items; using judgement; engaging in social intercourse with co-workers; and so on.

Whilst entities such as class structures, patriarchal structures and tacit rules exist independently of their identification and explicit rules and laws do not, they all share a common factor. None of them can exist independently of practical and conceptual activity. If, for example, actors ceased to enter into class and patriarchal relations, ceased to draw upon tacit rules, or ceased to follow explicit rules and laws then class, patriarchy, tacit rules, explicit rules and laws would disappear. Actors must also have some conception about the activities they are engaged in. It is, however, important to avoid two common mistakes.

First, let us recognise that all social entities depend on the concepts agents have of them; they are *concept dependent* or *concept mediated*. Second, to say entities do not exist independently of the concepts agents have of them does not mean agents have to

have the *correct* conception, or *complete* knowledge, of what they are doing and why they are doing it. It merely means agents have some idea of what they are doing and why they are doing it: agents are purposive. In this sense to say that some social entities can exist 'behind our backs' does not involve reification of these entities. Working class women do not have to know they are discriminated against in class and patriarchal systems, in order for such discrimination to occur. In fact, they could be discriminated against whilst explicitly denying the existence of such systems. Objecting to this on the grounds that the social analyst claims to know more about the situation than the layperson and is, therefore, a form of cultural imperialism, is a red herring. It would be valid only if we were prepared to say that lay persons can never be mistaken, and given that social analysts are also persons, this would be tantamount to saying that analysts can never be mistaken. If we, as analysts, can be mistaken, so too can lay persons and hence we must accept the possibility that social analysts can know things lay persons do not.

In short, to recognise that certain entities are activity dependent does not imply that *all* humans are involved in the reproduction or transformation of those entities.

At what temporal location are these activities involved

Whilst some, but not all humans, and some but not all activities, are involved in the reproduction and transformation of social entities, we need to consider the temporal locations where moments of agency occur. Archer is keen to stress temporality in her own morphogenetic and Bhaskar's transformational approaches. Whilst Archer's sophisticated insights cannot be expanded upon here, I will comment upon a version of the following figure taken from Archer (1998: 376).

Whatever happens, however the interplay between agents and structures takes place, it is important to be clear about one point: action is a continuous, cyclical, flow over time: there are no empty spaces where nothing happens and things do not just begin and end. The starting point for an analysis of any cyclical phenomena is always arbitrary: we have to break into the cycle at some point and impose an analytical starting point. The starting point here is some prior cycle.

DIAGRAM 1 HERE

At T^1 pre-existing structures emerge from a prior cycle and act as pre-existing structures that govern subsequent social interaction.

At T^2 agents find themselves interacting with, and governed by, these (to them) pre-existing structures and a process of production is initiated where these agents do whatever it is they can do given the nature of these pre-existing structures – i.e. they are constrained and enabled by them.

Between T^2 and T^3 the pre-existing structures undergo change, which is completed by T^4 where structures are reproduced (i.e. morphostasis occurs) or transformed (i.e. morphogenesis occurs).

After T^4 a new cycle starts.

Activity, then, is clearly necessary for this cycle to take place. It does not follow, however, that the only activity necessary for reproduction is that taking place between T^2 and T^3. In fact, central to Archer's approach is August Comte's insight that the majority of actors are dead. The past actions of humans interacting with past social structures generated phenomena like the distribution of income; depletion of the ozone layer, libraries full of books and business organisations. These phenomena pre-date any subsequent activity and exert a causal influence upon subsequent activity.[16] Whilst Archer refers to this as 'structural conditioning', it is distinct from structuralism where the agent is a cultural dope - the 'spoilt brat of history' as Strauss famously put it.

> [S]ocial structures are only efficacious through the activities of human beings, but…only…by allowing that these are the effects of *past actions*, often by long dead people, which survive them (and this temporal escape is precisely what makes them *sui generis*). Thus they continue to exert their effects upon subsequent actors and their activities, as autonomous possessors of causal

powers. How they carry over and how they exert their effects is just what the M/M (morphogenetic/static) approach is about.

(Archer 1998: 368)

This is an important insight because, as Archer notes (1998: 370 *passim*) it avoids a problem that arises when voluntaristic concepts like 'instantiation' are applied. If structural conditioning did not take place, if structures were only present at the moment of their instantiation, that is, at the moment when agents act, two bizarre conclusions would follow.

First, structures and structural entities such as a business organization, would come and go in virtue of activity. Structures would, for example, come into existence at the point when the workforce arrive in the morning, and they would go out of existence when the workforce go home in the evening. This is counterfactual because the structures that constitute the organization endure and 'structurally condition' activity in the sense that, for example, they (usually) influence appropriate bedtime.

Second, there would be a kind of 'hole' in history, a space or period where society was un-structured. Imagine trying to construct a sentence, or trying to work at the pace of the workgroup, when just at the moment when we are about to draw upon the structures of grammar or the tacit rules that govern group work pace, these structures and rules momentarily disappeared. We would, at that precise moment, be unable to string the words together meaningfully, or gauge the appropriate work pace: we would be unable to act.

In sum then, whilst social entities are activity dependent, differentiating between who does and who does not do what, when, and how, allows a more nuanced understanding of exactly what role human activity plays in the reproduction, or transformation of these entities. Moreover, it helps identify problems arising when we operate with a repertoire consisting of only one human activity, namely that of socially constructing entities. Recognising only the 'blanket' activity of social construction leaves us with little option but to apply this in an undiscriminating

manner, and impedes the development of a more nuanced understanding of the role of human activity in the reproduction or transformation of entities.

Ontological commitments of critical realism: a summary

The following summary indicates how the terminology developed can be used to refer to different modes of reality. Whilst the richness of language implies there are far more permutations than can be sketched here, the summary should give some indication of acceptable phraseology.[17]

Socially real entities are:

- Conceptually *mediated*.
- Irreducible to discourse: there is a remainder and this remainder is non-empty. This remainder is, however, not materially or artefactually real.
- Dependent upon (human) activity.

Ideally real entities:

- May or may not have a referent which may be ideally or *non*-ideally real.
- Are conceptually *mediated.*
- Are reducible to discourse in the sense that they are made from discursive 'stuff'.
- Are always caused by something, even if the cause is a reason.
- Can, but do not always, make a (considerable) difference.
- Are dependent upon (human) activity.

Materially real entities are:

- Not conceptually *mediated* in the sense that they can exist independently of our reflection and hence mediation, although if and when they become the focus of our reflection we can say they are conceptually mediated.
- Irreducible to discourse.

- Are not dependent upon (human) activity.

Artefactually real entities are:

- Conceptually *mediated*
- Discursive but are irreducible to discourse: the remainder is materially real.
- Material but are irreducible to material: the remainder is discursive
- Dependent upon (human) activity.

In sum, then, critical realists are ontologically committed to the existence of an (non-empty) extra discursive, dimension - the prefix '(non-empty)' will be clarified below.

Critical realism and (weak) social constructionism

Now something like these ontological commitments are often accepted by those who are happily associated with postmodernism, poststructuralism or social constructionism. Many aspects of the following comments are perfectly acceptable to a critical realist – although most critical realists would express themselves using different terminology.

- 'This "turn" to language in organization studies can be traced to a heightened awareness of the way linguistic expressions, rules, conventions and practices *shape or affect* organizational practices (Chia and King 2001: 311 emphasis added). Notice how the terms 'shape' and 'affect' are used in preference to stronger terms like constitute and construct.

- Symbolic representations, such as theories of organizational functioning, must not be understood as attempts to accurately mirror reality, but must instead be understood as "standing for" the intractable and obdurate experiences of our organizational lifeworlds…Representation is the quintessential organizing mode through which *our social world is revealed and represented* (*ibid,* emphasis added). Notice that theories *represent* or *stand for* what appear to be extra-discursive experiences and an extra-discursive world.

- 'It is the organizational capacity of language to structure our thought-worlds and hence our social worlds through ongoing material acts of punctuating ordering and classification' (ibid: 312). Through language we do things like compile duty rosta's and in so doing bring about practical activities like turning up for work at certain days and times.

What is crucial in these comments is the absence of *ontological exaggeration*. That is, the important role played by discourse is accepted, with no further suggestion that discourse entirely constitutes, or exhausts, the world. Whilst I do not like putting matters like this, another way of saying this is to say that these comments are weakly, but not strongly, social constructionist – with the term 'weak' carrying no pejorative connotations. Those who consider themselves to be postmodernist or poststructuralist, and feel able to accept this ontology have nothing to fear from critical realist ontology. In a carefully argued paper O'Docherty and Willmott (2001: 464) seek to maintain the insights provided by poststructuralism and postmodernism, in this case, in labour process theory, whilst rejecting anti-realist ontology.

> For us it still makes sense to talk, or better, appreciate, that capitalism is something that exists in part outside of language and text, even if it is only through language that this existence is communicated…Instead of the wholesale abandonment of subject/object or structure/agency that an anti-realist approach tends to endorse, we favour a more critical, and we would argue post-structural, as contrasted with 'anti-structural' sensitivity. This involves a self-critical and multi-disciplinary exploration of the complex political, economic, psychological and existential processes that inter-articulate and combine in the practices of the labour process.

Hopefully, this section has clarified some of the ideas, terms and concepts central to the ontology provided by critical realism, demonstrated a high level of ontological sophistication and made it clear that critical realism is not positivism by another name. This has paved the way for the elaboration of a critical realist orientated ontology of organization and management, to which we now turn.

2. Critical realism in action

After discussing some general points, the ontology will be explicated by means of labour process theory.[18] In sketching the ontology, I will refer to configurations of social structures, positioned-practices, powers, mechanisms and tendencies.

Structures

According to Porpora 'social structure is a nexus of connections among [agents or actors] causally affecting their actions and in turn causally affected by them' (1998: 344 *c.f.* Lewis 2000; Scott 2001). Social structure is relational: it exists in virtue of agents entering into relations. The patriarchal structure is the nexus of (a specific set of) relations between relatively powerful men and relatively powerless women.

The labour process is the location where the specific set of relations between capitalists and workers are produced, reproduced and transformed. In the labour process, workers reproduce themselves as workers and capitalists (create the potential to) reproduce themselves as capitalists. Other structures are, of course, involved in this. The valorisation process cannot work (as it does currently) without the structures of patriarchy locking women into the performance of domestic labour. Capitalists have an overriding interest in generating a sustainable level of profit over an extended period because they enter into relations with other capitalists. For simplicity, however, I leave these other structures out of the discussion and concentrate upon the relation between capitalist and worker. [19]

Positioned-practices

If social structures exist, and are relational, then there must exist relata. Agents enter into specific social relations by taking up certain slots or social positions such as landlord and tenant, or capitalist and worker. Attached to any position are a set of practices such as paying wages and turning up for work on time. This combination is referred to as a positoned-practice. Social structure consists, then, of a dense web of relations between positioned-practices.

The position of capitalist entails practices such as hiring labour power and capital and subsequently producing an appropriate quantity and quality of commodities (goods, services or knowledge) by controlling the transformation of labour power into labour at a rate that generates sufficient profit. Notice, however, that whilst the particular agent could be replaced, the position would still remain, and the practices would still be carried out. This should not be misunderstood to imply the 'death of the subject' or the absence of agency, or some other (post)structuralist position. The capitalist is free to engage in these practices in various ways and, clearly, to invent new practices – e.g. to implement flexible working practices or partnership agreements with unions. However the practices are undertaken they must be consistent with the position of capitalist: not any old practices go.

Powers (or capacities or dispositions)

Entities possess powers, that is, dispositions, capacities and potentials do certain things, but not others. Gunpowder has the power to explode, but not to speak a language. Entering into these relations between positioned practices endows agents with a set of causal powers. Agents may, of course, already possess other powers so entering these relations may modify, or even counteract, these prior powers. Causal power lies in the entire web of relations not in the particular individual or component.

Now powers are rather complex things. Powers may be possessed with or without being exercised and be exercised with or without being actualised.

♦ A power is possessed by an entity in virtue of its internal make-up, and this power endures whether or not it is exercised or actualised and, therefore, endures irrespective of any outcomes it generates. When a power endures in this sense, it can be said to act *transfactually*.

♦ A power exercised is a possessed power that has been triggered, and is generating an effect in an open system. Due to interference from the effects of other exercised powers, however, we can never know *a priori,* what the outcome of any particular power will be. An exercised power acts transfactually.

♦ A power actualised *is* an exercised power generating its effect and not being deflected or counteracted by the effects of other exercised powers. An actualised

power does not act transfactually but factually in the sense that the power generates its effect.

To grasp these distinctions more fully, let us consider them via the example of a bicycle.[20]

- When a particular cluster of components such as wheels, frame, saddle and handlebars are combined, we can say the bicycle *possesses* the power to facilitate transportation. This power is transfactual: it endures even if the bicycle remains locked in a garden shed.

- A person may *exercise* the power by bringing the bicycle out of the shed and mounting it - i.e. a person triggers the power. However, due (say) to excessive alcohol consumption, strong head winds or steep gradients, the effect may not be the transportation of a cyclist from A to B. In this situation, the bicycle's exercised power is being deflected or counteracted by interference from other exercised powers.

- A person may *actualise* the power and successfully cycle from A to B. The bicycle's power is not being counteracted by any other powers such as alcohol, strong head winds or steep gradients.

Let us now turn to the social realm and consider the powers possessed by workers. Powers are possessed by workers in virtue of their physiological and social make up. Unlike most animals, humans do not just execute genetically pre-programmed tasks, they conceive these tasks first – although there may be a complex and recursive process between conception and execution. The power of conception is of crucial importance here because it consists of the powers of *imagination, ingenuity*, *creativity* that conceived of the Pyramids, the Guggenheim, the cart, the MIR space station, surgical tools - and nuclear weapons. These same powers of *imagination, ingenuity*, *creativity* are also exercised in the conception of less grandiose endeavours such as finding better ways of producing a rivet, writing a programme or engaging in a telephone conversation. HRM practices such as team working, total quality management, quality circles and especially *kaisen*, along with schemes to increase employee participation and empower employees, are designed to unleash and harness the powers of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity that workers bring with them to

the work place. If workers did not have these powers there would be no point whatsoever in even contemplating HRM practices. The fact (and it probably is) that these HRM practices have not succeeded in unlocking workers powers does not mean they do not exist: something could be counteracting these powers. I will return to this in a moment.

Mechanisms[21]

When we adopt a positioned-practice, carrying out the requisite practices usually means engaging with a mechanism or mechanisms. The positioned-practice of capitalist brings him/her into contact with mechanisms for recruiting and shedding labour; regulating the rate and mass of profits; regulating skill levels; controlling the workforce[22] and so on. In virtue of the position a capitalist adopts in the web of class relations s/he, and not the worker, has access to (say) the mechanisms that govern recruitment and redundancy. Agents, holding a range of causal powers engage with these mechanisms. Whilst creating a set of mechanisms to actualise workers powers for imagination, ingenuity, and creativity is the Holy Grail of HRM, it is also possible that the mechanisms available to the HR manager succeed in preventing the actualisation of these powers.

In the past I have used the term 'mechanism' as a label applied to the ensemble of structures and relations, and written that it is the mechanism that has a tendency to x. I now think this is misleading so want to re-work the idea of mechanism in two ways. First I want to avoid thinking of 'mechanism' as a generalising term applied to a set of causal factors and I suggest we treat a mechanism as one component alongside several others. Second I want to avoid conflating tendency with the operation of a mechanism, as if other causal factors play no role in the tendency. Instead I want to equate a tendency with the operation of a *causal configuration.*

Causal configurations

A causal configuration (or just configuration for short) consists of a cluster of causal factors or components, which in this context are, typically, social structures, positioned-practices, relations, rules, resources and so on. Causal configurations are emergent phenomena. That is, when certain components are assembled, they give rise to

properties that are not found in any of the components. A bureaucracy has properties for processing information that are not found in the individuals that constitute it. Configurations, then, are emergent from, but irreducible to, the cluster of components that constitute them.

No two configurations will ever be the same (although they can be very similar) because they have different clusters of components that constitute them. Thus, one part of an organisation may differ from another part because they each consist of different structures, positioned-practices, powers or mechanisms – or whatever components are relevant.

Depending upon the level of abstraction used, an entity can be conceived of as a particular configuration *sui generis*, or in terms of the sub-configurations that constitute it. The labour process is no exception and can be analysed as a particular configuration, or in terms of any of its sub-processes. We simply zoom in on different sub-configurations depending upon the questions we ask.[23] Whatever the level of abstraction, it is important to note the following: *it is the configuration as a totality, and not any of its individual components that generates the tendency.*

Tendencies[24]

A tendency is the typical way of acting of a particular *causal configuration*. Now, to write that a configuration has a tendency to x, does not mean that it will x. In an open system, configurations do not exist in isolation from one other, rather there is a multiplicity of such configurations each with their own tendencies and these tendencies converge in some space-time location. The sub-configuration that constitutes a workforce with the tendency to resist control, co-exists with the sub-configuration that constitutes an employer with the tendency to assert control.

A tendency then, metaphorically speaking, is akin to a force: it drives, propels, pushes, thrusts, and asserts pressure and so on. A tendency relates *not* to any outcome or result of some acting force, such as a regularity or pattern in the resulting flux of events. Rather, a tendency refers to the force itself. The relation between configuration and tendency might be characterised as follows.

♦ The configuration does not always bring about certain effects, but it *always* tends to. Hence it acts transfactually.

♦ Configurations continue to causally govern the flux of events, irrespective of the conditions under which they are said to operate. We do not say of a transfactually acting configuration that it would bring about certain events *if* certain conditions prevail, or *ceteris paribus.* Rather, the configuration tends to bring about certain events, period.

♦ Configurations continue to causally govern the flux of events irrespective of any events that ensue. A transfactually acting configuration does not depend for its action upon the patterns of events that it governs: it continues to govern, whether the ensuing events are constantly or non-constantly conjoined.

When investigating the labour process, we may wish to investigate how the rate and mass of profits is regulated; how skill levels are established; or how the workforce is controlled. Each of these sub-processes is governed by different sub-configurations with their own tendencies. We can, for example, identify various sub-configurations that generate tendencies: to de-skill and to up-skill the workforce; to decrease and to increase the rate of profit; to decrease and to increase the mass of profit; to increase and decrease levels of employment; to increase control of the workforce; and for the workforce to resist control.

These tendencies can counteract, and augment, one another in complex ways. A few examples should suffice:

- Tendencies to de-skill the workforce counteract tendencies to up-skill the workforce, yet both can be going on simultaneously within the same organisation.

- Tendencies to de-skill the work may augment tendencies to increase the rate of profit, yet profit rates could still decline because of the influence of other tendencies.

- Tendencies to increase the rate of profit may be counteracted by tendencies to increase the mass of profit – downsizing and outsourcing means less workers to extract profit from.

- Tendencies to increase control of the workforce may augment tendencies to increases in the rate of profit, or may counteract the latter if, for example, the chosen mechanisms of control lead to increased resistance.

Setting out the analysis in terms of tendencies avoids the debilitating (empirical realist) situation where either one thing or the other can be occurring, but not both simultaneously. How much ink has been spilled debating whether organisations de-skill or re-skill their workforce; or whether new forms of control create or negate resistance. For the critical realist, tendency and countertendency can be at work simultaneously. It is, then, an empirical (not a philosophical) question to discover which of these tendencies are actualised at any point in time.

Conclusion

Hopefully this chapter has clarified some of the more common comments and objections to critical realism and has gone some way to removing as much misunderstanding as possible. Hopefully also, it has demonstrated that critical realism can provide a viable ontology of organisations and management, allowing positivism and its empirical realist ontology to be abandoned without having to accept a social constructionist ontology. If, then, you now think critical realism is not what you initially thought it was, if you are persuaded by the ontological arguments, or if you still harbour doubts, then I invite you to peruse some of the chapters that make up this collection to see critical realism in action in organisation and management studies.

NOTES

[1] For some of the more recent contributions see the especially the collection by Ackroyd & Fleetwood (2001) and also Clark (2000); Delbridge (1998); Johnson & Duberley (2000) Easton (1998, 2002); Harisson & Easton (1998; 1999); Kwan and

Tsang (2001); Johnson and Duberley (2000); Mingers (1999, 2000, 2000a, 2000b, 2001); Mingers and Brocklesby (1999); Mir and Watson (2001); Reed (2000, 2001); Tsang and Kwan (1999).

[2] For a critical realist critique of positivism and its empirical realist ontology see Fleetwood (2000) and Sayer (1994 & 2000). For a critical realist critique of postmodernism and poststructuralism and its social constructivist ontology in general see Sayer (2000) and in organisation and management studies in particular see Fleetwood (2003). Note well that, throughout this chapter, any critique of postmodernists and poststructuralists is not directed against any particular substantive claims (e.g. an analysis of power) but is restricted to ontological matters. The points of departure come where I suspect postmodernists and poststructuralists (a) misunderstand the nature of critical realism and its ontological commitments, and (b) slip into making ontologically exaggerated claims that amount to denying, (or fudging) the existence of an extra-discursive realm. See below at the end of part one.

[3] For a good example of how to completely misunderstand critical realism's ontological commitments (e.g. that critical realism is committed to something called a '"real" reality' see Guba and Licoln (1994).

[4] Note that nothing turns on the choice of example. If that if it turns out that fairies are real, then I am simply mistaken: critical realists are fallibilists.

[5] Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002) appear to do the opposite. They place critical realism under the rubric of relativism. Guba and Lincoln (1994) refer to critical realism as 'postpositivist'. Whilst I realise Guba and Lincoln are trying to perform a difficult task, namely presenting a complex taxonomy of paradigms in a concise manner, they manage to (mis)interpret critical realism at almost every turn.

[6] It is also associated often with essentialism, and this is not a mistake. Critical realists accept that some entities have essences – which do not have to be fixed but can evolve. A thing (such as an animal, an organisation, or a mode of production) has a set of non-accidental properties that make it the kind of thing it is and not another thing. Many commentators who are now potty tained to jump at the mention of essence, feel they can dismiss the concept without even having to provide an argument – as if 'everyone knows' essentialist thinking is misguided (*Cf.* O'Neill (1998; Sayer 2000).

[7] Jackson & Carter do not define realism or critical realism and neither of these terms appear in the index or glossary. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) make no mention of critical realism, and where they do mention realism, it is to associate it with naïve forms and/or positivism.

[8] See Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (2002) and Creaven (2000) on the relation between Marxism and critical realism.

[9] Gergen (1998: 150) mentions *critical* realism in one sentence before returning to the unqualified term 'realism'.

[10] Because these kinds of elision are common, critical realists should avoid comments like reality 'hits you in the face' when referring to the social world because they do nothing to assuage the (mis)interpretion that critical realists treat socially real entities like physically real entities. What is usually meant here is either metaphorical, or that social states, like being unemployed, nevertheless can have physical consequences.

[11] Moreover, discourse analysis, as a research technique is acceptable to critical realists. Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2002) develop contemporary critical realist thought on ideally real entities - in this case semiotised entities. Cf. Sayer (2000); Stones (1996); and O'Neill (1998).

[12] I say 'non-ideal' for simplicity because we can, of course, construe a construal, that is, make a mental image of a mental image, or a have a theory of a theory – which I return to below.

[13] The sophisticated ontology developed here should pull the rug from under Potter's (1996: 7) 'furniture argument' whereby the realist critique allegedly turns on realists banging on the table and claiming 'you're not telling me that's a social construction'.

[14] Discourse, of course, refers to far more than talk, but putting matters like this allows the main point to be made with clarity.

[15] I assume commodities are physical entities, and not services, simply for convenience.

[16] See Lewis (2000), however, for an argument against the misinterpretation that critical realists treat social structures as efficiently causal entities.

[17] The sophisticated ontology developed here should pull the rug from under Potter's (1996: 7) 'furniture argument' whereby the realist critique allegedly turns on realists banging on the table and claiming 'you're not telling me that's a social construction'.

[18] Notice that the ontology advanced does not hang on the particular choice of theory: other theories could be used, and the ontology might still be correct even if labour process theory was not

[19] I use the terms capitalists and worker for brevity.

[20] As will become clear below, powers are not restricted to materially or artefactually real entities: human beings can have powers such as powers of communication and imagination. The bicycle example is simple and aids exposition.

[21] The term 'mechanism' has unfortunate connotations of 'determinism' and 'mechanistic thinking' but it need not involve this. In fact critical realism sets its face steadfastly against such phenomena. (*c.f.* Lewis 2000: 266). Further, it is often misunderstood to refer only to 'material' or 'artefactual reality' but again this is not the case – as will become clear below. Since the terminology is well established, I (reluctantly) stick with it.

[22] Note well that a critical realist can accept control as control over 'labour power and behaviour' or (in Foucauldian mode) as control over 'mind power and subjectivities of employees' Alvesson and Deetz (1998: 186).

[23] Because configurations are emergent phenomena, tendencies are not mechanistically additive or aggregative.

[24] For further elaboration on tendencies, see chapter 1 in Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (2001).

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Previous cycles T^1 Pre-existing structures

Structural conditioning

T^2 Production T^3

(Social interaction)

Reproduction T^4

(Morphostasis)

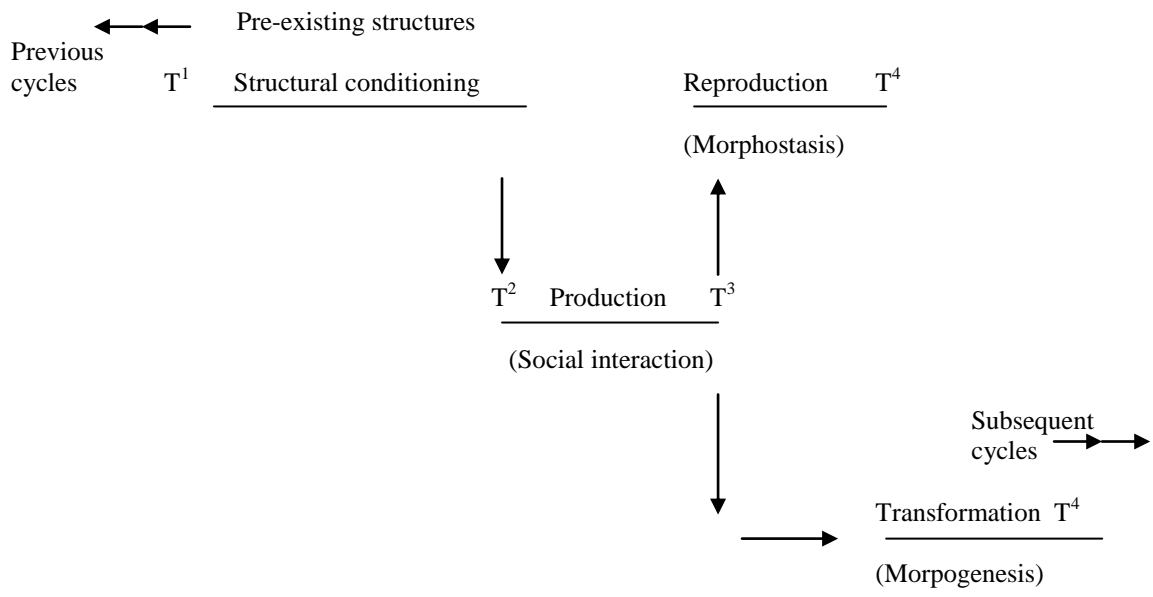Subsequent cycles

Transformation T^4

(Morpogenesis)

Figure 1.1 Reproduction and transformation of structures. Based on Archer's superimposition of the Transformational Model of Social Action and the morphogenetic/static cycle (Archer 1998: 376)