

A Note on Critical Realism in Organisation and Management Studies

Critical realism (CR) is a philosophy of science that prioritizes ontology (i.e. the study of being or existence) over epistemology (i.e. study of the way knowledge is obtained) in the sense that, for critical realists, the way the world *is* should guide the way knowledge of it can be obtained. It derives mainly from the work of Bhaskar (1989) although it has been developed by thinkers like Archer (1995, 2000 & 2003), Sayer (2000) and Archer *et al* (1998). In organizational and management studies CR has been developed by Ackroyd & Fleetwood (2000); Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004) and Reed (2005). *Critical realism* should not be confused with other forms of realism such as naïve, empirical or scientific realism, nor with positivism and related discourses such as empiricism, scientism, science, scientific objectivity, structuralism, foundationalism, or modernism.

CR occupies the intellectual ‘space’ between positivism, with an ontology of observable events, and postmodernism and poststructuralism, often with a *strong* social constructionist ontology. CR rejects positivism’s preoccupations with prediction and (often inappropriate) quantification and measurement. For CR, social phenomena can, often with great difficulty, be *understood*, but not often (meaningfully) *measured*, hence its preference for qualitative methods. See Donaldson (2003) for an account of positivism in organisation and management studies. CR rejects postmodernism’s and poststructuralism’s tendency to down-play extra-discursive phenomena and its flirtation with judgemental relativism that follows from this ontological position. If reality is constructed or created entirely via our linguistic or discursive actions, then there is no reality independent of the language or discourse. In this case there is no reality against which we can compare and evaluate (i.e. judge) competing knowledge claims. The best we can do in this case is compare knowledge claims to each other, or perhaps deconstruct them to see where they came from. Incidentally, the latter course of action is compatible with CR. For CR, whilst some parts of the social world are discursive, other parts are extra-discursive. For discursive parts, we need discursive methods and techniques; and for extra-discursive parts, we need extra-discursive methods and techniques. CR rejects the ‘one size fits all’ ontology and advocates selecting research methods and techniques according to the nature of the phenomena under investigation. Moreover, because CR claims there is only *one* reality, usually with multiple interpretations of it, there is something against which to compare and evaluate competing knowledge claims. This does not, of course, mean evaluating such claims is easy, but it does mean that it is not impossible. Judgemental relativism does not bite. See Westwood & Linstead (2001) for some examples of postmodern and poststructuralist thought in organisation and management studies.

Because CR is relatively new to organization and management studies, significant critical commentary is only just beginning to emerge. At present, such commentary largely takes the form of attempts by poststructuralists such as Willmott (2005) and Contu & Willmott (2005) to probe and clarify the terms and concepts used by critical realists and poststructuralists.

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