

THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF TRUTH

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Roy Bhaskar's project of Critical Realism and the relationship between art/culture and truth claims. The paper will address how art/cultural production does not exist in an autonomous relationship to historical reality but is inextricably bound up in it. Furthermore it will highlight the fact that at any specific historical conjuncture there is a dominant hegemonic power that structures the conditions of political, economic, and social practices. If this dominant hegemony is to be contested we need to be able to make truth claims regarding its existence, how it works to reproduce itself and maintain dominance, why an alternative project is necessary and what it could look like. Bhaskar makes the case for the reintroduction of ontology into the field of epistemology arguing for a dialectical understanding of real structures/forces and our knowledge of them. I will argue that art/cultural production is one of the sites from which these structures/forces can be represented and made knowable in order to contest dominant ideological and hegemonic forces while avoiding the essentialism and relativism that has led to the current impoverishment of truth that marks our present historical moment.

THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF TRUTH [1]

INTRODUCTION:

This paper was born out of the recent and ongoing crisis in epistemology represented by the sustained attacks on truth as a category within political, economic and social reality and discourses. Phrases such as post-truth, fake-news and alternative facts abound and threaten to minimize all truth claims to matters of personal preferences and/or group interests. The prevailing theoretical models that have guided the questions of what we know and how we know it have been ineffective at countering these attacks leading to the need for a more rigorous critique and defense of epistemology. The critique and defense of epistemology and the relationship of the arts and culture to the production of knowledge is the focus of this paper. I will begin by providing an outline of the five main arguments.

1. Art/cultural production does not exist in an autonomous relationship to historical reality, but rather has a position of relative autonomy in relation to other structured forces of society (political, economic, social). As a result artistic practices are inherently political being articulated exoterically or esoterically in opposition to, or in support of (thereby reproducing), the dominant hegemonic order.
2. At any specific historical conjuncture there is a dominant hegemonic project that structures the conditions of political, economic, and social practices [2]. The dominant hegemonic project of our contemporary moment is that of global capitalism.
3. If global capitalism is to be contested we need to be able to make truth claims regarding its existence, its effects, and how it works to reproduce itself and maintain dominance.
4. The standard epistemological models of empiricism and conventionalism (idealism) are insufficient for this project. Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism seeks to resolve the errors of these prior models while advancing a notion of epistemology as an emancipatory project.
5. Art/cultural production's unique position makes it one of the sites from which the dominant hegemonic project of global capitalism can be opposed and contested.

ART/CULTURE

Art/cultural production and its relationships to political, economic, and social life have been thoroughly discussed by numerous theorists. Perhaps most notably by the Frankfurt School philosophers who looked very closely at the relationship between capitalist production and the field of culture. At their most cynical they asserted that the penetration of capitalist production into the field of culture effectively negated art's

critical potential by constantly recuperating it into the reproduction of capitalism. One has only to think of the recent boom in the art market and the rapid financialization of artworks to support an assertion such as this. According to supporters of this view the only option available for radical critique is “a total break with the existing state of affairs” (Mouffe 2013, 104). However, this conclusion requires a conception of an artistic avant-garde that exists in an autonomous relationship to political, economic and social life, and is consequently capable of critique, and presupposes that it is possible to exist outside of ideology. If one takes ideology to mean “...the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall 1986, 29), as I do, then it is difficult to see how social existence outside of ideology is possible. For this reason, and against a conception of an autonomous artistic avant-garde, I prefer Chantal Mouffe’s view:

“From the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension. The political, for its part, concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations, and this is where its aesthetic dimension resides. This is why I believe that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art.” (Mouffe 2013, 91)

The questions then are: how are the conditions of these practices structured so as to prevent them from generating a radical critique, and if a ‘total break’ is not possible, under what conditions could critique and change occur?

HEGEMONY

As has been previously stated, the dominant hegemonic project of our contemporary moment is that of global capitalism. I prefer to use the model of hegemony because it describes a social formation that is open, structured and differentiated rather than closed, atomized and strictly deterministic [3]. It is a model that acknowledges the simultaneous existence of multiple projects that may or may not be brought into or out of alignment with each other for political purposes. Because the main focus of this paper is epistemology I will only be providing a brief definition of hegemony here.

Suffice it to say that hegemony is the concept of dominance and social totality. To establish hegemony is to establish dominance over the other structured forces of society (political, social, economic). However dominance, once established, is not guaranteed and must be actively sustained through ideological and, if necessary, forceful means in order to reproduce itself and represent itself as natural or given. A naturalized (or dehistoricized) hegemony is a very successful one. But, as Raymond Williams has pointed

out there are always dominant, residual, and emergent forms of culture within society. These residual and emergent forms may be oppositional to the dominant hegemonic order, thereby posing a threat to its dominance. Stuart Hall has elaborated on this by pointing out that “dominant ideology often responds to opposition, not by attempting to stamp it out, but rather by allowing it to exist within the place that it assigns, by slowly allowing it to be recognized, but only within the term of a process which deprives it of any real or effective oppositional force” (Hall 2016. 50). It effectively creates margins and simultaneously reinforces the centrality of its dominant ideology.

TRUTH CLAIMS

The reason for needing to be able to make accurate and reliable truth claims becomes apparent very quickly. If we are to contest the dominant ideology and hegemonic project we need to be able to ask very fundamental questions about how society is structured. This includes questions about how our conditions of existence are represented to us as natural/given. Any statement about the way things are presupposes that there is a world/things that such statements can be made about. This means that all truth claims have an ontological dimension to them that must be considered. How are we to choose between competing or even incommensurable theories without some conception of an objective world? It is this ontological level that empiricism and conventionalism have both minimized, and that Roy Bhaskar seeks to restore to the project of epistemology

EMPIRICISM/CONVENTIONALISM/REALISM

Roy Bhaskar was a philosopher of science and former World Scholar at the University of London Institute of Education. He is the originator of the philosophy of Critical Realism and has published several works on the subject including *A Realist Theory of Science* and *Reclaiming Reality* a compendium of his writings [4].

For Bhaskar any theory of epistemology presupposes both an *ontology* and a *sociology*. Statements about knowledge always presupposed some real object or relation as well a role for the producers and/or receivers of such statements. It is important to note that for Bhaskar sociology is the study of social relations rather than of mass behavior. The projects of empiricism and conventionalism (idealism) for Bhaskar commit errors in both categories that lead to impediments towards achieving more adequate explanations for events/phenomena and for the role of social agents in generating such explanations and acting upon them.

Empiricism, simply put, is the theory that knowledge is what can be known through sense perception. Knowledge is generated through a process of induction involving close observation of phenomena under specific conditions leading to the generation of causal laws that explain the phenomena. These 'constant conjunctions of events' provide the conditions necessary for the establishment of theorems and the more they are repeated without aberration the stronger or more true the resulting theorems are presumed to be. It thus presupposes a world that is "flat, uniform, unstructured and undifferentiated...so occurring in closed systems" (Bhaskar 2011, 8) that permits such modes of observation and study. In asserting such a close relationship between the object of knowledge and our knowledge of it empiricism reduces ontology to epistemology committing the epistemic fallacy. It is commonly called the "masked man" fallacy and is effectively illustrated by the following example:

- *Premise 1:* Lois Lane believes that Superman can fly.
- *Premise 2:* Lois Lane does not believe that Clark Kent can fly.
- *Conclusion:* Therefore Superman and Clark Kent are not the same person.

In making sense perception the primary condition of knowledge it also presupposes an individualistic sociology, in which people are regarded "as passive spectators of given facts in a given world rather than as active agents in a complex one" (Bhaskar 2011, 22). The result of this implicit ontology and passive individualistic sociology is the assertion of universal causal laws as dependent on their reduction to constant conjunction of events and of such events to individual experiences. Bhaskar sums up the contradiction produced by this double reduction by stating:

"...in a world without human beings there would be no experiences and few, if any, constant conjunctions of events...the assertion of causal law entails the possibility of a *non-human world*..." (Bhaskar 2011, 17)

Which is exactly what is denied by empiricism.

Conventionalism (idealism) argues that knowledge is the product of mental constructs guided by theory to explain phenomena. It takes issue with empiricism's claims to theory-neutral language and methods, claiming that "sense-perception itself depends upon theory, so that the way in which we perceive the world...depends upon the theoretical presuppositions we bring to it...and the very terms of our experience presuppose certain knowledge-claims" (Lovell 1983, 15). Conventionalism suggests an alternative way "of securing a link between human beings and the world – in that instead of the world naturalistically determining our knowledge of it, human beings decide, by convention, what level of their knowledge is to count as knowledge of the empirical world" (Bhaskar 2011, 30). Rather than the certification of knowledge through the close observation of the constant conjuncture of events that serve to strengthen claims through repetition (therefore generating predictive models) the inverse is now put in

place whereby statements are presumed true until there are falsified by counter examples/explanations that replace previously held beliefs. This shift from verifiability to falsifiability is most associated with the work of Karl Popper.

By making theory/mental constructs the basis of truth claims, conventionalism again suggests an individualistic sociology that can easily fall into relativism. Without any real dimension that exists in common between competing theories it is difficult to determine which explanation may be more accurate. Knowledge becomes a matter of social convention, introducing an aspect of power into which theories/explanations become accepted and which ones are dismissed or pushed to the margins.

For Bhaskar the critiques of empiricism by conventionalism while well articulated still amounts to an inversion and displacement of the same problem. Rather than reducing ontology to epistemology so that the objects of our knowledge contain their own meaning that is given in sense perception, conventionalism sublimates ontology to epistemology making the real only a product of epistemology. Conventionalism “does not necessarily entail a denial that there is a real material world. But if our only access to it is via a succession of theories which describe it...then the concept of an independent reality ceases to have any force or function” (Lovell 1983, 15).

Between these competing theories of epistemology is where Bhaskar situates his Critical Realism. In the preface of his book *Reclaiming Reality* he states:

“These essays seek only to reclaim reality for itself. To reclaim it from philosophical ideologies – such as empiricism and idealism – which have tacitly or explicitly defined it in terms of some specific human attribute, such as sense-experience [or] intuition...for some or other restricted – individual or group – interest.” (Bhaskar 2011, XV)

Bhaskar’s project is both the restoration of ontology to the project of epistemology, giving it an explicit role rather than the implicit one assigned to it by both empiricism and conventionalism, and a more active, rather than passive, sociology. For Bhaskar there is an ontologically real dimension that exists separate from our experiences that can be known through theory but cannot be reduced to it either. If “for empiricism, the natural order is what is given in experience, for idealism, it is what we make or construct; for realism, it is given as a presupposition of our causal investigations of nature, but our knowledge of it is socially and laboriously constructed – with the cognitive resources at our disposal” (Bhaskar 2011, 25). The real world is the a priori assumption of our investigations of it and the knowledge we construct is determined, in part, by the theories/models available at the specific historical conjuncture in which they occur. This knowledge that is “socially and laboriously constructed – with the cognitive resources at our disposal” suggests an active conception of social agents understood from a materialist perspective.

Through the assertion of a historically produced knowledge grounded in the investigation of an ontologically real dimension, Bhaskar avoids both the essentialism attributed to empiricism and the relativism of conventionalism.

This distinction between reality and our socially produced knowledge of it Bhaskar separates into two realms, respectively called the intransitive and transitive dimensions. The intransitive dimension is the ontologically real space of causal laws that exists independent of our experiences and the transitive dimension includes the theories and practices that provide the conditions for the study and identification of the intransitive dimension. Thus a distinction must be made “between the *real* structures, mechanisms and systems of relations and work in nature (and society)...and the manifest (or *actual*) patterns of events they generate” (Bhaskar 2011, 40). This conception of reality opposes the closed, atomistic, one advanced by empiricism with a conception of reality as open, structured, and differentiated [5]. Here events and discourses do not exhaust their own meaning but are the conditions by which we are able to begin to identify and understand the generative mechanisms and structures that produce them. That is not to say that events and discourses do not exist but that the only way we will be able to understand them and change the social world is by identifying the underlying structures and forces in the intransitive realm.

However Bhaskar is clear that the relationship between the transitive and intransitive dimensions should not be thought of as a binary one but that the two should be thought dialectically, as in constant motion with each other. Bhaskar’s project is not completed solely through the discovery of the real structures, mechanism and systems of relations. Discovery in and of itself is not sufficient to enact change. The emancipatory potential of Critical Realism involves extending its explanatory critique through the multiple and simultaneous levels of reality (the transitive and intransitive dimensions). As Bhaskar puts it:

“...the identification of the *source* of an experienced injustice in social reality, necessary for changing or remedying it, involves much more than redescription...It is a matter of finding and disentangling webs of relations in social life, and engaging explanatory critiques of the practices which sustain them” (Bhaskar 2001, 175).

CONCLUSION

If we accept that reality, including social reality, is open, structured, and differentiated and that the production of knowledge must be done at multiple and different levels in order to understand and change the social world then we can return to hegemony and the role of art/culture within societal structures. “We do not create society – the error of voluntarism. But these structures which pre-exist us are only

reproduced or transformed in our everyday activities; thus society does not exist independently of human agency – the error of reification. The social world is reproduced or transformed in daily life” (Bhaskar 2011, 4). Practices that are able to resist or contest the dominant ideological forces within society, thereby transforming rather than reproducing them, are one of the places from which critique and eventual action can be made. If as Mouffe claims, the arts are involved in the maintenance and constitution of the symbolic order of societies and are one of the means by which we represent ourselves and our realities to each other, then they are one of the sites from which we can imagine and represent alternatives. This in and of itself is not sufficient to overcome hegemony but creates the opportunity for arts’ articulation with other oppositional practices to more effectively challenge the forces of dominance. Such political maneuvering requires that we expand our notions of art beyond those that reduce it to merely a form of aesthetic experience or an instance of market commodification. As I have suggested in this paper, we can begin to expand these notions by investigating and making truth claims about how the conditions of social life are structured in dominance and representing those claims within art/cultural practices.

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NOTES:

- [1] This paper is an edited version of a talk given at the University of Hertfordshire on June 20, 2019.
- [2] Times of revolution or struggle where no dominant hegemony has yet been established are the exception to this general statement.
- [3] For further reading on the subject of hegemony and the shift away from simple deterministic logic I recommend reading Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and Raymond Williams' essay *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory*.
- [4] This paper should in no way be considered a replacement for Bhaskar's writings and I strongly encourage readers interested in these topics to consult Bhaskar's works directly.
- [5] A conception of reality shared by hegemony.

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