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**A Response to Banfield's 'What's really wrong with ethnography?' (2012)**

I have only recently come across Grant Banfield's critique of my 1992 book *What's Wrong with Ethnography?*, published in this journal in 2004. Despite the lapse in time, it warrants a response. I appreciate the careful attention he has given to some of my arguments, though as might be expected I disagree with many of his interpretations, criticisms, and conclusions.

As Banfield notes, my book was a collection of essays, but he correctly identifies some of the central themes running through it, notably a concern that there is a tension at the heart of much ethnographic and qualitative work between realism and forms of constructionism that are anti-realist, plus an opposition to those types of work – whether labeled Marxist, 'critical', feminist, anti-racist, or whatever – that seek to re-define the purpose of social research as pursuit of some goal other than the production of worthwhile knowledge.

The first criticism that Banfield directs at my book is that I avoid ontology in favour of epistemology, and he advocates instead the ontological theory developed by Bhaskar under the heading of critical realism. His second criticism is that I dismiss too quickly 'orthodox Marxism as a viable theory for critical ethnography' (p53). He insists that Marxism is essential to any worthwhile critical ethnography. He also makes some more specific points. One of these is that I mis-spell Peter McLaren's name, which I do and apologise for. I would point out, though, that Banfield manages to mis-spell my name in the second line of his article, and then again on the second page. Unfortunately, such mistakes are easily made and overlooked.

Banfield notes how long ago my book was published but suggests that since it has been reprinted quite recently he can take it 'that Hammersley still considers both his question and his advocacy for a subtle realism to hold contemporary relevance' (p53). He is correct in this, broadly speaking, though had he examined my other publications (for example, Hammersley 1984, 1985, 1987, 1995a and b, 1997, and 2002) he would have found a great deal of material relevant to the two themes he has identified, which is not to say that he would have been persuaded by these elaborations and modifications, since our disagreements appear to be rather fundamental.

As regards the first of the two themes outlined, Banfield claims that the 'subtle realism' I outlined in the book amounts to 'a kind of smorgasbord approach to the production of theory' (p55). His complaint here is that, while I acknowledge the structured character of reality, I do not identify the structures themselves. This is, of course, where critical realism and Marxism come in for him, since they attempt to do this. However, for me structures are to be discovered through empirical research, not supplied by philosophy or speculative theorizing, and I do not find Marx's empirical research convincing in this respect. This is not to say that critical realism and Marxism are of no value, only that they must be treated as resources to aid investigation of the social world. Moreover, I have doubts about the idea that the social world is characterized by some single set of structures that are relevant to all of the factual questions we might wish to address about it. There may be such a structure to physical reality, I don't know enough about natural science to offer any very

reliable judgment about this, but my impression is that even here different sciences discover different forms of structure. While these cannot be incompatible with one another, they are at the same time not part of some single unity, rather they reflect the particular sets of questions that each science addresses. I am doubtful about any notion of a 'theory of everything' even there. In any case, it is certainly my view that there is no single, unitary set of structures that generates the features of the social world, though of course I may be wrong about this.

Banfield's argument is that my failure to address the question of how reality is structured, in the manner of critical realism, results in my position collapsing into constructionism, or spiralling 'into judgemental relativism' (p55) as he puts it. He does not provide any argumentative support for this claim, and he gives insufficient weight to the label I gave my position. 'Subtle' was intended to indicate that this position is complex. It was, in fact, a rather immodest, implicit reference to Duns Scotus, who while being the eponymous 'dunce' was also given the title the 'subtle doctor'. While the sort of realism I advocated is not close in character to his, I do share his belief in the need for careful distinctions and argument. In more specific terms, for the record I don't accept that I engage in either upward or downward 'conflationism' in my book, and once again Banfield provides no evidence that I do. The issues around agency and structure are also complex, and unfortunately I do not find Margaret Archer to have resolved them, illuminating though her work is.

Under the heading of 'the problem of relevance', Banfield runs together two issues that are not, for me, all that closely related: the purpose towards which social research ought to be directed, and the relationship between ethnography and the pursuit of explanatory theory. The second of these is a question that, as Banfield notes, I was uncertain about in some key respects at the time I wrote my book. Prior to that I had been strongly of the view that ethnographers should aim at producing explanatory theories (Hammersley 1985 and 1987). But I came to recognize that explanation is always pragmatically framed, so I drew a distinction between explaining why some actual event occurred and producing a theory about why events of type A cause events of type B. (I write in terms of 'events' here simply for the sake of simplifying the discussion, I am not suggesting that causality can be reduced to relations among events.). Over the past twenty years I have explored this issue from various angles, and have become increasingly doubtful about whether there are any theories, of the kind I believed ethnography should seek to produce. I am inclined to think that we can only produce sound explanations, these drawing on general ideas about what causes what that are close in character to ideal types or rational models, rather than theories analogous to those in natural science. However, I am still struggling with this issue even if, as I believe, I now have a clearer and deeper understanding of the problems involved, including what it means to say that explanations are pragmatic or context-dependent.

Banfield concludes from my expressed uncertainty on these issues that my subtle realism 'is inadequate for the job and he seems to recognize this' (p57). This, to me, implies a curious notion of how difficult philosophical and methodological issues of this kind are to be resolved. The implication appears to be that there is some other position already available, but presumably overlooked for ideological reasons, which solves the problem, so that, to use a phrase coined by Banfield, the 'epistemological shopper' must just look round for 'the solution'. I read Bhaskar's first book when it

appeared (Bhaskar 1975), it has long been an important influence on my thinking, and I have followed the subsequent development of his ideas, and of other critical realists. However, for a variety of reasons I do not find in their work a solution to the problem just outlined. I may have missed something here, but Banfield, it seems to me, is too quick to reject some lines of thinking and too ready to accept others. In discussing my work, he lurches from reasonably accurate description and quotation to dismissive rhetoric, without really engaging with my formulation of the problems or my arguments toward solutions.

As regards the issue of the purpose and relevance of ethnographic work, Banfield correctly identifies that I have serious concerns about action research and the idea that research should be directed towards political goals. These are issues about which I have written quite a bit since 1992 (Hammersley 1995b, 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2009), and any effective attempt to grapple with my arguments would need to take this work into account (some, but not all, of which was available to Banfield). Here, again, he relies heavily on dismissive rhetoric – for example claiming that my position ‘smacks of scientism as a positivist illusion’ (p57) – in place of critical engagement with the actual position I adopt. His summary of my critique of critical theory being used as a model for ethnographic work is superficial and inaccurate. For example, I do not see Marxism and critical ethnography as ‘partners in crime’ nor as ‘positivist’, nor as ‘prime exemplars of naïve realism’ (p58). He says that I see them as unscientific, and this is nearer the mark, but I have always been clear that the nature of science is an open question, especially as regards social science.

In the remainder of his paper Banfield outlines critical realism as an alternative to the subtle realism I proposed in 1992, implying that it effectively resolves the problems I identified, and counters the arguments of mine to which he objects. This is not the place to engage in a detailed assessment of critical realism, I have in any case addressed one aspect of it, its ‘critical’ orientation and its arguments for deriving value conclusions from factual premises alone, elsewhere (Hammersley 2002 and 2009). As already indicated, I have long found the other parts of Bhaskar’s early work instructive, particularly the notion of causal mechanisms (though I am now starting to think that this metaphor may be misleading) and the distinction between reality, actuality, and experience (though my current thinking throws doubt on the distinction between the first two, and I have always had problems with the idea of the last as an ‘ontological domain’). It is perhaps worth pointing out, though, that the chapter in my book on critical research was not specifically directed against critical realism but at the broader field of ‘critical’ social science, much of which is less coherent and well-supported by argument than critical realism, and deviates in significant ways from Bhaskar’s position, including his commitment to science.

I have never been convinced that Marx’s work fits very well the model of science that Bhaskar put forward, though there are certainly parts of it that do. Banfield recognizes the lack of isomorphism himself on page 60 in a footnote. However, it is not true to suggest that I see (or saw) no value in Marx’s ideas or in Marxism more generally, thus Banfield is quite wrong to say that my book involves ‘the *in toto* rejection of an entire corpus of work’ (p57). What I rejected quite briefly, in my chapter, was the teleological view of history that the early Marx inherited (albeit transformed) from Hegel. And this is not, on my reading, central to critical realism. More generally, it is true that I do not find Marxism, in any of its many

versions, entirely convincing, even as providing accounts of such things as the emergence of Western capitalism or the current financial and economic crises. It provides some very important pointers and resources, but in my judgment it does not give us cogent answers to any of the major questions that are now pressing in social analysis and practical politics. Moreover, I worry that anyone should think that it does, any more than do the various other lines of thought to be found within the social sciences and philosophy. Banfield assures us that he does not believe that 'the good word can be found in some gospel or in the utterances of great individuals' (p57), and I am happy to agree with him about this. But, as I suggested, the tenor of his article smacks of dogmatism in places, and he tends to explain away my 'errors', for example as the result of 'ontological shyness and social conservatism' (p62), rather than engaging with my arguments. In short, his use of my work 'as a vehicle' to 'establish the possibility of a transcendentalist ethnography', presumably in fact a Marxist ethnography, tends to ride roughshod over some very difficult and unresolved philosophical, theoretical, and methodological problems.

## References

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