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Ontology in Organization and Management Studies: A Critical Realist Perspective

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Abstract. *Organization studies has recently been captured by a cultural, linguistic, poststructural or postmodern turn, the impetus for which has come from the ontological turn from a (naive) realist ontology to a socially constructed ontology. Much of the current ontological discussion is, however, characterized by* ambiguity*, which makes it difficult to get to the bottom of ontological claims and, of course, to locate the source of any ontological errors. This paper uses a critical realist perspective to highlight the ambiguity and error encouraged by postmodernism's commitment to a socially constructed ontology. Critical realism's ontology is offered as a more fruitful alternative. Labour process theory, specifically* agency and structure*, is used to demonstrate (i) that critical realism is not damaged by many common postmodern criticisms of agency and structure, and (ii) that, once interpreted through the prism of critical realism, there is no need to abandon this powerful analytical device.* ***Key words.*** *critical realism; epistemology; management studies; methodology; ontology; organization studies; postmodernism; poststructuralism*

The way we think the world is (ontology) influences: what we think can be known about it (epistemology); how we think it can be investigated (methodology and research techniques); the kinds of theories we think can be constructed about it; and the political and policy stances we are prepared to take. Although having the 'right' ontology does not guarantee that the ensuing meta-theory, theory and practice will also be 'right',

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having the 'wrong' ontology makes this virtually impossible—although we might be 'right' by accident. Similarly, having an unambiguous ontology does not guarantee that the ensuing meta-theory, theory and practice will also be unambiguous, but having an ambiguous ontology makes this much harder. In short, *ontology matters*.

Organization studies has recently been captured by what is variously described as a cultural, linguistic, poststructural or postmodern turn (Westwood and Clegg, 2003a), all of which I refer to simply using the term 'postmodern', whilst fully recognizing this is a gloss. Much of the impetus for this postmodern turn has come from the ontological turn from a (naive, unsophisticated, empirical) realist ontology to a socially constructed one. Although these turns have the merit of placing ontology on the intellectual radar screen, many people, especially *critical realists* (an entirely different species from those realists just mentioned), are concerned that current debate is mired in ontological *ambiguity*—i.e. lack of clarity, imprecision, conceptual slippage and confusion vis-à-vis matters ontological. Such ambiguity makes it difficult to identify *exactly* what ontological claims are made by postmodernists and to locate the source of any ontological errors. Ontological ambiguity and error have implications for organization theory, research and even policy—although these issues are not addressed here.[1]

This paper uses *critical realism* in an attempt to highlight the ambiguity and error and to offer a more fruitful alternative to the social constructionist ontology associated with postmodernism—and, incidentally, to the empirical realist ontology associated with positivism. I first clarify terminology and concepts central to critical realism,[2] which paves the way for a demonstration of, and elaboration upon, the ontological ambiguity and error found in postmodernism. I then use labour process theory, specifically *agency and structure*, to demonstrate that (i) critical realism is not damaged by many common postmodern criticisms of agency and structure, and (ii), once interpreted through the prism of critical realism, there is no need to abandon this powerful analytical device.

Ontological Commitments of Critical Realism

Accusing (most) postmodernists of ontological ambiguity does not mean I am capable of presenting critical realists' ontological commitments in completely unambiguous terms. But neither does it mean I should not try. My aim, then, is to make an opening move in the drive for ontological clarity.

Entities Existing Independently of Their Identification

Critical realists claim that an entity *can* (which does not mean it *does*) exist independently of our knowledge of it. I prefer the term 'identification' to the term 'knowledge' because it encompasses the latter and refers to a wider range of activities. Saying *an entity can exist independently of*

its identification implies that it can exist without someone observing, knowing and constructing it. The term also encompasses cases where actors are knowledgeable but their knowledge is *tacit*. They may know *how* to perform a particular work task, but they cannot explain how they do it. They know 'how' but they don't know 'that' (see Fleetwood, 1995: Ch. 7). When, for example, the rules of the workplace are known tacitly, it is misleading to write that 'rules exist independently of our knowledge of them' because, in a curious sense, they do not: they exist independently of *articulable* knowledge but not of *tacit* knowledge.

Concept Mediation

Unlike various forms of naive or empirical realism, *critical* realists accept that there is no (defensible) theory-neutral observation, description, interpretation, theorization, explanation or whatever. There is, in other words, *no unmediated* access to the world: access is always *mediated*. Whenever we reflect upon an entity (or a state of affairs), our sense data are always mediated by a pre-existing stock of conceptual resources (which often includes discursive resources), which we use to interpret, make sense of, understand what it is and take appropriate action. This stock is both individual (e.g. a subjective belief or opinion) and social or inter-subjective (e.g. an accepted theory, perspective or social norm). When they become the focus of human beings' reflection, then, entities may be said to be *conceptually mediated*,[3] although this will have to be clarified below.

Modes of Reality

For critical realists, an entity is said to be real if it *has causal efficacy*; *has an effect on behaviour*; *makes a difference.* Confusion often stems from (mis)treating *real* entities synonymously with *material* entities; and/or from (mis)treating non-material entities synonymously with non-real entities. God may or may not be real, but the *idea* of God is as real as mount Everest, because the *idea* of God makes a difference to people's actions.[4]

Although many things are real, they are real in different ways or *modes*. Confusion often arises from not recognizing, or not specifying, these different modes. It is possible to identify (at least) four modes of reality, or four different ways in which entities may be differentiated: material, ideal, artefactual and social.[5] Entities can straddle two modes. Entities are, typically, always undergoing evolution and change (are becoming) and this can result in entities shifting between modes. Much depends, of course, on context, and my categorization is intended to clarify the analysis, not to place entities in inappropriate ontological straightjackets.

Materially Real The term 'materially real' refers to material entities such as oceans, the weather, the moon and mountains, which can exist independently of what individuals or communities do, say or think.

Clearly, in some cases materially real entities are affected by our actions, hence my recognition of 'straddling' mentioned above (see Schmidt, 2001). Weather systems may be affected by our inappropriate burning of hydrocarbons and the surface of the moon was affected by our landing upon it, but these acts are contingent: materially real entities would continue to exist even if humans disappeared. In some cases, it might be more appropriate to classify what seem, at first blush, to be materially real entities as artefacts—e.g. a quarry. Much will depend upon the context, but the category 'materially real' allows us to handle entities that do exist independently of what we do, say or think. Although materially real entities *can* exist independently of our identification of them, sometimes we *do* identify them, whereupon we may refer to them as *conceptually mediated*. Note, however, that the act of mediation does not alter their material status: they become *conceptually mediated material entities*.

Ideally Real The term 'ideally real' refers to conceptual entities such as discourse, language, genres, tropes, styles, signs, symbols and semiotized entities, ideas, beliefs, meanings, understandings, explanations, opinions, concepts, representations, models, theories and so on. For brevity, I refer to entities such as these as *discourse* or *discursive entities*. Discourse or discursive entities are real because, as noted above, they *have causal efficacy*. Ideally real entities may or may not have a referent, and the referent may be ideally or *non*-ideally real. Discourses about the management of knowledge have, as their referents, ideal entities such as knowledge and non-ideal entities such as people. Discourses about women being less intelligent than men have no referent at all. It is worth emphasizing here that having no referent does not mean discourses have no cause.[6]

Although critical realists claim there is more to the world than discourse, this should not be taken to suggest that they think discourse is irrelevant; far from it. Reed (2000: 529), for example, notes that discourses such as financial audit, quality control and risk management are 'generative mechanisms' with 'performative potential'. Consider the example of skill and gender. In some cases, female workers possess skills similar to those possessed by (comparable) male workers. Not only does sexist discourse draw our attention to 'women's skills', it draws our attention to them in ways that present them as being of a lower skill level. And of course, once these skills are discursively downgraded, discrimination in the labour market and the workplace often follows. Many would say that these downgraded skills are *socially constructed*, and I would agree. I refrain from using this phraseology, however, because it carries too much unwanted baggage. Working alongside this discourse, however, are extra-discursive factors that also cause discrimination. Many female workers simply do not possess skills similar to those of male workers. There are various reasons for this, such as women's

restricted access to jobs where skill attainment is possible. This is often caused by intermittent labour market activity, which is, in turn, caused by the requirements of child and/or dependant care. In this case, the lower skill level is not caused by sexist discourse but by extra-discursive, socially real factors.

Artefactually Real The term 'artefactually real' refers to entities such as cosmetics and computers. Computers are a synthesis of the physically, ideally and socially real. Because entities are *conceptually mediated*, we interpret them in various, and often diverse, ways. Violins may be interpreted as musical instruments or as table tennis bats. But, unless we are prepared to accept that any interpretation (and, therefore, subsequent action) is as good as another, that interpreting a violin as a table tennis bat is as good as interpreting it is a musical instrument, then we have to accept that there are limits to interpretation. And these limits are often established by the materiality of the entity itself. Although critical realism is, in this and similar contexts, materialist, the recognition that material entities are *concept mediated* guards against any vulgar materialism.

Socially Real The term 'socially real' refers to practices, states of affairs or entities for short, such as caring for children, becoming unemployed, the market mechanism, or social structures in general, especially the social structures that constitute organizations. Critical realists use the term 'social structures' as a portmanteau term to refer to configurations of causal mechanisms, rules, resources, relations, powers, positions and practices (see Fleetwood, 1995). Socially real entities have the following properties:

- Like ideally real entities, they contain not one iota of materiality, physicality, solidity or whatever. We cannot touch a social entity.
- Entities are *social* because they are dependent on *human activity* for their existence.
- Being dependent upon human activity does not mean they do not exist independently of our identification.
- They may or may not be conceptually mediated—it depends on the kind of social entity it is.
- Socially real entities should not be conflated with ideally real entities such as theories or explanations *of* them.[7] Processes such as theorization and explanation do not transform socially real entities from extra-discursive to discursive (ideally real) entities. Socially real entities retain their extra-discursivity, but now, *alongside* the socially real entity, we have a concept and a word with which to discuss it—although the concept and the word are, of course, conceptually mediated.

Since organization theorists are (primarily) interested in socially real phenomena, let us take some time and elaborate upon socially

real entities. To say socially real entities are dependent upon human activity tells us nothing about which humans are involved, which humans are not involved, when they are involved, or what kind of human activity is involved. We know identification is involved, but what else? Are all of us, all of the time (past present and future), always involved in the reproduction and transformation of social entities? We only have to ask the question to see it is a mistake—in fact it is the very same mistake that arises from ambiguous claims such as 'the world is socially constructed', and this is one of the reasons I do not use this phraseology.

The following sections take classes of socially real entities (of interest to organization theorists) and classes of activities and ask more precise questions about the human involvement in their reproduction and transformation.

Which Activities Are Involved?

Class structures, patriarchal structures and tacit rules of the workplace *do not* require the activity of identification (i.e. observing, knowing and constructing) in order to be reproduced and transformed. We do not, for example, have to identify the constraints (or enablements) that gender places upon us, or others, in order for those constraints to be operational. Class structures, patriarchal structures and tacit rules of the workplace *do*, however, require other forms of activity in order to be reproduced and transformed. The reproduction and transformation of class structures, for example, require that owners of (only) labour power engage in the hiring out of their (quasi) commodity.

Explicit rules of the workplace and laws (i.e. legislation), in contrast, *do* require the activity of identification in order to be reproduced or transformed because individuals have to recognize them and choose to be constrained (and enabled) by them. Explicit rules of the workplace and laws also require other forms of activity such as clocking on and carrying out duties earmarked in individuals' employment contracts in order to be reproduced and transformed.

To say, where it is appropriate to do so, that entities (not only can, but do) exist independently of our identification of them does not mean they exist independently of human activity. It merely means that they are not dependent upon the specific activities involved with identification.

Which Humans Are Involved?

The term 'our' in the phrase 'entities exist independently of *our* identification' often leads to confusion because we fail to differentiate between 'us' as social analysts and 'us' as those we study, that is, human actors (see Lewis, 2000: 261).

- An entity may exist independently of its identification by social analysts *and* actors. We (i.e. *all* human beings) may not have dis-

covered it. Institutional racism has only recently been discovered, but clearly it existed prior to its discovery.

- An entity may exist independently of its identification by social analysts, but *not* independently of actors. Actors may have known about institutional racism for many years before social analysts discovered it.
- An entity may exist independently of its identification by actor A but *not* by actors B, C, . . . Z. Actor A may have just started a new job and be unfamiliar with the *explicit* rules of the workplace, but her workmates are obviously familiar with them.
- An entity may exist independently of its identification by all actors but *not* by social analysts whose research aims precisely to tease these things out. Tacit rules of the workplace are drawn upon in order that action takes place, but the actors involved do not identify these rules.

To recognize that certain entities are activity dependent does not imply that *all* humans are involved in their reproduction or transformation.

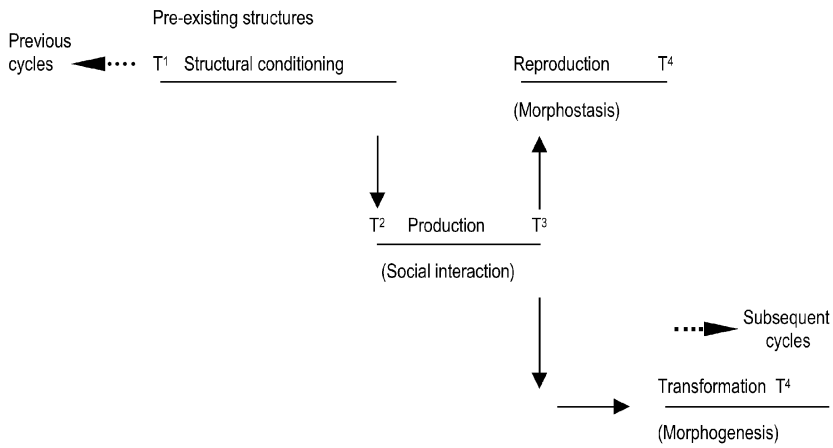
The foregoing implies that the reproduction and transformation of the social world require agents to have some idea about what they are doing, some conception of the activities they are engaged in. This does not, however, mean agents have to have the *correct* conception, or *complete* knowledge, of what they are doing and why they are doing it. It merely means agents have some idea of what they are doing and why they are doing it: agents are purposive. In this sense, to say that some social entities can exist 'behind our backs' does not involve reification of these entities. Working-class women do not have to know they are discriminated against in class and patriarchal systems in order for such discrimination to occur. In fact, they could be discriminated against while explicitly denying the existence of such systems.[8]

At What Temporal Location Are These Activities Involved?

Although some, but not all, humans and some, but not all, activities are involved in the reproduction and transformation of social entities, we need to consider the temporal locations where moments of agency occur. Archer is keen to stress temporality in her own morphogenetic approach and Bhaskar's transformational approach. Although Archer's sophisticated insights cannot be expanded upon here, I will comment upon a version of the diagram (Figure 1) taken from Archer (1998: 376).

Whatever happens, however agents and structures interact, it is important to be clear about one point: action is a continuous, cyclical, flow over time: there are no empty spaces where nothing happens, and things do not just begin and end. The starting point for an analysis of any cyclical phenomenon is always arbitrary: we have to break into the cycle at some point and impose an analytical starting point. The starting point here is some prior cycle. At T^1 pre-existing structures emerge from a prior cycle and act as pre-existing structures that govern subsequent social interaction. At T^2 agents find themselves interacting with these (to them) pre-

Figure 1. Based on Archer's Superimposition of the Transformational Model of Social Action and the Morphogenetic/Static Cycle (Archer, 1998: 376).



existing structures and a process of production is initiated where these agents do whatever it is they can do given the nature of these pre-existing structures—i.e. they are constrained and enabled by them. Between T^2 and T^3 the pre-existing structures undergo change, which is completed by T^4 where structures are reproduced (i.e. morphostasis occurs) or transformed (i.e. morphogenesis occurs). After T^4 a new cycle starts.[9]

Human activity, then, is clearly necessary for this cycle to take place. It does not follow, however, that the only human activity necessary for reproduction is that taking place between T^2 and T^3. In fact, central to Archer's approach is August Comte's insight that the majority of actors are dead. The past actions of humans interacting with past social structures generated phenomena such as the distribution of income, depletion of the ozone layer, libraries full of books, and business organizations. These phenomena pre-date any subsequent human activity and exert a causal influence upon subsequent human activity.[10] Although Archer refers to this as 'structural conditioning', it is distinct from structuralism, where the agent is a cultural dope.

In sum then, although socially real entities are activity dependent, enquiring precisely into who does and who does not do what, when and how allows us to see exactly which humans and what kinds of activity are, and are not, involved in the reproduction or transformation of these entities.[11] This discourages us from overplaying one particular (and relatively ambiguous) activity, namely the activity of socially *constructing* entities. To say 'entities are socially constructed' (or some variant) is insufficiently nuanced because it does not differentiate between practical and discursive activities; it often fails to establish who is doing the constructing; and it is incorrect for a range of entities that are reproduced

and transformed by agents who often have incorrect, incomplete and, in some cases, no idea of the social entities they necessarily interact with.

Ontological Commitments of Postmodernism

My reading of the literature leads me to conclude that, when the ontological commitments of postmodernism are stated unambiguously, they are mistaken. More often than not, however, I find them stated ambiguously. The following sections try to provide evidence to support these fairly stringent criticisms.

Mistaken Ontological Commitments of Postmodernism

The following series of quotations is selected because they reflect not only 'the idea that reality, as we know it, is socially constructed', but also that this idea 'has become a commonly accepted claim' (Chia, 2003: 111).

> Social constructionist . . . writings . . . invite alternative formulations, the creation of new and different realities. . . [L]anguage for the postmodernist is not a reflection of a world, but is world constituting. (Gergen and Thatchenkary, 1998: 24)
>
> [P]ostmodernism . . . emphasized the centrality of discourse—textuality—where the constitutive powers of language are emphasised and 'natural' objects are viewed as discursively produced. (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999: 199)
>
> [Postmodernists] start with Saussure's demonstration that the point of view creates the object. (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999: 199)
>
> [S]ensemaking . . . becomes a process that creates objects for sensing or the structures of structuration. (Weick, 1995: 36)
>
> For postmodernists, it is the explanation itself that creates order, gives structure to experience. *Structure is the meaning given to experience*. Structure is immanent in the subject not in the object, in the observer not the observed . . . Poststructuralists conclude that there are no real structures that give order to human affairs, but that the construction of order—of sense making—by people is what gives rise to structure. *Structure is the explanation itself*, that which *makes* sense, not that which *gives* sense. It follows from this that structure cannot be seen as determining action because it is not real and transcendent, but a product of the human mind. (Jackson and Carter, 2000: 41 and 43, emphasis in original)
>
> Organization is a structure, but only when structure is recognized to be an effect of language. (Westwood and Linstead, 2001: 5)
>
> Taken-for-granted social objects of analysis like 'the organization,' the 'economy,' 'the market,' . . . or even the 'weather,' are part of our discursively shaped understandings that derive from a particular set of ontological commitments. They are not natural phenomena existing in the realm of the real. Instead they are a product of our own unconscious 'will to order'. Order and organization, therefore, do not exist *a priori* to human intervention. . .

> The idea that reality, as we know it, is socially constructed has become a commonly accepted claim. What is less commonly understood is how this reality gets constructed and from what it is constructed out of in the first place, and what sustains it. . . [W]hat remains absolute is the immediacy of our unthought lived experience. Our prethought life world is an undifferentiated flux of fleeting sense impressions, and it is through these acts of differentiating, fixing, naming, labelling, classifying, and relating—all intrinsic processes of organization—that social reality is systematically constructed, sustained and modified. (Chia, 2003: 111)

> It is . . . inappropriate to think of 'organizational discourse' . . . as discourse *about* some pre-existing thing-like social object called 'the organization'. To do so is to commit the . . . Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, whereby our socially constructed conceptions of reality are unreflexively mistaken for reality itself. (Chia, 2000: 514)

Comments such as these at worst encourage, and at best fail to discourage, the ontological claim that discourse, language or some other conceptual or cognitive activity, quite literally, constructs, creates, makes, produces, generates or constitutes entities. And, like it or not, the verb 'construct' has all these connotations. To suggest that discourse, language or some other conceptual or cognitive activity creates (or whatever verb is implied) socially real entities such as organizational structures is to engage in what I call *ontological exaggeration*. Simply put, social constructionism exaggerates the consequences of activities such as speaking and thinking to the point where it is hard not to define this as an example of subjective idealism.

Before we leave this section, I want to deal with a common objection, namely that postmodernists are simply being metaphoric, and critical realists are either fools or knaves to interpret them literally. There are two responses (see also the section below on retrospection). First, some of the postmodernists I cited above are most certainly not being metaphoric. Second, many postmodernists use metaphor as a rhetorical device to distance themselves from the empirical (naive) realist ontology associated with positivism. In this case, although I am sympathetic to this endeavour, I urge them (a) to make it absolutely clear that they are using metaphor (or any other linguistic device) and (b) to avoid inadvertently slipping into ontological exaggerations of the kind cited above.

Ambiguous Ontological Commitments of Postmodernism

Claiming that the language of postmodernism tends to be ontologically ambiguous could lead us off into a discussion of structuralism and poststructuralism of Saussure and Derrida. This, I suspect, is where the likes of Chia (2000: 517; 2003: 105) and Westwood and Clegg (2003b: 9) come from in treating the demand for unambiguous and accurate language as a demand from those who have not grasped the significance of the linguistic turn in Western thought. What I mean by ontologically ambiguous language is, however, far more mundane. My thoughts are more in line with Alvesson and Skoldberg (2001: 183), who refer to the

'excessive rhetoric and insubstantial phrase mongering among the post-modernists'. Let me be clear. *Critical* realists accept fully that linguistic terms have no one-to-one relationship with observed phenomena; that language is not transparent; and that language is not a medium that allows us accurately to represent our perceived reality linguistically. Yet accepting this does not mean we should abandon attempts to write with (an appropriate degree of) clarity and accuracy. In short, invoking the linguistic turn should not be used as an excuse to write ambiguously.

Be that as it may, my criticism is not actually with linguistic style, but with a deeper ontological confusion than manifests itself as ambiguous exposition. Put simply, if we have inconsistent ontological commitments, we are likely, sooner or later, to make inconsistent ontological statements. The following sections take several ambiguous comments and interpret them as manifestations of inconsistent ontological commitments.

Conflating Terminology Related to 'Making' with That Related to 'Conceptualizing' It is common to come across terminology implying that entities are in some sense *conceptualized* via our cognitive activities (which is acceptable to critical realists) sitting alongside terminology implying that entities are in some sense *made* via our cognitive activities (which is not acceptable), except for the case of ideally real entities.[12] Table 1 is compiled from various comments by Weick (1995: Chs 1 and 2) to illustrate the ways in which terms can be (mis)used alongside one another as if they were synonymous.[13] Slipping between the activities of 'making' (etc.) and 'conceptualizing' (etc.) an entity as if the two activities were synonymous is either careless or a manifestation of ontological inconsistency.

Ontological Oscillation To be fair, Weick (1995: 34–5) does attempt to defend this 'ontological oscillation' as follows. Because lay persons oscillate ontologically, social analysts who seek to understand lay persons' actions will, inevitably, reproduce this oscillation in their work. Newcomers to a situation, for example, are:

> at first flooded with surprises, then they start as interpretivists. And hermeneutics helps the newcomer gloss the unexpected. But it isn't long until opposing interest groups make a play for the loyalties of newcomers, in which case those newcomers act more like radical structuralists whose actions are best understood using conflict theory, and later on functional

Table 1.

The world is 'made'	The world is 'conceptualized'
Phenomena are: created, constructed, generated, invented, take form, called to life, or produced by our conceptual activities	Phenomena are: made sense of, interpreted, comprehended, justified, filtered, framed, or called to attention by our conceptual activities

> theories such as social system theory becomes more useful. (Weick, 1995: 35)

Although there are several reasons to question this defence, the most pressing one is that, in shifting the focus from social analysts to lay persons, the problem facing social analysts gets lost. The real objection to ontological oscillation is not that it is practised by lay persons, *but that it is practised by social analysts*. The real objection is to social analysts who attempt to make simultaneous claim to the effect that (non empty) extra-discursive entities *do* and *do not* exist. If in one situation a lay person presupposes that the moon is made of green cheese and in another situation presupposes that it is made of rock, he is simply being inconsistent—although, clearly, this inconsistency may be something for the social analyst to investigate. If the social analyst studying this lay person reproduces these ontological presuppositions *in ways that suggest the analyst accepts them both*, then she simply reproduces the lay person's inconsistency and, thereby, renders her own work inconsistent.[14]

Lay persons may oscillate ontologically, but they may do so for two reasons and it is important to differentiate between them.

1 Lay persons interact with a range of materially, artefactually, ideally and socially real entities. With each interaction, they adopt an ontological position appropriate to that mode of reality.[15] Assuming they adopt the appropriate mode, then ontological oscillation would, in this case, result from lay persons being consistent. When social analysts reflect lay persons' oscillation in their own work, the analysts' reflections are legitimate because they are consistent—although analysts may wish to differentiate between claims held by lay persons and claims held by themselves or other social analysts.
2 Lay persons can, of course, be mistaken. If on one occasion a lay person mistakenly identifies an ideally real entity for a materially real entity, then he has committed the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (Chia, 2000: 514). If, on another occasion, the same person identifies an ideally real entity correctly, then he is not mistaken. This form of ontological oscillation results from lay persons sometimes being right and sometimes wrong. When social analysts reflect lay persons' oscillation in their own work, their reflections are illegitimate because they are inconsistent.

Social analysts should not (simply) reproduce lay persons' mistakes and inconsistencies, but should identify and report on them and, where appropriate, comment on the causes and consequences (for lay persons) of these mistakes and inconsistencies—lay persons may, of course, act on mistakes. Moreover, analysts should not reproduce other analysts' mistakes and inconsistencies, but should identify and report on them and, where appropriate, comment on the causes and consequences (for theory and policy) of these mistakes and inconsistencies. This is no more than

Chia does when criticizing analysts for committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. We must, then, consider the possibility that ontological oscillation is no more than ontological inconsistency dressed up as something more elegant.

Retrospection Weick's use of retrospection is an example of ontological exaggeration. Critical realists have no trouble accepting the proposition that in the present we create consistent and meaningful statements, then retrospectively we treat these statements *as if* that is what happened in the past. Weick's lack of ontological consistency, however, leads him into exaggeration. The 'as if' gets lost as he slips from the claim that we make sense of the past via the prism of the present, to the claim that the past is *created* via the prism of the present. He uses Garfinkel's well-known example of jurors. It is quite plausible that jurors construct an interpretation that is consistent and meaningful to them, and then retrospectively treat this interpretation *as if* that is what happened in the past. It is, however, not plausible to say that 'if the interpretation makes good sense, then that's what happened' (Garfinkel, cited in Weick, 1995: 10). The verdict, clearly, did not make the crime happen; it is an interpretation of what happened. Retrospective interpretations matter, sometimes greatly, but they do not have the power to 'reach back' into the past, as it were, and cause past things to happen. Put like this, Weick's claim about retrospection is easily seen for what it is: an example of ontological exaggeration.

It might be possible that some of this is metaphoric, but it is not easy to tell, because Weick insists on adding comments and quotations that suggest otherwise. According to Starbuck and Nystrom, '[organizational] structure is itself "an artefact of postdiction, observation and explanation"'. This is clear, but it is mistaken for the same reasons as Garfinkel's claim about jurors is mistaken. According to Pirsig, '[a]ny intellectually conceived object is always in the past and therefore unreal. Reality is always the moment of vision before intellectualization takes place. There is no other reality' (both cited in Weick, 1995: 24). Rather than dissect these statements to show what is wrong with them, I simply ask the reader to consider the possibility that where they are not ambiguous they are ontologically exaggerated.

Empty Realism Many postmodernists follow Laclau and Mouffe (1987) in accepting the existence of an extra-discursive realm of 'existence' where entities that 'exist' (existents) are located. This is distinct from a realm of 'being', which is where existents are transferred to (or transformed into) the moment they are brought within a discourse—i.e. 'beings'. 'Outside of any discursive context objects do not have being; they have only existence' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 99). We cannot say anything about existence except that there are existents. The moment we try to discuss the characteristics of existents, they become discursive entities, they are transformed into beings and we are no longer discussing entities.[16] An

analogy might be the impossibility of Midas ever touching a non-gold or an extra-gold entity.

The analogy of Midas is a useful way to see the point, but it is also a useful way to see what is wrong with this manoeuvre. Just as any entity that Midas has not touched remains an extra-gold entity, any entity that is not expressed discursively remains an extra-discursive entity or existent. Furthermore, even when an extra-discursive entity is expressed discursively, it is not 'transformed' (*pace* Burr, 1998: 19), because this implies a change of state from existent to being—from material, artefactual or social to ideal. Rather, the existent remains an extra-discursive entity, but now, *alongside it*, we also have a term with which to discuss it. If Laclau and Mouffe accept that existents remain, then they have to put 'a bit of what they call being back into what they call existence', as Geras (1988: 55) puts it. It is problematic to claim that *x* exists, while simultaneously claiming to know nothing about *x*. To know *x* exists is already to know something about it.

Being a realist about a realm that is 'empty' and about which we can say absolutely nothing can accurately be described as *empty* realism or even 'fig leaf realism' (Kukla, 2000: 5). This explains my decision to attribute to social constructionism an ontology consisting of no (*non-empty*) extra-discursive entities. Unfortunately, however, empty realism is mistaken and impoverished because the extra-discursive realm is, typically, not non-empty: it contains material, artefactual and socially real entities.

Confusing Entities and Discourse/Language Du Gay identifies two approaches to the relationship between language and entities: a traditional approach; and an approach rooted in the cultural or linguistic turn, which I will refer to as a postmodern approach. In the traditional approach, language is subordinate to the world of fact, whereas, in the postmodern approach, language 'is declared to bring facts into being and not simply to report on them'. The 'fact of a particular physical entity being identifiable as a "stone" depends on a way of classifying objects and making them meaningful' (du Gay, 1996: 42). Although arguments such as this are commonplace in postmodernist theory, I suggest they work only because of the ambiguity surrounding the term 'fact'. Disambiguation is, however, rather difficult and I apologize in advance for the rather formalistic exposition. To get a handle on my argument, keep an eye on the way the discussion slips from dealing with the relationship between language and *entities* to discussing the relationship between language and *facts/meanings*.

(a) 'Fact' might be used to refer to the *entity itself*. Thus we can say 'that X *is* a molecule is a fact'. X denotes molecule. To say that 'language brings facts into being' is like saying: 'language brings entities into being'; 'entities are subordinate to language'; 'language is the precondition of entities'; or some such.

(b) 'Fact' might be used to refer to the *classification* we apply, or the *meaning* we attribute, to an entity. Thus can we say 'that X is *classified* as a molecule is a fact'. X denotes classification. Here, facts *just are* linguistic entities. To say that 'language brings facts into being' is like saying: 'facts are subordinate to language'; or 'language is the precondition of facts'; or some such.

This, in turn, leaves us with three possibilities:

(1) In the traditional approach, language is subordinate to entities or entities are a precondition of language.
(2) In the postmodernist approach derived from (a) above, *entities* are subordinate to language or language is the precondition of entities.
(3) In the postmodernist approach derived from (b) above, *facts* are subordinate to language or language is the precondition of facts.

As a postmodernist, du Gay quite rightly wants to reject (1) on the grounds that it gets the direction of causality between language and entities the wrong way around. Rejecting and replacing (1) with (2) would do the trick, because (2) is the appropriate replacement for (1). But there is a snag. Accepting (2) is tantamount to claiming that language creates non-linguistic entities. To avoid this nonsense, du Gay substitutes (3) for (2), trying to use (3) as the appropriate replacement for (1). But (3) is not the appropriate replacement for (1). Although accepting (1) entails rejecting (2), accepting (1) does not entail rejecting (3): we can accept both (1) and (3). Du Gay's attempt to reject the traditional approach does not work, but, because the argument is ambiguous, this is not easily spotted. The actual outcome is the following:

- The postmodernist approach where language is the precondition of entities (2) is exposed as nonsense, and as such provides no grounds to reject (1).
- The traditional approach where entities are the precondition of language (1) remains un-rejected.[17]
- The postmodernist approach (3) where language is the precondition of facts is accepted. But critical realists accept this as well.

This argument slips, almost imperceptibly, from discussing the relationship between language and *entities* to discussing the relationship between language and *facts/meanings*, while not noticing, or at least not alerting the reader, that entities and facts/meanings about these entities are very different things.[18]

Gergen does something similar. He slips from discussing entities to discussing ideas ('presumptions') about entities. After writing that 'few are shocked to learn that terms such as "social structure" . . . are socially constructed, because most of us were never quite convinced that these words reflected real entities in the first place', he then reminds us that 'our *presumptions* about "atoms," "chemical elements," and the "earth as round" are socially constructed' (Gergen, 1999: 237, emphasis added). It

is not the socially constructed nature of *presumptions* that is in dispute but the socially constructed nature of social structures, atoms or chemical elements.

Transformation of the World into a World 'for Us' In the following case, investigation starts out discussing extra-discursive entities, but ends up with these entities undergoing a transformation, and disappearing, in their brush with discursive practices. Extra-discursive entities (existents) are said to exist, but they achieve the status of being or beings when they are given meaning through language. Sometimes this manoeuvre is carried out by attaching phrases such as 'for us' or 'as we know it' to terms such as 'entity' or the 'world'.[19] For du Gay:

> Theorists taking the cultural turn . . . regard the attempt to endow objects with an essence which precedes their linguistic articulation as a crucial error. . . [T]hey reject the argument that it is the essence of atoms themselves—their 'atomicity', if you will—which has caused physicists to have words to refer to them. They argue that natural facts are also discursive facts. . . They argue that atoms are discursive objects because to call something an 'atom' is a way of conceiving of it and that depends upon a classificatory practice. The classificatory or discursive practice, therefore, comes first and the 'atom' second. Again this is not to deny the existence of something, which physicists have come to term 'atom'. However, it is to assert that this object only achieves *being (or meaning)* through language. (du Gay, 1996: 43)

These comments imply something like the following. When an extra-discursive entity (e.g. an existent such as an atom or a stone) is classified, discussion is no longer about existents (atoms and stones) but about beings ('atoms' and 'stones'). Discursive entities (beings) are a function of language or discourse in the sense that our classificatory schemas, for example, influence the being. There are several critical realist responses to this.

First, the confusing nature of the presentation encourages, or does not discourage, the idea that extra-discursive entities are 'made from' discourse as it were.

Second, where it is partially true it is trivial. If this is *not* saying that discourse makes extra-discursive entities (and it is probably not), then it is merely saying that, once extra-discursive entities have a linguistic counterpart, this counterpart is a function of language. Who would disagree?

Third, saying it is partially true implies it is also partially false. Phrases such as the world 'as we know it', the world 'for us', a world of beings are intelligible only on the assumption that there is also a world '*not* as we know it', a world '*not* for us', a world of existents.[20] Put another way, even beings, or ideally real entities in my terminology, are not *merely* a function of discourse; they are also a function of the extra-discursive. This has implications for the next points.

Fourth, du Gay claims that, in order to *classify* an extra-discursive entity (existent), humans and discourse come first and the entity second, because classification is a discursive activity. For example, classifying plants as weeds is a discursive activity whereby humans impose these characteristics, arbitrarily. But what about classifying whales as mammals (not fish) because they suckle their young? Or, to stick with the social world, what about classifying a group as suffering gendered discrimination in the workplace because patriarchal structures constrain their activities in specific and systematic ways? Such classifications are not, arguably, arbitrary. Classification does not come first and the entity second; classification expresses an extra-discursive state of affairs. As Sayer (2004: 10) puts it: 'the ability of landlords to charge rent is not merely a product of the way the concept of landlord is defined' that is, not just a function of language but rather 'a consequence of their possession of land which others who lack land need to use'. It would be a mistake to suggest something like 'the classificatory or discursive practice comes first and the rent or landlord second'. We have the terms 'landlord' and 'rent', in virtue of the relations between property owners; we do not have property owners in virtue of the terms 'landlords' and 'rent'.[21]

Downgrading Material Practices By confusing the relationship between material and discursive practices, social constructionists end up with a definition of discourse that downgrades material practices. Du Gay asks us to:

> Imagine you are building a wall with a colleague. At a particular moment you ask your colleague to pass you a brick and once she has done so, you add the brick to the wall. We can conceive of two distinct acts taking place here. The first act—asking for the brick—is, of course, linguistic; the second—adding the brick to the wall—is extra-linguistic. The question is how much is to be gained from conceiving of these two acts as qualitatively different from one another in kind—the one linguistic, the other extra-linguistic. [T]he total operation—building a wall—includes *both* linguistic and extra-linguistic elements and cannot be reduced to one or the other, rather it has to be prior to this distinction. (1996: 46)

Up to this point, there is nothing to which a critical realist would object. What follows, however, changes matters significantly. He goes on:

> This totality which includes both linguistic and extra-linguistic elements is what proponents of the cultural turn refer to as discourse. . . [D]iscourse cannot be conceived of as 'idealistic' because it does not exclude the 'extra-linguistic'; rather it serves to undermine divisions between language and material practices by indicating the ways in which meaning and use are intimately connected. (1996: 46)

To refer to this *totality* in terms of *one* of its elements (i.e. discourse) is totally arbitrary. Although I am not advocating it, there is no reason why this totality could not be referred to as a 'material practice'. Reference to

a totality in terms of *one* of its elements leads to confusion. After continual reminders that *both* linguistic and extra-linguistic elements are necessary and that we cannot reduce to one or the other, du Gay ignores his own advice and downgrades the extra-linguistic, the material practices. This is no surprise, given that a few pages earlier he reminded us that 'language has been promoted to an altogether more important role' (1996: 42). The term 'extra-linguistic' could refer to atoms or to the physical act of building a wall. If, as in the case of atoms, he argues 'the classificatory or discursive practice . . . comes first and the "atom" second', then consistency demands he argue that 'the classificatory or discursive practice . . . comes first and the "building a wall" second'. A sequential claim does not, however, sit easily with a simultaneous claim that 'building a wall . . . includes *both* linguistic and extra-linguistic elements and cannot be reduced to one or the other'.[22]

Du Gay adopts a terminology that strongly encourages the downgrading of the extra-discursive; the exaggeration of the discursive; and the reduction of material practices to discursive practices.[23] By downgrading extra-discursive entities, postmodernists remove these entities as potential resources for explanation and hence emaciate their own explanatory accounts (see Lewis, 2000). Once again, the ontology is impoverished.

Reed (2000: 525) thinks this downgrading manoeuvre is widespread in organizational analysis. Postmodernist discourse analysis, he suggests, 'tends to marginalize the non-semantic aspects of economic and political reality in that it is ontologically insensitive to material structuring and its constraining influence of social action'.[24]

Implications of Ontology: Labour Process, Agency and Structure

In this final section, I borrow an example from labour process theory, specifically the analytical device 'agency and structure', to demonstrate, first, that *critical* (as opposed to other forms of) realism is not damaged by many common postmodern criticisms of agency and structure; and, second, that, once interpreted through the prism of critical realism, there is no need to abandon this powerful analytical device.

Postmodernism

For some years, a debate between the 'orthodox' and 'postmodernist' labour process theorists has raged. The works of postmodernists Grugulis and Knights (2000–1) and Knights (2000–1) have the merit of recognizing that ontology, or, from their perspective, an ontology of binary oppositions or dualisms, lies at the heart of the debate. They also argue that the (flawed) dualistic analysis and research of 'orthodox' labour process theorists is rooted in a (flawed) commitment to an agency–structure framework, which is, in turn, rooted in a (flawed) dualistic ontology. As it happens, the agency–structure framework forms a central part of critical

realist social theory. Comparing and contrasting the two perspectives, then, will reveal the relevance of ontology for organization studies.

For many postmodernists, the moment we accept the terms of the agency–structure debate we have already presupposed a flawed dualistic ontology, one deriving from, and reproducing, the 'ontological dualism between the "subject" and the "object" ' (Knights, 2000–1: 71). Dualistic terms such as 'agency' and 'structure' are acceptable as analytical distinctions or heuristic devices. The mistake, postmodernists allege, comes when social analysts create a 'separation between representations and what they purport to represent' where 'conceptual representations of reality are treated unproblematically as related to "objects" to which they refer' (Knights, 2000–1: 71). These flaws allegedly manifest themselves in problems in the research agenda, of which I rehearse three here, and then consider a critical realist's response in the following section:

(a_1) Forced to choose between one or other of the polarities, some focus on the subject, pursue a voluntarist (subject-orientated) research agenda, and opt for action or agency theory; others focus on the object, pursue a determinist (object-orientated) research agenda, and opt for structural theory.

(b_1) When one of the polarities is chosen, the other becomes the absent, subordinated, marginalized other.

(c_1) By treating representations as unproblematic representations of an object, some social analysts fail to reflect deeply on the nature of the *subject* (both researcher and researched) that makes their representations possible. They then 'assume a stable and objectified subject that can be represented by a healthy body, competent speaker or a rational economic person' (O'Docherty and Willmott, 2000–1: 115). They go on to suggest that this inattentiveness to subjectivity 'continues to reify the industrial employee as a timeless essence and sovereign owner of attributes such as "agency", "attitude", "motivation" and "value"'.

Grugulis and Knights (2000–1: 14) attempt to avoid reproducing the ontological dualism underlying agency and structure by rejecting it. Social analysis, they argue, should occupy the 'analytical space' that lies between (a) the representations of both agents and structures and (b) 'the subjectivity which makes them possible'. With this analytical space consisting only of representations and subjectivity, the implication is that the subjectivity of human agents alone makes the representations possible. Social structures and agents are, therefore, reduced to representations.

Critical Realism

For critical realists, by contrast, agency and structure are central to their social ontology. Two points need to be borne in mind here. First, the basis

of the transformational ontology (i.e. Archer's morphogenetic and Bhaskar's transformational approaches) is that agency and structure are internally related: one is what it is, and can exist, only in virtue of the other. Second, because critical realists have an ontology that differentiates between modes of reality, they are not forced into a dualistic (how ironic) situation whereby, if structures are not materially real, then they must be ideally real.[25] Bearing these points in mind, let us consider how critical realists respond to the allegations that they have a flawed research agenda.

(a_2) Critical realists are not forced to choose between, or to privilege, one or other of the polarities. They do not focus on the subject, pursue a voluntarist (subject-orientated) research agenda, and opt for action or agency theory; nor do they focus on the object, pursue a determinist (object-orientated) research agenda, and opt for structural theory.

(b_2) Critical realists do not privilege one of the polarities so that one becomes the absent, subordinated, marginalized, other.

(c_2) Critical realists do not treat representations as *unproblematic* representations of an object—as naive realists (i.e. positivists) often do. This is why, where appropriate, entities are referred to as *concept mediated*. Critical realists are not disabled from reflecting deeply on the nature of the subject. There is nothing in critical realism that weds it to 'assuming a stable and objectified subject that can be represented by [say] a rational economic person'. I have, for example, written several articles criticizing economists for using 'rational economic person'. Neither is there anything in critical realism that weds it to reifying the 'industrial employee as a timeless essence and sovereign owner of attributes such as . . . "attitude", "motivation" and "value"'. Anyway the stability or instability faced by human subjects, along with other characteristics such as 'attitude', 'motivation' and 'value', are empirical not philosophical matters. Although critical realism might, however, defend human agency as a 'timeless essence' (O'Docherty and Willmott, 2000–1), let us not get carried away with this matter. In this context, all it means is that human beings have the 'timeless' capacity or ability to exercise free will; to have done otherwise; to think and act creatively; to do novel things (see Archer, 2000).

In their rush to avoid ontological dualism and occupy a different 'analytical space', Grugulis and Knights end up merely collapsing one (of the following) poles into the other.

- Trying to reject any separation between 'representations and what they represent' merely collapses referents into representations as heuristic devices.

- Trying to treat entities such as social structures as just representations or heuristic devices merely collapses the socially real into the ideally real.
- Trying to reject dualisms such as agency and structure, by treating social structures as representations or heuristic devices, merely collapses structure into agency.
- It is unclear whether they take subjectivity to refer just to the cognitive activities or to both the cognitive and practical activities that create representations as heuristic devices. Either way, when this is taken along with their ontology that contains nothing objective, then objectivity collapses into subjectivity.[26]

Although they do not put matters thus, Knights and Grugulis appear to be committed to a (non-empty) extra-discursive realm consisting solely of discursive, conceptual, representational, heuristical (or whatever) entities. Critical realists, by contrast, are not forced to choose between an ontology exhausted by discourse, concepts, representations and heuristics *or* an empirical (naive) realist ontology that has no place for such entities. This is because critical realists are committed to an ontology that differentiates between different modes of reality, accepts the existence of a (non-empty) extra-discursive realm, and also allows for entities that are *conceptually mediated*.

Conclusion

Although this paper amounts to a fairly hard-hitting critique of postmodernism, I want to pull back a little in conclusion. As many postmodernists come to realize that *critical* realism is absolutely opposed to the empirical or naive realism of positivism, they have begun to realize that there may be some common ground between themselves and critical realists.[27] One nod in this direction comes in a carefully argued paper by O'Docherty and Willmott (2001), who seek to maintain the insights provided by postmodernism while rejecting anti-realist ontology. Writing on labour process theory, they note that:

> For us it still makes sense to talk, or better, appreciate, that capitalism is something that exists in part outside of language and text, even if it is only through language that this existence is communicated. . . Instead of the wholesale abandonment of subject/object or structure/agency that an anti-realist approach tends to endorse, we favour a more critical, and we would argue post-structural, as contrasted with 'anti-structural' sensitivity. This involves a self-critical and multi-disciplinary exploration of the complex political, economic, psychological and existential processes that inter-articulate and combine in the practices of the labour process. (O'Docherty and Willmott, 2001: 464)

If this paper has helped clear some of the ontological fog that clouds our vision, perhaps it can help critical realists and postmodernists to open a dialogue on the ontology of organizations.

Notes

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1 A few postmodernists and poststructuralists accept these labels for reasons other than ontological commitments. They often reject social constructionist ontology and accept (something like) the ontology advocated by critical realists. To these fellow travellers, I offer my apologies for associating them with an ontological position they would reject; I do this only for ease of exposition.
2 See Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000) and Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004) for an elaboration of other key critical realist ideas vis-à-vis organization and management studies.
3 I have abandoned previous attempts (Fleetwood, 2004) to split social constructionism into 'weak' and 'strong' variants, the former being compatible with critical realism and the latter being some kind of empty realism (see below), because the terminology associated with social constructionism has become mired in confusion.
4 My use of the term 'entity' is neutral vis-à-vis ontology: it connotes nothing about the nature of the thing in question; and it certainly does not imply materiality or physicality or 'thinglikeness'.
5 For examples of confusion, see Burr (1998: 24); Keenoy (1997: 835); Shenhav and Weitz (2000: 377); and Chia (2000: 513).
6 For a sophisticated understanding of discourse, language and semiotics from a critical realist perspective, see Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999); Fairclough (2005); Fairclough et al. (2002); Sayer (2000); Stones (1996); and O'Neill (1998).
7 Notice that if an explanation is not 'of' something, then it 'is' something, which is what Jackson and Carter (2000) claim when saying that structures are an explanation. This puzzles me. If to explain X is to create X, then explanation (an answer to a 'why' question) as opposed to creation becomes impossible.
8 Incidentally, objecting to this on the grounds that the social analyst claims to know more about the situation than the lay person, which is, therefore, a form of cultural imperialism, is a red herring. It would be valid only if we were prepared to say that lay persons can never be mistaken, and, given that social analysts are also persons, this would be tantamount to saying that analysts can never be mistaken. If we, as analysts, can be mistaken, so too can lay persons, and hence we must accept the possibility that social analysts can know things lay persons do not—and *vice versa*.
9 It is worth noting here that Archer's morphogenetic approach is perfectly compatible with Chia's (2003) 'becoming ontology' and the Heraclitian notion of continual flux—with one important caveat. There is no reason why the phenomena that are in flux are only linguistic constructs. For critical realists, material, ideal, artefactual and social entities are all, typically, in a state of becoming.

10 See Lewis (2000), however, for an argument against the misinterpretation that critical realists treat social structures as efficiently causal entities.
11 I hope that the reasonably sophisticated ontology developed here can prevent accusations that critical realists invoke 'Death and Furniture' type arguments (Czarniawska, 2003: 131) and/or are prone to table thumping while claiming 'you're not telling me that's a social construction' (Potter, 1996: 7).
12 We also often come across ambiguous terms like 'constitute' that seem to imply both. A referee of an earlier draft criticized me for glossing the distinction between 'constituting' and 'constructing', arguing that poststructuralists favour the former and my focus on the latter is misleading. If there is a distinction, then it is far from clear. My thesaurus identified the term 'constitute' with the terms 'comprise', 'make up', 'form', and 'compose', all of which connote making or constructing, as well as the term 'representing' which has no such connotations.
13 For Shenhav and Weitz (2000: 377), the phrase 'the socially constructed nature of empirical objects' implies a social constructivism (but is ambiguous because the terms 'empirical' and 'objects' are under-elaborated); whereas the desire 'to show how knowledge is actually [socially] constructed' is acceptable to critical realism.
14 Although consistency is no panacea, inconsistency is certainly a problem if for no other reason than it is extremely difficult (and may be impossible) to demonstrate that an inconsistent position is in error. Criticizing someone who holds *both* that the moon is made of green cheese *and* that it is made of rock, or that a patriarchal relation is *both* socially *and* materially real, will prove very difficult. Notice that inconsistencies of this kind are mistakes or logical contradictions. They should not be confused with dialectical contradictions, which legitimately express the dialectical nature of the many phenomena.
15 It might, of course, be the case that the properties of the entity itself change. Czarniawska (2003: 133) recognizes this and uses Latour's term 'variable ontologies'. A section of hillside, for example, might change from being materially real (in its virgin state) and become artefactually real as it was turned into a quarry. Changes in lay persons' and/or social analysts' ontological categories that expressed changes in the section of hillside would not, however, amount to ontological oscillation in the sense Weick means it.
16 'Most postmodernists treat the external as a kind of excess or otherness . . . the referent has no specific character' (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999: 203).
17 This does not mean that critical realists accept that an entity somehow 'causes us to have words to refer to them' (du Gay, 1996: 43).
18 Chia (2000: 514) does something similar by confusing stability and a sense of stability.
19 Weick (1995: 30–8) does something similar with his notion of enactment. See especially his paragraphs on Czarniawska-Joerges and Van den Ven.
20 Weick (1995: 30) uses the term 'enactment to preserve the fact that people often produce part of the environment they face', but fails to elaborate upon the parts of the world people do not produce.
21 Alvesson and Deetz (1999: 199) make precisely this mistake, writing: 'As a person learns to speak these discourses, they more properly speak to him or

her in that available discourses position the person in the world in a particular way prior to the individual having any sense of choice.' Apart from the extreme structuralism, determinism or lack of human agency and creativity, this comment would imply that the discourse of landlord and tenant causes landlords and tenants.

22 Du Gay is correct: discourse cannot be conceived of as 'idealistic' because he is a realist about extra-discursive entities and practices. But his realism is empty.

23 In a discussion of quality, Xu (2000) makes a rather similar manoeuvre, but here the slippage is between material practices, in this case the practices associated with quality, and discursive practices associated with the creation of discursive objects.

24 According to Cromby and Nightingale (1999: 2–3), the 'discursive turn', with its heavy emphasis upon the role of language and discourse, 'has produced a corresponding lack of attention to other significant elements of human life such as: the influence of embodied factors, constraints placed on social constructions by the material world and structural features of society such as capitalism or patriarchy. Other problems, we suspect, arise either from the strenuous efforts to bring into the linguistic arena these missing elements, or from misguided attempts to downplay their significance.'

25 Postmodernists often claim that organizations and structures are not things, thinglike, entitative, solid, concrete, material, etc. I agree, and would define them not as materially real but as socially real. Lacking the category of socially real, however, postmodernists have little choice but to classify organizations and structures as ideally real. Westwood and Clegg (2003b: 84), for example, suggest 'things' such as organizations are 'merely stabilized patterns produced by language and imputed to phenomena in consequence rather than being the effect of the thinglike properties of phenomena we take to be real'. In rejecting a crude materialism, they accept an equally crude idealism whereby organizations and structures are merely linguistic, discursive or ideal.

26 For a note on objectivity and subjectivity, see Fleetwood (2004).

27 I was disappointed to discover that Westwood and Clegg's (2003a) excellent collection, especially the sections on ontology, epistemology, methodology and structure, has (to the best of my knowledge) one brief mention of critical realism. Despite the inclusion of a *scientific* realist perspective, the collection does little to discourage the view that organization theorists must choose between some form of positivism, with its empirical realist ontology, or some form of postmodernism, with its social constructionist ontology.

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