'Flat-pack' philosophy:[1] relativism, realism and the persistence of rhetoric in organization studies*

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abstract   In this paper I explore several ways in which critical realist and relativist arguments and ontological claims have been presented in recent debates, with especial reference to organization studies. The purpose of this exploration is to consider whether discussions have, or could have, moved away from reductive bottom-line arguments in the ways sometimes suggested by commentators, both theoretically and rhetorically. I argue that despite claims to the contrary, elements identified in earlier relativist critiques of some forms of realist argumentation still persist, although relativists themselves are not immune to criticism. Neither Critical Realism nor its adapted forms of (lower case) critical realism (such as those applied in organization studies) escape the trap of bottom-line rhetoric, despite their claims of offering a sophisticated stratified ontology that departs from empiricist views of science. They only succeed in moving the bottom line forward from a flattened world of ready-made pieces of furniture to flat-pack structures-to-be-actualized. Moreover, despite changes in the content of their arguments, the rhetoric of critical realists reveals the continuance of underlying strategies of power based on commitments to theology rather than ontology. Part of the problem, I conclude, is a consequence of constructing these textual exchanges as 'debates' in the first place.

Introduction

> Realism/relativism is not a debate hanging in the air; it is made into one. (Potter, 1998: 42)

Relativism in the social sciences has experienced a range of critiques that sometimes identify relativist practice with its radical and abstract extreme, using this as a rationale for its dismissal. Realism too has complained that its more naive exponents are no longer typical of the range of its current complex understandings. As a landmark and dramatic intervention into this stand-off, Edwards et al. (1995: 26) produced an argument that has achieved the status of a minor classic in the philosophy of the social sciences: a discussion of the 'Death and Furniture' argumentational style. In their paper

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1 With acknowledgement to The Buzzcocks' 1996 album *Flat-Pack Philosophy* (Cooking Vinyl).

'Death and Furniture', Edwards et al. (1995) attempt to show that the rhetorical practice of realist critiques of relativism typically deploys what are intended to be two irrefutable proofs of ontological realism. The concrete 'facts' of the existence of 'death' (as a universal condition that all humans must face) and 'furniture' (such as tables – representing a physical object world) are established by realists as two common and unavoidable objections to ontological relativism. Both are regarded as inalienably universal and external to human experience, and provide a 'bottom-line' beyond which argument is deemed to cease. Edwards et al. set out to expose the poverty of such 'bottom-line' arguments. Some recent critical realist writings have felt it necessary to claim that they have moved on from and are not reproducing such arguments, distancing themselves from earlier naive positions (Fleetwood, 2005: 219; Mutch, 2005). In this paper I critically explore some of Edwards et al.'s arguments about realist rhetorics, and some critical realist responses, questioning whether, even in more recent debates, both realists and relativists continue to reproduce their own bottom lines in less obvious guises.

In the first section, I summarise what Edwards et al. term 'Death and Furniture' ontological arguments against relativism and outline their response. In the second section, I turn to consider Bhaskar's more sophisticated transcendental realist arguments and highlight some of the logical contradictions and conceptual problems pertaining to his justifications of critical realist ontology. This is discussed in the context of the overarching naturalist scientific programme defended by critical realists. While my subsequent argument scrutinizes realism and its contradictions from a relativist perspective, it also includes a reflexively critical evaluation of the limitations of relativist standpoints in section three. I then further consider the rhetoric and politics of specific critiques of relativism, including the reductionist strategies that they adopt and the political and 'theological' content of their claims. In the fourth section, I consider more recent arguments by critical realists in the field of organization studies (Fleetwood, 2005; Mutch, 2005; Reed, 2005a, 2005b) and responses to them. I also examine whether these do, as they claim, offer a more sophisticated account than 'Death and Furniture' bottom-line arguments, or whether beneath a polished rhetorical surface the politics and theology remain the same. I conclude by suggesting that, despite obvious developments to incorporate social constructionist insights, the bottom line has shifted rather than disappeared. At best, the 'furniture' of the metaphor, rather than being just natural evidence of objectivity, is recognised as having constructed elements that nevertheless operate objectively. The 'furniture' now has the 'flat-pack' quality of a ready-made but customizable reality while death arguments have merely been prolonged.

'Undermining' relativism: Death and furniture arguments

> Philosophy… has long recognized the pro-relativist implications of the fact that empirical observations themselves cannot conclusively establish a theoretical interpretation, and thus cannot in and of themselves account for the acceptance or truth of a knowledge claim. (Knorr-Cetina, 1982: 133)

'Death and Furniture' arguments have been explored recurrently in the history of the philosophy of the social sciences and, for ontological realists, these arguments are deployed to represent the absolute 'end of rhetoric'. Indeed:

> 'Furniture' and 'rocks' type arguments [in which solid things on which we sit, upon which we might bang our hands, or against which we might stumble are deployed metaphorically and sometimes literally] invoke 'the objective world as given, as distinct from processes of representation; [and] as directly apprehended, independent of any particular description'. (Edwards et al., 1995: 26)

As Edwards et al. observe, the solidity and the 'out-there-ness' of objects like furniture and rocks make it hard for relativists to deny or deconstruct them, or even to argue that their 'reality' is a strict social construction.

The use of 'furniture' arguments tries to establish relativist responses to what appears to be obvious as complicated, over-elaborate, unnecessarily ambiguous and even duplicitous – 'pedantic and unreasonable deconstructive nit-picking' (Edward et. al. 1995: 29). Realist 'death' arguments deploy the inescapable fact of human death and the reality of global and historical horrors (such as genocide and the Holocaust) to indicate that there are universal aspects to existence beyond the relative that have absolute moral sticking points. Edwards et al. (1995: 33) specifically identify two forms of 'death' arguments: *ontological* and *siren*. Ontological versions stress that the reality of 'death, misery, tragedy, disaster... [is] undeniable, except by a scoundrel or a fool' (ibid.). Alternatively, the siren version of the argument is aimed to act as a warning against dangerous and unintended consequences of relativism ('relativism actually *produces* death and misery'), invoking obvious politico-moral realities that relativists should not undermine without being thought of as morally perverse (ibid.). The overall intention of a 'death' argument is to discredit any relativist position towards a series of presented 'inescapable realities', often by appeal to the undesirable consequences of that stance (ibid.). For such realists, only realist thought, and the acknowledgment of ontological realism, can recognise incipient horror and prevent its proliferation.

Edwards et al. undermine the 'death and furniture' line of argument in two ways. First, they identify what they call the 'realist dilemma', namely, how ontological realism cannot escape the paradox that, in spite of its protestations to the contrary, it undercuts itself and the assumed obviousness of the reality that sustains it the moment that it needs to justify itself by representation. Realism therefore denies what they regard as its own rhetorical devices, political objectives and quasi-theological commitments. Indeed, Edwards et al. demonstrate persuasively how reality-based 'furniture' arguments are themselves rhetorical devices. Even the simple act of banging a fist on a table in demonstration of a point in one's argument, the common illustration used to indicate the undeniable materiality of the object world, is based on a double metonymy that involves allowing *one* part of *one* table to stand for the universality of all tables, and the narrow waveband of our human perception of 'solidity' for all states of 'table' matter. Consequently, they argue, most realist claims may at best be those of an experiential realism whilst the specificity of human experience is paradoxically denied (cf. Campbell, 1985). The 'reality' of different categories of rocks and stones that exist independently of human practices and categorizations (Edwards et al., 1995: 30), and function as emblems of natural reality, also relies upon a centring of human experience.

Nevertheless, how the independent status of rocks and their categorization are relative to human actions, immediate intentions and broader purposes (such as those of the geologist, construction engineer, climber, stumbler, catapult manufacturer) are unfortunately glossed over. What remains, they continue, is a situation where intentional states *precede* the real status of rocks, and self-consciousness and memory are accepted as reliable bases on which 'to report events' such that reality is assured (ibid). Commonsense definitions of reality have here colonized apparently analytical thinking.

The second way that Edwards et al. undermine death and furniture argumentation is by pointing out that ironically, in order to make Death arguments work, realists take an ethical position and superimpose it on their ontology, i.e. they know 'the Good, the Bad and the Ugly' and naturalize it. Here ontology is not merged with ethics; ethics is masked as ontology. But as Smith (1988: 54; in Edwards et al., 1995: 33) points out, misery, tragedy, atrocity and disaster exist in a world that is still predominantly realist in orientation. This suggests that both realist science and realist common-sense assumptions are more prevalent and influential over contemporary tragedies than are relativist orientations and appear to offer no incontrovertible defence against such tragedies.

Edwards et al. target their arguments at 'bottom-line' realism. It could be claimed that they in fact only refer to one kind of realism in their critique (naïve or empirical realism) but they do not consider death and furniture objections to be the sole province of such extreme positions. Indeed, they argue that resonant bottom-line arguments can be found in the work of 'those sophisticated realists or moderate relativists for whom there has to be a bottom line, beyond which they refuse to go …' (Edwards et al., 1995: 26). Critical Realism anticipated such critiques and does not claim such extreme naïve realist positions. Critical Realism supports (and 'aims to re-establish') a realist view of being (ontology) whilst at the same time accepting and accounting for the relativism and subjectivity of knowledge and scientific activity (Bhaskar, 1975). Indeed, Critical Realists, with their differentiated and stratified conceptualization of reality (which includes three domains: the empirical, the actual and the real), seem to offer a more subtle version of ontological realism than empirical realism.

In what follows we will see that neither Critical Realism nor its adapted forms of (lower case) critical realism – such as those applied in organization studies – escape this trap in spite of their claims to offer a differentiated conception of reality stratified into empirical, actual and real levels, departing from empiricist views of science.

Displacing the bottom-line: Bhaskar's transcendental rhetoric

For critical realists, the real encompasses an independently existing world of intransitive structures and generative mechanisms that are causally active and give rise to, but are being manifested or not into, *actual* patterns of events that occur independently from the

social mechanisms of perception of the *empirical*[2] (Bhaskar, 1975). Critical realism subsequently moves the 'bottom line' of realist ontological arguments from observable and atomistic events ('the ultimate objects of knowledge' in 'superficial' ontological formulations inherited from Hume) to underlying causal 'structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena', considering the latter as the primary ontological entities or 'intransitive objects' (Archer et al., 1998: 19). Contrasting with idealist or relativist positions, critical realism clearly differentiates between ontological (intransitive) and epistemological domains but acknowledges that scientific observations and knowledge are historically and socially situated ('produced in the social activity of science') as well as mediated by 'transitive objects', understood as 'the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day' (Archer et al., 1998: 16-19; Shotter, 1992). Critical realism also aims to offer an alternative formulation of causal explanation based on the discovery of actual mechanisms and structures ('causal laws'), which is distinguished from the empiricist production of regularities and patterns thanks to the empirical observation of constant conjunctions of events.

In this section, I reconsider Bhaskar's transcendental self-justification of critical realist ontology and demonstrate the tautological rhetoric that contributes to its certainty and indubitability. Bhaskar's (1975) Critical Realism is formulated as an answer to some of the weaknesses of existing philosophical positions, including relativism (as a form of idealism). However, Bhaskar's transcendental argument itself cannot depart fully from the idealism that it criticizes, in spite of its reclothing of Kant's formulation, which we will discuss below.[3] Baskhar's justification of ontological realism is performed using a transcendental argument extending the model of Kant's transcendental deduction of objective categories of thought (Callinicos and Bhaskar, 2003; Viskovatoff, 2002). He transposes Kant's transcendental argumentation from the possibility of sense experience to the possibility of science (Viskovatoff, 2002), summarized as follows:

> What kind of transcendental arguments can be produced… to demonstrate the intransitivity and structured character of the objects of scientific knowledge? The intelligibility of [experience in science, which depends on experimental activity as well as sense-perception] presupposes… the intransitivity and structured character of the objects of scientific knowledge, at least so far as these are causal laws. And this presupposes in turn the possibility of a non-human world… and in particular of a non-empirical world. (Archer et. al, 1998: 23-26)

Bhaskar's transcendental argument concludes by asserting 'the necessary condition of the existence of a natural and independent real' through developing a retroductive (or abductive) process of argumentation which starts from certain widely accepted premises

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2   As Bhaskar (1975: 46-47) states it: 'There is a distinction between the *real* structures and mechanisms of the world and the *actual* patterns of events that they generate. (…) The world consists of mechanisms not events. Such mechanisms combine to generate the flux of phenomena that constitute the actual states and happenings of the world. They may be said to be real, though it is rarely that they actually manifest and rarer still that they are empirically identified by men. They are the intransitive objects of scientific theory'. Bhaskar also distinguishes between necessary and accidental patterns or sequences of events, with the former corresponding to 'a real connection actually manifest in the sequence of events that occur' (ibid.).

3   It is ironic to note as an aside that, at the time of his foundational Critical Realist writings in the mid-1970s, Roy Bhaskar was a member of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh with an office located in the 'David Hume Tower'.

about the intelligibility of scientific activity (Parsons, 1999: 152). The transcendental character of this assumption has been challenged, however, with Bhaskar's logical demonstration being deemed questionable (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003; Mingers, 2006). Unlike Bhaskar, Kant is able to regard his transcendental deduction of common human categories of thought as unquestionable and showing apodeictic certainty because 'he starts with something indubitable: with the kind of sense experience that every human being has' (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 92). As Callinicos further notes:

> It's the indubitability of the starting point that transfers certainty, from the premises to the conclusion. But if we look at Roy's version of the argument in *A Realist Theory of Science*, we don't start from anything indubitable. (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 93)

First, then, it has been argued that Bhaskar's 'de-individualized' and 'de-idealized' version of Kant's transcendental argument is problematic as a basis for Bhaskar's ontological claims, as his formulation robs Kant's argument of its 'apodeictic' certainty (Viskovatoff, 2002: 700). Moreover, the question of the existence of science and the question of the existence of thought are two very different questions, but Bhaskar (1975) treats them as the same, with 'human activity' and 'cognitive activity' being used ambiguously (Viskovatoff, 2002: 700). Callinicos also notes how 'science is not a universal feature of human existence [but] a highly culturally and historically specific set of practices' and how Bhaskar (1975) offers a persuasive interpretation of what is 'central to scientific practice'. But this is only an interpretation: a 'contestable, conjectural account of what scientific activity involves' (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 93) based on claims that are 'fallible and corrigible' (Viskovatoff, 2002: 700). This makes Bhaskar's argument vulnerable by his own criteria. Second, the persuasiveness of Bhaskar's argument is partly based on its rhetoric: the premises of the argument are assumed to be fairly secure, therefore the use of abduction as a form of argument is considered to be reliable and its conclusions are treated as valid (ibid.). But, as noted by Mingers (2006: 26), Bhaskar's logical demonstration of the veracity of his transcendental argument for 'an independent, stratified ontological' domain is also questionable as he reverses the form of the traditional syllogism, going 'from the agreed occurrence of some phenomena [or activities] backward to an inference about what, therefore, the world must necessarily be like', rather than from (theoretical) inference to (actual) occurrence.

Bhaskar (1975: 36), however, manages to make his transcendental argument a convincing and attractive justification for the ontological possibility of science by pulling a magical rabbit out of his philosopher's hat. This is by invoking the epistemic fallacy: 'the [erroneous] view that statements about being can be reduced to or analyzed in terms of statements about knowledge'. Bhaskar's transcendental argument is made into an ontological (foundational) claim instead of a knowledge claim under the cover if this epistemic fallacy, as follows.

Critical realism establishes causality as a necessary and not a contingent feature of human agency. It is accepted as a constitutive principle of the existence of an independent and external world and a justification of the possibility and intelligibility of science. But in taking this position Bhaskar merely transforms Kant's earlier 'regulative' (and therefore not 'properly transcendental') argument relating to the 'ideal of an ordered nature' into a constitutive or transcendental one in order to interpret

contingency as natural necessity (Viskovatoff, 2002; Parsons, 1999). Kant's regulative argument runs as follows: 'in studying nature, one must proceed as if nature is ordered … [otherwise] the project of science would not make sense' (Viskovatoff, 2002: 701). The assumption of a natural order as a probability is merely regulative, however; it is a practical stratagem applied to regulate scientific activity, and its truth cannot be established with certainty. Viskovatoff (2002: 702) notes that Bhaskar is 'aware of Kant's idea of regulative principles, but is dismissive of it', apparently believing that he offers more than a mere regulative principle. He is only able to do so, however, by conflating reasons and causes and by setting aside the uncomfortable fact that the truth of the premises he makes to justify the possibility of science cannot be established with certainty, using the epistemic fallacy as cover. Bhaskar's argument is in effect:

> if we knew that my ontology was really true, then we would understand how our experiments are possible, but that we don't really know, since to worry about this would be to commit the epistemic fallacy. (Viskovatoff, 2002: 702)

It is worth noting here that Bhaskar frames his justification of his transcendental form of argumentation in terms of 'immanent critique', or critique that emerges from inquiry. This, however, appears to be a way of sidestepping the circularity of its logic without appearing tautological. Bhaskar displaces the logical closure of his system of thought by injecting the idea of change and history as a dialectic to open it up, saying 'we have a certain phenomenon or a position which someone is holding, let's see what must be the case for that phenomenon or position to be possible' (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 97).

To summarise, then, Bhaskar's (1975) stratified ontological formulation displaces the 'bottom line' from the empirical (as in experiential realism) to the actual or real (via generating causal mechanisms). His structured and differentiated view of the real, he claims, enables him to conceptualize change and contrasts with 'flat, undifferentiated and unchanging' views of the world as conveyed by empiricists and idealists (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 97). Critical realism, however, only succeeds in moving the bottom-line from a flattened world of ready-made pieces of furniture to flat-pack structures-to-be-actualized. Flat-pack ontology invites capable human agents to discover 'the potentials and possibilities of the powers of structured entities' by dialectically creating a multi-dimensional reality from transient instructions (Morgan, 2003: 578). Unfortunately, Bhaskar's deterministic system only partially allows human freedom and makes limited room for change under constraints. The transcendental self-justification of Bhaskar's ontology, which assumes the existence of causality as a natural necessity, is ironically a leap of faith that undermines his own project of solving the problem of induction in scientific inquiry (Viskovatoff, 2002). Even if ontological commitments are considered inescapable by critical realists, the assumption that this necessitates 'a separate philosophically constituted and validating domain of ontology' is problematic for some (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 109; Kivinen and Piiroinen, 2006: 304-308). This again suggests that the leap of faith is a little too far:

> Whenever we speak something about the world, whenever we have a set of beliefs, embodied in that speech or those beliefs are presuppositions about the nature of the world. So it was obvious to me that the world is in some way stratified – it is structured and differentiated – and it is changing. (Bhaskar, in: Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98)

The leap is necessary, however, because Bhaskar's (1978) Critical Realism is also part of a wider scientific project of developing a critical and non-reductionist naturalism in the social sciences. Whilst accepting that the process is affected by the performative and historically-situated character of social structures and objects, the critical naturalist project aims to provide a social scientific theory with a relational conceptualization of society as a 'complex and causally efficacious whole' and a truth-seeking mode of explanation that makes the latent and generative structures of the social world visible, through abstraction being continuously transformed in practice (Bhaskar, 1978: 24; Sayer, 1981). In the process, he produces a reformulation of the Death Argument (siren version) in claiming that the distinction between ontology and epistemology is necessary for political and moral reasons. Bhaskar also offers another moral reformulation of the death argument when he claims that only critical realism is able to offer an appropriate conceptualization of agency which can 'properly grasp the nature of human freedom as emancipation from real and scientifically knowable specific constraints' rather than poetic or other kinds of descriptions of an 'already determined world' (Shotter, 1992: 160). But as Shotter (1992: 163) subsequently notes, Bhaskar's 'scientific' method for discovering the true using 'philosophical discourse and argumentation' severely limits the range of possible approaches to intelligibility in its making (hence the creative production of new interpretations and meanings) by systematically evaluating theories, models, claims, arguments and positions (what critical realists call 'transitive objects') along reductive criteria like truth and falsity, correctness and error. Again, such an evaluative form of argumentation enables critical realists to level difference, diversity and plurality in terms of oppositions and rivalries and to frame them into competitive claims for access to the (ultimate) truth. Differences in perspective are transformed into positions that are then rendered into politically opposed rivalries to be resolved through debate. Hierarchies are also encouraged and elaborated with some theories being thought of as being more powerful or satisfactory e.g. offering better explanations of social phenomena than others.

Critical realist reactions to relativist evasions

> In the case of *A Realist Theory of Science*, [I] start from two premises: experimental activity and applied activity. Why? It's not that no one can dispute them, it's because these are premises which infused [most] philosophical thought [and that it] did not dispute (or even sometimes theorize). In fact, there's nothing you can take for granted in philosophy except your opponents' premises. (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 97)

To return to Edwards et al. (1995), although they may see some vindication of their position in the foregoing critique of Bhaskar and other critical realists, and although they themselves develop their views persuasively, they nevertheless remain vulnerable to criticism (see Mclennan, 2001; Parker, 1999 and O'Neill, 1995). In particular, their explicit neglect of ontology in their arguments; their privileging of language as almost the only considered form of representation; and their concentration on 'bottom-line' reductionism are regrettable, as not all reductionisms take this form as Critical Realists argue. Edwards et al. frame their arguments as epistemological rather than ontological. In this they largely follow Gergen's (1994: 8) line of ontological neutrality towards the world 'out there', which seeks neither to deny nor affirm the nature of external 'reality'. They focus on the problem of meaning rather than the problem of existence, and in

some senses could be seen as reinforcing the divide between ontology and epistemology that critical realists emphasise. In the process, they neglect alternative approaches to ontology, such as what Bergson calls his 'partial realism', the rhizomatic materialism of Deleuze (which De Landa insists is realism), the pragmatism of Dewey, and the process philosophy of Whitehead. What these diverse writers would deliver of relevance to pro-relativist argumentation is an emphasis on the problematic processes by which reality as flux is engaged and shaped, the significance of the body's immersion in those processes, and the importance of non-linguistic evocational forms amongst those processes alongside language. Similarly, recent social constructionist writers who centre linguistic processes or 'conversational realities' within their work have also begun to place renewed emphasis on the role of the body in knowing and the need for a critical appreciation of modes of representation, expression, relation and apprehension outside language in reality construction (Shotter 1993a, 1993b; 2005).

Furthermore, the arguments of Edwards et al. on representation heavily favour language rules and language-mediated representation. Postmodern thought is sometimes caricatured by critical realists as being solely about language as discursive form, with a literal view of the meaning of 'text' (although recent developments in critical discourse analysis have sought to redress this). Yet whilst the world as we know it might be within language, is language only the verbal/textual form that we commonly refer to as 'language'? Derrida argued that language itself is comprised of organising practices such as ordering, sequencing, marginalizing, bracketing, prioritizing and erasing/correcting. As such it constitutes ways of 'writing' the world, or of bringing it into relation, but this does not necessarily entail inscription in words – other forms of representation are equally relevant, and their practices are equally worthy of close scrutiny (see Cooper, 2006; Shotter, 2005). Edwards et al. unfortunately miss an opportunity to dispel this myth.

One of the aims of the 'Death and Furniture' article's argumentation was to 'explicitly repudiate' the mistaken realist view of relativism as 'anything goes' – itself a variant of realism (Potter et al., 1999: 81) – and defend it against accusations of 'moral dissolution' (Edwards et al., 1995: 39). As Potter et al. (1999: 81) reiterate, relativists can possibly make assumptions and judgments about the world, but 'they also hold these assumptions to be permanently open to examination and critique'. Relativists also challenge 'fact/values' polarities, treating facts as inseparable from judgments (ibid.). But contemporary or subsequent intellectual exchanges illustrate that Critical Realists and critical realists alike are still deaf to such attempts (see e.g. O'Neill, 1995; Parker, 1999; Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003).

In death and furniture arguments, it is precisely what they take to be the opponents' premises that critical realists find so infuriating, leaving them often 'bewildered if not outraged' (Willmot, 2005: 761). In his response to 'Death and Furniture', O'Neill (1995: 102) described and defended table-banging as a 'sign of hopelessness and exasperation' by realists when faced with the absence of serious consideration by relativists of any utterance, rather than it being a bottom-line argument. We could, however, by the same token note the frustration of relativists with the obsession of realists with framing, indeed imprisoning all dialogue within the 'ritual of Theory-Criticism-and-Debate' that infuses Bhaskar's Critical Realist and most derivative

critical realist writing (Shotter and Lannamann, 2002). As Rorty counters, this 'appears as the end-product of an original wish to substitute confrontation for conversation as the determinant of our belief' (Rorty 1980: 163, emphasis added). Potter's (1998) documentation of his attempt as an author to resist the ordering imposed by realist forms of argumentation, in presenting a fragmented and situated collection of realized thoughts, ironically incorporates his editor Ian Parker's own resistance to the project of his chapter by re-presenting their email correspondence as the conclusion to the paper. Although despite his robust resistance, Parker as editor obviously gave way, Potter's strategy proves both amusing and edifying, mirroring back O'Neill's (1995: 102) critical accusation levelled against Edwards et al.: 'This is a strategy of power, quite literally'.

Familiar critiques and caricatures of relativism continue to re-emerge in the rhetorics of realists of diverse loyalties (Bhaskar, 1975; Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003; Hibberd, 2001). Long-standing realist critiques include the following:

1. *Relativism denies ontology.* Bang! Bang! Realists are now exasperated (O'Neill, 1995) and they despair of debate in the face of imagined relativist claims: 'What possible point could there be in my carrying on a dialogue with something that doesn't exist? Of course the moral here is that ontology is absolutely unavoidable' (Bhaskar, in Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98). Or they find pretexts not to take relativist claims seriously until relativists accede to 'their demand that some utterances be taken seriously' – which the realists won't accept that they do (O'Neill, 1995).

2. *Relativism is conflated with post-structuralism (and vice-versa).* Relativism is accused of reducing all assertions and truth-claims to matters of language and rhetoric. O'Neill (1995: 101-102) exemplifies such simplistic reductions of post-structuralism's critique of representation: 'if a claim is made, put quotation marks around it and discuss it as a piece of language. Don't take the sentence seriously as an assertion. This I take is the central move in recent relativism… The distinction between fiction, jokes and assertive utterances about the world then falls'. Relativism reconstructed in this way does not see anything beyond text and is only concerned with irony, creating 'performative contradictions: it is a performative contradiction to assert that you are not making an assertion' (O'Neill, 1995: 101-102; O'Neill, 1998). But conversations are not about logic, and language can be used tentatively rather than assertively – which is precisely to raise reflexive awareness of the consequences of such discursive performativity and particularly performative foreclosure – whilst nevertheless communicating meaningfully.

3. *Relativists oppose realism to relativism.* Such an opposition is a mistake (O' Neill, 1995; Hibberd, 2001). But as illustrated in O'Neill (1995: 102), critical realists construct argumentation in terms of assertion and counter-assertion, and argument becomes defined as debate rather than as conversation. In Parker (1999), for example, relativism is abusively described as a 'full scale perspective', a 'position, equal and opposite to critical realism' instead of a 'more or less extensively theorized questioning – analysis, problematizing,

critique – of the key elements of traditional objectivist thought and its attendant axiological machinery' (Potter et al., 1999: 81, quoting Smith, 1988). Mclennan (2001) temporizes such polarized distinctions, calling for a more nuanced discussion of differences between perspectives. But, together with O'Neill (1995), he reinforces an integrationist discourse of immanent convergence. Relativism is not so much a perspective as a process of working on perspectives. If the binary opposition were true, it would negate the equation of relativism with post-structuralism, an approach that in Derrida in particular seeks to deconstruct such polarized thinking and its implicit power relations. So do Potter et al. (1999), who also reject the realist construction of relativism in terms of polarities. Relativism is neither more nor less moral or political than critical realism (O'Neill, 1995; Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003), but is rather more aware of the perils of claiming the moral high ground of representation and speaking for the Other. Critical realism, unfortunately, cannot usurp the privilege of speaking for the 'tortured, oppressed and murdered' as emphasized by Potter et al. (1999).

In summary, then, Edwards et al. make a telling critique of realism through their identification of 'death' and 'furniture' arguments. Nevertheless, their own form of relativist argumentation is not without its flaws, in common with other forms of relativism as I have noted. The question that now needs to be addressed is whether these flaws enable critical realism, widely recognised within organization studies to be the most articulate form of realism, to have a cohesive response to this attack.

Shadow boxing? 'Stripping down' critical realist ontology in organization studies

> I hope that the reasonably sophisticated ontology developed here can prevent accusations that critical realists invoke 'Death and Furniture' type arguments ... and /or are prone to table thumping while claiming 'you're not telling me that's a social construction'... (Fleetwood, 2005: 219)

The worst and most obvious excesses of 'Death or Furniture' argumentation, as we have seen, are eschewed by more sophisticated critical realist writers such as Fleetwood (2005). Nevertheless, we might still question whether such arguments continue to appear by stealth in an unacknowledged way in critical realist writings. We should also ask whether changes in the argumentational rhetoric of critical realism brought about accompanying changes in what Edwards et al. argued were its politics and 'theology'.

Unfortunately, examination of two important critical realist statements in the field of organization studies, Fleetwood (2005) and Reed (2005a), along with a critique (Contu and Willmott 2005), and a response to the critique, Reed (2005b), suggests that 'Death and Furniture' argumentation is still present, and its politics and theology remain intact. To begin with, ontological and siren versions of the 'death' argument are still employed, typically using two different nominal strategies. The first move involves a nominal strategy of identifying events and situations as having unequivocal moral significance, regardless of their complexity. The Holocaust is such an event, treated as having obvious significance – one does not need to discuss it – as it represents an evil that so obviously must be avoided. The key threat here is the relativist condition of not

being able to see the event for what it so obviously is, and therefore to be unable to avoid or correct it. In Fleetwood's (2005) ontological version of the death argument, the ultimate horror presented by 'death' in the extreme versions of this type of argumentation is attenuated into its intellectual equivalents: being mistaken (p. 205), stupid or nonsensical (p. 211) – all presented as profound scholarly abominations for critical realists. Similar labelling strategies may appear in other guises in critical realist accounts, and can be found in both Fleetwood and Reed's work. Among these is the pejorative device of naming those who make relativist arguments as 'postmodernists' or 'poststructuralists' – those who cannot or will not acknowledge the obvious (a repackaging of the siren version of the death argument). Fleetwood selectively quotes a series of often complex quotations from a somewhat heterogeneous group that he chooses to label 'postmodernists' and leaves the quotes to speak for themselves, with only a brief general comment. A similar strategy is used by Fleetwood where comments from one of those previously and perhaps curiously labelled postmodernists (Karl Weick, for instance!) are dismissed 'rather than dissect[ing] these statements to show what is wrong with them' (p. 209). Reed (2005b) gives an eloquent siren version of the death argument after Contu and Willmott (2005: 1646) take him to task for relying heavily on 'traditional' approaches that cannot therefore be considered 'new and innovative' – his initial claim for the contribution of critical realism (in Reed, 2005a). This resonates with what Edwards et al. identify as the 'realist dilemma': in needing to deploy arguments for realism as well as negatively characterising oppositional positions, critical realists cannot avoid the need to 'represent' that which is supposed to be self-evident. O'Neill (1995) argues that it is not a genuine dilemma as realist thought is not inevitably 'trapped' in language but constitutes a mode of engagement with the world outside language. This, however, seems to be more of a denial of the problem than a refutation of it.

Reed's (2005b) defensive, if combative, response culminates in an *ad hominem* that accuses Contu and Willmott (2005) of being closet postmodernists after he took their point as a negative accusation of traditionalism and lack of vision, rather than an ironic observation. Reed's (2005b) negative nominal strategy does not make any further attempt to make this labelling relevant to his argument, with the implication that we all know what the terrible consequences of being postmodernist are. Next stop: chaos and disaster – again, a weak variety of the siren version of the death argument!

The second move reverses the first nominal strategy by naming the good things that are abandoned or neglected by relativism. *Ontology* is the good here, because flawed ontologies provide flawed foundations for everything else we do in the world. Epistemology, despite the inevitable epistemological features of their constructions of ontology, is typically regarded as nugatory. Epistemologists are at best mistaken and at worst misleading, another weak example of the siren version of the death argument (Fleetwood, 2005: 206). Only critical realist philosophy is used as a source by Fleetwood and Reed, and those who reject it are treated the same summary way as those who neglect it. Ironically Fleetwood and Reed actually don't appear very interested in philosophy per se at all – they only ever cite Bhaskar and the adapters of his work, Lawson and Archer, and often their 'translations' of this work into organization studies are either not very accurate, as Contu and Willmott (2005) point out, or fail to constitute the creative move forward that Mutch (2005) attributes to critical realism. Almost no-

one else appears to get any substantial treatment. Their critique of 'postmodernists' is entirely based on secondary sources, citing them outside their textual as well as their social and historical context. Fleetwood, particularly, does not even bother to interpret or explore how the statements he cites might have come to be possible or regarded as meaningful by their authors themselves except in a throwaway metaphorical argument (several times he gives the excuse of not having space or time to do more). So death arguments – albeit heavily mediated, still pervade critical realist contributions in organization studies.

To continue, 'furniture' arguments, where the object world speaks for itself and refuses constructivist attempts to render it malleable, are not immediately obvious. But consider the emphatically put idea in Fleetwood (2005: 205) especially that *one can know simply*, what is an *error* or *mistake*. The impact of this intervention in scholarly argument is the verbal equivalent of banging one's fist on the table. *You or they are wrong!! It's obvious!!* One can almost feel the shockwaves. Fleetwood (2005: 217) himself also asserts that his critique of postmodernism (conflated with relativism as we have seen) is 'hard-hitting', evoking the noise of the impact as he slams the metaphorical table. Reed (2005b), despite his attempt to be a deft counter-puncher, has little by way of a response to Contu and Willmott's (2005: 1648) question as to how critical realists can be so sure that the world conforms to their version of it other than bluster. Ontological ambiguity is condemned out of hand, but what if it is a reflection of the way the world is rather than of analytic inadequacy? After all, any physicist would be familiar with the (quantum) insight that light can be seen to behave both as a particle and a wave. For some critical realists, at some point, and after some accommodation of social construction, reality just is. If we want to look for a concept that performs an equivalent function to tables or rocks for critical realists, we have the *entity* (Fleetwood, 2005: 199). An entity can be real without being empirically observable or material, its reality stemming from its causal efficacy or actuality (ibid.). The 'flat-pack' components of reality can thus become *ideally*, *materially* and/or *socially* real once animated by causal powers, depending on whether and how they are conceptually, materially and/or socially mediated. Transient, emergent and performative mechanisms shape, reveal and animate fundamental entities and structures-in-waiting. But unfortunately, the ontological status of entities relies upon a limited incorporation of relationality, constrained by causal mechanisms, procedures and laws.

The common discursive forms of realist argumentation display a persistent stubbornness. As Edwards et al. (1995: 35) observe, the typical realist dispute follows the form: 'I'm right and you are wrong'. 'No, I'm right and you are wrong'. 'No, no, I'm right and you are wrong'. Here for illustration we can compare Fleetwood's discussion of Du Gay's work on p. 215, and his earlier critical realist rejection of Du Gay's position on p. 206. Whilst there is not room to reproduce this discussion here, the similarity in the approach is unsurprising, although the terminology used is more on the dialectical lines: 'You do'. 'I *don't*'. Yes, you do'. 'No, I *don't*'.

Rhetoric is replete in critical realist organization theory. Reed (2005a: 1636) uses critical realism (i.e. the more explicitly philosophical work of Bhaskar, Lawson and Archer) to symbolise what he characterises as a bold new direction in thinking, which only serves to mask an underlying and somewhat nostalgic return to the concerns of

'"classical" historical and sociological studies of management and organization'. In pointing out that critical realists in organization studies often diverge from Critical Realist statements in social philosophy,[4] Contu and Willmott (2005: 1659) suggest that Reed is 'invoking it to anoint and regenerate classical analysis as a model for the contemporary study of organizations'. In fact, the realism of Fleetwood and Reed turns out to be not as critical as they avow, which may explain why they don't appear to be terribly interested in philosophy more broadly. There are also strong rhetorics of collectivity – 'critical realists think, say or do [the following things] etc', with widespread use of the character 'we' (see Edwards et al., 1995: 29). Ironically, in spite of a shared condemnation of identity and subjectivity turns in recent work influenced by poststructuralism, these three critical realist papers seem themselves to be obsessed with identity – the establishment of their own.[5]

Edwards et al. also note that an underlying concern with politics typically surfaces textually in the form of an argument we want to win. Fleetwood (2005) is pugnacious and indeed masculine in his vocabulary, self-satisfiedly describing himself as 'stringent' and 'hard-hitting'. Reed claims to be valiantly contesting a dominant approach although Contu and Willmott (2005) demonstrate (empirically, with some relish of the irony) that the approach Reed targets was and is far from dominant.[6] Furthermore, Reed (2005a) asserts that, contesting this assumed dominance, a realist 'turn' has now been achieved. Contu and Willmott (2005) demonstrate that not only has such a counter-turn not materialized, but that the claims for distinctiveness of such a turn are questionable: it might, if achieved, constitute little more than a retrogression to earlier, somewhat tired, ideas. Both Fleetwood (2005) and Reed (2005a, 2005b) liberally use phallic imagery: they repeatedly characterize their own position as strong and powerful, and Fleetwood even claims it is impregnable to counter arguments (Fleetwood, 2005: 214). These papers are political statements, establishing the 'identity' of critical realism for the purposes of changing the balance of power in organization studies, and indeed returning it to the golden age of British industrial sociology when Labour Process Theory was in its pomp.

Finally Edwards et al. insist that critical realism constitutes a belief system or a theology. The giveaway here is that ontology, rather than being regarded as simply given or prior, is termed a 'commitment' (Mutch et al., 2006: 612). Realist ontology, and indeed realist science, then, is a belief system, and the arguments in the papers introduce us to its rituals, its prophets, and even its human sacrifices. And like a religion, it is holistic without being complete – if you adopt its 'prism' (or pentacle perhaps) you will be saved from the evils of epistemology and ambiguity and you will epiphantically 'see the world more clearly' (Fleetwood, 2005: 197). Of course, such a theology insitutionalizes aporia and its reflexivity, if there is any, is always limited by

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4   This would be acknowledged by critical realists, many of whom who don't follow Bhaskar's intellectual trajectory and are more influenced by the recent theoretical and empirical work of Margaret Archer.

5   I am of course aware that even a paper such as this one constitutes some form of intervention in identity politics, however innocuous, and Edwards et al themselves acknowledge this as an inalienable part of their own position. But the rhetorical emphasis, style and claims are striking.

6   And outside the UK, such an argument could barely be launched, let alone sustained.

the failure to acknowledge that its own carving up of the world is itself a language, and constitutes an epistemology. So despite Fleetwood's claims that his sophisticated ontology should not be vulnerable to accusations of death and furniture arguments, we detect hubris. The ontology is actually limited; insofar as it is based on Bhaskar's transcendental argument, it is contentious; much of it is rhetorical; its aims are political and theological; and the paper accordingly does not constitute sophisticated ontology but sophisticated 'death and furniture': 'flat-pack' philosophy. The solid reality that the furniture metaphor represents in earlier bottom line argumentation is no longer so simplistically represented. But even though a critical realist version of the real recognizes conceptual mediation and social construction, its assumption of entities, structures and mechanisms is still part of a solid bottom-line rhetorical justification strategy – a flat-pack artefactuality to be actualized. The more politics and theology are present in these discussions, the more agonistic the dialogue becomes, with debate being constructed as something to be won, and arguments as something to be settled (Linstead, 2003).

Looking for ground:[7] Final reflections on the debates

> In an age in which recognition and understanding of difference has come centre-stage, the study of relations between differents has correspondingly become more pressing. (Gabriel and Willman, 2005: 425)

My final comment will be about the 'nature' of the 'bottom line' and of forms of argumentation. For realists, the bottom line is the line between interpretation and that which resists interpretation – its meaning is regarded as uncontestable and the means of the construction of that meaning remain unexamined. For relativists, what is beyond the line of interpretation is mysterious, rather than to be understood through a reduction of its dimensionality. So where realism takes a positive approach to the bottom line, relativists embrace negativity and ontical (not ontological) ambiguity – not a taken-for-granted approach to the real but an openness to possibility. Critical realist flat-pack-structures-to-be actualized only partially allow limited possibilities for human action and change. Some relativists, as Edwards et al. note, do themselves embrace a bottom line and their arguments with realists consist of debating where the line should be drawn. However, as Contu and Willmott (2005) hint but don't fully discuss, the argument ought to be about how what lies beyond any such line should be approached, between common-sense positivity and impressionable negativity.

Following from Gabriel and Willman (2005), it could be argued that contemporary developments in the social sciences have rendered projects that seek to integrate different perspectives nostalgic, if not obsolete. Critical realism, from Bhaskar onwards, is explicitly committed to the integration of the social sciences into a naturalistic project (Bhaskar, 1978; Mutch et al., 2006). This entails a preference for a language of convergence that is seen to be insufficiently cultivated in relativist approaches. Fleetwood (2005: 3), for example, deplores the ontological ambiguity, i.e. lack of

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7   With acknowledgement to Wyckham Porteous's 1995 album *Looking for Ground* (Bohemia Beat Records).

clarity, imprecision, conceptual slippage and confusion vis-à-vis matters ontological-that relativism introduces to debates. But as Gabriel and Willman (2005: 3) reiterate, boundaries and differences are increasingly seen 'not as fixed entities, but as provisional, loose, contexted, challenged, reinforced or blurred'. Critical realists, however, are uncomfortable with such fragmentation and fluidity, and seek ways to solidify boundaries and aggregate differences into larger units of meaning that can be more easily manipulated analytically. Furthermore, realism in general tends to pursue a majoritarian or imperialist strategy that seeks either to dismiss different approaches or incorporate them within its perspective. Even where realist perspectives allow themselves to be modified by the encounter, relativist approaches are rendered as minor voices within it. This is one by-product of approaching differences as invitations to debate. As Linstead (2003) reminds us, one of the origins of the term 'debate' is the medieval French *debâttre*, meaning 'to beat down'. Debates are unavoidably power struggles, to be settled by one party asserting a dominant position over the other. 'Moving forward' entails the supposedly defeated party accepting this situation. This requires some establishment of shared criteria by which both are comfortable to be judged, a common bottom-line. In the absence of this, skirmishes continue with the possibility of both sides considering themselves triumphant in their own terms.

Dialogue offers a different possibility of communication across boundaries, a recognition of the provisional nature of bottom lines, unencumbered by a unificatory mission. It opens up the potential of criteria to be immanent and mutable, and the productivity of dissensus. It requires, for its continuing success, a sense of openness against closure, and a reflexive awareness of the potential of rhetorical strategies and devices to reassert the agonistics of older argumentation. Whilst there is no doubt that discussions between critical realism and relativism in organization studies have become more nuanced in recent years, I have argued in this paper that the underlying rhetorics may nevertheless allow earlier positions to persist. To the extent that this remains unaddressed or unacknowledged, future dialogue is likely to be frustrated.

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