Critical realism in the social sciences: An interview with Roy Bhaskar

Interview with Roy Bhaskar, conducted by Hubert Buch-Hansen on 27 April 2005.

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Abstract: Critical realism is gradually gaining ground in the social sciences. In this interview, the founder of the critical realist philosophy of science, Roy Bhaskar, gives an account of the overall developments in his thought. Having briefly accounted for his background and reasons for becoming a philosopher and having explained how he took reflections on certain natural scientific practices as his starting point in the development of his philosophy, Bhaskar moves on to outline the main differences between the natural and the social sciences and to discuss his attempt to transcend the dualisms of the social sciences. The critical realist approach to the agency-structure dualism is contrasted with Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, and Bhaskar explains what he sees as the main difference between critical realism and poststructuralist discourse theory. Towards the end of the interview, Bhaskar deals with the latest developments in his thought, and he reflects on the state of crisis in today's world.

Keywords: agency and structure; alienation; critical naturalism; critical realism; dialectics; discourse theory; dualisms.

HBH: I would like to begin by asking you to say a few words about your own background and your reason for becoming a philosopher.

RB: I was born of an Indian father and an English mother. My father was a doctor, and he had a feeling that I should become a doctor from a very early age. But I felt that I wasn't very manually dexterous, and furthermore I was intensely interested in society and in other people. I thought I had already got some good clues about the nature of society, and I actually wanted to go and do this as my study at university. Although my father opposed it, I managed to get a scholarship at Balliol College, Oxford, where I enrolled as a student of Philosophy, Politics and Economics. I really enjoyed all three subjects. But I thought that Economics was probably most important, because it seemed to me that the biggest problem in the world was the problem of world poverty. So, I enrolled as a graduate student, first at Balliol College and then at Nuffield College, to do a PhD on the relevance of the economic theory for the problems of underdeveloped countries. But I found it extremely difficult to write anything on this – namely for the reason that sophisticated economists didn't make – or allow – comparisons of their models with

reality. It is a sort of practice in many economic schools just to write some equations on the board and go, 'don't interpret it! Don't interpret it! Don't say what it is!' Actually, when I went into this on a philosophical level, I discovered that the peculiar thing is that this taboo on saying anything about the world actually reflected a taboo on ontology, which was part of the Western tradition, at least since Hume and Kant. And I think, probably, the argument for ontology and the argument for a *new* ontology were the two most important moves in my first book, *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975).

HBH: In *A Realist Theory of Science*, you use reflections on the nature of some important practices of the natural sciences – e.g. natural experiments – as a stepping stone to criticize existing philosophical positions and to develop your own philosophy of science. Could you explain how this was done?

RB: I think it is really important for people to understand that philosophical arguments, like all good arguments, are arguments which involve discussion of your opponents', your antagonists' beliefs or values. In other words, you don't start from what you believe; you start from what your discussant believes. And if you believe that they're wrong or that their views need refining, then you have to show that in terms of their system of beliefs or values. This is to say that philosophical argument is *immanent critique*. So, I couldn't just naively counterpose my own intuition that the world was structured and differentiated, and that most of the social world was intrinsically open. I had to prove this in terms of things that my opponents valued and believed to be important and asserted. Now if you read classical Western epistemology from at least the beginning of the 17th century, there's one word which is absolutely sacrosanct, and that word is *experience*. When pressed, most epistemologists would say, well, they mean proper scientific experience, which is experimental activity. But here I came up against another surprising thing: That very few philosophers had actually analysed what's really specific to experiments. There's a lot of discussion about what experience consists in – whether it can be reduced to sense data and so on – but very little discussion on experimental activity.

There were a couple of writers, though, who had started to broach it by the time I was a post-graduate student. They had given a lot of attention to the fact that natural experiments involve intervention in nature. But what they didn't really go into was that if it involves intervention in nature, then what is the significance? Because after all if we're a causal agent in producing a sequence of events, this is something human beings have done, this is a human artefact, and that can't be a natural law, a causal law. But of course, therein lies the whole significance of what a causal law is, because what you do when you set up an experimental situation is try to get closed access to one specific mechanism, excluding the operation of all other mechanisms. And this artificially closed system allows you to identify the operation of a causal law. The assumption that it is a causal law is the assumption that it will operate outside the experimental setup, and unless you appreciate that, you don't really understand what experiments are trying to do. And once you say that causal laws operate outside the experimental setup, you've got to say that they operate in open systems, and so there's no way that they can be identified with

constant conjunctions of events at the empirical level. They describe workings at a non-empirical and also a non-actual level – a level which I call 'transfactual'.

And that led me to the realisation that what science really talked about was a domain of the real which wasn't actual and which wasn't empirical, and this was very, very exciting, because that's what most of reality is. So, when I introduced the idea of a domain of the non-actual real, I talked about the operation of mechanisms. A *mechanism* is just something that makes something else happen – you could say that water boils because of its molecular structure. You could say, analytically, that this level of the non-actual real is deeper, it describes the level behind; this can sometimes be inside, it can sometimes be smaller as in the case of molecules, but it can also be wider. And it's almost always more recondite and almost always less easy to observe, so the importance of actually getting to come into empirical contact with the level of the non-actual real is very great in science. And so the distinction between the non-actual real and the actual and the empirical real is one that continually is transcended in science, so that something which was unobservable becomes observable.

HBH: In your next book, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Bhaskar 1979), you turned your attention towards the social sciences. Could you try to explain the moves you make from *A Realist Theory of Science* to *The Possibility of Naturalism*?

RB: Once you say that what science is about is understanding the deep enduring structures that generate the play of manifest phenomena, you have to ask whether a similar move is possible in the domain of society. Are there deep recondite structures? A lot of my generation were very impressed with Marxist economic theory, because the phenomena of a price, for example, were explained in terms of pretty easy-to-understand concepts, but by relationships which weren't empirically manifest. Many of my contemporaries were also very impressed with Freud, though actually you didn't need to turn to these radical thinkers. Because if you look at the explanations that Durkheim or Weber gave, they all involve something behind the play of phenomena which, once you understood it, would explain the phenomena satisfactorily. And so, it seemed to me intuitively obvious that that same kind of move was made in social science.

But then there was, of course, the problem of whether you can say anything a little bit more rigorous about it? A little bit more philosophically, or in fact social scientifically, relevant? And here again, you can't just say, 'well look, I've written this book on science and I'm going to apply it to social science', because we've already agreed that argument in philosophy and also, I believe, in science is an immanent critique. So, if I wanted to start writing about society, I had to look at the problems which obsessed philosophers and social scientists. The situation in philosophy and social science was that it was absolutely replete with dichotomies, with dualisms: The dualism between those who believed that social society could be studied naturalistically, mostly represented by the positivists, and those who believed that it couldn't be studied naturalistically, the hermeneuticists; the protagonists of structure versus the protagonists of agency; the methodological individualists versus the holists; those who stressed the importance of mind versus those

who stressed body; reasons versus causes, fact versus value, theory versus practice – it was just split!

What I then tried to do was to work through these different dualisms to transcend the splits. And probably the most important point, from the point of view of isolating a distinctive domain for the social sciences, was the resolution of the problem of structure and agency. What occurred to me was that there's one feature of the social world of extreme importance, and that is that we don't create it. I mean it is always given to us, and that is our legacy, if you like, from the past. Now let's think of the sort of things that are given to us so we're clear what we're talking about: the parliamentary system, the economic system, the meanings of words, the rules of traffic, the conventions of family life – all those things, some of which would clearly be called structures by some people, but many of which aren't; all those things are things which, although we don't create, we nevertheless are responsible for reproducing *or* transforming in praxis, in our activity. So, this was the fundamental insight of my *transformational model of social activity* (TMSA). It was clear that there was a relationship, but you couldn't really describe this relationship as dialectical or anything like that; it's *sui generis*. And the role of agency is to reproduce or transform structures. Structures provide us with the means, the wherewithal, and the particular form in which we do this in social life. And once you've got clear about that, then you mark out a domain of the distinctively social.

HBH: There has been much debate about the similarities and differences between your transformational model of social activity and Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration. Margaret Archer, who has written quite a lot about this, argues that we're dealing with very different models here (e.g. Archer 1995). What is your view on this?

RB: Well, I formulated the TMSA pretty much at the same time that I wrote *A Realist theory of Science*, and it was first published in 1978 in an article for the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (Bhaskar 1978). About the same time, Giddens was formulating his 'theory of structuration', which was presented in his book *Central Problems in Social Theory*, which came out in 1979 (Giddens 1979). And actually, when I read it, I thought, 'well that's great! He's saying more or less what I'm saying'. And Giddens told me that when he read my book *The Possibility of Naturalism*, he thought, 'That's great!' Then we had discussions, and we thought that we were sort of fellow travellers, on that road anyway. But over ten years later, I think in the early 1990s, Margaret Archer showed me some papers she had written, and she convinced me that there actually was a profound difference between my model and Anthony Giddens' model. And I think it was easier to see then, because Giddens had moved into a phase in which structure and agency sort of happened together the whole time, and the givenness of structure was gradually dropped – it was like we could wake up in the morning and have a new social structure. What Margaret Archer said was that – unlike in Giddens' theory of structuration – in the TMSA the agency comes *after* the structure. So, there is a 'tensed' difference: There *was* structure; there *is* now that agency; and there *will* be the structure that this agency produces. And I think she's absolutely right – there *is* a profound difference between the two models. I think that unless you understand pre-structuration, then it makes it too easy to change the social world when in fact it is very,

very difficult! It can be done, but we have to take the weight of the past seriously if we want to overcome it. You have to work at the totality, and it's important that we know this if we have aspirations to change society.

HBH: What you argue for in *The Possibility of Naturalism* is a critical naturalism. Perhaps you could just briefly state what you see as the main differences between natural and social science.

RB: Once you have a sense of what structures are, you are going to have to ask the question what are the differences between natural and social structures? Now every social structure is different, but there might be some broad characteristics which characterise all social structures. What I did in *The Possibility of Naturalism* was to isolate ontological, epistemological, relational and what I called critical differences. If we begin with the *ontological differences*, I argued that, unlike natural structures, social structures are context-dependent, they're human activity-dependent, and they have a greater space-time dependency than natural structures. The last is only a relative distinction. The second – that they're dependent on human activity – follows, if you like, from the TMSA. Their concept dependence is very interesting, because conceptuality is a feature of social life. Just as you can't have agency without structures, you don't have social life without intentionality, and to say that something is intentional is to say that concepts are involved. Perhaps the most important *epistemological difference* is that we can't experimentally close systems. In fact, you get horrendous results where you try to do so in, say, some psychological experiments. What this means is that a fundamental criterion for the adequacy of a theory is an explanatory one. We could still use empirical tests, but we can't use a simple predictive test.

If we turn to the *relational difference*, beliefs are themselves part of the subject matter of the social sciences – you have a subject matter and beliefs about the subject matter, both being part of social science. And if you can show why a false belief about a subject matter is generated, then you must have a negative valuation on what it is that generates that false belief. Because, other things being equal, a false belief undermines the rationality of agency. That means that social science is going to have a demystificatory role, and this opens a road for what I'm firmly committed to, which is an emancipatory role for social science. So, you have a very important difference here from the natural sciences, the *critical difference*. Of course, natural science can inform our beliefs, so you can also use natural science to generate a critique of our consciousness, and in that way it may have an emancipatory role. But it doesn't have this double-edged effect – from beliefs to not just the actions informed by them, but also to the realities generating them. In the case of natural sciences, you have a critique only of beliefs, not also of an extra-cognitive subject matter; you're not saying that, for instance, these atoms or electrons are wrong.

HBH: These years quite a few critical realists, yourself included, are engaged in debates with postmodernists. For instance, you analyse Rorty's work in your book from 1991 (Bhaskar 1991), and a few years ago you also par ticipated in a debate about critical realism and discourse theory with Ernesto Laclau (Bhaskar/Laclau 2002). Where do you

see the main differences between critical realism and the position of, say, Laclau and Mouffe?

RB: I think the biggest difference with writers like Laclau and Mouffe comes over the question of conceptuality and language, because we've seen that conceptuality is distinctive of the social sciences. But many poststructuralists move from the fact that it's distinctive to the social sciences to argue that it's exhaustive of it, that it's all there is to social science: language and concepts. I profoundly disagree with this in lots of different ways. You can look at it from the point of view of the TMSA, which I have already sketched, and you can see the moments of agency, you can see the agent doing something for reasons. Now, is social science just to be concerned with their reasons for doing that and the concepts agents actually have? No, it must concern itself also with the unacknowledged conditions, the unconscious motivation, even the tacit skills they perform in doing things – and then, of course, the whole domain of unintended consequences.

What many social constructionists and poststructuralists are doing is that they are taking a truth from neo-Kantianism and a truth from hermeneutics, and they're putting them together to yield a view of social reality as exhausted by concepts. From neo-Kantianism they take the truth that in order to describe something scientifically, we have to have a concept of it. In order to describe, say, a stone, we have to have the concept 'stone', but that doesn't mean that the *concept* 'stone' and the stone are the same. And from hermeneutics they take the truth that social behaviour has this inside I was talking about and this inside is formed by our reasons. So, in order to explain what a person does, you must make reference to their reasons, their conscious intentionality. But that doesn't exhaust it – it's part of the explanation, but not the end of it. To give an example, let's imagine a sold ier who thinks, 'I'm going to fight a war, and I'm going to fight a war because my country is right'. It would be pretty naïve to stop there, one ought to talk about the complete ideological background that made him feel that he ought to fight in this war, or that made him feel that his country was right. And then, in explaining that event, you'd have to refer to everything that made that war, that stage of war, an actuality for him. I mean, clearly there's a lot outside his consciousness that one wants to evoke in explaining that particular act. I actually think that when you go into it, it's a fundamentally very simple error; social constructionists move from the fact that concepts are necessary to the idea that they're sufficient. And they are necessary, but *not* sufficient. Society is conceptual; social life is conceptual, concept-dependent, but not exhausted, not saturated by concepts. When you have a job or when you get paid for doing something, the concept of money is part of it, and the concept of a job is part of it, but if you're digging a garden, the job is also the physical digging. And what the job gives you is access to the world of commodities. The actual conceptual bit, at that level, is important, but it clearly isn't everything.

HBH: When you look back at things, how do you evaluate the impact that your two early books, *A Realist Theory of Science* and *The Possibility of Naturalism*, have made on the way science is understood and, especially, on the way that the social sciences are practiced nowadays?

RB: I think that most philosophical reflection – most critical, radical philosophical reflection – makes an impact when things are going wrong. So, I don't believe that it has made much impact on the practice of natural science, for the most part because they're basically ok. But when you turn to the social sciences, I think it's very clear that things are not ok – that they have been going wrong. And I think that critical realism has had a big impact there – at least at the level, if I can say so, of something to discuss. But I would have liked to see more real social scientific research done in a critical realist manner rather than just discussion about critical realism.

HBH: *Dialectic* (Bhaskar 1993) seems to mark a turning point in your thinking. Could you try, briefly, to explain in what direction you took your philosophy with that book?

RB: I am not quite sure that I would necessarily agree with you that it marks a turning point. Actually, I was working on questions of dialectic really for fifteen years or so before. I was coming from a position of involvement with Marxism in the late1960s and the 70s and had discovered that it was not at all clear to anyone what dialectic was. What *Dialectic*, the book, said was that in essence it is not that difficult. It is, in fact, a basic mechanism of progress in intellectual and in social affairs generally, and it involves moving to a more inclusive totality. The basic situation in science is that an inconsistency, a problem, is generated which reflects an incompleteness, something that you've left out. And this is the essence of dialectics: You assume that you're proceeding in the right direction until you have a problem, an inconsistency, a dichotomy, an antinomy, an aporia of one sort or another. When you have a problem of that sort, then you know that you've left something out, so you have to look for a deeper level of structure in science which will rectify the absence. When you've successfully rectified the absence, then you'll be able to restore consistency.

The most important thing I did in *Dialectic* was to show that absence and negativity was real. It is utterly amazing to me that Western philosophy had this prohibition on negativity. At best they thought that the realm of negativity was the realm of human beliefs, but there was nothing negative in the world, no contradictions, no inconsistencies, no absence – I mean, this is crazy! So, my real innovation there was being able to show coherently that absence was real and begin to sketch its role and the role of all concepts derivative from absence, which include all concepts of change, of becoming, of contradiction and of negativity, of correction, of learning. So, absence is absolutely crucial to social and intellectual life. Although *Dialectic* does not as such mark a turning point in my thinking, it is true that the pre-*Dialectic* articles that I wrote on dialectic did not involve, centrally, the understanding of the role of absence that *Dialectic* first formulated. It's also true that after *Dialectic* and after *Plato, Etc.* (1994), I moved into an increasing concern with issues that were published in *From East to West* (Bhaskar 2000) and the three *meta-Reality* books (Bhaskar 2002a; 2002b; 2002c), which became known, unfortunately as my spiritual turn…

HBH: Some people even call it a religious turn. What is this turn about?

RB: One way of looking at what I've been doing in critical realism and with critical realism is that I have been overcoming taboos. In my first work, *A Realist Theory of Science*, what was the taboo, what was the place where you couldn't go? That was ontology! So, in *Dialectic*, the place where you couldn't go was absence. And these were huge taboos. And what I was involved with increasingly after 1989 was the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was trying to understand not only what went wrong, but what would be needed for a better society than the kind of egoistical society we fundamentally still have today. I thought that there was a level in which our thought was too shallow. And what I was first motivated to do was look at Eastern systems of thought like Taoism, like Hinduism, like Buddhism, to see whether there was something missing in Western thought. And actually there is something missing. I talked earlier on about human beings having an inside, but our understanding of this inside, our understanding of their conceptuality, reasons and so on can be quite shallow – many people do act for shallow reasons. But what you find in Eastern thought is an emphasis on in wardnes s that you don't get in Western thought. And I became aware that there was a huge dimension, the dimension of what's within, that we never discuss. But if you are a Taoist or a Zen-Buddhist, you have to come to terms with this, and I was very fascinated by these things.

At the same time, I became aware that there was another taboo here, you saw for instance how the church had survived in Russia, and how important the church was in societies like Poland. There was a problem about explaining this. Everyone knows that religion is sort of unpopular in North-Western Europe. But actually it's a huge force in the rest of the world – it's a huge force in America. And a lot of it is misconceived religion from my point of view. But what I was aware of was that a lot of people that I knew – close friends – actually went to church; they prayed, and they performed various religious acts – I'm talking about people in England, in Western Europe. And they never could speak about it, it was a taboo. They didn't want to speak about it. It wasn't clear whether they were ashamed of it, or if they thought that it wasn't quite right, or that it was a weakness. So, I was out to break a taboo. My book *From East to West* did talk about God. And when I went to do workshop s in India, I quickly saw that people wanted to know which god, because as you know, Hindus and Muslims have been at each others' throats. Then it occurred to me, well actually I can say everything I want to say without talking about a transcendent god, at least as normally understood. So, I developed the concept of the *cosmic envelope*, which refers to that which unites all beings. You can imagine or say that you believe that outside the cosmic envelope there is a transcendent god, but you don't have to – it's not part of the philosophy of meta-Reality. And you can say that the cosmic envelope is God, but you don't have to either. You can stop at human qualities or other natural qualities – there's nothing non-natural. So, you can say that, metaphysically speaking, my position is much more parsimonious now.

HBH: In one of your most recent books, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, you paint a rather pessimistic picture of the world we live in. You write that 'we inhabit a world of duality: of unhappiness, oppression and strife', and you further write that the natural world we inhabit is 'currently hurtling into crisis and self-destruction' (Bhaskar 2002b: 8). Could you try to explain what you see as the main problems in the world and what their main causes are?

RB: I think there's a simple word which describes this state of crisis, and that word is 'alienation'. I have developed a model of *four planes of social being*, and I talk about four dimensions in terms of which we can understand any social event. These dimensions are the dimension of our material transactions with nature; the dimension of our social interaction with others; the dimension of social structure; and the dimension of the stratification of the personality. On all four levels, we're in a profound crisis, we're profoundly alienated. At the level of our *transactions with nature*, we have an ecological crisis in the form of global warming; we have pandemics like AIDS and growth of malaria. On the level of *social interactions with others*, we have a state of endemic conflict, and we have wars, and the wars, in a technological context, are always going to be endangering to all. Then, at the level of *social structure* we have problems like the Third World Countries facing economic debt; we have problems of poverty; we have problems about the nature of our democracy. Finally at the level of the *stratification of the personality* we have problems of narcissism, problems of drug addiction – you name it, you have to be specific to the societies. On each of these four levels we are profoundly alienated, and we are alienated by things that we cause to ourselves. They're not natural causes, they are causes which are mediated by human agency, as a result of which human beings are profoundly alienated – I mean split. So, we've got a world in crisis, what are we going to do about that, how do we attack it?

Well, we can say that social structures are the cause of our misery. If we take capitalism or some form of capitalism, how does this get reproduced? Well, it gets reproduced through our agency, through our actions, and that's the only place to start. Because however you're going to intervene in the social world, whatever kind of distant effect you're going to have, you're going to have to do it from here – and you're going to have to do it now. We can actually observe the way in which these social structures are carried in our daily practice. Why do we accept the cutting of wages? Because we don't want to lose our job. Why don't we want to lose our job? Because we don't want to lose face. Why do you buy that Christmas tree even though it's going to make you bankrupt? Well, because you don't want to lose face, or whatever. This is crazy! And there's no other way these structures can get reproduced. It's not to say we're at fault – it's not a question of judgment. It's just to say that we all have the capacity to change.

If you look at social revolutions, if you look at 1917, or 1989, or 1789, the extraordinary thing is that they are unpredictable: What happens in, say, 1989 is that someone drives out of Eastern Germany; then some more drive out of Eastern Germany; then everyone drives out of Eastern Germany. Why? Because everyone knew that they were living under a lie, this was not a socialist society they were building – it was not technically a capitalist society, but a society driven by the same motives in a less efficient way than capitalism was. Everyone knew this! Now, I believe that everyone knows that things like the war in Iraq are wrong; everyone knows that selfishness and greed are consuming our environment and destroying our relationship with each other, our sense of community. There will come a time when someone acts, and then we will all act. Think about the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in America: There was a black woman, Rosa Parks, who was too tired to go to her position at the end of a bus, so she sat in the white

section – that was how it all began. I mean, you can't say that black people in America didn't understand that they were living in a racially discriminatory, segregated society, and that they didn't know this was wrong. But the forces were so weighed against them that an individual action could have very little effect. But when you're all going to stand together, something is going to happen; when you all know something is wrong, something will happen – and then we have social change.

HBH: You mentioned earlier on that the social sciences have an emancipatory role to play. To finish off, I would like you to elaborate a bit on this in relation to the process of creating the sort of social change you are talking about here.

RB: All human change centrally involves changing consciousness. There is no other way in which we change, except through a change in our consciousness. And that basically means that the main way in which we're going to change is through raising our consciousness, increasing our understanding, increasing our knowledge about ourselves and the social world. This is the method of change. It is really crazy that Marxists who've paid so much attention to the potential and actual role of class consciousness – the crucial thing in historical change – don't understand the importance of consciousness. What else is there to human beings? There's our physical states, but how do we affect our physical states? Only by doing something different. How do we do something different? By thinking differently. So social science plays an absolutely enormous role in this.

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