

Review of Andrew Sayer, *Realism & Social Science*, published in: *The Sociological Review* 49 (1) February, pp.149-152.

Realism and Social Science, Andrew Sayer, Sage Publications, London, 2000, £45.00, paper £15.99, 224pp.

Perhaps because they have not yet learnt to fudge the issue, students undertaking social science research typically face two moments of crisis: when they begin their empirical research and when they try to make sense of their data. Too often they find theories lend themselves neither to being operationalised nor to development through data analysis. The test of a conceptual framework is its ability to translate between the theoretical and the empirical, but this means of translation is often lacking. Worse, one finds this split recurring in areas to which one turns for guidance: philosophies of social science divorced from practical questions of research and methodological texts resembling menus where, as Bernstein puts it, 'the menu is abstracted from the kitchen' (2000: 132). Andrew Sayer makes a habit of listening to and engaging with such problems from the front-line: his *Method in Social Science* (1992) was an accessible and rigorous attempt to bridge this gap; and his recent book, *Realism and Social Science* (comprising five revised articles and three new chapters) further focuses on clearing away such obstacles to social science.

Here Sayer targets a series of recurrent dualisms (such as positivism / relativism, objectivism / idealism), argues that each option results from ontological fallacies with disabling consequences for research, and shows how critical realism offers an alternative to these false dichotomies which avoids their resultant problems. This notion of a third way also informs the form of the book. It aims to avoid both 'a sound-bite approach' (p.4) of deconstructing dualisms and 'cookbook prescriptions of method which allow one to imagine that one can do research by simply applying them without having a scholarly knowledge of the object in question' (p.19). For Sayer, many

research problems are founded on errors in their (often tacit) ontology. Getting hold of the difficulties deep down is what matters; they have to be pulled out by their roots, otherwise they resurface in new guises. This is where critical realism comes in: as an underlabourer and occasional midwife, to diagnose and resolve the roots of problems.

Sayer begins by tackling misconceptions of critical realism; indeed, the book could have been called *Realism Is Not What You Think It Is*. (One section asks ‘How wrong can one be about realism?’ (pp. 62-4); the answer is: very). After a brief but nicely illustrated introduction to critical realism, Sayer engages in chapters 2-4 with anti-realist positions. These three chapters are of the widest interest - essential reading for anyone concerned with social science - and, to my mind, the centrepiece of the book. Here Sayer engages with idealist positions which have come to dominate those social science disciplines closest to the humanities, but which realism has typically neglected. In a sympathetic but rigorous critique of (amongst others) standpoint theory, social constructionism, postmodernism, feminist accounts of ‘malestream’ science, and the discursive turn, he deftly analyses the basis and implications of their arguments and targets (of which they are typically an inversion) and argues for realism as a genuine alternative. Of particular value is his ability to unravel and clarify the terms of debate; Sayer has an ear for elisions, an eye for confusions and a facility for bringing things into sharper focus. (A distinction between three usages of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ is a masterly example of simplicity without being simplistic; pp. 58-62). Far from being intellectual gymnastics, such work is necessary and urgent; as Sayer puts it:

Charges of “totalizing discourses” or logocentrism sound rather impressive, if not intimidating, and it is especially important to go into the arguments behind them rather than merely parroting these terms. Otherwise academic debates may become debased to the point where, instead of engaging with the substantive accounts of others, one simply disqualifies them by accusing them of assuming some privileged standpoint or foundationalism. (p.79)

The emphasis on 'engaging with the substantive accounts of others' is crucial: Sayer consistently focuses on the question of the 'practical adequacy' of ideas - what they tell us about the world and whether this (fallibilistic) knowledge is (currently) better than competing ideas. Using this criterion, Sayer skilfully separates the insightful from the dogmatic and the considered from the pavlovian response, whether discussing intellectual positions (such as anti-essentialism, chapter 4) or weighing the significance of claims of neglect (such as of the issue of space, chapter 5).

Whilst the import of these chapters is clear, the book's third part - two chapters (5-6) addressing space and geohistorical narrative - would benefit from more explicit guidance as to the wider significance of the issues they address. For, on closer inspection, they provide excellent examples of the significance of ontology to evaluating claims for the importance of neglected issues and relations between description and explanation. Again, Sayer goes further than simply debunking 'all or nothing' dichotomies and claiming it's more complicated than that; rather, he analyses the conditions under which an approach or issue is necessary to the explanation of the phenomenon under consideration. This dedication to the practical adequacy of ideas rather than to a specific approach is perhaps most evident in the final part of the book - two chapters on normative social science - where he takes critical realism itself to task over its under-developed understanding of the relationship between facts and values and neglect of normative theory.

Sayer's book will disappoint anyone seeking a philosophical primer on realism or 'how to' book on realist research. However, by engaging throughout with ideas rather than specific authors, Sayer avoids intellectual name-checking and name-calling and offers an illuminating contribution to a philosophy of social science more focused on the utility of its ideas for social scientists than the accumulation of symbolic capital through metatheoretical discussion. To this end, though, it is a shame that he chose not to include his own substantive work and I hope future editions might consider such

expansion. (Saying this, I am currently writing up theoretical and empirical research, and the copious notes I made for myself whilst reviewing the book are testament to its utility). My main concern is whether such a text will be embraced by those who most require it. As research degrees become more a driving licence than a licence to explore and research assessment reduces opportunity and inclination to address fundamental problems of research, the easy solutions offered by methodological cookbooks and name-checking primers become evermore tempting. Moreover, realist research takes time and effort. It is to Sayer's credit that his text shows such 'solutions' to be facile and ultimately less rewarding than a rigorous engagement with both theory and practice in the pursuit of a better understanding of the world.

References

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