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RESEARCH AS EMANCIPATORY

The Case of Bhaskar’s Critical Realism

It is a widely held belief, perhaps especially among researchers, that knowledge is emancipatory. And this idea has a long history: it was a key element of the French Enlightenment, and in some respects was a secular reformulation of the older religious notion that ‘the truth will make you free’. Many Enlightenment thinkers believed that rational inquiry necessarily involves the exercise of freedom, in the sense of questioning all previously accepted assumptions, and especially those enshrined in religious dogma or enforced by the ancien régime. Furthermore, they saw scientific inquiry as leading to a true understanding of the world that would provide a sound basis for the reorganization of society into a form that embodied freedom from irrational constraint. In the nineteenth century, the same idea was woven into the teleological accounts of history produced by Hegel and the early Marx. These authors treated a comprehensive understanding of the world as intrinsically related to the practical realization of human ideals; with pursuit of each seen as serving the other. And this notion remained enormously influential in the twentieth century, alongside a broader belief that there is an intimate connection between scientific and social progress.

Nevertheless, the idea that knowledge is emancipatory has also been a target of criticism, notably but not exclusively by conservative writers. Critics of the Enlightenment insisted that all action and thought come out of past tradition; and that any attempt to escape this influence and to start again from scratch—whether in the realm of science or practical affairs—will not only fail but will also have undesirable consequences. Later, against Hegel, a new generation of critics denied that the real is, or could ever be, rational. Closely associated with this was rejection of the Enlightenment’s valorization of thinking and talk—and especially of its apparent promotion of a specialized cadre of intellectuals to the role of

legislator. The emphasis instead, often, was on direct engagement in action; and on the superiority of those engaged in practical activity, of various kinds, over intellectuals.

More recently, criticism of Enlightenment ideas in the academic world has stemmed from a revival in the influence of scepticism, a trend exemplified most clearly in those forms of work labelled social constructionist or postmodernist. Under this influence, current ‘critical’ approaches very often combine a continuing Enlightenment belief in the emancipatory character of knowledge with a strong dose of epistemological scepticism. The latter is used to subvert sets of ideas, institutions, and forms of practice that are regarded as dominant and oppressive, these often including natural science and even social research itself. However, there is an obvious contradiction between the idea of knowledge as emancipatory and a consistent application of scepticism. In Hegelian terms, this contradiction could be treated as a spur to dialectical development, but it loses this character in post-structuralist thought. Exhaustively applied, scepticism undermines any claim that emancipation has taken place or could take place—and also any rational commitment to it as an ideal (in fact, to any ideals)—by challenging claims to positive knowledge of all kinds.

One adaptation to this by some critical researchers is to treat the content of emancipatory ‘knowledge’ as wholly negative: seeing it simply as the knowledge that there is no knowledge (in the conventional sense of that term). Here the task becomes solely to subvert, to ‘unsettle’, dominant ideas, and thereby (it is thought) to undermine the institutions with which these are associated. In other words, the aim is to de-naturalize, and thereby de-stabilize, the status quo; so as to clear the way for something new. However, even this project does not escape the problem of internal inconsistency, since scepticism leaves no basis even for claiming that knowledge is impossible, nor any means of justifying a desire for something new and ‘other’. In short, irrationalism looms. In much

3 For useful discussion of conservative critiques, see P.-A. Tagouieff, ‘The traditional paradigm—horror of modernity and anti-liberalism: Nietzsche in reactionary rhetoric’ in L. Ferry and A. Renaut, ed., Why We Are Not Nietzscheans (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997). This rather neglected book in which Tagouieff’s article appears illustrates the response of a younger generation of French scholars to post-structuralism’s critique of Enlightenment ideals. Sorel is perhaps the most obvious early critic of rational thought and knowledge on the Left, though his politics were ambivalent; on Sorel, see G. Lichtheim, From Marx to Hegel and Other Essays (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1971).
'critical' research today, then, there is considerable incoherence generated by the combination of a continuing attachment to the idea of knowledge as emancipatory with a commitment to sceptical epistemological ideas.

An important exception to this trend has been the ‘critical realism’ espoused by Roy Bhaskar and a number of other writers. They argue for an unashamedly realist perspective, one which prioritizes ontology over epistemology and treats science as providing the most secure source of knowledge. Moreover, against prevailing intellectual trends, critical realists regard scientific knowledge as ‘emancipatory’; and believe, like Habermas, that post-structuralist scepticism is conservative in its political implications. Furthermore, while the idea that social research has a ‘critical’ purpose—that its function is to challenge social institutions, public policies and practices so as to bring about progressive change—is by no means distinctive to Bhaskar’s critical realism, he offers novel arguments in support of it. In this paper I want to examine those arguments.5

ASSESSING BHASKAR’S ARGUMENT FOR THE EMANCIPATORY FUNCTION OF SCIENCE

It is important to be clear about what is meant by the claim that science is emancipatory. It has at least two components. The first is the idea that science frees people from erroneous beliefs. As we shall see, this is central to Bhaskar’s position. However, for him, as for most proponents of that claim, this is not the end of the story: scientific knowledge is also regarded as providing a basis for freeing people from oppressive social arrangements. And for Bhaskar, by contrast with most constructionists and postmodernists, this depends on research telling us about what is, about why it came to be the way it is, and about how it ought to be. This last claim is the most controversial, and I will focus on it here.

The idea that science can provide more than just factual knowledge is not unique to Bhaskar, of course; though his justification for it is new in important respects. Aristotle argued that things have natural tendencies which dispose them towards realizing their ideal forms. So, from an

5 I will address Bhaskar’s discussions of other issues—in particular, of the nature of scientific knowledge and how it is produced—only insofar as they bear on this one. For another evaluation of the aspect of Bhaskar’s work discussed here, from a different perspective, see H. Lacey, ‘Neutrality in the social sciences: on Bhaskar’s argument for an essentially emancipatory impulse in social science’, Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour vol. 27, no. 2–3, 1997, pp. 213–41; reprinted in M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, T. Lawson and A. Norrie, ed., Critical Realism: Essential Readings (London: Routledge, 1998).
Aristotelian perspective, in identifying these natural tendencies a scientist at the same time indicates the proper role in the world of the things studied. Moreover, this notion was inherited by medieval Western thought, and continued to have an influence down to the writings of Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, from at least the seventeenth century onwards, there was a very influential counter-tradition, symbolized by Hume’s denial that ‘ought’ can be logically derived from ‘is’. This has informed most twentieth century views of science, which see it as limited to providing knowledge of factual matters and as unable to produce value conclusions on its own. It is, for example, a central element of Weber’s argument that science should be guided by the principle of value-neutrality: that, in terms of goals, research should be neutral towards all values other than truth.\(^6\)

Bhaskar rejects the Humean argument that value conclusions cannot be derived from facts, just as he rejects Hume’s concept of causation. However, his reasoning is different in the two cases. Against Hume on causation he employs a transcendental argument to the effect that without real mechanisms generating underlying tendencies, the very idea of causal regularities is unsustainable. In other words, he argues that science would not be possible if there were not real causal mechanisms operating in the world. This is undoubtedly a powerful argument. However, Bhaskar’s criticism of the other famous Humean position, that value conclusions cannot be drawn solely from factual premises, is much less successful.

Collier identifies two elements of Bhaskar’s argument about this issue.\(^7\) The first starts from the fact that truth is a value which is built into scientific research, and indeed into all discourse; in other words, is intrinsic to them. And it is argued that, through their work, researchers

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may show the falsity of a particular belief that many people hold; and this will often be a belief that is systematically generated by particular social institutions, and serves to legitimate them. A crucial next step in Bhaskar’s argument, according to Collier, is his claim that, in publishing a factual finding of this kind, researchers are necessarily criticizing those who hold the belief, and/or any institution which generates or relies on it. In this way, it is suggested, researchers can legitimately (and, in fact, inevitably do) draw value conclusions from their work: specifically to the effect that people should not hold a particular, erroneous belief; nor should institutions rely on or promote it. An example would be the doctrine of ‘free market economics’ which prevents workers under capitalism recognizing that they are being systematically exploited and that this can be remedied only by a change of social structure.\footnote{Collier, \textit{Critical Realism}, p. 191.}

As this example suggests, throughout his work Bhaskar treats Marx’s work as a model for the kind of critical realism that he is proposing in the social sciences. Thus, it seems to be crucial to his argument not just that research can demonstrate that a belief is false but also that it can show the social function this false belief serves. What is involved here, then, is a contrast between scientific and ideological belief formation. And the argument is that since ‘(other things being equal) it is better to believe what is true than what is false, it is also better (other things being equal) that institutions that cause false beliefs should be replaced by, or transformed into, those that cause true ones’\footnote{Ibid., p. 172.}. On this basis, it is claimed that social science can and should produce explanatory critiques of dominant ideas and institutions.

The other main element of the critical realist position on this issue, as reconstructed by Collier, is an extension of the first argument to values other than truth. Here, it is suggested that research can identify human needs, document how they are frustrated, and thereby lead automatically to criticism of the type of society which fails to meet those needs; along with a recommendation that it be transformed so as to remove the sources of failure.

I will examine each of these elements of the critical realist argument in turn.

**Deriving value critique from a commitment to truth**

There are some social scientists today who would dispute the first part of the critical realist argument here: the claim that a commitment to truth is built into research as an activity. However, given that I regard this part of
the argument as correct, I will not address their criticisms. Similarly, I agree that research may indicate the falsity of some of the beliefs that people hold, including those generated as rationales by particular social institutions.

However, the next step in Bhaskar’s argument is much more questionable in my view. To declare that a knowledge claim (let us call it ‘P’) is false does not, in itself, amount to declaring that belief in the truth of P is wrong; it only does this in the present tense and in the first person. Thus, past belief in the validity of P cannot be judged wrong on the grounds that P has now been disproven. After all, prior to this time, there may have been reasonable grounds for believing P to be true. Moreover, this indicates a more general point: that there is an important distinction to be drawn between the rationality of believing and the validity of the beliefs held.

Significant here is the fact that the products of science are fallible, a fact that Bhaskar and Collier both accept. As a result, it is always possible that, despite scientific findings apparently disproving a lay belief, the belief may nevertheless be true; it could be that, instead, it is the knowledge claim put forward by scientists that is false. The implication of this is that we cannot say straightforwardly even that it is wrong for someone to carry on believing P after scientific research has declared it false. To do so would be to suggest that people ought to adopt an attitude of blind acceptance towards scientific results; whereas, presumably, any ‘critical’ approach would expect people to engage in critical assessment of the ‘findings’ of science; and, given the fallibility of all reasoning, this leaves open the possibility of their coming to different conclusions. One can reach false conclusions by impeccable means, just as one can reach true conclusions by irrational ones. That people hold and promote (what science suggests are) false beliefs is not in itself a justifiable ground for criticizing them; any more than their holding what one takes to be true beliefs commits us to treating the means by which they reached these conclusions as rational or sound.

This is not a relativistic or sceptical argument to the effect that we have no grounds for declaring that P is false. It is rather to point out that we can never be absolutely certain that it is false, and that often there will be scope for reasonable disagreement about the validity of P. This does not mean that we cannot legitimately criticize the arguments of those who believe that P is true. However, it does mean that we cannot automatically assume that continuing belief in P is to be explained as a product of ulterior motives, ideology, etc. Like many social scientists,

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critical realists seem to assume that a different form of explanation is required to account for false, as against true, belief. But even if this assumption were sound, and there are good reasons for doubting it, the fallible character of our knowledge would still mean that we should not automatically seek a causal explanation for belief in P, rather than continuing to assess the cogency of the arguments offered in support of it, simply because science has declared it false.

It is also important to remember that, even in the case of a belief whose truth is accepted, there may still be room for reasonable disagreement about its scope, about the situations to which it applies. Very often, people may accept the general validity of some knowledge claim, but argue that, despite appearances, it does not apply to the particular cases with which they are concerned. This may simply be special pleading, but it need not be—especially not in open systems. There are often exceptions to general rules, and people may have information about the cases they are concerned with that enables them to assess the application of a general principle more effectively than those who do not. Furthermore, there is often room for reasonable disagreement about how the scope of a knowledge claim is to be defined, and how its constituent terms are to be formulated. This latter point is illustrated by an example that Bhaskar and Collier themselves use: the issue of whether Britain is now a classless society. ‘Class’ is a concept that is open to a very wide range of interpretations, and these can generate different answers to that question. So, on these grounds too, scientific findings do not automatically imply criticism of people’s beliefs or of institutional assumptions.

The problem becomes even more complex once we abandon the notion that belief is a matter of simple acceptance or rejection, and acknowledge that there can be degrees or kinds of belief. Here the effect of the publication of scientific findings which question P may simply be to reduce the degree of belief in P, or to change the kind of belief in it, rather than to eliminate belief completely; and with good reason. Much depends here on the current standing of available alternatives. While scientists are able simply to remain agnostic about issues where there is no single well confirmed answer, practical actors are often not able to do

this. Indeed, they may sometimes feel, quite reasonably, that they have to act on beliefs whose validity is uncertain or even doubtful.\footnote{Lacey (Neutrality, p. 217) usefully distinguishes between having and holding a belief; between beliefs informing an action or an activity and the actor reflectively endorsing those beliefs. Elsewhere, he distinguishes between adhering to a belief, accepting it, and provisionally entertaining it as a working hypothesis: see Is Science Value Free?, p.13. For an analysis of the interesting case of superstitions see C. Campbell, ‘Half-belief and the paradox of ritual instrumental activism’, British Journal of Sociology, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 151–66. Campbell comments, ‘This then is perhaps the most puzzling feature of modern superstition: it involves individuals engaging in practices in which they don’t believe; that is to say, they are reluctant to admit that they do believe in them, even if they are sometimes also reluctant to say that they do not. In other words they would appear to “half-believe” in the superstitions they practice’ (p. 157).}

So, in the context of practical action, despite a reduction of confidence in its validity as a result of scientific findings, P might continue to be acted on because the action strategy in which it is involved still seems to be the best available. This points to the fact that what we treat as true, in the sense of what beliefs we choose to act on, is determined not just by our assessments of their cogency, but also by judgements about whether action informed by them seems to work in the relevant circumstances, whether there is a viable alternative that offers anything better, and so on. Indeed, it cannot be assumed that correcting a false assumption will always improve the performance of a practical activity. Sometimes it may even damage it because, for example, it simply leaves us uncertain as to what to do.\footnote{See M. Hammersley, Educational Research, Policy and Practice (London: Paul Chapman, 2002), esp. ch. 2.} Furthermore, the practical costs of different kinds of error will also need to be taken into account. Here, Pascal’s ‘wager’ and James’s ‘will to believe’ capture an important aspect of a practical orientation.\footnote{For an illuminating discussion of James’s position, see H. O. Mounce, The Two Pragmatisms: From Peirce to Rorty (London: Routledge, 1997).}

These points undermine Bhaskar’s claim, as interpreted by Collier, that strong scientific evidence against a belief immediately implies that no-one should believe it, and therefore that, simply by pursuing social research, we automatically engage in critique of lay beliefs and of the legitimatory ideas on which dominant institutions rely. Furthermore, my arguments suggest that social scientists would be wise not to extend their research conclusions from factual statements to normative ones about who should and should not believe what, or to critiques of institutions. To do so is to assume that the practical realm calls for the same
orientation as research; and there are good reasons for thinking otherwise.\textsuperscript{17}

In this context, it is important to emphasize that the doctrine of value neutrality recognizes that research is committed to the value of truth, and that people can legitimately use the factual findings produced by research, along with other assumptions, to draw value conclusions.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, in pragmatic terms there will sometimes be no need to mention any value premise, thereby apparently moving straight from the facts of the matter to a value conclusion about what should be done. But the point is that one or more value premises are presupposed in any such a move. So, the foundation of the value neutrality principle is the specific Humean claim that no value conclusion can be logically derived solely from factual premises.\textsuperscript{19} Given this, adherents of that principle would agree with critical realists that factual assumptions can form part of arguments that lead to value conclusions. What they would dispute is the claim that those conclusions can be derived from factual assumptions alone. And neither Bhaskar nor Collier shows that this is possible. Indeed, many of their formulations of the point include ceteris paribus clauses, which effectively admit that no logical deduction from factual premises alone can produce practical value judgements about what is right or wrong, and about what should be done, in particular circumstances.\textsuperscript{20}

**Ideological belief formation and critique**

Next, let me address the specifically Marxist element of the critical realist argument: the claim that if we can show that a belief functions ideologically we necessarily criticize those who hold it, and those institutions which generate or use it. This argument requires not simply demonstrating that a belief is false but also showing what social function it serves. Thus, Bhaskar writes:

> Now the appellation ‘ideology’ to the set of ideas P is only justified if their necessity can be demonstrated: that is, if they can be explained as well as criticized. This involves something more than just being able to say that the beliefs concerned are false or superficial, which normally

\textsuperscript{17} See M. Hammersley and R. Gomm, ‘Research and practice: two worlds forever at odds?’ in Hammersley, *Educational Research*. For a general argument about the role of criticism within science and outside, see my ‘Should social science be critical?’ (forthcoming in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 2003).


\textsuperscript{20} There is an issue here about whether ceteris paribus covers only variation in factual conditions or also variation in value assumptions.
entails of course having a better explanation for the phenomena in question. It involves, in addition, being able to give an account of the reasons why the false or superficial beliefs are held—a mode of explanation without parallel in the natural sciences. For beliefs, whether about society or nature, are clearly social objects.

Once this step is taken then conceptual criticism and change passes over into social criticism and change, as, in a possibility unique to social science, the object that renders illusory (or superficial) beliefs necessary comes [...] at least in the absence of any overriding considerations, to be criticized in being explained; so that the point now becomes, ceteris paribus, to change it.21

Later, reinforcing the point, Bhaskar comments:

If, then, one is in possession of a theory which explains why false consciousness is necessary then one can pass immediately, without the addition of any extraneous value judgements, to a negative evaluation of the object (generative structure, system of social relations or whatever) that makes that consciousness necessary (and, ceteris paribus, to a positive evaluation of action rationally directed at the removal of the sources of false consciousness).22

There are a few points that need to be made about this argument. First of all, it assumes that the consequences of a belief, or its social function, are connected by 'necessity' to its validity. The idea seems to be that false beliefs will function in negative ways in society, while true ones will function in positive ways. Along these lines, Collier quotes Althusser: 'true ideas always serve the people; false ideas always serve the enemies of the people'.23 Now, while this was an influential Enlightenment assumption, it is difficult to see why we should still believe it. Intrinsic to it is a highly rationalistic conception of the operation of societies; one which Marx inherited from Hegel—though, of course, a historical, dialectical relationship was assumed between the validity of a belief and its social functioning, rather than a simple logical one. Bhaskar does not defend this assumption, but it does need defence. And any attempt to test it faces a practical problem. This derives, first of all, from the fallibility of any knowledge claim: as noted earlier, we can never know with absolute certainty what is true and what is false. For the same, and additional, reasons, we can never know for sure what is socially beneficial and what is not. This makes establishing any fixed correlation between the two difficult, and probably impossible. And this problem is exacerbated by the fact that the unavailability of experimental method in

21 Bhaskar, Possibility of Naturalism.
22 Ibid., p. 81.
23 Althusser, quoted in Collier, Critical Realism, p. 190.
the study of society makes the identification of causal relations much more uncertain than it is in natural science.\textsuperscript{24}

Of course, this concept of ideology relates not just to the implications or consequences of a belief but also to how it was formed and adopted. And here Bhaskar might seem to be on stronger ground. We can perhaps draw a fairly clear distinction between more and less rational processes of belief formation, if we take as our standard the exclusive goal of reaching true beliefs. In these terms, in general, a scientific approach is less likely to produce false conclusions than any other approach.\textsuperscript{25} So it is certainly the case that how a belief is formed is a relevant consideration in judging its likely validity. However, we should recognize that the relationship is a relatively weak one. As noted earlier, we can hit on the truth by quite inappropriate means; and we can adopt the most rational approach to inquiry and still come to invalid conclusions (or to no clear conclusion at all). This means that even where it can be shown that the process of belief formation was structured by other considerations than validity, we cannot conclude that the belief is false; nor can we conclude that because a belief is false it must have been formed in an irrational fashion. Moreover, as already argued, in practical circumstances the validity of beliefs is often only one of several rational considerations relevant to their adoption. It is also important to recognize that the relative weight and import of those considerations will probably vary according to the context; and that there will often be considerable scope for reasonable disagreement about what is and is not rational in the circumstances. For these reasons, scientific method does not provide a sound, self-sufficient basis for judging the rationality of adopting one set of beliefs rather than another as a basis for practical action.\textsuperscript{26}

Even more questionable is the third leg of ideology critique: the claim that there is a necessary link between the process of belief formation and the consequences of holding the belief. There is reliance here on a form of functionalism which parallels conspiracy theory. In the latter, beliefs are promoted precisely because of their implications and expected


\textsuperscript{25} Even this is not a straightforward matter. There is not one single standard in evaluating the pursuit of knowledge. The standard will vary depending on whether one can accept uncertainty or whether one has to make a judgement one way or the other; and on whether accepting as true what is false is a more significant risk than treating as false what is in fact true (or vice versa).

\textsuperscript{26} It is perhaps important to note that the scientific enterprise is geared to minimizing the danger of coming to false conclusions, as opposed to the danger of treating as false what is in fact true. This is an aspect of what Merton refers to as ‘organized scepticism’. See R. K. Merton, \textit{The Sociology of Science} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), esp. ch. 12 and 13.
consequences: they are devices used to pursue particular ends, and they are disseminated because it is believed that this will serve those ends. In the functionalist version, those who adopt and perhaps even those who promote the belief may be unaware of why they do this; they simply believe P to be true, or they adopt it for functionally irrelevant reasons. Behind their backs, the social system generates the belief because this preserves its existence. Now, while I would not want to deny that people’s adoption of beliefs is often caused by factors other than the reasons they cite, and that this may involve feedback loops via the consequences of belief, the idea that there is a single social system which manipulates beliefs in this way, or that most of our beliefs are a product of such manipulation, has not been established, and needs to be if this kind of ‘explanatory critique’ is to be convincing. Yet how could any attempt to do this extricate itself from the possibility that it too is ideological?

It is also important to recognize the methodological dangers of this kind of functionalism. In practice there is often a tendency to use evidence about the validity of a belief to draw or reinforce conclusions about how it was formed, or vice versa; to use evidence about how it was formed to draw or reinforce conclusions about its effects, or vice versa; and to use evidence about its effects to draw or reinforce conclusions about its validity, or vice versa. The inclination to do this arises because the evidence available for each of the three legs of the argument will always be fallible, and will often be weak. It is also common for the likely consequences of beliefs to be ‘read off’ from what are taken to be their implications. Thus, for example, the belief that Britain is now a classless society might be assumed to have the consequence of reconciling people with the status quo; whereas in practice beliefs may have a variety of consequences depending on the circumstances, including some that are not anticipated. Thus, there is no reason why the belief that Britain is a classless society could not be used to criticize behaviour which is discriminatory in class terms.

The final issue I will mention is that, just as our judgements about the validity of beliefs are fallible and take practical considerations into account, so too do our judgements about the social functioning of beliefs.

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28 Explanatory critique of the kind proposed by Bhaskar also potentially faces us with the curious situation where our judgement about the validity of a belief might have to be revised not because new evidence has emerged which suggests that it is false, but simply because new evidence has arisen about its social functioning; or our account of its social functioning might have to be revised because new evidence has arisen to show that it is true after all.
This means that the fact that social scientists have claimed to document how a belief serves to support the status quo does not necessarily imply criticism of anyone continuing to hold or promote the belief, even if the status quo is generally accepted to be undesirable. For the reasons outlined earlier, to claim that it does amounts to a scientific dogmatism that is the opposite of any critical orientation.

To summarize, Bhaskar’s argument seems to be that if it can be shown that a belief is false and that holding this belief is causally necessary for the preservation of the status quo—in short, that the belief is ideological—then it follows automatically that believers should renounce this belief and that the institutions which generated it should be changed. However, this conclusion inevitably relies on value judgements about the rationality of particular instances of belief formation and about their consequences. Bhaskar’s argument also requires a very strong notion of causal necessity that is implausible in open systems; assumes that different types of cause (or different sets of causal factors) are involved in the formation of true and false beliefs; presupposes that whether an institution generates true or false ideas is the main criterion by which it should be judged; and requires that our knowledge about the validity of any belief, and about its social functioning, can achieve a very high level of certainty. The underlying assumption seems to be of a system which produces false consciousness, in the absence of which people would hold true beliefs or at least would engage in belief formation that would be rational from a scientific point of view and would lead to such beliefs. However, Bhaskar does not establish the cogency of most of these assumptions; and they are far from being sufficiently convincing to be accepted at face value.

The analogy between disproving a belief and identifying a need

To a large extent, the other component of the critical realist argument identified by Collier operates on the same basis as the first one: it claims that, just as showing a belief to be false implies that it should not be held or promoted, so the identification of a need implies that it must be met. Not surprisingly, then, this component suffers from many of the same problems as the rest of the argument. It smuggles a value conclusion into scientific findings, this time through ambiguity in the meaning of ‘need’. This term sometimes has a factual sense, as for example when it is stated that animals have a need for food and water, meaning only that without food and water they die. Of course, very often when we say that there is a need for something we also imply that the consequences of not meeting it are bad and should be avoided. This introduces a value premise. In the example mentioned, the premise is the idea that animal life is of value and should be preserved. Only on the basis of that value assumption does
it follow that any animal which is in need of food and water ought to be
provided with them.

A second point is that while, given this value principle, it follows that
any failure to meet a need for food or water is bad, it does not follow that
we should always ensure that this need is satisfied. For example, this
principle does not necessarily justify the force-feeding of those on hunger
strike. Equally, some might argue that human beings’ need for food never
justifies the killing of animals for meat, even in circumstances where that
need cannot be met in any other way.

Furthermore, while humans do have some basic needs, in the sense of
things without which they could not physically survive, there are many
other things whose absence might make them unhappy. And it is even
more obvious that there is no absolute requirement that such ‘needs’
should always be met. To take a trivial example, it might make me
unhappy if boxing or motor racing were banned, since I enjoy watching
them; and so do many other people. But the fact that we experience a
need to watch them does not, in itself, logically imply that they should
not be banned.

A third problem is that each human being has multiple needs, and
satisfying one is sometimes only possible at the expense of not satisfying
others. Similarly, given scarcity of resources, satisfying some people’s
needs will usually be possible only at the expense of not satisfying other
people’s needs of the same or different kinds. Indeed, some ‘needs’ are
relational, in that their satisfaction on the part of one person depends
directly on the extent to which they have been satisfied for others. This is
true, for instance, of so-called ‘positional’ goods, where the relationship
between satisfaction on the part of one person and another is inverse.29
And the same problem, in positive form, also often arises where the
concern is with equity, in the form of distributional justice.

A further complexity is that satisfying many needs depends on the
existence and effective operation of institutional means, and much
resource that could in principle be allocated directly to the immediate
satisfaction of needs might have to be devoted to the maintenance of
those means. For example, curing sickness, on any scale, entails
considerable institutional investment which has to be sustained over time.
And some of this will bear only a very indirect relationship to health
care, for example the allocation of National Health Service funds to the
pensions of hospital staff.

Now, it seems likely that Bhaskar and Collier recognize the validity of some of these points, since in presenting their arguments they often use *ceteris paribus* clauses. But this means that, even in their own terms, all that social science can do is to validate a particular value principle, not indicate what ought to be done in any particular situation. In other words, it does not support the critical realist conclusion that scientific findings automatically imply a critique of social institutions if they identify unmet needs. Even were research to document a need, and to be able to establish that this is a need that should be met in principle, it would not follow necessarily that any society which was not meeting this need could be criticized justifiably. The bridge from a value principle, other things being equal, to a practical value judgement about what is wrong and what should be done in particular cases has still to be crossed; and Bhaskar and Collier provide no means of doing this. Moreover, as I have shown, they have not even established convincingly that value conclusions about principles can be drawn solely from factual premises. So, this element of their claim to move directly from factual evidence to institutional critique does not stand up to scrutiny, any more than did the earlier ones.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have claimed that the critical realist argument for the emancipatory character of social science—the claim that social research necessarily involves a critique of society, pointing in the direction of desirable change—is not cogent.\(^{30}\) Bhaskar and Collier have not succeeded in undermining Hume’s demonstration that ought cannot be derived solely from is. Nor does their claim that the identification of needs provides the basis for institutional critique survive analysis. Of course, my conclusion about their arguments does not in itself undermine the idea that the task of research should extend beyond producing well grounded knowledge to engagement in value-based criticism of dominant ideas and institutions.\(^{31}\) However, it does undercut the rationale they put forward for this position. In effect their argument is that research cannot

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\(^{30}\) I will not address the additional problems involved in the concept of ‘emancipation’ here. For a brief discussion, see chapter 6 in my *What’s Wrong with Ethnography?* (London: Routledge, 1992). Bhaskar (*Philosophy*, p. 145) defines ‘emancipation’ as ‘the transformation or replacement of unneeded, unwanted and oppressive sources of determination, or structures, by needed, wanted and empowering ones’. It is not difficult to see how much scope there is for reasonable disagreement about what are and are not legitimate needs, what is and is not oppression, and what is and is not empowering.

\(^{31}\) For arguments against this, see P. Foster, R. Gomm, and M. Hammersley, ‘Case studies as spurious evaluations: the example of research on educational inequalities’, *British Journal of Educational Studies* vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 215–30. A similar case is made in Hammersley forthcoming 2003.
avoid being critical in this sense—that through producing soundly based knowledge social research necessarily engages in critique of dominant ideas and institutions—and that it should therefore do so explicitly and in a systematic way. For the reasons I have outlined, I do not believe this conclusion is warranted.

I should perhaps emphasize again that, while this paper challenges an important element of Bhaskar’s position, it in no way questions all of the arguments that he puts forward about the nature of scientific knowledge and social inquiry. Most of these arguments do not hinge on his claim to derive ought from is or to have shown that research is necessarily ‘critical’; and I find many of them convincing. But, for the reasons outlined here, I see no justification for wedding realism to a ‘critical’ orientation. Indeed, in the context of Bhaskar’s treatment of science as emancipatory, this orientation amounts to a form of scientism; in other words, it fails to recognize the proper limits that operate on the authority of science in the practical realm.