Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations

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Introduction

Drawing on the anti-positivist philosophy of science of Roy Bhaskar, ‘critical realism’ has sought to challenge some of the core assumptions theorists hold on the nature of explanation and science in IR theoretical inquiry. One important area in which critical realists challenge disciplinary conventions in IR is the issue of causal analysis. Causation has been a contested notion in much of twentieth-century philosophy of science and social science and, since the late 1980s, has also been debated in International Relations, where the causal approach of the positivists has come under increasing criticism from a selection of post-positivist ‘constitutive’ theorists. Critical realism seeks to reformulate currently dominant understandings of the role and nature of causal analysis in the social sciences and in IR. This short contribution to the forum focuses on examining the critical realist intervention to the debates on causal analysis in IR. Critical realism, it is argued, opens up important new avenues in IR theorists’ and researchers’ conceptions of causal analysis: avenues previously hidden from view by the dominance of a positivist view of science in IR.

1. This paper focuses on ‘critical realism’ associated with Bhaskar’s ‘critical naturalist’ philosophy of science. Roy Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of Science (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978); Roy Bhaskar, The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979). While the term ‘scientific realism’ is used by many other IR theorists, such as Alexander Wendt, the term ‘critical realism’ is preferred here because of its close association with Bhaskar’s thought, the focus adopted here. There are many different strands of philosophical realism and some strands of scientific realism do not adopt a strongly non-positivist stance as critical realists do. For example, while Wendt’s work has been ground-breaking in IR, it does not follow Bhaskar’s philosophy of science in certain important respects.

I will proceed by, first, analysing some of the key tenets of the critical realist approach to causation and its contributions to our understanding of causation in IR. A critical realist account of causation suggests that the positivist model of causal analysis is not the only way to engage with the complexity of causal relations in world politics. On the other hand, the critical realist model provides a framework for ‘constitutive’ IR theorists to re-engage with causal analysis. For it is argued that, despite their misgivings on causation, ‘constitutive theorists’ associated with various ‘post-positivist’ approaches in IR already implicitly do causation in ways that provide IR with rich knowledge of causes and consequences in world politics.

The latter part of the paper will engage with some of the criticisms that the critical realist understandings of causation may encounter from both the positivists and the post-positivists in IR. I will show that, while these criticisms are interesting, a defence of the critical realist position is possible and, in fact, helpful in clarifying certain misunderstandings held in the discipline about critical realism. Indeed, the issue of causal analysis demonstrates well that important aspects of the critical realist critique have been misunderstood in IR and that, as a result, important lines of convergence between critical realism and other IR theoretical approaches have been left inadequately explored.

Causal Analysis, International Relations Theory, and the Critical Realist Intervention

Causation has been one of the most contested concepts in philosophy of science and social science. In philosophical circles key debates on causation have centred around: (1) the meaning of the concept; (2) the reality of causes; and (3) the methods of causal analysis. Various positions have been taken on these issues during the last two thousand years and a full account of these positions is not possible here. For our purposes it suffices to state that during the last three hundred years causation has been understood predominantly in accordance with an empiricist philosophy of causation. This approach, to summarise it crudely, studies causality through observed patterns of facts: causality is something we identify through studying general patterns of observed events, whether it is the tendencies of heavy objects to fall to the ground or the tendency of democracies not to fight other democracies. For empiricists we have grounds for speaking of causal connections or casual laws only when


4. However, for an interesting history of causation see Wallace, Causality and Scientific Explanation I & II (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1972).
strong empirical regularities have been identified. For many empiricists, regularities can also be used to predict (at least probabilistically): for example, given an empirical ‘causal law’ of gravity has been identified, we can predict that when a rock is dropped from a height it will fall. As a consequence of the dominance of empiricism, the bedrock of positivist philosophy of science, causal analysis has entailed the prioritisation of methods focused on systematically observing patterns of facts or ‘laws’.

The empiricist assumptions on causation have also held sway in the minds of many IR scholars throughout the twentieth century. I cannot here investigate in detail the different forms that empiricist assumptions have taken in IR. I will merely state that they seem to have informed, in various permutations, both the classical behaviouralist approaches in IR and many ‘post-behaviourist’ methodological prescriptions for social scientific IR, for example, those of Michael Nicholson and Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba (which have influenced the methods of study of many contemporary liberal, realist and even constructivist theorists in IR). While IR theorists from different schools of thought have historically disagreed in their substantive analysis of causes of war and peace, for most of the history of the discipline the idea of causal analysis, conceived of in a positivist fashion, has been largely unquestioned. This was until the 1980s and 1990s, that is, when many reflectivists in the discipline started to reject causal notions altogether and came to favour explicitly a ‘non-causal’ form of theorising often referred to as ‘constitutive theory’. With the solidification of the terms of

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5. Although some positivists would even question the validity of causal language and see relations of patterns simply in terms of correlations. Indeed, the very status of causal language is in question for some logical positivists. See, for example, R. Carnap, *Philosophical Foundations of Physics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (London: Basic Books, 1966), 204.

6. Positivism is of course a contested term. Here I will take it to refer to a philosophy of science that is informed by empiricist theory of knowledge and that emphasises systematic gathering of empirical facts, empirical testing of hypothesis, value of instrumental knowledge and fact–value distinction.


the ‘fourth debate’ in IR, which pitted the ‘positivists’ against the ‘post-
positivists’\textsuperscript{10}, it has become widely accepted that there are two options in
IR theorising: causal theorising that studies general patterns\textsuperscript{11} and non-
causal theorising that studies contingent role of rules or discourses.

Critical realism points out that many treatments of causal analysis
in modern philosophy of science, and in contemporary IR, are seriously
problematic in that they have been informed by an uncritical acceptance
of a rather narrow positivist conception of cause.

**Critical Realist Intervention in Debates on Causation**

Detailed examinations of the critical realist philosophy of science can
be found elsewhere\textsuperscript{12} but here the core assumptions of the critical realist
philosophy of causation are assumed to be the following:

1. Causes exist as (ontologically) real forces in the world around us
and causes are ubiquitous (‘nothing comes from nothing’).
2. Many causes are unobservable and the empiricist observation-
based approach to causal analysis is problematic.
3. Causes do not work in ‘when A, then B’ manner and always
exist in complex causal contexts where multiple causes interact and
counteract with each other.
4. Social causes are of many kinds: from reasons and norms to
discourses and social structures. Interpretation is central to causal
analysis in social science.

What makes critical realism a distinctive approach to the philosophy of
science is its particular ontological approach. Critical realist philosophy
of science starts with the assumption that reality exists independently of
human observers. Critical realism sees this as the fundamental justification
of the practice of science.\textsuperscript{13} It follows that the causal forces that sciences

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} While some call this debate ‘third debate’, I follow Ole Wæver’s
characterisation of the contestation between the positivist and post-positivists as
a ‘fourth debate’. Ole Wæver, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Interparadigm Debate’,
in *International Theory; Positivism and Beyond*, ed. Steve Smith, Ken Booth and
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Even though within the positivist tradition some, on the basis of empiricist
logic, also reject the very notion of causality in favour of speaking of correlations
of observed facts. See footnote 5 above.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy
Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994); Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar,
Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie (eds), *Critical Realism: Essential
Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998); Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*; Bhaskar,
*The Possibility of Naturalism*; Patomäki and Wight, ‘After Post-Positivism?’.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} See, for example, Christopher Norris, *On the Limits of Antirealism*
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997). See also Colin Wight’s article
in this forum.
\end{itemize}
study, from gravity to social structures, must also exist as real ontological forces (outside our observations): it is only by accepting that causal forces really exist ‘out there’ that we can make intelligible scientists’ efforts to explain why and how processes around us work as they do and, indeed, our everyday efforts to negotiate the world around us where things seem to give rise to other things.\textsuperscript{14} Importantly, critical realists also believe in the ubiquity of causal forces. Critical realists, following Aristotle, accept that ‘nothing comes from nothing’, that is, they believe that all events, processes, objects and agents arise out of some conditions and influences, if you like from a pre-existing causal context.

While advocating a causal understanding of the world, the critical realists reject the empiricist logic for identifying causes. Critical realists challenge the assumption that causal analysis is dependent on empirical observation of regular patterns of facts. For critical realists causes are often unobservable and hence causal analysis cannot be dependent on perception alone: ‘to be [and to cause] is not to be perceived [but] to be able to do’.\textsuperscript{15} For critical realists causes are often unobservable. What causal analysis seeks to do is, not to describe observed patterns, but to give an account of the underlying causal powers that explain why the patterns of facts we observe exist. Critical realism argues that in engaging in causal explanation, scientists, both in the natural and social sciences, need to engage in ‘deep ontological’ inquiry,\textsuperscript{16} which involves conceptualisation of the nature of the unobservable structures that lie beneath observable patterns. In conceptualising ontological reality, scientists always draw on the conceptual and metaphorical tools available to them and, in this sense, science is always social process. Epistemologically, critical realists emphasise pluralism and ‘opportunism’: the nature of the ontological object has an important role in defining which ways of knowing are appropriate to it.

The empiricists assume that, given they have adequate evidence of patterns of facts, we can assume, at least probabilistically, that ‘when A, then B’.\textsuperscript{17} Critical realism rejects mechanistic\textsuperscript{18} and predictive understandings of causal relations. It emphasises that causes always exist in open systems where multiple causal forces interact and counteract in complex ways and where individual causes cannot be isolated as in a laboratory experiment. Critical realists prefer ontologically holistic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Bhaskar, \textit{Realist Theory of Science}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Bhaskar, \textit{Possibility of Naturalism}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Deep ontology as a term highlights the difference between empiricists’ observable ontology where observable events are what form the basis of ‘existence’. Deep ontology emphasises that causal forces exist on deeper levels of reality and hence can be, while unobservable, nevertheless real.
\item \textsuperscript{17} An assumption Bhaskar has termed ‘regularity-determinism’. Bhaskar, \textit{Realist Theory of Science}, 70–1.
\item \textsuperscript{18} While some critical realists use the notion of causal mechanisms, these are not understood in a classically mechanistic manner. Many critical realists, including this author, prefer to avoid the use of the metaphor mechanism precisely because of its mechanistic connotations.
\end{itemize}
accounts that explain how and why complex causal factors come together. They also prefer non-deterministic metaphors in their causal accounts: causes for them are those things that produce, generate, create, constrain, enable, influence or condition. Recently, critical realists have sought to develop a causal terminology that recognises the differentiated and pluralistic nature of causes. Different kinds of causes (e.g. material, agential or structural) are recognised to cause effects in very different ways: while some causes may ‘push and pull’, others ‘constrain and enable’.

Recognising these wider meanings of the concept of cause has been especially important in the social sciences where ontological objects and causes are complex and dynamic. Critical realism recognises that ontologically social causes are very different from the kinds of causal powers that natural sciences study. In the social sciences, causal factors include a variety of ontological forces: material resources, social structures, social rules and norms, discourses and, controversially for the interpretivists, also ‘reasons’ that agents have for their actions. Engaging with these sorts of causal factors – and the causal complexes that they form – entails non-empiricist epistemological tools: it entails interpretation and recognition of the ‘double hermeneutic’ relations between the inquirer and their objects of study. Following the empiricist method of studying patterns of behaviour we can identify some descriptive patterns of behaviour (for example that being working-class tends to be associated with voting socialist). However, we can only causally explain when we engage with the reasons actors give for their actions and the possible social structural causes that condition them to act in certain kinds of ways.

Through its critique of positivism, critical realism forces us to recognise that positivist causal explanations in IR, while not necessarily without their uses and insights, can be characterised by certain ontological and methodological limitations. In their focus on relations of independent and dependent variables positivist models can lack holistic ontological (conceptual) engagement with complex causal environments, even


21. This concept is developed by Heikki Patomäki; Patomäki, ‘How to tell Better Stories’, 105–33.

22. Qualitative research is seen as ‘intensive’ causal research, while quantitative is seen as an ‘extensive’ taxonomical model. See Sayer, *Method in Social Science*, 243.
when they try to negotiate causal complexity methodologically.\textsuperscript{23} Also, they may draw on an overly narrow evidence-base in focusing on study of observable regularities of facts.\textsuperscript{24} Positivist accounts of democratic peace, for example, have often not adequately grappled with explaining (ontologically) where patterns of associations arise from, and have often sidelined, if not ignored, intensive engagement with qualitative, historical and discursive evidence-bases as these methods have not been perceived as suitable for testing in accordance with rigorous positivist standards.\textsuperscript{25} While the positivist mainstream in IR has increasingly moved towards a greater utilisation of qualitative methods, for critical realists it has not gone far enough in this respect, nor moved towards ontological holism or methodological pluralism on the right grounds in continuing to prioritise empiricist assumptions.\textsuperscript{26}

As for the post-positivists, critical realism directs them to accept the general principle of causation as part of all social inquiry, including their own. The norms, rules and discourses that many constructivists, feminists and poststructuralists inquire into are, within the critical realist perspective, distinctly causal, although not causal in the positivist ‘when A, then B’ sense. In expanding our understandings of causal analysis to recognise, for example, norms as ‘conditioning’ causes,\textsuperscript{27} critical realism opens up the contributions of post-positivist explanations: these approaches are interesting precisely because they give us in many instances better purchase on the complex causal forces involved in world politics than some of the positivist explanations do.

It is important to note that the critical realist contributions to IR theory are meta-theoretical: contrary to what is often expected of it, critical realism does not entail a specific theoretical model of world

\textsuperscript{23} Huth and Allee characterise the empiricist treatment of causal complexity in a telling way. They call for use models and tests that allow us to capture a variety of ‘variables’ in study of democratic peace. However, in the face of complexity, Huth and Allee cannot but recognise the difficulty of finding any adequately holistic statistical models that would account for the complexity of the causation involved. They do not, however, try to resolve the complexity ontologically through use of conceptual models that indicate the interactions of various causal forces. P.K. Huth and T.L. Allee, ‘Questions of Research Design in the Testing of Democratic Peace’, \textit{International Interactions}, 28, no. 1 (2002): 51.


\textsuperscript{26} King, Keohane and Verba’s influential approach to advocating qualitative research, for example, still utilises positivist meta-theoretical framework that prioritises parsimony, observation and regularities. King, Keohane and Verba, \textit{Designing Social Inquiry}. See Kurki, ‘Causes of a Divided Discipline’, 195–7.

\textsuperscript{27} See Kurki, ‘Causes of a Divided Discipline’, 206–9.
politics. However, as a consequence of its ontological, epistemological and methodological leanings critical realism tends to prefer certain kinds of substantive explanations of world political processes over others. Critical realists tend to criticise mono-causal understandings of world politics: whether singularly materialist (characteristic of some realist thought) or singularly normative (characteristic of some constructivist thought). Instead, they prefer those causal explanations that account for the interactions of sets of social relations and normative structures in historically situated causal complexes. Examples of such approaches in IR, might be, for example, Cox’s complexity-sensitive account of the forces in the world system or Enloe’s understanding of gender relations that recognises the complex interactions of international relations with gender relations and global economic relations.\(^28\) The critical realist social ontology advanced by Bhaskar, with its emphasis on social structures, leans towards historically materialist explanations.\(^29\) However, it is not in principle inconceivable for a realist or a constructivist theory of international politics to be produced on broadly critical realist lines as multi-causality and depth ontology can equally characterise these approaches. Also, critical realists do not ignore the importance of discourses and thus their interests are also compatible with those of some poststructuralists.\(^30\) Critical realism, then, can provide a meta-theory to a variety of different kind of scholarship in IR. Beyond that, it also values theoretical contestation in IR: although it argues that the point of argumentation between theorists should be primarily ontological, that is over the nature of world political processes conceptualised to exist and cause, not epistemological, over what kind of knowledge claims count as valid a priori.

Critical realism is a meta-theory that provides IR with a pluralistic non-positivist model of social scientific causal analysis. It may not present the only possible avenue towards more holistic and pluralistic causal explanations of world politics\(^31\); however, it provides a well-argued philosophy of science justification for holism and pluralism, plausibly inverts the dominance of the empiricists’ approach to scientific causal analysis, allows us to appreciate the wide use of causal language in science and in everyday life, and directs us to rediscover themes of classical ‘pre-positivist’ thought on causation.\(^32\) In a field where causal


\(^{29}\) Jonathan Joseph discusses the link to Marxism in his contribution to this forum.


\(^{31}\) For example, non-realist accounts such as Suganami’s also open similar avenues. Hidemi Suganami, *Causes of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

\(^{32}\) Indeed, critical realist philosophy has many convergences with the Aristotelian and medieval conceptions of causation.
analysis has been dominated by a particularly narrow positivist discourse on science and causation, critical realism certainly seems to provide an interesting and a potentially useful intervention.

Defending the Critical Realist Approach to Causal Analysis against its Critics

Yet, despite its potential to reshape how IR theorists think about important issues such as causation, critical realism has been engaged with rather superficially in IR. To the extent that it has been acknowledged in the discipline, it is often the Wendtian ‘scientific realist’ position that is engaged with.\textsuperscript{33} Critical realism is in a position of some difficulty in IR: on the one hand it poses some important challenges to the meta-theoretical field in IR, on the other, IR theoretical approaches have had some difficulty in engaging with critical realism in a constructive fashion. In order to clarify the core assumptions of critical realism and for us to appreciate better the convergences between critical realism and other positions in IR, this section seeks to engage with some of the core criticisms that might be levelled at the critical realist view of causal analysis. Due to limitations of space I shall focus on two sets of criticism, one associated with the positivists and the other with the post-positivists in IR. These criticisms are not holistic expositions of views of particular authors, nor do they pretend to be all-embracing. However, they give some indication of the kind of criticisms to which critical realism gives rise.

\textit{Criticisms of Critical Realist Causal Analysis}

Positivists have grounds to be dissatisfied with critical realism because of the lack of criteria it provides for justifying the superiority of some knowledge claims over others: the critical realist model of science lacks concrete guidelines to follow in evaluating causal claims against each other. How do we tell which explanation of democratic peace, for example, is more convincing than another if not through evaluation of empirical evidence according to some systematic and agreed-upon criteria? This criticism goes hand in hand with positivists’ scepticism of critical realists’ emphasis on (ontological) causal complexity. On the most basic level, social reality is of course complex: however, this means next to nothing unless we have systematic methodological tools to deal with this complexity, something that critical realism does not seem interested in providing. There are many possible causes of something like democratic peace, for example, but how do we come to know which factors are more important than others if not by devising some indicators for levels of democracy, wealth or common culture, and measuring the explanatory content of these variables against each other? For positivists, talking about ‘deep ontology’ opens up the avenue for unscientific statements: we cannot simply come up with ‘deep ontological conceptualisations’ of

\textsuperscript{33} Both Kratochwil’s and Chernoff’s influential critiques are focused on Wendt. Kratochwil, ‘Constructing a New Orthodoxy?’; Chernoff, ‘Scientific Realism’.

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causes of democratic peace in the absence of clear criteria for determining why these conceptualisations are better than others. Only empirical testing can provide us with grounds, instrumental ones, to formulate and to evaluate theoretical conceptualisations (or models).

On top of these criticisms, positivists would challenge critical realism on the issue of empirical contributions. Critical realism can be accused of not having provided any real empirical examples of its contributions to concrete IR research. If only critical realists devised an actual explanation – of something like democratic peace – we could start engaging in real discussion with them rather than simply engaging in ‘meta-babble’.

If these positivist criticisms are not powerful enough, the post-positivists also have persuasive points to make. They would challenge the critical realist prioritisation of language of causality and their emphasis on the ‘reality’ of causes – on both theoretical and political grounds. Critical theorists, feminist and many critical constructivists tend to be sceptical of the use of causal language due to its association with science, seen as a ‘depoliticising’ Enlightenment discourse. The poststructuralists, also, tend to reject language of causation due to the political consequence of this language of representation: it calls upon foundationalist language of rational knowers and helps to justify, through its legitimisation of objective knowledge, particular interpretations which have specific political consequences for social life. To give an example, for poststructuralists it is important to recognise that it is because the causes of an ethnic war are narrated in a particular way that ‘conditions of possibility’ are engendered for, say, divisive identities and political conflict. Post-positivists highlight that the causal accounts we advance can legitimate certain political actions over others and this can entail destructive policies for certain sections of society, as well as the marginalisation of alternative narratives and histories. It is for largely the same reasons that many post-positivists also criticise according causes ‘reality’: our causal accounts are inevitably always interpretations, not objectively true accounts of ‘real causes’.

Also, many post-positivists would reject the critical realist argument that ‘reasons are causes’: causal language does not adequately describe the role of ‘reasons’ in social life. Fierke, for example, provides a sophisticated argument against treating a ‘reason’ an actor gives for an action as a ‘cause’: for her this entails a problematic redescription of the role of reasons in social life. As Fierke explains through an example, IR analyses of, say, the Iraq War should not simply focus on explaining the

34. See, for example, Robert Cox, ‘Realism, Positivism and Historicism’, in Approaches to World Order, ed. R. Cox and T. Sinclair (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jill Steans, Gender and International Relations: An Introduction (Oxford: Polity, 1998), 13; Kratochwil, ‘Constructing a New Orthodoxy?’


36. For a persuasive and reflective exposition of this argument see Suganami, Causes of War.
causes of the war through trying to unearth the US administration’s ‘real’ reasons for engaging in war in Iraq. Rather they should seek to understand the process through which the ‘reasons’ that the US administrations cited came to have a role in shaping public language and, hence, the dialogue on the war. For Fierke, analyses should focus not on reasons as causes but rather on the examination of how the war was made possible through the citation of certain ‘reasons’ for war, such as the existence of weapons of mass destruction.37

Defending Critical Realism: Replies to Positivist Critics

Both areas of criticism are interesting and give much food for thought for a critical realism. However, both sets of criticisms are fed by certain important misunderstandings of critical realism and, thus, do not provide adequate grounds for dismissing this approach. On the contrary, it is argued here that both positivist and post-positivist perspectives often have unappreciated convergences with critical realism.

A key reason for the inadequacy of the positivist critique is that the positivists tend to evaluate critical realism on the basis of their own criteria for measuring the scientific credentials of an approach rather than actually engaging with the core critical realist argument that positivism misunderstands the nature of scientific inquiry and causal analysis. For example, the positivist charge that critical realism lacks criteria for testing knowledge claims about causes is deeply informed by the positivist assumption that clear criteria for evaluation is what scientific knowledge requires. Critical realists would point out that the very request for fixed methodological criteria through which we can evaluate causal claims is unreasonable, since such criteria are not appropriate in the social sciences where the nature of the ontological objects makes reliance on strict observational knowledge problematic and entails some indeterminacy in explanation. As Andrew Sayer puts it, in devising social scientific explanations ‘we should not expect more precision than the object allows. We should not expect something like cultural values to be unambiguous and determinate any more than we should expect a lump of granite to be malleable and indeterminate.’38 The scientific study of causes, critical realists argue, necessitates that we take into account the ontological nature of the objects studied. In the social sciences this in many instances, though not all, will lead researchers towards the use of interpretive, historical and discursive methods requiring use of judgement, and renders the application of systematic empiricist criteria of evaluation inappropriate.

Against the positivist fears of relativism critical realists point out, however, that just because we do not have fixed criteria for measuring theoretical approaches against each other this does not mean that we

can not argue about how well different approaches explain something. Social scientists can – and constantly do – make judgements between approaches: this is not only in reference to specific forms of empirical evidence, parsimony and predictive capacity of theories but also, in reference to various forms of evidence, plausibility of theoretical assumptions, and the consistency, explanatory power and coherence of explanations. Judgements about theories, even though always taking place in a political and social context, are, contrary to positivist fears, not ‘relative’ or ‘ad hoc’: even in the absence of fixed criteria we can still evaluate the contributions of, for example, Enloe’s account of gender relations or Campbell’s account of the Bosnian War. We can do so in reference to how convincingly they deal with (plurality of) evidence, explain the processes they focus on, reflect on possible biases in their accounts and engage in reasoned argumentation with other accounts. Scientific mentality is, the critical realists point out, associated more with willingness to accept constant critique rather than with compliance with strict methodological rules: science entails serious engagement with evidence and attempt at plausible conceptualisation but also methodological and argumentative openness, pluralism and reflexivity. This is something that researchers interested in explaining and understanding particular causal questions ‘out there’ (rather than being driven by fixed epistemological a priori assumptions) often recognise: they tend to hold far more pluralistic criteria for knowledge claims than the positivists assume. Indeed, the assumptions of practising scientists outside the influence of the scriptures of positivism are generally in line with the critical realist, not the positivist, model of science.

On the question of causal complexity the critical realists would also argue that the starting point of the critics is a problematic one: parsimony is an aim that has been prioritised misleadingly by the empiricist–positivist model but is not essential to scientific causal explanation. While in some natural sciences laboratory experiments can be conducted to isolate individual causal forces, this is not what defines science in natural sciences: this is an unrealistic and unnecessary expectation in the social sciences, with dynamic ontological objects. It is true that parsimonious accounts can be helpful in some contexts and that all approaches must engage in some simplification. Yet it does not mean that parsimony should be prioritised: oversimplification entails important weaknesses in social explanations. Simplified analyses of complex social processes do not necessarily provide the most interesting, nor sufficiently nuanced, causal explanations to facilitate adequate understanding of social issues. As critics have pointed out it is not insignificant theoretically or politically

39. Interestingly, a point made by Chernoff in his article that seems to advance predictive empirical tests as the key criterion for scientific theories. Chernoff, ‘Scientific Realism’, 195. He also prioritises simplicity much more heavily than critical realists would. See later discussion of causal complexity.

40. See Colin Wight’s discussion of this issue in his contribution to this forum.

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that positivist democratic peace theory, for example, has tended to lack appreciation of the complex historical conditioning of democratic politics within states and actions of democratic states within global economic, political and cultural relations.\(^{41}\)

As for the problems of working with ‘abstract’ conceptual causes, the critical realists would reaffirm that because of the inherently unobservable nature of most social causes – reasons, ideas, rules, discourses or social structures – we simply cannot capture them in any other way but through conceptual models. For critical realists it is the ontological nature of social reality that directs how we come to know it; we should not throw particularities of social ontology by the wayside in an effort to conform to a particular empirical methodological specifications on what constitutes science. It follows that there is nothing unscientific about talking about norms, reasons or social structures, such as capitalism or states: these ontological objects can be traced to have causal impacts on agents and behaviour and hence can be theorised to exist as ontologically real. The ontological plausibility of these conceptualisations can still be evaluated and their usefulness in dealing with evidential support assessed: they are not accepted without any ontological or evidential justification. English school theorists’ ontology of international society, or historically materialist ontology of social relations of production, for example, are adopted – and criticised – through an ontological and empirical evaluation of what these conceptualisations contribute in understanding world politics.

As for the accusation of not explaining empirical reality, the critical realists would re-emphasise that just because critical realism does not come up with particular empirical explanations of world politics, this does not mean that critical realism is disconfirmed: critical realism is a meta-theoretical position on the nature of social scientific inquiry, not a specific theory about the nature of world politics.\(^{42}\) While critical realism does not necessarily come up with certain specific causal explanations of democratic peace (and while any critical realist approach to democratic peace would require careful ontological specification of one’s specific focus of study\(^{43}\)), some general comments can be made about how critical realism can direct researchers in certain directions and, importantly, legitimise certain approaches to democratic peace that the positivists may have marginalised. Methodologically critical realism would tend to push democratic peace theorising away from its focus on quantitative evidence and would avoid the positivist tendency to isolate causal variables and to measure them ‘against’ each other: critical realism would welcome the study of interaction of complex sets of social, political, economic,

\(^{41}\) See Barkawi and Laffey, *Rethinking Democratic Peace*.

\(^{42}\) Although individual critical realists can of course come to formulate theories of world politics. See, for example, Heikki Patomäki, *After International Relations*.

\(^{43}\) See Colin Wight’s contribution to this forum.
cultural and military relations that provide the context for the empirical patterns of behaviour that democratic peace theorists have studied.\footnote{In terms of democratic peace research, critical realists would prefer the general lines of research suggested by, for example, Barkawi and Laffey. Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘Introduction’ in Democracy, Liberalism and War, 16. See also Barkawi and Laffey, ‘Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations’, Millennium Journal of International Studies, 31, no. 1 (2002): 112.} It would call for conceptualisation of how various discourses and social structures, from capitalist social relations to cultural discourses, constrain and enable the workings of democracies and their interactions. They would also avoid ‘procedural’ definitions of democracy (observational democracy indexes) and would call for social structural understandings of forms of democracy in their historical contexts.

Epistemologically they would reject the possibility of non-political and neutral explanations: indeed, critical realists would show that the link between liberal political thought and democratic peace theory is in most instances clearly identifiable.\footnote{This connection has been pointed to by a variety of authors, but is especially well indicated in Mark Rupert, ‘Democracy: What’s not to Love?’, in Rethinking Democratic Peace, ed. Barkawi and Laffey.} These sorts of insights are not necessarily unique empirically in IR but they provide a justification for certain alternative kinds of questions, ontological framings and uses of evidential support in IR scholarship, which can be of surprising use to practising researchers in a discipline unnecessarily dominated by positivist questions and standards.

There are a number of defences that critical realism would resort to against the positivist criticisms. However, need the relationship between critical realism and positivism be acrimonious? While critical realists disagree with the positivist legacies that inform much of contemporary social science, they do not think that positivist knowledge is ‘useless’ in IR, but simply that it does not exhaust the analysis of complex causes in world politics and needs to be complemented by more holistic ontological and methodological avenues. Critical realism emphasises that positivists need to open their minds to different ways of doing causal analysis in IR and engage with alternative causal methodologies and questions in a more serious manner. Yet much room for dialogue with the positivists also remains: both views recognise the importance of science and causal analysis in shaping our understandings of the world around us, value critical evaluation of existing explanations and emphasise importance of empirical evidence gathering (though with different methodological emphasis). Critical realism, as an anti-positivist philosophy, does not support a positivist view of science of IR; however, it can understand the partial relevance of positivist knowledge claims, provide tools for complementing these claims with more pluralistic methods and introduce positivists to the possibility of a more open and reflective model of science.
Defending Critical Realism: Replies to Post-positivist Critics

As for the post-positivists, while there is room for dialogue here too, much more needs to be done to clarify what critical realism is about since the post-positivists, too, tend to work with a somewhat skewed notion of critical realism. Interestingly, while critical realism shares most of the core arguments, methods and political sensitivities of the critical end of IR theorising, this has mostly been ignored in disciplinary debates so far: instead post-positivists have been keen to associate critical realism with positivism and this has entailed critiquing it for the sins of positivist approaches. The association of realism with empiricism is problematic, not only in that it leads to misunderstanding of critical realism, but also in that it prevents post-positivists from taking advantage of the strengths of the anti-positivist philosophy of science critical realism advances.

It is important for post-positivists in IR to realise that critical realists, first and foremost, seek to challenge the positivist conception of science, not to defend it. As a meta-theoretical stance on science they seek to make room for methodological and epistemological pluralism, something that many post-positivists value.

They also seek to legitimise work that can be sidelined by the positivist mainstream in IR for being ‘unsystematic’, ‘focused on the wrong questions’ or as ‘politically biased’. They also refuse to accept an uncritical view of science: for critical realists being aware of the social and political underpinnings and biases is fundamental to any causal analysis because causal discourses – whether on differences in intelligence of races, reproductive biology or causes of crime – are all deeply informed by sets of politically consequential discourses and assumptions. The critical realist model of science in important ways advances the cause of the critics of positivism by equipping theorists with more comprehensive tools for challenging the taken-for-granted nature of the positivist model of science. This, however, has not been widely recognised by post-positivists in IR.

We can see this in particular with the case of causation: what is curious about the anti-causal analysis position of the ‘constitutive theorists’ is that, while they want to reject causal terminology because of its objectivist connotations, by maintaining this stance they perpetuate the positivist connotation of this notion. Might it not be

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47. A point paradoxically made by Kratochwil in ‘Constructing a New Orthodoxy’, 90.

48. However, instead of rejecting science because of its potential political biases, critical realism advocates challenging socially destructive science by seeking to bring out its biases, as well as, in the cases of racist stereotyping or patriarchal biology, the ontologically implausible and evidentially poorly supported bases of these scientific theories. See, for example, Sayer, Realism and Social Science, 44.
more productive to challenge the positivist meaning of this key term? Some poststructuralists such as Campbell have indicated an interest in developing non-deterministic forms of causal analysis.\textsuperscript{49} Surely the critical realists would provide, if not necessarily a close friend in such developments, a useful ally in constructing more pluralistic notions of causation in the discipline.

Indeed, collaboration with critical realists on causation does not endanger the logic of post-positivist explanations. For example, accepting discourses as causal in that they shape, constrain and condition the possibility of agential actions does not downgrade poststructuralist arguments on the political consequentiality of discourses – rather (non-positivist, non-deterministic) causality can be seen as an implicit claim within their theorisations.\textsuperscript{50} Also, accepting reasons as a type of cause on a critical realist basis does not downgrade Fierke’s constructivist arguments on world politics. While her argument against the use of causal language is persuasive against the positivist conception of causality, it does not refute the critical realist account of causation, which does not entail a ‘when A, then B’ notion of causality, nor does it refute the critical realist argument that reasons must be causal in some sense for agents to possess intentionality.\textsuperscript{51} Fierke’s account, it seems, is also dependent on a non-positivist conception of causality in that Fierke seems to emphasise ‘justificatory reasons’ agents give precisely because these reasons have consequences for public language and debate on legitimate actions – and hence on the critical realist basis can be conceived to condition identities and actions causally. Recognising language of causality does not downgrade post-positivist arguments: it simply denies the validity of the positivist meaning of the concept of cause in talking about these kinds of complex conditioning situations and, in fact, opens up the usefulness of the wider causal language developed by the critical realists, such as recognising differences between agential causation, intentional causation, and conditioning causation.

Beyond these theoretical defences of the critical realist position there might also be an important further reason for critical realists to maintain their belief in causal language and science, a reason that post-positivist critics, but also many critical realists themselves, have overlooked. Critical realism seems, albeit implicitly, to affirm the political consequences of applying the notion of causation in social analysis. Social science for critical realists is an inherently evaluative process, as it is for many other critical social theorists, but critical realists reinforce the link between causal analysis and critical evaluation of social structures and discourses. Critical realists argue that when social scientists study

\textsuperscript{49} David Campbell, ‘Poststructuralism’ in \textit{International Relations Theories}, ed. Dunne, Kurki and Smith, 225.

\textsuperscript{50} See Kurki, ‘Causes of a Divided Discipline’, 198–9.

\textsuperscript{51} Reasons must be causal in that the agent’s reasons are ‘a necessary condition for the bodily movements that occurred, in the straightforward sense that had the agent not possessed them they would not have occurred’. See Bhaskar, \textit{Possibility of Naturalism}, 113-4.
causation they inevitably form ethical judgements, positive or negative, regarding the causal powers of social structures and discourses they study. It follows that in the light of critical realism, the arguments of critical social theorists – for example the Critical Theorists’ analyses of capitalism or poststructuralists’ analyses of discourses of terrorism - can be seen as forms of causal analysis that seek to identify structures and discourses that enable and constrain actors within them in such ways that are adversely consequential on certain groups of people. If certain structures, ideas or discourses were not causally consequential on the world and in an adverse way for some actors, why would these theorists ‘waste their breath’ in criticising them? Implicit in the very notion of critical theorising seems to be an acceptance of causality: it seems that accepting social causation, although in a non-positivist way, is not only consistent with the aims of critical theorising (generally conceived) but also provides something of a justification for the underlying political drive of critical theorising. This political justification of talking about causation, even if a possible point of disagreement (for poststructuralists for example), has been ignored by most post-positivist critics. It follows that the ‘politics of causal analysis’ have not really been engaged with in IR as well as many post-positivists would like to think.

This is a shame since it seems that the convergences of critical realism and post-positivism are significant: they both share a critique of positivist science, both emphasise methodological openness in social inquiry, both recognise inherent politics of social analysis and both seek critical engagements with social forces in world politics. Yet so far critical realism has not been engaged with seriously by the post-positivists and adequate engagement with critical realist justifications for their position has not been achieved. Through a more constructive appreciation of the critical realist justifications for their position it is be possible that more constructive alliances can be formed in the discipline between critical realists and existing IR theorists.

Conclusion

Critical realism is a meta-theoretical approach that focuses on challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about science and causality in social sciences. This means that it is not an IR theory in a classical sense and does not aim to make a specific kind of empirical contribution to our understanding of world politics. Yet, meta-theoretical interventions, while not directly empirical, are not inconsequential in IR: whether one adopts a positivist rather than a critical realist approach is not inconsequential for the kinds of questions one might come to ask, the kinds of conceptual models one formulates, the kinds of reflection one engages in and the kind of methodological and evidential grounds one considers important and legitimate. In the case of causation, critical realism, through its particular non-positivist insistence on the ubiquity of causal forces in

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natural and social spheres, challenges positivist assumptions on science and causation in IR and directs IR theorists towards more holistic, reflective and methodologically pluralistic causal theories. It also forces post-positivists away from simplistic rejection of the language of science and causality and, in fact, points out that many of their analyses provide a way forward for IR theoretical causal analysis.

While critical realism has been criticised heavily from various directions in IR theory, this is often simply because of its insistence on the language of science, reality and causality. When critical realism and its reasons for its use of scientific and causal language are understood in a more nuanced way, we can appreciate that it can speak to IR theoretical approaches in a potentially useful and complementary manner. Critical realism shares positivists’ emphasis on critique and importance of scientific knowledge, while agreeing with the post-positivist emphasis on complexity of social life and the ‘politics of science’. There are then some areas of agreement and conversation between critical realism and existing IR theoretical positions and this holds open the possibility that critical realism can be engaged with more constructively in the discipline.

By pointing to the convergences between critical realism and existing IR theoretical approaches, I do not mean to argue for a ‘synthetic’ via media position such as Wendt’s or suggest that with the acceptance of critical realism all argumentation would cease in IR. Critical realism does not entail, nor desire, an end of IR theory debates: it simply argues for a shifting focus in debates from epistemological and methodological ground to ontological ground. The aim here has been, rather moderately, to indicate that while critical realism may not be a friend to many IR theoretical positions, neither is it necessarily a foe. Recognition of the lines of overlap between meta-theoretical positions in IR is a first step towards a fuller appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of critical realism and also of the existing theoretical approaches in IR. Arguably, a fuller appreciation of the contributions of critical realism would be welcome not just for meta-theorists and critical realists in IR, but arguably also for many empirical IR researchers for whom the critical realist model of science, based not on methodological scriptures, but on the more basic scientific attitude of ‘desiring to understand’, is likely to be attractive.

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