

# Critical Realism and the Limits to Critical Social Science

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## INTRODUCTION

Critical social scientists argue that explanations of social practices must be critical precisely in order to be explanatory, and that the necessity of critique gives social science a potentially emancipatory character. In practice, critiques of social phenomena are enormously contentious because it is difficult to establish agreement about what constitute problems, solutions or improvements, and whether the latter are feasible. The quest for emancipation therefore involves addressing normative questions and the feasibility of alternatives. Yet these considerations are unevenly represented in the practice of critical social science<sup>1</sup> (hereafter CSS). They are most prominent in newer CSS's such as feminism and green political theory, where discussions on topics such as the politics of difference or animal rights argue about the nature of problems and progressive alternatives. By contrast, until recently they were largely absent from the older Marxist-influenced CSS, reflecting the traditional Marxist antipathy to moral discourse and analysis of 'blueprints'.<sup>2</sup>

The new CSS's reflect the shift in politics away from the old certainties of class and distribution, where normative goals were largely taken for granted and the main concern was with attacking established power, to a politics in which debates about desirable alternatives are much more to the fore. There are now clear signs of a reawakening of interest among social scientists in ethics and political philosophy. For example, in development studies, critical social scientists who were previously sure of their value standpoints and realise they are problematic (Corbridge, 1993a and b; Toye, 1987).

However, as they stand, the philosophical reconstructions of CSS are seriously out of kilter with these developments, and are implicitly closer to the older CSS in their neglect of the normative side (Fay, 1975; 1987; 1996; Bhaskar, 1986; 1991; Collier, 1994; Edgley, 1985). Critical realism in particular gives a complacent account of CSS in which ought follows straightforwardly from is,

apparently by-passing difficult normative issues which elsewhere are the subject of interminable debate. For a philosophy concerned with emancipation, its lack of discussion of normative issues is astonishing.

While I accept much of the rationale for CSS and identify with its aims, I wish to argue here that there are important flaws in these reconstructions, which explain the limited success of those CSS's which neglect normative questions and the often contentious and inconclusive nature of those which do confront them. I aim to show that there are substantial limits to the applicability of the models of critical social science, particularly critical realist reconstructions, and that accordingly their claims need to be moderated.

The paper begins with a sketch of how CSS has been philosophically reconstructed and justified. Through a series of examples I then discuss the need to examine the standpoints from which critiques are made and the desirability and feasibility of the alternatives they imply. I then assess the implications of uncertainties about standpoints and needs and what these in turn imply about the limits of critical social science and its conception of emancipation.

#### RECONSTRUCTIONS OF CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

We may of course criticise social practices because they are an affront to our values, but the rationale of CSS according to the philosophical reconstructions starts from explanations rather than value positions, although of course we usually already have such positions. An account of patriarchal behaviour which failed to evaluate actors' assumptions regarding men's and women's abilities would fail as an explanation of what happens. Such critical evaluation would of course in no way deny that the suspect beliefs were held. Criticism of social practice in this kind of case is not an option which involves stepping outside social science, but is necessary for social scientific explanation itself. Criticism becomes critique when we not only show that certain beliefs are false but explain why they are held, and what produces them. Critique is therefore intrinsic to social science. More simply, and from another angle, there is no point in social science if it does not at least offer the possibility of some kind of social improvement, even if it doesn't go beyond enlightenment and reduction of illusion, to material change.

In philosophical reconstructions (e.g. Bhaskar, 1989; Collier, 1994; Fay, 1975; 1987), CSS is often identified as having four stages:

- (i) identifying problems – unmet needs, suffering, false beliefs;
- (ii) identifying the source or cause of those unmet needs, false beliefs, etc., such as a particular form of domination;
- (iii) passing to a negative judgement of those sources of illusion and oppression;
- (iv) favouring (*ceteris paribus*) actions which remove those sources.

In some cases the false beliefs (i) help to perpetuate the circumstances which generate them (ii).

There are two main variants of the model—the cognitive explanatory critique, which starts from the identification of false beliefs, and the needs-based explanatory critique which starts from the identification of suffering, or frustrated needs (Collier, 1994). Bhaskar argues that the transitions from (ii) to (iii) to (iv) are necessary, thus breaking ‘Hume’s Law’—that *ought* cannot be derived from *is* (see also Edgley, 1985). If a belief is known to be false, then, other things being equal, it makes no sense to deny that people ought not to believe it. Even if, in the case of the needs-based critique, we take the view that it does not logically follow that because a person is starving they ought to have food, it at least does not *make sense*, *ceteris paribus*, to deny that they ought to have it (Collier, 1994). The *ceteris paribus* clause in (iv) is intended to cover situations where there is a conflicting and overriding need which makes it unwise to remove the initial problem and its sources.

Bhaskar and others argue that this approach offers the promise of an *emancipatory* social science, providing at least a necessary condition for the emancipation of its ‘target groups’ by enabling them to see how to replace ‘unwanted determinations’ by ‘wanted and needed determinations’. It is recognised, of course, that enlightening people (or facilitating their own self-enlightenment) as to the source of the illusions and other unwanted determinations responsible for their plight is not a *sufficient* condition for their emancipation from them, and may indeed increase dissonance and despair: for emancipation the mechanisms actually generating the problems must also be removed or blocked.

In a discussion of a related issue—values in social science—Charles Taylor has criticised emotivist and subjectivist conceptions of values as expressions lying beyond the scope of reason and has argued that values are ‘secreted’ by theories and explanations of social action (Taylor, 1967). Thus, the explanation of profit in neoclassical economics in terms of the marginal efficiency of capital secretes the value judgement that it is a fair return to capitalists. The explanation of profit offered by Marxism secretes the judgement that it is an undeserved appropriation of workers’ surplus labour by capital. We should choose the values secreted by the superior explanation. Values can therefore be assessed rationally<sup>3</sup> via an evaluation of relevant explanations. This argument compliments Bhaskar’s point that the important question regarding values is not whether social science is value-free but whether values are science-free.

Attractive though these ideas may seem, they make critical social science look all too straightforward and strangely at odds with the experience of practical instances. It is not always clear which among rival explanations is superior, or what the relevant explanations responsible for secreting particular values are, and as we shall see, there are some cases, concerning culturally-specific needs and obligations to others, where normative judgements appear to be prior to

and secrete explanations rather than vice versa. More simply we are often deeply uncertain as to what would constitute improvement or emancipation, and hence unclear as to what determinations we should want and need.

Most of the arguments in philosophy relating to CSS concern the controversial naturalist move from *is* to *ought*. While I accept that the move is legitimate where the *ought* term is unspecific, that is where it means merely 'the false belief, or type of suffering – ought to be removed', it is far more questionable where it means 'x ought to be changed in a certain way'. Clearly CSS would have little to offer if it was limited to the former unspecific directive; its claim to be potentially emancipatory would be decidedly feeble. An emancipatory social science worth the name would need to have a more specific and directive critical content, identifying what exactly was wrong and what specifically needed to be done to improve matters. But here we run into difficulties, firstly regarding how we identify problems at the start (i), and secondly concerning the issues concealed by the apparently innocuous *ceteris paribus* clause in (iv).<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, these two problems feed into each other and create uncertainties at the critical stage (iii). Both derive from a lack of examination of the standpoints from which critiques are made.

#### CRITICAL STANDPOINTS

To identify unmet needs and decide that certain beliefs are false is to make judgements of good and bad and what ought and ought not to be, and hence to engage with normative questions. CSS therefore implies a connection between positive (explanatory/descriptive) social science and normative discourses such as those of moral and political philosophy. But in much of the literature on CSS, this normative dimension is hardly acknowledged (e.g. Bhaskar, 1986, 1991; Collier, 1994; Fay, 1975, 1987; Edgley, 1985). In the case of the best known CSS, Marxism, it is often denied and suppressed. The historical reasons for this are well-known and widely criticised (Buchanan, 1982; Lukes, 1985), but the problems are perpetuated rather than countered in the philosophical reconstructions. However, it is noticeable that the younger CSS's of feminism and green theory have a far stronger focus on normative issues and have a closer relationship between their positive/explanatory literature and explicitly critical/normative debate (e.g. Bock and James, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Benton, 1993; Dobson, 1990; Martell, 1994). Without an examination of normative questions, the standpoints from which social phenomena are evaluated in critical social science are left to intuition or unmonitored peer pressure.

Any criticism presupposes the possibility of a better way of life; to expose something as illusory or contradictory is to imply the possibility and desirability of a life without those illusions and contradictions. This much has been established by critical theorists such as Habermas and Apel. Yet the notion that critique

implies a quest for the good is a highly abstract one. Up to a point, particular critiques do imply something a little more specific than the standpoint of a better life. The critique of capitalism's anarchic and uneven development implies a critical standpoint or contrast space of an imagined society with a rationally ordered and even process of development. The critique of class implies the desirability of a classless society. But this does not take us very far unless it identifies the determinants of class so that they might be eliminated. Naturally, society would be better if its illusions, injustices, conflicts and contradictions were reduced, but we need to know how this could be achieved. The desirability of a life without contradictions or illusions does not make it feasible. If we develop an explanatory critique of something but can see no feasible or desirable alternative, then the force of the critique is weakened, to say the least. Thus, the critique of capitalism's anarchic and uneven development would lose much of its force if all advanced economies were necessarily anarchic and uneven in their development.<sup>5</sup> All this is not to argue that the absence of plausible superior alternatives should render radical political economy silent in the face of the ills of capitalism or whatever. The lack of such alternatives might blunt the political force of its critiques but it would still be important to have a CSS which identified the causes of social ills, even though, for the time being, we could not see a way of eliminating the causes without generating greater problems.

There are two kinds of feasibility which might be considered:

- (1) whether a certain desired end state or goal can be realised, for example, how people can be politically mobilised to make it happen; and
- (2) whether, assuming enough people are willing to try to make it happen, whether the goal or end state is feasible in itself, e.g. could one have an advanced economy without money?

While many might think it idle to ignore (1), it is surprising how little attention is given to (2), especially in socialist politics, as if the journey mattered more than the destination and large-scale political mobilisation could precede a reasonably well-worked out conception of a feasible alternative.

As Steele (1992) points out, arguments about the merits of utopianism frequently get confused by two different concepts of utopia. If utopias are treated as being infeasible by definition then that prejudices any questions about their merits; merely to mention the word 'utopia' is then to slam the door on rational assessment. If, on the other hand, we leave it open as to whether utopias can be feasible, we avoid excluding possibilities and enable a more rational assessment to be made. Considering utopias is therefore compatible with 'science' since it is consistent with asking counterfactual questions, conducting thought experiments and scrutinising critical standpoints. Indeed, as Steele puts it, political thought would be more scientific if it were more utopian (Steele, 1992, p. 374–5).

This is not the same as asking for blueprints for it merely involves attempting to think through the likely tendencies or mechanisms of different forms of social organisation: e.g. Can highly complex economies be subject to detailed *ex ante* control by participatory democracy?; Would a change in property relations tend to eliminate externalities?; Could markets be regulated so as to avoid regressive effects? Although we obviously cannot predict the future we can make some judgements about what is or is not feasible and desirable. In the terms of critical realism this is not a request for 'actualist' predictions of what will happen at the level of concrete events. Such a request is unanswerable because the open nature of social systems means that both the activation of mechanisms and their effects are not pre-determined but depend on contingent conditions. What can reasonably be requested is that we explore as far as is possible what the causal powers and liabilities of alternative forms of social organisation are likely to be. For example: what would be possible and impossible for an economy of worker-owned enterprises? In what respects would their behaviour be likely to differ from capitalist enterprises? Answering these questions does not necessarily involve major leaps into the unknown since possible analogues and prototypes—both successful and unsuccessful—are usually available, in this case in the record of socialist experiments. Even if actual examples of similar practices are not available, conducting thought experiments and asking counterfactual questions is at least better than leaving alternatives unexamined (Sayer, 1995).

Critical standpoints and alternatives don't have to drop from the skies or be vacuous. They can come from what Wellmer terms a 'draft meaning' – a particular area of existing progressive practice, which provides a model which we would like to generalise (Wellmer, 1972). Thus the equal treatment of people as voters might be taken as a draft meaning for the extension of democracy to industry, or the norms of mutual respect and equality of the public sphere might be extended to the private sphere. Useful though the concept of draft meanings is, the main problem is that it is tempting to assume that just because a particular practice or institution is progressive, it must be generalisable to other situations, when in fact it may not be; it may be a 'niche' phenomenon rather than an embryonic version of something potentially large. Thus, regarding the extension of democratic control, it is necessary to consider whether the costs of participation are likely to outweigh the benefits. We therefore have to assess the possibility that the generalisation or extension of a currently restricted, progressive phenomenon may be either infeasible or inappropriate. In this context, Michael Walzer's critique of the extension of principles appropriate to one social sphere to others where they are inappropriate is salutary (Walzer, 1985).

So, when considering any concrete example of a critical theory it is important to ask what the standpoint is from which its criticisms are made, and we are likely to want a more specific answer than 'the standpoint of a better life'. We need to know enough about the critical standpoint and the implied alternative to be able to decide first whether the critique is justifiable. Since knowledge is

'situated' and often bears the mark of its author's social position, this includes taking this into account: does it privilege the position of a particular group (e.g. male workers, advanced countries)?; does it imply a society without difference?; if it implies greater equality, on whose terms is equality to be defined? Secondly, it involves assessing whether the alternative is feasible and desirable. We have to ask whether remedying one set of problems would generate others (it usually does), and whether these would be worse than the original problems. As Billig *et al.* put it, social life is frequently 'dilemmatic', eluding attempts to identify and resolve problems in the straightforward manner assumed in many reconstructions of CSS (Billig *et al.*, 1988, see also Toye, 1987). These tend to assume not only that the nature of the good and the bad is unambiguous, but that mechanisms producing good and bad effects are always separable.

These possibilities are rarely considered in the old critical social science of Marxism, the usual implicit assumption being that all bad things go together in capitalism and all good things under socialism/communism. Yet it is possible that some of the 'contradictions' involve dilemmas which can't be eliminated along with capitalism. Evaluations in terms of desirability therefore need to be cross-checked with evaluations of feasibility, and optimistic assumptions of inevitable improvement suspended.<sup>6</sup> Often—again, particularly in Marxism—the problem is that while certain mechanisms responsible for problems can be removed or blocked, the mechanisms which are supposed to replace them are unspecified. For example, as Buchanan notes, Marx and later Marxists "simply assume not only that a highly productive alternative to market coordination is feasible, but that a high level of productivity and a system for efficiently distributing what is produced can be achieved by a system of democratic decision-making." (1985, p. 29).

In the terminology of critical realism, we could describe the dilemmatic character of social life in terms of either structures which have both desirable and undesirable mechanisms, or mechanisms which tend to produce both desirable and undesirable effects. For example, to oversimplify, markets render people both free to choose and free to lose, by allowing individuals to choose among competing sellers and by increasing inequalities and insecurity. More generally, given the profound ambivalence of many of the leading social theorists of the last two centuries about modernity, it should be no surprise that the good and the bad are not always separable.

One dimension of modernity underlying this ambivalence of social theorists relates to the tensions between anarchy, rationalisation and liberty in societies with an advanced division of labour. The 'anarchic' character of development under capitalism generates inequalities, insecurity and numerous irrationalities. Inevitably, responses involving strategies of rationalisation seem attractive, but these tend to limit individual liberty, and lead to the Weberian iron cage scenario. On the other hand, defending liberty in terms of freedom from interference encourages anarchic and inegalitarian tendencies. In advanced industrial econom-

ies, attempts to escape this triangle of problems through democratisation can have only limited success, not so much because democratisation leads to further rationalisation, but because the division of knowledge restricts the extent to which the latter can succeed in reducing the anarchic qualities of development. The relationships between anarchy and rationalisation, liberty and equality, are more complex than this of course, and disputes about them form a major part of the diet of political theory and philosophy (Sayer, 1995). The point of drawing attention to them is (a) to juxtapose them to the simplistic view of social problems assumed in many accounts of CSS, and (b) to suggest the relevance of some well-known areas of normative discourse to the latter.

One of the reasons for the underestimation of the dilemmatic quality of social life in the philosophical reconstructions of CSS is simply that for the sake of clarity they take single mechanisms one at a time. Yet concrete critical social science has usually to deal with several interacting mechanisms simultaneously. The reconstructions are obviously likely to underestimate problems of the justification for a change in one mechanism being overridden by the danger of losing compensating benefits.<sup>7</sup> It is not enough, for example, to argue that if the capital-labour relation can be shown to be unjust, it therefore follows that capitalism must be overthrown (e.g. see Carling's case against capitalism, (1992, p. 145–6)). Capitalism in the inclusive sense consists of more than the capital-labour relation, and the ignored features may produce effects which offset the ills of exploitation within the relations of production. It also has to be demonstrated that there is a superior alternative. All too often critical theorists ignore these points and judge and condemn whole (concrete) systems on the basis of a selective, abstract analysis of just one of their parts and invoke an unspecified, imaginary society as automatically superior. To be useful, evaluations or critiques need to involve 'intersystemic comparisons', in which the systems are evaluated in equal depth, involving comparisons of balance sheets of strengths and weaknesses instead of isolated points of condemnation (e.g. See Buchanan, 1985; Putterman, 1990).

At one level, these kinds of problems could be said to be preempted by the *ceteris paribus* clause in the final stage of the model of explanatory critiques. This is a highly economical device for describing such problems, and one which may be uninteresting from a philosophical point of view. Yet from a practical point of view it is crucial, and the implications go beyond the final stage of the model. In some cases the complications represented by factors covered by the *ceteris paribus* clause are liable to prompt us to revise our initial judgements of what constitutes a problem (stage (i) in the model of explanatory critiques) and how we should respond to those conditions (iii). This is likely where the factors over-riding the initial arguments for change involve mechanisms which are ubiquitous, and which produce beneficial as well as bad effects, and hence where they are not easily removed without causing further, more serious problems. It is therefore not merely the 'output' (stage iv) of the model which is affected here, but its prior, internal stages.

## UNCERTAIN STANDPOINTS AND CONTESTED NEEDS

While there is unwarranted confidence in certain critical realist quarters regarding answers to questions of values and needs, in the actual practice of CSS we find uncertainty and frequent *inconsistencies* in the implicit or explicit critiques made of social practices, and fundamental disagreements where alternatives are considered. Is the problem of industrial decline one of ineffective competitive behaviour, or a consequence of the very existence of a competitive framework? The rise of green critiques of growth are particularly important in upsetting traditional, radical assumption in favour of industrialisation. Do we say of a backward region or country that there's a lack of growth? – or that growth is the problem? One of the hallmarks of the structuralist influence on radical thought was that it taught theorists to see problems as deriving not from the way particular players played the game, but from the very structure of the game itself. Valuable though this distinction is, there now seems to be less confidence about it, perhaps because, even though the problem might lie with the structure or game, we don't have a convincing alternative game, so we revert to seeking better strategies within the existing one. Thus, for example, in radical studies of industry, there has been an apparent shift from Marxist critiques of capitalism, implicitly in favour of socialism, to critiques of Fordism, implicitly or explicitly—and with many qualifications—in favour of 'post-Fordism' and particular varieties of capitalism (e.g. social democratic rather than neoliberal) (Amin, 1994). Such shifts and inconsistencies indicate the difficulty of choosing critical standpoints where there is insufficient understanding of, and confidence in, alternatives.

This is not to suppose that a stronger focus on normative issues—as found in green critical social science—necessarily makes matters clearer; witness the fundamental disagreements regarding the rights of non-human species in green politics and theory, where the problems extend to initial identifications of false beliefs and frustrated needs. Consider also the debate around work such of that of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan which bears upon qualities associated with femininity, mothering and caring (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). Such literature involves both an empirical, positive dimension regarding what is the case, and whether it is so necessarily or contingently, and a normative discussion challenging dominant evaluations of these matters. Yet the authors' own evaluations have been widely criticised. On the one hand, positively valuing the practices and attitudes associated with caring appears to oppose dominant values associated with masculinity. On the other hand there is a danger of supporting rather than challenging patriarchal hegemony and its essentialist characterisations of women, as such valuations could be construed as celebrating what are arguably actually effects of women's subordination which patriarchy might be only too happy to endorse. Moreover, the very terms of such arguments can be contested, as in the debate over Gilligan's 'ethic of care' (e.g. Benhabib, 1992). This illustrates the enormous difficulty of deciding on the nature of the good:

what are the false beliefs and frustrated needs here?<sup>8</sup> On issues such as this, perhaps the best that CSS can do is raise consciousness or 'enhance reflexivity' so that the debate becomes internal to its object.

The rationale of CSS provided by critical realism is that although descriptions of social phenomena are likely to be already 'valuey', as Andrew Collier puts it, in that we are rarely completely indifferent about them, we can decide what are problems and what would be solutions via a naturalist route, moving from explanations to critiques and proposals of solutions (Collier, 1992). This is most convincing in the case of 'cognitive' explanatory critiques, where we identify mistaken beliefs, for example, concerning race, which influence action. Some instances of needs-based critiques, involving transcultural or naturalistic needs, such as our example concerning the implications of knowing that someone is starving, are also relatively straightforward.

Matters are not so simple when we move to needs which are culturally-specific and hence not reducible to biological properties or indeed to any universal social properties. It is one thing to argue that just because all natural needs are socially interpreted and mediated they are not thereby purely 'socially-constructed'; but some needs are so specific to particular contingent kinds of society (e.g. the need of a religious group to attend church) that they may indeed be regarded as entirely socially-constructed.<sup>9</sup>

While we can still accept that there are some universal human needs, as Nussbaum (1992) and Doyal and Gough argue (1990), others are local and contested. To proceed with such matters, critical social science would have to engage with normative issues such as those of pluralism and tolerance – standard fare of moral and political philosophy. But then, how extraordinary that advocates of critical social science could imagine that they could by-pass such issues!

Of course, it is possible to define universal needs sufficiently abstractly and openly to allow more culturally-specific needs to be defended under their ambit. For example, if a general need for sociability were posited this could allow for a vast range of more specific needs through whose satisfaction it might be met. This helps to show why much critical social science can only come up with the vaguest of solutions to the problems it addresses; it has to be vague in order to leave a space for pluralism and to avoid neglecting cultural difference. The alternative is to put forward locally-specific, contextually-sensitive claims (Nussbaum, 1990); a danger here is of assuming a *parochial* context which ignores relevant connections of the target group to others who may be unfairly disadvantaged by the solutions. Moreover, it is not merely a question of measuring circumstances against relevant local conceptions of culturally-specific needs, for these are likely to be in question too. In such cases, we/they have to consider what kind of society and individual we/they want to become.

At one point in *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* Roy Bhaskar notes in passing that a thoroughly reworked ethics is needed to compliment critical realist social science (1986, p. 187).<sup>10</sup> That reworking would certainly and immediately

reject emotivist or subjectivist treatments of values and defend some kind of ethical naturalism. But as these last arguments indicate it would also have to go beyond ethical naturalism to consider a communicative or discourse ethics in which needs would have to be the subject of democratic determination in something approaching an ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1984, 1990; Benhabib, 1992).<sup>11</sup> It would presumably be desirable for participants in such a discourse to be aware of relevant explanatory critiques made by critical social science; this would help to counter the common criticism of discourse ethics as being merely procedural and formal<sup>12</sup> and hence oriented to providing consensus and legitimation rather than truth or moral validity.<sup>13</sup> However, as we have seen, they can only apply to a limited domain. Beyond this domain, where issues such as culturally-specific needs have to be decided, discourse ethics, by specifying the conditions for a democratic and 'open-ended moral conversation' (Benhabib, 1992), offers the least bad way of proceeding.

Uncertainties regarding critical standpoints are also likely to be serious where critical social science is concerned with problems deriving from the nature and distribution of social obligations or responsibilities. Yet these are not considered in the reconstructions.

The dominant conception of emancipation in critical social science is one of escape from domination, through removal of unwanted and unneeded constraints or determinations. Bhaskar does talk of a move from unwanted and unneeded determinations to wanted and needed sources of determination. Thus for a starving person, food is obviously a wanted and needed determination. In the case of overcoming illiteracy, the needed determinations are the commitment of time and resources to education. This feature of the critical realist model is an advance on some libertarian kinds of 'radical' social science, which imply a search for maximum individual liberty through minimizing restrictions on individual choice, or worse, presuppose what Andrew Collier terms an 'out-of-gear' conception of freedom as freedom from necessity (1994, p. 97). Against the latter critical realism acknowledges that freedom requires recognition of necessity and that to have some purchase on the world it must have some causal influence upon us.

However, critical realist reconstructions of CSS fail to recognise that in many cases, deciding what are wanted and needed determinations requires consideration of the nature and distribution of responsibilities in society.<sup>14</sup> Indeed often the problems facing societies or particular groups may be better couched in terms of unmet responsibilities than unwanted determinations. The problem is often not that some people or groups have too little freedom but that they have too much freedom from responsibilities. Recently fashionable concern with 'empowerment' suffers from the same problem – it implies having fewer constraints and more resources and is silent on responsibilities, and sometimes on the disempowering effects on others (though these may of course be justifiable). It is of course always easier to talk of rights than responsibilities. To reply that

obligations are the flip side of rights and therefore already implied on the discussion of rights can easily serve as an evasion of the question of just what the obligations should be. What our responsibilities are, for example towards distant strangers and future generations, and whether some should be delegated through divisions of labour – are central to any assessment of possibilities for social improvement (Ignatieff, 1985). The fact that some of these sorts of question are being addressed by green CSS (e.g. O'Neill, 1993) shows how the philosophical reconstructions lag behind current practice.

To illustrate the difficulty regarding wanted determinations which involve responsibilities, consider problems relating to responsibility for childcare. In explaining these problems, do we say:

- they are caused by a lack of state provision of nurseries and after-school clubs, etc.?
- or that the problems are caused by the lack of involvement of *men* in childcare?
- or that they're caused by the failure of parents to make adequate provision and sacrifices for bringing up their children? (why should you subsidise my child's upbringing?)

Note how closely the definitions and explanations of the problems are bound up with normative judgements about what ought to happen, and where responsibility ought to lie. Not surprisingly, the very selection and definition of a problem implies a value standpoint and is highly contestable. Of course, any self-respecting critical social scientist would want to check empirical evidence regarding the situation – for example, how much state provision actually exists. However, no matter how complete the evidence, it would still leave open the normative question of responsibility. Again, answers cannot be derived from explanatory critiques but require an open-ended moral debate.

#### CONCLUSION

The claims of CSS regarding its emancipatory potential need to be moderated by recognizing the limits of its method. The main problems lie in justifying the standpoints of its critiques and of finding alternative social forms which generate fewer problems than those they replace, and hence lead to net improvement.

The dominant message of critical realism's reconstruction of CSS is that explanation enables us to decide how to judge the situation under investigation, hence indicating what critical standpoint we should take. In this way, the difficulty and contestability of normative judgements are downplayed.<sup>15</sup> This model is relatively compelling where cognitive explanatory critiques are involved, or needs-based critiques concerning universal human needs. It is less convincing

where the alternatives on whose development emancipation depends are themselves problematic in terms of their desirability and feasibility, and often the main problem is not removing a cause of suffering but finding an alternative which is less bad. Furthermore, where we are dealing with more contested matters such as culturally-specific needs, or responsibilities, as in our childcare example, it seems that prior values determine explanations, so that the latter largely follow from the former.

The extraordinary degree of interconnection or integration of modern societies is such that piecemeal changes have multiple unintended and sometimes damaging consequences. Is it so surprising that little can be achieved towards emancipation without the articulation of a feasible, politically- and ethically-desirable alternative? Again, the childcare example illustrates the problem; it is not a question of merely removing obstacles to the realisation of a certain group's freedom but of deciding what kind of society we want and what would be desirable and feasible in terms of an allocation of responsibilities that would benefit all groups, though the very nature of some of the groups—e.g. parents—may need to be fundamentally altered. It would also inevitably have major implications for other spheres of life – the terms of employment, taxation and the welfare state in particular. In this way an initial concern with what appears to be a limited problem affecting a discrete target group addressable by explanatory critique leads us into a much larger, open-ended series of normative issues.

As societies become more interdependent and multi-cultural, a wide range of needs which are culturally-specific come to have implications for members of other cultures with different values and who may find those needs false or abhorrent. The more diverse this world, the more difficult it is to find a consensus or at least an accommodating framework. Both liberalism and Marxism implicitly expected difference in terms of religious and other affective communal attachments and identities to wither with the rise of modernity, through the growth of either individualism or the class conscious proletariat. Actual social developments and recent concerns with difference in social and political theory underline just how mistaken this was. On the other hand, the more integrated and interdependent the world becomes, the more such a unifying normative framework is required.

A moderate definition of postmodernity which does not involve a contradictory attempt to abandon modernism altogether could be that it is modernity coming to terms with its own limitations (Bauman, 1992). As yet, critical realism and the older critical sciences appear not to have come to terms with these limitations. It should by now be glaringly obvious both that social change is inherently contradictory and dilemmatic and that while those contradictions and dilemmas continually mutate there is no sign of any reduction in their number or severity. This should not induce defeatism or an outright rejection of critical social science's project, just a greater regard for the need to consider critical standpoints,

and more generally to engage with normative questions of social organisation and behaviour.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Critical social science refers to critical empirical studies of substantive objects, such as feminist and Marxist research, as distinct from *critical theory*, associated with the Frankfurt School and Habermas and others which is pitched at the level of meta-theory.

<sup>2</sup> Now, particularly through the rise of analytical Marxism (e.g. Bardhan and Roemer, 1992; Roemer, 1994; Wright, 1994), radical political economy is showing signs of a normative turn, although there is still an imbalance between the sophistication of its explanations and the underdevelopment of the alternatives it offers. In some of the new CSS's positive analysis is arguably being neglected, and discussion of desirable alternatives is running ahead of assessments of feasibility. I leave without comment the tendency of 'ethical disidentification' and relativisation/subjectivisation of values in postmodernism (Connor, in Squires, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> One might want to exempt aesthetic values from this claim, but this does not affect the argument of the paper.

<sup>4</sup> See Fay, 1978, for an excellent (sympathetic) critique of other aspects of critical social science.

<sup>5</sup> However, one could still criticise advanced economies—not just capitalist ones—from the very different standpoint of 'deep ecology', calling for a return to small-scale, more primitive economies (Dobson, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Fay at least recognises that critical social science might lead to a change which removed one source of suffering but do so "by producing another sort of society with a new and worse form of suffering," . . . "It . . . would make no sense for a critical social scientist to condemn a social arrangement and call for its alteration, while at the same time admitting that the alternative arrangements which would emerge will be worse than the original." (Fay, 1987, p. 30). However, he does not follow this up with an acknowledgement of the necessity of normative analysis.

<sup>7</sup> In another context (concerning the case of justifying irradiating food by reference to experiments in closed systems) Collier himself notes the dangers of moving straight from abstract to concrete (Collier, 1994b) and he notes that the partial emancipation of people in Eastern Europe in the 89–90 revolutions has left many worse off.

<sup>8</sup> The situation may sometimes, as in this case, be eased to some extent by the possibility of it being left to personal preference whether to take certain life courses or follow certain codes of behaviour.

<sup>9</sup> However, even social constructions or conventions only work if they keep within the bounds of natural necessity. They have their own causal powers and liabilities; for example, to say something intelligible you have to speak mostly within the limits provided by the resources and rules of a language your audience understands. However this does not help us decide on their desirability.

<sup>10</sup> In his book, *Plato, Etc.* (1994), Bhaskar does take up questions of ethics and other matters of value, defending a moral realism and ethical naturalism. He also notes in *Plato*

that emancipation is always constrained, and he mentions that feasibility is a limit on the logic of dialectical universalizability (p. 151). Otherwise, as far as I can see, his discussions do not remedy the problems identified here. However, I have to note that like many other readers, including other enthusiasts for critical realism, I was largely defeated by *Plato, Etc.*'s Niagara of neologisms, most of them inadequately explained, even in the glossary. The description of the dialectic of freedom in *Plato, Etc.* is extraordinary for ignoring the warnings which were included in his earlier works about moving from philosophical to substantive claims; it leaps from the transcendent deductions of critical realist philosophy, to indications of the shape of a 'eudaimonistic' society, ignoring substantive social and political economic theory on modernity and the intractable practical dilemmas which it identifies. The resulting impression is one of pulling global salvation out of the critical realist hat.

<sup>11</sup> In *Plato, Etc.*, Bhaskar also notes in passing that a rapprochement with Habermas's ethics is possible and he acknowledges communitarian points about the diversity and relativity of moral belief.

<sup>12</sup> Habermas himself notes that theories such as his own cannot make substantive contributions regarding particular ethical problems (Habermas, 1990, 211). Rather his aim is to encourage a participatory public life democratic politics instead of providing particular norms, which he would see as pre-empting citizens' rights to democratic politics (Benhabib, 1992, 81).

<sup>13</sup> Equally, like any science, CSS, assumes that evaluation of its claims will take place in conditions approaching an ideal speech situation.

<sup>14</sup> In *Plato Etc.*, questions of responsibilities are only momentarily alluded to under the heading of "civic duties" including "providing care and sustenance" (1994, p. 157).

<sup>15</sup> Note that Bhaskar rejects (as 'scientism') the view that theory can create values where none had existed before, but what I am addressing here is the alteration of pre-existing values in the light of theory.

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