

EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF CRITICAL REALISM FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

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1: Introduction¹

In order to carry out a meaningful exploration of the relevance of critical realism for social movement research, it is necessary to clarify how I conceive of the “research object” – social movements – and the knowledge interests that guide the research itself. Thus, in the following I present brief outlines of (a) how I conceive of ‘the movement process’ and the relationship between experience and theory in this process, and (b) social movement research as ‘insurgent architecture’.

1a): The Movement Process and the Experience-Theory Nexus

I shall start by giving a brief introduction to what I have elsewhere called ‘the movement process’ (Cox and Nilsen, 2005). Starting from an understanding of social movements not as the static institutions that are predominant throughout mainstream social movement theory, but as *‘the organization of multiple forms of materially grounded and locally generated skilled activity around a rationality expressed and organized by (would-be) hegemonic actors and against*

¹ This part of the essay draws heavily on my own previous work on social movement theory (Nilsen 2003, 2004) and my joint work with Laurence Cox (Cox and Nilsen, 2004, 2005a/b/c). However, I and I alone stand responsible for the arguments that follow.

the hegemonic projects articulated by other such actors' (Cox, 1999: 99; emphasis in original), the object of research are those processes through which the scope of collective action is widened and deepened through reflexive self-activity. I have suggested that the various phases of this process can be discerned through the conceptual prisms *local rationality*, *militant particularism*, *campaign*, and *social movement project*, which aim for the formulation of a developmental theory of the direction of the collective agency of subaltern social groups².

Local rationality refers to the various oppositional ways of being and doing – ways of being and doing that in more or less radical ways run counter to the routines and received wisdoms that characterize the hegemonic elements of what Gramsci (1998: 327) calls 'common sense' – that people develop in their attempt to cope with experiences of frustrations, constraints and threats of and to their needs. *Militant particularisms* are those forms of struggle that erupt when local rationalities are made more unitary and coherent as subaltern social groups deploy specific skills and knowledges in open confrontation with a dominant social group, in a particular place and at a particular time, in a particular conflict over a particular issue³. *Campaigns* are those forms of movement activity that emerge as militant particularisms communicate with and form links with each other, develop common strategies and identities across socio-spatial boundaries – i.e. the organization of a range of local responses to specific situations in ways that connect people across multiple such situations so as to challenge the construction of those situations. *Social movement projects* emerge from the development of a politics which connects campaigns with what from a local or situated perspective is seen as diverse origins around a challenge to the way situations are constructed in general. Social movement projects are thus defined by the following features: (a) they pose challenges to the social totality which (b) aim to control the self-production of society and (c) possess or are striving to develop the capacity for the kind of hegemony – i.e.

² Whereas I define these concepts briefly in the following paragraph, I must refer the reader to Cox and Nilsen (2005) for a more elaborate discussion. See also Cox (1999) for the original definition of local rationality, campaign, and social movement project.

³ The concept 'militant particularism' was coined by Raymond Williams (1989: 249) and has later been developed by David Harvey (1996, 2000).

giving direction to the skilled activity of different subaltern social groups – that would render (b) and thus (a) possible⁴.

As has been asserted by Eyerman and Jamison (1991) and Barker and Cox (2002), social movement processes are fundamentally animated by the production of knowledge. In the present approach, the point of departure is the simple assumption that people turn to activism in and through social movements because they find that something is not right in the world, and more specifically that it cannot be fixed within the normal “channels”. To become an activist, then, is to learn that the system does not “work” as it claims, and to move towards the understanding that to achieve change people need to organize and create pressure. The turn to activism and the building of social movements, then, is essentially moored in *experience*. Experience is here understood as the practical and tacit knowledge that we as human beings generate about the material (social and non-human) world, through our encounters with and interaction with this material world. This practical-tacit knowledge is thus ‘an attribute of individuals by reason of their social character, their participation, active or passive, in relations with others within inherited structures’ (Wainwright 1994: 107). Why highlight experience? Because it constitutes *the stuff that consciousness starts from*; it informs our consciousness of the world out there and our place in it, and on the basis of this perception we choose to act – or not to act – in certain ways: ‘human consciousness [is] produced by creative human beings trying to understand their existence so that they can purposefully choose how to better organize their efforts to fulfil their potentials. And the understanding of experience is mediated by beliefs, which rationalize and make sense of experience’ (Cole 1999: 250-51). Experience, then, is that unruly body of half-submerged knowledge that mediates between objectively existing conditions and social consciousness of these conditions: ‘What we mean is that changes take place within social being, which gives rise to changed *experience*: and this experience is *determining* in the sense that it exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness’ (Thompson 1995: 9 – 10).

⁴ The sequence I suggest is of course a logical one, but not necessarily a chronological one in all cases. The abstraction from militant particularism to social movement project is not a foregone conclusion or a necessary trajectory, but an inherent potentiality of movement processes, whose realisation is contingent upon how actual struggles work themselves out. Hence, when I suggest that movements can develop from local rationalities and militant particularisms, to campaigns, and ultimately to social movement projects, I am initially suggesting these as logical - as opposed to teleological - categories.

A crucial feature of experience is that it is gained by people situated in a determinate time-space location, and hence also circumscribed in the sense that it is *concrete*, *particular*, and *local*. By *concrete*, I mean that experience is drawn from what Ollman (1993: 24) refers to as ‘the world as it presents itself to us’ or ‘the world in which we live, in all its complexity’. By *particular*, I mean that experience is interpreted through ‘loci of consciousness formation’ (Harvey, 1985: 252) based on notions, concepts and symbols drawn from cultural and cognitive traditions that is particular to a given space, time and social group. By *local* I mean the – concrete and particular, as it were – social and geographical place in which people reside (Harvey, 1996: 261-264, Chapter 11).

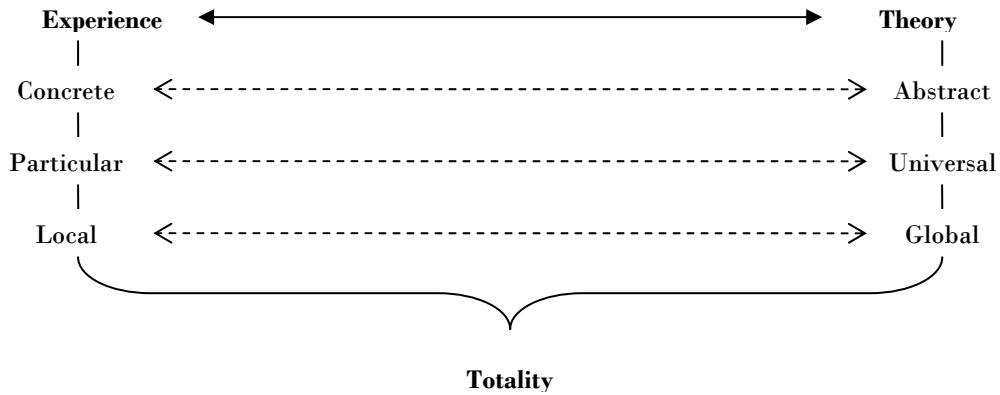
In responding to the experience of problems, obstacles, challenges and frustrations, activists want to do so in as adequate a way as possible. Hence movement participants seek to develop sets of practices that makes it possible to tackle problems, overcome obstacles, resolve frustrations and respond to challenges successfully. In order to do so, activists need to reflect on their (concrete, particular, local) experience and develop a more thorough understanding of it. In doing this, they are in fact developing theoretical knowledge in the sense that what emerges from their reflections is a knowledge which is consciously developed out of experience, which has been worked through using experience as a touchstone, which has become explicit and articulate, and which has been brought to a level where it can be generalized. Activists develop theory on the basis of their practical knowledge interest in understanding our experience in more adequate ways: that is, it stems from an urge to make sense of our experience so as to develop new practices in response to our experience of constraints and frustrations⁵.

If we want to figure out what is happening to us, why it is happening, and what to do about it we need to *go beyond* the immediacy and situatedness of experience. If this immediacy and situatedness is defined by forms of knowledge that are concrete, particular, and local, the knowledge that is forged through the efforts to go beyond this immediacy and situatedness is characterized by being – or containing intimations of being – *abstract*, *universal*, and *global*. By *abstract* I mean the result of the intellectual process of abstraction

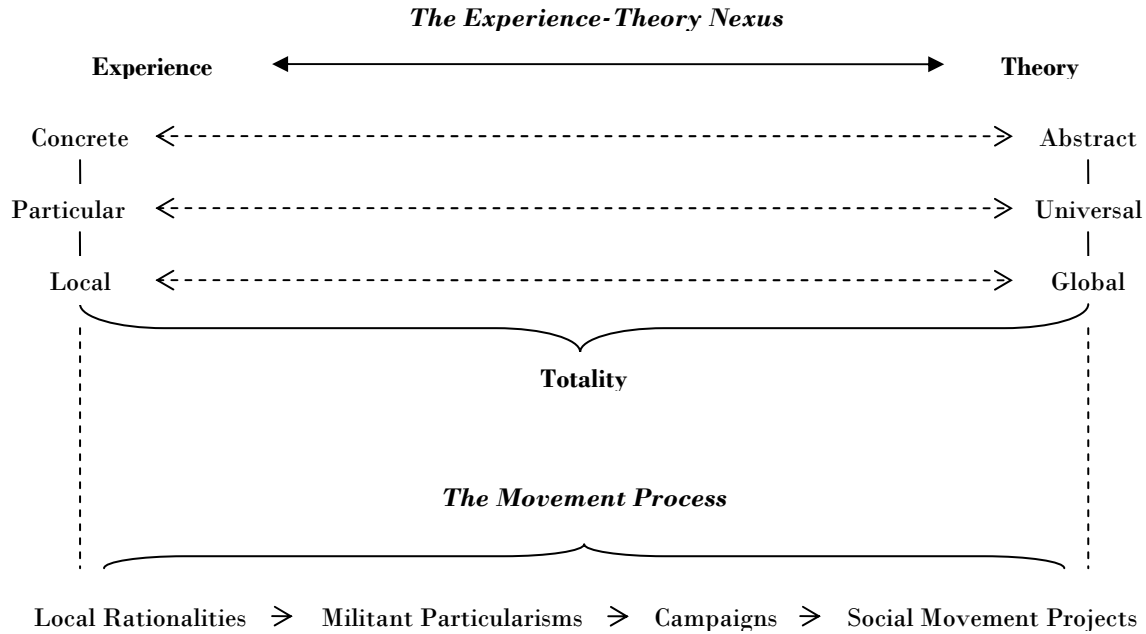
⁵ This makes it clear why social movements are so commonly generators of theory: if people are satisfied with their experience, or at least have not arrived at the point of seeing it as highly problematic, they are unlikely to understand themselves as having any interest in changing their understanding of the world.

through which the real world is broken ‘down into the mental units with which we think about it’ and which eventually yields the abstract as ‘a reconstituted and now understood whole present in the mind’ (Ollman, 1993: 24). By *universal* I mean the interpretation of experience through loci of consciousness formation based on notions, concepts and symbols that are widely shared across societal and cultural boundaries (see Harvey, 1996 and 2000). By *global* I mean the – abstract and universal, as it were – social and geographical space beyond state territories (see Robinson, 2004; Sklair, 2004; Scholte; 2003). It is this exercise of “going beyond” immediate surfaces and appearances which arguably constitutes the defining feature of theory. “Going beyond” in this case means an effort to understand the wider ramifications of, and underlying processes that give rise to, whatever it is that we experience as problematic and frustrating in our everyday lives: ‘Theory attempts to understand things not apparent on the surface, to find the inner connections ... And the point of all this is to understand the real world – in order to change it’ (Lebowitz 2003: 20).

So far, it has been argued that experience is the starting point of activism, that it is a form of practical and tacit knowledge about the world generated through our being and acting in the world, and that this knowledge is defined by being concrete, particular, and local in character. Theory, on the other hand, is the knowledge that emerges from attempts to go beyond experience in order to develop more adequate forms of activism, and this knowledge is defined by being abstract, universal, and global in character. This being said, experience and theory – and the respective traits by which they are defined – should not be viewed in a dualist perspective as binary oppositions, but in a dialectical way as opposites in unity. The experience-theory nexus is dialectical one where ‘two opposed perspectives and forces [are] united in one contradictory totality’ (Cleaver, 2000: 141), where totality refers to ‘the insistence that the various seemingly separate elements of which the world is composed are in fact related to each other’ (Rees, 1998: 5), which is in turn an insistence predicated upon the assumptions of ‘the philosophy of internal relations’ where it is assumed ‘that the relations that come together to make up the whole get expressed in what are taken to be its parts’ and where ‘[e]ach part is viewed as incorporating in what it is all its relations with other parts up to and including everything that comes into the whole’ (Ollman, 1993: 35). Hence, the experience-theory nexus can be diagrammatically represented as follows:

The Experience-Theory Nexus

As a movement process unfolds, and as activists seeks to “go beyond”, I would argue that what takes place is a process of transcendence of or move: from the concrete experiences of a given lifeworld towards an more abstract understanding of the workings of a social organization of human practice; from particular interpretations of these experiences to more universal interpretations – and hence also a move from a politics of particularity towards a politics of universality; and a transcendence of or move from the local towards the global in the form of social movement projects that challenge the social totality. The homologous relationship between the movement process and the experience-theory nexus can be expressed diagrammatically as follows:



1b): Social Movement Research as Insurgent Architecture

Developing social movement practices and perspectives from militant particularisms towards more universal political projects entails “going beyond” the concrete, the particular, and the local. Anchored in the assumption that local conflicts will tend to represent specific mediations of global conflictual processes, the development of practices and perspectives for activism entails an interrogation of the experience that has engendered this militant particularism in the first place, so as to unearth the dimensions of conflict that point towards a more universal politics. This is what Harvey refers to as “the labour of translation” and “abstraction”⁶:

The movement from particularity to universality entails a “translation” from the concrete to the abstract. Since a violence attaches to abstraction, a tension always exists between particularity and universality in politics. This can be viewed either as a creative tension or, more often, as a destructive and immobilizing force in which inflexible mediating institutions

⁶ There is no room here to go into the debate over the notion of ‘translation’, but see Harvey (2000) and Calhoun (1995: Chapters 2 and 3) for discussions of various approaches.

.... claim rights over individuals and communities in the name of some universal principle (Harvey 2000: 242)

The daunting task of engaging in the labour of translation and abstraction in order to build universalisms out of particularisms is referred to by Harvey as ‘insurgent architecture’: ‘The insurgent architect with a lust for transformative action must be able to translate political aspirations across the incredible variety and heterogeneity of socio-ecological and political-economic conditions. He or she must also be able to relate different discursive constructions and representations of the world ... He or she must confront the conditions of and prospects for uneven geographical developments. The skills of translation become crucial here’ (Harvey 2000: 244). The compulsion towards insurgent architecture arises from this situation: ‘without translation, collective forms of action become impossible. All potential for an alternative politics disappears’ (Harvey 2000: 245).

This is very much what activists engage in when they build campaigns and develop social movement projects. However, it could also be a central aspiration and fundamental knowledge interest in social movement research. As Barker and Cox (2002: 7) have pointed out, there is a schism dividing academic theorizing about social movements and activist theorizing for and within social movements. The former is dominated by a drive towards providing “explanations” of the “normal”, “scientific” type, and the debates within the discipline centre around the type of explanations required, and the theory it generates, is thus of a contemplative nature. Social movements are defined as objects of study to be subjected to observation, description and explanation; they are not conceived of as active processes with which people, engage, experience and transform (ibid.: 4, 5). The latter centres not on providing general scientific explanations, but on generating ‘case propositions of a very definite and practical nature’ (ibid.: 4), that is, movement theorizing produces practical and concrete proposals for action in a given, conflictual setting. Social movement practice is thus characterised by a form of knowledge produced in an attempt to answer questions emanating from an active engagement with a particular context, be it other movements or more generally the social world ‘within which those movements move’ (ibid.: 6).

By positing insurgent architecture as a knowledge interest in social movement research this schism might be transcended. For social movement research this would entail

putting the focus of attention of the movement process and thus on activists' attempts to "join the dots" between the particular struggles they are directly involved in and the totality in which these struggles are embedded, and the development of practices and ideas that can match the joining of the dots. In short, social movement research as insurgent architecture would seek to develop theoretical knowledge that can enhance activists' capacity for transcending militant particularisms, build campaigns, and develop social movement projects⁷. This would, for instance, entail critical participation in attempts to unearth how specific conflicts in particular locales are related to and embedded in a larger social totality, and critical participation in attempts to articulate political imaginaries, agendas, and strategies that embed particular political claims in universal political claims etc. In the remainder of the essay, I shall explore the relevance of some aspects of critical realism for such an undertaking.

⁷ This knowledge interest is of course informed by Touraine's (1981) notion of 'sociological intervention', without assuming that this approach is unproblematic (see XXXXX for critiques and critical applications of the methodology).

2: Exploring the Relevance of Critical Realism for Social Movement Research

In this part of the essay I first outline the basics of critical realism as a general ontology and the applicability of this ontology to the social and human sciences and then, secondly, narrow the focus to some aspects of critical realism that seems particularly relevant for a social movement research motivated by the knowledge interest mapped out above. I would like to stress that this is an exploratory essay which focuses on the relevance of critical realism to a specific kind of research; it is not an essay on critical realism as such. Hence I shall neither venture into the relationship between critical realism and those philosophical orientations it is directed against – i.e. empiricism and idealism⁸ – nor the contested terrain of the relationship between critical realism and Marxism⁹. Moreover, while critical realism has a range of exponents (and a range of orientations and internal disputes)¹⁰, I have chosen to rely on Collier's (1994) introduction to Roy Bhaskar's work, along with some texts by Bhaskar, and some supplementary secondary texts where these are relevant.

2a): “The ABC” of Critical Realism: Transcendental Realism and Critical Naturalism

Following Collier's (1994: xi) mapping of Bhaskar's critical realism, this part of the essay presents an outline of ‘*transcendental realism*’ – i.e. ‘the general ontology which Bhaskar derives from his analysis of scientific practices’ – and ‘critical naturalism – i.e. ‘his development of the possible implications of transcendental realism for the human sciences’.

⁸ See Collier (1994: Chapter 3) for an exposition; see Bhaskar (1991) for his substantial polemic against Rorty; see XXXX on the relationship between critical realism and postmodernism/poststructuralism.

⁹ See Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (n.d.) for an exposition of three different views on the relationship between critical realism and Marxism; see Roberts (n.d.) and Magill (n.d) for rejections of the claim that critical realism is a relevant ontology for Marxist theory; see Joseph (n.d.) and Ehrbar (2000) for claims to the contrary.

¹⁰ See the discussion between Harré and Bhaskar (2000) as an example of these variations and disputes; the Website for Critical Realism is in itself an illustration of the internal heterogeneity of critical realism.

“Transcendental Realism”

A strong realism starts from four basic knowledge claims: (i) *objectivity*: that which is known would be real regardless of whether it is known or not; (ii) *fallibility*: a claim about what is real can always be refuted by further information; (iii) *transphenomenality*: knowledge is not restricted to that which appears, but can also be about underlying structures which are of a more enduring character than appearances and which generate and/or render these appearances possible; (iv) *counter-phenomenality*: knowledge of underlying structures is not just defined by the fact that it goes beyond, or explains, appearances, but by the fact that it can contradict appearances (Collier, 1994: 6-7).

So much for ‘strong’ or ‘depth’ realism – what about ‘transcendental realism’? Philosophical endeavours can illuminate the workings of practices through transcendental arguments, i.e. arguments which set out with the question “what must be true for X to be possible?” Such questions necessarily entail a move from something that is “actual” towards something more fundamental in which the possibility of that which is actual is grounded. Transcendental arguments, then, entail a transcendence of ‘a phenomenon that occurs’ and a move in the direction of unearthing ‘a structure that endures’ (Collier, 1994: 20)¹¹. The distinction between occurring phenomena and enduring structures implies a three-pronged conception of that which exists as being defined by structured depth. The three prongs are: the distinction between ‘the real’, ‘the actual’, and ‘the empirical’; an ‘emergence theory’ of science; and a distinction between the transitive and intransitive objects of science.

Bhaskar makes a distinction between of the three domains of ‘the real’, ‘the actual’, and ‘the empirical’ as discrete levels of reality. The distinction can be represented as follows:

¹¹ The lineage of transcendental arguments can be traced to Kant’s concern with the possibility of the empirical world – a possibility which he attributed to the imposition of knowable forms of temporality and spatiality by the perceiving subject upon the perceived object in the act of cognition. Bhaskar’s fundamental concerns and questions parallel those of Kant, but also diverge in three important ways. I shall not venture into an exploration of this here, but see Collier, 1994: 20-29 for a discussion.

	The Real	The Actual	The Empirical
Mechanism	X		
Events	X	X	
Experiences	X	X	X

(Adapted from Bhaskar, 1978: 13/Collier, 1994: 44)

The first level – *the empirical* – is constituted by that which is experienced by perceiving subjects; the second level – *the actual* – is constituted by events which are logically prior to experiences¹². However, transcendental realism assumes that ‘events are caused by the powers of things – powers that exist even when they are not causing events’ and this assumption necessitates the recognition of ‘a third level of reality’, namely *the real* (Collier, 1994: 42). The relationship between the levels can be explained as follows: The real is constituted by those mechanisms that generate the series of events that constitute the actual, whereas the empirical, in turn, consists of experiences of certain events. These layers of reality are interrelated, but not reducible to each other (ibid.: 44).

Scientific investigation of the interrelated layers and strata of reality, Bhaskar argues, assumes the form of a ‘vertical’ explanatory approach where an ordered sequence of mechanisms is studied in terms of how the lower sequence – the phenomena that occur – explain the higher sequence – the structures that endure – without replacing the higher sequence or reducing the higher sequence to the lower sequence (Collier, 1994: 48). A realist approach to science assumes that science is in fact about something that exists independently of the scientific endeavour and, moreover, that the knowledge that science produces at any point in time is fallible. This leads to a distinction between the two-fold nature of the object

¹² In empiricism, this logical priority would constitute a causal relationship, where events are perceived as the causes of our experiences.

of science: on the one hand, science has a *'transitive object'*, which consists of scientific theories and attempts to transform and improve these theories, and, on the other hand, an *'intransitive object'*, which is the world that exists independently of scientific activity (ibid.: 51).

"Critical Naturalism"

The implications of transcendental realism for the social and human sciences are first and foremost rooted in the positing of the ontological as prior to the epistemological: '... knowledge exists as an aspect of our being in the world, and before we can know how we know, we need to have some idea how we interact with that world in such a way as to acquire knowledge of it' (Collier, 1994: 137). The ontological orientation is thus towards an inquiry into 'the properties that societies possess' while the epistemological orientation is towards an engagement with 'how these properties make them possible objects of knowledge for us' (ibid.: 137). Hence, it is necessary to develop or acquire an idea of what societies and people actually are, and this can be discerned from the implicit knowledge we possess by virtue of being people and thus social beings. The task of transcendental realism is to render this 'connatural knowledge' explicit (ibid.: 137-8).

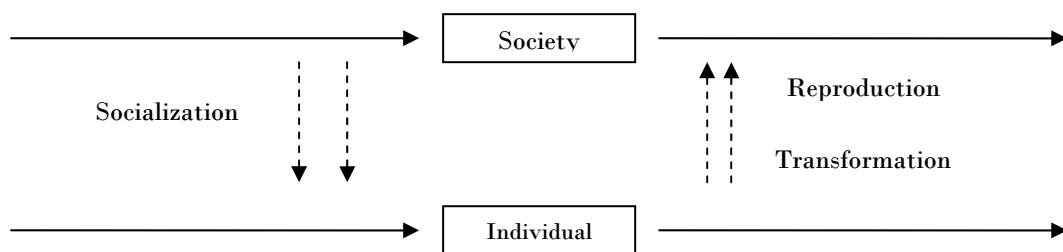
The first step in this direction is the development of a social ontology which is referred to as 'the relational conception of society' [henceforth RCS] (Collier, 1994: 138-141). In opposition to both methodological individualism and collectivism, RCS draws on the notion of the recognition of real complex wholes with emergent powers that defines the notion of the stratification of nature and focuses on the ever-present relations between individuals and groups and with the relations between these relations:

Our social being is constituted by relations and our social acts presuppose them. Yet relations and the related individuals may be ontologically independent ... Relations presuppose other relations, relations are related to other relations. The lattice-work of relations constitutes the structure of 'society' (ibid.: 140-1).

It is these relations that form the subject matter of the social sciences. The lattice-work of relations that constitute the structure of society can be understood as those mechanisms –

‘the real’ – which generate the events – ‘the actual’ – which are in turn the stuff that people’s experiences – ‘the empirical’ – are made of. The task of social science, then, revolves around investigations of the social phenomena that occur and that people experience and how they can be explained in terms of – but not reduced to – the social structures that endure.

The nature of the relationship between society/structure and individual/agency needs to be further specified. Bhaskar proposes ‘the transformational model of social activity’ [henceforth TMSA] for grappling with the task of understanding the relationship between structure and agency (Collier, 1994: 141-151). TMSA can be represented with the following figure:



(Adapted from Collier, 1994: 145)

What distinguishes TMSA from the humanist assertion that societies only exist as the outcome of human agency, the structuralist assertion that human action presupposes the existence of society, and the assertion that the social process is an interaction between society and people is the argument that we should not only distinguish between human practice and social structure, but between two aspects of both structure and agency (ibid.: 145). Bhaskar puts it as follows:

Society is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is, *conscious production*, and (normally unconscious) *reproduction* of the conditions of production, that is society. One could refer to the former as the *duality of structure*, and the latter as the *duality of praxis* (cited in Collier, 1994: 145-6).

Hence Bhaskar proposes ‘an ontological hiatus between society and people’ (cited in Collier, 1994: 147) which entails that ‘people are not relations’ and, vice versa, that ‘societies are not

conscious agents' (Collier, 1994: 147)¹³. The crucial logical conclusion that follows from this is a distinction between 'the properties possessed by social forms' and '[the properties] possessed by the individuals upon whose activity they depend' (Bhaskar, cited in Collier, 1994: 147). Hence:

... people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to sustain the capitalist economy. Yet it is nevertheless the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is also a necessary condition for, their activity. Moreover, when social forms change, the explanation will not normally lie in the desires of agents to change them that way, though as a very important theoretical and political limit, it *may* do so (Bhaskar, cited in Collier, 1994: 147).

The TMSA thus follows the logic of the RCS in that allows us to question people's views of the reasons why they do what they do and what is the outcome of what they do in terms of underlying structural mechanisms that condition their actions and the way in which these actions contribute to the reproduction of those underlying structural mechanisms:

On this transformational and relational conception, society is a skilled accomplishment of active agents. But the social world may be opaque to the social agents upon whose activity it depends in four respects, in that these activities may depend on or involve (a) unacknowledged conditions, (b) unintended consequences, (c) the exercise of tacit skills, and/or unconscious motivation. Accordingly, the task of the social sciences is to describe what social processes ... must be going on for a Stock Exchange Crash or some other manifest phenomenon to be possible (Bhaskar, 1989: 4).

To sum up, social sciences are characterized by a three-pronged characteristic: (i) they are explanatory sciences; (ii) they are sciences without closure; (iii) they are sciences with hermeneutic premises (ibid.: 161). The methodology that Bhaskar envisions for the social sciences is one which – contra positivism and hermeneutics – revolves around constructing

¹³ For Bhaskar – and Collier – this entails a difference in the subject matters of the social sciences, posited as the explanation of social structures, and psychology, posited as the explanations of personal motivations, purposes, desires and beliefs (see Collier, 1994: 146).

transcendental arguments from the basis of the received wisdoms of social practice in an attempt to develop knowledge about ‘the real’ social structures that conditions these practices and are in turn reproduced by them¹⁴. As the ensuing discussion will show, the theoretical limit that Bhaskar proposes, namely that social change may indeed follow from people’s conscious actions is fundamentally important for the relevance of critical realism for social movement research.

2b): Some Aspects of Critical Realism and their Relevance for Social Movement Research

My argument for the relevance of critical realism for social movement research in the form of insurgent architecture basically consists of a two-pronged proposition: there is a homologous relationship between the knowledge that activists engender as they seek to “go beyond” their immediate experience and the knowledge that critical realism seeks to advance through the construction of transcendental arguments that interrogate the causal interrelationship between the empirical, the actual, and the real; the knowledge created through “going beyond” experience and interrogating how the empirical and the actual are rooted in the real are forms of knowledge that can underpin social movement projects and the struggle over historicity.

The homologous relationship between the knowledge generated by “going beyond” experience and interrogating the relationship of the empirical and the actual to the real can perhaps best be explained by starting from Piven and Cloward’s seminal observation:

... people experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes, and it is the concrete experiences that mould their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets. Workers experience the factory,

¹⁴ For Bhaskar, social science should combine the explanatory and the interpretative by starting its endeavour from agents’ conceptions of social practices, but seek to move beyond these conceptions – and possibly refute them – through an investigation of underlying structural causality which might contradict these conceptions. The integration of critical realism and critical hermeneutics has been explored in depth by Outhwaite (1987) but evades the parameters of this essay.

the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foremen, the spies, the guards, the owner, and the pay check. They do not experience monopoly capitalism (1977: 20).

A critical realist approach to the study of social movements would, I submit, take its point of departure in workers' experience of the factory¹⁵, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foremen, the spies, the guards, the owner and the pay check – recall here the hermeneutic premises of critical naturalism – but it would not be content with this. It would, rather, join hands with those activists and militants who not only seek to challenge, say, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line and the guards and the owner but who also seek to “go beyond” these experiences and discover just why it is that they are experienced as frustrations; indeed, a critical realist approach to the study of social movements would ostensibly seek to explain how these experiences – i.e. the empirical – are ultimately rooted in – but not reducible to – the workings of monopoly capitalism – i.e. the real¹⁶.

Wainwright (1994) has provided an interesting account of such a process. Experiential knowledge, her argument goes, is essentially practical, tacit knowledge. However, limited though it is by the particular situatedness or positioning of the “knower” in question, it still constitutes a valid source of insights into the workings of the social world with all its contradictions and constraints. The experiential knowledge that propels people to activism, then, should be conceived of as being a valid form of knowledge ‘not simply as a source of empirical instances, or falsifications of a general law; but as clues, signposts and stimuli to deeper understanding and theoretical innovation’ (ibid.: 67).

Experience, rather than simply yielding facts which confirm or falsify general laws, provides clues to underlying structures and relationships which are not observable other than through the particular phenomena or events that they produce (ibid.: 7).

More specifically, if this practical, experiential knowledge – ‘everyday understandings’ (ibid.: 6) – is socialized, i.e. shared between actors, and combined with and interrogated through

¹⁵ See Scott (1985) for a call to a phenomenological study of class, class consciousness, and class struggle.

¹⁶ This paragraph is very much inspired by Rick Fantasia's (1988) remarkable study of class consciousness among American workers.

theoretical knowledge, the outcome of the process might be more adequate maps by which to chart out a course on the terrain of resistance:

Much of [social movement practice] indicates a belief in the possibility, through social organisation, of extending and combining fragmented knowledge to gain not 'a complete picture', but rather a better understanding of the social mechanisms at work, so as to direct their efforts in order that their intentions might be more efficiently fulfilled (ibid.: 107-8).

Social movement research guided by the knowledge interest of insurgent architecture and the critical realist insistence on the possibility of uncovering the real, I submit, may make valuable contributions to such movement practice.

The production of knowledge animates all phases of a movement process – from militant particularisms to social movement projects. However, the kind of knowledge which prevails in militant particularisms and campaigns are typically geared towards the amelioration of states of affairs. For instance, while the development of campaigns entails the transcendence of the boundaries of militant particularism, the generalization of and abstraction from local struggles, and the development of collective identities that cut across socio-spatial divides, they are still limited forms of movement activity in that they do not address the issue of the social totality. Campaigns typically construct themselves as field specific in the sense that the organization of local struggles against waste incinerators or hospital closures, for example, limits itself to a questioning of a particular kind of environmental or health policy. They do not automatically, or for all their participants, bring into question the larger question of the social totality - the particular social organization of human practice - within which such field-specific policies are fostered and implemented; this only happens with the development of social movement projects.

The second prong of my argument is thus as follows: social movement research moored in critical realist assumptions is particularly apt for developing knowledge which can contribute to the development of social movement projects in that critical realism deliberately targets structures as its object of knowledge and therefore has the potential to generate knowledge about how structures can be transformed. If the powers of societies or institutions are generated and constrained by inner structures, there are three questions that would define the critical realist approach to the study of societies or institutions: (i) what sort

of things can be done and what sort of things cannot be done given the character of the extant structures?; (ii) if the structures had been different, would this have rendered possible the doing of other things?; (iii) how can one structure be transformed into another (Collier, 1994: 10). Thus Bhaskar argues:

All social structures ... depend upon or presuppose social relations ... The relations into which people enter pre-exist the individuals who enter into them and whose activity reproduces or transforms them; so they are themselves structures. And so it is to these structures of social relations that realism directs our attention – both as the explanatory key to understanding social events and trends and as the focus of social activity aimed at the self-emancipation of the exploited and oppressed (cited in Collier, 1994: 10).

Hence, in a critical realist approach it is possible to make the distinction between ‘the amelioration of states of affairs’ and ‘the transformation of structures’ as the objective of political activity, with the former being the domain of the social movement pro.

This contention can be elaborated by drawing on Touraine, who argues as follows:

The presence of a social movement must ... be revealed through what is a factor favourable to intervention, through questioning the militants as to the purpose of their struggle and through seeking profound commitment beyond the specific conditions of a particular battle ... In analyzing the nature of a struggle, intervention reveals to the actors their utmost capacity for historical action, thus helping them to raise the project level of the movement. Such is its function: knowledge and action associated (1981: 156, 216).

Behind the somewhat convoluted language there seems to be a notion of the task of social movement research as revolving around bringing about a realisation of the role social movements can play in terms of generating historical development and social change through a fundamental rearrangement of the social organisation of human practice. Laurence Cox writes:

[Touraine’s approach] is trying to identify both the local rationalities which are at the root of a movement’s support and the directions in which those rationalities are articulated, theoretically

and practically. In other words it is an attempt to extend the logic implicit in participants' skilled activity to a more comprehensive standpoint (1998: 7).

As Cox (*ibid.*: 8) notes, a critical realist methodology which assumes that 'there are underlying patterns to the immediately discoverable empirical world, and that these are at least indirectly knowable' is a necessary condition for such a project.

One last point needs to be made. One could quite easily imagine that the critical realist approach to social movement research sketched out above can be viewed as being marred by an elitist or even totalitarian impulse. Doesn't the above argument reflect an attitude of letting the high priests of critical realism, wielding the sceptre of privileged access to 'the real', loose on the imperfect world of activists, and then, after they have determined the nature of the enduring structure that causes the occurring phenomena that people react to, and inferred from this the narrow path that needs to be followed to transform this structure, having the activists follow them like obedient disciples? Well, no. There are three reasons why this argument does not hold up. Firstly, critical realism is not marked primarily by a belief in scientific knowledge where the hubris of certainty and infallibility strike the dominant chord. On the contrary, scientific knowledge – the transitive object of science – is ostensibly posited as being fallible and the scientific endeavour is not about attaining closure but about a perennial process of digging deeper, in turn rooted in the humility of the admitted fallibility. Secondly, as I hope has been made clear in the above argument, the relationship between activist attempts to "go beyond" and critical realist attempts to discern 'the real' is not one of qualitative difference, but of homologous affinity, which, hopefully, can constitute the basis for developing and strengthening the capacity of activists to build social movement projects. Thirdly, the knowledge interest which motivates the kind of critical realist movement research outlined in this essay – insurgent architecture – presupposes solidarity and participation – as opposed to superiority and subordination – between "researcher" (academic) and "researched" (activist). Indeed, it seeks to breach this divide as such; the insurgent architect can be an activist as well as an academic, if not both at once. However, this argument moves into the territory of research ethics and

methodology, and – in respect of the sanctity of academic boundaries – will have to be explored elsewhere¹⁷.

(Word count: 5.982)

¹⁷ But see Routledge (XXXX) and Cox (1998, 1999) for interesting perspectives on ethics in social movement research.

