Review of International Studies (2012), 38, 187–189 doi:10.1017|S0260210511000623
© 2012 British International Studies Association

Introduction to the Forum

OLIVER KESSLER

In the last couple of years, Critical Realism has established itself as an alone-standing intellectual movement in International Relations (IR). It not only seeks to challenge the idea of the middle ground on which most of the more moderate versions of constructivist thought base their convictions, but it also seeks to provide own answers to basic scientific problems around the relationship between facts and values, causation and causality, or agents and structure. If one would want to characterise Critical Realist positions, one has to point to their attempted resurrection of ontology. Taking inspiration, in particular, from Bhaskar's *Possibility of Naturalism* and subsequent works,[1] different strands of Critical Realism are tied together in their conviction that epistemology has had too much influence on scientific debates ever since Kant changed the structure of philosophical reasoning by asking how objects were determined by concepts rather than the other way round. The prevalent focus on epistemological questions is not only biased and asks the wrong questions, but it starts from false premises in the first place, as Wight and Patomäki once put it: every theory of knowledge must also logically presuppose a theory of what the world is like (ontology) for knowledge (epistemology) to be possible.[2]

With this interest in ontology, Critical Realism differentiates itself in two respects from more traditional IR theories: first, for critical realists the world is not simply the sum of all things, but it additionally consists of *unobservable* structures that are not exactly detectable through experience or discourse as 'epistemological' positions would argue.[3] Instead, these structures provide the condition of possibility for experience and are thus antecedent to epistemological questions. By highlighting the causal influence of unobservable structures, critical realists want to challenge both 'idealistic' and more empiricist philosophies of science that reduce reality to observable entities.

Moreover, according to critical realists, debates in IR concerning questions of philosophy of science were essentially flawed. Neither is science a deductive nor an inductive enterprise – as most philosophies of science argue. Rather, as Wight and Patomäki called it, science should be understood in terms of retroduction, that is the: 'movement on the basis of analogy and metaphor among other things, from a concept of some phenomena of interest to the development of a model of some totally different type of things, structure or condition, that, at least in part, is responsible for

[1] Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1979); and *From Science to Emanzipation* (London: Verso, 2002).

[2] Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, 'After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 44 (2000), pp. 213–37, 223; Colin Wight, 'A Manifesto for Scientific Realism in IR: Assuming the Can-Opener Won't Work!', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35:2 (2007), pp. 379–98, at p. 382; and Jonathan Joseph, 'Philosophy in International Relations: A Scientific Realist Approach', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35:2 (2007), pp. 345–59, at p. 346.

[3] Wight and Patomäki, 'After Postpositivism?', p. 223; Wight, 'A Manifesto for Scientific Realism', p. 379.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000623 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the given phenomenon.'[4] Science identifies the structures, power, and tendencies that give rise to certain phenomena in the first place. Alas, there cannot be 'the' scientific method, but rather what kind of methodology one employs depends on the regional ontology under consideration. Instead, critical realists tend to subscribe to an epistemological pluralism resembling Feyerabend's *anything goes* rather than Popper's *conjunction and refutation*. In this sense, critical realists seek to differentiate themselves from 'empirical and linguistic realism'. According to Wight, those who find themselves either beyond the boundary of boredom or beyond the boundary of negativity actually share a certain instrumentalism when it comes to scientific concepts. For critical realists, both are realists if not even empiricist.[5] Consequently, both share a realist view, they only differ in the kind of realism: while positivists are empirical realists, post-positivists are linguistic realists. However, whether one subscribes to some form of empirical or linguistic realism, a deeper realism as their condition of possibility needs to be taken seriously, that is critical realism.

Of course, the issues critical realists raise are substantial and it will take some time to assess the validity of their claims. This forum cannot even hope to resolve them or even to provide definite answers. What the forum does hope, however, is to contribute to a discussion of the merits and pitfalls of Critical Realism. The forum starts with the contribution by Badredine Arfi. At first sight, Arfi shares with critical realists the conviction that there is no theory without some ontology. However, he differentiates between the ontological, that is, the ontological conviction of theoretical arguments, and positive ontology or ontologism and thus raises the question whether it is possible to speak of the ontological without ontology? His affirmative response rests on the proposition that we need to rethink ontological without falling prey to an ontological discourse. His answer takes him to Derrida and the logic of 'without'. A similar, more ontology related argument is formulated by Torsten Michel. He challenges Critical Realism on their ontological grounds as they did not ask the primary ontological question of 'what being is'. Taking seriously the notion of being then brings Michel to Husserl and Heidegger and less to Critical Realism. Michel then discusses Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world as an alternative avenue to think about ontological questions in IR. Martin Weber uses the examples of 'gravity' and 'money' to show that both 'materiality', and 'unobservable force' are *ontologically* radically different in both cases. Consequently, the link to the agent-structure problem is hence not as straightforward as Wight suggests. Weber thereby intends to call into question the stratified naturalism that critical realists presuppose. Benjamin Herborth focuses on the relationship between theory and practice. While sympathetic to many of Critical Realism's core commitments such as methodological pluralism, the critique of positivism, or a type of social theory, which does not shy away from 'big questions', Herborth argues that Critical Realism is ineffective and counter-productive in achieving theses goals. In their attempt to resurrect scientific authority as a means of social criticism, critical realists offer only a slightly different articulation of the traditional 'quest for certainty', in where it is ultimately scientific authority that is to be ascertained. Herborth proposes to focus instead on the critique of scientific authority as a precondition for inquiring into the practical and normative consequences of social scientific research. The forum closes with the contribution a

[4] Wight and Patomäki, 'After Postpositivism?', p. 224.
[5] Wight, 'A Manifesto for Scientific Realism', p. 381.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000623 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Oliver Kessler. He takes the recent exchange between Wight and Kratochwil as a vantage point for his discussion.[6] His contribution is not formulated in terms of a critique, but in terms of an *invitation.* Kessler observes that Wight and Kratochwil share a certain critique on bivalent logic and agree it is unsustainable today. It might be more useful to explore this common ground instead of continuing the exchange of mutual accusations. In this sense, Kessler reconstructs the constructivists' critique on bivalent logic, shows why from this perspective arguments about the objectivity of the world stand in some awkward relation to intersubjectivity, and invites critical realists to tell the story of their critique on bivalent logic.

As a summary, all contributions inquire into the status of 'things'. Arfi questions the ontological status of objects; Michel puts forward the argument of objects as 'ready at hand' and not simply 'present at hand'. Weber queries into the relationship between concepts and objects, Herborth interrogates the practical consequences of Critical Realism's take on objects and objectivity, and Kessler argues that objects as things and objects as 'intersubjective', meaning constituted objects stand in an uneasy relationship that cannot be bridged.

[6] Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Of false promises and good bets: a plea for a pragmatic approach to theory building', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 10 (2007), pp. 1–15; Colin Wight, 'Inside the epistemological cave all bets are off', Journal of International Relations and Development, 10:1 (March 2007), pp. 40–56.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000623 Published online by Cambridge University Press