

# Toward Pragmatic Realism in Human Geography

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## Article abstract

Classical realism describes the notion that the world we inhabit is completely mind-independent, that there is one *unique* account of the world and that truths about the world are a matter of the absolute correspondence between linguistic terms and their referents in the world. Human geographers have recently employed a form of transcendental realism inspired by the works of R. Bhaskar, A. Giddens and A. Sayer. This form of realism is anti-positivist and based on the dual notions of ontological stratification and emergent powers materialism. Reactions in geography have been both positive and negative indicating that neither classical realism, nor transcendental realism nor anti-realism seem acceptable. As a way of solving this dilemma, pragmatic (or internal) realism proposes the adoption of a natural ontological attitude toward the objects of geographical inquiry.

## TOWARD PRAGMATIC REALISM IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

by

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### ABSTRACT

Classical realism describes the notion that the world we inhabit is completely mind-independent, that there is one *unique* account of the world and that truths about the world are a matter of the absolute correspondence between linguistic terms and their referents in the world. Human geographers have recently employed a form of transcendental realism inspired by the works of R. Bhaskar, A. Giddens and A. Sayer. This form of realism is anti-positivist and based on the dual notions of ontological stratification and emergent powers materialism. Reactions in geography have been both positive and negative indicating that neither classical realism, nor transcendental realism nor anti-realism seem acceptable. As a way of solving this dilemma, pragmatic (or internal) realism proposes the adoption of a natural ontological attitude toward the objects of geographical inquiry.

**KEY WORDS: Realism, anti-realism, pragmatic realism.**

### RÉSUMÉ

#### Géographie et réalisme

Le réalisme classique décrit la notion selon laquelle le monde où nous vivons est entièrement indépendant de l'esprit, qu'il n'y a qu'un seul et unique compte rendu du monde et que les vérités en ce qui concerne le monde sont de l'ordre de la correspondance absolue existant entre des termes linguistiques et leurs référents dans le monde. Les spécialistes en géographie humaine ont récemment employé une forme de réalisme transcendantal inspiré des travaux de R. Bhaskar, A. Giddens et A. Sayer. Cette forme de réalisme est anti-positiviste et se base sur les notions doubles de stratification ontologique et de matérialisme des puissances émergentes. Les réactions en géographie ont été à la fois positives et négatives, ce qui indique que ni le réalisme classique, ni le réalisme transcendantal, ni l'anti-réalisme ne semblent acceptables. Afin de résoudre ce dilemme, le réalisme pragmatique (ou interne) propose l'adoption d'une attitude ontologique naturelle vis-à-vis les objets de l'enquête géographique.

**MOTS-CLÉS: Réalisme, anti-réalisme, réalisme pragmatique.**

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Does the world consist of some "fixed totality" of objects which are completely constituted independently of our existence? Answering in the affirmative is the first step toward a broadly realist stance concerning the world and our experiences of it. A variant of realism based on the philosophical reflections of M. Hesse, R. Bhaskar, R. Harré, A. Giddens and A. Sayer has recently found favour among a wide variety of Anglo-American theorists in geography, particularly those concerned with the emerging focus on how such social themes as class, gender, family, race and ethnicity are produced (and reproduced) in specific places such as the home, the work place, the school, the region and the nation-state<sup>1</sup>.

Very broadly, this realist stance is based on the following general tenets: 1) commitment to the view that experience is "larger" than the world as we have it; 2) the belief that the limits of our world are not given by the limits of our language; 3) the notion that for the purposes of the human studies both object-based and event-based ontologies are limited; 4) the notion that causality is an emergent property of objects; and 5) the belief that mind is a *sui generis* emergent power of matter (see Bhaskar, 1975, 1979, 1986; Harré, 1986).

While it would do us no great disservice to simply accept the new realism into our theorizing about a fully contextual rendering of the social with the spatial, it would appear that some of its basic tenets do cry out for further critical examination. The reaction of geographers to the realist option has been swift and, at times, punishing. But there is an enduring nature to realist thought; there is a certain raw essentialism which is present in all our inquiries that is informed by realism. To the extent that we wish to endorse the new realism, we will have to examine this essentialist tendency and its implications for the discipline. Whether or not one believes that we can form any definitive answer to the larger question of there being some mind-independent reality "out there" to which our inquiries are attempting to be adequate, a whole range of responses is still possible within the broad overlap between society, spatiality and human geography. One of these responses is to employ a pragmatic or "minimal" realism in theoretical human geography.

## CONTEXT

In keeping with the modern attempt to contextualize everything, it may be fair to say that even the context of the responses to realism in geography has had a major role to play. In this sense the reaction to realism has to be seen as being played out in the wider context of post-modern thought in a variety of disciplines from architecture to literary criticism to ethnographic studies and cultural anthropology. As some would see it, this post-modern context "hates metalevel analyses" of any sort, be it metatheory, metalanguage or metanarrative (Cooke, 1987). It abjures almost anything transcendental, e.g. the hermeneutic movement, the emancipation of a working subject, dialectical thought, and so forth, so much so that fragmentation of both thought and theory has become excessively glorified. In such a context perhaps even the traditional notions of academic debate and critical thought are in danger of being susceptible to "he who has the smoothest tongue or the raciest story" (Eagleton 1986). Perhaps we as geographers have had the misfortune to engage in such a debate when the whole project of having knowledge at all is in doubt (Rosenberg, 1980; D'Amico, 1988).

Given this wider context it is not surprising that some outside observers think that one reason why realism is popular in geography is that it has become simply the latest fashion (Ellen, 1988). Even inside observers will admit that we are presently witnessing

the scavenging of social theory in search of some stance which is suitably "post-modern, post-historical and post-Fordist" (Soja, 1989). Some others within the discipline think that the whole gamut of realist thinking can be used to legitimate a new kind of immunity for favored beliefs and perhaps even political programmes (Saunders and Williams, 1986). But in spite of the prevailing pessimism concerning the ability to mount even a modest assessment of the realist programme, there are several reasons why realism has gained credibility in human geography.

In the hands of geographers the realist stance has been used to double advantage. First, as a foil against empiricism, realism insists that there must be some ontological depth to the social world. Realists such as Bhaskar and Harré postulate several "layers" of reality: an actual level of events and actions in the world is underlain by a "real" level where unobservable causal mechanisms and structures exist. These mechanisms structure the decision making environment of actors in the actual world although they do not determine it in an exact manner. Interpretations of both actor's actions and those of observers are key elements in the realist stance and the overall goal is to theorize about these interpretations at a third level, the empirical level. At this empirical level, an attempt is made to see how the underlying structures at the real level are actualized as events in the world and to understand how the practices created at the actual level are correctly conceived of as both actual outcomes as well as the media for those outcomes (see Johnson, 1983, 1986; Goodall, 1987). As Johnson (1986) has pointed out, the realist approach offers several advantages when compared to either wholly positivist or wholly idealist approaches. Realism is an interpretative approach since meanings are fully incorporated in the analysis. As well, realism is fully wedded to the notion of context, thus the creation (and recreation) of larger social practices is central to the project and realism admits of the fully structural sections of our human context, hence it does not promote overly voluntarist notions as would some forms of idealism, eg. phenomenology.

The second part of the double advantage has been the affinity between realist stances and Marxist approaches. Although realism, as a philosophy of science, does not entail Marxism (Sayer, 1987), realism can be viewed as a reconstitution of dialectical materialism (Thrift, 1987) and as a distinct improvement over the earlier social construction of reality theories, e.g. those proposed by Alfred Schutz (Berger and Luckmann, 1975). Because realism offers a bounded conception of human agency and a distinctive social ontology, it has been very useful in the analysis of the changing capitalist modes of production, the theory of the state, the analysis of uneven economic development and the analysis of landlord-tenant relations (see Sayer, 1982; Gregory, 1982; Massey, 1984; Morgan and Sayer, 1984; Allen, 1983). In this context realism has become an analytical tool for conceptualizing groups which possess intrinsic "causal" powers, i.e. groups which structure the social, political and economic environment of everyday actors.

Emphasis in these types of analyses has been on revising the general realist approach to accommodate whole social systems, systems which can be described as inherently "open" or unbounded as opposed to "closed" or bounded (see Sayer, 1982, 1984, 1987; and Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984).

## THE REALIST QUESTION

As a way of beginning our deliberations on these questions, we might take an example from the realist inspired literature in geography<sup>2</sup>. One group of individuals

who have continuously exhibited power relations in our society is landlords. The essential relationship between a landlord and a tenant is given by property rent; this relationship would qualify as "necessary" since without it there would be no reason to suppose that a connection existed between the two individuals. As Allen (1983) points out, when a landlord takes money for rent, he/she is selling the rights to occupy a particular space for a particular period of time. Herein lies the essential feature of domination, i.e. the direct control over another individual's living conditions. But landlords themselves are not free to exact any amount of rent they wish since they act only as part of a larger circuit of capital and other sections of the circuit such as banks, mortgage holders, maintenance and repair workers, utility companies and so forth also exist as part of the "historically transferred" conditions in the system as a whole. Hence although landlords do possess what realists would term an emergent power to dominate, they will not always exercise this power or act uniformly since there exist all manner of other contingent conditions: official housing policies, building codes, government subsidies, tax variations, legal statute variations, price differences for houses and apartments, interest rate variations, and so forth. The result is that every landlord-tenant relationship, although it does contain an underlying structural property which is similar, becomes very unique. Local conditions almost always dictate that a landlord who exercises his power to dominate excessively over a long period of time will lose his profit-making and revenue-making capabilities and therefore cease to be a landlord, by definition.

How can we see this example as one involving realist concepts? One way to reconstruct this example would be to analyze it as a proposition about certain types of statements that we are prepared, or not prepared, to accept. For example, a realist version of the postulation of a mechanism for the landlord-tenant relation might be:

if, and only if, some event E would not have occurred except for the operation of X, and X did occur,  
then, one is justified in saying, "X is a cause of E" *whether or not one knows the nature of the connection between X and E* (see Bhaskar, 1979, p. 129).

So if E is taken to be an increase in the tenant's rent, then X could be said to be the tendency, say, of landlords to pass along the increased costs of taxes, utilities, repairs, insurance, etc. to tenants so as to at least hold constant the profit margin (from each tenant or the net profit margin considering all tenants). Other examples of realist inspired theorizing can be given which are more central to the concerns of human geography: in social geography if E was the denial of mortgage funds to certain prospective borrowers by particular lenders (i.e. "redlining"), X might be taken to be some mechanism of *distanciation* and the resultant spatial outcome (a homogeneous residential area) might be some form of nodality (Darden, 1980). In political geography E could be the decision of some local state to privatize some previously public service and X could be taken as some mechanism of hegemony or control and the spatial outcome some expression of the territorial behavior of political systems (Laws, 1989). And in economic geography a pertinent example might be that E is the decision to close a manufacturing facility, X is the mechanism of flexible accumulation and the spatial outcome is the migration of jobs and capital out of some particular region (Scott and Storper, 1986). In all of these cases E occurs in the actual domain but for Bhaskar X exists in the domain of the real and is not observable, only its manifestations (in the actual domain) are observable. Bhaskar would recognize that satisfaction of the condition "X did occur" does not guarantee the occurrence of the event since all manner of other conditions might prevent the landlord from acting according to the tendency announced in the mechanism. For example, a rent ceiling or limit in rate

increase imposed by an outside agency could prevent E from occurring even though X was present. But none of this affects the analysis at all given the caveat "whether or not one knows..." It is therefore at the level of what the statements *refer to* that we will have to try to grasp the nature of the realist stance. On this question exactly, Bhaskar is unequivocal: "what is real" and "what is sayable" or "knowable" is not a homologous relation. Thus objects, things and whole practices can remain at a conceptual level; they can remain as meanings, as reasons, as supposed rules or routines and they can remain independent of our attempts to describe it or them. Saying that "X did occur" and "could be said to be an emergent power" is a judgement, but such a judgement can be as accurate as the assertion of any truth in the actual world. There are two extremes here: for the strong-minded realist, X never refers just to *reality*, (a property or characteristic of this very world), but always to REALITY, (an ultimate something to be perceived perfectly like TRUTH or GOODNESS). For the anti-realist, things and relations are *real* only in relation to other statements, relations and judgements; X can exist as long as he/she can feel justified in believing that it does and this justification is consistent with the rest of his/her currently held beliefs about landlords, tenants, the nature of the rental market and so forth. For a coherent realist human geography, it is a position somewhere between the two that we want.

#### FORMS OF REALISM

In the classical sense, realism describes the notion that the world we inhabit is completely mind-independent and that universals do have real objective existence. In more modern usage, realism describes the view that material objects exist independently of our sense experiences. Both usages of the term contrast with idealism and phenomenalism; in the first instance since idealist thought insists that there cannot be material objects or external realities existing apart from our consciousness of them and in the second instance because a phenomenalist would be persuaded that material objects exist only as groups of *sensa*, actual or possible<sup>3</sup>.

As a doctrine about what sort of things exist in the world, realism concerns itself explicitly with metaphysics. G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein all held that we can think and talk about things as they "actually" are and we can do this by virtue of a "correspondence" relation between the terms in our language and the sorts of mind independent entities which are supposed to exist. For them metaphysics were seen then as the task of describing the "furniture of the world", what sorts of things and entities we should believe do exist. Metaphysical realism amounts to holding that: 1) the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects; 2) there is exactly one true and complete description of *the way the world is*; and 3) that truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought signs and external things and sets of things (Putnam, 1981, p. 49). Over against this "maximal" metaphysical realism, we have all manner of anti-realist responses: non-realism, internal realism, intuitive (or naive) realism, minimal realism, mitigated realism, policy realism and *tepid* realism (see Harré, 1986; Putnam, 1983; Wright, 1987). What characterizes all of these responses is their rejection of the notion of correspondence between the terms in our language and the mind-independent entities in the world which the terms are supposed to describe. In its place, most anti-realist stances accept the notion of a coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences as these experiences themselves are represented in our belief system. On this view, truth names a relationship we believe to be the case within a particular discourse. Since there is not "complete description of the way the world is", no external perspective to

be had, there are only the various "points of view" or "multiple accounts" of actual individuals reflecting various interests and theories at their disposal (Putnam 1981, 1983, 1987). So what emerges is a very broad multi-faceted spectrum with maximal metaphysical realism at one end, then perhaps various semi-realist or "mixed" positions in the middle ground, e.g. internal realism and policy realism and then completely phenomenalist positions at the other extreme.

On the whole, the realism of the type now popular in human geography does have some similarities to a scientific realism on the questions of the general standards of scientific inquiry, the notions of rationality, objectivity and the importance of evidence. But the new realism in geography is, by most accounts, not an empirical realism, it is a *transcendental* realism, that is, it is not just based on what investigators find the empirical world to consist of but its categories or existents are based on what the world *would have to be like* if certain known processes are to be explained (Gregory, 1982; Allen, 1987).

Bhaskar proposes that, if one accepts the view, against positivism and empiricism, that experience is larger than the world and further, against Winch, that the limits to our language do not define the limits to our world, then one can avoid the two-fold reduction of statements about being to statements about knowledge (the reduction of ontology to epistemology) and the further reduction of epistemological questions to statements about the properties of our language. This done, one is free to postulate that there can be notions of *being* or *world* which are free of our thinking entirely. Science itself investigates at least *some* transcendent entities, e.g. electrons, magnetic fields, and quarks can be regarded as legitimate objects of investigation. But this transcendence is contingent on the world as we know it since, for the most part we are confronted with *open* systems, systems in which all manner of connections between events may escape our theorizing altogether. For Bhaskar, 1) the world exhibits a stratified ontology: there is not one domain of existents, there are three: the empirical, the actual and the real. The relationship between the domains, in conventional terms, is:  $D_R \supset D_A \supset D_E$ , whereas empirical realists have assumed that  $D_R = D_A = D_E$ ; 2) events in the actual domain are controlled by mechanisms which exist in the real domain, but the real domain is ontologically irreducible to the actual domain. Hence such objects or entities as exist at the real level may not be manifest at the actual level or if manifest do not always exhibit characteristics such as constant conjunction and regularity of occurrence. The mechanisms may exist therefore, entirely independently of us. 3) The mechanisms and structures at the real level operate as tendencies which are "in play" all the time but may only occasionally surface when a mechanism is investigated at the empirical level. Causality and causal laws then do not concern the identification of events in restricted space-time *slices*, but involve the analysis of *powers* or *liabilities* or *tendencies* that the mechanisms display over time. Since an analysis of causality cuts across the three domains of the real, the actual and the empirical, the specification of conditions under which particular events will or will not occur is labelled "transfactual"; only the conditions at the real level (the "normic" conditions) will govern whether a mechanism is acting in a given manner. Laws do exist but are not always about empirical events, they may be considered as "normic, transfactual statements" applying to both open and closed systems. 4) Events are construed as changes in things or changes in the structures-in-themselves, not as the sequential replacement of one thing or kind of thing by another thing. Hence saying that things have powers or liabilities is equivalent to saying that a thing possesses a structure and would *tend to act this way or not tend to act this way* if given conditions applied. 5) As above, "mind" is taken to be a real emergent power of matter. Entities possess minds if they have the

capacity to acquire and manipulate symbols and such capacities or powers are fully "causal". Reasons can be considered causes and can be separate from their act "performances", but such powers are circumscribed by the acts of others and mechanisms operating at the real level. 6) The study of society is the study of relations which exist between *positions* such as places, functions, rules and tasks and *practices*, the actual actions taken by individuals. Society is not just the individuals or the group but expresses the sum of the persistent relations in the position-practice system; agents operating in society may or may not be aware of the relational nature of their activities hence their actions produce both intended and unintended outcomes. Society then is both a condition (a material cause) and a continually reproduced outcome of human agency.

In the wider context of realist thought, it is certainly the case that Bhaskar's transcendental realism is not a maximal metaphysical realism. Of the three tenets suggested by Putnam, only the first, the independence axiom, would characterize Bhaskar's position. But where could we place Bhaskar on the spectrum of realism? There are several considerations here. First, social science is clearly a second order type of discourse for Bhaskar and in it judgmental relativism is tolerated and to a degree epistemological relativism. This is the case because there is an asymmetry of relativism present: in the domain of the real, things and mechanisms can exist but without our knowledge of them. So at the actual level, if we were to act so as to prefer one belief over another, eg. some rule or practice over another, this would amount to exhibiting a form of judgmental relativism which is defensible. But knowing exactly *how* the practice in question came to be manifested at one time or place and not another is another question entirely — we may only be able to state that, like all beliefs, the one we acted on was socially produced, transitory, theory-ridden, etc. Thus realism at the ontological level would not appear to entail judgmental relativism but it would entail an epistemological relativism (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 73). However we can go on describing *tendencies* as dependent on *real* mechanisms because we *judge* this to be the case without ever having to defend *why* we know it to be the case. Second, it would appear that Bhaskar's position on emergent powers materialism is consistent with some scientific ontologies. The fact that causality is analyzed "transcategorically" does not destroy the argument that *some* psychological states affect neurophysiological states which result in action, (since it is a fact that they do), rather it is that Bhaskar has analyzed the categories of existents in a different manner. In an open system it is simply an *unanswered* question as to which mechanism or structure is responsible for a particular event (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 123). Third, explanation in the realist mode is a convergent process and quite fallible. Theories develop by analogy to already established explanations. During this process, cognitive claims for what inhabits the realm of the real will change since

"theoretical predicates are not isomorphs of essences rather (they are) distanced and multiply connected metaphors embedded in experience — dependent and mutable interpretations of more or less formalized structures designed to grasp the mechanisms generating some particular range of phenomena" (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 56).

What emerges from this discussion of Bhaskar's transcendental realism is that it is a qualified, anti-positivist realism which is based in the dual notions of ontological stratification and emergent powers materialism. As such it is a form of metaphysical realism but not a maximal form, since for that to occur (by the definition given above), truth would have to "intelligibly transcend" evidence altogether; nothing we could say about our material world would be captured in language at all. Bhaskar believes that even though experience may be larger than the world for us, we can still make intelligible statements and hypotheses about that experience.



## REACTIONS TO REALISM IN GEOGRAPHY

Reaction from both the theorists and practitioners of human geography has been of a mixed variety, ranging from those who think that realism, in the forms presented to us by Bhaskar, Giddens and Sayer, is the "best of the Enlightenment" and "twentieth century social theory put together" (Thrift, 1987) to those who think that it will "reimport Kantian dualism by the back door" (Smith, 1987) or that it is "failing us utterly" since the major components of the realist ontological system are "purely imaginary" (Gould, 1987). Still others have noted that since realism, like any other philosophical stance, can have no privileged status, it can only be viewed as some type of "looser logic", or a "convenient cover or transition back to old fashioned causal empiricism" (Harvey, 1987, p. 368).

### Positive Responses

In seeing realist thinking take on greater and greater importance in geography, there is the hope that there has been (finally ?) a coming of age for geographical theory. Whether one believes that realism began as part of the project to "make modernity spatial" (Soja, 1987) or that realism began as a critique of a Marxism incapable of incorporating any notions of individual or group agency (Smith, 1987), it is quite clearly the case that the realism debate is helping to resituate the whole of geographical thinking including the objects, events and meanings that the discipline treats within a thoroughly modern philosophical framework. Realism, as a philosophy of science, has a very respectable pedigree (Gregory, 1978), and this modern version has forced geography to confront directly the whole question of how language and belief systems commit us to different ontological and epistemological programmes. It has therefore opened the way for theoretical statements that allow us to make ontological commitments. The whole emphasis on "ontological depth" found in modern realism depends on this fundamental starting point. In turn, this ontological depth exploration stands on thoroughly modern notions of reference, meaning and truth. Reference is not to be construed as "fixed" or "causal" but rather as intentional; there are *only* empirical theories of meaning, there are no "natural" or "intrinsic" theories given by our language, and truth is discourse dependent and "local" (Rose, 1987).

There are several positive implications which follow from this new emphasis. Gregory (1982) pointed out that realism's distinctly layered ontology was a great improvement over phenomenologically inspired *social* constructions of reality (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1975), since it gave us a properly bounded rather than open-ended conception of agency. One result of this has been that geographers have now questioned the adequacy of the older "object and event" ontology and begun to grapple with the postulation of other, more complex entities such as *structure*, *class*, *state*, *gender* and *ethnicity* (Cooke, 1987). A second advantage has been that if, as realism suggests, we take the notion of human action descriptions as thoroughly concept-dependent then much more attention will be given to what our theorizing activity actually consists in. Since realism provides for theories which have allowed for unintended as well as intended consequences and contingent as well as necessary causes, this has allowed geographers not only to see how meaning systems (and language in general) are constitutive of what they study but also it has allowed them to go beyond the actor's concepts to a level of critique (Sayer, 1982).

Another positive response has resulted from the breaking away from a very old and outmoded version of causality. The whole thrust of realism has been to completely refocus our thinking about causality. As long as causality was a property of events, such properties could always be conceived of as separate from either the phenomena they produce or the individuals involved. But with the realist notion of locating causality *in objects* and treating it as an "emergent power" has come the more modern notion that reasons, beliefs, desires and wants can be *causes* just as easily as can *physical* causes, and more importantly that causality can be analyzed as a *variable* power not just as a property of events, and that causal powers may or may not emerge depending on the relations that individual actors have within particular social structure. Allen (1983) demonstrates that while realism may not be concerned with each and every social object, the value of realism lies in the identification of structured groups of individuals who do possess "intrinsic" causal powers, eg. capitalists, landlords and family patriarchs. Along with this newer version of causality has come the attendant notion of geographers at work in an "open" system. Regular patterns of events such as would be expected to occur in laboratory-like "closed" systems almost never are the rule in human geography, and in such open systems the emphasis on the study of contingent conditions is "unavoidable and is in good scientific tradition" (Sayer, 1987).

### Negative Responses

Perhaps the most vigorous and sustained attack has been on the unobservable character of entities postulated to exist in realist theory. Thus Sack (1982) was quick to ask why we should believe that structure and mechanisms exist at the 'real' level especially if the descriptions of that real level are, by the realist view, a product of our own theorizing. If such structures do exist, he said, it is science, not our theorizing *about* science that will disclose their nature. Allen (1987) goes further to state that such entities are just "conjectured" and *if* they existed, *would* account for certain types of events. But since we are given no guarantee that such entities do exist even at the supposed *real* level, realist theory remains wholly hypothetical and dependent on the *a priori* transcendental argument to the effect that a particular world, (a possible world we might say), *would have to have* conditions of the type specified in order that the mechanisms with the causal powers would work in the postulated way. Since such counterfactual conditions cannot be satisfied at the *actual* level, — and, in any event, the system is "open" — no such conjuncture will ever take place and the best that we could ever hope for is some "restricted synthesis of the unique where the powers of particular structural mechanisms are overstated" (Allen, 1987, p. 238). For Soja there is no "meso-level" between theory and empirical work at which realism can theorize and if there were such a level, "there are no deep logics in it" (Soja, 1987). Smith (1987) believes that there are the beginnings of a Kantian dualism in that realism lays heavy emphasis on theorizing at the expense of all empirical discussion. He sees no reason why the existence of contingent events should prevent us from generalizing about them and points to the all-powerful necessary conditions as "barring us from interesting general patterns" (Smith, 1987, p. 292). Gould (1987) thinks that without the determinate effects of the postulated mechanism in evidence *somewhere*, the entities at the real level are purely "imaginary things posited something like the unconscious in Freudian psychology" (Gould, 1987, p. 611).

A second line of attack has been to state that while causality may be conceived of as non-Humean in character, i.e., that in a general sense, reasons can function as causes in the explanation of human actions, there is far too much emphasis in realist

thought on the notion of contingent causes. Thus Harvey is of the opinion that with the judgements of individual researchers dictating which contingencies are the special ones (those that lead to conjunctures of events in the actual world), any process or relation thus described will be entirely unique to that event or constellation of events. Eventually, he says, "there is nothing to guard against the collapse of scientific understanding into a mass of contingencies..." (Harvey, 1987, p. 373). What then may have started out as an attempt to employ a genuinely modern version of causality will give us only a "theorization of the unique" (Allen, 1987) or a very limited localism (Smith, 1987). There is the further danger that with too much emphasis on locality studies, (where locale might signify anything from the scale of a room to the scale of a nation state), and on micro-spatial processes, there may be the urge to think that the whole question of geographic space belongs to the realm of the contingent.

A third line of critique has centered specifically on Giddens's theory of structuration. Gregson (1986) has succinctly fashioned this critical account as follows. While Giddens claims that structures underlie action, we never encounter such structures until their point of "instantiation" at the moment of individual action; we are never given any evidence that such structures have a prior existence since we never see them at work at the actual level; there is only the claim that they exist. Despite Giddens's lengthy treatment of practical consciousness, the knowledgeability of human actors and the production and reproduction of daily practices and routines, he gives no real insight into the agency side of the "duality of structure". Intentionality on the part of lay actors is not wholly incorporated into the transformational model of society and consequently the model has nothing in particular to say about when and where either structure or agency will dominate (Gregson, 1986). Empirical research might be able to show either how agency works on structure, (the / of the reflexive agent), or how structure works on agency, (the constraints imposed by different locales, time-space paths, budgets, etc.), but empirical research cannot show how both will work together to co-produce actions in some recognizable pattern. Thus the model of society as a duality of structure is ultimately indeterminate and it is doubtful whether we can ever have such a *co-produced* type of knowledge given that in order to know one side of the duality one would have to continually "bracket out" the other side, a procedure that can only lead to a further methodological dualism.

What emerges from this list of complaints against realism? Two points are worth noting. First, if realist thinking can be said to be guiding present theorizing on the socio-spatial nexus, then there almost has to be an unruly, damaging tension between the "necessary-but-contingent-driven-unobservable-mechanisms-which-produce-unique-configurations-of-events-in-the-actual-world" and the hope that, at the very least, human geography can produce some idea of the processes which pervade whole regions of the earth's surface or whole groups of people. This tension between the largely idiographic character of realism over against the supposed holism of geographic objectives is, of course, not an unnoticed problem (Glick, 1987), but it would appear to be one which could simply destroy any ongoing empirical programme for a realist geography. In other words, there is a basic conflict between the *naive* realism of geography, which is satisfied with the study of basic objects and events, and the *formal* properties of any type of metaphysical realism, viz. independence, uniqueness and correspondence. Second, at the theoretical level, if realism is to survive as a serviceable philosophical stance in geography, it must somehow be disengaged from a vicious circularity present in the argument. While realism seems to have provided a continuing epistemological justification for the subordination of history to theory, it does this by drawing the crucial distinction between necessary tendencies and contingent effects.

Since it is our own theories that identify the necessary tendencies in things to behave in certain ways and not in other ways, but "whether and how these tendencies will become manifest *in any given time or place* depends on a variety of unpredictable and experimentally uncontrollable, contingent conditions", then it can be the case that "the *real* tendencies identified by our theories may or may not be found to operate in empirical studies, but our theories assure us that they are there!" (Saunders and Williams, 1986, p. 395). We end up with a realist methodology identifying contingent conditions "which we already *know* are in some way mediating the *real* motive forces identified through our theory". Here there is simply too much *a priori* included in *the real*, a situation which most investigators would find difficult to defend. What if the *contingencies* cannot be explained except as part of *the real*? Do they then inhabit both realms? Or, more drastically, what if basic categories such as *perceiving*, *knowing* and even *being* turn out to be only contingent? However one construes these problems, it amounts to the same question: how does a realist have knowledge of layers of reality which remain hidden to everyone else? So posed, *the* question for supporters of realist thought has to be to show in some satisfactory way how *their* identification of these layers of reality is *not* due to the postulation of some conceptual scheme, some discourse, some state-of-affairs, some external viewpoint or "third thing" placed between the world and an observer of it that they (realists) are somehow in touch with but the rest of the cadre is not. Without a satisfactory response to this question, we would be quite correct to think that realist theorizing is just "there" for those who have the "right" attitudes or beliefs to appreciate it. For the rest of us it will be just so much hand waving.

## PRAGMATIC REALISM

Pragmatic realism has emerged at a time when many of the doctrines that hold that there is some determinate match between the cognizable properties of the actual world and the cognizing powers of the mind (such as: foundationalism, positivism, naturalism, objectivism, essentialism, the *epistemological model*, the *mirror image*, the correspondence theory of truth) are all in "wholesale retreat" (Margolis, 1986). We need to believe that a reply to our question, the question posed by transcendental realism, requires some commitment to standards of rationality and coherence. We need to believe also that, despite the rise of praxis-oriented stances, the rise of historicity in general and a prevailing, if not pervasive relativism, that at least some views on the question of realism can be broached and taken seriously, and subjected to criticism and revision in the normal fashion.

If we begin by reaffirming our belief that science does not utterly misrepresent the world but then allow that there is no privileged access to the world, we can go on to describe a type of pragmatic realism. It is built up out of a series of four tenets.

### *Metaphysical parsimony*

On the whole question of what there is, pragmatic realism counsels metaphysical parsimony; it takes commonsense schemes of what there is at face value without helping itself to the notion of the thing *in itself* (Putnam, 1987, p. 1). In this "natural" ontological attitude we are committed to the existence of individuals, objects, events, properties, relations and processes in our scientific accounts in the *exactly the same way* as we are committed to the individuals, events and features we believe to be the case in the everyday world (Fine, 1984). Thus the world is "out

there" and it is *real* (small *r*) and it does consist of these types of existents and categories but because we cannot make intelligible the notion that any conceptual scheme (or perfect vocabulary, or intrinsic language, or one fixed view) could intervene in any first order way between that world and our utterances about it, there are no "essences" of things, no "exact" references, no "final" meanings, no "absolutely correct" interpretations "out there". So people and rocks exist, but so do mental maps, place-ballets and dominant locales.

### *Truth is a semantic category*

There is no sense in which the truth is "out there" in the way that the world is "out there". This is because truth is a property of sentences and sentences are parts of languages which in turn are of our own making. As a property of sentences, truth will depend on the warranted assertibility of sentences within discourse and not on mind-independent "states-of-affairs". This means that the truth of any sentence will be based on the best available arguments, beliefs and judgements and that all truths will be theory-dependent; it also means that truth is a very "local" property in the sense that agreed upon assertibility conditions for truths far removed in space and time from our present situation will be more difficult to provide.

### *Multiple accounts*

Because true descriptions of the world are not out there, multiple accounts of how the phenomena in the world work will be justifiable since there will be many different ways in which to arrive at similar accounts of the same phenomena. If there is no privileged access to the world, then all our attendant notions of necessity, contingency, reference, meaning and so forth will be empirical ones and drawn from restricted, non-totalizing discourses.

### *Moral decisions on discourse*

Because there are multiple accounts of how the world is, the pragmatic response is pluralist, but because we can distinguish between accounts which are better or worse, more useful or less useful, this pluralism does not result in runaway relativism.

Compared to our starting position of a maximal, metaphysical realism, the pragmatic realism here proposed is minimal, internal and mitigated as opposed to maximal, external and absolute. In terms of the spectrum set out above, it is a type of intermediate position between maximal metaphysical realism and anti-realism, perhaps best expressed as simply small *r* realism (see Fine, 1984; Davidson, 1984; Margolis, 1986; Putnam, 1983, 1987; Rorty, 1982, 1989; Wright, 1987). Can a realism of this type be of use in human geography? Presumably, if pragmatic realism can accommodate the realist tendencies recently espoused in human geography and if it can do so without the objections raised so far, this could lead to some useful middle ground. The following is the argument.

In pragmatic realism the uncapitalized terms "true", "good", and "real" name properties of sentences or actions or situations which we ordinarily encounter in our everyday lives. Capitalized however, they become TRUE, GOOD and REAL or more properly *objects* which can function as the ultimate goals of our sentences, actions or situations (Rorty, 1982). One way in which to see the metaphysical urge in realist thought is to see it as the urge to move from some "lower-case" truth or reality to an

"upper-case" TRUTH or REALITY. This urge is the notion that there is always more truth to be found if we keep looking for it and this, in turn, is based on the belief that there is something "out there" called the TRUTH ABOUT THE WORLD which exists alongside the world. As Rorty points out, philosophers since Kant have been trying to rid us of this notion but our enduring essentialism makes us want to say that a sentence should not be made true because *we* say it is so, (or our current best evidence says it is so), but because it is TRUE by virtue of corresponding to the way the world REALLY is. The metaphysical realist wants to find things or entities in the world that will eventually make his version of truth THE VERSION, truth will then be extra-theoretic and complete (Rorty, 1982, 1986, 1989). In response to this, pragmatists such as James, Dewey, Quine, Putnam and Davidson have advanced the claim that this metaphysical urge amounts to an attempt to transcend our existence entirely. It is the desire for an absolutely external viewpoint, a point from which our world could be compared to our theories about it and the disparities and similarities thereby noted. Another way of seeing this same urge is to say that a metaphysical realist holds that our language (or vocabulary or discourse) "does not go all the way down"; hence in some "supercommensurable" VOCABULARY there will be, once and for all, the REAL REFERENTS, TRUTH-CONDITIONS and MEANINGS laid bare. The usual defence of such a position is that there is nothing to prevent REALITY from outstripping our conceptions of it; and it would be very presumptuous for us to believe that what we call reality is actually REALITY.

What the pragmatic realist believes that the metaphysical realist does not believe is that there is no external perspective from which to view the world *and there cannot be one*; there is no "third thing" between the observer and the world (James), no God's Eye View (Putnam), no Conceptual Scheme (Davidson), no Nature's Own Language (Rorty)<sup>4</sup>. It follows that entities or objects cannot exist independently of our conceptions of them and moreover, *we* are the ones who introduce any one or other conceptual scheme hence whatever objectivity we may suppose is present is objectivity *for us*. And "*nothing at all we say about any object describes the object as it is in itself, independently of its effect on us*" (Putnam, 1981, p. 61). There is no way that our ideas of objects can be construed as "copies" of mind-independent things because there is no way to make sense of the notion of some total scheme for the organization of our conceptions standing alongside something waiting to be organized by that scheme (Davidson, 1984).

Using our example from part I and following Dummett (1978),

Let P (a proposition) be "X is a cause of E" and, P is not decidable. It follows that :

- 1) ∴ the condition for P to be true is not recognizable;
- 2) ∴ there is no situation in which S (some subject) would judge that P is true, if and only if P is true;
- 3) ∴ S cannot manifest knowledge of the condition for P to be true;
- 4) ∴ S does not know the condition for P to be true;
- 5) ∴ S can attach no sense to the supposition that P is true;
- 6) ∴ truth does not exist independently of our capacity to recognize it;
- 7) ∴ realism is false.

Now given that this proposition is exactly that proposed by realists such as Bhaskar and that the condition "P is not decidable" correctly interprets the realist

phrase "whether or not one knows the nature of the connection between X and E", there are definite problems which both the realist and the anti-realist have with such statements. As Horwich (1982) points out, the move from step 3 to step 4 is less than compelling since all that it would take to understand P is the ability to use it in accordance with community norms for judging the degree of confidence it should be given. In this situation, manifesting knowledge for P to be true *could* take place if there were a situation in which S would judge P to be true. Surely this is quite within the realm of our normal experience: a landlord, upon being asked by a tenant or group of tenants, why the rent has increased replies with a list of quite legitimate, verifiable reasons, e.g. the municipal property taxes have increased, the service (or water) taxes have been increased, the building has been reassessed at a higher value and so forth. In such a situation P would be decidable to the extent that when landlords act so as to effect E, they do so for reasons such as  $x_1, x_2, x_3 \dots x_n$ . For the pragmatic realist these are all quite believable in a world consisting of individuals, buildings, municipalities, ratepayer's associations, taxes, etc. But he/she does not have to postulate a new category of existents to handle the fact that reasons can be causes. The metaphysical realist may respond that S cannot distinguish  $x_1, x_2, x_3$ , etc. from the "overall" tendency of landlords to increase rents "indiscriminately" or "without reason" or "for the sake of profit only". For the metaphysical realist there is no difference between saying "X is a cause of E" because *the* reason was "for the sake of profit only" and saying "X is a cause of E" because "X is REALLY there" and "X has the power to act this way". On the metaphysical realist's view there is no *account* given of what it is to know when P would be true, but this is not because such an account does not exist, it is because the account and the existence of X are *all the same*, they are "co-terminus". And further we have no idea that if X were really "like that", why it should automatically be manifested in some particular linguistic behavior in contrast to any other behavior (on the notion that mechanisms such as X are quite beyond the powers of our mind to even conceptualize). The upshot is that P may or may not be decidable depending on the degree of believability and appropriateness that any subject could marshal for *his/her* account of the situation.

We are then in a strange way driven back to consider what it is about X that makes us want to propose it in the first place. While the metaphysical realist wants to deny that all our talk "about X" is in fact talk about how X REALLY is, i.e. he/she would say that the truth of realism is not decided by any of *our* doing but by the world (herein to include language), the pragmatic realist can reply that the problem is that we cannot plausibly disjoin our theorizing about the nature of existence, truth, reference, meaning and so forth from what would be essential to saying how REALISM actually works — we cannot throw out *en bloc*, how we *have* the world and then turn around and make some second-order statements about it (Margolis, 1986). We are then caught in the dilemma of the "intuitive" realist: one part of us wants to go out and say as a matter of brute fact that because there is something ineffable which it is "to be like X", we will simply state that the world must be "like that", "have X's", and that it is our job to find them. The other part of us wants to say that while there may be something that exists, that makes a difference, and is real and is different from what we know about X's *so far*, saying it is all there is (Rorty, 1982, p. xxix). One way out of this dilemma is to go with the pragmatist response and decide to accept the scientific results of our inquiries in much the same way as we decide to accept the results of our everyday experiences. As Fine puts it: "I take it that we are being asked not to distinguish between kinds of truth or modes of existence or the like, but only among truths themselves, in terms of centrality, degrees of belief, or such" (Fine, 1984, p. 96).

Accepting this however does not mean that truth-conditions within a specific discourse are any the less rigid. We can go on to insist that whatever standards of warranted assertibility are judged relevant within a given discourse, it will be those (agreed upon) standards that are used by academic practitioners in their discourses and likewise by laymen in their discourses. If therefore X must exhibit certain necessary properties or relations or "not be X" within a given theory (say structuration theory), and this is an agreed upon way of defining X, then the assertibility conditions must be covered in order that we can say "here is (some) evidence of X" or "some manifestation of X exists".

Now it would seem that this is not far from the basic position outlined by Bhaskar. We noted that Bhaskar's realism was a qualified anti-positivist realism in which a realist view of what there is goes together with a science seen as an ongoing social activity; knowledge "comes out" as a social product even though it may have no contact with the presumed categories of existents such as the "transcategorically active mechanisms". But what may be more important about Bhaskar's system is that in the end what is real is a matter of what is *internal* to theories, (and this means *all* theories, including those that claim *anything* exists outside the domain of the actual). In fact Bhaskar states: "Whenever we speak of things or of events, etc. in science we must always speak of them and know them *under particular descriptions*, descriptions which will always be to a greater or lesser extent theoretically determined, which are not neutral reflections of a given world" (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 249).

It would seem then that Bhaskar cannot avoid a type of mixed position here: if reality consists of notions of *being* or *world* which are completely free of our conceptions, we cannot then have things or events in science *under particular descriptions*, where *what is real is internal to those descriptions*. The domain of the real may not be reducible to the domain of the actual, as a pure matter of faith, but this does not then commit us to the absolute noncoincidence of *some* of our theoretical notions with at least *some* of the properties of the real domain. And if this is allowed, then, *to that extent*, there will be no difference between the domains of the real and the actual. We could then adopt this mixed position: realism is the view that reality exists independently of our conceptions of it though it may *under certain descriptions and theories, coincide with it* (Trigg, 1980). To return to our example, this tactic would then support the view that there may be situations in which *P is decidable* and hence that X has "something to do with E" in a *minimal* realist way, but that because this is the case *within a given description*, the truth of P is a local truth, and there is no attendant tendency for the type of realism here envisioned to "go metaphysical". In short, in the pragmatic realist stance, truth cannot be "aimed at" nor, further, can the process we use to make true statements continue with a complete disregard for our ontological commitment. Truths will be local, context-dependent and theory-dependent in just the way that our best judgments dictate the acceptance of one view rather than another. This "natural" ontological attitude is neither realist nor anti-realist in the extreme; individuals, and properties and entities all exist but their existence and characteristics will change as our theories change (Fine, 1984, p. 98). This type of realism will not commit us to any wide open metaphysical catalogue of existents, such as "self-identifying objects", imaginary entities or states-of-affairs which cannot be communicated. But it will commit us to an epistemological strategy which is based on the distributed claims of science and likewise to the commonsense claims of lay actors as well. It thereby avoids the overzealous essentialism or foundationalism often found in metaphysical realism yet it makes room for "inspecting alternative, diachronically conservative, general regularities or conditions that by arguments to the best explanation are historically



judged to be among the best candidates that have as yet been found" (Margolis, 1986, p. 182).

The REAL is therefore not something we "get" by seeing "more clearly", by hypothesizing "more correctly" or by theorizing "more completely"; all we get by seeing, hypothesizing and theorizing is reality *point final*.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

The importance of a pragmatic realist response for human geography will consist not only of giving high priority to the ongoing work toward an appropriate ontological and epistemological location for spatiality (Buttimer, 1990) but it will also serve to assert some of the boundary conditions for that very important meta-theoretical project. Certainly one such boundary condition is that the postulated mechanisms associated with transcendental realism currently in vogue such as domination, distancing, hegemony, and flexible accumulation, are under no obligation to inhabit a domain of the REAL which is primordially given and thereby hidden from our cognitive capacities entirely. The pragmatic realist account of such entities allows our theorizing to go forward without the transcendental realm. The categories of existents that our theories and discourse commit us to can be within the domain of the actual and these categories need not escape us in any profound way. If this much is accepted for such mechanisms, then it will be true for the *spatial outcomes* of the operation of such mechanisms as well. For example, the notions of nodality (where the mechanism is distancing), the notion of territoriality (where the mechanism is hegemony) and the notion of uneven economic development (where the mechanism is flexible accumulation) are squarely in the domain of the actual. To understand any of these spatial outcomes we do not need the additional question: what would the world *have to have* in the way of existents if this outcome were to be the case? To put it another way, there are no different "tiers" of reality which separate people from their mental maps, institutions from their dominant locales or whole regions (such as "Sunbelt" or the "Frostbelt") from the flexible specialisation of capital and deindustrialization.

A second boundary condition for the ontological project confronting modern human geography consists of the reaffirmation that, just as the REAL is not a product of theorizing at some "higher" level, neither is the SPATIAL. The urge to *have* an account of SPATIALITY is the metaphysical urge — we may wish to talk (in certain discourses e.g. Soja, 1989) about "the primal setting at a distance" (in Buber) or *emplacement* (in Sartre) or a "positioning in the *lebenswelt*" (in Husserl) but *none of this is an account of the fundamental features of SPATIALITY*. Such features of spatiality, if we wish to talk this way, are "local" features, they are not residents of some first-order ontological system; they are second-order constructs, they are the product of the human geographer and they are in his/her theories about the actual world *and nowhere else*.

It would be a reasonable conclusion that compared to the realism on offer from theorists such as Bhaskar, Giddens, and Sayer we do not need any version of realism which is maximal, externally based and absolute in nature; what we need and *all we need* is small *r* realism, realism which is minimal, internally based and (forever) mitigated by our experiences in the world. Some will no doubt say that geography, like most other sciences, has been "anti-metaphysical" throughout most of its history anyway, so that our conclusion would not seem to be very spectacular. But as easily as the transcendental is dismissed it has an eerie way of reappearing. One need only think

back to several of our recent theoretical pairings such as society-ecosystem, landscape-text, economy-system, mind-machine, society-class struggle (Harrison and Livingstone, 1982), and then for the hyphen substitute the phrase "really is", to see how eager we are to apply the metaphysical urge. The shadow of metaphysics is still with us, it would seem, in this latest version of realism. In this sense the transcendental realist can escape the actual with all its problematic perceptions, opinions and fuzzy beliefs and proceed to erect another world, a world that has the sought after degrees of symmetry, determinateness and coherence. That we are *guided* by such "religious" urges does not seem much in doubt; what we *do* and what we *say* are, however, another story altogether. For the pragmatic realist there is no mind-independent reality, no one true account of the way the world is and no perfect set of term-to-world correspondences.

But what if, for the moment, we can do all the things the transcendental realist wants us to do without most of the baggage? What if we need only a little realism and not a lot? The pragmatic response to the new realism is just this — all we need is a minimal realism. There is no deep sense in which reality escapes us entirely and there is no deep sense in which the transcendental realm names for us the workings of our everyday world. The continued pressing of either of these claims is not just mysterious, it is empty. Geography can profit from a little realism; it will be doomed by a lot.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The relevant texts are: Bhaskar (1975, 1979, 1986), Harré (1986), Giddens (1979, 1984), and Sayer (1982, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> While it is true that much of the "realist-inspired" literature in geography owes much to the work of Giddens and Sayer, it is perhaps easier to grasp the fundamental tenets of realism by limiting the discussion here to Bhaskar's very explicit form of realism. Obviously there are no complete overlaps between these three authors but there is a sense in which Bhaskar's realism forms a very solid theoretical base for the "tacit" realism of Giddens and the "revisable" realism employed by Sayer.

<sup>3</sup> However there have been a multitude of realisms in philosophical thought: 1) the representative realism of Descartes and Locke in which material objects as the ultimate objects of perception are distinguished from private *sensa*, the mental *effects* of those objects on the sense organs; 2) naive realism, the view that all of our normal suppositions based on our sense perceptions are correct; 3) the "new" realists of the early twentieth century (Holt, Marvin, Montague) arguing for a complete return to Platonist thought particularly for mathematical entities; and 4) the critical realists (Sellars, Lovejoy, Lewis) arguing that our sense perceptions are not actually part of the external objects but are character *complexes* taken at the moment of perception to be characteristic of the external objects.

<sup>4</sup> As Davidson puts it: "Nothing, however, no *thing* makes sentences and theories true; not experience, not surface irritations, not the world, can make a sentence true. *That* experience takes a certain course, that our skin is warmed or, that the universe is finite, these facts, if we like to talk that way, make sentences and theories true" (Davidson, 1984, p. 194).

And for Putnam: "There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve" (Putnam, 1981, p. 50).

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