

# Newcastle University e-prints

---

**Date deposited:** 1<sup>st</sup> July 2010

**Version of file:** Author, final

**Peer Review Status:** Peer -reviewed

## **Citation for published item:**

Outhwaite W. [Realism and Consensus](#). *Sociological Analysis* 2009,**3** 1 109-111.

## **Further information on publisher website:**

[http://www.uet.edu.al/\(Website\)](http://www.uet.edu.al/(Website))

## **Publishers copyright statement:**

This paper was originally published by the European University of Tirana, 2009 and can be accessed from the URL below, with permissions:

[http://www.uet.edu.al/download/SA\\_Spring\\_09\\_web.pdf#page=111](http://www.uet.edu.al/download/SA_Spring_09_web.pdf#page=111)

Always use the definitive version when citing.

## **Use Policy:**

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not for profit purposes provided that:

- A full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- A link is made to the metadata record in Newcastle E-prints
- The full text is not changed in any way.

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

**Robinson Library, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE1  
7RU. Tel. 0191 222 6000**

## Realism and Consensus

As I warned the editor when undertaking to write this comment, I almost always agree with everything Peter Manicas writes in this area, and this article is no exception. All I can offer here are some reflections on the path he steers between objectivity, ethnographic scepticism and theory, retracing his path in slightly different terms. I take realism in its most basic sense to mean that there is usually a fact of the matter about which to agree or disagree, that things are not so radically indeterminate, nor we so radically diverse in our perceptions, that agreement can never be more than accidental. The point then becomes to discover what kinds of agreement or objectivity we may aspire to and in what fields.

It may be useful here to refer to Karl Mannheim's classic discussion of relationism in *Ideology and Utopia* and in a number of his earlier writings.<sup>1</sup> This tends to be brushed aside as a rather inadequate attempt to solve 'the problem of relativism', but it can, I think be shown to be a good deal richer than that. Taking the notion of opposed yet complementary perspectives in a quite literal (visual) sense,<sup>2</sup> Mannheim pursues the idea of an objective synthesis which does not rely on a positivistic myth of unmediated knowledge but operates precisely through taking into account the biases and distortions which inevitably accompany knowledge of human reality.<sup>3</sup>

We can I think, roughly following Mannheim, differentiate three states of social scientific agreement or disagreement. The first I shall call convergence or, following Gadamer, the 'fusion of horizons'<sup>4</sup>. Realists believe that meanings are real, that there is a fact of the matter about what words and sentences mean in a given language,

however much what we also call ‘meanings’ may spin off into more speculative directions. The ‘meaning of Hamlet’ may be impossibly broad, but ‘the Prince of Denmark’ has a clear sense and might have a reference, as ‘the Prince of Wales’ currently does in the UK. ‘Boot’ means one thing in English and another in German; there might be disagreement whether a heavy walking shoe or the Titanic are appropriately described, respectively, in these terms, but the core meanings are not in doubt. Agreement can also be sought in relation to historical events; commissions of historians are formed from time to time to attempt the production of an agreed narrative. This is undoubtedly difficult but not, I suggest, impossible. Nor, I think, is there a difference of principle between historical and (other) natural events. The latter may of course be repeatable in controlled experiments, but this does not, as historians and sociologists of science have repeatedly shown, guarantee the rationality and objectivity of the interpretations which are put on them: fashion, habit, hierarchies and personal antagonisms will often distort these.<sup>5</sup>

It is however in relation to historical events that we begin to see a second theme, which I shall call pluralism. Here, the diversity of perspectives is not seen as something to be overcome but is instead valued for its own sake. If you visit Battle Abbey, near the south coast of England and overlooking the site of the Battle of Hastings in 1066 which established Norman rule over much of what we now call Britain, an audioguide provides alternative accounts of the battle from the viewpoints of a Norman and a Saxon soldier and of a female civilian. Here, I think, the intention is that visitors appreciate the diversity of these perspectives, as in the approach which Manicas calls ethnographic scepticism. Going beyond this mere diversity, standpoint epistemologies defend something similar in more formal terms: a feminist or other

standpoint is shown to be particularly, if not uniquely, illuminating of a particular social situation.

The third approach, which Manicas identifies with theory and in particular the construction of theories of social mechanisms, can be linked with the tradition of dialectics from Hegel, through Marx and Lukács, to Derrida. Lukács provides perhaps the neatest example. In a chapter of *History and Class Consciousness* on 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg', he writes:

Classical economics and above all its vulgarisers have always considered the development of capitalism from the point of view of the individual capitalist. This involved them in a series of insoluble contradictions and pseudo-problems. Marx's *Capital* represents a radical break with this procedure. Not that he acts the part of an agitator who treats every aspect exclusively from the proletarian standpoint. Such a one-sided approach would only result in a new vulgar economics with the plus and minus signs reversed. His method is to consider the problems of the whole of capitalist society...(pp. 28-9)

Such an approach<sup>6</sup> does not, however, supplant the other two. As Manicas writes, theories of social mechanisms 'provide accounts of action in terms of the meanings and beliefs of actors *and* an explanation of why the outcomes are as they are'.

Or as Roy Bhaskar wrote in *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979: 59), in the social sciences 'precision of meaning...assumes the place of accuracy in measurement...'

Thus 'qualitative methods' are not just an alternative option to quantitative ones in the social sciences but an essential element of social scientific inquiry.

## REFERENCES

- Archer, Margaret and Outhwaite, William (eds). 2004. *Defending Objectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Bhaskar, Roy. 1979. *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Bhaskar, Roy. 1989. *Reclaiming Reality*. London: Verso.
- Collier, Andrew. 2003. *In Defence of Objectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Frisby, David. 1983. *The Alienated Mind. The Sociology of Knowledge in Germany 1918-1933*. London: Heinemann.
- Lukács, Georg. [1921] 1971. *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin.
- Mannheim, Karl. [1929] 1936. *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Mannheim, Karl. 1953. 'American Sociology', in Mannheim, *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Ossowski, Stanisław. 1967. *O Osobliwościach Nauk Społecznych*. Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe. (German translation: *Die Besonderheiten der Sozialwissenschaften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

---

<sup>1</sup> David Frisby's early book on the sociology of knowledge (Frisby, 1983) remains a superb guide to this work and its context. Relativism is of course highly relevant to any discussion of realism, since the opposition between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' has come to subsume earlier oppositions between realism or empiricism in the social sciences. Whereas realism had originally set itself up against positivism, the real line of opposition was now with postmodernism or post-structuralism. The title of Bhaskar's essay collection of 1989, *Reclaiming Reality*, may reflect this; other realists such as Margaret Archer and Andrew Collier (2003) have criticised postmodern and other variants of relativism.

---

<sup>2</sup> There is a parallel here with the Polish sociologist Stanisław Ossowski's important book on the particularities of the social sciences, still unfortunately not available in English. Ossowski (1967) does not however mention Mannheim.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 3 of *Ideology and Utopia* has the rather bland title: 'Prospects for a scientific politics'. The German original, first published in 1929, has the more upbeat 'How is politics possible as a science?' [Wissenschaft – the German term is of course broader] This theme becomes stronger over the development of Mannheim's thought, so that by 1932 he is roundly asserting that 'The desire to treat politically important problems without being a victim to bias was responsible for the development in Germany of a new branch of social science, *Wissenssoziologie* [sociology of knowledge].' (Mannheim, 1953: 192-3)

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer's existentialist hermeneutics opposed the methodological objectivism of the mainstream hermeneutic tradition, yet contained a notion of possible convergence and historical progress in interpretive clarity, marked by this notion and the related one of a consciousness of effective history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*).

<sup>5</sup> David Bloor's current work on the history of aerodynamics in Britain discusses a particularly telling example.

<sup>6</sup> Particularly prominent of course in international relations, setting rival nationalisms or blocs in a broader systematic context.