

42 THEORY AND ACTION FOR EMANCIPATION: Elements of a Critical Realist Approach

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Abstract Adopting a non-Habermasian critical realist position, this paper seeks to outline some key elements of a realist ontology, on the one hand, and a radical critical stance on the other. The relationship of critical realism to positivism and interpretivism is described, and the case for methodological pluralism made. The elements of realism described are connection of the particular with general, contribution to knowledge, and construction of alternatives. The critical aims entail a commitment to emancipation, a focus on issues of equality and inequality, a questioning of the status quo, and a challenging of ideology. One key conclusion for practice concerns the alliances for researchers with less conservative members of organizations in order to avoid compromise on emancipatory aims. The contribution of the paper is summarized in a concluding table.

Keywords: Critical realism, methodological pluralism, emancipation

1 INTRODUCTION

This short paper delineates some key elements that constitute a critical realist approach to Information Systems research. Contending that there are options beyond the interpretive-positivist dichotomy and that methodological pluralism is feasible, we supplement the extant IS critical literature. Generally speaking, *critical* tends to imply critical social theory. Thus, we refer to the body of writing in this more established IS trend. Our contribution is provided by drawing on research in the social sciences concerning the validity of a critical realist approach to understanding phenomena within organizations. Within IS research, Dobson (2001) has indicated the potential of critical

realism, Mingers (2001) has made the case for strong pluralism based on a realist ontology, and a guide to the use of critical realism has been well described by Carlsson (2004). Further to this, the paper is distinguished by a preference for materialist, radical writing on organizations, such as Braverman (1974) based on a Marxian approach (as opposed to the more popular Habermasian writings, based on a more idealist, Hegelian approach).

The choice of realist elements included is guided by an implicit polemic against a flat treatment of the agency structure dimension (Carlsson 2004). One of the main advantages of the adoption of a realist ontology is that it allows for the feasibility of methodological pluralism (Mingers 2001), guided by the principle that the choice of methods employed should be decided by the nature of the object of study. Underpinning the critical standpoint is a neo-humanism (Hirschheim and Klein 1989) with a radical twist. The critical elements selected serve to underline the exigency for emancipatory action. In conclusion, the implications of the approach for IS research are sketched in a summary table. Next, we pave the way for later sections by situating critical realism in relation to the positivist-interpretivist debate.

2 CRITICAL REALISM, POSITIVISM, AND INTERPRETIVISM

Critical realism is an attempt to transcend the bi-polar opposition between positivism and interpretivism (Outhwaite 1983). Evidently, research needs an amount of rigor to be of value and realism appeals to notions of scientific method and objectivity. The term critical denotes a challenge to the orthodoxy of accounts which reinforce the status quo of (unequal) power relations in organizations. While sharing many of the fundamental assumptions of the Habermasian-inspired critical social theory (Ngwenyama 1991), we favor a Marxian, non-Hegelian understanding of how radical emancipatory change in the status quo can occur. The implications of this dissimilarity must be debated elsewhere. Suffice to mention here that our approach is skeptical of the possibility of overcoming conflict in organizations, and reluctant to extend the acceptance of the socially constructed nature of knowledge to the point of extreme relativism.

The increased popularity in using critical and social constructivist approaches to study technology in IS helps in “demystifying technological imperatives and managerial rationalism justifying a particular IS design” (Cecez-Kecmanovic 2001, p. 141). Such perspectives have raised issues concerning the ontological and epistemological assumptions implied by an acknowledgment of the role of culture and language in framing our knowledge of the world. One problem faced by researchers stems from the commonly held assumption that there are two basic perspectives on offer,

either the world is objectively and unproblematically available...or it is not knowable objectively at all; and, in the place of claims to objectivity, we find only the idea that what is known is merely the product of discourse (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000, p. 4).

In response, realists have argued that a dualistic or analytic ontology is necessary for studying organization and management, which asserts the reality of belief systems

and cultures as elements that should feature in realist explanations (Reed 2000). Thus, conceptualizing the attitudes, values, and cultures of people will be central. However, realists do not accept that the world is *entirely* constituted by the discursive acts of people: unobservable social structures (mechanisms, relations, powers, rules, resources, institutions, technology) must also be taken into account. Hence, in critical realism, the view of social reality is materialist and structuralist in nature, with reality existing independently from the observer. Further, reality is ordered and thus open to explanation. With this realist ontology it follows that a critical realist approach, *to an extent*, accepts the applicability of scientific principles unearthed in the natural science of the social subject, while simultaneously adopting the position that there are fundamental differences between natural and social phenomena (Ngwenyama 1991).

3 WHAT CONSTITUTES A REALIST APPROACH?

In this section we detail elements that form part of the realist side of the critical realist approach.

3.1 Connection of Particular with General

Critical realism has a predilection to connect the particular with the general. This entails an examination of structures and mechanisms, such as stratification of work. An important assumption here is that IS are part of social phenomena and therefore must be viewed as open systems (Mingers 2000). The focus is on the mechanisms operating in society that are required to be in place in order for a certain set of circumstances to exist. Laws expressing the tendencies of things are a credible subject of enquiry in critical realism (Blaikie 1986, p. 8). Thus, explanatory *mechanisms* are postulated and the task of research is to try to demonstrate their existence. However, for realists, causation is not understood on the model of regular successions of events (Sayer 2000). While regularity is expected, *consistent* regularities are unlikely as they occur only in closed systems. In addition, we may want to explain *why* a certain mechanism exists and so we will engage in exploring the nature of the structure or object which possesses that mechanism or power.

3.2 Contribution to Knowledge: Ontology and Epistemology

In terms of ontology, and the contribution of research to knowledge, realism assumes that what exists can be discovered (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000). An associated assertion is that the nature of the world being investigated dictates the appropriate methods for that investigation. In common with others (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991), a plurality of research perspectives is recommended. However, while researchers have advocated the integration of positivist and interpretivist approaches (Lee 1991; Trauth and Jessup 2000) and the integration of case study with survey research methods (Gable 1994), or combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Kaplan and Douchon 1988),

the underlying philosophy and issues of ontology are not addressed (Carlsson 2004). One exception is Mingers (2001) and his advocacy for strong pluralism.

3.2 Construction of Alternatives

The promotion of alternatives is highly dependent on the critical points made below. The argument is that, if by our research and writing we make apparent how our own acts and those of others are implicated in the reproduction of social structures and relations that stand in the way of emancipation, then we are potentially in a position to consider alternative structures and solutions (Collier 1998).

4 WHAT IS CRITICAL?

Having outlined the realist characteristics of a critical realist approach, we now construct the critical aspect.

4.1 Question Status Quo

In questioning the assumed status quo in social interaction, critical realism assumes that everyday life has superficial and often conflictual aspects in operation. In relation to IS in organizations, we would be aware and critical of capitalism and the labor process. Marx drew a central distinction between essential relations and surface appearance (Pratten 2000). In building on Marx's insights, the tradition initiated by Braverman (1974) inaugurated a radical critique of the use of technology in organizations because of the potential of increased exploitation of workers. For the IS researcher, this implies an examination of the construction and use of technology to further increase the process of exploitation on the part of management and at the expense of employees.¹

4.2 Challenge to Ideology

Braverman's (1974) radical approach implicitly challenges views of organizations which do not seek to explore the contradictions emanating from their conflictual nature. A critical realist approach challenges *accounts* of the status quo and aims to deconstruct dominant ideology. Two notions to be criticized here are managerialism (for increasing productivity and curtailing worker resistance) and technological determinism (for excluding human agency and not examining social and organizational contexts [Lopez and Potter 2001]).

While interpretivism offers us the possibility for capturing such complex, dynamic, social phenomena, it will be vulnerable to those criticisms aimed at Habermasian approaches, namely that it does not examine the (material) conditions which give rise

¹Maru and Woodford (2001) argue that in some critical approaches, the focus on emancipation has been relegated due to a concentration on pluralism. This, claims Dobson (2003), is a logical outcome of the epistemological focus of the underlying critical theory of Habermas.

to certain meanings and experiences, that it neglects to clarify historical change; unintended consequences of actions go unexplained, and that it ignores the structural conflicts and contradictions endemic to social systems (Hollis 1994). Further, interpretivism does not explicitly contain the notion of “non-corrigeable accounts,” constraining our ability to criticize actors’ views of the world (Blaikie 1986). Critical realism, by comparison, presents the possibility of ideological error (Lopez and Potter 2001) since it allows for the notion of false beliefs and consciousness.

4.3 Focus on Equality and Inequality

Critical approaches maintain a focus on issues of equality and inequality. Critical realist researchers have recourse to the dialectic of equity: “the principle of sufficient practical reason states that there must be ground for difference. If there is no such ground then we are rationally impelled to remove them” (Bhaskar 1998, p. 676). In IS research we would be looking at patterns and conditions of employment to highlight areas of inequality, since the labor market is not only a reflection of inequalities in broader society, but rather plays a part in the generation of inequality (Peck 2000).

4.4 Commitment to Emancipation

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a critical approach implies a commitment to contribute to changing the world for the better and for the creation of structures that are wanted, needed, or generally emancipatory (Hollis 1994; Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). Revealing the way things are is a necessary step to demonstrate the place of human acts in the “reproduction of social structures and relations that stand in the way of emancipation” (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000, p. 23), thereby enabling the suggestion of alternative structures where genuine human flourishing can develop. Critical realism seeks ways of transforming asymmetric relations and calls for action to mobilize research: to act to prevent degeneration of equity, and to improve the situation. This would imply we do not support IS that lead to increased exploitation and a worsening of extant inequalities. In this regard, Mingers (2001) identifies the restrictive nature of alliances with managers who can determine what the researcher does, setting the scope and boundaries of investigation. One solution to this quandary of compromised research is the creation of alternative alliances with agencies concerned with employee welfare, such as trades unions.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to existing critical research in IS by describing elements of a critical realist approach for exploring an IS phenomenon from a more radical tendency as represented in labor process writings. The significance of this for IS is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Critical Realist Elements in Relation to IS Research

	Area of Interest	Example Target Areas of Concern
Realism Element		
Connecting particular to general	Existing social structures and mechanisms.	Stratification of work, impact of technology on work practices, impact of IT/ IS on workers.
Contribution to knowledge	Nature of phenomenon and appropriate method for investigation.	Quantitative analysis for examination of wages, conditions, patterns of employment. Qualitative investigation of meaning of work.
Construction of alternatives	Alternative structures and solutions. Alternative research questions, priorities and aims.	Social measures to alleviate worst of alienation. New perspectives and research foci generated via alliances with employee-centered agencies.
Critical Element		
Questioning status quo	Development and use of IS to increase exploitation of employees. Partnership with nonmanagerial sponsors in defense of employee conditions.	Extension of working day; deterioration in working conditions; routinization of tasks. Possibilities for collective representation.
Deconstruct dominant ideology	Social and organizational context of IS examined to challenge managerialism and technological determinism. Equating technical with social progress in relation to IS phenomenon.	(Non-)valuing of employees by managers. Increased/decreased conflict between work and home. Examination of talk of flexibility against lower job security.
Equality and Inequality	Areas of inequality of treatment and conditions. Patterns of work in relation to use of IS.	Access and experience of IS by employees different from managers. Propensity to part-time, degraded work.
Emancipation	Ways to transform asymmetric relations. Mobilization of research to prevent degeneration of equity.	Examination of chances for development or promotion, increased division of labor. Assemble policy making groups for dissemination of research

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