

Motherhood and Apple Pie

I am very grateful to Mervyn Hartwig for his stimulating response to my article ‘Marching to the promised land?’ In October 1999, in my first *Alethia* article, I examined the claims that (A) critical realism is emancipatory, (B) critical realism shows that a genuine, democratic socialism is possible, and (C) critical realism shows that social democratic or Fabian politics are flawed. I argued that (A) was ‘overblown or insufficiently substantiated’ and that (B) and (C) were both false.

In his reply in the same issue, Andrew Collier admitted that critical realism’s particular, ‘emancipatory’ claims are ‘vague’. He also conceded that ‘critical realism does not by itself entail a socialist conclusion’. He did not attempt to defend the false claim that critical realism shows that social democratic or Fabian politics are flawed. I argued that Andrew’s attempt to show that critical realism leads to socialist conclusions, once ‘empirical claims’ are added, is misconceived.

Quite reasonably, Mervyn requests that before anyone criticises Roy Bhaskar they should read and digest his works. However, this argument works both ways. In criticising my position, Mervyn should read and digest at least some of my own works in the relevant area. This might have avoided some errors of misunderstanding. Clarity is essential. My argument was distorted when, as editor of *Alethia*, Mervyn inserted the subheading ‘Socialism proved wrong’ on page 5 of my October 1999 article. Essentially, I was not arguing whether socialism was right or wrong, but whether or not it flowed logically from critical realism.

Mervyn now discusses whether or not I have ‘come to grips with’ the ‘dialectical’ turn in critical realism. By and large, this is irrelevant to my original argument. My argument was that the claims that specific political and policy conclusions flow from critical realism are vague or false. I stand completely by my original claims.

Some of Mervyn’s points are tangential to my argument. I shall deal with some of them very quickly. Contrary to Mervyn, in my *Alethia* article I did not ‘reject the critical realist notion that values are science-free’. Furthermore, I do not subscribe to the claim ‘that facts are value-free’. I have written on the complicated relationship between statements of facts and values elsewhere, and most extensively in my recent book *Evolution and Institutions* (Edward Elgar, 1999). I accept fully that elements of fact and value are typically entangled with each other, and to some extent unavoidably so, especially in the social sciences. If Mervyn wishes to read and discuss my real views on this question he is free to do so. I am not going to try to defend views that I do not hold.

The eudaimonistic society

I now turn to my allegation that the so-called ‘eudai-

monistic society’ is vaguely defined. Mervyn accuses me of having ‘blind spots’, particularly concerning Roy Bhaskar’s discussion of this society. In his book *Dialectic* (pp. 284, 202) Bhaskar writes of ‘universal human flourishing’ in which ‘the free flourishing of each is the condition for the free flourishing of all’. However, contrary to Mervyn, the ‘eudaimonistic society’ is *not* ‘elaborated in his *Dialectic*’. No statement of Bhaskar’s amounts to an *elaboration* of the essential, structural features of the eudaimonistic society.

Descriptions of a state of ‘universal human flourishing’ in which ‘the free flourishing of each is the condition for the free flourishing of all’ do not amount to elaborations. Just like motherhood and apple pie, few people would oppose such vaguely specified goals. Fascists, conservatives, liberals, social democrats and socialists would all claim that their particular political objective would involve as much ‘human flourishing’ as possible. The problem is that these phrases do not amount to an adequate description of the desired society.

Who decides what flourishing means?

Mervyn thinks otherwise. He claims that if fascists were persuaded by a vision of a society in which ‘the free flourishing of each is the condition for the free flourishing of all’ then they would have to abandon their fascism. I do not think so. Being in favour of something as vague as universal ‘human flourishing’ does not rule out the repugnant politics of fascism. Fascists claim that the flourishing of humankind is achieved through the power and purity of the nation and its state. This is abhorrent nonsense, of course. But fascists do genuinely believe that their policies will lead to ‘human flourishing’. As a general rule, all political activists are persuaded that their brand of politics is for the goodness of humankind.

Let us consider a different example. Mervyn argues in a footnote that a policy to offer suicide pills to men ‘blatantly contradicts the critical realist principle ... of “the free flourishing of each is the condition for the free flourishing of all”’. I fail to see why this is necessarily the case, because critical realist descriptions of the eudaimonistic society do not tell us much what ‘free flourishing’ means. Many people have committed suicide in the strong belief that after death they would flourish in heaven. The problem is this: in the eudaimonistic society, who has the authority to interpret what ‘flourishing’ means?

Mervyn goes on in the same interesting footnote to proclaim that ‘the citizens of eudaimonia love rather than hate or fear one another’. Fine sentiments. But what are the underlying structures and mechanisms that would give rise to such universal accord? Furthermore, how would a eudaimonistic society deal with occurrences of hate? Would hate

be banned or punished? Mervyn accuses me of being ‘hackneyed’ when I ask such detailed questions. This does not stop me pointing to the absence of adequate answers.

Eudaimonia undefined

After accusing me of failing to digest Roy Bhaskar’s *Dialectic* (which in fact does not tell us very much about eudaimonia) he turns to *Plato Etc.* (which says a tiny bit more). ‘Culled from the pages’ of the latter work, Mervyn lists some features of the desired society. Note that there is nothing especially socialist about these culled proposals. Apart from two or three more controversial items, discussed below, they are so vague that many social democrats, liberals and even conservatives could readily agree with them. For instance, even some conservative thinkers have called for redistribution and greater equality of wealth.

Furthermore, I fail to see how these proposals logically follow from the core philosophy of critical realism. We are fully aware that Bhaskar has peppered his philosophical works with political rhetoric. It is not necessary to prove this point. My main contention is that this rhetoric is (a) vague and (b) does not follow logically from the core argument of critical realism. Mervyn has neither removed the vagueness, nor shown how these particular eudaimonistic proposals flow from the core philosophy of critical realism.

The details remain vague

Let us consider some of these culled proposals. The statement concerning individual self-realization is fine-sounding but obscure. For instance, it proposes ‘unquestioned individual choice’ as long as ‘its exercise does not interfere with the universally reciprocally recognized rights of others to enjoy a similar domain’. But *what precisely is allowed or disallowed* here? For example, what forms of commerce and contract would be permitted? Would an individual be free to start up a private business? Would prostitution, child sex or the selling of drugs be permitted? Would there be any legal restraints on advertising? Would an individual be free to sell himself or herself into voluntary slavery, as some libertarians have proposed?

In the name of greater equality, Mervyn calls for a ‘massive and global redistribution of resources’. Fine. But how far would this go? Is the complete global equality of income and wealth involved? How much inequality would be tolerated?

Other details are also vague. For example, what is meant by a ‘socialized market’? A problem with this term is that it suggests the possibility of a market that is not social. In fact, all markets are embedded in social structures and relations. (Even Diane Elson’s 1988 *New Left Review* article on this topic fails to define this concept adequately.) There is also an extensive postwar German literature on what is described as the ‘social market economy’. We are not told how much the ‘socialized market’ would coincide or differ from other such conceptions.

Apart from being vague, some of Mervyn’s statements are open to objection. The claim of ‘rights of the unborn’

raises the difficult moral question of abortion. In eudaimonia, *would abortion be illegal?* The problem here is that two *conflicting* rights are involved here: the rights of the unborn, and the rights of women to have control of their own reproductive capacities. Once we leave the world of apple pie, any proposal concerning a desired future society must deal with these difficult questions of moral conflict.

Furthermore, does Mervyn’s celebration of the universal rights of ‘other species’ mean that everyone in eudaimonia has to be vegetarian? Does critical realism logically imply vegetarianism? I doubt it.

Another example: Mervyn favours the ‘socialization of knowledge’. What does this mean? Does it mean that all available knowledge should be available to everyone? If so, I am against it. I believe that people have the right to privacy. As long as we keep within the bounds of morality and law, the public has no business knowing about the details of our sex lives or our bank accounts. The right to privacy conflicts with the public availability of knowledge. This is another difficult dilemma ducked by the eudaimonians.

The importance of tacit knowledge.

On the vital question of knowledge, Mervyn clearly has a ‘blind spot’. It partly concerns the important role of tacit knowledge. Much of our knowledge, particularly concerning skills, cannot be readily described. We know more than we can tell. Tacit knowledge is, by definition, uncodified. Much of it cannot be codified. The question of the feasibility or otherwise of socialism hinges very much on this question.

In his brilliant book *Tacit Knowledge* (1967), Michael Polanyi argued convincingly that attempts to make personal and tacit knowledge social would be both destructive and unattainable. As he put it: ‘the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge ... the process of formalizing all knowledge to the exclusion of any tacit knowledge is self-defeating’ (p. 19). Accordingly, attempts to ‘socialize’ knowledge by formalizing it are both abhorrent and impossible. These issues are discussed at length in my *Economics and Utopia* (Routledge, 1999) – which Mervyn does not claim to have read. If ‘socializing knowledge’ means attempting to make it all publicly available then I am against it. However, the problem is that critical realist slogans such as the ‘socialization of knowledge’ are too vague to be of much use.

Mervyn wants it both ways. On the one hand he claims that the description of eudaimonia in Bhaskar’s works ‘can hardly be described, accurately, as “vague”.’ On the other hand, when we ask questions of clarification, he claims that eudaimonia is ‘incapable of being specified in any detailed proposal’. Instead he points to ‘an evolutionary process ... which cannot be predicted in advance’. Evolution may not be predictable. But evolution does not exclude policy intervention. There are important questions concerning the criteria of fitness and the mechanisms of selection in the said ‘evolutionary process’. Forethought and policy are still required.

No critical realist has yet produced an adequate descrip-

tion of the desired eudaimonistic society. Such a description would have to address the socio-economic structures of production and distribution, as well as the nature of the state. Would private ownership of the means of production be prohibited? What forms of common ownership are preferred? What role would markets play? Would there be a capital market? What forms of contract between individuals would be admitted? There may be no ‘compulsion to sell one’s labour-power’, as Mervyn puts it, but would employment contracts be allowed? Would self-employment be permitted? What role would worker cooperatives play? Would worker cooperatives be able to sell their products to others? Accordingly, would there be ‘market socialism’? What mechanisms of participatory democracy would be instituted? Would nations have the right to self-determination? And so on ...

Above all, is the eudaimonistic principle of ‘universal human flourishing’ of help to us in answering these questions? If it is, then what are the answers? If it is not then it must be regarded as inadequate.

Eudaimonia and Marxism

In his writings, Roy Bhaskar has made much of his Marxist political beliefs. It is thus reasonable to enquire of the relationship between the statements culled by Mervyn and the political doctrines of Marxism.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels applauded unreservedly the ‘abolition of private property’. They were not inclined to defend or reinstate even ‘the property of the petty and of the small peasant’ on the spurious ethical grounds that ‘to a great extent’ it was ‘already destroyed’. They wished for an economic order in which ‘capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society’. They advocated the abolition of ‘bourgeois freedom’ including the ‘free selling and buying’ of commodities. In other words, *all* private trading would be outlawed. Would this be true for eudaimonia as well?

In the same work, Marx and Engels also welcomed efforts ‘to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state’. They looked forward to a time when ‘all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation’. In other words, *all* production would be nationalised. Would this be true for eudaimonia as well?

Before anyone signs up for the eudaimonistic project, it would be imperative to get answers to these questions. I have quoted the following statement by Roy Bhaskar and Andrew Collier (from the *Essential Readings* on critical realism) that

critical realism shows the fallacy of several of the classical

arguments against socialism and supports the *possibility* of a form of socialism which is neither a market economy nor a command economy nor a mix of the two, but a genuine extension of pluralistic democracy into economic life.

I have shown in my previous articles that not only have critical realists failed to address the classical (i.e. Austrian) arguments against socialism, but also they have failed to show how critical realism supports the possibility of socialism. Furthermore, they have not explained how ‘neither a market economy nor a command economy nor a mix of the two’ is feasible, and what it could mean.

I continue to ask for further clarification on these issues. In my view it is not only reasonable but also highly important to do so.

What are the underlying socio-economic structures and mechanisms?

In asking these questions – some of which are central to any proposal of a better society – I am addressing the problem of defining *underlying socio-economic structures and mechanisms* of eudaimonia. Answers to these questions do not have to preclude further ‘evolution’ and ‘emergent possibilities’. No complete blueprint is requested. But a rough, structural sketch would help. Strangely, the existing literature of critical realism is largely silent on these structural details. This ill-suits a philosophy that emphasises the importance of underlying structures and mechanisms.

Instead of serious answers, attempts to raise these important questions are ridiculed as ‘hackneyed’. Such rhetorical devices allow critical realists to claim all sorts of normative implications for their philosophy but at the same time to be silent on the underlying structural substance. Wonderful phrases concerning ‘human flourishing’ – highly reminiscent of the utopians of the early nineteenth century – are mixed with an extreme reluctance to answer important questions concerning underlying structures, or to deal with genuine ethical dilemmas. I am not against the discussion of utopias; but this is utopianism of the weakest and vaguest kind.

For some of its advocates, it seems, critical realism is the philosophy of motherhood and apple pie. Or can a serious philosophical content be rescued from underneath this thick layer of vague and unworldly, utopian wish-mongering? The fact is that critical realism has taken upon itself a mass of political verbiage that has no unique logical relationship with its core philosophical argument. When it comes to substance, discussions of the eudaimonistic society within critical realism remain extremely vague. My alleged ‘blind spots’ are not the basic problem. In truth, concerning structural details, there is not much there to see.

could have indicated my assent to Andrew’s concessions (see my Note 7) – while lamenting a job half-done – and left it at that. In fact, however, Geoff has explicitly given the opposite impression. That being so, it must be reiterated that he has not shown that no political implications flow logically from critical realism post-dialecti-

Mervyn Hartwig comments:

There are two broad strands within critical realism, the one dialecticized, the other not. Geoff’s polemics relate predominantly to the latter, as does Andrew Collier’s response. Had Geoff made it clear from the outset that he intended to exclude the former from consideration, I