

# A critical ‘post’ to critical realism

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The aim of this paper is to initiate a dialogue between critical realism (CR) and what is termed a ‘post’ist perspective’. This amalgamated perspective is composed of relatively recent transdisciplinary theoretical approaches such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism and postcolonial theory. Such a conversation between CR and post’isms within economics has not been attempted before. I shall argue that this uncommon methodological exchange is worth pursuing, since it allows us to raise important new questions. After the initial stage-setting, the dialogue proceeds in two parts. In the first part, aspects of CR are evaluated using post’ist insights. In the second part, certain underconsidered theoretical domains in CR are highlighted. I conclude by sketching the outline of a possible non-universalist and strategically essentialist way of considering knowledge—as a Contextual Social Political Economy praxis.

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## 1. Introduction

Critical realism (CR) enters on stage against the backdrop of times when the unyielding hegemony of mainstream economics is under sustained criticism from all quarters.<sup>1</sup> It has a most interesting performance in its stated aim of underlabouring for the possibility of more productive economic theories (Lawson, 1999A, p. 15). Continued intellectual engagements of critical realists, both among themselves and with work from other positions, have ensured the possibility of referring to the work of the ‘school of critical realists’ or ‘the critical realist work’ and being reasonably sure that the central tenets of CR are recognised (summarised in Baert, 1996, pp. 515–17). It is the scope of this academic engagement that I wish to further in this paper by attempting to evaluate the critical realist stance<sup>2</sup> on several pertinent issues, from a perspective inspired by some of the insights of

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<sup>1</sup> Mainstream economics here serves to denote the powerful common disciplinary element that has been criticised variously in recent years for its methods and conceptualisation of ‘economic’ phenomena. The critiques have come from methodologists, and from diverse heterodox theoretical approaches such as feminist, Marxist, post-Keynesian, ecological, Austrian and so on.

<sup>2</sup> In this, I am addressing principally critical realists working in relation to economics. See Lawson (1997), Fleetwood (1999).

poststructuralism, feminism, deconstruction and postcolonial theory (hereafter called the post'ist position).<sup>1</sup> It would be a thoroughly heartening side-effect if some (more methodologically minded) readers also construed this as an invitation to attend seriously to what these approaches can contribute to our disciplinary discussions of economic theory and methodology. Indeed, they might find that these positions are not necessarily as devoid of ethics, 'debilitatingly relativist' or ambiguous as is often assumed.<sup>2</sup>

Before I move towards the main arguments of the paper, a few more words which attempt to situate its motivation: a dialogue between the critical realist and post'ist positions is not an obvious methodological candidate, but I aim to demonstrate that it can be a fruitful one. This is for several reasons. Firstly, although CR performs an important function in trying to convince the mainstream of its 'essential error of closed systems modelling' (Lawson, 1999A, p. 4), once we conduct a dialogue with the critical realist position from a post'ist perspective, we find that the conceptualisation of certain elements of the critical realist method (as we shall see, notions of language, expectations of science, role of metaphor, role and criteria for theories and so on) can also be problematised and further developed for their (perceived) inadequacy. Secondly, its not only a matter of method/s. Critical realists (such as Lawson) have recently tried to establish a dialogue with feminist standpoint theory in its attempts to ground the possibility of human emancipation (Lawson, 1999C). Given the legitimate concern in CR for the emancipatory potential of theories, it becomes necessary to question certain absent emphases in its domain.<sup>3</sup> Issues such as power, positionality, consideration of the 'other' and so on have been influential in the post'ist (especially feminist and postcolonial) thinking about emancipation. CR may benefit from attending to the accumulated insights of these theoretical formations. So, stemming from a post'ist perspective, I shall aim to evaluate both the conceptualisation of some elements

<sup>1</sup> For the ease of argument, I term this the 'post'ist' position. In a subsequent section, I explain in detail its insights and what it entails. I hasten to add that this should not be read as 'pomo' *per se*. In fact, I have deliberately chosen not to state postmodernism as one of its constituents because of the extremely diverse interpretations accorded to the term. I see the difference between postmodernism and poststructuralism along with Butler, who writes that 'positions of poststructuralism claim that the subject [of knowledge] never existed, . . . the postmodern position which claims that the subject once had integrity, but no longer does' (Butler, 1992, p. 15). Finally, it is perhaps worth mentioning that, subsequent to writing this paper, I have come across another work (MacKenzie, 2001) that uses the term 'post-isms' to denote a set of perspectives and theoretical positions. What the author has in mind when denoting 'post-isms' is similar to what I imply when I used the phrase 'post'ist perspective'. He, however, aims to unravel the knots surrounding 'post-isms' and explores how it may best be defined. See also Kaul (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Sayer (2000, p. 180) writes, 'It is also clear that postmodernist relativism undermines calls for an extension of an ethic of care to our others, for relativism denies the existence of any universal grounds for caring about them; relativists need only worry about themselves'. I shall argue later (Section 3.2) that this need not be the case. It is indeed possible to combine a post'ist perspective with an explicit ethical concern. This negotiation is achieved by delinking the possibility of emancipation from its precondition of grounded commonalities such as those based on 'human nature'. The question of ethics which is also a concern of the CRs (Collier, 1999; Lawson, 2000), can be explored further in the context of economics by engaging with post'ist approaches.

<sup>3</sup> By absent emphases, I mean certain underconsidered domains which may be more fully investigated by deploying post'ist insights. This is especially true of CR in economics, where (perhaps unlike other social sciences) it is too soon to dismiss post'isms as their full impact has not been taken on board anyway. Sayer (2000), for instance, represents a rare work attempting to engage with postmodernism (although in my view he often takes it to be far too defeatist, relativist and ethics-less). He cautions rightly (2000, p. 30) 'that critical realism should not reject postmodernism but acknowledge that some elements of it may be valid, particularly [this] problematisation of modernist categories and structures of explanation'. He goes on to say, 'Strategically, the main mistake made by critical realists in academic debate is to have ignored rather than engaged with poststructuralist and postmodernist thought'. This is close to what my attempt here seeks to do—open up the conversation between post'ism and CR in relation to economics.

and the inter-linked emphasis on some issues within critical realist thought. During the course of this, it is also hoped that the post'ist position will be relieved of some of its common characterisations such as relativistic, nihilistic, apolitical or jargonised—charges which are all too often accepted unquestioningly—which damage it severely. Finally, my aim is not solely to problematise CR on an assortment of issues, for I conclude by providing, for further thought, an outline of a possible praxis—Contextual Social Political Economy—that can follow from the amalgam of insights employed in (and emerging from) this methodological dialogue with CR.

## 2. The post'ist perspective

As the bearer of big words, it is best to make myself explicit from the start. I have labelled for ease of dialogue the perspective taken here as 'post'ist—*informed by insights from poststructuralism,<sup>1</sup> deconstruction,<sup>2</sup> feminism<sup>3</sup> and postcolonial theory.<sup>4</sup>* These approaches are not akin to disciplines or completely contained within a particular discipline, but can broadly be understood as critical theoretical approaches which cut across many conventional disciplines (they refuse to be 'disciplined'). Whilst a detailed discussion of their emergence or merits is not possible here, let me now outline some of their major relevant contributions. This is admittedly a rough characterisation in many ways (stage-setting), but it helps to appreciate the post'ist position. It is only after this that I shall proceed to engage specifically with CR, in the subsequent sections.

<sup>1</sup> A flavour of poststructuralism: according to Butler (1992, p. xiv), it is not a position but 'a critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which "positions" are established'. It requires that terms such as subject and agency be reused and rethought, exposed as strategic instruments and effects, and subjected to a critical reinscription and redeployment.

<sup>2</sup> Consider Spivak's comment: 'Deconstruction does not say that there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly looking into how truths are produced' (Landry and MacLean, 1996, p. 27–8). In a similar vein, Butler writes (1992, pp. 15–17),

To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject or redeployment that previously has not been authorised . . . To deconstruct the terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power.

Poovey (1988) discusses deconstruction in relation to feminism. The relation of CR (in general) with deconstruction has been previously explored by Norris (1997, especially pp. 38–65). In such engagements of CR with deconstruction, it is generally argued that deconstruction *need not* have an *anti-realist* stance, and is thus different from other 'anti-realist or postmodern-pragmatist' approaches (*ibid.*, p. 61). Unfortunately, within the context of economics, deconstruction and CR have not had a chance to meet at length. Lawson (1999C, p. 50) does mention the "deconstructive" turn in feminist theory' (no such turn having occurred in feminist economics), but it is the opinion of this author that this is an engagement waiting to happen.

<sup>3</sup> The influence of feminist work in economics is most pronounced—feminist economics as a sub-field is widely known (see Ferber and Nelson, 1994; Strassmann, 1994; Humphries, 1995). There has also been some engagement of feminist with poststructuralist thought in economics (see Hewitson, 1999) and of CRs with feminists (see Harding, 1999; Lawson, 1999C).

<sup>4</sup> The postcolonial is usually taken to mean simply post-of-colonial (i.e., post-colonial) in a temporal sense. But, there is an immense literature in theoretical postcolonial work that critically challenges the accepted practices of representation in the construction of knowledge which rely upon accepting the closures of (neo)colonial modernity as beyond questioning. Some prominent writers are Said (1978), Spivak (1988, 2000), Bhabha (1994). For an introduction to the term, see Ashcroft *et al.* (1998, p. 186). See also, Mohanty (1991), Ashcroft *et al.* (1994, 1998), Chambers and Curti (1996), Mongia (1996), Moore-Gilbert (1997) and Gandhi (1998). Within economics, see McCloskey, Spivak and Charusheela in *Rethinking Marxism* (2000), Kaul (forthcoming).

The approaches I outline here certainly resonate in focusing attention on issues of the subject (who is the referent? how do we define the person whose concerns a particular theory addresses?), power (how does consideration of power affect the theoretical set-up? we know knowledge is power but how often does power define what gets counted as knowledge/valid theory?), language (what happens if language is more than a neutral medium of communication?), perspectivity (which perspective counts?), positionality (to what extent does the context affect justification?), criticality (to what extent is it a theoretical virtue?) and an attention to what is conventionally deemed to be the margin of the main narrative, the outside (in the mainstream economic narrative, do women or the environment or history belong?).

Including these questions disrupts most givens of a conventional methodological set-up,<sup>1</sup> but this can be helpful, for we should not underestimate the value of being disturbed (Butler, 2000B). If they pull the carpet from under the metaphysical certainties<sup>2</sup> that we rely upon as a basis of our theoretical endeavours, this gesture also immediately includes that which orthodox theory will not talk of. Perhaps, the most important thing in all this is that they force us continually to ask, *how is the legitimate ground of theoretical contestation constituted?*

So, we wave an unapologetic farewell to the all knowing self-transparent Cartesian subject and the dualisms<sup>3</sup> (subject–object, nature–culture, mind–body, reason–emotion) that helped structure *his* world and spurred him on the continuous quest for ‘mastering nature’.<sup>4</sup> The economic man armed with his rational faculties is a true image. Creating economic knowledge in the image of such a being is also a process of making a particular

<sup>1</sup> I should clarify that by a ‘conventional methodological set-up’ I mean one where theory is taken to reflect/describe (accurately, or even fallibly as in CR) reality but where theories are *not* allowed to be recognised as *productive* of reality (that is, produce their own domain of the ‘real’ rather than merely reflect a pre-existing reality). This set-up conforms to what may be called an *Enlightenment Epistemology*. I should add that CR claims its distance from positivism and empiricism, but this has been disputed, for instance by Walters and Young (2001), who provide an account of CR as close to positivism and empiricism by (among other things) challenging the epistemological basis of CR and its reading of Hume and Humean causation.

<sup>2</sup> One example of this is the idea of the ‘transcendental subject’ that in its various guises (the self, human nature) has structured most humanist modernist disciplinary knowledge. While claiming to be a common universal marker of knowledge, this subject has universalised as fundamental and necessary the Enlightenment Western European modes of experience. Solomon (1988) discusses this ‘transcendental pretence’ (see especially pp. 1–7 and 194–203).

<sup>3</sup> The implication here is not just that dualisms *per se* are bad, but that *gendered* dualisms have played a large part in structuring the social scientific and cultural imaginary. Feminists (and feminist economists) have worked variously to make this case. As for critical realist economists, I shall direct them to Sayer (2000, especially pp. 55–8), who has considered this issue and possible responses. He argues (p. 57) that to valorise the hitherto devalued side of the binary is not enough, that the binary itself needs to be deconstructed to breakout of the conceptual schema. It would be useful to add that cultural binaries have also played an important role in the logic of imperialism which derived sustenance from comforting oppositions such as civilised/primitive. Consider for instance,

It may be argued that the very domain of post-colonial theory is the region of ‘taboo’—the domain of overlap between the imperial binary oppositions, the area in which ambivalence, hybridity and complexity continually disrupt the certainties of imperial logic . . . Imperial binarism always assumes movement in one direction—from the coloniser to colonised, from the explorer to explored, from the surveyor to the surveyed. But just as post-colonial identity emerges in the ambivalent spaces of the colonial encounter, so the dynamic of change is not all in one direction; it is in fact *transcultural*, with a significant circulation of effects back and forth between the two . . . (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998, pp. 25–7)

<sup>4</sup> The ‘mastering’ of a ‘feminine’ nature is in line with Baconian ideas. I should clarify that the worldview inherent in ‘science torturing nature’s secrets out of her’ is quite different from that implied in building flood defences in an area prone to flooding! The former is emphatically modernist in the desire to predict and control, something to which economics is not an exception.

type of 'economic subject' out of individuals, and needless to say, there will be those who feel excluded.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, language is seen not as a neutral means of communication where signs stand for what they name. Rather, the meaning of something is always created by referring to that which it is not (presence as invoked by absences). Thus, we say that meaning is constantly deferred without having any essential centred core, rather like a dictionary (Hewitson, 1999, especially pp. 13–16). There is also a focus on the role of the 'constitutive outside' in narratives—which are seen to define themselves in relation not only to the stories that they are telling, but also in relation to the ones that they are *not* telling. The outside of stories about the economy is not merely the result of an omission or neglect (and hence cannot be 'brought in' by amending the methods) but rather serves a *constitutive* function in being there. Without that outside, the inside would not be what it is. We can then interrogate the narratives and subsuming truth claims as to whose interests they serve, what they leave out, and how they silence the alternatives.

As an emancipatory project, feminism does not have an unqualified or unproblematic relation to knowledge (see Lennon and Whitford, 1994; Lennon, 1999; Tanesini, 1999). The feminist project of making mainstream economic knowledge more reflective of the realities or experiences of women can also play out in several ways (see Hewitson, 1999). It can mean empiricist ways of adding women's contributions to the existing literature, or interrogating the mainstream for its absence of women. It can mean talking about a feminist standpoint, thus recognising that women's experiences as an oppressed group may have led to knowledge which cannot necessarily be integrated to the mainstream without also acknowledging the situatedness of the marginalised group. Last but not the least, it can also link up with poststructuralist insights to ask whether the existence and dominance of the mainstream is maintained *because* of the exclusion of women as its *constitutive outside*. This poststructuralist feminist theory (which is my main interest here) is very different from what is called 'post-feminism' in popular culture (see Barrett, 2000).

Somewhat similar in nature to the above, postcolonial theory as I draw upon it here is not merely the temporal 'post' after colonial but uses a theoretical sense of the word 'post'. This signifies an attempt to re-understand the colonial and neo-colonial encounters in ways that will give agency to all those involved. It emphasises the importance of pointing towards the silencing and marginalising of certain voices in the writing of histories. Projects of simply recovering or speaking for the silenced subjects need to be aware of the possibility of their own complicity in the dominant power relations. One speaks and writes from sites of power. A recognition of the representational practices which shape the cartographies of power carries within it the possibility of resistance and resignification. Why is this important for theory? Because it encourages critical self-reflexivity, an awareness of history, and warns against decontextualised universalistic theoretical exercises.

Issues like the above may seem far removed from the economic terrain, but their undisciplined nature may be a valuable aid to asking questions that disciplines (such as mainstream economics) are resistant to asking or answering.

### 3. CR and economics

It will be the purpose of Sections 3.1 and 3.2 to engage with CR in relation to economics. It is not a general dialogue with Roy Bhaskar's philosophy (1979; *cf.* Drake *et al.*, 1920) or

<sup>1</sup> See Williams (1993, p. 145) for a discussion of the relation of *homo economicus* to the Western philosophical tradition.

even with CR for its own sake. Rather, it is an attempt to bring into relief some tensions in the fabric of CR as far as its own engagements with economics and economic methodology are concerned.

Critical realists focus on criticising the ‘ontological neglect’ of mainstream economics which occurs as a consequence of its formalistic modelling (Lawson, 1999D, p. 275) and attempt to provide alternative remedial methods, of causally explaining an open social system, such as contrastives, demi-regs, etc. (Lawson, 1999E). In doing so, they place an excessive stress on the deductive method of the mainstream, indeed marking it out as the *essential error*. Lawson writes that the ‘*scandal* of the mainstream deductivist project is *not its conclusions* but its lack of relevance: its inability to provide an understanding of the real world’ (Lawson, 1999B, p. 241, emphases added). ‘Whose’ (interpretation of the) real world does mainstream theory not adequately capture? It must do a somewhat decent job of being relevant to those whom it supports by its conclusions. Yet there are others—certain kinds of economic actors for whom the greatest scandal lies in their being excluded—who are not recognised as legitimate. Those whose voice is not translatable into the standard performances of mainstream neoclassical dialogue (‘inferior irrational others’ who value ecology over global capitalism for instance). For them, critiquing the mainstream *method* is not enough. One wants to go further with the disciplinary discontent, but CR stops here.

The CR quarrel with the mainstream over the *choice of method* leaves open the space to ask more subversive questions such as is it *merely* a problem of *the mainstream method* not being helpful, *or* are there other dimensions to it? For, one can argue that the aesthetic aspirations of the mainstream are not only theoretically exclusionary (in that they exclude any consideration of situated subjects from its narratives) but also materially deprive those whom they exclude. This is not to deny the method-related problems of economics—methodological individualism, individual rationality, obscuringly arcane mathematical formalism, a heroic role for assumptions, deductive nomological explanation, operation of an extremum principle and so on. However, it does mean asking difficult questions about ‘violence’ and ‘oppression’ as we have not thought of them before. We have not previously thought of *exclusion as a violent act in and of itself*.<sup>1</sup> It is here that post’ist notion of ‘epistemic violence’ can help to establish that the very gesture of excluding someone/ thing (‘being written out’) from a disciplinary account commits an invisible oppression—in the representational realm, and that this may be no less real in its effects than what CR would recognise as ‘real’ oppression. We need to rethink the *power of signification*. Butler observes:

The violence of the letter, the violence of the mark which establishes what will and will not signify, what will and will not be included within the intelligible, takes on a political significance when the letter is the law . . . So what can this kind of poststructural analysis tell us about violence and suffering? Is it perhaps that forms of violence are to be understood as more pervasive, more constitutive, and more insidious than prior models have allowed us to see? (1992, pp. 17–18)

Substituting the notion of the ‘economic’ for ‘law’ in the lines above, we can see that we need to contest how the very boundaries of what gets counted as being ‘economic’ are established. How is the ‘economic’ realm delineated and re-demarcated from that which is not economic? As Butler asks (2000A, pp. 277–8), ‘We ought not simply to “plug in”

<sup>1</sup> If this seems alien from a critical realist (economist’s) point of view, it might be useful to recall Charles Taylor ‘since identities are formed dialogically in social contexts, they require recognition from others, not denial or misrecognition, and hence withholding recognition can be a form of oppression’ (quoted in Sayer, 2000, p. 183).

the economic as the particular fields whose conditions of possibility can be thought out on an *a priori* level'. A significant insight of feminist thought has been to question the arbitrary nature of these boundaries (with respect to housework, carework, non-marketed transactions) to demonstrate how they are linked to power and dominance. When CR addresses itself to the problems of economics, it does not give explicit attention to the politics of the determination of 'the economic'. We need to prod further and question not just the method, but the very nature and role of economic theories and how they link to (or construct) an 'economic' realm worthy of investigation.<sup>1</sup>

In the following sections, I deal with two sets of interrelated points: first, those that evaluate the conceptualisation of some elements within CR and, second, those issues which may be better emphasised in CR.

### 3.1 *Critical evaluation*

According to CR, the important features of reality, including the social world, are intransitive and structured, the process by which we come to know them is retroduction, a move from the level of phenomenon identified to a different 'deeper' level in order to explain the phenomenon, to identify a causal mechanism responsible (Lawson, 1999A, pp. 9–10). Lawson writes, 'I do argue that the primary aim of science and explanation is to identify and understand the underlying structures, capacities, mechanisms, etc., which causally bear upon (facilitate, influence, produce) surface phenomena, including events, of interest' (Lawson, 1999B, p. 233). Such statements are close to the CR view of the world. But, what are the implications if the full import of the above is allowed through into theorising?

Realism of the kind espoused in CR leads one to conceive of theories driven *solely* by the need for *explaining* phenomena. This quest for dis-covering or un-covering the causal mechanisms underlying surface phenomena does not adequately accommodate the problem of how the very *description* of phenomena might be *constructed*. Further, the retroductive move to a 'different deeper level' is full of ambiguity. The 'deep' is claimed not as an artefact of methodological convenience, a metaphor—it is rather a fundamental (though not directly observable) feature of reality. But, there is little hope of judging something against the deep—since knowledge is fallible. Thus, if critical realist methodology were to be translated (on its own terms) into concrete substantivist theoretical terms, the criteria of explanation would play a significant part in arbitrating between competing accounts. However, what counts as a better explanatory account of some phenomena is to be decided on a contextual basis. Then, the function of the appeal to an existing deep reality is not clear. One would perhaps do as well (if not better) by focusing attention on *the way* the competing accounts are constructed and the way in which contextual approval is sought *in practice*.

There is also the linked question of *who performs* these moves and un-covers these causal mechanisms thus explaining the surface phenomena? In passive 'scientific' fashion, the critical realist theorist (as methodologist) is missing from the picture. We hear what counts, the important objective causal mechanisms behind (deep down under) the mere surface phenomena. But whose interpretation of a structured ontology is this? The idea of the social scientist uncovering causal mechanisms of phenomena in the social

<sup>1</sup> It may be that CR cannot comment on this, because it claims to give methodological rather than substantive pronouncements. The two may not be separable and in this case, CR may not be all we need to dismantle the mainstream—since method alone is not the problem and the distinction between method and theory itself is arbitrary.

world presumes that people's activities are observable in the public domain as social phenomena. This is contestable, as the *meaning* of such phenomena rests on the subject's perspective and even from there it is perhaps revised and re-thought and cannot be admitted as *uncontested* data from the transcendental perspective of the social scientist from which to postulate ontology. The issue here is the extent to which the critical realist theorists can recover the meanings (beliefs) of those whom they are studying. Is there anything *specific* to being in a *particular* position (at the intersection of various discourses) which is not available to theorise from a different perspective? Is it disciplinary virtue that allows a social scientist (in the critical realist scheme of things) to be able to recover meanings for agents which they themselves are not aware of? The answer is not merely that the social scientist may be wrong, or fallible, *but* that they may consistently and deliberately misattribute agents' meanings to construct accounts which allow them to retain (perhaps) positions of power in the generation of knowledge. It is here that CR and postcolonial theory could talk further. Representation, history and culture matter in knowledge construction, in ways that can best be appreciated by attempting to be ever critical of accounts where someone (the agent) is being spoken for (by the theorist). This does not imply the end of theory as we know it (since postcolonial work is *not* 'backward-looking' but offers an incisive analysis of phenomena such as development or global capitalism in our age). The 'deep real' allows a bolstering of expert's efforts to knowledge claims in a way that is very hard to challenge, and we must be circumspect of its use in a discipline such as economics, which already drips with beliefs in positivist empiricist a priori certainties.<sup>1</sup> Within economics at least, we need to pay far greater attention to *subjective beliefs* in the *social realm* than to a purported non-discursive realm. The interesting question then is, how do economic theories not only describe, explain, predict but *create* economic realities? What are the means by which we can connect the *logic of economic theories* with the *economic logic* that has permeated at every level of society? How do accounts of knowledge by social scientists *produce* their own real?

What are the means by which scientists gain access to the unknown, structured, intransitive objects of the mind-independent world? According to Lewis (1999, pp. 83–101), CR relies upon a 'logic of analogy and metaphor'. He shows how the critical realist method has a generative role for the metaphor. The metaphor is allowed an indispensable creative role in the process of formulation, it provides a linguistic context for the models of scientific explanation, supplies new terms for the theoretical vocabulary and directs scientists towards new avenues of inquiry. However, he leaves unanswered the question of whether, once the metaphor has played its part in theoretical formulation, the theory can be expressed without the metaphor. In other words, does metaphor play a fundamental role or a literal one *after* the process of formulation? Metaphors also close off alternative paths and often the creative metaphor *is* the theory.

Let us now consider the role of language in CR<sup>2</sup> as it relates to economics. Within economics, it is not considered explicitly, apart from when the rules of language are compared with the highway code (Lawson, 1999A, p. 11), they are 'social' in the sense of being both the condition and consequence of intentional human agency. To paraphrase

<sup>1</sup> According to Baert (1996), CR resembles positivism and falsificationism in relying upon a reduced concept of knowledge acquisition. He writes, 'CR tends to ignore the extent to which knowledge acquisition, especially in the social realm, is always a dialogue or a two-way process, whereby, through confrontation with the object of research, people also learn about their own assumptions and culture . . .' (pp. 519–20). There *may not* be anything in CR that *necessarily* prevents taking some of these points on board, but that needs to be pointed out as an area of possible further work.

<sup>2</sup> On the CR view of language in general, see Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999).



Lawson, rules of language facilitate speech acts and themselves are reproduced by these acts. Language facilitates communication, and is transparent. This relies upon a determinate system of references and the ability to fix meaning within language. The reluctance of critical realist economists in accepting the view of language where there is an endless deferral of meaning does not tie very well even with some general critical realist accounts. For example, Sayer writes,

Thus we find that meaning is not to be located at any specific point but is continually 'deferred' across the network [he alludes to Derrida's concept of *Différance* here] . . . Interpretation is therefore characterised by 'intertextuality'. *In view of this, it is easy to be persuaded that meaning must be radically unstable, even though in everyday life, at least in its practical aspects, meaning seems fairly stable. Critical Realism can and must accept that meanings are not locatable at single points in the network, but are rather formed through the play of difference within the network.* Nevertheless the acceptance of this point needs qualifying by reintroducing the referent into the discussion . . . (2000, p. 36, emphasis added)

It needs to be said, however, that both these accounts of language (the general CR and CR in economics) differ from the poststructuralist view outlined earlier (Section 2 above). There, language itself is a set of relationships within which meaning is produced and discourses are elaborated. We actuate our existence within languages. In substantive terms, this means that we bring language inside the contested terrain where battles over theory are fought. This is useful because it allows us to make the important claim that theories do not just explain (or predict or describe) a reality out there, but *discursively produce*<sup>1</sup> mediated accounts of reality to which we do not have unproblematic access.

Now I shall explore the critical realist belief in the possibility and extent of Science in the social realm. This can be problematised for several reasons—because of what it implies (reasons one and two below), what it allows (reason four), and what it requires (reason three). First, the desire for science as systematic knowledge means that the metaphysics behind what gets counted as 'scientific' or 'systematic' knowledge is not subjected to any scrutiny. Questions such as who distinguishes science from non-science? who defines 'systematic knowledge'? whose interests does objective science serve? (see Brown, 1993) have not (yet?) been posed by critical realists. *Economics* (especially the neoclassical mainstream variant) as a discipline is famous for its attempts to mould itself into a social *physics* (on this, see Mirowski, 1989, 1991). In this regard, an interrogation of the very bases on which 'scientific knowledge' is created, and differentiated from that which is deemed non-science, may be far more useful for dismantling the masters' house.

A second (and linked) issue relates to the way science is taken to denote legitimacy. Within the prevailing environment in which scientism is over-valourised, the use of signifier 'Science' for one's endeavour could be taken to indicate the desire that the enterprise be received as one which is 'legitimate' and has the authority of the 'groundless ground' (infinite regression of authority in the prior). But in large part this *historical* belief of *legitimacy* is based upon the association of science with (a) a Western eurocentric way of knowing (which is deemed superior to 'native' or indigenous knowledge), (b) its preferred methodological language—mathematics, and (c) its 'malestream' practitioners. By aligning itself rather uncritically with this signifier, CR does not adequately address the concerns of those who have raised valid objections to the associations mentioned above. In this regard, its perhaps worth mentioning very briefly work such as: ecofeminism, which links up the insights on the inferior status of women with that of ecology in the normal, rational scheme of things (Mies and Shiva, 1993); feminist critiques of science

<sup>1</sup> The performativity of neoclassical theories of hedonistic egoism can be an example of this.

(Haraway, 1988; Longino, 1988; Le Doeuff, 1989); critiques of eurocentrism in social science and work tracing the non-European roots of mathematics (Joseph *et al.*, 1990; Kanth, 1997, 1999; Joseph, 2000); postcolonial uncovering of ‘Orientalism’ (notably Said, 1978).

Third, Pleasants notes that a primary motivation for Bhaskar’s social and psychological ontologies (and therefore CR ontologies) stems from:

His desire to justify the social sciences as *genuinely scientific enterprises*. In order to achieve this he believes that he has to establish the ‘*sui generis* reality’ of social and psychological phenomena: ‘*what properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?*’ (Bhaskar, 1989 a:13—original emphasis). The concepts of emergence and irreducibility, and the picture of ‘reasons’ as ‘causes’ are, therefore, the means by which he endeavours to guarantee ‘real objects’ for social and psychological science to study. It is ironic then, that the ‘real objects’ underwritten by his philosophical ontology are not so much *real* ‘real objects’ as *theoretical* objects. (Pleasants, 1999, p. 113, original emphases)

He provides a persuasive account of why this can be problematic (see especially pp. 99–120). The backdrop for his interrogation of CR ontology is the peculiar way in which it seeks to combine indeterminism<sup>1</sup> with compatibilism.<sup>2</sup> Further, this critical realist theory of mind and agency is developed against the established philosophical traditions of positivism and hermeneuticism. And on the positivist side, for Bhaskar the Humean account of causality cannot deal with the (CR) ontological picture of reasons as causes. It is here that Pleasants delivers a Wittgensteinian critique of the idea that reasons are causes.<sup>3</sup> According to Wittgenstein, the grammar of expression ‘reasons are causes’ relies upon a linguistic confusion, for it immediately and imperceptibly makes ‘reasons’ into things (quasi-objects).

From this perspective, Bhaskar’s assertion that ‘intentional human behaviour . . . is always caused by reasons’ is just a rationalist myth created by his own symbolism. If we desist from conceiving reasons as ‘things’ or ‘aethereal objects’, then we should see that *what looks like the ‘real reason’ for an act from one point of view (the theorist’s) may well look quite different from another perspective (participants or, for that matter, other theorists)*. (Pleasants, 1999, p. 109, original emphasis)

Thus the realist picture of individual agency and freedom ‘is unable to show *how* individuals always “could have acted otherwise”, and that “agency is real”’ (p. 109, original emphasis).<sup>4</sup> The other problematic specified by Pleasants relates to the epistemological position of realism. He writes (pp. 114–15) that realists fallback on a ‘common sense realism’ by referring to ‘some ordinary, everyday facts . . . like “there are physical objects”’

<sup>1</sup> The thesis that although human beings are subject to the laws of nature, they can still initiate action as conscious, purposive agents, possessing ‘free will’ which affects the causal order of nature. That individuals always ‘could have acted otherwise’ (Pleasants, 1999, p. 102).

<sup>2</sup> One way of reconciling freedom with determinism where the paradigm of free will means that it is the individual who determines his/her course of action freely from a range of alternatives such that the casual antecedents of her actions are the motives (beliefs, desires, and reasons) that she holds. This is a naturalistic position (*ibid.*).

<sup>3</sup> Pleasants writes, ‘Whilst not denying that *some* acts are motivated by reasons, Wittgenstein (1968) contends that in many (most?) cases we just “act, without reasons”’ (*ibid.*, p. 109).

<sup>4</sup> This is the same as the account of individual agency in economics provided by Lawson. He writes,

By an *agent*, I understand the possessor or bearer of powers, abilities and capabilities . . . By human acts or *action* I understand the intentional actions to be those human doings that are caused by reason(s) . . . I take the notion of *choice* to denote a power possessed by each individual whereby, in any situation, he or she *could really have acted other than he or she did*. (Lawson, 1997, p. 174, last emphasis mine)

which prove that 'external world' really exists independently of the perceiving subject. Wittgenstein counter-argues *not* that one is wrong about the things one claims to know, but that these facts do *not* prove the truth of the philosophical thesis 'realism'. Such subjective certainties, according to Wittgenstein, cannot be expressed as knowledge claims in the philosophical sense 'where "I know" is meant to mean: I *can't* be wrong'. Similarly, Pleasants counter-argues *not* that Bhaskar might be wrong about the assertion on individual ability to 'act otherwise', but that he 'doesn't *know* what he asserts he knows' (p. 114).

Returning to the fourth reason, within CR, science is seen as a *necessary* condition for human emancipation<sup>1</sup> (Lawson, 1999B, pp. 239–47), but the strong relationship between science and dominant ideologies (see Kanth, 1999, pp. 187–201) is not uncovered. It is this *neglect* of the role of ideology (and focus on method) that allows Lawson *mildly* to explain the possible casual factors behind the persistence of the modern mainstream in economics as follows:

Undoubtedly, there are numerous forces at work, including, *at times*, ideological ones. My own assessment is that a causal factor of *far greater* significance is the inspirational role of mathematics in western culture, certainly since the Enlightenment, and especially among economists. (Lawson, 1999B, p. 242, emphases added)

This is again another issue that needs critical evaluation and further dialogue.

### 3.2 Underconsidered domains

The issue of power is critical to social analysis. Following Foucaultian insights,<sup>2</sup> power is understood to be ever-present, a constant twin to knowledge, always and everywhere. Power can be conceptualised both as an oppressive force and as an ever-present source of resistance and creativity. It has the effect of closing down conversations, of censorship, of 'disciplining' discourses. But, power is also a productive force, in the sense that it continuously mutates, transforms and creates. It brings with it the possibility of resistance. Exchange of ideas also happens in a realm of power relations. Now, my claim here is twofold. First, I do not doubt that critical realist economists are aware of the aspect of power as an oppressive force (in the same way that feminist economists are aware of it, see Strassmann, 1994; Strassmann and Polanyi, 1995).<sup>3</sup> However, this is not something that has been *explicitly* dealt with in critical realist accounts of economics—where, owing to an excessive stress on method (which is flawed no doubt but its persistence may itself be ideological), the functioning of power in the successful attempts at marginalisation and/or internalisation of heterodoxy is not considered.<sup>4</sup> But, the second part of my claim relates

<sup>1</sup> A position to which I shall return soon.

<sup>2</sup> Solomon (1988) summarises the main themes of Foucault's work as follows: 'the centrality of language in understanding social practices, the "illusion of autonomous discourse", the discontinuity of history, the systematic oppression of people through classification and confinement, and the central place of political power in what the authorities prefer to present as scientific knowledge' (p. 199). See Amariglio (1988) for a detailed analysis of Foucault's work in relation to economics. For the purposes of the present argument, I mention Foucault's work to draw attention to three specific things which have been important themes in the post-'ist perspective—(a) the always-already presence of power in knowledge, (b) that 'there are no relations of power without resistances' (Foucault, 1980, p. 142) and (c) the recognition of the 'history of different modes by which human beings are made subjects' (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). See also Rabinow (1984).

<sup>3</sup> In her work, Strassmann provides an illuminating account of being a woman in economics trying to challenge the dominant conceptions of knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> I should point out that this of course does not mean that they *cannot* be considered. Indeed, that's the reason for *this* conversation!

to another use of the concept of power. Let me explain. When discussing ‘social relations and societal practices’, Lawson writes,

In short, society is constituted in large part by a set of *positions* [emphasis original], each associated with numerous obligations, rights and duties, and *into which agents*, as it were, *slot*. (1997, p. 164, emphases added)

There are hierarchies in the structured world but they are made of positions of varying power into which we slot. The matter of power mediating the interaction of individuals is not emphasised. To repeat, we *slot* into these positions—we are *made to slot* into them. We are not told how it is that agents *come to occupy* these positions. What is the processual story behind this organised hierarchical world? A focus on power *per se* would allow a greater self-reflexivity to enter into considerations such as—*how* do hierarchies come about? In respect of power, CR is more akin to hermeneutics because, like the ideas of Habermasian communication and Gadamerian linking of horizons,<sup>1</sup> in CR it is presumed that communication and cooperation will resolve conflict, and there would evolve forms of communication to link the different situated knowledges and perspectives.

How can we discuss emancipation within the CR framework? CR very rightly lays stress on breaching the fact/value divide and, for this, the credential of explanatory critiques are important (Collier, 1994). Thus, the ‘production of explanations of social institutions’ serves both as a precondition for criticising them and in some cases *is* itself a critique of them (*ibid.*, p. 172). To paraphrase Collier (p. 183), social sciences generate emancipatory projects by showing that there is a need, some obstacle preventing its satisfaction, and some means of removing this obstacle. Explanatory knowledge is ‘empowering to a movement of the oppressed’ (p. 189). Now, this close tying of explanation and emancipation in CR focuses on *grasping* the nature of phenomena at issue as a starting point for emancipation. In most cases, there is *not a dearth of ‘facts’* (knowledge of causal mechanisms, if you will) *about the world which is keeping the masses from emancipation*, possibly it is an understanding of consequences and a space for considering the ‘other’ that is the problem. Perhaps, what we need is more *understanding* (more self-examining, more doubting, more acknowledging of ambiguities) rather than *explanation*. By juxtaposing these two concepts, my intention is to bring out ‘understanding’ as having an always-already ethical implication and involvedness of attempting to see phenomena in terms which do not demand that this intelligibility be totally reduced to one’s own comprehension. This focus is quite different from the feel conveyed by explanation where it is required to have grasped the phenomenon. For CR, ‘*explanation is emancipation*’ (*ibid.*, p. 185) or will lead to emancipation. It is the *how* that CR needs to address.<sup>2</sup> This is also true of CR in economics, as I shall explain below. Collier (*ibid.*, p. 191) does at least acknowledge that, ‘may all know exactly what would make them free, but lack the power to get it’. However, he almost immediately follows it up with, ‘though the oppressed *may*

<sup>1</sup> Sayer agrees with me here. It is useful to turn to him for a description of the hermeneutic dimension—‘we might wish that scientific and other knowledge communities were like those of Habermas’s ideal speech situation, i.e. democratic, open and free of domination, whether hard and blatant or soft and subtle, so that the only force within them was the force of the better argument . . .’ (Sayer, 2000, p. 54), and further, ‘social science operates in double hermeneutic. These circles imply a two-way movement, a “fusing of the horizons” of listener and speaker, researcher and researched, in which the latter’s actions and texts never speak simply for themselves, and yet are not reducible to the researcher’s interpretation of them either’ (*ibid.*, p. 17).

<sup>2</sup> Collier writes, ‘And the vision of a pyramid of democratic loci of political and economic power, from the street and shopfloor meeting to the planetary plan, may have no inherent impracticability—only the uphill task of overturning the vested interests that oppose it’ (Collier, 1994, p. 204). One wonders *how*.

understand their oppression quite well, they may not' (p. 191, emphasis original), and that even if the oppressed have the knowledge but lack the power to emancipate themselves, '[y]et to a degree they are already more emancipated. No one with any self-respect would prefer to be a contented dupe than a clearsighted dissenter' (p. 191). Pleasants (1999, p. 120) makes my point in suggesting that 'a more sceptical attitude towards the relation between critical theory and social practice is called for . . .'. For instance, consider his reference to Sandel in mentioning that 'it is profoundly *uncritical* to regard agency and freedom as "a premise of politics rather than its precarious achievement"' (*ibid.*). This 'hopelessly utopian belief in the motivational force of critical social theory' follows from the idea that 'everyone possesses the inherent power of acting otherwise, and the notion that "reasons are causes"' (*ibid.*). He quotes Bhaskar,

explanatory critiques will lead, *ceteris paribus*, to action rationally directed to transforming, dissolving, or disconnecting the structures and relations which explain the experience of injustice and the other ills theoretically informed practice has diagnosed. (Pleasants, 1999, pp. 119–20)

Among the critical realists, for instance, Sayer (2000, pp. 168–9) does agree that this downplays the difficulty and contestability of normative judgements. In his view, while such a model is relatively compelling in the case of cognitive explanatory critiques, 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.

How does this debate play out in economics? In the critical realist engagement with feminist standpoint theory, Lawson (1999C) argues that, although there are differences, the endeavour of generalising cannot be opposed,<sup>1</sup> and as he repeatedly stresses, the 'broader projects or illumination and human emancipation' can only be possible in the face of 'existence of multiculturalism or differences in general' by recognising a structured ontology (pp. 26, 49). This is useful because it helps to retain multiplicity at the level of actuality in coherence with a degree of uniformity at the level of underlying causes or structure (p. 49). The characterisation admits of only two alternatives. A classic choice between *this* (CR ontology) and *that* (abyss of universalised difference) in a world with nothing else. This is not uncommon. Various such choices are offered in theoretical debates, the interesting thing increasingly is that the latter term (*that*) remains constant.

When Lawson cautions against achieving only a 'world of universalised difference' (1999C, p. 49), he stops a step too short. We could go on to ask, well, then *how is emancipation possible in this world?* And, we can think through it. For, to assume that emancipation is only possible with shared or common real needs and interests is not only problematic because of the conceptualisation of identity involved, but also restrictive in terms of its achievability. We need to move on from the prior privileging of either ontological or epistemological accounts<sup>2</sup> and recognise as unhelpful the desperate search for the finality of truth beyond dispute. We need not give up the pursuit of the 'good' and 'true', theories can still desire effective intervention in the world, but it will help if we admit to the contested nature of what it means to have a 'good theory' and what it means to 'effectively intervene' in the world. The idea is not (as many believe!) to give up in the

<sup>1</sup> However, as Sayer notes (2000, p. 175), 'The issue is not simply one of situatedness versus universalization; there is also the question of legitimate versus illegitimate universalization'.

<sup>2</sup> In this, I agree with Harding's response to Lawson (1999, p. 132), that 'epistemological and ontological arguments are always intimately entwined'.

universe of infinite worlds and interpretations, but to *carry on reflexively*. In the world of universalised difference, the way ahead is negotiated locally by cautious contextuality. What this means is that we attend to the ways in which the coherence of beliefs is constructed or fashioned in specific contexts. We essentialise ‘strategically’ (that is for directed and combative ends) and ‘reflexively’ (being aware that we have essentialised) and incorporate the functioning of power into our considerations. Moreover and most importantly, we move in the direction of having an explicit ethics foundational upon a concern for the ‘other’. I discuss this below.

The conventional economic world is one which is *populated by me-selves in a hall of many mirrors*. It is a world with the logic of the same where each is alike and no one has a primary ethical responsibility to any ‘other’. The whole world is up for grabs and desire never ends. It rests on a *voiding* (also the avoiding) of alterity. By alterity, I mean otherness, that which is not me, never me.<sup>1</sup>

The sense in which the voiding of alterity is a problem is because it renders meaningless what separates or differentiates the ‘self’ from the ‘other’. The certainties of an ontology which is based upon a denial of alterity derive from the submerging of difference, of possibilities. What Derrida terms *Hauntology*. The term carries within it the spectral *H* that represents possibilities, hovers over and hinders the certainties of an accessible ontology. Discussing the implications of Derrida’s ‘[*w*] *hat* is a ghost?’ (1994), O’Brien writes,

Derrida’s spectrality involves acknowledging the other that haunts the self . . . Derrida, [on the other hand] sees all discussions of ontology, of the nature of the being of anything, as imbricated in a hauntology of attendant traces, differences, disseminations. *The political implication of this is that such hauntologies allow for the introduction of the other, of other voices, other identities and other epistemological positions.* (O’Brien, 1998, emphasis added)

Such a conceptualisation of alterity and the ethics following from it can be a radical and productive way of ‘understanding’ the nature of intersubjective interaction. *An ethics which relies upon a foundational concern for the ‘other’, has emancipatory potential which is not limited by the perception of shared interests, needs, etc.* It just is as a fundamental ethical consideration for the ‘other’. Taken as a normative starting point, it can provide different ways of thinking about emancipation. While I cannot discuss this idea in greater detail here, I do wish to point out that when CR as a methodological prescriptive enters the substantive economic realm of *how* emancipation can be conceptualised in specific contexts, such an ethics is likely to be productive.

#### 4. Contextual Social Political Economy

It is hard to disagree with CR on the question of mainstream economic methods. Economic facts as abstracted and measured, contextless certainties are woven into mathematical functional forms in the exercise of modelling, and we have an authoritative generalisable theory. In this regard, the *importance* of the critical realist aim of *underlabouring* for better theories is *undeniable*. And it is here that CR in economics will find

<sup>1</sup> I invoke a Levinasian conception of ethics (see Levinas, 1969, 1999; Hand, 1989). This is the conceptualisation of a world where ethics are primary and derive from intersubjective interactions. The interaction is an ‘encounter’ with the ‘face of the other’, and each encounter is ethical. One owes to the ‘other’ a fundamental infinite responsibility.

productive a dialogue with some post'ist approaches which are grappling with the *how* of emancipation. Sayer is right when he cautions:<sup>1</sup>

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. (2000, p. 160)

I conclude now with a very rough sketch of a possible praxis<sup>2</sup> — *Contextual Social Political Economy* (CSPE), which is hopefully a move beyond dichotomies and either/ors to critical productive and realistic contextual understandings. As the name implies, it has the (latent) potential of authoring *contextualised theories* with *methodological pluralism* which will advance certain relevant notions in our economic consideration of the world. It is necessarily a non-universal praxis, a call for attention to contexts, and for the *practising of a wider Social Political Economy* so that diverse insights can be accommodated. An imperative to attend to *localised settings* with a *historicised present*.<sup>3</sup>

This is not a call for loss of all judgement or validity. It is rather a call for rejecting the idea of being able universally to pronounce what is valid in every situation. The important thing is to perennially question.

The only attitude (the only politics—judicial, medical, pedagogical and so forth) I would absolutely condemn is one which, directly or indirectly, cuts off the possibility of an *essentially interminable* questioning, that is, an *effective and thus transforming questioning*. (Derrida, 1995, emphases added)

Thus, the post'ist position, as I hope to have shown by this engagement with CR, is far from apolitical. On the contrary, it problematises the very boundaries of the political and renders everything contestable, political and worth engaging with. Just because it does not have a claim to the ownership of the modernist subject and its certainties, one cannot *assume* that the motives are any less ethical or more relativistic or nihilistic.

While recognising that one needs to 'make sense of' the world, and 'know its whys' and not lapse into a nihilistic sleep of unconcern, one also needs to be aware, possibly painfully aware of the contingency of all knowledge, the role not just of mediation and situatedness, but of power too in these situations to de-legitimise, vilify and declare 'improper' forms of knowledges which do not conform, for instance to the systematic standards of 'science' defined in a particular 'commonsensical' way. Similarly, while recognising that discourses need to be 'disciplined' somewhat and barricaded and fenced off from that which does not directly impinge, one should also be painfully aware that these boundaries of disciplines which have become borders (indeed with much border-patrolling) are not self-evident (even if self-reinforcing) and that they are contingent, strategic and open to revision, redemarcation in ways that are more inclusionary, productive and helpful. So that, while it might be aesthetically desirable to have compartmentalised, fragmented and professionalised bodies of knowledge, it should be recognised that such universalised knowledge

<sup>1</sup> Sayer is also correct when he argues against deferring a consideration of normative questions by saying 'it's a matter of politics' (2000, p. 178), and in saying that 'answers cannot be derived from explanatory critique but require an open-ended moral debate' (*ibid.*, p. 168).

<sup>2</sup> This position is further developed in Kaul (2001).

<sup>3</sup> For critical realists, one motivation to take CSPE seriously could come from Sayer's closing lines (2000, p. 187) in his book (published in 2000, at the same time this paper was first written!),

While we cannot expect theory to anticipate the specificities of particular political conjunctures, a normative theory which was more attuned to the patterning of social life, with its concrete geographies and histories could usefully inform political practice, and counter the loss of direction associated with the decline of the Left.

formations would benefit from greater interdisciplinarity and contextualisation at every level.

It has been the aim of this paper to inaugurate such a dialogue in the context of economics.

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