

## What's Really Wrong with Ethnography?<sup>1</sup>

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*In asking the provocative question: 'What's wrong with ethnography?' Hammersley draws attention to what he sees as the conceptual and methodological confusion arising from two competing strands of practice: 'naïve realism' and 'relativism'. As a solution, he offers 'subtle realism' to steer a path through and beyond the confusion. This paper presents an analysis of Hammersley's work, drawing attention to some of its shortcomings. These centre on two closely related issues. The first is Hammersley's conflation of ontology and epistemology. This results in a shallow realism that ignores the ontological status of structure and its relation to human practice. In contrast, Bhaskar's critical realism is offered as an appropriate under labourer to ethnographic theory and practice. The second is Hammersley's quick dismissal of orthodox Marxism as a viable theory for critical ethnography. Drawing on the critical realist ideas of stratification and emergence, the paper argues that Marxism is essential to any worthwhile critical ethnography.*

Ethnography, Critical Realism, Marxism, Philosophy of Science

### INTRODUCTION

In an edited collection of papers Hammersley (1992) asks the provocative question: 'What's wrong with ethnography?' According to Hammersley, ethnography (and qualitative research more broadly) is bedevilled by ambivalence: caught in a conceptual and methodological confusion surfacing in two competing strands of practice. Hammersley identifies these as 'naïve realism' (or positivism) and 'relativism' (for example, various forms of constructivism and poststructuralism). He advocates a 'subtle realism' to steer a path through and beyond the ambivalence<sup>2</sup>.

This paper begins with a description and an analysis of Hammersley's work. While supportive of his project to clear the conceptual ground for effective ethnographic practice, this paper draws attention to its shortcomings. These centre on two closely related issues. The first is of a general nature. It notes Hammersley's avoidance of ontology in favour of epistemology. Here Roy Bhaskar's critical realism is offered as an under labourer to ethnographic theory and practice. In particular, the ontological status of structure and its relation to forms of human practice are taken seriously. The second centres on Hammersley's quick dismissal of orthodox Marxism as a viable theory for critical ethnography. Drawing on the critical realist ideas of stratification and emergence, and their affinities with Marxist materialism, the paper argues that Marxism is essential to any worthwhile critical ethnography. Contrary to Hammersley, a Marxist inspired critical ethnography is not only possible but can stand as an example of emancipatory social science.

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<sup>2</sup> While Hammersley's collection of essays was first published in 1992, it has since been reprinted three times. The last reprint was made available in 2001. On this basis, I take it that Hammersley still considers both his question and his advocacy for a subtle realism to hold contemporary relevance.

### **HAMMERSEY'S CHALLENGE: SUBTLE OR SHY?**

Hammersley introduces his collection of essays by asserting its title to be intentionally ambiguous. By posing the question: 'What's wrong with ethnography?' confronts, what Hammersley considers to be, ethnography's current state of ambivalence.

On the one hand, in many fields it has achieved recognition so that the question of what is wrong with it may be interpreted rhetorically as implying its acceptance as one legitimate approach to social research amongst others. On the other hand, the emergence of some fundamental criticisms of ethnographic method suggests that the question ought to be interpreted in a more literal way. Hammersley (1992, p.3)

Hammersley's project centres on the latter interpretation of his question. With increasing acceptance of ethnography as a legitimate approach to social research, he contends that the new (and welcomed) challenges to its practice emanate from broader debates in social science and cultural inquiry. In general, these debates have served to problematise the status of science and draw into question the very nature of scientific inquiry. Specifically, this translates for Hammersley into taking seriously the relation of ethnographic practice, and the assumptions underpinning it, to positivist science. His solution is to offer a subtle realism as a kind of third way theory between 'naïve realism' and 'relativism'.

Hammersley's realism contains three key elements. The first two represent epistemological and ontological claims while the third refers to the application of those positions to ethnographic practice. His ontological claim is a straightforward realist one: phenomena exist independent of human knowledge of them. Against constructivist accounts of social reality, the social world contains objects whose existence does not depend upon what we think about them. However, against the over-inflated epistemological confidence of 'naïve realism' there is always the possibility that we could be wrong about things. Accordingly, the epistemological dimension of Hammersley's subtle realism emphasises the fallibility of human knowledge.

In outlining the problems confronting contemporary ethnography and defending his subtle realism, Hammersley identifies two particular issues that ethnographers must confront: the problems of validity and practical relevance. This section begins with a consideration of those challenges.

### **The Problem of Validity**

Hammersley constructs the problem of validity as an anti-realist challenge. He sees ethnographers confronted with the problem: "To what degree can ethnographic accounts legitimately claim to represent an independent social reality?" (Hammersley, 1992, p.2). This question presents a double-edged challenge. One blade cuts to the ontological claim that an objective social reality exists independent of human knowledge of it. The other edge probes to scrutinise the veracity of epistemological claims that such reality can be known and represented. The double-edged anti-realist challenge exposes a tension in what Hammersley identifies as the two competing strands of ethnographic practice. Against the naturalism embedded in 'naïve realist' beliefs that reality can be discovered through immersion in authentic experience rubs the relativism of 'constructivist' understandings that take the ethnographer's interpretations of the world as no more valid than any other. In arguing for his subtle realism, Hammersley rejects counterpoising 'naïve realism' to 'relativism' in a simple dichotomous relation. He insists that relativism is not the only alternative to naïve realism.

We can maintain a belief in the existence of phenomena independent of our claims about them, and in their knowability, without assuming that we can have unmediated

contact with them and therefore that we can know with certainty whether our knowledge of them is valid or invalid. The most promising strategy for resolving the problem ... is to adopt a more subtle form of realism. Hammersley (1992, p.50)

Suggesting that there is a subtle way out of the naïve realist – relativist bind, Hammersley is promising ethnographers that they will no longer have to choose between one or the other pole of the dichotomy. Essentially, Hammersley's approach is to collapse realism and anti-realism in a kind of smorgasbord approach to the production of theory. The proposal is that social researchers can be free to select and nibble the best from all plates. This most promising strategy has its problems and these are evident throughout Hammersley's defence of his subtle realism. To take one example, while choosing from constructivist fare, Hammersley recognises that an ethnographer's representation of reality

... must always be from some point of view which makes some features of the phenomena represented relevant and others irrelevant. Thus there can be multiple, non-contradictory and valid descriptions and explanations of the same phenomenon. Hammersley (1992, p.51)

While, on the surface of things, this may appear self-evidently true, it gives little help to understand **why** certain descriptions and explanations come to be taken as valid (or invalid). Might relevance itself be a structured phenomena? I am sure Hammersley would not disagree. Indeed, in a footnote to the above, Hammersley offers a tentative taste of structure:

I do not believe that reality is structureless. In constructing our relevances we must take account of what we know and can discover about that structure if we are to get the information we need to serve our purposes ... Hammersley (1992, p.55)

Once again, this is still not very helpful to the practising ethnographer. It is one thing to declare cautiously that reality is **not structureless** but it is quite another matter to directly assert that reality **is structured**. The latter brings with it some compulsion to answer questions like: What is structure? How does it relate to, for example, human action? Are social structures and human action qualitatively different kinds of things, or are they one of the same? These are ontological questions. They are also beyond the scope of Hammersley's subtle realism with its interest in epistemological questions, namely, how we can know and represent reality?

In the end, 'structure' has a rather mysterious existence within subtle realism. This is not surprising as Hammersley presents a realism that is ontologically shy. Rather than avoiding dichotomous theorising, Hammersley allows for easy slippage between structure and agency, realism and relativism. By not taking ontology seriously, his idea of 'subtlety' spirals into judgmental relativism where understandings of structure slide easily into voluntarist constructivism. Put simply: structure becomes construction<sup>3</sup>.

In effect, and contrary to his assertions, Hammersley does not present the ethnographer with anything new. Nor does he provide a realistic alternative to the dichotomous thinking he claims to reject. Subtle realism turns out to be just another example of what Archer (1995) describes as a conflationist theory. Such theorising is not difficult to find in sociology. It is replete with attempts to conflate qualitatively different social objects to others. For example, in the idea of 'downward conflation' of Durkeimian and Parsonian sociology individuals and small groups are taken as simple expressions of larger societal structures. Conversely, in the idea of 'upward conflation' found in the interpretivism of Weberian sociology or the voluntarism of Giddens' structuration theory, structural arrangements are reduced to the actions of individuals and small groups (see

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Helen Raduntz for this point.

Archer, 1995 and 1998). Upward and downward conflationism share “the same homological premises about there being no more, no less and or different properties characterizing different levels of society” (Archer, 1995, p.8). Not recognising, for example, social structures and the actions of people as (ontologically) different kinds of things leads Hammersley down self-confessed contradictory paths. These surface starkly in his consideration of practical relevance of ethnographic practice.

### **The Problem of Relevance**

For Hammersley, the problem of relevance brings into focus the relationship between contemporary ethnography and other forms of social practice. Arising here is a direct challenge to positivist ethnography where “questions about the relationship between facts and values, and between researchers and practitioners” (Hammersley, 1992, p.2) surface. However, as Hammersley correctly asserts, relevance is not simply a practical matter. Navigating the thorny terrain between facts and values leads, ultimately, to the exploration of the purpose of research. This demands the use of theory. While theory is something to which ethnographers often express commitment, Hammersley (1992, p.33) observes that there is “little discussion of the nature of theory used in ethnographic work”. Indeed, he is critical of ethnographers who, in general, “display a primary concern with describing social events and processes in detail, and a distaste for theories which, as they see it, ride roughshod over the complexity of the social world” (Hammersley, 1992, p.32).

While noting his position against a-theoretical description, Hammersley is quick to stress that a rejection of naive empiricism is not to admit a dogmatic theoreticism. He warns that philosophical discussion and theoretical debate “can easily become a distraction; a swapping of one set of problems for another” (Hammersley, 1992, p.43). Hammersley’s solution to this seeming impasse is to advocate a cautious acceptance of positivism. But this is still not satisfactory. Although attracted to the realism that positivist science brings to social research, Hammersley remains equivocal. He acknowledges what he correctly identifies as some troubling criticisms of positivist ethnography.

The first of the troubling criticisms that haunt Hammersley relates to the issue of explanation. He stresses that adequate explanation in ethnography is, and must be, contextually dependent. For Hammersley, this means understanding explanation as a pragmatic matter:

What should count as an adequate explanation of a phenomenon does not depend solely on the nature of that phenomenon and/or on the current state of relevant theory. It also depends on the particular purposes for which and context in which the explanation is being developed. Hammersley (1992, p.39)

Interestingly, Hammersley contends that adequate explanation in social science need not be directed by what a particular piece of research is **about**, nor necessarily informed by relevant theoretical abstractions. Leaving vague what is to be taken as context and purpose gives Hammersley space to shadow box anti-realist challenges. Behind his screen of pragmatism, Hammersley casts a shadow-image of nuanced subtlety floating freely between realism and anti-realism; positivism and relativism; structure and agency. He is able to do this because he leaves vague the ideas of context and purpose. However, as we will see, his actual uses of these terms are far from vague and serve to throw considerable light on where Hammersley’s fight is really directed.

Hammersley’s second concern with positivism is closely related to his first. He accepts as valid, criticisms of social research that attempt to generate law-like theories of the kind claimed in natural science. He insists, correctly I believe, that theories developed from social inquiry must be

more tentative or, as he puts it, probabilistic. However, this is a somewhat discouraging realisation for Hammersley. He laments that such tentative assertions “undercut the very possibility of the sort of theorising I ... have argued is a priority in the social sciences” (1992, p.41). Almost apologetically, he concedes:

I argued that some of the criticisms of the positivist model ... are misdirected, but that there are at least two that raise difficult questions about the validity of ... ethnographic studies and their assessment. These are the pragmatic character of explanation and the quasi-law-like character of social science theory. At present I see no obvious resolution to these problems. What is clear, though, is that what solutions we adopt to deal with them could have profound implications for the practice of ethnographic research. Hammersley (1992, pp. 41-2)

It is undoubtedly true that whatever solutions are embraced, they will have profound implications of some kind. But this level of generality is cold comfort to ethnographers wanting more concrete answers to the questions Hammersley poses. Simply put: his subtle realism is inadequate for the job and he seems to recognise this. All Hammersley’s subtlety offers is ambiguity with endless possibilities for the epistemological shopper who is free to select abstractions and generate explanations of the social world to fit fashionable or practical purposes.

However, Hammersley’s uncertainty and subtle shadow boxing evaporate when he turns to a consideration of applied ethnography. He registers serious doubts as to the legitimacy and practical relevance of any ethnography directed to improve professional practice or contribute to political activity. What Hammersley has in his sights here is the ‘action research’ and participatory forms of research expounded by the likes of Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Peter McLaren (1984)<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Hammersley balks at the possibility that research could, or should, be overtly political or, presumably, committed to social values like egalitarianism. It seems that while research is to be understood as a social activity, particular forms of human action are to be quarantined from its bounds and certain social ideals rejected. The separation of ethnographic practice from other forms of social activity smacks of scientism as a positivist illusion: “an ideology of technocratic expertise and managerial authority” (Bhaskar, 1986, p.272). In arguing for his subtle realism Hammersley insists that

... what is appropriate in general is a more limited and remote relationship between research and other forms of practice that advocates of applied or practitioner ethnography demand. Hammersley (1992, p.202)

Hammersley’s target here is what he understands as Marxist inspired critical ethnography. His rejection of critical ethnography (or rather Marxist theory and practice) rests on three pillars. The

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<sup>4</sup> Hammersley’s argument with McLaren’s critical theory is based on two mid-1980s pieces of work (see McLaren 1986 and McLaren 1987) As McLaren himself acknowledges, powerfully different intellectual currents from that of 15 years ago now carry his work. For example, in the third edition of *Schooling as Ritual Performance*, he regrettably notes that “in the first two editions of the book, I did not pay enough attention to the regime of production. My work since then has underscored the social relations of production and has been more critical of postmodern theorizing ...” (1999, p. xlv). In a recent interview, McLaren is even stronger. He identifies postmodern theory and his ‘critical postmodernism’ as “reactionary” and that he was “haunted by the realization” he had failed to engage with the work of Marx (McLaren, 2003). For a sample of McLaren’s recent Marxist inspired work see: McLaren (2000); Allman, McLaren and Rikowski (2003); Hill et. al. (2002).

While it is doubtful that that Hammersley would be impressed with McLaren’s greater emphasis on Marxist theorising, this is not the point. Along with the fact that Hammersley repeatedly spells McLaren’s name incorrectly (i.e. ‘McClaren’) and that these errors have not been corrected after three reprints reflects, what seems to be, a lack of familiarity with McLaren’s work. Hammersley’s disregard and dismissal of Marxism as historicist, determinist and teleological is equally off-hand. He does not provide any reference to, or engagement with, Marx’s own work – only selective interpretations of Marx and Marxism. I am not advocating here that the good word can be found in some gospel or in the utterances of great individuals. The point is that the *in toto* rejection of an entire corpus of work requires serious engagement with its ideas.

first concerns the nature of social reality or, as Hammersley puts it, the “highly implausible” Marxist view of history. The second can be captured under the well known sociological problematic of structure and agency. Hammersley characterises this in terms of the theory-practice relation. He claims that the objective of Marxist practice, and that of critical ethnography, is to bring “reality in line with theory” (Hammersley, 1992, pp.111 and 119]. This assertion is an extension of Hammersley’s first concern that Marxist theory is based on teleological, determinist, and reductionist views of social reality and human history. His third pillar is methodological and centres on issues of causation and the existence of causal laws. Here he presents what is basically a rehearsal of the Popperian critique of Marxism (namely, orthodox Marxism claims to produce naturalistic laws of social motion that, in the end, aren’t open to refutation). In short, Hammersley sees Marxism and its partner in crime, critical ethnography, as positivist, unscientific and prime exemplars of naïve realism.

The next section will contrast Hammersley’s subtle realism with the critical realism of Bhaskar. It will be argued that critical realism provides a depth ontology sorely missing from Hammersley’s account of things. Attention will be drawn to the affinities of critical realism and, what Hammersley rejects as, orthodox Marxism.

### THE CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL REALISM: DIGGING DEEP

... for empiricism, science *collects* discrete bits of knowledge and accumulates them in its mental bucket; for relativism, scientific changes are like *gestalt switches*, ‘coming to see the world differently’. Both of these metaphors have their place, but if transcendental realism is right, the metaphor of digging deeper catches far more essential features of the process. Collier (1994, p.50)

Collier points to the crucial differences between critical realism and the ontological assumptions that found the likes of positivism, empiricism and postmodernism. As a transcendental realism, critical realism not only accepts concrete objects as real (i.e. as in the case of empirical realism) but it also holds to the existence of underlying structures and mechanisms. The metaphor of digging deep suggests the possibility of a realist methodology that probes to ontological domains beyond those of the directly observable. For transcendental realists, like orthodox Marxists and critical realists, the existence of unobservable mechanisms and structures are established by means of transcendental argument<sup>5</sup>. For instance, in one of his early works: *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Bhaskar sets out to argue the possibility of a realist social science by asking the transcendental question: “What properties do societies possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?” He outlines his argument as follows:

I argue that social forms are a necessary condition for any intentional act, that their *pre-existence* establishes their *autonomy* as possible objects of scientific investigation and that their *causal power* establishes their *reality*. The pre-existence of social forms will be seen to entail a *transformational* model of social activity. [...] I show how it is, just in virtue of these emergent features of societies, that social science is possible. Bhaskar (1998, p.25)

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<sup>5</sup> Bhaskar directs attention to Marx’s transcendental credentials as follows:

Marx’s analysis in *Capital* illustrates the substantive use of a transcendental procedure. *Capital* may most plausibly be viewed as an attempt to establish what must be the case for the experiences grasped by the phenomenal forms of capitalist life to be possible ... Bhaskar (1998, p.51)

## Ontological Depth

It is because critical realism holds to a **depth** ontology that it can be transformative. For his transcendental realism Bhaskar describes three inter-related and ordered ontological domains: the Real, Actual and Empirical. He outlines these (along with their relations to mechanisms, events and experiences) as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Ontological Domains (Bhaskar, 1978, p.13)**

	Domain of Real	Domain of Actual	Domain of Empirical
Mechanisms	√		
Events	√	√	
Experiences	√	√	√

Table 1 shows the domain of the Real consisting of underlying structures, mechanisms and relations, as well as events, actions and experiences. The hierarchical ordering of elements within the domain of the Real indicates a causal relation between them (namely, structures, mechanisms and relations generate events from which experiences are derived). In contrast, the domain of the Actual consists only of events, actions and experiences. Here, structures and generative mechanisms are not recognised. The Empirical domain consists of simply what is experienced and observed. In other words, transcendental realism understands the Empirical as a part of the Actual, which is itself a part of the Real. As such, the claim of critical realism to present a depth ontology rests on its recognition of all three domains. All domains are real. It is true that the Actual and the Empirical provide partial or even distorted understandings of sociality. For example, within capitalism the relation between worker and capitalist appears as one of free exchange. However, in reality, “free labour is a construct of liberal ideology, the lived expression of oppression under capitalism” (Banaji, 2003, p.91). Or, as Marx put it, the essential complement to the capitalist and the means of production is the wage labourer “who is compelled to sell himself of his own free will” (Marx, 1976, p.932). However, taking understandings of lived experiences as partial and distorted is quite different from claiming that such thinking represents the work of ‘false consciousness’: an idea incorrectly attributed to Marx (see Allman, 2001). For Marx, ideologies are one-sided ideas and practices that are no less real or false. Hammersley’s own distorted representation of Marxism serves an eagerness to present, as obvious, the irrelevance of Marxism and its “critical model”:

It is an essential assumption of the critical model that there is a single set of values that everyone would agree on if it were not for the effects of ideology on our thinking. This is, of course, one of the areas of sharpest disagreement between Marx and Weber. Hammersley (1992, p.112)

While deep structures and generative mechanisms are not readily apparent, they can be observed and experienced through their effects. In critical realist terms, structures are social relations and not the events, actions or behaviours they generate. Accordingly, the objects of social research are those

... persistent *relations* between individuals and groups, and with the relations between these relations. Relations such as between capitalist and worker, MP and constituent, student and teacher, husband and wife. Now such relations are general and relatively enduring but they do not involve collective or mass behaviour. Bhaskar (1989, p.71)

Not only is it possible to know things as they appear but also to have knowledge of deeper enduring social relations from which appearances emerge. Unlike the straightforward claim of subtle realism that social objects exist whether they are known or not, critical realism recognises that something may be real without it appearing at all. Critical realism is trans-phenomenological

acknowledging that structures may have unexercised causal powers. Like the causal powers pertaining to combustible fuel are only activated under certain conditions (that is, in the presence of heat, fire or a spark), the powers of social forms are realised under certain socio-historical conditions. There are no guarantees, for example, that the emancipatory potential of the working class will be realised in socialist revolution. Nor can the disappearance of class be deduced from predictive failures of social theory. Events are not determined by mechanisms and causal laws are not predictions. Explanations generated by ethnography, or the work any social science, refer to mechanisms that may or may not be active at any point in time.

In this critical realist light we can see the limits of Popper's (and Hammersley's) criticism of Marx's view of history. Both hold to Actualism (i.e. there are no enduring structures, only states of affairs) and both are empirical realists (i.e. claim that theories are falsified by counterfactual occurrences). Popper (like, Hammersley), charges Marx with being "guilty of the misguided and noxious view that history has a pattern and a meaning that, if grasped, can be used in the present to predict the future" (McLellan, 1991, p.239). However, theories whose objects exist in open systems cannot be falsified by either failed predictions or evidence of counter examples: "theory is never disconfirmed by the contradictory behaviour of the uncontrolled world" (Bhaskar, 1978, p.119). This is not to insulate them from scrutiny but to recognize the fact that concrete social reality is multiply determined. It is the job of social science to establish the relationships between co-determining mechanisms (be they realised or unrealised)<sup>6</sup>.

### **Counter-Phenomenality**

In addition to its trans-phenomenological status, critical realism is also counter-phenomenological. It understands that while knowledge of deep social forms can provide explanations of appearances, it can contradict them. In other words, the apparent world can be shown to be a distorted expression of underlying structures. Surface realities may actually serve to conceal mechanisms generating alienating and exploitative relations of power. Here we see a clear affinity with the Marxian distinction between essence and appearance<sup>7</sup>. It is well known, as Collier reminds us, that

Marx thought it was the capacity of science for counter-phenomenology which made it necessary: without the contradiction between appearance and reality, science would be redundant, and we would go by appearances. [...] Its capacity for counter-phenomenology is what makes science a force for human emancipation. Collier (1994, pp.6-7)

Unlike a phenomenology of surface appearances, critical realism proffers a theory of hierarchical stratification and ontological emergence. Social reality is understood to comprise the concurrent operation of multiple mechanisms that are rooted in, and emergent from, lower ontological strata.

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<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the meaning of 'law' as employed by Marx and Bhaskar is far removed from those drawn from mechanistic accounts of society. Laws are the raw materials and transitive products of the work of science (Bhaskar, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> While Marxism and critical realism share widely acknowledged affinities, significant differences also exist between them (see, for example: Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts 2002). One such difference lies in the methods of abstraction each employ. Ollman, for example, points to Bhaskar's ambiguous philosophy of internal and external relations. Indeed, he argues that "critical realism should adopt Marx's process of abstraction and its underlying philosophy of internal relations" (Ollman, 2001, p. 291). Similarly, Roberts (2002) identifies the failure of Bhaskar's method of 'retroduction' to provide a discriminating critique of human emancipation. Unlike historical materialism, retroduction is seen to operate at a high level of abstraction inadequate for locating change within the historical conditions of existence. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to explore in detail such tensions between Marxism and critical realism. However, it is important to note that the position taken here is that critical realism does not replace historical materialism (i.e. what I take Hammersley to mean when he refers to 'orthodox' Marxism). Rather, as Roberts has put it, critical realism seeks to "develop the theoretical categories of historical materialism themselves rather than incorporate concepts and categories incompatible with historical materialism" [Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts 2002, p. 16].



However, emergent forms cannot be reduced to, or explained away by, lower order strata. They have relative causal autonomy. Just as the properties of water cannot be reduced to the separate properties of hydrogen and oxygen the qualities of emergent social phenomena are not predictable from lower level properties.

Importantly, mechanisms simultaneously pre-exist and depend upon human agency. Critical realism recognises the “vexatious fact” of society (Archer, 1995) that social reality is as it is because of its human constitution. It is thus the task of social science to establish the necessary structural conditions given for conscious human activity. In addition, it is especially important in (critical) ethnography where research is directed to the study of human interaction in everyday causal contexts that the latter cannot be reduced to the former:

In their conscious human activity, [people] for the most part unconsciously reproduce (or occasionally, transform) the structures that govern their substantive activities of production. Thus people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family, or work to reproduce the capitalist economy. But it is nevertheless the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is also the necessary condition for their activity. Bhaskar (1989, p.80)

Mechanisms co-determine **actual** events. Bhaskar refers to “multiple mechanisms” as strata that are layered and ordered. Importantly, it is mechanisms and not events that are stratified. History does not move to the pulse of events or the actions of great men. Concrete events and human action do not exist in an ordered or relational manner. This was exactly Marx’s point when outlining his method for the critique of political economy. He described the concrete as “the chaotic conception of the whole ... a rich totality of many determinations and relations. Likewise, events and actions according to Bhaskar are to be conceived as conjunctures where

the predicates ‘natural’, ‘social’, ‘human’, ‘physical’, ‘chemical’, ‘aerodynamical’, ‘biological’, ‘economic’, etc. ought not to be regarded as differentiating distinct kinds of events, but as differentiating distinct kinds of mechanisms. Bhaskar (1978, p.119)

The error of Actualism lies in its attribution of causal powers to events and the denial of ontologically deep mechanisms that may, in fact, codetermine a range of events. Theories that empty the social world of any enduring structural dimension project, what Bhaskar refers to as, “flat ontologies” that simply reflect and accommodate “the new and rapidly changing surface features of contemporary capitalist society” (Bhaskar, 1989, p.2). They provide only partial accounts of reality.

Flat ontologies, like those of subtle realism, collapse ontology and epistemology. Bhaskar identifies the failure to maintain the distinction between ontology and epistemology as the fundamental error of contemporary social science. It results in two fundamental errors. The first of these is the “ontic fallacy” where “what is known” is reduced to “what is”. It is the naïve realist position described by Hammersley and rests on an empiricist bypass of epistemology. Knowledge is determined by a pre-given reality that results in its “ontologization, naturalisation, or eternalization ” (Bhaskar, 1991, p.141). It is the fallacy into which Hammersley erroneously claims that Marx and Marxist inspired critical ethnography fall. The second error Bhaskar refers to is the “epistemic fallacy”. Here “what is” collapses into “what is known”. This is the relativist position outlined by Hammersley. The epistemic fallacy results in the ultimate neglect of ontology where reality collapses into text and all claims to truth are equally valid. Resting on the idealist assumptions that there is nothing beyond epistemology and “that we create and change the world along with our theories” (Bhaskar, 1989, p.11) the only way to settle disputes is through the “practical exercise of power” (Scott, 2000, p.14).

Through a consideration of the epistemic fallacy we can see Hammersley's pragmatism. While he claims to escape the traps of relativism, his own subtle realism ensnares him. The only way out for Hammersley becomes an idealist route: cost of which is a neglect of ontology or, as Collier (1999) puts it, a loss of so-called "aboutness" that is a fundamental characteristic of anti-realist idealism. Rather than offering a realistic alternative to naïve realism and relativism their problems become compounded in their subtle conflation. Hammersley's ontological shyness and unstated social conservatism work against him exploring more fruitful paths offered by transcendental realism of which orthodox Marxism and critical realism are examples.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to establish the possibility of a transcendently realist ethnography. Hammersley's attempt to overcome persistent and well-known problems related to the theory and practice of ethnography was used a vehicle to do this. It was shown that his solution, subtle realism, was inadequate for the job he set it. The limitations of subtle realism arose from its conflationism and ontologically shyness. In offering critical realism as an alternative to subtle realism the importance of distinguishing ontology and epistemology was emphasised.

If this paper has been successful in arguing for a depth realism (of which Bhaskar's critical realism and Marx's materialist view of history are examples) to under labour ethnography, then what confronts critical ethnographers is what this might mean for practice. The following list is offered to begin to draw out implications for methodological practice. It is not intended to be exhaustive.

- Holds to a stratified emergent ontology with a materialist view of history as its foundation.
- Takes structures, generative mechanisms as their objects of inquiry.
- Advocates a "standpoint epistemology" (McLaren 1998, p.459).
- Acknowledges the fallibility of knowledge.
- Accepts the openness of the social world.
- Understands events as the outcome of multiple causal processes.

However, as Bhaskar insists, reclaiming reality requires not just exposing ideologies that deny it but retrieving it from the effects of those ideologies. After all, following Marx, the point is not simply to interpret the world but to change it. Bhaskar continues:

What should be done with this reality once it is reclaimed? It should, I suggest, be used, nurtured and valued in an ecologically sustainable and humane way for human emancipation, happiness and flourishing. Bhaskar (1991, p.144)

Here Bhaskar points to the possibility, if not the necessity, of an emancipatory social science of which critical ethnography would be part. Contra to Hammersley's desire to separate ethnography from other forms practice like political action a transcendental realism would see radical transformative practice worthy of ethnography.

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