

How do norms work? Critical realism and the causal power of social structures

This is the original English text prior to translation of:

Elder-Vass, D. (2017) 'Wie wirken Normen? Critical realism und die kausale Kraft sozialer Strukturen' in Urs Lindner and Dimitri Mader (eds) *Critical Realism meets kritische Sozialtheorie*, Transcript, 77-93.

Dave Elder-Vass

Loughborough University

March 2014

Abstract

Does social structure exist? And if so, in what form? And how is it possible for such structures to be causally influential? This chapter provides an introductory outline of a set of answers to these questions based on the critical realist account of causality. On this account, events are caused by multiple interacting causal powers. The chapter argues that such powers are the emergent properties of entities, produced by generative mechanisms, and if we are to make sense of social structure we must explain the entities, powers, and mechanisms involved. The argument is illustrated with the case of norm circles, a kind of meso-level social entity that I argue is responsible for our tendency to conform with social norms. The chapter closes by exploring the wider implications for explaining social events.

Introduction

Critical social theory is necessarily both ethical and explanatory. Ethically, it depends on us having a basis for judging what is wrong with our existing societies, and some sense of how we might be able to judge other alternatives as being better or worse (Elder-Vass 2010b). But this chapter is focussed on the explanatory aspect: critique necessarily also depends on our understandings of how the social world works, how forms of power sustain themselves, and on what alternatives might be *viable* (Elder-Vass 2014a; Wright 2010). These understandings depend, among other things, on how we think about the operation of causality in the social world, and in particular on whether and how social structures can have causal power.

Does social structure exist, and if so, in what form? How is it possible for such structures to be causally influential? What relation do they have to human individuals and *their* causal influence? Can human individuals and social structures both be causally influential or does one exclude the other?

What relation does social structure have to the physical world? These are classic questions that have been central concerns for sociological thinkers for well over a hundred years. None of them has been resolved. Despite over a century of structural theories we still find today, for example, methodological individualists denying that social structures are causally significant, and ethnomethodologists and actor-network theorists labelling social structures as actor's fictions.

This chapter outlines the answers to at least some of these questions developed in my book *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (Elder-Vass 2010a). It will elaborate a critical realist approach to ontology in general that draws on Roy Bhaskar's account of the nature of causality as outlined in his seminal book *A Realist Theory of Science* (Bhaskar 1975). It then moves on to consider whether and how this understanding can be applied to the social world, arguing that we can indeed understand social ontology in terms that are compatible with Bhaskar's general ontology. The argument is illustrated using the case of norm circles, a kind of meso-level social entity that I argue is responsible for our tendency to conform with social norms. The later parts of the chapter discuss the potential significance of these ontological considerations for critical social theory. First, I outline a possible application of the norm circles argument to discursive power and thus to the question of the causal significance of ideology. Second, I look beyond norm circles, considering the possibility that the model is also relevant to the ontology of systemic power, and the implications for the process of explaining social events.

It must be stressed that this is an introductory piece, and one that summarises a great deal of other work, and hence it is rather brief in many places where the interested reader might prefer it to be more detailed. In places it will omit important subtleties, and in others it will appear to move rather rapidly from point to point without pausing to provide detailed support for each of them. I can only encourage those readers who find this frustrating to look at the much more extended discussions of these issues in my earlier publications (notably Elder-Vass 2010a; Elder-Vass 2012). It is also true that there are many different ways in which we could build on Bhaskar's work, so mine should be considered only one of many possible varieties of critical realist social ontology rather than *the* critical realist approach to social ontology. In places, for example, it differs somewhat from Margaret Archer's approach, though it also has a great deal in common with other aspects of her work (e.g. Archer 1995).

Emergence and causal powers

A Realist Theory of Science is built around a discussion of the nature of causality (Bhaskar 1975). This discussion is framed as a critique of the approach to causation, based on the work of David Hume, that has become foundational for positivist and empiricist approaches to the philosophy of science and social science. In the Humean approach, causation is identical with exceptionless empirical regularity: if an event of type A is always followed by an event of type B, this means that A causes B, and the claim that A causes B means nothing more than this: it means only that events of type A are always followed by events of type B (Elder-Vass 2010a: 41). Our intuition that causation must be something more that sits behind empirical patterns is, for Hume, an illusion. All we observe is the constant conjunction of A and B, therefore we only have empirical grounds for the belief that A leads to B, and not for any further type of causal explanation.

Numerous criticisms can be made of this approach to causality. For example, there is no satisfactory way of rescuing it from the fact that exceptionless empirical regularities are rare whereas we think

of causality as operating in many circumstances that are not marked by such regularities. For another, it is an extraordinarily thin theory of causality, telling us nothing about what might produce the empirical regularities upon which it focuses. For example, one of the more reliable empirical regularities on the surface of a planet like Earth is that day consistently follows night. On Hume's understanding of causality, this would mean that night causes day. But this offends against our usual understanding of causality, according to which it is not night that causes day, but rather the rotation of the Earth on its axis that produces the alternation of night and day. For realists, empirical regularities are not causes, or causal explanations, but rather phenomena that *require* causal explanations, and those causal explanations are provided by identifying the *mechanism* (or mechanisms) that produces the phenomenon we are seeking to explain.

Although Bhaskar takes a different approach to the critique of empiricism, his response converges with this kind of argument. For Bhaskar, all events are caused by the interaction of multiple *causal powers*, each produced by a mechanism, and the mix of causal powers at work is contingent on the situation. Thus, in this framework one might explain the succession of night and day as a consequence of several interacting powers, such as the power of the sun to emit light, the power of gravity and the consequent tendency of the earth to orbit the sun, and the tendency of the earth to spin on its axis. One consequence in general is that causal powers do not produce exceptionless regularities, but rather operate as tendencies: a causal power may have a tendency to produce a certain outcome, but in any given case that tendency might be prevented from operating as a result of other causal factors that are present in that case. A total eclipse of the sun, for example, might interrupt the usual succession of night and day.

This fits much better with our common sense understanding of causality, but creates a problem: if causal powers only sometimes produce their characteristic effects, how can we identify them empirically? This is a practical problem for science, and scientists have a variety of good solutions to it. The one that Bhaskar picks out is experimentation in the physical sciences. Bhaskar argues that experimental scientists solve this problem by setting up experiments in which interfering causal factors are excluded so that they can isolate individual causal powers in order to study them. They create, in other words, closed systems, by comparison with the open systems we encounter outside the lab, where other causal factors interfere unpredictably with the course of events (Bhaskar 1975: 33-4). This practice is only useful, however, because the causal powers that scientists identify in the lab also continue to operate (as tendencies) in the outside world, where they interact with other causal powers to produce events (Bhaskar 1975: 13).

These causal powers are properties of things (which I will also refer to as objects or entities). More specifically, they are *emergent* properties of things, which means that they are properties of whole things that would not be possessed by the parts of the whole thing if those parts were not organized into this particular kind of whole (Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 2). Thus, for example, most dogs have the power to bark. This power depends on the dog's lungs, windpipe, vocal cords, mouth and indeed brain, but these parts only have the (collective) power to bark when they are put together as parts of a living dog. Hence the power to bark is a property of the whole dog, and not a property of the parts.

Furthermore, as Bhaskar argues, causal powers are produced by *generative mechanisms* (Bhaskar 1975: 14, 50-52). A generative mechanism is a process of interaction between the parts of the entity that possesses the power, which depends on the structure of the entity – that is, on the way those

parts are organised, or related to each other, when they make up this kind of whole. This is easy enough to see in the case of the dog's power to bark, which clearly depends on a process in which the relevant parts interact to produce the power.

One consequence of thinking of mechanisms and powers in this way is that in principle, and often in practice, we can explain how these mechanisms work, so causal powers need not be mysterious in any way. Some philosophers take the view that if we can explain the powers of a whole thing in terms of the contributions of its parts then this implies that they are really not powers of the whole at all – a view known as *eliminative reductionism*. As I have argued elsewhere, however, this does not follow: explaining a power does not explain it away (Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 3; Elder-Vass 2014b). Even though we can explain how a power works as a result of the interactions between the parts of a whole, it still remains a power of the whole, if those parts only have that power when they are organised into this kind of whole. We still need the dog before we can have the power to bark!

Social ontology

For social theorists, the power of a dog to bark is not particularly relevant or interesting in its own right. For social theorists, this emergentist model of causal powers is only of interest if it can be applied to the social world. If it could be, we should be able to say which powers of which entities, arising from which mechanisms, produce the causal influences that are traditionally ascribed to social structure, and how these interact with other causal powers to produce social events.

But social science has rarely thought of social structure in these terms. If one were to ask what social entities were responsible for the causal powers of social structure, perhaps the answer that would seem to be implicit in much of the sociological literature would be 'societies'. Yet these are poor candidates in a variety of ways. One reason is that the taken for granted concept of society is usually thought of as bounded by the territorial limits of nation states – an assumption that may be labelled *methodological nationalism* (Chernilo 2007). But if this is the case, and if it is societies that are the causal agents at work when social structure is invoked as an explanation, this would seem to imply that social forces should operate similarly throughout the territory of any given state, and differently in the territories of other states. This is problematic because the geographical scope of specific social structural forces clearly varies enormously. It is perfectly clear, for example, that some social structures span the territories of multiple nation states – think of extended diasporic families, religions, or multinational corporations, for example – whereas others operate over much smaller spaces than the nation state. In the latter case social structural influence may be diverse within a single state territory. Think of meat-eating and vegetarianism, for example: if pressures to observe these practices were produced by a specific territorial society, how could we make sense of the fact that within the same national territory there are both committed meat eaters and committed vegetarians, and diversely varying social pressures in different contexts and on different occasions to follow both practices?

This argument, however, does not count against claims for the causal influence of social structures in general, only against those that identify the sources of such influence with territorial societies. I will argue that there *are* social entities with causal powers, but rather than national societies, these are more typically what we might call meso-level or mid-level structures (Little 2013). The effects usually attributed to societies, I suggest, are often really effects of any one of (or any mix of) a large number of these mid-level social entities. In an important range of cases, these entities take the forms of

groups of people: specific kinds of groups, with people as their parts, structured in specific ways that give the resulting whole emergent causal powers. Such social entities may sometimes also have other material kinds of parts, but I will focus here on the roles of people in them.

The most obvious type of such entities is organisations (Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 7). Organisations are groups of people – the members of the organisation – who are related to each other by a set of rules, standards, or expectations about how each of them should behave in the context of the organisation: their roles. Roles are specified in variable ways, ranging from job descriptions at the most formal end of the scale to rarely verbalised normative expectations at the other, but however they are specified, they define at least some aspects of how incumbents of the role should interact with other members of the organisation and with people outside the organisation when acting on the organisation's behalf.

The consequence of members interacting in the ways specified in their roles is generally that the organisation as a whole has emergent causal powers. Both members of the organisation and outsiders act differently than they would in the absence of the organisation, as a result of the impact of the organisation on them. And the organisation has powers that its members would not have if they were not organised into it. A classic example is described in Adam Smith's discussion of the division of labour in a nail factory: as a result of being organised in a particular way, the workers in the factory are able to produce more than they otherwise could (Smith 1970 [1776]: 109-10). This increased productive capacity is an emergent power of the organisation (Archer 1995: 51). Similarly, an orchestra has the causal power to produce certain sorts of harmonious multi-part music: a power that is generated as a result of the musicians (and arguably their instruments) who are its parts interacting in the ways specified in their roles (violin player, pianist, conductor, etc). If they were not organised into an orchestra, the players and instruments would not have the causal power to produce harmonious music.

Norm circles

Organisations, however, are not the only kind of social entity with emergent powers. There may be many such types of entity, but in this chapter I would like to focus on one further type: the entities I have called *norm circles*. This is a more innovative application of the critical realist ontological framework introduced above, one which seeks to explain the structures, powers, and mechanisms that lie behind social norms and their influence on us. Norm circles, I argue, are the social entities that are causally responsible for the influence of social norms and thus for the standardisation of social practices (for a fuller explanation, see Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 6; Elder-Vass 2012: chapters 2 & 3). This influence – the influence of what may be called normative social institutions – is often what sociologists have in mind when they are discussing social structure.

Norms are expectations that people will and should conform with certain recognisable patterns of behaviour which we may call practices. Again, there is a wide range of norms, some of which are rarely verbalised, while others may be quite formally documented. In many cultural contexts, for example, there is a norm that when a number of people are waiting for the same resource they should form a queue and follow certain related practices such as allowing the person at the front of the queue to access the resource first.

But what produces such norms and gives them their power to influence our behaviour? I argue that for every norm there is a *norm circle*, a group of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing that norm, for example by rewarding, praising, or otherwise honouring those who conform with the norm, and by criticising or punishing those who breach it. The effectiveness of norms depends on this group backing. Any of us could declare that a certain standard is a rule; we could even write it down and have it formally approved in some organisational context; but verbalisations of standards do not make them norms; a potential standard only becomes effective as a norm when individuals believe that there are other people who will back the standard by endorsing or enforcing it in practice. We queue, not because there is a formal rule, but because we know that other people expect us to and will react badly if we do not, and perhaps because we have as a consequence come to believe that queuing is the right thing to do.

Here, then, I am arguing that there is a social entity, a group of people that we may call a norm circle. These people are the parts of the entity, and they are related by their shared commitment to endorsing and enforcing the norm concerned. This shared commitment makes the entity more than a group of unrelated individuals. The members of a norm circle may be unaware of the full extent of the group, and they may not even think of it as a group, but they are generally aware when they act in support of a norm that they are not simply expressing a purely idiosyncratic personal attachment to a particular standard of behaviour. Rather, they are aware that when they do so they are endorsing a standard that others also endorse, and often do so with the expectation that others would support and approve of their action. The individual, in other words, has a sense, however vague and minimal, that she is acting on behalf of something wider than herself when she acts in support of a norm, and that sense increases the likelihood that she will act in its support. In the absence of the group it is possible that some of its members as individuals might still advocate the same standard of behaviour, but without any sense of this as being a shared commitment they would be less likely to do so and less convinced of their grounds when they did so.

This sense, in turn, is a product of the same process that tends to encourage conformity to the norm – the generative mechanism that underpins the power of a norm circle to increase such conformity. The heart of this process is repeated exposure of individuals to acts of endorsement and enforcement of the norm concerned. Because there is a group that endorses the norm, individuals are the targets of endorsing and enforcing behaviour, and as a result they come to believe they face a social environment where people will reward or penalise them depending on whether or not they observe the norm. If, for example, I repeatedly see people criticising those who try to jump queues, I will start to understand the norm of queuing, and to believe that I face an environment in which I will be sanctioned negatively if I fail to observe it. I will, in other words, develop beliefs about my normative environment which will tend to lead me to conform to the norm of queuing in the future, as a result of the actions of members of the norm circle for queuing. Similarly, the members of the group itself – those who are committed to doing the endorsing and enforcing – come to believe, for the same reasons, that they act on behalf of a wider force when they endorse and enforce the norm.

The mechanism at work here, then, is one that operates through the beliefs or dispositions of individuals. On the one hand, it is the actions of individual members of the norm circle acting in support of a norm that signal the normative environment to other individuals and these individual actions, therefore, reproduce and/or transform these social structures. On the other, those pressures do not lead directly and mechanically to norm conformity but rather influence the stored

beliefs and dispositions of the affected individuals, which then in turn influence their subsequent behaviour. Nevertheless, I argue, the resulting increase in the tendency of those affected individuals to conform to the norm is causally influenced by the norm circle, and not just the individuals. The norm circle can only influence us through its individual members, but those individual members would not influence us in that way, or at least not as strongly and as often as they do, if they were not part of a wider norm circle, and so their act of influencing us is produced by a causal power of the norm circle and not just of the individual. Both members of the norm circle and those who are exposed to its influence act differently than they would if the norm circle did not exist. If it did not, the members would be less likely to endorse the norm, and the targets would be less likely to conform with it.

We may therefore say that norm circles are social entities with an emergent power. Causal powers, as was noted earlier, are tendencies; the power of norm circles in a sense is doubly tendential (I owe this phrase to Jessop 2001). Norm circles tend, as a result of the mechanism described above, to produce a further tendency in individuals exposed to their influence: a tendency to comply with the norm concerned. Having been exposed to the influence of the norm circle, these individuals now understand that they face sanctions depending on their compliance or non-compliance with the norm, and this will tend to lead them to comply with the norm, but like any other causal tendency, this one may be defeated in specific cases. An individual may learn that stealing is socially sanctioned and avoid doing it as a result, but there may still be occasions where other causal factors have a more powerful effect: when their child is starving they may steal a loaf of bread to feed her or him.

This account of norm circles is necessarily brief and therefore omits many subtleties (for a fuller explanation, see Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 6; Elder-Vass 2012: chapters 2 & 3). Let me, however, briefly introduce one or two further complexities that are perhaps necessary to address some of the more likely objections that may occur to readers.

First, norm circles are diversely intersectional, though the extent and form of that intersectionality may vary between social contexts. By this I mean that the set of people that endorses one norm may be different from the set that endorses any other, and that the membership of different norm circles can overlap. Sometimes we may find clustering of the memberships of norm circles for different but related norms, but there is no necessity that this will be the case. Thus we do not face a monolithic normative environment. In contemporary contexts, normativity is highly complex. Different norms may be experienced as conflicting with each other and different people may find themselves faced with radically different normative environments. This in turn makes normative change more likely than in more homogeneous societies, since individuals are open to the influence of competing norm circles and may move between them. One implication is that the theory of norm circles is not merely concerned with the reproduction of a stable normative environment. It seeks to explain how normative influences contribute to the production of social actions that conform with prevailing practices, and thus may contribute to the reproduction of the normative environment, but there are many reasons why norms may be transformed rather than reproduced in some social situations (Elder-Vass 2010a: 133-8).

Second, this is not a consensus theory of normativity. Normative influence does not depend on agreement, rational or otherwise, with the norms concerned. Some actors may come to agree wholeheartedly with a norm as a result of the socialising influence of the corresponding norm circle,

and this is a powerful form of internalisation of the norm, but others may act in conformity with a norm while disagreeing with it profoundly, because they understand that in the normative environment they face they would suffer severe consequences for breaching it. People exposed to the influence of a norm circle may thus comply with the norm for reasons that appear to them moral, or for purely instrumental reasons. Both of these are variations of the same mechanism through which norm circles operate to influence our behaviour.

Third, norm circles are only one kind of social structure, and although I consider them an important one there are also many others. Hence social outcomes influenced by norm circles are never fully determined by that influence: both other social structures and the agentic capacities of individuals themselves also contribute to the causation of social events (Elder-Vass 2010a: 170-6). Agentic capacities are particularly significant in situations where these other forces place conflicting pressures on the individual. The parent who steals a loaf for her or his starving child makes a conscious decision to breach the norm, while feeling both the influence of the norm and that of their other circumstances. Although it is not centre-stage in this chapter, human agency is also an important topic for critical realist social theory. Individual human beings are themselves entities, composed of material parts, with emergent properties arising from the ways in which those parts are organised including, but not limited to, the organisation of neural structures in our brains that underpins our mental properties (Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 5). With this view of the human agent, we can see both how structures may influence human agents and how agents influence structures. On the one hand our experience of social interaction leads both directly and via our reflection upon it to modifications in our neural configurations and mental properties, and through such processes social structures affect both our subconscious dispositions (what Bourdieu calls our *habitus*) and our conscious awareness of our context. On the other, our emergent properties include the power to make choices and to act on those choices, thus reproducing and sometimes transforming the structural context for both ourselves and those around us (Archer 1995). The actions of norm circle members may be influenced by such conscious choices but also, in more Bourdieusian style, by dispositions that we act on with relatively little conscious deliberation (Bourdieu 1990; Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 5).

Fourth, norm circles are themselves the product of a causal history, a history of the events that shaped who is part of the norm circle, and how strongly they act in its cause. Other forms of social power also have a role to play here. In the early development of industrial capitalism, for example, capitalist employers used disciplinary sanctions to encourage the development of punctuality amongst former agricultural workers who had previously been able to work to their own schedules, thus contributing to the widespread endorsement of punctuality norms in modern societies (Thompson 1967), and employing organisations remain influential members of the norm circle for punctuality.

Normativity and discourse

One reason norm circles may be of interest to critical social theorists is that they provide a coherent ontological framework for making sense of the causal power of discourse, and thus are highly relevant to theories of ideology and its critique. Here I have in mind Foucault's account of discourse. For Foucault, discourse shapes our social world, but he is extremely unclear about how this could be possible, given his characteristic ambivalence towards questions related to causality (Sayer 2012). I

suggest that we can give a realist interpretation of Foucault's argument that invests discourse with real causal significance (Elder-Vass 2011; Elder-Vass 2012: chapter 8).

Discourse, for Foucault, operates on us through discursive formations: sets of rules about what can be said or written, and what should not (Elder-Vass 2011; Foucault 2002 [1969]). However, he is very unclear about how it might be possible for discursive rules to influence us. With the theory of normativity introduced above, we can start to think more productively about the nature of discursive rules. Such rules are often not written down explicitly, but rather tend to be absorbed more subtly from our experience of our discursive environment. We encounter people speaking in certain ways, and the reactions that they (and we) experience to their statements, and as a result we come to learn that some sorts of discursive content are acceptable and even encouraged, and others are not. To use one of Foucault's examples, there have been times in European history when it was considered appropriate to speak of the mad as touched by the divine, others when it was considered appropriate to speak of them as subhuman, and today it is considered appropriate to speak of them as mentally ill (Foucault 2001 [1961]). Discursive rules, then, are norms, and operate in the same way as the norms that were discussed earlier. To be more precise, there are discursive norms, and these are a subset of the whole set of social norms: that subset that relates to questions of what sorts of things it is appropriate for us to say and write. In influencing what may be said or written, they may well also influence what we think, but this is an indirect effect: normativity can only operate directly upon observable behaviour.

If discursive formations are collections of norms, then on the argument outlined earlier, we may see them as the product of norm circles. I suggest that there are discursive norm circles: groups of people committed to endorsing and enforcing specific discursive norms, which operate in the same way as other norm circles. Different discursive norms may be aligned with the interests of different social groups, they may be in conflict or competition with each other, and the power of the related norm circles may be in part a product of the social power of those whose interests are served by the norm concerned. Indeed, those with certain sorts of social power may play particularly prominent roles in discursive norm circles. We may say, in particular, that certain individuals, but also certain organisations, have substantial discursive power, and that when they throw this power behind a discursive norm they can have a disproportionate effect on the prevailing discursive regime in a given social space. Most obviously in the contemporary period, major media corporations exercise considerable discursive influence, while amongst individuals, politicians and experts spring to mind as notable examples. One implication is that norm circles may include not only individuals but also organisations, when an organisation has a clear policy in support of a particular discursive rule. The norm circle for a given discursive norm, however, will also include all those ordinary individuals who tend to endorse and enforce the norm concerned: the process of discursive hegemony requires the cooperation, willing or otherwise, of the population and not just of elite actors.

Let me illustrate this with a simple example: it has become the norm in the contemporary press and in contemporary politics to blame the unemployed for their unemployment and to disregard questions of how many jobs are available. Even supposedly social democratic politicians constantly sustain this discursive norm, for example by proposing compulsory retraining schemes for unemployed workers, and more generally by accepting a discursive environment in which unemployment is seen as a problem to be solved by the unemployed individual, perhaps with encouragement from the state. This discursive norm is so well established that many centre left

politicians seem to feel that to dispute it would destroy their credibility with the press and the electorate, and so they comply with it, effectively endorsing the norm in the process.

These are very brief and programmatic remarks, but I hope they are enough to show that the ontological framework introduced above, and its possible application to phenomena like normativity and discourse, have a useful bearing on issues of long term interest to critical social theorists. If we are to adopt a coherent approach to questions of ideology and/or discourse, for example, we need to be able to explain how they can be causally significant in terms that are consistent with our understanding of the causal significance of other social forces.

Beyond norm circles

Let me repeat, however, that normative social structures are not the only ones that matter. Normative structures, and indeed organisational structures, rest on the communicative influence of individuals upon each other and thus may be seen, in some senses at least, as belonging in what Habermas called the lifeworld (Habermas 1987) though in a lifeworld that is strongly influenced by differences in power. But the broader framework for social ontology introduced above can also be extended to other kinds of structure, other kinds of social entity, and in particular to those that Habermas has called systems, characterised by the emergence of unintended consequences from the interacting results of actions with other intentions. In saying so, I do not mean to endorse Habermas's entire schema; in particular, I accept Fraser's argument that the distinction between socially- and system-integrated action contexts reflects not an absolute difference but a difference in degree (Fraser 1985). From a realist perspective, it might be most useful to distinguish between lifeworld and system, not as two different sectors of the social world but as two different classes of social mechanisms.

Here, in particular, I have in mind commodity transactions and their systemic consequences when aggregated together – what is commonly described as the market economy. Clearly there are patterns of interaction between economic agents that result in systemic consequences like economic growth, financial crises, employment and unemployment, inflation, and the expansionary tendency of the capitalist sector of the world economy. These economic agents are no doubt influenced by normative structures – lifeworld forces – in their economic actions, but there are also other mechanisms at work, mechanisms that are essentially blind to the intentions and meanings of individual actors, that generate macro-level systemic consequences from the interactions between these lower-level forces. Critical realists have not yet contributed a great deal to theorising the ontology of these systemic forces, though they have been in the forefront of critiques of the ontology implicit in mainstream economics (e.g. Fleetwood 2002; Fleetwood 2006; Lawson 1997; Lawson 2003). More substantive work on economic ontology is a key area for further work in the critical realist tradition. I am not persuaded, in particular, that the prevailing concept of markets represents economic structures adequately, nor that prevailing conceptions of capital and capitalism can be used to describe the entire economic system in the ways that we often find them used in political economy. It is conceivable that such work might feed back into revisions in the more general ontological framework of critical realism – indeed any domain-specific ontological work could do so (Elder-Vass 2007; Elder-Vass 2010a: chapter 4). But we will only find out whether this is necessary if we begin by seeking to identify more rigorously the social entities, causal powers, and underlying mechanisms at work.

This chapter has focussed on this issue of identifying social entities and examining the question of whether they might have causal powers, and if so what kinds of mechanisms might underlie them. The activity of identifying such powers and mechanisms is known as *retrodiction* (Elder-Vass 2010a: 48; Lawson 1997: 24). This is an essential step if we are to be able to offer causal explanations of social events, but when we wish to develop explanations of actual social events a further activity is required. Because actual events are always the outcome of the interaction of multiple causal powers, if we are to explain a specific event we need to engage in an activity known as *retrodiction* (Elder-Vass 2010a: 48; Lawson 1997: 221). In *retrodiction* we identify the different causal powers significantly involved in causing an event and examine how they interact to produce it.

In practice, every social event is influenced by a wide range of causal powers, typically including a range of normative influences, systemic influences, agential decisions, and indeed the powers or capacities of material objects. The critical realist ontological framework in itself does not generate any presumption that any particular type of power might predominate in influencing social events: history in principle is open, multiply determined and contingent. But some powers may be particularly influential, and particularly so in some kinds of circumstances, and empirically supported theories of the powers concerned and their relative influence are required to explain such cases. In some set of cases, given certain contextual features, one particular cause might be a difference-maker in some respect, though any process for identifying such cases will be fallible. In this sense, and only this sense, it is always possible to make the case that some particular group of causes is of decisive importance. We need empirically-founded theories not only to explain the causal mechanisms that interact to produce social events but also to explain the balance of significance of different powers in different types of case.

Concluding remarks

The heart of critical realism is its ontology of causal powers; this chapter has argued that we can apply this ontology to the social world and it has given an introductory account of one possible way of doing so. I argue that there are social entities with causal powers, and that these interact with each other and with entities of other types to cause social events. Within this framework there are potentially many competing ways to explain which entities, powers, and mechanisms are causally influential in the social world, and the chapter has offered some examples. It will be clear to the reader that this is a radically incomplete account, for two reasons. First, as an introductory summary it does not cover many of the complexities of the thinking it seeks to introduce. But it is also incomplete because there is a vast range of different types of social entity and only a few of these have been theorised in terms of the framework introduced here. Many challenges lie ahead if this research programme is to bear substantial fruit, but I hope the chapter has done enough to suggest that it is a programme with some promise.

If this programme can help us to understand the social world better in explanatory terms, that in itself will provide an essential input to critical social theory. But there is also an important interdependency between the explanatory and ethical elements of critical social theory. Critical thinking has already foundered at least once on the rock of relativism that arose from seeing ethics itself as a social product, and the reader might be forgiven from steering away from similar formations that might seem to be emerging from the mist in this chapter. Is ethics itself nothing more than an expression of normativity that can be traced to the influence of norm circles, and if so must we return to moral nihilism and abandon critical theory entirely? I for one believe that we can

give a qualified 'Yes' to the first of these questions while still answering firmly 'No' to the second (Elder-Vass 2010b).

References

- Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Bhaskar, R. (1975). *A realist theory of science*. Leeds: Leeds Books.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Chernilo, D. (2007). *A social theory of the nation-state*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Elder-Vass, D. (2007). A method for social ontology. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 6, 226-249.
- (2010a). *The Causal Power of Social Structures*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- (2010b). Realist critique without ethical naturalism or moral realism. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 9.
- (2011). The causal power of discourse. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 41, 143-160.
- (2012). *The Reality of Social Construction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- (2014a). Giving and Social Transformation. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 13.
- (2014b). Social entities and the basis of their powers. In J. Zahle & F. Colin (Eds.), *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*: Springer.
- Fleetwood, S. (2002). Why Neoclassical Economics Explains Nothing At All. *Post-autistic economics review*.
- (2006). Rethinking labour markets. *Capital and class*, 89, 59-89.
- Foucault, M. (2001 [1961]). *Madness and Civilization*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- (2002 [1969]). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Fraser, N. (1985). What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender. *New German Critique*, 97-131.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Jessop, B. (2001). Capitalism, the Regulation Approach, and Critical Realism. In A. Brown, S. Fleetwood & J. Roberts (Eds.), *Critical Realism and Marxism*. London: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. (1997). *Economics and reality*. London: Routledge.
- (2003). *Reorienting economics*. London: Routledge.
- Little, D. (2013). Are there meso-level social causes?, *Understanding Society*.
<http://understandingsociety.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/are-there-meso-level-social-causes.html>, accessed 18 March 2014.
- Sayer, A. (2012). Power, causality and normativity: a critical realist critique of Foucault. *Journal of Political Power*, 5, 179-194.
- Smith, A. (1970 [1776]). *The Wealth of Nations*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism. *Past and Present*, 38, 56-97.
- Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso.