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Disaggregating Structures: An Agenda for Critical Realism?

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Disaggregating Structures: An Agenda for Critical Realism?

Stuart McAnulla's thoughtful discussion of our work includes a welcome willingness to join the conversation we hope our work will promote – the conversation about where political science might go after the death of positivism. He joins this conversation to argue that critical realism offers an alternative to an interpretive approach. We agree the socialist tradition, including critical realism, is a strand of political science that has been marginalized by the dominance of positivism and modernist empiricism (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 48-52). We would add that the socialist tradition has provided much of the inspiration for interpretive political science. That inspiration comes from the social humanism of the New Left and a post-Marxism that also draws on structuralism (Bevir and Trentmann 2002). In contrast, critical realists have played little part in developing interpretive approaches to political science, at least until now.

McAnulla holds out the intriguing prospect that critical realists might be able to rethink their position to make it post-positivist and perhaps even post-foundational. In reply, we want to clarify our own position and offer some remarks on the post-positivist analysis of structure. We want to encourage critical realists to disaggregate the concept of structure, and to reject appeals to concepts of structure that are incompatible with postfoundationalism. As there is limited space, we focus on the key theoretical issues and not the illustrations.¹

On ontology

McAnulla agrees with us that it is important to rethink political science and make it fit with post-positivism and even postfoundationalism. However, he suggests that our interpretive approach shares an “epistemic fallacy” more often associated with positivism. This epistemic fallacy consists in reducing ontological propositions about what there is in the world to epistemological ones about what counts as justified knowledge. McAnulla elides a distinction between two versions of the epistemic fallacy. We would suggest that we do not commit the first, and, although we commit the second, it is not a fallacy.

The idea of the epistemic fallacy was originally formulated as a critique of positivists who ruled out reference to objects that could not be observed, including, for instance, moral values and mental states. The first version of the epistemic fallacy concerns a positivist epistemology. It is that our ontological commitments are limited to the objects we perceive; we should dismiss as nonexistent all entities other than those we observe. As postfoundationalists, we simply do not commit this fallacy. To the contrary, we allow for the existence of all kinds of unobservable entities, most notably those postulated by folk psychology, such as beliefs and desires.

At times McAnulla appears to adopt a different, second version of the epistemic fallacy. This alleged fallacy is found in any attempt to limit ontological commitments to objects of which we have knowledge. It is, to repeat McAnulla’s words, that “statements about *being* can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about *knowledge*”. But, we would ask, why is this a fallacy? Far from being a fallacy, it is a valid – almost trite – conclusion. Surely we are bound to say that what is real is what we know to be real? No

doubt we should allow that we might be mistaken about what we know is real. Although we know that humans exist and fire-breathing dragons do not, we could be mistaken about this, and we could come to ascribe existence to dragons.

Yet, the fact that we might be mistaken, cannot give us grounds for ascribing existence to something we currently know is not real. It cannot legitimate our currently saying dragons exist. No doubt we also should allow that if people hold different epistemologies they might conclude that different things exist. Yet, when people disagree, they disagree precisely about what they think they know is real, and so their various statements about being are all ones that can be analysed as claims about what we know. So, an obvious way to begin a post-positivist conversation with critical realists is to ask what ontological commitments are and are not compatible with an epistemological rejection of positivism and perhaps even of foundationalism.

On structures

Critical realists such as McAnulla would agree with us in ascribing existence to: human beings, beliefs, actions, and (it seems) traditions and dilemmas. They then want to add a further ontological commitment to structures. We do not necessarily neglect nor oppose structures. However, we have two concerns about an ontological commitment to them. First, critical realists misleadingly clump different types of objects under the single term “structure”. Second, critical realists continue to rely on foundationalist themes in their understanding of structures.

To begin, though, we should correct miss-apprehensions about our ontology. Our procedural individualism asserts that meanings are always meanings for specific people

(Bevir 1999: 52-62). People hold beliefs and attach meanings to texts broadly conceived. Beliefs do not exist apart from the people who hold them. And texts do not have intrinsic meanings. So, we oppose appeals to meanings as allegedly existing at any systematic extra-individual level apart from the inter-subjective one. But procedural individualism does not imply that “all causal weight is burdened onto agency”. To the contrary, we clearly argue – as McAnulla recognises – that agency is situated against the background of traditions and dilemmas, both of which thus bear causal weight. We also would allow that explanations of the consequences of actions might require us to assign causal weight to factors other than agency, tradition, and dilemma. It is in the concepts of tradition and dilemma, and in the gap between actions and their consequences, that we leave room for concepts akin to that of structure.

(i) Disaggregating structure

Although we are willing to allow for concepts akin to structure, we are concerned that critical realists use the term “structure” without providing a clear analysis of the objects to which it refers. The term “structure” needs to be disaggregated. It needs to be unpacked into different types of object. Perhaps it might help if we list some of these objects. For each object, we give our analysis, including an account of its relation to human actions, and a sign of where we suspect critical realists might diverge from our analysis.

Tradition. A tradition is the ideational background against which individuals come to adopt an initial web of beliefs. It influences (without determining or – in a strict philosophical sense – limiting) the beliefs they later go on to adopt. The philosophical

justification for this definition of tradition derives from a postfoundational rejection of autonomy with a defence of situated agency. Traditions help to explain why people hold the beliefs they do; and because beliefs are constitutive of actions, they also help to explain actions. They cannot fully explain actions partly because people act on desires as well as beliefs, and partly because people are agents capable of innovating against the background of a tradition. While a tradition explains why an agent adopted an initial web of beliefs, it itself is composed solely of the beliefs of other actors. Because critical realists have been relatively slow to concentrate on meanings, we are especially unsure how they would conceive of traditions. McAnulla suggests they might unpack them as systematic extra-individual level meanings. If they do, they need an analysis of how meanings can exist apart from for individual subjects.

Dilemma. A dilemma is any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs and so forces them to alter the beliefs they inherit as a tradition. It combines with the tradition to explain (although not determine) the beliefs people go on to adopt and so the actions they go on to perform. Dilemmas and traditions cannot fully explain actions both because actions are informed by desires as well as beliefs and because people are agents who respond creatively to any given dilemma. Although dilemmas sometimes arise from experiences of the world, we cannot equate them with the world as it is because experiences are always theory-laden. Like meanings in general, dilemmas are always subjective or inter-subjective. Critical realists appear to adopt concepts such as dilemma or pressure to refer to the sources of change. But they sometimes appear then to define pressures as "structural" to equate them with the world as it is. If they are to define dilemmas or pressures in this way, they need an analysis of how these pressures lead

people to change their beliefs and actions. They need to argue either that people are bound to experience a pressure as it is, or that a pressure leads to new actions (and so presumably beliefs) even though the actor has no subjective awareness of it.

Practice. A practice is a set of actions, often a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Practices often give us grounds for postulating beliefs, for we can ascribe beliefs to people only in interpreting their actions. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions since people act for reasons of their own. People sometimes act on their beliefs about a practice, but, when they do, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs about the practice, and, of course, these beliefs need not be accurate.

There is a sense in which practices can constitute the consequences of actions. The effects of actions often depend on the responses of others. So, if we equate a practice with the set of actions by which others respond to an act, then, by definition, that practice constitutes the consequences of the act. Still, we should remember here that the practice is composed solely of the contingent actions of individuals. Hence, it is these actions in their diversity and contingency that constitute the consequences of the action, and we explain these actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, rather than by reference to the practice itself.

When critical realists appeal to “structures”, they often evoke something akin to a practice, while ascribing to it a constraining power greater than our analysis allows. If they do want to ascribe such constraining power to practices, they need to specify what they mean by constraint and how exactly practices constrain actions. Clearly practices – or at least the actions of others – constrain the effects, and so effectiveness, of an action.

What remains unclear is how practices could constrain the actions people might attempt to perform.

Unintended consequences. Clusters of actions can have consequences that – unlike actions themselves – are not constituted by intentional states. If a thousand people try to drive their cars across the Golden Gate Bridge at 9am on a Monday morning, the result will be a traffic jam. Such unintended consequences are emergent properties of clusters of actions. We can explain them by reference to these actions, which in turn we explain by reference to the intentional states of the actors. Unintended consequences cannot explain actions. When people act in accord with their beliefs about the unintended consequences of a set of actions, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs, which might not be accurate. Critical realists sometimes appear to assimilate all structures to unintended consequences whereas most structures are surely traditions or practices. One issue here is whether unintended consequences constrain actions. If critical realists want to argue they constrain the actions people can attempt to perform (as well as those they can succeed in performing), they face the same issues we raised when considering practices.

(ii) Philosophical pitfalls

To disaggregate the concept of structure is to suggest there is a case for dropping the term for more specific ones. Postfoundationalists might also add that the use of the term “structure” evokes a lingering attachment to foundationalist themes. Perhaps it might help if we list some of the foundationalist themes associated with use of the term.

Ideational vs. material. Critical realists sometimes define the ideational and material as contrasting facets of the social world. In contrast, postfoundationalism implies that all experiences are constructed in part by prior theories, so all beliefs are similarly constructed, which means that all actions, practices, and institutions are informed by ideas, beliefs, or theories. For postfoundationalists, the entire social world thus appears to be infused by meanings. They are thus sceptical of a distinction between ideational and material aspects of the social world. Critical realists sometimes associate the material with the economy. In sharp contrast, postfoundationalists suggest that the economy is a product of actions infused with ideas, beliefs, or theories. Critical realists sometimes associate the material with interests. Again postfoundationalists differ, suggesting that people's interests are never simply given to them. People construct their understanding of their interests in part through their ideas, beliefs, or theories.

Social concepts as 'natural' kinds. Critical realists sometimes treat social concepts as if they captured natural kinds. They argue that social concepts are – in one of their favourite similes – analogous to water in having an essence (H₂O), which is common to all cases of the things to which the concept refers, and which also explains other features and properties of these things. We suspect that critical realists treat social concepts as natural kinds precisely because they think of them as referring to a material part of the social world that is not constructed in part by ideas or theories. In contrast, postfoundationalists often suggest that most – perhaps all – social concepts are pragmatic constructs. Appeals to essences are incompatible with the contingency implied by recognition of the constructed nature of the social world. So, postfoundationalists suggest that social concepts, including structures, are characterized by fuzzy boundaries, not

essences. They suggest that we can justify drawing the fuzzy boundaries only (if at all) by reference to our purposes, not a natural order.

A naturalist form of explanation. Critical realists sometimes equate social explanation as similar to explanation in the natural sciences. They suggest that we can explain social phenomena by reference to the causal properties of structures or other such social facts. This naturalism relies, of course, on the idea that structures have essences that explain other aspects of the social world. In contrast, postfoundationalists decenter structures precisely because they do not ascribe essences to them; they regard traditions, practices and the like as products of contingent actions and beliefs. Hence they look to alternative forms of explanation appropriate to the pragmatically-constructed concepts that allow for the meaningful and contingent nature of the social world. In their view, social explanations have distinctive forms such as those associated with narrative and genealogy.

An agenda for critical realists?

To conclude, we want to draw on the preceding analysis of structures to set out one possible agenda for critical realists who want to contribute to a postfoundational political science. We would most welcome further discussion of these questions:

- (i) What types of structure are there?
- (ii) Do discursive structures exist as objects independent of subjective and even inter-subjective intentionality?
- (iii) Can any type of structure constrain beliefs and so the actions people might think of performing?

- (iv) Do structures ever generate unmediated pressures, or are all pressures experienced only as theory-laden dilemmas?
- (v) Are some structures non-ideational (or material) in that they are not even in part constructs of contingent beliefs embodied in actions?
- (vi) Which (if any) of the different types of structure resemble natural kinds with essences?
- (vii) What forms of explanation are appropriate to each type of structure?

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Notes

¹ Also, we seek to open debate, not close it, and defending, for example, our interpretations of Thatcherism and New Labour will get in the way of developing an agenda for critical realism. For a book-length analysis of New Labour, which is not discussed by McAnulla, see Bevir 2005.