### Frederic Vandenberghe – The critical in critical realism

**Timothy Rutzou:** Fred, you have been involved in an intimidating number of theoretical circles including critical theory, critical realism, Bourdieu, MAUSS…so the first question I want to ask is why critical realism? How did you come to critical realism, and what did it do for you?

**Frederic Vandenberghe:** It was really when I was doing my Ph.D. I was working on theories of reification and alienation in German social theory, from Marx, Weber, Simmel and Lukács via the Frankfurt School to Habermas.[[1]](#footnote-1) At the time, during the early 90’s, Giddens was the star of sociology. Structuration theory got a lot of traction and I happened to be in Cambridge as a visiting scholar for six months. Reification it is a rather thorny issue because there are two distinct approaches to the problem: a realist one and a constructivist one; one that is more macro; the other that is more micro-sociological. Either you say reification is objective and structural, out there in the world, or it is subjective and resides in our concepts. I ended up theorizing reification in terms of the former, and coming from a critical theory tradition and heavily influenced by the Frankfurt school, I was concerned with the alienated autonomy of social structures: the manner in which structures become independent, estranged and removed from human agency with the results that people are deprived of their agency, subjects are transformed into objects, and objects are turned into quasi-subjects with a life of their own. If, on the other hand, you take reification as a conceptual problem, then it is not the world that is out of joint, but the theories that spin out abstractions (like social structures, systems, capitalism, etc.) and take them for real. One is a matter of ontology, the other a matter of epistemology. So, these were the alternatives and I knew that I could go either way: arguing with critical theory against Giddens or with Giddens against critical theory. I was more interested in the social critique of reification than in the critique of conceptual hypostasis. But there is a problem, however, because the two concepts are interlinked and in tension with each other. We can see this most clearly in the Frankfurt School. They reified their critique of reification as it were. For historical and rhetorical reasons, they foregrounded domination and backgrounded social action, social processes and social movements. At the end of the day, it was no longer clear who was reifying what: Was society really reified or did they reify their conception of society? *One Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse is symptomatic of the metatheoretical dead end of critical theory. The structures of domination are so suffocating that there is no hope. With the exception of the theorist who denounces total reification, we are all trapped in the iron cage of industrial capitalism and critical theory just ends up painting black on grey.

Critical realism offered a solution to my metatheoretical problem of alienation and reification. While Giddens took a more praxeological and processual view of society and considered reification as a way of speaking, Margaret Archer introduced a distinction between analytical duality and empirical dualism. This distinction allowed me to affirm with force the autonomy of social structures, which is a precondition for analyzing the alienated autonomy of social structures. From a morphogenetic perspective, social structures could be both autonomous and dependent on action. With critical realism, I could thus think the autonomy of social structures and the autonomy of the actors at the same time. Structures and agents have their own autonomy and their own causal powers. They have different ontological properties. With Giddens´s theorem of the duality of agency and structure, the autonomy of social structures could not be properly thematized, let alone their being out of joint and out of control. Being able to think through the distinction between ontology and epistemology is what made the difference. Once the emergence and autonomy of social structures was conceptually granted, I could move to a critical analysis of their estrangement, their alienation of human agents and their alienating effects on human agents. This is a more normative argument and presupposes the articulation of some normative conception of the human being, which would then be used to judge and criticize reification as a systemic deviation. As a Habermasian, I was faulting Archer for her lack of an explicit philosophical anthropology – this was before her publication of *Being Human* - but I confess that I myself had not sufficient clarity about the normative foundations of critique at the time.

**Tim:** Now, you have written a book titled, *What’s Critical About Critical Realism*. Given how central critical theory is to your thinking… well…what do you think is critical about critical realism?

**Fred:** I should perhaps first answer why I wrote that book with that title… I was looking for a snappy title.

**Tim:** Haha… well… thank you for your honesty

**Fred:** But I like the title! In fact, the critical in What’s critical about critical realism can be understood in two ways. It could mean what is *central* in critical realism as in what is the critical core of critical realism. It could mean critical in the sense of critical theory, the Marxist and Hegelian tradition, which critical realism certainly is a part of. Don´t forget it was largely started by a group of Marxists! People like Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Sayer, Andrew Collier… But it could also be what is *critical* about critical realism in the sense of what are the problems of critical realism, and more importantly by drawing on different strands in social theory, how can we make it stronger? When it comes to questions of critique, I think you have “positive” critiques and “negative” critiques. I always try to do positive critiques. The point is not to make a position weaker, but by bringing it into dialogue with other traditions, you want to make them stronger. I no longer see the point of negative critique. I am interested in dialogue and reconstruction. Critical realism is helpful because it is able to bring ontological and epistemological questions to bear on other traditions, such as German critical theory or French historical epistemology. With critical realism, you are able to highlight shortcomings and more importantly move beyond them. But the reverse also holds for critical realism itself. By drawing on other traditions, like hermeneutics, pragmatism and phenomenology, which I don’t think critical realism does well, I wanted to strengthen critical realism and push it in a more idealist, cultural and praxeological direction.

**Tim:** Now, for you, critical theory has been one of those traditions with which to dialogue, but one of the other key figures you often go back to is Bourdieu.

**Fred:** True. I did my Ph.D. in France and at the time, you did not have that many choices. The field was dominated by a few positions. Methodological individualism, a kind of rational choice that was upheld by Raymond Boudon, was not my direction at all. Touraine´s action theory was interesting, but I thought his theory of social movements was conceptually rather woolly. And then you had Bourdieu, who was on a different plane and played in a different league. He was very strong on theory. If you are interested in the philosophy-theory connection, then there is a lot in Bourdieu that makes him very attractive. He has reworked the whole of European or Western sociology (not just the classics, plus Marcel Mauss, but also Manheim, Elias, Goffman, etc.) to reformulate and integrate them in his own theory of the social world. He is truly an exceptional theorist. The best of his generation. At the same time, he is not just doing theoretical theory, which is something I must say, as a theoretical theorist, I do admire. Although I love micro-sociology, I do not really do fieldwork, but I recognize that theory should not simply be theoretical. Moreover, there is also a critical juncture in Bourdieu that is very important. I always read Bourdieu as in continuity with, and as heir of, the Frankfurt School. He´s at it were the successor of Adorno. At the time, this definitely was not done. Now the connection has been reestablished through the dialogue between Axel Honneth and Luc Boltanski. I think, however, it is better to see Bourdieu as a continuation from the *first* generation of critical theory, with all its strengths, but also with its weaknesses. Like the early Frankfurt School its strength *and* weakness would be that it is a theory of domination and reproduction. Like them, Bourdieu is a hyper-critic. He’s hopeful but at the same time he has a vision of the world which is suffocating. All that said, Bourdieu is a formidable thinker and, nowadays, I think he keeps sociology together. You cannot ignore Bourdieu. You can like or dislike him. He is the hegemon of the field. If we did not have the notions that everybody knows by now, of field, habitus, capital and symbolic violence, it would be difficult to maintain the unity. Thanks to Bourdieu, we can have a common frame of reference and because of that we can talk across traditions and even across disciplines. Bourdieu is also able to give us a narrative. We have lost our narrative of social theory. The standard narrative is, basically, almost universally, the one that comes from Anthony Giddens and Jeffrey Alexander. You have Talcott Parsons who presented the first synthesis of the classics in the 1940’s and went on to dominate the field of sociology in the 50’s. In the 60’s, the hegemony of structural functionalism is increasingly challenged both by micro-sociology and by the Marxist front. The result is an opposition between micro and macro, agency and structure, which is then overcome in the grand theoretical syntheses of Habermas, Luhmann, Giddens and Bourdieu. This is the story of the 1980’s and 1990’s. But since then, we no longer have a coherent story. Or better, we keep the story, but add a few names, like Boltanski, Butler or Latour. I think by putting Bourdieu as the hegemon, perhaps in the way that Parsons was, you can capture and reorganize a narrative about social theory that reconstructs the recent history of social theory in helpful terms with reference to Bourdieu. Not just in France, but across the world. Archer, Honneth, Boltanski, Latour, Collins, you name it, they have all been influenced by Bourdieu and worked out their theory as a response to his.

**Tim:** Now, you have called, I think proactively, Bourdieu a critical realist

**Fred:** Well, if you look at Bourdieu epistemologically, you can see he is not a critical realist. He is a rationalist coming from the neo-Kantianism tradition of Ernst Cassirer on the one hand and the historical epistemology tradition of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem on the other. The biggest difference between Bourdieu and critical realism is that Bourdieu is ambivalent about realism and remains a neo-Kantian. For him, like for Saussure, the point of view creates the object. The task of the theorist is to construct models that are analogous with reality. When you´re a critical realist, you need to invert the neo-Kantian epistemology of Bourdieu. The epistemological vector goes from reality to theory and not, as neo-kantians and constructivists have it, from theory to reality. Once the realist correction is made and the vector is inverted, we are in the field of critical realism. But this is only at the highest level of philosophical abstraction, when you look at his epistemology. Once you go down into his social theory, what you can see is that the notions of field and habitus are absolutely realistic. What does Bourdieu actually say? His concept of the field as a system of relations between social positions is almost identical to Bhaskar´s concept of social structure. They have the same definition: both are generative systems of relations between positions that condition and determine the habitus associated with that position. And what is the habitus? It is a system of dispositions at the subjective level. Bhaskar was always thinking and talking about dispositions and tendencies in the social world. . That´s another nice fit. What is also very important is that as generative systems, both the field and the habitus are invisible as such; they can be observed in their effects, much in the way Bhaskar talks about causation and distinguishing between the real, the actual, and the empirical. So clearly by using critical realism, you can make a lot of sense of Bourdieu’s work and by forcing the interchange, we can really move forward. Reading together Bhaskar and Bourdieu, we can arrive at a strong synthetic integrative social theory. I would not hesitate to say that Bourdieu is our best example of critical realism, outside of critical realism, and somewhat opportunistically, I would recommend a realist recuperation.

At the same time, we need to be able to move beyond Bourdieu. When I say move beyond Bourdieu I am thinking about what it would look like to have a post-Bourdieusian social theory, which is not anti-Bourdieusian. I would say the same thing about critical theory. Bourdieu and critical theory are the starting points; you need to begin with the structures of domination: capitalism, colonialism, and so on. We also need to be able to move beyond that, though, both politically and theoretically; we have to see it not as an end point, but as a point of exodus. For me, it has become an existential issue—how can we find a way out, a way out at the same time of the types of society that we are living in, but also the kinds of theories that, even if they are critical, become a symptoms of their own hyper-critical diagnosis. That would be my position on Bourdieu and also on the whole tradition of critical theory, with the exception of Habermas.

**Tim:** I really like that idea of hyper-critique! Could you tell me more about that?

**Fred:** Critical theory was supposed to develop both a theory of domination and a theory of emancipation.The problem ofhyper-critique is that it only does half of the job. It insists so much on structures of domination that the emancipatory of social theory becomes an empty invocation. You see this in Adorno´s theological Marxism. He is analyzing the world down here, precisely from the world that possibly could be, but is not. I think the problem with this kind of critique is that it gives the intellectual impression of standing on top of the world and being able to see hell clearly. But precisely how to get out hell often becomes empty rhetoric. I got to this notion of hyper-critique because I myself, in an extended post-script to my work on reification and alienation, I wrote a study about bio-capitalism and post-humanism.[[2]](#footnote-2) I started with the Frankfurt School but reformulated it, through systems theory of Luhmann, adding a little bit of Foucault and Deleuze as well, and eventually, I “closed the system”. In my attempt to actualize critical theory, I had radicalized it. I argued that nowadays it was longer just the lifeworld that was colonized by capitalism, but life as such. I did not avoid the traps of “enlightened catastrophism” and fell right through its cracks to the bottom. It was more than a critical text; to the extent that there was no way out anymore, it was a hypercritical text and to the extent that I got scared of my own diagnosis, it was also a pathetic one. Capitalism was everywhere. It was already within your body, it already governed your existence. Perhaps it was a good analysis, but I felt that with Luhmann, with Foucault, with Deleuze, I had constructed a wall and run my head straight into that wall. From then onwards, I have been really looking for a way out and thinking about reconstruction, which is precisely the other side. That is where my own thinking started to converge with Roy Bhaskar´s philosophy of meta-Reality. I read the philosophy of meta-reality for contingent reasons, which is the time I spent in India. Unlike other people, can read those texts without immediately being shocked by the invocation of love, creativity and tantra. . I read Bhaskar´s spiritual works in the same way as David Graeber as a sketch of basic condition, a “baseline communism”[[3]](#footnote-3), and if we want another world then we need to think about such things as love, care, empathy, and sympathy. Which are not easy to theorize. I belong to a movement which is called MAUSS (*Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales*) which is of course also a reference to Marcel Mauss and his theory of the gift. It is a kind of Marx and Mauss, but moving beyond Marx. I think reconstruction goes in that direction, and the struggle with Marx is helpful because Marx is complex. He is the staunchest critic of utilitarianism but at the same time he has strong utilitarianism tendencies in his work. Marx is a doing hyper-critique but it is at the same time utopian. I am still struggling with that tension. But one thing I think is a helpful place to start - and I think that is the legacy of *second* generation of critical theory - is that the basic weakness in Marx is (of course) that democracy is an emptiness, a void. It is the kind of thing which is not central in the Marxist tradition. I think as well that there is sometimes also a lack of reflexivity of agents in Marx, which I also see in critical theory. It goes hand in hand with hyper-critique. You cannot theorize reification and alienation and then have an escape clause, whereby your analysis and your diagnosis is valid for everyone but not for you. This kind of epistemological privilege is something I find problematic in Marxism, and I find problematic in the first generation of critical theory, and I find problematic in Bourdieu as well. I don’t think it is enough to say we need more democracy in politics. I would say that, as academics, when we think of democracy we also need to think about democratizing research; we do not have the kinds of privileges anymore to stand outside of society and looking in, pronouncing from on high and ex cathedra. In research, just like in critique and diagnosis, we only have participants we must try to convince. It is a process of dialogue.

**Tim:** I am curious about what place you see morality playing in sociology, because I would say what you are talking about is almost building a political project of moral sociology.

**Fred:** Let me start with the fact value distinction, which I think is extremely problematic. And I think this has been the doxa within the field in the sense that value-freedom is something we have to strive for. If you understand this as we need to be objective, then of course there is nothing against, because there must be somehow somewhere the distinction between science and ideology. But if you like it back to Max Weber, and situate Weber within the history of moral philosophy, you can see he actually takes a very radical stance. He is basically a Nietzschean and his ethical neutrality is presupposed on relativism, nihilism, and decisionism, which is not a consensual position. I think the time has come to revise and rethink this doxa. The last time the debate about axiological neutrality was really on the table seriously was in the 1960’sand 1970’s and was part of the ping-pong game between Marxism and Weberianism. I think we need to come to a new consensus: the fact value distinction doesn’t work, and that sociology cannot be value free for the simple reason that facts seep into values and values seep into facts, but also because the Weberian position is not a consensual position, it is actually a very radical position which wipes out and crushes with a hammer the whole tradition of moral philosophy. So, I think we need to reclaim moral philosophy within sociology.

Ethics is something I feel extremely strongly about. It is something that concerns me. It is not just theory but practice. In this sense, the connection to ethics and morality was always there. When you start looking at the field of ethics, I think the question of justice is absolutely central, but at the same time, and I think you get this when you work on Habermas and when you come from the hermeneutical and philological tradition, it is also intersubjective. It is not just justice as in a theory of justice but it is also and always a question of justice in terms of intersubjectivity and interpersonal relations. This is I think what we have to look at and what we must think. Moving from diagnosis or deconstruction to reconstruction, from a negativism to positivism. If we think of in terms that come from Spinoza, we have to theorize not just with the sad passions such as anger or despair, and theorizing from the stomach up, but to think about the joyous passions, love, creativity, compassion. I think it is necessary to theorize these so that we do not lose hope and so that we can see what needs to be reinforced and what should be thought. There is a strong Habermassian communicative element I have in my thinking. Having worked on critical theory while also moving beyond critical theory, I would say my position is very second generation critical theory. In fact, if you want to find out where I stand, just assume I am a good Habermasian and you will be able to situate me; hermeneutics, dialogue, the critique of coercion, and the centrality of interpersonal relations. What characterizes Habermas’s position is always an ethical sensibility. This I see as a big difference with post-structuralism, which is more interested in aesthetics.

In this sense, coming from sociology and being social theorists, the question is more about how we are going to construct a continuity between sociology and moral philosophy. And this is where moral sociology comes in. Ethics or morality is not just something which is figurative but it is basically constitutive of what the social world and this should lead to a re-appreciation of sociology and the social sciences as being comprehensive human sciences and moral sciences concerned with a theory of institutions, practices, cultures, and a theory of morality. Today, however, what you see with moral sociology or moral science, is that we do not have comprehensive or grand theories anymore, whether it is Luhmann, Habermas, Bourdieu, or Giddens. Rather, what you can see, especially in the North American setting, is an attempt to theorize by staking out a certain distinct “theoretical” field or school with an appropriate title and empirical research program; it can be moral sociology, it can be relational sociology, pragmatism, analytical sociology, etc... but they are primarily just empirical programs concerned with understanding or explaining particular social phenomenon. This will not do. When I say moral sociology, I understand it in the strong sense and not just as kind of specialized field you are working on. For me, it is really about a dimension which is constitutive of the social world and not so much a subfield or an attempt at school-building or field building. In this sense, I would take some distance from what you can see in a *Handbook or a Companion*. That is not what I am doing. For me, moral sociology is an attempt to reconnect sociology to its origin, and is the continuation of the tradition of moral and practical *philosophy* by its own means. If you think about moral sociology you are generally probably thinking about someone like Durkheim. Durkheim, especially when you read him from a Maussian background, is not the conservative of which they are speaking when they teach first year students in sociology. I think Durkheim was probably the Habermas of his generation. He is a universalist, republican, and precisely -- I mean continuing one way or another the Kantian tradition -- incorporating the Aristotelean tradition. He knew what he was doing. Indeed, it was all about morality, solidarity, and fraternity. This is what I think we need. This dialogue between sociology, critical theory, and moral philosophy. I think of this position as HaberMaussian.

1. See *Une histoire critique de la philosophie allemande*. *Aliénation et réification,* 2 vols. (Paris: La Découverte, 1997-1998). For an abridged translation, see *A Philosophical History of German Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Posthumanism, or the Cultural Logic of Global Neo-Capitalism”, pp. 246-329 in What´s Critical about Critical Realism? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Graeber, D. (2012). *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. BROOKLYN, NY: Melville House. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)