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Critical Realism and Concrete Utopias

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ABSTRACT

The role of Concrete Utopias in the works of Roy Bhaskar are contrasted with the 'Real Utopias' of Erik Olin Wright. Critical Realism treats them as 'possibilities' that are real because realizable. Conversely, to Wright, they are extrapolations of existing social forms whose future combination could result in socialism. As such, Bhaskar's philosophical contribution is supplemented by the Morphogenic Approach (Archer) developed for use in the social sciences. 'Real Utopias' are considered to be necessarily Actualist, thus limiting future change in social forms to those that already exist, despite transformation being 'activity dependent'. Critical Realism attaches more importance to structural and cultural constraints and to agential ingenuity in transforming them. In short, Real Utopias are *realistic rather than real* though preferable to existing social formations, whilst Concrete Utopias allow for new novelty, such as de-growth, giving hope for reshaping global society.

KEYWORDS

Real Utopias; actualism;
Concrete Utopias; generative
mechanisms; Morphogenic
society; reflexivity

Introduction

Outside Critical Realism not much use is now made of the term 'Concrete Utopia', or for that matter inside it. Most recall that it turned up sporadically in Bhaskar's 2008 [1993] *Dialectic* without playing a starring role. Yet, in 2016, when his *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism* was posthumously published, profound importance is attached to it. Consider the following two statements: Concrete utopianism 'forms an indispensable component in all ethical thinking' (Bhaskar 2016, 16); and 'Concrete utopianism is a key figure for thinking about how to effect a transition to the good society' (Bhaskar 2016, 93). Since I take it that no-one would deny that either ethics or eudaimonia were central concerns to Roy, one wonders why he consigned this 'indispensable' and 'key' concept to a minor role in his texts, with the partial exception of *Dialectic*? I can offer no convincing explanation.

However, his last book (originally commissioned as 'C.R. in a Nutshell' by the Yale Critical Realism Network) was a title that he took very seriously indeed, perhaps being aware when starting it, and certainly convinced as it proceeded, that this would be his last and thus was challenged to synthesize his philosophical trajectory. 'We' had carved up his corpus into 'phases', suiting our interests and our limitations, whilst he benignly looked on and encouraged our endeavours; but this was his turn to exercise authorial authority and display the integrity of his works (Bhaskar 2016). In the process, some concepts receded, and others were promoted, Concrete Utopia being one of the latter.

In the taped interview with Mervyn Hartwig (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010), produced as *The Formation of Critical Realism: A Personal Perspective*, Bhaskar disavowed any direct line of inheritance from the *locus classicus* of Concrete Utopianism in the work of Ernst Bloch (2000) [1918]. Nevertheless, what the two shared was not only the assumption that utopianism is indispensable to postulating a different state of affairs from the actually existing one, but also that it does so in way that conveys hope for an alternative future. Indeed, in the glossary to *Dialectic*, Bhaskar defines this objective, severed from Bloch's (1971) rather tortuous attempts to rehabilitate Marxism, as follows: 'Concrete Utopianism consists in the exercise of constructing models of alternative ways of living on the basis of some assumed set of resources, counterbalancing actualism and informing hope' (Bhaskar 2008 [1993], 395). However, Bhaskar never advanced any such model but rather dwelt on the requirements to be met in constructing them. This might seem puzzling, though the answer to 'why not' is, I believe, deceptively simple and thoroughly consistent with his self-designated role as a 'philosophical under labourer'; he had no desire to pretend to being a sociologist or any other type of social scientist – that was where he effectively said 'over to us'.

Therefore, after summarizing the formal requirements, garnered from his various texts, I will spend the next section of this paper examining my attempt to delineate a Concrete Utopia of the 'Morphogenic Society' and its reception and refinement at the hands of my twelve collaborators in the five books we published from our 'Centre for Social Ontology' (Archer 2013a; Archer 2014; Archer 2015a; Archer 2016a; Archer 2017a). In the final section, Bhaskar and Archer will be compared and contrasted with Erik Olin Wright's 2010 book *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

Criteria of concrete utopianism

First, what qualifies a utopia as 'concrete'? Both Bloch (in Geoghegan 2008 [1996], 32) and Bhaskar make the same distinction between what is 'objectively really possible' and what is 'formally possible' that is, 'abstract'. If one were building a house, this would be the difference between what could be built using accessible materials and what could be built if girders ten times stronger were available. Thus, the 'concrete' serves to 'pinpoint the real, but non-actualized possibilities inherent in a situation, thus inspiring grounded hope to inform emancipatory praxis' (Bhaskar 2009 [1994], 112).

Second, it rests upon 'dispositional realism', namely that possibilities that are realizable are real, unlike those that are not: "'Real" here means "realizable", and designates which possibilities may be actualized *given a particular constraint*' (Bhaskar 2016, 125, my italics). Their 'realizability' is what distinguishes (real) possibilities from fantasies and wish-fulfilment. But how – if a possibility has not or not yet, been acknowledged or even imagined – can its 'realizability' underwrite its ontological status as belonging to the real domain? For instance, an illness cannot be attributed to vitamin deficiency before the discovery of vitamins and their effects, despite these being responsible all along.

Sometimes, however, there seems nothing objectionable in working backwards in search of what produces an effect, as the history of medicine illustrates. For example, 'Wasting disease' and 'consumption' – as empiricist re-descriptions – were in turn rejected in favour of 'tuberculosis' once this possibility was capable of being entertained. More difficult are cases where the possibility ventured cannot be realized because the constraint in force is simply too strong; a family may be aware that the possibility of eating a more

varied diet would be better for them, but it lacks the means to do so. Sometimes, again, the possibility could be realized by being demonstrated experimentally, but that is not the case for venturing the realizability of a 'classless society'.

It seems that there needs to be a waiting room in which possibilities can sit it out (unlike 'let's start killing unicorns, which might be good to eat'). This is a particular instance of the need to separate culture from structure because there is such a waiting room for cultural ideas. They can be logged into the 'Universal Archive' (Archer 1988) and retrieved for (attempted) realization at any time a group wants to try them out as an alternative to the status quo (an instance of 'concept dependence'), when constraints do not preclude this. Structural alternatives can be stored in the same way, but as *ideas of them* rather than as such. Notions (ideas such as killing unicorns) that are unrealizable can never form part of a Concrete Utopia, even though they remain in the Archive as mythology or are never consulted.

Third, the advent of a given Concrete Utopia is 'agency-dependent' because it involves some actively searching for 'hitherto unrealized possibilities for change in the way life is currently organized. This is where concrete utopianism, a theory of transition and a relationship to an on-going depth struggle become crucial' (Bhaskar 2016, 109). These linkages appear incontrovertible. Overall, the most satisfactory solution is in taking the above quotation seriously by demonstrating empirically that 'realization' was envisaged and sought but prevented by identifiable constraints. This, I shall maintain is the main parting of the ways between Bhaskar and Olin Wright (2010, 2013). The former insists on a theory of *transition and struggle*, whilst the latter relies upon a *classification* of alternative combinatory possibilities where the question of *contestation* does not arise.

Our ten associates of the Centre for Social Ontology – who worked for five years on the transformation of Late Modernity – leaned heavily on the Generative Mechanism through which intensified morphogenesis could be transformed into a morphogenic social formation and the countervailing constraints encountered. We appreciated the need to work upon the intertwining of the components involved, namely: the *Generative Mechanisms*, responsible for such social change; the *Interests*, both material and ideal promoting and resisting it; and the *Emergence* of new properties and powers. For the latter, we also looked for contradictions and compatibilities with other existing properties and powers, since we were aware that interventions are always vulnerable to the contingencies of the open system that is the Social Order. Thus, what follows is a brief history of a research project in social theory, which indeed began from a rather simplistic Concrete Utopia, which as Roy put it embracingly, intimated 'a better way of doing things and an alternative order of human being and social life' (Bhaskar 2016, 207). What we resisted was that to be realists about social change was making over hasty proclamations of the advent of a new social formation – despite the global mess that we are all now confronting.

The Trajectory of a Concrete Utopia

How do they originate?

Today, in almost every aspect of life, it is common for many to bemoan that there 'must be a better way of doing things', fostering a huge impulse towards invention and innovation, often taken up (fallibly) by market and state. Anthropologically, there was no such impulse,

rather changed practices resulted contingently; from serendipity (the first person accidentally to drop raw meat on the fire), by contact with other tribes or travellers or in response to climatic variations prompting viscerally-based survival responses (when the wild animals move on, follow them as nomads). It generated what I termed, 'The Myth of Cultural Integration' (Archer 1985) held to be free of internal systemic contradictions as of socio-cultural critique amongst classical anthropologists.

Pre-Modernity was preoccupied with the sanctification of current practices (in caste and kingship *inter alia*), which recent sociologists have elevated to a static notion of 'Tradition' (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Certainly, 'Utopias' could be envisaged, Plato's *Republic* (Grube and Reeve 1974) [380 BC] probably being the first, but these were its 'science fantasy', not dealing with *transition* towards 'an alternative order of human being and social life'. Mainly they evoked a lost idyll like the Biblical Garden of Eden, the medieval 'Land of Cockaigne' or Sir Philip Sidney's (1999) [1580] *The Old Arcadia*. In short (and even if one includes Thomas More's *Utopia* as other than a satire on his day) they were unrealistic because no link was made with a possible future. No suggestion of their real possibility was advanced until the nineteenth century when Morris's (2012) [1890] *News from Nowhere*, standing for Modernity's genre, served to encourage the foundation of utopian communities in the New World. Note, however, that these did not consider transformation – which Robert Owen had attempted in terms of factory production in his own manufactories before sailing to found New Harmony – but rather resembled a fresh start, an attempt to *escape* from countervailing constraints.

There is only one point in introducing this cursory glance at history, namely, to emphasize the contrast with the twentieth century, which intensified as it proceeded and became pointed amongst millennials. In the course of researching and writing my trilogy of books on reflexivity (Archer 2003, 2007, 2012) what became clear was that dominant modes of practising the 'internal conversation', in which subjects consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa¹, were changing with a marked decrease in 'Communicative reflexivity' the previous underwriter of social integration *but itself dependent on contextual continuity* and a proportionate increase in 'Meta-reflexivity' and 'Fractured reflexivity', both associated with '*contextual incongruity*', whilst 'Autonomous reflexivity' held its own. Since the main impetus to investigate reflexivity at all was to discover a better, because concern-based linkage, between the structural/cultural context and agential responses to it rather than the vague term 'conditioning' that Critical Realism had used to date.²

Through long in-depth interviews of students and the residents of Coventry G.B., the Meta-reflexives became increasingly intriguing as potential agents of social transformation. Having already turned their backs on modernity's two Leviathans, the market and the state, and having rejected the confines of 'friends and family', the Meta-reflexives recognize that it is only in between the macro and the micro – that is, it is only within like-minded associations – that they could be both generators and beneficiaries of the Relational Goods they hold worthwhile. These Relational Goods include solidarity in pursuit of a common cause, multi-faceted friendship, meaning and purpose in daily life, and making a communal contribution that exceeds their aggregate exertions. Another way of putting this is that Meta-reflexives seek to discover congenial 'Corporate Agents'³ with whom they can live and work.

Just as importantly, the young Meta-reflexives are explicitly inclusive. Their signature tune, the 'desire to make a difference' was frequently followed up by them adding, 'If only to one person'. In other words, they are seeking the 'common good' rather than the 'total good', an addition sum whose result is higher if those doing less well on whatever criterion are discounted.⁴ The Meta-reflexives are unwilling to discount the well-being of anyone. Socially, their mission is fully inclusive; individually they will go after the lost sheep. What they seek to do is to *integrate* the less fortunate by extending the availability of opportunities to these groups, which they consider themselves to have enjoyed as an unmerited privilege. From the start of their university careers they were free-givers who contracted into to making regular donations to charities, as undergraduates they intensified their efforts for causes and for individuals in difficulties, and at the point of graduation they are prepared to dedicate themselves to this in their careers. Another way of putting this is that they were bent upon *the extension of variety and its integration as diversity*; the former being the distinctive effect of morphogenesis, the latter usually being disregarded. Yet another is that to them a good society cannot be a divided society.

What stood out here was the discrepancy between the societal desiderata of these subjects and their absence of any idea of how to achieve it or what that society's constitution would be. In other words, it seemed to me that what they lacked was precisely a Concrete Utopia that delineated, embodied and combined the various possibilities they sought in a realizable manner. Critiques of the Social Order were not wanting, but just as the varieties of heterodox economics were strong on their critical thrusts against mainstream economic theory and practice, they were correspondingly and collectively weak in venturing any Concrete alternatives. Hence, I found myself increasingly exploring whether or not the intensification of morphogenesis (which could and was being of use in explaining particular social changes in various domains) could not be developed into a new social formation – the Morphogenic Society.⁵

What were the features that in combination could constitute a Concrete Utopia articulating this possibility, thus supplying the potentially realizable lineaments of something new, still to become an emergent, yet furnishing a source of hope for a better Social Order than the mess we were in? These are listed below, although space precludes their proper explication and exploration, which are contained in the five books already mentioned. Of course, morphogenesis has always been with us, otherwise the Social Order would be without history, but the recent changes (dating roughly from 1980) are distinctively radical.

- (a) Morphogenesis has increased in momentum, and intensification, such that no social institution is left untouched, and it is not merely the acceleration of change that anyway defies measurement.⁶
- (b) Morphostatic processes have diminished, meaning that negative feedback decreasingly restrains positive feedback.
- (c) As novel items, termed 'variety', such as new ideas, techniques, products and skills are added to the social and cultural orders, so the range of potential compatibilities between them grows, resulting in the marked tendency for exploring their synergy, meaning that 'variety produces more variety' tendentially.
- (d) As these are increasingly taken up (educationally, occupationally etc.) the situational logical of action is such that Competition no longer completely monopolizes as the

motor and motive propelling morphogenesis, though always attended by its serial production of 'winners' and 'losers' in the zero-sum outcomes inherent to capitalism. Instead, capitalism itself, always dependent upon growth becomes ever more morphogenetic.

- (e) Consequently, the situational logic of action begins to mutate into one of Opportunity, with subjects valorizing the variety already generated (by taking up the new ideas and openings) and extending it through making new connections generative of further novel opportunities.
- (f) Such innovations do not confront opposition from vested interests in the *status quo*, or at least to a much-reduced degree, because these they lose their relevance, whilst new objective interests take time to be consolidated by old opponents.
- (g) Unlike every other situational logic,⁷ that of Opportunity has the potential to foster 'win-win' outcomes which appeal to a greater proportion of any population. However, one consequence is that it will also foster the heterogeneity of that population which generates the paradox that social antagonism may diminish whilst social solidarity is not rebuilt by this.
- (h) The situational logic of Opportunity still confronts that of Competition because – in the ensuing relational contestation, one that ultimately re-shapes the Social Order – preceding hegemonic groups do not quit the field but undertake their own morphogenesis using their existing power that may have been undented by the challenge to their monopoly of practices.

Even in the unlikely circumstances that all of the above were to prove uncontentious, some important questions remain unanswered. First, why would I suggest that the points listed above furnished the material that had the makings of a Concrete Utopia?⁸ Second, to whom was this projected Utopia thought likely to appeal? These questions will be answered in turn.

First, 'Unbound Morphogenesis' is what defines Morphogenic Society as one where morphogenetic processes intensify until they predominate over morphostatic ones, becoming less and less constrained by them and *ceteris paribus* will generate increasing variety, thus expanding the range of opportunities that can become the objects of subjects' concerns.⁹ It follows that with these new openings social action becomes less governed by routinization, by *habitus* or habits and that it lies in the hands of individuals and groups reflexively to match their choices with what they now care about most (Frankfurt 1988). That is, if nothing else prevents, distorts or constrains this process. This is the root source of the Concrete Utopia; it is presumed by those who advocate it that its realization may well be delayed but its possibility is not denied by the stubborn endurance of institutions, power and vested interests from the past whose influence still suffuses the present. In other words, it is possible to overcome them.

The conviction about the realizability of this possible future hangs on critical realism's portrayal of humankind (individually and collectively) as the bearers of 'capacities' and 'liabilities'. Both these potentials can be extended or limited through their relations with the world they confront, namely natural reality and its three orders: the Natural, the Practical (our heritage of material culture) and the Social (Archer 2000, Chapters 4 and 5). At the moment we are concerned with the Social Order and the potential for Morphogenesis 'unbound' to enable the development or fuller use of people's 'capacities' in society. It

pivots upon the new opportunities opening up (new experiences, novel jobs, newly recognized skills etc.), elasticating subjects' existing 'capacities'. In short, ascribed characteristics will diminish in importance and achieved ones increase as the notion of achievement itself diversifies. Finally, *if more people can do more of what they do best and care about most* – be it for remuneration, for pleasure, or for pro-social ends – this provides the stepping stones towards the 'good life' in society and the enhancement of subjects' flourishing.

Secondly, to whom will this Concrete Utopia appeal? Because all social stasis and change is activity-dependent, the utopian outcome hinges upon, *inter alia*, its supporters realizing this possibility against its opponents which, in turn, depends upon who its supporters are and where they are socially situated ('contextual-dependence' to Realists).

At the micro-level this will be sensitive to the distribution of dominant modes of reflexivity amongst persons and groups. Therefore, it will be tempting for the protagonists of the Morphogenic Concrete Utopia both to cite and target the growing ranks of the Meta-reflexives, especially among the most highly educated. And they will be right to pinpoint these critics of contemporary capitalism who are equally dissatisfied with their current social roles (Archer 2012), as those most able and willing to work for the realization of this Utopia. But are they fully correct to neglect the ranks of the Fractured reflexives, who are simultaneously on the increase? Some theorists, who do *not* maintain that routinized action guided by habits or habitus is evergreen, do argue that the rapidity of change – the very fact of an increased 'variety' of opportunities becoming available to human subjects – is disorienting, destabilizing and a source of dissatisfaction because people can neither keep up with nor sample everything on offer.¹⁰ They are literally spoilt for choice, or by it, so 'acceleration theorists' claim.¹¹ In short, to them, intensified Morphogenesis increases subjects' 'liabilities' to novel forms of suffering. The route to the 'good life' is no longer paved by traditional routines. Instead, subjects' reactions – as 'distracted people' (Archer 2012; Carrigan 2017) – take the form of 'expressivism' and 'presentism' which poorly prepare them for designing their own *modus vivendi* in which they can thrive in contemporary society. For the time being, we have no basis upon which to assert that the Fractured reflexives do not or will not outweigh the Meta-reflexives.

At the meso-level we have also to consider the Generative Mechanism that is driving morphogenesis forward and assess whether its constituents (or which of its components) is likely to prevail in realizing the possibility of the Concrete Utopia – not forgetting those other Generative Mechanisms at work simultaneously and the ubiquitous role of contingency in social change.

In our earlier volumes, I ventured that the key mechanism involved was the synergy that developed between multinational and later financialized capitalism and digital science, sponsored by the US military relatively independently of entrepreneurial interests at first (Archer 2015b, 2016b). This way of re-telling the Silicon Valley story does not assume that pioneers of new computer technology were universally awaiting talent spotting (funding and contracts) by big corporations, despite the number who were magnetically drawn to working together. On the contrary, from the beginning there were the original 'hackers', whom I called the 'diffusionists' whose aims were precisely the realization of a 'cultural commons' by means of free Open Licensing, genuine Open Access, sharing source codes and so forth. Conversely, the materially based corporate interests promoted collaboration with digital developments to foster their own (global) market competitiveness. In other words, even whilst synergy continued to grow, the two

parties were pulling in different directions for social change. The active diffusionists appreciated that cultural goods could be shared or given away without loss of value, the big corporations sought artificially to transform them into socially scarce resources through the medium of restrictive intellectual property rights.

Cui bono from this successful Generative Mechanism that intensified morphogenesis for both parties in the last three decades? The story is unfinished and yet it has some remarkable twists and turns. For example, the social media, dating back only to the late 1990s, until quite recently appeared to back-up neo-liberalism partly by unabashed commodification and 'product placement' and partly by its trivialization of 'real news'. On the other hand, its use for organizing instant demonstrations, crowdsourcing for 'change' appeals, and most recently for *both* political power play from the very top *and* political mobilization of the young as party members and voters (in Britain) means that it is serving both 'sides', without an umpire or an end result in view. All it shows is that morphogenesis itself can be intensifying, that morphostasis and its associated interests and mechanisms are in retreat, without the Concrete Utopia having come any closer or, for that matter, having gone away.

However, if we move to the macro-level, this is also to distinguish the above analysis from being an update of conflict theory because it is here that the constraints upon realization most fiercely confront Concrete Utopias for the common good. These do so in two ways: by playing upon people's liabilities (individual or collective) rather than their capacities; and by mutuality reinforcing one another's constraining influences upon the Social Order and its future.

In general, Social Theorists are over-restrictive about the world in which we live. In other words, to them 'our human context' does *not* signify the whole natural world with its three orders; the Natural Order, our physical environment; the Practical Order, our material heritage, at any time, of tools, techniques and technology; as well as the Social Order. Instead, sociological imperialism increasingly accords primacy to the Social Order and slides the natural and the practical domains under its hegemony. The effect is that singular subjects are cut off from direct contact with and influence by their interplay with the Natural and Practical Orders because these are mediated to them by the Social.¹² This leads Critical Realists to some very different conclusions from those of the sociological imperialists and to some considerations that they cannot entertain.

At birth, human beings have a range of inborn *liabilities* and *capacities* in relation to the world they have entered. All of these exist only *in potentia* and *none* of them may be realized (walking, talking, loving) if the neonate does not survive. Human *capacities* are fragile and their development is demanding of time, care and propitious circumstances supplied by all three kinds from natural reality, working together without tension. The new opportunities furnished by intensified morphogenesis *can* only contribute to eudaimonia provided that they enable enhanced development of our human *capacities* and reduce the import of our *liabilities*. The Concrete Utopia of Morphogenic Society depends upon this for its realization.

We all inhabit one world and the impacts of our various morphogenetic actions (intended, unintentional, unknown, aggregate or emergent) upon our three very different environments confront us all today with new threats, working on our liabilities, the greatest of which is the extinction of humanity climatically through rendering the planet uninhabitable or through nuclear warfare. As the first time that we live with the possibility of our species-extinction, so for the first time the entire population must

choose between succumbing to its ultimate *liability* or collaboratively co-operating, using its combined *capacities*, to avert this conclusion. Facing finitude is an unprecedented (morphogenetic) feature that now outweighs our other concerns. Recognizing our shared finitude may prompt a higher collective regard for universal thriving, helping it for the first time collectively to override zero-sum competition by cooperation. The Paris Agreement of 2015 was an indicator that this is a realizable goal – until President Trump indicated his intention to withdraw the USA from it in 2017. However, matters deteriorate if our collectively unfriendly relations with nature are taken in conjunction with effects in the other orders of natural reality. This can be portrayed schematically in the following [Figure 1](#), intended to highlight the main negative consequences stemming from each order for the intensification of human liabilities registered in the others:-

- (i) The effects of climate change signalled the millennial switch from ‘man’s mastery of nature’ (a phrase intended in the Enlightenment to celebrate something very positive for human well-being) to its opposite, the repercussions of destructive human interventions in nature upon themselves. The consequences of unmitigated climate

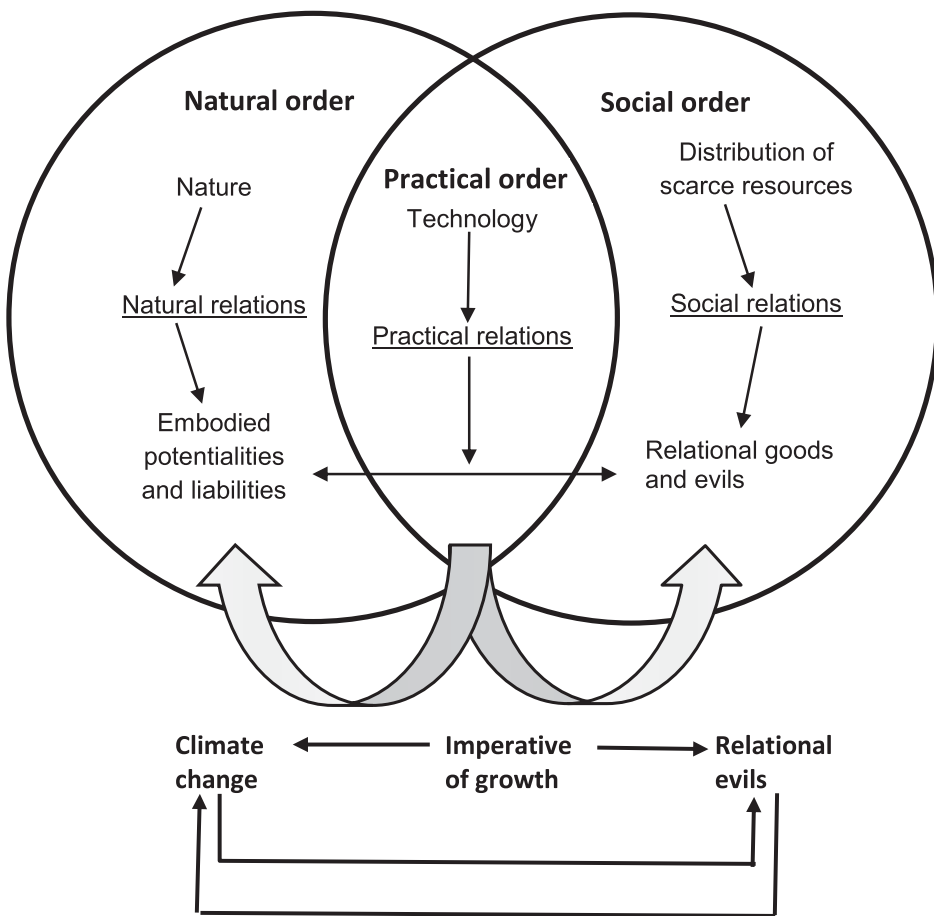


Figure 1. Relations between the three orders of natural reality. (From Archer 2017b, 125)

change exacerbated global inequalities by falling *most heavily on the poorest and excluding them from sharing any benefits from global morphogenesis*, despite almost 75% of annual carbon dioxide emissions being released by the global North with its mere 15% of the world's population (Holdren 2007). Hence the paradox that whilst levels of absolute poverty were falling globally, per capita differentials in income between developed and developing countries were rising; a relational evil harming international relations.

- (ii) The nub of the contradiction between the Practical and the Natural Order was that capitalist competition fuels the corporate practice of externalizing costs to the environment. Despite the morphogenetic forms assumed by capitalism since 1980, the imperative of growth remained paramount to support corporate profitability with further negative consequences for inequalities between countries and for differentials between rich and poor within countries. Competition is inherent to capitalist production and capitalism is healthy only when it is growing. Growth and profit both increase by shifting manufacturing to the 'extractive peripheries', where labour and raw materials are also cheaper, welfare minimal, toxic waste is a literal externality of production, and such countries represent a massive potential consumer market. Enshrined within the metric of GNP/GDP was the assumption that economic growth is the measure of social development. Yet, infinite growth is environmentally unsustainable. How can this paradox be explained? In other words, how can it be that most consumers in the developed world more readily entertain the prospect of eco-disaster than the end of capitalism? Competitive consumerism is in large part the answer.
- (iii) Competitive consumerism is also the source of the negative relationship between the 'imperative of growth' and the increasing 'relational harm' experienced in the Social Order as the precipitous decline in social integration. The most blatant indicator is the intensified delineation of what Pope Francis terms 'disposable people', the largest category being the 'retired', with limited spending power but an increasingly expensive longevity. A further irony is the attempt made by the State to respond with rhetorical tenacity to maintaining their health care, whilst hospitals are run on the lines of Taylorism with through-put as their main target. Equally disposable are non-working youth, especially those of ethnic origin, who make up the largest group in US gaols. Once again, economic morphogenesis has played on human liabilities rather than encouraging our capacities. Furthermore, Agential political passivity has further causes and consequences arising from the 'mode of consumption'. Social 'self-worth' consists in collaborating with commodification as witnessed by retail spending remaining buoyant in in most EU countries despite being based upon people's increased indebtedness during the recent years of austerity and increasing numbers becoming dependent on food banks. Once again, this growing element in the Social Order had battered onto people's liabilities rather than exercising their capabilities. Another way of putting this is that the generation of Relational Evils had swamped Relational Goods, precluding the realization of the Concrete Utopia.

Significantly, both Bhaskar and Olin Wright are in broad agreement with the above conclusions and with one another. Bhaskar wrote endorsing that

the various crises feed into each other; the ecocrisis exacerbates the economic crisis, which produces ethnic and political tensions, which threaten the international political structure of the system; so that we have in effect the concatenation of the crises in such a way that they mutually reinforce one another. (Bhaskar 2016, 205)

In turn, this leads him to cast doubt on the realization of his Concrete Utopia, given the force of a particular constraint:

it is not possible to combine ecological viability and *further net growth*. This is of course consistent with growth in some sectors and countries and with a radical redistribution of resources and wealth. But overall it must be *de-growth*. Of course, whether or not it is possible to have capitalism and degrowth is a moot point. (Bhaskar 2016, 207)

Olin Wright makes a similar point:

Capitalism inherently threatens the quality of the environment for future generations because of Consumerism and endless growth in material production. The world is finite; endless growth in material consumption is simply not compatible with long-term sustainability of the environment. This does not mean that prosperity as such is incompatible with the environment, but simply that prosperity dependent on a dynamic of endless growth is incompatible. (Wright 2013, 8)

Nevertheless, although Bhaskar, Olin Wright and I are agreed upon this proposition, this does not spell our complete concord about Concrete Utopias.

Real possibilities, generative mechanisms and obtrusive actualism

Real possibilities

As was seen at the start of this paper, a Concrete Utopia to Bhaskar depends upon 'dispositional realism' such that 'real' signifies those possibilities that maybe actualized given prevailing constraints. Thus, its *realization depends on the relationship between a given possibility and the actual constraints upon it*. However, apart from the absencing of all versions of the 'master-slave relationship', Bhaskar told us remarkably little about the *contours* of any Concrete Utopia, nor about the social *contestation* involved in attempting to promote and/or deter its realization by different social groups involved.

If Bhaskar remained unduly lacking in specifying the 'concrete' features of Utopia (which is one reason why the 'Morphogenic Project' was undertaken), Wright's notion of 'real utopias' draws its specificity from actualism and becomes more dependent upon combining elements of the actual as his theorizing unfolds. If I am correct, then there is a more serious divide between Bhaskar and Wright over the meaning of 'the possible' than appears at the start. At the beginning of his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, this is not apparent when Wright opens with the words, 'My hope is to contribute to a normatively grounded sociology of the possible, not just the actual' (Wright 2013, 2). The sentence which immediately follows may be nothing more than a semantic difference when he fleshes this out to mean 'Developing a theory of alternatives to capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century'. Are 'alternatives' a synonym for 'possibilities' as could be the case, and is a 'real utopia' interchangeable with a 'Concrete Utopia'? Although he asserts that the 'idea of real utopias embraces th[is] tension between dreams and practice: utopia implies developing visions of alternatives to dominant institutions', he immediately dilutes this with his definition of *real*: '*real* means proposing

alternatives attentive to problems of unintended consequences, self-destructive dynamics, and difficult dilemmas of normative trade-offs' (Wright 2013, 3). In my view, he thus draws us further into actualism because unintended consequences can only be exhibited in 'actually existing alternatives'; but we necessarily remain ignorant of such consequences in as-yet-unrealized 'possibilities'.

The same pull in this direction is exerted when Wright seeks to develop an account – on the basis of his main normative requirements, specifically equality, democracy and sustainability – of 'viable alternatives' in response to the moral critique based upon abrogation of these principles. Viability is given precedence over achievability because the former influences the latter and although the reality of limits of possibility does not depend upon their discovery, nevertheless 'Evidence for the viability of alternatives has the potential to shape beliefs' (Wright 2013, 8). I agree, but where can such 'evidence' be found other than in actual social processes? This becomes incontrovertible when Wright maintains that 'the study of real utopias mainly focuses on institutions that in one way or another *prefigure more radical emancipatory alternatives*' (Wright 2013, 9; see Wright 2010 for further discussion). To prefigure must mean these have a prior realized existence – as the examples offered indeed do (e.g. Wikipedia, worker owned co-operatives, or Nordic social policy etc.). By themselves not one constitutes a significant challenge to capitalism. But, 'taken collectively and scaled up', to Wright (2013, 12), 'they potentially constitute elements of a more comprehensive alternative'. I would term this 'ameliorative actualism', one that may well be more desirable than current social institutions and practices but not one that is transformative of the Social Order, let alone of natural reality.

Generative mechanisms

This brings us to transformative mechanisms. Elsewhere, in Archer (2003, 1–18), I expressed dissatisfaction – not with Bhaskar's (1989) original brief sketch of how 'the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency' (Bhaskar 1979, 25–6), which is surely correct (Figure 2 below) – but with his elaboration of this sketch with his model of structure and praxis, reproduced in Figure 3, below.

The following reasons are why it needs unpacking: -

- (1) It does not tell us anything about the mediatory process involved. That is, the word 'through' in Bhaskar's (1979, 25–6) sentence – 'the causal power of social forms is

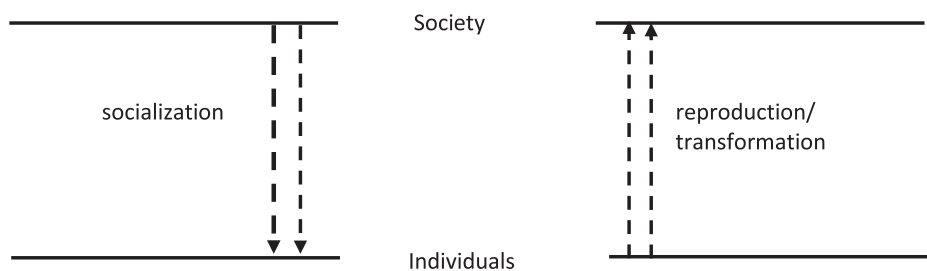
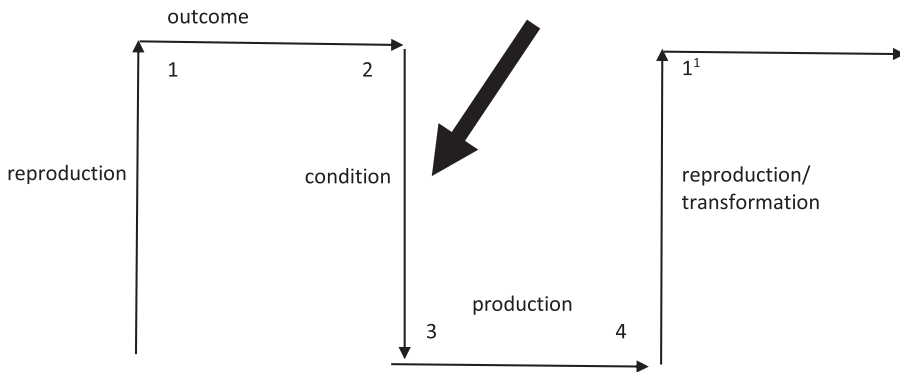


Figure 2. The transformational Model of Society Activity. (From Bhaskar 1989, 94)



Key: 1, 1¹ = unintended consequences; 2 = unacknowledged conditions; 3 = unacknowledged motivation; 4 = tacit skills

Figure 3. Structure and Praxis. (Adapted from Bhaskar 1989, 94; focus of my argument indicated by my addition of a central arrow)

mediated *through* social agency’ – requires unpacking before mediation is adequately conceptualized.

- (2) Generically, unpacking has consisted in replacing the word ‘through’ by the process of ‘social conditioning’ (or ‘constraint’ and ‘enablement’); which I indicate with an arrow in Figure 3.
- (3) First, this involves a specification of how structural and cultural powers impinge upon agents, and second, how agents use their own personal powers to act ‘so rather than otherwise’ in such situations. ‘Conditioning’ is a process that involves both objective impingement and subjective reception.
- (4) For anything to exert a ‘conditioning’ influence, it must stand in a relationship such that it obstructs or aids some specific agential enterprise (that I termed ‘projects’).
- (5) Thus, constraints and enablements have the generative power to impede or facilitate projects from groups of agents differentially placed. Such properties and powers are what shape agential contexts and therefore *must precede any cohort of agents*. The activation of their causal powers is contingent upon agents who conceive of and pursue projects on which they would impinge. Otherwise, such conditioning remains unexercised.
- (6) This is where reflexivity comes in as the real mediatory mechanism; those mental abilities possessed by all normal people to reflect upon themselves in relation to their social circumstances and vice versa.

Without the diversity of modes of reflexivity practised by agents because of their different concerns, we are left first, with power conflict alone, and second, with the *theorists’ own designation* of the moral ends that should be sought through social transformation, not those of the agents. The fact that most of these normative goals are almost an orthodoxy among social theorists (my own too) should not blunt our critical edge for they are neither universal nor helpful in explaining what I have termed a ‘relationally contested society’ (Archer 2013b) or in explaining the alignment of the contesting parties. For example, car manufacturers globally are no longer ‘natural allies’ of the

climate change deniers because in anticipation or response to the Paris Agreement they have already shifted their design and production to electric vehicles.

Even if we accept their 'explanatory critiques' we are left with power conflict alone to shape the successor to the Late Modern social formation. In fact, I will argue more puntingly that neither of our theorists has furnished us with a Generative Mechanism for transition. Undoubtedly both Bhaskar and Wright are 'power theorists', but how do their two versions feed into the realization of Concrete Utopias?

Bhaskar made a distinction between Power₁ and Power₂. Power₁ entails the agential causal powers whose full exercise would entail the possibility of human emancipation; it includes agents' ability, through their use of judgemental rationality, to reach agreement on practices which would realize emancipation through social transformation. Power₂ refers to exploitative domination, conceptualized most generally as variants on the structuring of 'master-slave relationships'. His naturalistic ontology of ethics, which frees him from personal normative imposition, in conjunction with his insistence on those absences that are responsible for social evils, together form the nub of his transformative solution. This consists in the realizable reality of absence that provides for the possibility of a mutual freedom, where freedom is not the removal of determinations (an impossibility) but the practice of creating wanted determinations. I have no space to go further into this issue except to say that Bhaskar's argument in the *Dialectic* against ontological monovalence – absences are real too, like presences – discharges him from being a 'mere' power theorist and establishes the connection between power and his Concrete Utopia. Nevertheless, it tells us little about the struggles involved in attaining Concrete Utopia within a 'relationally contested society'. Probably, this is another instance where the 'philosophical underlabourer' cedes spadework to the social scientists.

In that case, Wright might be hoped to undertake it. As he states at the start: 'I propose a power-centred framework ... anchored in the idea of 'real utopias'. At its core, this proposal revolves around transforming power relations within the economy in ways that deepen and broaden the possibility of meaningful democracy' (Wright 2013, 2).¹³ Later, he proffers 'A general framework for the analysis of real utopian alternatives to capitalism'. He states that

At the centre of analysis is a power centred framework for understanding capitalism and its alternatives ... I adopt a deliberately striped-down concept of power: power is the capacity to do things in the world, to produce effects. This might be called an "agent-centred" notion of power: people, acting individually and collectively, use power to accomplish things. (Wright 2013, 2)

Already, this outline is a long way from Bhaskar's definition of a Generative Mechanism as 'nothing other than a way of acting of a thing' (Bhaskar 2008 [1975], 42), which provides the real basis of causal laws, above, beyond and regardless of outcomes at the level of events – and involves more than activity-dependence alone, but also contextual and conceptual dependence. Instead, for Wright (2013, 20),

the problem of transformation requires strategies of transformation [that] have long-term prospects for eroding capitalist power relations and building up socialist alternatives ... The central theoretical idea is that building alternatives on the ground on whatever spaces are possible both serves an ideological function by showing that alternative ways of working and living are possible, and potentially erodes constraints on the spaces themselves.

This is a much more gentle formula than my ‘relationally contested interpretation’ and is more like persuasion. It introduces his gradualism as the approach to ‘real utopias’. Of course, he can reply that gradualism is a Generative Mechanism – but it remains actualist.

Moreover, it is not persuasive for two reasons. On the one hand, initiatives in the voluntary sector may be colonized by the powerful (Power₂), as in the case of food banks to reduce the State’s outlay on the hungry during austerity measures, whilst simultaneously derogating their users as work-shy. On the other hand, the plethora of charitable initiatives have difficulties in presenting a united oppositional front because the most powerful and successful succumb to the logic of Competition and its common practices: advertising their lower overhead costs as a performance indicator, gaining celebrity endorsement and employing professional lobbyists against smaller charities. If this is a power struggle, then it becomes mimetic of corporate struggles against their competitors, rather than heralding any real utopia.

Obtrusive actualism

Wright’s approach to establishing ‘real utopias’ could be termed *more realistic than realist*. He begins by distinguishing three different kinds of power characteristic of currently existing economic systems because all of them are hybrids ‘varying according to how these different forms of power interact’ (Wright 2013, 12), which includes capitalism and its varieties, up to and including the global economy. These forms of power are economic *power*, based on control of economic resources; *state power*, grounded in controlling rule making and enforcement, and *social power*, ‘rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, voluntary collective actions’ (Wright 2013, 12). What he seeks is do is to ‘deepen the socialist component of the hybrid and weaken the capitalist and statist components’ (Wright 2013, 12). What follows are seven schematic but actualist permutations on the varying strengths of these factors, in isolation from interconnections with other social institutions, shorn of their histories and separated from the rest of the world. In other words, the seven represent abstracted forms of actualism.

From there, ‘the problem of transformation requires understanding how the *strategies* of transformation have long-term prospects for eroding capitalist power relations and building up socialist alternatives’ (Wright 2013, 20). However, if these strategies are ‘agent-centred’, such aims cannot simply be imputed to them by the theorist. This was precisely the imposition that reflexivity theory repudiated as unwarranted (Archer 2007), because agential concerns may be wildly divergent from those of the investigator and of one another (those running homes for lost dogs are unlikely to be homogeneous with workers in a cooperative). If this is a *strategy* then it requires a corporate agent(s) to articulate its aims and to organize for their attainment – as best they can. The existence alone of a voluntary, third or social-private sector is an actualist phenomenon which has been nominally grouped together, without its members acting collectively and without anything to justify sliding from calling it ‘social’ (much less pro-social) into warranting it being ‘socialist’.

Wright admits that many leftist activists do not regard locally-oriented or community-based ventures as a challenge because there is nothing ineluctable about them coming to confront political power. Nevertheless, what he terms their ‘interstitial strategy’ may gain ground at the expense of the other two strategic modes he outlines. ‘Interstitial strategies

to create real utopias involve showing that another world is possible by building in the spaces available, and then pushing against the state and public policy to expand those spaces' (Wright 2013, 22). But, actualists cannot be dreamers.

The State and public policy push back, most importantly I have argued through the increasing gamut of 'anormative (or bureaucratic) regulation' (Archer, 2016b). These require no-one's moral endorsement but impose fines and penalties upon anything from how many people are standing on a bus to the sale of forked carrots. No criminal record is accrued for their infringement and no social sanction is acquired, but they are, on the whole, obeyed because agents become rational choice theorists weighing the value of a contravention to them rather than grudging obedience. Now move this away from the ridiculous (the rites surrounding putting out refuse in the UK) and consider 'planning permission', 'right to change usage of a building or public area', 'health and safety regulations' pertaining to private Care Homes, Childcare and on and on. Actually, it transpires that there are not many 'spaces available' at all and 'public policy' is busy contracting them rather than allowing them to expand.

Isn't this just what one would expect in a 'relationally contested society'? Isn't it also what one would expect from a highly Morphogenetic Society where the law cannot run fast enough to keep up with new social practices and novel openings and opportunities are daily happenings, invested in, monopolized by devices such as intellectual property rights, sold on the stock exchanges as dot.com 'futures', and going viral via our kids' mobile phones. This does not mean that – as morphogenesis increases in intensity, and morphostasis declines – the Social Order becomes out of control, as suggested by Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994).

The trouble with the actual is that actually it is now more and more ephemeral given intensified morphogenesis, so 'real utopias' extrapolated from it have become past-tense whilst they are still talked about in the future tense.

Notes

1. 'Reflexivity is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' (Archer 2007, 4). This definition of reflexivity is common to all my work.
2. See Chapter 1 of *Structure, Culture and the Internal Conversation* (Archer 2003).
3. 'Corporate Agents' are collectivities who have articulated their aims and organized to seek their accomplishments (Archer 1995, Chapter 8).
4. A point first made by Stefano Zamagni who goes on to say that the common good is more akin to a multiplication sum. If one entry is zero, so is the total (Zamagni 2011, 322–3.).
5. This did not involve using the morphogenetic/morphostatic (M/M) approach as an explanatory approach, since the M/M does not explain anything, just as a realist social ontology does not explain anything (see Porpora 2013, 26). The shift to discussing the morphogenic society was a move to theorizing the possible advent of a social configuration that might displace that of Late Modernity.
6. In brief, contra Rosa, there seem to be four intractable problems attaching to any empirical estimation of the rapidity of social change. First, what is included is *necessarily incomplete* because certain changes will have occurred without yet producing their full manifestations, especially given the lack of proportionality between cause and effect. In other words, that legendary butterfly may just have flapped its wings in Tokyo. That is the ontological problem. Epistemologically we may also be incapable of knowing it. Second, what we do know more or less correctly about recent social change will be a series of *incommensurables*,

literally a list without common measure, preventing any comparison or weighting of the items listed. For example, in Europe, proportionately more people came on-line and less of them got married in the last quarter of century. However, we can neither say that these two changes make equally important contributions to change in general, nor can we assert the opposite. Third, change often involves *displacement*. As the sale of machine-made knitted goods increased, those with the ability to knit has diminished. However, fourth, it cannot be concluded that a (hypothetical) *rate of displacement* would be a better measure of the rapidity of change. This is because we also know that ‘displacement’ is often artificial (planned obsolescence) and may involve no significant change at all (cosmetics).

7. The full array of Logics of Protection, Correction, Competition and Opportunity were first elaborated in my (1988) book *Culture and Agency*.
8. Which I do throughout the series but probably of most importance is its appearance on p.2 of the last volume (Archer 2017b, 2).
9. I am in full agreement with Sayer (2011, 125) that ‘our own flourishing comes to be dependent upon the flourishing of our commitments ... There is thus no clear distinction between our own flourishing and that of our commitments; they are fused’.
10. An argument first advanced by Dahrendorf (1994). See also Archer (2017b).
11. See Rosa (2003) and various critiques of his thesis in our Volume 2 of the Centre for Social Ontology series on morphogenesis (Archer 2014).
12. A similar slippage was the theme of Campbell’s (1998) excellent *Myth of Social Action*, where he traced how the broader Weberian concept of ‘action’ was sedulously truncated into ‘social action’ by later theorists.
13. Wright (2013, 2) goes on to admit ‘when concrete claims are made about the specific mechanisms that generate these harms’ they tend to be ‘very controversial’.

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