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Charging at Red Flags? Blind Spots in Geoff Hodgson's 'Promised Land'

Notwithstanding its scandalised tone, Geoff Hodgson's 'Marching to the promised land?' has, I believe, performed critical realists a service in raising for public discussion the important issue of the relation between philosophical critical realism and politics.¹ While I do not shrink, in what follows, from astringent criticism of Geoff's polemics, I very much hope that a constructive discussion of the issues he has so far neglected ensues, and that as a consequence critical realists themselves confront the issue of dialecticisation more squarely. For Geoff's arguments, while in some respects valid for critical realism prior to its dialectical development (as Andrew Collier has, in effect, conceded), are vitiated by failure to consider it *in* its dialectical development.

Intellectual scotomata

This is no small matter. Dialectical development was undertaken by Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism, in *Dialectic: the Pulse of Freedom* (1993), widely regarded as his magnum opus. Geoff includes it in his bibliography and refers to it twice in the text of his article, claiming, *inter alia*, familiarity with 'much of the content'. Taking him at his word, that he has indeed read much of it, he has either failed to comprehend it, or comprehended but ignored its main arguments relevant to his own. Neglect of its arguments in an article, the avowed aim of which is 'to show that the claimed [policy] implications of critical realism do not follow from its philosophy' (2), by an author so liberal with (and in) his accusations of scholarly irresponsibility, unworthiness and dilettantism on the part of Bhaskar (and Andrew Collier) is, on the face of it, a massive performative contradiction.² It is so at variance with Geoff's usual scholarly practice that one can only surmise that he has been intellectually blind-spotted by the Bhaskarian 'red flag' he himself adduces.

Granted (and patently), critical realism as Geoff understands it is by no means entirely the same as critical realism in its dialectical development. But why stop short of a *complete* demolition job in the matter of alleged political connotations? It is like trying to refute the practical implications of Hegel's thought without paying attention to the *Phenomenology*, or of Marx's without *Capital*, or of Keynes' without the *General Theory*. To be sure, Geoff is by no means alone in this. For the dialectical counterpart of his article, by an author coming from the opposite direction – that critical realism is *not* Marxist or socialist *enough* – the reader may consult Roberts (1999). Roberts, however, expressly (though not sensibly) excludes 'Bhaskar's mighty *Dialectic*' from consideration, whereas Geoff clearly wants his readers to believe that he has

included it, explicitly referring to 'the claimed link between critical realism and a "eudaimonistic" society' elaborated in *Dialectic*. (2). Geoff's concept 'critical realism' is, therefore, it seems, *intended* to embrace what some would refer to as 'dialectical critical realism'.³ In reality it does no such thing.

Thus, in assessing the theory of explanatory critique, Geoff claims that 'critical realism offers little detailed guidance' (3) on criteria for distinguishing true from false beliefs. But a very complex, stratified theory of truth is elaborated in *Dialectic* (214-24, *et passim*). Again, Geoff is not alone in making such claims. At the 1999 critical realist conference, one participant told me that critical realism 'has no theory of truth'. However, he freely admitted ignorance of *Dialectic*, and undertook to correct it. What he and Geoff will make of the theory when they consult it is another matter; it is admittedly controversial, even within critical realism, but that is not the issue here.

Acceptance of 'Hume's law'

Geoff's next sentence suggests that it is by no means only *Dialectic* that he has failed to come to grips with:

Furthermore, we are given *no clue* as to how one could 'explain' the basis or origin of false beliefs in social institutions, or how such institutions can 'cause' false beliefs. (3, emphasis added).

But Bhaskar's very first work in the philosophy of social science, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979), elaborates detailed argument concerning how this can be, and elaboration and refinement by himself and others has been in train ever since.⁴ This is no small matter because, as I understand him, Geoff uses this 'argument' to reject the critical realist notion that values are not science-free. More surprisingly, he clearly subscribes to the related claim, very widely regarded as discredited, that facts are value-free, such that we have (or should have) science and scholarship in one compartment, and values, politics and ideology in another, each completely sealed off to prevent bad scientists from 'sneaking' the latter into the former. (9). It is this ill supported acceptance of 'Hume's law' that fuels Geoff's outrage at the thought that critical realism might have practical implications and that Bhaskar and Collier do not keep their 'Marxist ideology' separate from their 'philosophy' and 'scholarship'. Critical realism, he concludes, is 'not merely ... a philosophical discourse, but ... a sociological and political phenomenon'. (6). It is indeed. But the same holds true, critical realism undertakes to show, of any philosophical discourse. (Bhaskar 1994). Critical realism is however

distinctive in claiming, and arguing in detail, that ‘politics need not vitiate [social] science, and [social] science (guided by philosophical underlabouring) can determine the cast of our politics.’ (Hartwig & Sharp 1999, 21).

Marx’s critical realism

Geoff’s acceptance of ‘Hume’s law’ issues in a curious understanding of the relationship between, on the one hand, the general conceptual schema or philosophical ontology indicating the contours of the world that critical realist philosophy seeks to provide and, on the other, specific (emancipatory) social scientific paradigms or research programmes such as Marxism. The philosophical ontology is *intended* to underpin and inform such programmes,⁵ and the importance of research on the basis of an explicit ontology is *argued* at length, yet Geoff *assumes* that they should be kept separate. Indeed, the elaboration of philosophical critical realism has gone hand in hand with a reassessment of the Marxism of the mature Marx as critical realist, albeit by no means exempt from criticism (see especially Bhaskar 1993); that is to say, the largely unelaborated (by Marx) philosophical ontology informing the substantive work of the mature Marx is argued to be critical realist in its essentials. Again, Geoff seems unaware of this, notwithstanding that the reassessment, while largely undertaken in *Dialectic*, is highlighted in Bhaskar’s ‘General Introduction’ to *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (1998, *xvi*; see also Bhaskar & Norrie 1998, 561). Only thus (unless explicit connection can run *one way only*) could he write

Critical realists are critical of capitalism, but they have no developed critique of capitalism that connects explicitly with critical realism itself. (7).

Or

There is nothing in critical realism to tell us how to rank the causal powers of different types of social structure. It is his Marxism that does this ranking for Andrew [Collier], not his critical realism. (13).

What a splendidly split fellow Andrew Collier must be! – This is not in any way to suggest, however, as Geoff seems to think Bhaskar and Collier think, that Marxism is the only possible (emancipatory) research programme, or socialist politics the only possible politics, capable of being supported or informed by critical realist philosophy. In fact, multiple possibilities – ‘a broad church’ – are explicitly envisaged and encouraged; Bhaskar and Collier by and large accept Marx’s critique of capitalism (and both can and do say why), other critical realists do not; and, indeed, one could consistently embrace the tenets of critical realism and adopt a conservative (as distinct from Conservative – or British National or Ulster Unionist, as Geoff wrongly claims [13]) stance at particular conjunctures on the grounds that worse consequences might well ensue were emancipatory transformation essayed, i.e. in view of the ‘feasibility principle’.

Reinventing the wheel

I have used the word ‘curious’ advisedly. For Geoff’s posi-

tion leads him to demand, in effect, that critical realism invent the wheel all over again; or (negatively) disprove the flat earth theory once more, or – since it has indeed done this, from a novel perspective – the theory of phlogiston (which it hasn’t, to my knowledge, at any rate explicitly). Here is another example:

Mention of John O’Neill’s important book *The Market* (Routledge, 1998) does not help Andrew’s [Collier’s] case [that critical realism can *enter into* arguments for socialism]. In his book, O’Neill makes no reference to critical realism and it does not *explicitly* build on critical realism. (12, emphases added).

What if – as seems likely – Collier believes, correctly, that O’Neill’s work is *implicitly* critical realist in the sense that the philosophical ontology informing it is essentially critical realist or at any rate not incompatible with critical realism? Must he make the arguments all over again as distinct from indicating his reasoned agreement? Does Geoff reinvent the wheel in his own work? Most natural science which makes genuinely novel discoveries and most emancipatory social science,⁶ according to Bhaskarian arguments which Geoff fails to examine, conforms at least implicitly to critical realist principles.

What starts out as a discussion of explanatory critique and its limitations is in short order identified by Geoff with a discussion of ‘Bhaskar’s “emancipatory” argument’ (3f) as such, and its limitations. But explanatory critique is only *one* stage in the *development* of Bhaskar’s (developmentally consistent) emancipatory argument. Its elaboration in the seventies was followed, in the eighties, by that of needs-based critique, and in the nineties by that of the dialectic of desire to freedom, both of which Geoff completely ignores. When he wants to suggest that ‘there is nothing at the core of Bhaskar’s “emancipatory” argument that would convince a fascist that they would have to abandon their fascism’ (3), Geoff cites anything but *Dialectic*, which powerfully argues that the dialectic of freedom (a dialectic of *content* and not just form) tendentially promotes the possibility of a society in which the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all, i.e. one in which fascists would in fact have abandoned their fascism – not because they had been persuaded by Bhaskar’s argument, of course (what argument *could* do that?), but because Bhaskar’s argument about the tendential rational directionality of history had been soundly based. Geoff does not even note the argument. (Again, it is admittedly contentious, even within critical realism, but neglecting it will hardly demonstrate any weaknesses it may have.)

Red flag

It is a similar story concerning Geoff’s discussion of the links, if any, between critical realism and ‘socialism’. When he wants to paint a picture of Bhaskar the philosopher ‘jumping up suddenly, waving the red flag’ (5), he cites Bhaskar (1989), a piece originally written for presentation to conferences specifically designated as socialist. But links are discussed in greatest detail and argued for most cogently in *Dialectic*, which judges, as Rachel Sharp and I recently summarized it:

the dialectic of desire to freedom to be ‘concordant with Marx’s goal of a[n] ... “association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”’, and fundamentally consistent ‘with the other basic principles – as distinct from actually existing practices – of socialism’ – principles of distribution, civic duty, social virtue, and individual self-realization. (Hartwig & Sharp 1999, 21-2).

Geoff makes much of the history of the term ‘socialism’, attempting to confine Bhaskar’s and Collier’s understanding of the emancipated society within its limits. Here he has a point, since they do – or are prone to – call themselves socialists; however, he seems unaware that Bhaskar, for his part, wonders – presumably precisely because of its history – whether ‘socialism’ is the right term for the good society (the basic formal principles of which in Bhaskar’s view are established by the dialectics of freedom), often preferring to speak, instead, of ‘eudaimonia’, ‘universal human flourishing’, etc. Moreover, the point has *no bearing whatsoever on whether the formal principles follow from the* (unexamined by Geoff) *philosophical arguments Bhaskar deploys*. Geoff dogmatically states that ‘no exegetical link between critical realism and *any* form of socialism has been established.’ (6, emphases added). First examine the arguments! But Geoff does not even seem aware that the arguments – which concern ‘the practical presuppositions of agency and discourse’ (Bhaskar 1994, 141) – exist. ‘[I]n satisfying my desire in absencing agency’, they attempt to show, ‘I am *thereby* committed to the project of universal human emancipation.’ (*ibid.*, 169, emphasis added.)

Eudaimonia defined

Since Geoff also considers the project of human emancipation ‘vague’,⁷ and that ‘if socialism is to be defined in a different way [i.e. as not excluding markets], then such a definition is lacking in the literature by critical realists’ (5), here is a more complete indication of the formal principles Bhaskar claims to establish, culled from the pages of *Plato Etc.*⁸:

Individual self-realization: The supreme good is concretely singularized universal human autonomy, i.e. ‘the free development of each as a condition for the free development of all’.

The highest good is the supreme good aesthetically enjoyed by all in creative flourishing.

A sine qua non for both is the existence of a domain of unquestioned individual choice, subject only to the recognition that its exercise does not interfere with the universally reciprocally recognized rights of others to enjoy a similar domain.

Civic duty: There will remain a domain of civic duty in which every concretely singularized individual must participate, say, in providing care and sustenance in exchange for a basic standard of living and, as the recipient of universal rights, access to public resources, health-care, education and so on.

Distribution: Massive and global redistribution of resources, tending to a core equality in virtue of our common humanity, with differences justified by particular mediations, specific rhythmic and individual singularities.

Social virtue: Recognition of the openness of political, moral, social, and technological evolution.

In keeping with this, society must be in a comprehensive state of reflexively self-monitoring learning processes, in which there is a premium on work which benefits all: on initiative and enterprise, economies and ecologies, on the one hand, and on

necessary but tedious and unpopular work on the other.

Universally recognized and enjoyed rights, extended to include the rights of the unborn and other species.

Vast expansion of participatory democracy and democratic accountability.

Provision for a socialized market, without the compulsion to sell one’s labour-power.

Socialization of knowledge.

Encouragement of individual talents.

Remuneration for (relatively) burdensome tasks.

Celebration of diversity and plurality (equality does not presuppose sameness, to the contrary).

As formal general principles established by philosophical argument go, these can hardly be described, accurately, as ‘vague’, and they show up Geoff’s claims about the lack of a definition and the exclusion of markets as false. To be sure, a number of principles incorporate empirical claims about the world. However, either they can be reformulated such that this is not the case (for example, for ‘vast expansion of participatory democracy’ read ‘extensive participatory democracy’), or they are so uncontentious (for example, ‘there is a market’), that their presence is entirely appropriate in a philosophical argument seeking to grasp real processual possibilities. The concept ‘labour-power’ is of course Marxist in provenance, but the distinction it relies upon – between powers and their exercise – is fundamental to Bhaskar’s philosophy and is transcendently deduced from human activity.

But Geoff wants more – and rightly so. Specifically what he wants, however, seems somewhat problematic:

... it is important to show how the ‘socialism’ advocated by critical realists is not vulnerable to [the Austrian school] attack.

This defence must necessarily involve a detailed description of the *underlying structures and causal mechanisms of the proposed socialist system*. The canons of critical realism must be applied to critical realism itself. (5).

But the canons of critical realism state that the future (in particular of human society in virtue of intentionality), though ‘increasingly shaped possibility’ (Bhaskar 1993, 143), is open and incapable of being specified in any detailed proposal; that geo-history is an evolutionary process necessarily punctuated by transitions and emergence which cannot be specified or predicted in advance; and that emancipation can be achieved only on the basis of a multiform dialectically rational *process*, or the unity (better, coherence [*ibid.*, 378]) of theory and practice *in practice*. Geoff seems to agree, at least about history’s openness.⁹

Not only are different post-capitalist systems possible but there are different types of capitalism. The number of contenders is infinite. (13).

Processes and products

This does not deter him from trotting out the hackneyed demand for ‘detailed blueprints’ of ‘socialism’. Has he, or any other economist, provided such a blueprint for the transition currently in train from the command economies of the former Soviet Union to market

economies? If not, why not? If so, what a mess! Another performative contradiction? Perhaps not: Geoff seems to *equate* blueprints with ‘utopian proposals’ (13). Well and good, if that is what he consistently means by ‘blueprint’; he seems unaware, however, that a call for ‘exercises in concrete utopias’ resonates throughout the later philosophy of Bhaskar,¹⁰ to the point where Gramsci’s famous slogan is reformulated to read, ‘[O]ptimism of the will..., concrete utopianism ... of the intellect’ (Bhaskar 1994, 215); and that Bhaskar himself stresses that the formal criteria of the good society have to be fleshed out substantively ‘by an empirically grounded theory of the possibilities of developing four-planar social being in nature’,¹¹ and that ‘totalizing depth praxis’ must produce ‘a plausible concretely utopian model of flourishing’, if the eudaimonistic project is to be actionable. (*ibid.*, 144; 210). This is by no means the same as the ‘detailed description’ of ‘the proposed system’ demanded by Geoff, redolent as it is of endism, stasis and elitism, such as might be nipped out in a common room and announced to a grateful world for implementation. It bears repeating, as Bhaskar himself does, that the dialectic of freedom is essentially a dialectic of content – ultimately it just is ‘the process, or ... the set of processes, or more generally phenomena (in the intransitive dimension), which critical realist, like Hegelian, dialectic sets out to describe (in the transitive dimension) and dialectically and reflexively connect in the philosophical system or network of dialectical critical realism.’ (*ibid.*, 134). Critical realism (and the ‘self-reflexive, geo-historicized social science’ [*ibid.*, 216] informed by it) must indeed, and does, specify ‘underlying structures and causal mechanisms’ – but it treats of *structured processes* rather than of *products* or *systems* as such.¹²

Unjustified difference

In demanding detailed blueprints and descriptions of the good society – or plausible concrete utopias, if that is what he means – regardless of the praxis that must produce them, Geoff is, perhaps unwittingly, espousing the view, underpinned by the irrealist (more specifically analytic) philosophical problematic, whereby it is *changes* from the status quo that must be justified rather than *differences* within it. (*ibid.*, 139). Before we can begin to move towards the good society we must show in advance and detail that it would work. Does the *status quo* work? For whom? How *are* its gross and increasing inequities – of opportunity, income, wealth, knowledge, power and freedom – to be justified? In Bhaskar’s view (1993, 301) they are ‘monstrous’. In any case, and *a fortiori*, does not the status quo of globalizing capital itself systematically generate change, at least some of which must be adjudged baneful? Is *this* happening according to blueprint? Bhaskar is by no means alone in the assessment that it is devastating the planet ecologically, in consequence of which the human species may not survive beyond the present century.¹³ This is the context – of unethical *difference* and baneful *change* – which renders *necessary* ‘a revolutionary

transformation far more profound than perhaps any of us can imagine’. (Bhaskar 1999). Bhaskar’s philosophy seeks to *describe its possibility*, as well as its necessity. (For good measure, it also seeks to describe the *impossibility* of actually existing socialism, tracing the philosophical genealogy of its downfall. [Bhaskar 1994, Ch. 10]).

Immanent critique

Geoff ‘genuinely request[s] more information and clarification from Bhaskar and Collier’ concerning what it is that ‘would necessarily lead to considerations of the possibility and desirability of some kind of radical, structural and emancipatory transformation of society.’(6).¹⁴ For Bhaskar it is, in brief, the dialectic of desire to freedom. More information? First digest what there is! *Dialectic* is admittedly very difficult, in particular for anyone unfamiliar with the thought of Kant, Hegel and Marx, but less so than some other major philosophical texts. If assistance is required, the main arguments are recapitulated more briefly in *Plato Etc.*, there is a Bhaskar List discussion group on the internet, there are critical realist conferences, seminars and workshops, and there is *Alethia* and the International Association for Critical Realism... Lord Acton was surely right to believe that the most devastating attacks on opposing arguments are those which first grasp them in detail from the inside and present them in their strongest light, and then demolish them.¹⁵ It is not for me to try to spell out these arguments for Geoff Hodgson. That is a labour he must undertake himself. I genuinely hope he does (and indeed that he pinpoints any anomalies and contradictions there may be). If he can only stop charging at red flags, I should think he will.

Notes

1. Geoff Hodgson, ‘Marching to the promised land? Some doubts on the policy affinities of critical realism’, *Alethia* 2:2, October 1999, 2-10. Reference is also made to Andrew Collier, ‘Response to Geoff Hodgson’ and Geoff Hodgson, ‘Andrew Collier’s promised land’, *ibid.*, 10-12.

2. For a straightforward logical contradiction, see Hodgson’s claim, in replying to Collier, that ‘there is nothing in critical realism’ which prevents us reaching a policy conclusion that ‘all men [should be] offered suicide pills’ (13). This blatantly contradicts the critical realist principle he himself cites of “‘the free flourishing of each [as] a condition of the free flourishing of all’”. (2). It is not just that ‘all’ includes men, but that the principle entails that the citizens of eudaimonia love rather than hate or fear one another. When Hodgson gets to grips with the arguments in *Dialectic*, he will come to see that this principle (arguably) follows from the philosophy.

3. This is the sense in which I myself deploy the concept hereinafter.

4. See especially Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1979, Ch. 2; 1986, Ch. 2; 1993, Chs. 1 § 9, 2 § 2 & 9; 1994, Chs. 4 & 5 and Appendix; Archer et al, ed., 1998 Part II. Hodgson (1999) himself accepts that social emergence exists and is explanatory.

5. For this reason, among others, Bhaskar sometimes refers to critical realism as ‘a movement in philosophy and the human sciences and cognate practices’ (1998, ix, emphasis added), and that is my own preferred understanding of the term. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I have followed Hodgson in confining its meaning to ‘a movement in philosophy’.

6. At a recent seminar, reported in Hartwig (1999, 36), Bhaskar stressed that 'critical realism does not defend most actually existing social science; it is a philosophical programme which can inform a possible emancipatory social science, which is precisely a science of the possible rather than the actual.'

7. Collier agrees that the goal of human emancipation is vague and also that no political conclusions follow from critical realism as such. In regard to both these matters he seems to be in clear disagreement with Bhaskar, who holds that some political conclusions do follow from critical realist premises, viz. – at the very least – the formal political principles I go on to indicate. However, it is not clear whether Collier is referring (a) to critical realism prior to dialecticisation (in which case I agree, with the proviso that the demonstration of the derivability of facts from values 'allows the possibility of ethics and politics becoming, in principle, decidable disciplines' [Bhaskar, 1999]), or (b) to critical realism post-dialecticisation but indicating dissent from (some aspects of) the dialectics of freedom – which establish for Bhaskar the principles indicated (in which case I disagree).

8. Pp. 148-54. I have paraphrased as well as quoted. To avoid tedium, I do not indicate the quotes separately.

9. Elsewhere, he also accepts that the social is emergent (see Note 4, above).

10. Bhaskar regards the (philosophical) dialectic of freedom as itself an exercise in (metacritical or metatheoretical) concrete utopianism, in that it is 'not an historicist enterprise of anticipating the trajectory of a future which has yet to be caused, but rather depends in part upon us' (1993, 278). The *primary* function of philosophy remains, however, to 'underlabour' for emancipatory social science which has a central role to play in the dialectical process of freedom.

11. Bhaskar himself briefly essays such a theory in his 1994, 152-3. Nothing of what I have said should be construed as suggesting that little remains to be done, in particular on the empirical side. Critical realists themselves often lament that the philosophy and social theory has not as yet been deployed extensively in empirically based research. (See, for example, Archer *et al.* 1999.) This situation, however, is changing.

12. See the instructive discussion of process as 'directional absenting'; of 'the need to break down ... the distinction between process and product, that is see the synchronic/diachronic distinction, although realistically justifiable, as not categorially constitutive'; and of the need for 'the geohistoricization of social theory' in Bhaskar 1993, Ch. 2, § 8 and Ch. 3, § 6 (the quotes are from pp.255, 145, and 146 respectively). See also the concept of 'rhythmics'. Hodgson's own work in the field of evolutionary economics suggests that he is no stranger to thinking processually.

13. Already in 1784, as Bhaskar (1986, 221) paraphrases him, Kant had arrived at the view that 'the development of a truly universal or cosmopolitan sensibility, rooted in a shared sense of our common humanity, and of our shared place, Earth' is 'a condition ... for the very survival of the human species'. At a recent day school on Critical Realism and Ethics, Bhaskar suggested that, when it comes to pipe dreams, it is not eudaimonia that qualifies, but the notion that the status quo can go on. (Bhaskar 2000).

14. Notwithstanding that, in the paragraph immediately preceding the one

from which this sentence is taken, Hodgson states that Bhaskar and Collier have made 'no attempt ... to show the possibility of any form of socialism' (emphases mine). I do not, of course, question Hodgson's genuineness. Like Beckett's Clov and others operating only at the level of instrumental rationality, he seems to glimpse 'what is going on here' (6), only to lose it:

Clov: Sometimes I wonder if I'm in my right senses. Then it passes off and I'm as intelligent as ever. (Beckett, 1986 [1957], 128). Hodgson's understanding of 'possibility' is clearly very different from Bhaskar's, the former tending to dwell at the level of the Actual, the latter pertaining to the level of the Real.

15. This is of course one of the chief virtues of the Hegelian method of immanent critique, much practiced in an adapted form by Bhaskar himself.

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