Response to Willmott

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> To assume that what Laclau and Mouffe mean by discourse is self-evident –
> and can therefore be grasped without regard to the context of its use in relation
> to other key elements of their thinking – is, in effect, to render their work
> inaccessible or incoherent.

So says Hugh Willmott in his counterposing of the work of Laclau and Mouffe to what he
presents as some elements of critical realist thinking. In the spirit of Hugh's comment, I
do not intend to grapple with his reading of Laclau and Mouffe, as for that to be done
properly would demand a knowledge of their work that I do not possess. Rather, I would
to start from some of the absences in Hugh's account of critical realism that render his
account, to my eyes, problematic. I start with some brief comments on the nature of
critical realism in order to situate my later discussion. I then turn in particular to the work
of Margaret Archer. I explain why I think this needs the sort of close attention that Hugh
demands for Laclau and Mouffe. In particular, I want to draw out some elements of her
project which I think Hugh misses or glosses over. I do this in order to suggest some
challenges for organizational theorists who find the questions that Hugh raises of
importance. This then leads me to consider the nature of 'discourse theory' and to point
to some avenues for investigation which are opening up. I close with some brief
comments on science and emancipation. Given the time and space I have, the aim is not
to engage in detailed textual critique of Hugh's argument but to suggest how some areas
may be taken further.

I need to start by considering briefly the nature of the critical realist project. I need to do
this in part because of the way in which Hugh uses the term. I cannot find anything
specifically critical realist about the questions that he 'addresses' in the early part of his
discussion. Part of the problem might be that critical realism does not claim to have a
substantive theory of anything. Rather, it is a philosophical tradition that seeks to act as
'under labourer' for both the natural and the social sciences. It is, therefore, compatible
with a wide range of substantive theories. It may be seen by some to have an elective
affinity with particular traditions, notably Marxism, but this is fiercely contested by some
within that tradition (Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts, 2002; Creaven, 2000; Gunn, 1988)
and Collier (1994), for example, argues that critical realism may be congruent with more
conservative theories of the world. This is important for Hugh's discussion, because it
suffers from what seems to be a regrettable focus on Bhaskar's work, something which is
shared by others (Mingers, 2004; Klein, 2004). I am not for a minute denying the
importance of Bhaskar's work, but what we tend to get is a critique of Bhaskar's
formulations as applied to the social world, without a recognition that the same criticisms
have emanated from some seeking to develop his ideas for use in the social domain. At
stake here is the distinction between what Alex Callinicos has termed 'lower case' critical
realism and 'upper case' Critical Realism (Morgan, 2004). That is, Marxists such as

Callinicos (and others from other theoretical traditions) can find a great deal of value in the work on ontological issues but would want to resist the grander claims made by upper case Critical Realists – in particular the claims towards spiritual understanding made in the later Bhaskar. I would place myself firmly in the former camp and it is on that basis that I develop the ideas here. In particular, as a student of organizations (and writing in a journal called *Organization*) I am interested in those who have developed the ideas in the realm of social theory, for what they might suggest to me by way of looking at organizational life. I accept that the shorthand term 'critical realist' has entered our discourse to cover such an approach (and I have been guilty of it myself) but this distinction, between conceptual under-labouring and substantive theorising, is worth bearing in mind when we look at the work of Archer.

It is worth looking at the origins of Archer's morphogenetic approach for a number of reasons. One of those reasons is because Hugh's discussion refers only to one brief introductory piece. Her work, in particular as developed across a series of four books (1995; 1996; 2000; 2003), is rich and complex and deserves closer attention. However, I want to start with her earlier work on education systems. In her *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (Archer, 1979) she essayed a comparative macro-sociological treatment that introduced many of the distinctions that we find more fully elaborated in her later books. In particular, there is the attention to structural change over large sweeps of time and to the delineation of cycles of change characterized by structural conditioning, social interaction and structural elaboration. The later work, therefore, reflects an engagement with critical realism. In this she found concepts such as emergence and the stratification of reality valuable in developing her earlier work, but this earlier work also gave her the resources to engage in a comprehensive critique of Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Action. What is also interesting about this early work of Archer is that, of course, it is in the same domain, that of education, which supplies many of Hugh's illustrations. What we have to be clear about in Archer's treatment is the way in which structures emerge over the *longue durée* and condition (not determine) social interaction. Thus, she contrasts the development of centralized and decentralized systems of education in different countries over several centuries. She uses this to argue that such systems constitute inter-related networks of institutions and practices which cannot simply be reinvented or reimagined. Or rather, they can be, but in general such networks supply situational logics and resources to actors which are powerful guides to action, sometimes all the more powerful for not being visible or self-evident to actors. This is what conditions the interplay between the roles of student and lecturer which will be different, argues Archer, in the different systems. This was her basis for a critique of the work of both Bourdieu and Bernstein on education (Archer, 1983), that it assumed rather than problematised these broader structural settings.

One of the challenges, of course, for organizational theorists is to take these ideas which are applied to broad sweeps of history and to apply them to mundane organizational life. Archer argues that this is possible, but success will come, it seems to me, from engagement with other substantive theories of organization. There is potential mileage, for example, in interrogating concepts such as 'institution' as deployed by both new institutionalists and institutional economists in order to seek greater clarity. That is, the

project is not the creation of a 'critical realist' view of organizations (for we have already seen that that is formally incorrect) but the development and enhancement of existing perspectives. In doing this one clear lesson from Archer is to pay greater attention to history than is common in organizational theory. Of course to say this is easy, but I will simply note here that 'history' is itself not a straight forward term and that such an approach demands an engagement in further debate. However, Archer's work is not simply about the unfolding of grand schemes of structural conditioning and elaboration across the centuries. Indeed, more recently it has had a much smaller scale focus, for her concern has been with elaborating the nature of agency (Archer, 2000, 2003). Her discussion in this regard goes beyond what Hugh sees as common sense understandings and seeks, in the spirit of the critical realist project, to understand the mechanisms which bring some into conflict with structural logics whilst others avoid them. In her latest work she suggests that the internal conversation is the key mechanism by which individuals construct their engagement with the world, shaping as it does the construction of a range of types of reflexivity. Now, we may wish to contest this characterisation, but it deserves closer engagement than Hugh is prepared to offer. If I return to the quotation from his work that I opened with, my argument would be that Hugh's attention in his critique is focused in the wrong place. There is more to be gained for both those who find the ideas presented by Archer and others persuasive and those who remain unconvinced in engaging with the arguments as they have been elaborated rather than in rehashing old battles. I am not arguing here at all that the discussions that Hugh engages in are not key ones, just that the elaboration of them on the critical realist (lower case) side has moved on somewhat.

Now, it is possible to be critical of some of Archer's formulations. She has placed a considerable emphasis on the importance of pre-linguistic and non-linguistic forms of understanding. In so doing, it could be argued that she fails to pay due attention to the different resources available for conducting the internal conversation (Mutch, 2004). However, Archer does not of course exhaust the ranks of those seeking to apply concepts derived from critical realism to the social domain. As Hugh quite rightly notes of discourse analysis 'its forms are highly diverse'. I am not necessarily convinced by the detail of his characterization of Philllip's (2003) discussion (which depends, I think, on a reading of the counterpoint provided by Lounsbury (2003) in which Foucault is central) but I am more concerned by his assertion that 'the tendency has been to identify, and thereby discredit, all forms of discourse analysis as 'idealist''. This may or may not be fair for some treatments, but it would be to ignore the concerns of, for example Jose Lopez, as expressed in the following:

> More often than not, Bhaskar, and critical realists in general, seem to imply through their practice that theoretical engagement has to be understood exclusively in terms of the logical, or illogical, architecture that underpins theoretical discourse, and the empirical adequacy of substantive claims (Lopez, 2003a: 79).

This prefigures a major study of the role of metaphor in social theory (Lopez, 2003b). Closer to organizations is the engagement between Fairclough and critical realism in the

development of his Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer, 2002). Of particular interest here is his observation that an engagement with critical realism might also prompt a revisiting of what he sees as the neglected work of Basil Bernstein (Fairclough, 2000). There is a connection here with the interesting work of those working in sociolinguistics on changing forms of discourse in contemporary organizations, notably the work of Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996; Gee, 1996). There is, then, rather more of an engagement with notions of discourse than Hugh acknowledges, although this is an area that needs closer attention and development.

I want to finish with some brief remarks on science and emancipation. In an (ironically) crude dualism Hugh suggests a contrast between 'critical realism, which privileges science/understanding and defends dualism, and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory which privileges emancipation/change and refuses dualism'. Somewhat later he writes of Laclau and Mouffe that 'their primary concern is not the epistemological one of revealing phenomena that have been previously overlooked or misrepresented but, rather, the political-ethical one of constructing a social ontology that is compatible with emancipatory change.' The implications of this worry me considerably. I do not have the space to enter here into what is a complex debate, but it does seem to me that at a time when the sponsors of the American imperialist project are open about their scorn for 'reality' that a key part of the emancipatory project is its scrutiny of precisely what is happening in 'reality'. That search will always be provisional and corrigible, but to place all the emphasis on acts of will in imagining a different ontology seems to me to be conceding terrain to an enemy far better equipped to fight on that ground. Clearly, Hugh has raised some important issues that require continuing debate, but my contention would be that the critical realist project is more complex and sophisticated that he allows. It may certainly be argued that those of us who find the ideas persuasive and useful have been guilty of poor explication, but a proper debate depends on a full engagement with a range of interesting and challenging ideas.

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