

## CRITICAL REALISM. ANTI-UTILITARIANISM AND AXIOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

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# Critical Realism. Anti-Utilitarianism and Axiological Engagement<sup>2</sup>

*Frédéric Vandenberghe*

This paper is a call for resistance, cooperation and reconstruction. I want to suggest that if we want to get social theory back on track, we need to reconnect it to philosophy and clear some of the rubble —not just of positivism, but also of decisionism and utilitarianism. If we want to move forward and rebuild sociology as a social, moral and human science, we need to build a broad-based, rainbow-coloured triple alliance against positivism, axiological neutrality and rational choice. The point is not to set up a fight, however, but to open the way to a new social science and a new society. Neither critical realism nor anti-utilitarianism are negative doctrines, but eminently positive ones. The junction between critical realism and the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences, I propose is constructive and reconstructive. What we want is a philosophically grounded alternative to positivism and utilitarianism that conceives of society not as a closed system, but as a system that is open to transformation and of the human being, not as a calculator, but as a giver, a care-taker and an existential activist.

The title of the conference and the discussion so far suggest a common enemy: Positivism. In its different guises, it comes up in

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2. Paper presented at the Conference of the Critical Realism Network in Montreal in August 2017. I thank Phil Gorski, Georg Steinmetz, Doug Porpora and Tim Rutzou for their companionship over the years.

the social sciences as a form of naturalism, scientism or just plain method fetishism. Vanquished in theory, it comes back in practice —in the introductory courses to the philosophy of sciences that give an all too prominent place to Popper, Kuhn and Lakatos, none of whom have anything to say about the social sciences; and also in the standard format of the scientific article with its zero hypothesis, its dependent and independent variables, the statistical tables (which I just skip) and the conclusion that more research has to be done. It also appears in ontological assumptions of a linear universe, in the epistemology of the covering-law model, in the normative assumptions of axiological neutrality, in the technocratic assumptions of policy makers and, last but not least, in the philosophical anthropology with its Humean conception of the human as a kind of living billiard ball.

With its solid critique of the philosophical assumptions of positivism, critical realism has not only acted as an “underlabourer” of the D-N model, but I also want to suggest as its “undertaker.” By introducing a new conception of causality and breaking with the empiricist misconception of the experimental sciences, scientific realism has defeated empiricist realism on its own terrain. It offers a coherent transcendental-dialectical approach of reality that points beyond the “Erklären-Verstehen controversy.” Thereby, it brings the *Positivismusstreit* to a proper end. Coming after neo-Kantianism (Weber), neo-positivism (Popper), neo-Wittgensteinian philosophy (Winch) and critical theory (Habermas), critical realism is the grand finale that finishes the positivist struggle and defeats positivism.

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The struggle against positivism finds its extension in the struggle against value-neutrality. While critical realism is the final phase in the *Positivismusstreit* that started two centuries ago, the *Werturteilsstreit* still lingers on in the Weberian dogma of axiological neutrality. As professional sociologists, we all know the meaning, the sense and the relevance of Max Weber’s doctrine of axiological neutrality (*Wertfreiheit*). It is part of our common knowledge and, until recently, it was part of the doxa that one should not insert one’s own subjective evaluation in the object

one studies. For sure, when one is teaching, one should abstain from evaluation, refrain from indoctrination, and not behave like a “publicly remunerated petty prophet in the lecture-room” (Weber). But what appears at first as a reasonable position represents, in fact, if one approaches it as an ethical doctrine, a rather extreme position within the history of moral philosophy. Weber’s plea for *Wertfreiheit* is indeed inseparable from Nietzsche’s wholesale denunciation of ethics as resentment in disguise.

Since its original formulation in 1917, the doctrine of ethical neutrality has often been contested. In the 1960’s it was rejected for political reasons. This time we need to revise it for moral reasons. Recent developments in philosophy and sociology have questioned the possibility of an all too neat separation of fact and values. Phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists, hermeneuticians, pragmatists and analytical philosophers have amply shown that facts are not only theory —but also value-laden. One cannot properly describe facts without judging them. Poststructuralists, postcolonialists, feminists, critical theorists and adepts of the “Studies” have questioned not only the possibility, but also the desirability of neutrality within the human sciences. The expulsion of values from science and of science from values is not only arbitrary; it is an ideological non-starter.

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Assuming that it is possible to overthrow the doxa of axiological neutrality, we need to take the next step and bring back ethics into the social sciences and consider sociology as the continuation of moral philosophy by other means. We have recently noted a resurgent interest in moral sociology and moral anthropology. The sources for this renewed interest in ethics and morality are varied, but within the field of social theory, we can distinguish at least four currents that are consonant with the ethical turn: German critical theory (Habermas, Honneth, Forst); French pragmatism (Boltanski, Thévenot, Heinich), British critical realism (Bhaskar, Archer and Sayer) and American communitarianism (MacIntyre, Taylor and Walzer).

Within critical realism, there's a tendency to focus on human flourishing and the good life. While I welcome the return to Aristotle's eudemonia and even to Shankara's philosophy of non-duality, I think we need a broad spectrum-approach to ethics. Within the Western tradition, our current moral intuitions consist of a mixture of classical teleological conceptions of eudemonia (the "good life"), Judeo-Christian ethics of love, care and solicitude ("with and for others") and modern deontological conceptions of justice ("in just institutions"). Drawing on Paul Ricœur's incredible talent to compact complex materials into a mnemonic phrase, we can characterise our moral horizon in terms of a "*visée* of the good life with and for others in just institutions." We cannot simply rest content with personal self-realization. The dialectics of stances drive the quest for self-realization forwards, from the first, to the second and the third person perspective, and back. The dialogics of reciprocity that are built into language introduce a demand for self-determination, autonomy and universality. Personal well-being and social welfare are joined. Following Bhaskar's thoughtful revision of Marx's take on eudemonia, I'd like not only to argue that the free development of all is a precondition for the free development of each. With Habermas, I'd also want to redeem "the prospect of a self-conscious practice in which the solidary self-determination of all is to be joined with the authentic self-realization of each."

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With critical realism, we have a connection between the good life of each and justice for all. What we don't have, though, is the middle, intersubjective element in Ricoeur's formula: "the good life with and for others in just institutions." We get it, for sure, from Habermas's dialogical sociology and his discourse ethics, but as everybody knows, the rationalism is so strongly built into his language, that the moral sentiments of benevolence, sympathy, trust, care, recognition and gratitude are not sufficiently given their due. They are presupposed, but backgrounded. To bring them back to the fore, I will now introduce some of Marcel Mauss's moral insights from his famous on the gift into Habermas's theory and propose a "Habermassian" (!) theory of communicative

action. In Habermas, there's a motivational deficit. We know that people communicate with each other, but we don't know why they start the communication nor why they want to continue it. With Mauss, we can suggest that they exchange perspectives and communicate, because of the universal norm of reciprocity is built into communication as its engine: the triple obligation to give, to accept the gift and to return the gift forms the bedrock of social life. At a reflexive level, the norm of reciprocity is acknowledged by all universal religions and morality systems; more importantly, it is practiced as a matter of course in everyday life. Ultimately, it is what keeps society going.

Within contemporary developments in moral philosophy, there's a whole range of kindred theories that underscore alterity, intersubjectivity and sociability. I am particularly thinking here of post-habermasian theories of communication, theories of recognition and the ethics of care that are perfectly compatible with the theory of the gift. Like the theory of the gift, which is multiple and contains many strands, those theories refer, in fact, to complete, loosely articulated and overlapping paradigms. To underscore their inner plurality, they should be thought of as constellations within the firmament. While the image of constellations evokes a scattering around a given asterism (dialogue, care, gift and recognition) and a clustering around a major star that catches the eye (Habermas, Tronto, Mauss, Honneth), I think that the constellations can be interconnected and interarticulated in a more general theory of intersubjectivity and alterity. This is what I have attempted in *For a new classical social theory*, a book co-written in French with Alain Caillé.

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To make this theory of intersubjectivity more political, we can once again invoke MAUSS, but now spelled in capital letters as an acronym for the Movement of Anti-Utilitarianism in the Social Sciences. Founded by Alain Caillé in 1981, the movement gathers sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and heterodox economists who accept Mauss seminal insights on giving, solidarity and associative socialism as a platform to organize the resistance

against utilitarianism. Utilitarianism may well be the hegemonic worldview of today. It expresses itself in the classical writings of Mill and Bentham, but also in everyday instrumentalism and in the colonization of the social sciences by rational choice. Economics and political sciences have already surrendered to the RAT's. Anthropology and history are resisting. Sociology remains on the fence.

What we need is an alternative to the *Homo œconomicus*. The desolate vision of the Anthropos as a calculator, a strategist, a schemer can only be overcome in a positive philosophical anthropology that stresses the openness towards the other and acknowledges the importance of symbolic forms, values, norms and moral sentiments in the constitution social life. Gift-giving is not limited to primitive societies, nor to small communities. It continues to structure social life in contemporary societies. If the market and the state are driven by systems of interests, the associations of civil society are structured by the mechanism of reciprocity. To resist the colonization of the life-world (private sphere, public sphere, civil society) by the systems of the economy and the state, the ties of intersubjectivity that bind individuals to each other and create solidarity among them have to be strengthened.

The call for resistance to the colonization of the social sciences by rational choice comes from Margaret Archer; the critique of the colonization of the life-world comes from Habermas (who, by the way, has absolutely nothing to say about colonization *stricto sensu*). Critical realism and critical theory are united in their anti-utilitarianism.

Let me now, to conclude, once again cite Paul Ricœur's memorable phrase of the *visée* of the good life with and for the others in just institutions, to tie my argument together. In critical realism, we have a strong internal connection between eudemonia and justice. In the theory of communication and the theory of the gift, we have a strong linkage between intersubjectivity and solidarity. What is still needed is a theory that promises justice, but without giving up the good life with and for the others. We can get it through a sympathetic, convivial and sentimental correction to Habermas. The Kantian drive in his theorising is so strong though that along the way rationalism drives out moral sentiments, justice trumps the good life and the promotion of happiness is thrown out.

Even if we were to assume for a moment that the utopia of a fully deliberative democracy was to come into existence, in the absence of a substantive conception of the “good life,” nothing excludes that this well-ordered society might provide justice, though —and here’s the rub— without happiness. In the *Convivialist Manifesto*, Alain Caillé, myself and some fifty Francophone intellectuals have recently proposed “convivialism” as a successor to the secular ideologies of communism, socialism, liberalism and anarchism. Unlike Habermas, we do not privilege consensus, but we set off with social division, conflict and violence and conceive of social order not as a negation and denial of conflict, but as a continuously renewed attempt to manage the divisions and live with them: “how can we live together with one another without massacring each other” (Mauss). That is the central question that convivial societies have to satisfactorily resolve. For us, democracy is the answer. Not any democracy, but a democracy that is grounded in a solid axiological engagement. It is not a procedure, but a way of life; not a means, but an end in itself. Beyond the positivism of utilitarianism and the negativism of anti-capitalism, convivialism proposes a post-materialist vision of a possible future without continuous growth that finds its intrinsic motivation in the mere pleasure of coming together and acting in concert for a common purpose.