

A Plea for Sobriety in Matters Epistemological: A Critical Realist Appraisal of the Postmodern Turn in Sociology

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The recent postmodern turn in sociology has been very powerful in transforming the landscape of the discipline. By questioning the basic epistemological and metaphysical character of positivism, the dominant paradigm in sociology, postmodernism has enticed a lot of sociologists in questioning their discipline. What is lost in this acrimonious debate, however, is the need to bring in back "ontological questions" to sociology. This paper therefore is an attempt to move beyond the postmodern deconstruction of sociology by having recourse to critical realism of Roy Bhaskar and others. Its main objective is to show that critical realism provides a better alternative to postmodern nihilism. To end the paper, the implications of this debate to Philippine sociology is discussed.

Keywords: critical realism, postmodernism, sociological theory, epistemology, Bhaskar

Sociology today has become hostage to postmodern critique. Many sociologists, who had been steeped in traditional positivist paradigm now find themselves on the defensive in parrying the postmodernist onslaught against "formalistic sociology" (Houston 2001). Hand in hand with the postmodern eruption in sociology is the ascendancy of social constructionist paradigm in social theory and research (Denzin 2002). So one can read a lot of articles being written on "social construction of homosexuality," "social construction of childhood," "social construction of gender," "social construction of knowledge," and countless others. What is lost in this orgy of

postmodern theories is the question of the ontological status of these concepts. One can also hear postmodern deconstructionists attacking the notions of truth, validity, quantitative method as suspect. Sociologists who do not badge under the postmodern pressure are accused of colluding with Western imperialism and exercising exclusionary violence against women, colonized people, and countless other subaltern groups.

This “crisis of representation”¹ (Denzin 1997: 4, 2002; Flaherty 2002) in the social sciences that undermine the traditional positivist orientation has its greatest impact on methodology (Alvesson 2001: 4). The crisis itself, albeit not new in the social science disciplines, has been accentuated by the postmodern turn (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 87). This crisis leads to the interrogation of the fundamental assumptions that underlie the practice of social research. The crisis dislodges empirical grounding of social scientific inquiry by the neo-pragmatic question of language and representation (Potter, 1986; Brown 1989, 1987). The long-established principle that social scientific inquiry aims at capturing the underlying properties of the social world is now in doubt (Polkinghorne 1994: 151). The established view that the ultimate goal of social research is to discover regularities in the realm of the social is now perceived as misguided (Seidman 1991a). Objectivity that is supposed to guide social research is now seen as a bias itself (Bradley and Schaefer 1995). How did this crisis of representation come about? What are its implications in conducting social research? This paper will argue that there is much to be learned from postmodern turn in sociology but its philosophical grounding in nihilistic anti-representationalism must be abandoned. What is lost in exciting this debate is the question of ontology: can we really deny social reality? I will argue that critical realism offers the best way out of postmodern nihilism. It shifts the discussion from epistemology to ontology. I endorse Jonathan Joseph’s statement that “critical realism asks, given that knowledge is possible and is meaningful, what does this pre-suppose about the world itself? Does not knowledge of the world indicate that the world is intelligible, and therefore ordered in a certain way? Is not the practice of science related to the structure of the world?” Here, sociological theory must necessarily presuppose unabashedly metaphysical view of social reality.

What I will do in the following is to rescue sociology from the postmodern blackmail: you are either a positivist or postmodernist. I will do so by showing that the postmodern critique of sociology could be deflated by having recourse to critical realism.

THE ILLUSION OF POSITIVISM

Positivism as a philosophical outlook about science assumes several things. Numerous criticisms had been raised against the positivist tradition in sociology from hermeneutics, feminist theory, and Marxist critique. I will briefly summarize these criticisms below.²

The myth of “brute facts.” Positivist paradigm of social research assumes that one can develop a theory-neutral description of the social world. Writing within the existentialist tradition within sociology, Blum observes, “if objective knowledge is taken to mean knowledge of a reality independent of language, or presuppositionless knowledge, or knowledge of the world which is independent of the observer’s procedures for finding and producing the knowledge. Then there is no such thing as objective knowledge” (quoted in Phillips 1973: 143). Or, as David Maines (1993) put in propositional form: “All social science data are already interpreted data; the uninterpreted datum does not exist.” This is far cry from the traditional assumption in social research that there can be “neutral facts” or theory-independent data that can arbitrate between competing explanations (Goode and Hatt 1952). Clifford Geertz describes this obsession with neutral facts as another form of rhetoric: “The pretense of looking at the world directly, as though a one-way screen, seeing others as they really are when only God is looking, is indeed quite widespread. But that itself a rhetorical strategy, a mode of persuasion.” (1988: 141).

In survey research, for example, painstaking care is taken to avoid imputing subjective and extraneous biases on the questions (Nasatir 1985). Textbook writers on survey research caution neophytes that poorly constructed survey questionnaires are like unstructured interviews that are unreliable source of objective information (Moser and Kalton 1971). Critics aver that this is based on the culture of formalism – a culture that “encourages particular patterns of for asking questions, making assumptions, and using techniques, even when these are inappropriate (Bradley and Schaefer 1995: 37). This culture is responsible for the mathematization of social research. Its greatest fetish is the meticulous construction of formal models based on mathematical simulations.

Aron Cicourel (1964), writing within cognitive sociology, has noted, “All social research includes an unknown number of implicit decisions which are not mirrored in the measurement procedures used. The abstraction process required to describe a set of properties, regardless of the measurement system, automatically imposes some amount of reification” (p. 80).³

Instrumentalist and conventionalist philosophers of science (Duhem, Poincare, and Hanson) have also raised serious objections to the standard view of scientific method. They show that facts are always theory-determined. This is now known as the Duhem-Quine thesis: "Test of any primary hypothesis involve so many auxiliary assumptions that the original, primary hypothesis is insulated from a hard rejection" (Bradley and Schaefer 1995: 197). This means that facts only make sense within a given context or social situation. If facts are taken as "evidence," then, "evidence does not exist in a vacuum but is contextual, in the sense that "facts can only become evidence in response to some particular question" (Madjar and Walton 2001: 29). Hence even if we "have valid measures and strong associations between our variables, the sociologist [/social scientist] is still faced with the problem of making sense of accounting for these facts" (Phillips 1973: 13). Or, as Bradley and Schaefer (1995) rightly argue, "Statistical inference can offer evidence but cannot supply the criteria by which it is admitted." It does not remove the need for "insight, common sense, and persuasion" (p. 153).

The myth of fact-value dualism. Coupled with the belief in "pure facts" positivist social researchers also subscribed to the strict separation between facts and values. The reason being that facts can be objectively studied, while values are inextricably subjective. Numerous critics target the value-freedom advocacy of Max Weber and his followers (Turner and Factor 1987). Of course Weber acknowledged the value-ladenness of choice of research topic;⁴ nevertheless he strongly believes that values should not intrude in the interpretation and validation of data. Critics, like Tim May (2001) argues that "In the process of data collection itself, there are decisions to be made over the strength and weaknesses of particular methods and in relation to the aims and objectives of the research project" (p. 53). He further adds, "within the data collection process itself, there are a number of ethical and political decisions to be made. Researchers may wish to concentrate on one group of people rather another, reflecting their own bias" (p. 53). Moreover the notion that "rigorous research" involves the separation of the subject from her research reflects the idea that reason and emotion should be separated. Feminists have challenged this taken-for-granted idea by pointing out that such separation fails to acknowledge the multiple ways in which the researcher is affected by the context of the research as well as the subjects themselves (Cook 1986; May 2001: 21). For some feminist researchers, ethical neutrality itself is a value-choice (Farganis 1986; Harding 1986). They also insist that values do not only intrude in the selection of research topics but, more

significantly, during the validation and assessment of the findings of the research (Potter 1989; see also May, 1993: 39). Feminists also argue that objectivity masks the masculine character of reason (Harding 1987; Kasper 1986). For dominant rationality is often equated with dispassionate distance from what one studies.

Jurgen Habermas, a member of the Frankfurt School, argues that objectivism is only possible by bracketing the hermeneutic grounding of research. Together with the assault against fact-value separation, many critics also assailed the seemingly political conservatism that ensues from fact-value dualism. Because values are considered as subjective preferences, researchers can wash their hands by shirking away from their social responsibility. Objectivity and neutrality then becomes the shield for academic irresponsibility (Kincheloe and McLaren 1998; Fay 1975). In fact some critics suggest that the researcher is responsible for how her findings are read, understood, and acted upon or not, and for who benefits and who does not as a result of the inquiry (Ray and Mayan 2001: 63).

Castrating the “physics envy.” Many humanist critics assailed the unconscious “physics envy” that inform positivist-oriented research (Seidman 1991a; 1991b). This “unconscious” of social research assumes that “the scientific mode of thought is superior to others, and so represents progress in the sphere of thought to match” (Benton and Craib 2001: 46). Like physics, “textbooks on quantitative social research often say that the purpose of research which works with survey interview materials is to extract universally valid laws, to identify the causes of things” (Alasuutari 1998: 53). This “physics envy” has also infected qualitative researchers that even textbooks on qualitative research have to acknowledge that their enterprise is a “soft science.”

Postpositivist philosophers of science challenged the homogenizing and reductionist character of such programme (Benton 1977; Bhaskar 1975; Keat and Urry 1975). Because it uncritically nominates the hypothetico-deductive model (originally proposed by the German physicist, Carl Gustav Hempel) as the standard form of scientific explanation. Critics point out that even contemporary quantum physics has rejected the deterministic and strict causal principle of Newtonian view of science (Crotty 1998:29ff.). As Paul Feyerabend (1970) argues, “The idea of a method that contains firm, unchanging, and absolutely binding principles for conducting the business of science gets into considerable difficulty when confronted with the results

of historical research. We find, then, that there is not a single rule, however, plausible, and however firmly grounded in epistemology, that is not violated as sometime or other...we see that they are necessary for progress [in science]" (p. 21). Moreover the adoption of naturalistic model of explanation is simply based on the enormous cultural authority possessed by the natural sciences (Benton and Craib 2001: 23). Benton and Craib assert, "Social scientists might well want to present their disciplines as sufficiently well established for them to be accorded this sort of authority [like natural sciences]...Strong claims made by social scientists about the reliability, objectivity, and usefulness of the knowledge they have to offer may be used to support their claims to be well represented in university staffing and research council funding for their research" (p. 23).

The andocentric character of social research. Alvesson (2002), summarizing the feminist critique of "male-stream" social research states,

Male domination has produced a masculine social science built around ideal such as objectivity, neutrality, distance, control, rationality and abstraction. Alternative ideals such as commitment, empathy, closeness, cooperation, intuition and specificity, have been marginalized. Scientific rationality is thus expressing male domination, rather than superior reason (p. 3).

Allison Jaggar (1994) has offered a radical critique of outlawing emotions in Western epistemology. She points out that "Western epistemology has tended to view emotion and even hostility. This derogatory western attitude towards emotion, like the earlier western contempt for sensory observation, fails to recognize that emotion, like sensory perception, is necessary to human survival." Laurel Richardson (1993), a feminist postmodernist, narrates how her involvement in presenting the narrative of her research in poetic form changed the way she looks at sociological texts:

I try to write sociology that moves people emotionally and intellectually. When successful, the texts violate sociology's unwritten rules. Social science writing is supposedly emotionless, the reader unmoved. But, just as other social science writing conventions (e.g., prose, passive voice, omniscient narrator) conceal how truth-value is constituted, the affectless prose style conceals how emotions are harnessed in the service of a presumed truth-value" (p. 706).

These naïve positivist assumptions have been rightly criticized by many philosophers of science beginning with Michael Polanyi's classic *Tacit Knowledge*. But positivist thinking was well-entrenched in the sociological

traditional especially social research. The latest craze of intellectual interrogation of positivist approach to science is raised by postmodernists. These are some of the crucial criticisms from postmodernist alternative:

The social construction of research. Postmodernists challenge the commonsense realism that underpins social research. Pragmatic and poststructuralist versions of this critique advocate the total abandonment of realism in favor of social constructionism. Laurel Richardson (1995: 199), a feminist postmodern researcher, for example, claims, "all knowledge is socially constructed. Writing is not simply a "true" representation of an objective reality." She further adds, "All social scientific writing depends on narrative structure and narrative devices, although that structure and those devices are frequently masked by a scientific frame, which is itself a metanarrative." Social research is also rhetorical more than reportorial (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 92). According to this view, "all factual representations of empirical reality, even statistical representations, are narratively constructed" (Clough 1992: 3). Even "official statistics" that is considered as the most objective source of data in social sciences also reflect the cultural values of the researcher (May 2001; Phillips 1973). In the same vein, Bradley and Schaeffer (1995), after reviewing the limitations of measurement in social sciences declare: "Human information, no matter how carefully and accurately gathered, often requires discussion of values and principles before meaningful interpretation is possible." They further argue, "The impact of human information is never neutral, as it is reported in a context that involves human preconceptions, values, and beliefs" (p. 121).

Of course the postmodernists do not deny the existence of a mind-independent reality. But rather than asking whether social research is being faithful to the representation of the social world, postmodernists shift the focus on the way our theoretical description of the world are created and contested (MacLure 2003). Postmodern researchers contend that "the 'empirical world' –the world of objective facts and doings –may well exist but that it cannot be directly known. What we can know is solely a function of human interventions, mediations, and constructions" (Maines 1993: 27).

Moreover pragmatic version of postmodernism suggests that "social structures and processes powerfully shape the circumstances that become identified as problems, the way those problems are engaged, and which of the multiple options is judged the best solution" (Kuzel and Engel 2001: 119). Norman K. Denzin (1997; 1994), the bellwether of this new movement,

which veers away from representationalist tradition in ethnography, calls for the renewal of qualitative research on the “sixth moment” or post-Malinowskian fieldwork (see also Marcus 1994).⁵ More radical versions of the postmodern approach encourage ethnography of textual representations themselves (Marcus 1994; Clifford 1988). The focus shifts away from the veracity of texts to the analysis of styles and authorial voices that underline the unacknowledged power relations embedded within the texts.

The “narrative turn” and the fictionality of non-fiction. There are two major reasons why postmodernists advocate the turn to the study of narratives. First, by problematizing the concept of representation in social research, postmodern research turns to the ethnography of texts or “tales from the fields” (Van Mannen 1988). Rather than attempt to establish the veracity of empirical data by checking them against what they purport to describe, postmodernists follow the Saussurian path of severing the text from the world. The focus is the world created by the text itself (Richardson 2003; Denzin 1989). Second, recall that Baudrillard suggests that the boundary between the real and the hyperreal has already imploded. This leaves us with the existence of “society of signs.” In this type of society the flow and exchanges of signs have stamped out the illusion of the “real.” Everything is a simulation. Hence social research does not mirror the social world but is merely another text to be deciphered.

Postmodern researchers champion the use of discourse analysis, semiotics, grammatology, archaeology, textual and conversational analysis, and biographical methods (Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994). Biographical methods are especially favored by postmodern researchers who want to study the lives certain individuals as forms of literature (Denzin 1989). The antiessentialist posture of postmodernism makes it skeptical of any attempt to ground the meanings of narratives—either as lives of individuals or signs—in a logocentric fashion (coined by Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstructionism); that is, the belief that there is a single correct way of narrating an event or a life history/story.

To avoid the trap of logocentrism, postmodern researchers experiment with other forms of styles of writing (Van Mannen 1988). Some propose impressionistic style; others opt for confessional tales, while some feminists favor the use of poetry (Richardson 2003). In experimenting with writing styles, postmodernists intend to undermine the distinction between fictional writing and non-fiction (Rosenblatt 2003:225). The boundary between fact

and fiction itself is a socially constructed category. Postmodern writers do so by focusing on the rhetorical devices used by researchers to lend credibility to their authorial voices (Gusfield 1976).⁶ This leads postmodern researchers to be skeptical about the “truths” they produce: “in our awareness of the social construction of reality, the rhetoric of writing social research reports, and the inevitable limits, biases and subjectivity (often covert) of research, we are ever more skeptical if the status of the provisional truths we have to offer” (Rosenblatt 2003: 226).

Challenging the canons of validity. Because postmodernists are skeptical about science-based definitions of validity, postmodern researchers propose new alternative ways of grounding and defining validity. They strongly reject definitions of validity that are tailored for all types of research (Curtin and Fossey 2007: 89). As Maines (1998: 29) points out, “whether an account is regarded as valid is a function of the social contexts and conventions that the members of those contexts use to construct validity as a criterion for truth claims.” Hence the search for alternative forms of validity is very strong among qualitative researchers with strong postmodern orientation. Catherine Reissman (1993: 64-65), for instance, speaking within narrative research, argues that the truth of narrative research is not based on factual recording of facts. Because narrative facts are also products of interpretation. Hence validation shifts from the question of truthfulness to “trustworthiness.” As she explains, “Trustworthiness not truth is a key semantic difference: the latter assumes an objective reality, whereas the former moves the process into the social world” (p. 65). Reissman lists four forms of validation, namely, persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic use. Other researchers suggest more daring alternatives to validation (Altheide and Johnson 1994). Patti Lather, in particular, gives four new meanings of validity:

- Validity as simulacra/ironic validity (multiple voices of the author, non-finality)
- Lyotardian paralogy/neopragmatic validity (emphasizes differences and contradictions, multiplicity, interruptions)
- Derridean rigour/rhizomic validity (emphasizes play and subversion from within, decentered authorship, unrepeatability)
- Voluptuous validity (male-female othering, marginal voices, and open texts)

While Lather looks for validity in recent philosophical currents, some postmodern researchers suggest that we must look for the source of authorial validity in ethnographic writing itself. Patricia Clough (1992: 2) provocatively

suggests, "Ethnography is the productive icon, of empirical scientific authority." Whatever definition one follows, postmodern researchers are in agreement that "it is apparent that validation in narrative studies [and other qualitative studies] cannot be reduced to a set of formal rules or standardized technical procedures" (p. 68; see also Czarniawska 1998: 5).

Deconstructing the quanti-quali divide. By loosening up the stringent demand for validity, postmodernists urge the blurring of the boundary between quantitative and qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Traditionally, qualitative research is often seen as only a preparatory stage for serious quantitative research (Brymann 1999: 36). But feminists and critical theorists strongly argue that science itself is an interpretive enterprise. Every step in the scientific analysis and experimentation involves necessarily subjective and interpretive understanding. Even precision and the use of numbers are not pivotal to distinguish quantitative research from qualitative one. Precision and the use of numbers are all functions of a situation and context. This leads Hammersley (1999) to suggest transcending the classical dualism between nomothetic (generalizing) and idiographic research (particularizing): "what is involved [in the quanti-quali divide] is not a simple contrast between two opposed standpoints, but a range of positions sometimes located on more than one dimension" (p. 80). For instance, quantitative research need not necessarily lead to formulation of strict social laws. And qualitative research may also produce probabilistic generalization based on analytic induction (Hammersley 1999: 78). Michael Crotty (1998: 41) therefore rightly suggests that the issue is not between qualitative and quantitative research but between positivist and non-positivist orientation of research. This leads to methodological pluralism that rejects the privileging of one method over the other (Johnson and Cassell 2001: 140).

The reflexive turn: Today ethnographers, as the result of the postmodern crisis in the social sciences, have become more reflexive about the philosophical grounding of their own research practices (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Atkinson 1990; Benton and Craib 2001; Denzin 2003). Bourdieu cautions sociologists against denying the fact the she is a "cultivated subject of a particular culture" and thereby failing to "subordinate his practice to a continuous questioning of this relationship" (p. 72). He advocates a "sociology of sociology" that is widely discussed today in ethnographic research as reflexivity (Brettell 1993; Coffey 1999). In *New Approaches to Social Research*, Carol Grbich defines reflexivity:

Reflexivity can be simply defined as viewing the self and the process of data collection and interpretation in a critical and detached manner through internal dialogue and constant (ad intensive) scrutiny of what I know and how I know it (Hertz, 1997: viii) in the development of knowledge claims" (p. 71).

Alvesson (2002) offers another postmodern definition: (2002): "It stands for conscious and systematic efforts to view the subject matter from different angles, and to avoid strongly privileging a favored one" (p. 171). This obsession with reflexivity leads many sociologists to castigate themselves in confessional rhetoric and away from addressing real issues in research.

A CRITICAL REALIST RECUPERATION OF SOCIOLOGY

To be a realist today in sociology means being associated with dogmatism, Enlightenment, and Absolutism, not to mention being out of the most recent intellectual fashion in the West. But I believe that a good defense of critical realism can be mounted. Following Andrew Sayer, I also believe that critical realism is the best alternative midway between positivism and the irrational tendencies in postmodernism. If, as realists, we take it that there is a reality independent of our consciousness, then, we can be mistaken about it. But if from the beginning we believe that reality is socially constructed, then, how could we ever know we are wrong? This seems to open to the door to the floodgates of relativism.

Critical realism must be distinguished first from positivism. In fact, critical realism shares with postpositivist philosophies of science some of basic criticisms against positivistic view of science. There are many forms of realism. What I will defend here is the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar and others (Margaret Archer, Ted Benton, Andrew Collier, Andrew Sayer and others). Critical realism as a philosophical orientation of science originated with Roy Bhaskar (Steinmetz, 2004).⁷ Bhaskar and other realists rightly insist that science can be underwritten by various philosophies. What is often attacked by critics of scientific sociology is its positivistic orientation. The inability of the critics to distinguish various philosophies of science that can underwrite sociology is the main source of this acrimonious debate.⁸ From a critical realist point of view, philosophy requires metaphysical stance about what the world would be for science to be possible. But philosophy itself cannot tell us what the basic structures of the world are and how they differ from each other. It is the task of science (Bhaskar 1989: 7). To subsume science under philosophical analysis is to be guilty of "speculative idealism," while to subsume philosophy

into scientific logic is to fall into now-defunct positivist illusion. What philosophy can only do is to produce knowledge about the necessary condition for true knowledge to obtain.⁹

THE REAL, ACTUAL, AND EMPIRICAL: AGAINST HUMEAN VIEW OF THE WORLD

The fundamental premise of realism, which sets it apart from idealism, is there is a world out there independent of human consciousness (Keat and Urry 1989: 230). Critical realism further distinguishes between the real, the actual, and the empirical. The real is what is there independent of the way we perceive the world. The real consists of causal mechanisms that make events in the world possible (Ekstrom 1992: 116). The actual is the event that happens in a specific time and space coordinate in accordance with the confluence of specific variables. Following this distinction it becomes clear that positivism errs in equating the actual with the empirical. The Humean definition of law as “constant conjunction of events” does not obtain in nature (Harre, 1970:105). They are rare and could only be replicated in laboratories. What is actual and real may not necessarily be empirical. Moreover the empirical cannot exhaust the description of things. This is also the fallacy of positivism and its postmodern critics. Because positivists shun away any talk about unobservable essences they stay on the level of the empirical (Keat and Urry 1989: 30). The postmodernists, on the other hand, reduce experience to linguistic formulation. This is paradoxical. For by equating science with the empirical as the positivists do, and to discourse as postmodernists do, both become trapped in the “anthroporealism” (truth is human experience-based) (Bhaskar 1986: 8). Critical realists insist that the object of science is not to deal with instantiation of the laws of nature but to explain the causal mechanism and the properties of things that trigger these events. This is the intransitive dimension of science. This solves the problem of induction. The problem of induction is not the quantitative number of repetition in nature but in the investigating the properties of things that make up such regularities in an open system (Bhaskar 1986: 31).¹⁰

INTRANSITIVE AND THE TRANSITIVE DIMENSION OF SCIENCE

Second, critical realism distinguishes the transitive and intransitive dimensions of science. The intransitive dimension shows that the “objects of the scientific investigation are typically structured and intransitive, that is, irreducible to patterns of events and active independently of their identification

by human beings" (Bhaskar 1989: 11; see also Keat and Ury 1989: 232). The intransitive objects of knowledge are in general invariant to our knowledge of them; they are the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world; and for the most part they are quite independent of us ... They are the intransitive, science-independent, objects of scientific discovery and investigation (Bhaskar 1997: 22).

The major offshoot of this distinction is that science is both progressive and fallible. It is progressive because science is able to know the intrinsic nature of things (the causal mechanism that is not necessarily exhausted in the empirical), while respecting the position of postmodernists and postpositivists critics that scientific truth can never be final. Scientific discoveries are made not from immaculate standpoint but only within a given social condition. This is the transitive dimension. Science therefore is a social practice whose aim is to discover the intransitive dimension. Because postmodernists equate truth with the context of justification, they are guilty of "epistemic fallacy". That is, "decreeing that ontological questions can always be transposed into an epistemological key, i.e., that statements about being either just are or may always be parsed as statements about knowledge" (Bhaskar 1986: 6).¹¹

Consequently critical realism embraces epistemic relativism on the level of the transitive. This realization has been forcefully argued by the postpositivist philosophers of science. Science is always grounded in social praxis and therefore there are multiple ways of looking at the world. But where they err is in embracing judgmental relativism. This kind of relativism, as Andrew Sayer argues, is just a pretext to avoid theoretical disagreement.

EMANCIPATORY NATURE OF SOCIOLOGY

The emancipatory role of sociology. Unlike positivist science, critical realism shares with the feminist and critical theorists the position that sociology should be able to use its findings and analysis to uncover existing oppressive structures and false consciousness. Bhaskar and critical realists agree that social science can be used to uncover false consciousness of people. Hence it can support certain values that would serve human needs. However critical realism does not argue the obverse of this position: that values can validate factual data. Of course values do intrude in the validation of certain factual claims as feminists and sociologists of knowledge would claim. But values themselves can never legislate the final validation of factual claims.

STRATIFIED SOCIAL REALITY AND OVERDETERMINATION

Critical realism is founded on a conception of ontological depth. It posits the existence of a certain layer of structures or mechanisms, but seeks to move beyond and explain what generates these events. When a stratum of reality has been described, the next step should be to examine what mechanisms underlie or intersect with this level and so on. This is a radical approach focusing on processes of emergence and change.

Because reality is stratified, causation is multifaceted. The social world is composed of countervailing tendencies and forces that might not necessarily produce uniform results (Manicas, 1987). This is premised on the distinction between a closed and open system. In an open system certain predictions may not obtain because of the overdetermination of events. Social sciences, especially sociology, operate within the domain of open systems. In the social realm, CR defines a closed system "as one in which a constant conjunction of events obtains; i.e. in which an event of type a is invariably accompanied by an event of type b" (Bhaskar 1978: 70); and it defines an open system as one "where no constant conjunction of events prevail" (ibid., 13).

Hence, unlike positivism, critical realism promotes indeterminacy. The focus of research is shifted from excessive search for regularities in social world to the causal mechanisms that trigger or inhibit certain predicted events. Critical realism argues that the social world is structured in a certain way and that it contains dominant generative mechanisms which exert a powerful influence over the social formation. So while it acknowledges overdeterminism it also believes in causal priority of certain mechanism (for instance, in Marxism, society is seen as founded on basic material relations and operates through material production, appropriation and labour).

TRANSFORMATIONAL MODEL OF SOCIAL ACTION

Finally, critical realism provides a way of transcending the problem of agency and structural determinism. Bhaskar offers the transformative theory of social action as a model of social action. The transformational model of human activity argues that the social world is made up of structures and that these structures must be reproduced through human activity. However, it also argues for the open and stratified character of the social world. Because of the complex inter-relations between different structures, mechanisms and practices there is no guarantee that reproduction will take place automatically. Such a position veers away from functionalist/structuralist determinism and

the voluntarism of humanistic sociologies (phenomenology, existential sociology, and symbolic interactionism, etc.).

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOLOGY IN THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

Critical realism is premised on the hermeneutic grounded-ness of sociology. Hence it is amenable to postcolonial critique of sociology. Sociology must always be based on the interpretation of the life world of the subjects. It therefore rejects the colonial and imperialistic tendencies in positivist oriented sociological research that uncritically imposes Western categories on local cultures. This stance also follows from the critical realist notion of metacritique that is already built-in in its practice. Critical realism, by embracing sociology as a form of practice, demands from sociologists a rigorous critique of their own presuppositions derived from the social world. This is consistent with the reflexivity demanded by postmodern sociologists and the advocates of the strong program in the sociology of knowledge. But it does not follow the path of postmodern critique of Western social science: rejection of science in favor of indigenous knowledge. While social science is practiced in a definite historical and cultural location, nevertheless, it does not mean that there is no possibility for cross-cultural dialogue.

Second, it re-directs sociologists to re-define the use of quantitative methods in sociological research. Again, consistent with the postmodernist critique, critical realism emphasizes the importance of qualitative method in uncovering the causal mechanisms in explaining social phenomenon. However it does not take side in the methodological debate. Methodological dispute should not be confused with ontological questions.

Finally, critical realism can be a potent ally of radical Filipino sociologists (critical theorists, Marxists, postcolonial theorists, and feminists) who believe in the emancipatory goal of social research. It embraces wholeheartedly the intersection of values, politics, and social research. However, critical realism also provides a corrective to the otherwise nihilistic and relativistic tendencies that can arise from this recognition (that postmodernists exploit quite mistakenly). Values can be debated and sociology can contribute in resolving value conflicts. It provides a viable way out from the Humean veto against deriving value judgment from empirical analysis.

In short, critical realism is the most viable philosophical position that could re-new social theory in *fin de siècle*. It is the only position that could mediate between the now defunct positivism and the nihilistic tendencies in

postmodernism.¹² It is more persuasive than postmodernism because it is able to assimilate most of the valid criticisms against positivism, while providing a strong ontology for social research. Thus, Filipino sociologists are well advised to turn to serious study of critical realism rather than allowing themselves to be seduced into the nihilistic aporias and theoretical *cul-de-sac* of the postmodern turn.

NOTES

- 1 Denzin and Lincoln (1994), two major bellwethers of the postmodern movement in social research also use the term “crisis of legitimation” to highlight the circularity of validating the language of social research without appealing to external reference or standard.
- 2 The following discussion is taken from my essay on The Postmodern Turn in Social Research (for CHED Project Manual for Social Research under Dr. Ester de la Cruz).
- 3 Cicourel (1964) specifically criticizes the claimed objectivity in survey interviews. He rightly observes, “The authors [researchers] are not aware that too much stress has been placed on asking questions and recording answers, and that the interviewer is overlooking...the many judgments he made in the process” (p. 91). Jack Douglas (1985), more than any other sociologists, has been very effective in dismantling the supposed objectivity in survey interviews.
- 4 Max Weber would have agreed with the assertion of postempiricist philosophers of science and feminists that “At a deeper level, many scientists are motivated by respect for and wonderment at the integrity, otherness and intrinsic beauty of the objects of their investigation” (Benton and Craib 2001:45). Furthermore even “the pursuit of objective knowledge about the world itself implies value commitments—namely, not to misrepresent the results of experiment, to give serious considerations to arguments against one’s views...” (p. 44). Weber however strictly distinguishes between values that inform the sociologist’s choice of topic with the values that enter in the validation of empirical data.
- 5 This sixth moment refers to the “the moment of discovery and rediscovery as new ways of looking, interpreting, and writing are debated and discussed” (Denzin 1997:23). This is the postmodern condition.
- 6 Rosenblatt (2003: 231), for instance, argues that in simplifying research reports, there is already a fictionalizing process involved.

- 7 Critical realism is now widespread among social scientists (Dean, Joseph, Roberts, Wright 2006), educational researchers (Egbo 2005; Corson 2000), among geographers (Roberts 2001; Lovering 2007; Pratt 1995), social work (Houston 2001); historical studies (Steinmetz 2008), statistical analysis (Mingers 2006; Steele 2005), Marxist theory (Roberts 1999; Callinicos), and economic theory (Peacock 2007; Fleetwood 1999; Lawson 1994), organizational analysis (Tsang 1999; Leca and Naccache 2006), and even among qualitative researchers (Porter 1993; Hammersley 1992).
- 8 Critics like Clough (2009) and Denzin, for instance, two bellwethers of postmodernist sociology, fail even to consider critical realism as opposed to empiricism, which they equate with positivism.
- 9 So Bhaskar also calls his project “transcendental realism” to highlight its Kantian twist. Philosophy must assume the intelligibility of science and it asks the question what the world must be like for scientific practice to be possible” (1989: 9).
- 10 Steele writes, “By its focus upon noumena, as opposed to methods for interpreting phenomena, critical realism purports to avoid the problem of induction by bypassing epistemology in favor of ontology: “Nature’s uniformity . . . derives not from the ‘accidental’ regularities of sequences of contingently related things but from the internal relations, structures and ways-of-acting of things themselves” (Sayer 1999: 158). Instead of regarding “events” as occurring in (observable) “conjunctions” whose lawlike repetition is epistemologically problematic, CR regards events as expressions of noumenal essences” (see Steele 2005).
- 11 Bhaskar (1989) lists three steps in scientific production: identification of a range of phenomenon, construction of a model to explain it and test it against reality, and identification of generative mechanism that works beneath the empirical.
- 12 A recent alternative is “culturalized social science” that emphasizes the performative side of research rather than uncovering the deep mechanism of social structure (Reed and Alexander, 2009). Against this “fashionable” tendency we must insist in the “obdurate” character of social structures. This alternative commits the culturalist version of the epistemic fallacy, i.e., reducing the question of ontology to cultural meanings.

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