

Sociology 63900: “Critical Realism & Human Personhood” – AY 2013-2014

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Office Hours: by appointment (am on leave other than teaching this course)

Introduction

This course will explore critical realism as a particular philosophy of social science that, I believe, offers a superior alternative to positivist empiricism, hermeneutical interpretivism, and postmodernism. Having first come to a firm grasp of what critical realism is and the kind of research and thinking it promotes, we will then turn our attention to reflecting systematically on the nature of human persons and possible related implications for work in the social sciences. The concern of this course is with first principles in sociology and how good presuppositions and thinking can improve our scholarship, teaching, and—yes—living. Little knowledge of philosophy is presupposed but some background in social theory and philosophy will be helpful. This course satisfies an elective requirement of the ND sociology doctoral program.

Structure

This is a year-long course for three credits being taught from August 2013 to April 2014. The actual work load of the course will be the equivalent of 1.5 credits per semester during the academic year 2013-2014. Students must register for this seminar over two semesters. The fall semester course is offered for 1 credit, the spring semester course for 2 credits. No student may register for the spring course without having first taken the fall course. Most of the fall semester will be spent on understanding critical realism; most of the spring semester will be spent on the questions of human personhood and beyond. We will meet weekly on Tuesday evenings, from 5:05-6:20 pm, in O’Shaughnessy 115. Class meetings will consist of a combination of interactive lectures and discussions of readings. Between meeting times, I will assign significant readings to engage and digest.

Goals

The purpose of this course is frankly to turn students into knowledgeable critical realists and personalists—or, rather, to help them see that, to the extent that they conduct and appreciate good sociological scholarship, they probably actually already are *de facto* proto-critical realists and should better understand that, own up to and learn about it, and more consistently work out its implications in their thinking and scholarship. That is done within the larger context of learning basic philosophy of social science. In that sense, this course is about clearing up intellectual muddles that too often confuse sociologists. Students who have successfully learned from this course should as a result be familiar with alternative approaches to conceptualizing the purposes and methods of social science, the problems and promises of each, and therefore the key commitments, interests, and purposes underlying their own sociological work. In short, this course provides a clarifying basic orientation to what from a critical realist perspective social science is and ought to be doing, why, and what that actually may look like when done well.

Requirements

Education at the graduate level is all about time and energy invested by, and intellectual and career payoffs for, the graduate students who are seeking to become professional scholars in their disciplines. It is not finally about fulfilling course requirements, but rather about mastering the knowledge, perspectives, and intellectual and interactive skills needed to become productive, first-rate scholars and teachers in a very competitive discipline and profession. That is especially so for this course, since it serves as an elective, not a program requirement. The requirements of this

course are designed to serve those larger ends. They are (for the year) to:

1. Carefully read, digest, and reflect on all of the assigned readings.
2. Regularly attend and actively participate in all seminar discussions—this is particularly important.
3. Send to the instructor (via email attachment or as hard copy in the instructor's mailbox) no later than five (5) hours in advance of each meeting a list of discussion questions that arose in one's thinking from engaging the readings. The purpose is (1) for students to show the instructor that they are completing and intellectually grappling with the readings and (2) to help the professor gauge the level of students' understanding and need for focuses of class explanations and discussions for each meeting.
4. Write a 3-page analysis of one published journal article in ASR or AJS or SF, examining the article from a critical realist perspective in terms of its evidence, causal claims, and conclusions (details forthcoming). Due date TBA.
5. Write one significant paper directly engaging or deploying the material of the course toward a specific intellectual or scholarly end. No substantively-specific kind of paper is required (other than that they must work with the course issues and may not be mere summary reviews of the course materials). Papers may undertake in-depth explorations of specific theoretical points of concern, seek to develop ways that course materials may apply in specific debates in particular fields of interest, examine methodological implications of theories considered, or any number of other fruitful possibilities. The burden here is on the creative interests and insights of the student to use the materials of the course for good purposes. I particularly encourage students' producing potentially publishable papers (as students taking this class in previous years have done). At the end of the first semester, students will be required to submit for the instructor's approval one-page proposals describing the papers they intend to write. Final papers will, time allowing, be presented in class near the end of the spring 2014 semester and are due at the end of that semester (details forthcoming).

Readings

Please purchase the following books from Amazon.com or elsewhere:

Berth Danermark et al., 2001, *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, New York: Routledge.

Christian Smith, 2010, *What is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Also, [by spring semester] page proofs for Christian Smith. 2014 [forthcoming]. *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (I will provide these)

In addition, the instructor will make available well in advance assigned articles and chapter, such as these published, excerpted, and unpublished readings, for example (specific assigned readings to be given as the seminar unfolds over time):

Andrew Bennett, 2008, "The Mother of All 'isms': Organizing Political Science around Causal Mechanisms," in Ruth Groff (ed.), *Revitalizing Causality: Realism about Causality in Philosophy and Social Science*, New York: Routledge, pp. 205-219.

Roy Bhaskar, 1998, "Societies," in Margaret Archer et al., *Critical Realism: Essential*

- Readings*, New York: Routledge, pp. 206-257.
- Peter Manicas, 2006, "Explanation and Understanding" (Ch 1), "Theory, Experiment, and the Metaphysics of Laplace" (Ch 2), and "Appendix A: The Limits of Multiple Regression," in Manicas, *A Realist Philosophy of Social Science: Explanation and Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas Porpora, 2008, "Sociology's Causal Confusion," in Ruth Groff (ed.), *Revitalizing Causality: Realism about Causality in Philosophy and Social Science*, New York: Routledge, pp. 195-204.
- Douglas Porpora, 1989, "Four Concepts of Social Structure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 19(2): 195-211.
- Andrew Sayer, 2000, "Introduction," *Realism and Social Science*, London: Sage, pp. 2-28.
- Andrew Sayer, 1992, "Quantitative Methods in Social Science," in Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, New York: Routledge.

→ I will add additional readings as the course develops on what is meant by "critical," explanatory critique, and the normative good of social science, etc. These are meant to be examples of some of the material we will be reading.

Warning

Students in this course will be socialized into a perspective that is not one that is taken for granted in contemporary mainstream sociology—although it ought to be. Critical realism is an upstart critique of and alternative to standard disciplinary mentalities, routines, and, to some degree, methods. Becoming a critical realist therefore can have the effect of making one sometimes feel like an alienated malcontent within the mainstream. It can also place upon us more demanding standards than what are commonly accepted for producing what counts as valuable sociological knowledge and scholarship. All of this has the great appeal of being part of something that is stimulating, innovative and—I believe—a truer and more fruitful account of our proper professional task. It helps us to see and articulate problems, confusions, and worries that may have been nagging us about sociology, which is illuminating and refreshing. But it also potentially gets in the way of the efficient training and integration of grad students into the disciplinary standards of the mainstream as it is currently (sometimes unfortunately) practiced. If your goal is to be optimally and economically trained to fit successfully into professional sociology as it is currently conceived and practiced, then you should not take this course. If, however, you are interested in thinking creatively and being part of an intellectual scholarly movement to push sociology in better, more ambitious, satisfying, and useful directions—even at the risk of complicating your own career—then this course is for you. Consider yourself well warned.

Larger Context

Currently, a small but significant intellectual/social movement, led in part by yours truly, is underway to promote critical realism in American sociology, of which the Yale workshop last summer is a part. Consider your taking this course to be linking you to that growing movement. Someday you'll be able to say you got in on the ground floor of the transformation of American sociology.

Some Resources

A sizeable body of literature and other resources on critical realism exists and is growing (see <http://www.nd.edu/~csmith22/criticalrealism.htm>), which includes, for starters, the following:

- Margaret Archer et al. (eds.), 1998, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, New York: Routledge.
- Margaret Archer, 2000, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Margaret Archer, 1995, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Margaret Archer, 1996, *Culture and Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Margaret Archer and Jonathan Tritten (eds.), 2001, *Rational Choice Theory: Resisting Colonization*. New York: Routledge.
- Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas Porpora (eds.), 2004, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, New York: Routledge.
- Roy Bhaskar, 1997, *A Realist Concept of Science*, London: Verso.
- Roy Bhaskar, 1998, *Critical Realism*, New York: Routledge.
- Roy Bhaskar, 1998, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, New York: Routledge.
- Bob Carter, 2001, *Realism and Racism*, New York: Routledge.
- Bob Carter and Caroline New, 2004, *Making Realism Work: Realist Social Theory and Empirical Research*, New York: Routledge.
- Andrew Collier, 1994, *Critical Realism: an Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*, London: Verso.
- Andrew Collier, 2004, *On Christian Belief: A Defense of a Cognitive Conception of Religious Belief in a Christian Context*, New York: Routledge.
- Andrew Collier, 2007, *In Defense of Objectivity and Other Essays*, New York: Routledge.
- Andrew Collier, 1999, *Being and Worth*, New York: Routledge.
- Sean Creaven, 2001, *Marxism and Realism*, New York: Routledge.
- Justin Cruickshank, 2002, *Realism and Sociology: Anti-Foundationalism, Ontology, and Social Research*, New York: Routledge.
- Bert Danermark et al., 2002, *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, New York: Routledge.
- Mats Ekström, 1992, "Causal Explanation of Social Action: The Contribution of Max Weber and of Critical Realism to a Generative View of Causal Explanation in Social Science," *Acta Sociologica*, 35: 107-122.
- Steve Fleetwood, 2005, *Critical Realism in Economics*, New York: Routledge.
- Ruth Groff (ed.), 2008, *Revitalizing Causality: Realism about Causality in Philosophy and Social Science*, New York: Routledge.
- Ruth Groff, 2004, *Critical Realism, Post-positivism, and the Possibility of Knowledge*, New York: Routledge.
- Branwen Gruffyd-Jones, 2006, *Explaining Global Poverty: A Critical Realist Approach*, New York: Routledge.
- Cynthia Hamlin, 2002, *Beyond Relativism: Raymond Boudon, Cognitive Rationality, and Critical Realism*, New York: Routledge.
- Mervyn Hartwig, 2007, *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, New York: Routledge.
- David Harvey, 2002, "Agency and Community: A Critical Realist Perspective," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 32(2): 163-194.
- Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg (eds.), 1998, *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [not CR per se]
- Jonathan Joseph, 2007, *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis*, New York: Routledge.
- Stephen Kemp and John Holmwood, 2003, "Realism, Regularity, and Social Explanation," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 33(2): 165-187.

- Jose Lopez and Garry Potter (Eds.), 2005, *After Postmodernism: An Introduction To Critical Realism*, New York: Continuum.
- Peter Manicas, 1989, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- William Outhwaite, 1987, *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics, and Critical Theory*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Douglas Porpora, 1987, *The Concept of Social Structure*, New York: Greenwood Press.
- Douglas Porpora, 2002, "Social Structure: The Future of a Concept," in Sing Chew and J. David Knottnerus (eds.), *Structure, Culture, and History: Recent Issues in Social Theory*, Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 43-59.
- Douglas Porpora, 1993, "Cultural Rules and Material Relations," *Sociological Theory*, 11(2): 212-229.
- Douglas Porpora, 2008, "Recovering Causality: Realist Methods in Sociology," in A. Maccarini, E. Morandi, R. Prandini (eds.), *Realismo Sociologico*, Genova-Milano: Marietti.
- Sam Porter, 2002, "Critical Realist Ethnography," in Tim May (ed.), *Qualitative Research in Action*, London: Sage.
- Andrew Sayer, 2000, *Realism and Social Science*, New York: Sage Publications.
- Andrew Sayer, 1992, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, New York: Routledge.
- R. Keith Sawyer, 2005, *Social Emergence: Societies as Complex Systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Margaret Somers (offers a somewhat more pragmatically driven approach in her) "'We're No Angels': Realism, Rational Choice, and Relationality in Social Science," *American Journal of Sociology*, 104(3): 722-784.
- George Steinmetz, 1998, "Critical Realism and Historical Sociology," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40(1): 170-186.
- Robert Wilmott, 2008, *Education Policy and Realist Social Theory*, New York: Routledge.

JOURNALS, CENTERS, WORKSHOPS, & WEBSITES

- Journal of Critical Realism* - <http://www.equinoxjournals.com/ojs/index.php/JCR/>
- Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* (not devoted exclusively to critical realism but publishing many critical realist articles) - <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0021-8308>
- Center for Critical Realism - <http://www.criticalrealism.demon.co.uk/>
- International Association for Critical Realism - <http://www.criticalrealism.demon.co.uk/iacr/>
- Cambridge Realist Workshop - <http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/seminars/realist/index.htm>
- Lancaster Realist Workshop - http://www.criticalrealism.demon.co.uk/iacr/lancaster_workshop.html
- London Realist Seminar - http://www.criticalrealism.demon.co.uk/iacr/realist_seminar.html
- Critical Realism News Blog - <http://criticalrealism.edublogs.org/>
- Critical Realism Social Network - <http://criticalrealism.ning.com/>
- Critical Realism Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_realism
- Critical Realism Wiki - <http://criticalrealism.wikispaces.com/>
- Website for Critical Realism - <http://www.raggedclaws.com/criticalrealism/index.php?sitesig=WSCR>