and historical sources to argue that the rational choice postulate is based on an inappropriate physical metaphor taken by economists from physicists in the late nineteenth century. While that metaphor has provided its users with power and prestige in an age of science, its concomitant physicalist assumptions mitigate any isomorphism with the social world it supposedly explains, and it is now simply a piece of out-dated theoretical physics.

References

Suggested Reading
Barnes (1996), chs 2 and 3.

realism A philosophy of science that uses abstraction to identify the specific causal powers and liabilities of specific structures that are realized under specific conditions. This is a complicated sentence, but in order to understand its repeated emphasis on specificity – in sharp contrast to the philosophy of positivism – we need to begin by considering realism’s view of causation.

Realism makes a fundamental distinction between:

- the identification of causal mechanisms, which is typically the concern of so-called intensive research: the key question here is ‘how does something happen?’; and
- the identification of empirical regularities, which is typically the concern of so-called extensive research: the key question here is ‘how widespread is something?’

Realism distinguishes between these two forms of research because ‘what causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times it happens’ (Sayer, 1985a). Yet in the 1960s and 1970s much of mainstream human geography effectively eroded this distinction. Spatial science was preoccupied with the identification of empirical regularities, with a search for ‘order’ and ‘pattern’, and this tradition of extensive research was continued in the prediction of empirical regularities using space–time forecasting models. All of these projects were tacitly informed by the philosophy of positivism. But they faced a serious barrier, because the empirical regularities that they detected could only approach the status of the scientific laws envisaged by positivism – could only be regarded as laws of constant conjunction – provided both the mechanism capable of generating them and the conditions under which they were produced were held constant. These requirements can only be satisfied, however, if research is confined to a closed system. The problem, as Chouinard et al. (1984) explained, was this: all of the cases with which human geography and the other human and social sciences are centrally concerned are open systems.

On the basis of this equation between the identification of empirical regularities, the conduct of extensive research and the existence of closed systems, realism makes three critical interventions:

(a) The success of different sciences in identifying and predicting empirical regularities is determined in large measure by their ability to devise either empirically or (more usually) experimentally closed systems. In open systems it is not possible to guarantee the symmetry of explanation and prediction required by positivism. (Sayer, 1984a)

(b) The analysis of open systems requires the elaboration of a stratified and differentiated ontology, and it is here that realism makes its strongest and most strategic claim (Yeung, 1997). Both empiricalism and positivism assume that the world is made up of events: these are the ‘empirical particulars’ of science, and so their observation is accorded a special privilege as the leading edge of scientific discovery. In opposition to such ‘atomism’, realism provides a multi-tiered ontology in which the world is made up not only of events but also of mechanisms and structures (see the figure). The connection between the last two is crucial. ‘Structures’ are seen as sets of internal relations that have characteristic ways of acting: more formally, they possess ‘causal powers and liabilities’, which are seen as constitutive because they possess these powers and liabilities by virtue of what they are. Precisely because these powers and liabilities enter fundamentally into the constitution of structures they are thus held to be necessary. Whether they are activated or not, however, is contingent: less technically, whether they are put into practice through the ‘mechanisms’ of the structure (or not) depends on the circumstances. Seen like this, the task of a realist science is to tease out the causal chains that situate specific events within specific mechanisms and structures. The technical term for this procedure is the recovery of ontological depth: whereas positivism collapses the world into a single plane pockmarked by the space—
time incidence of events, realism seeks to recover the connective tissue between the differentiated, foliated domains of events, mechanisms and structures.

(c) The identification and recovery of the various mechanisms and structures that make the world is far from straightforward, because they are not immediately inscribed in the taken-for-granted categories which we draw upon in our everyday, ‘common-sense’ discourse. Their disclosure thus requires a process of abstraction that is progressive, reflexive and essentially iterative (Yeung, 1997). In other words, realism relies on a research strategy in which theoretical categories inform and are in turn informed by empirical materials. Rather than privilege supposedly ‘theory-free’ observations, realism places a premium on theoretical work on the critique of theoretical systems and on the co-determination of theoretical and empirical systems (Hesse, 1974; Gregory, 1978).

These three interventions can be used to underwrite both the natural sciences and the human and social sciences. Although physical geography did not engage with realism in any systematic fashion until the 1990s (see Richards, 1990a, 1990b), realist perspectives were opened up across the spectrum of the human and social sciences in the early 1980s: in history (e.g. McMann 1981), in sociology (e.g. Keat and Urry, 1981), and in human geography (e.g. Williams, 1981; Sayer, 1982, 1985a; Chouinard et al., 1984). Within the human and social sciences the ‘mechanisms’ that are the springboards of realism were usually identified with systems of social practices: indeed, Williams (1981) insisted that ‘in a fundamental sense the concept of practice lies at the heart of the realist account’. Many thinkers sought to establish filiations between realism and both HISTORICAL MATERIALISM and STRUCTURATION THEORY, and in doing so were led to a view of social practices as (i) being dependent upon knowledgeable and capable human subjects (although not reducible to them) and as (ii) having their effects determined in some substantial degree by contingent features of the settings in which they occur (Gregory, 1985). Double-edged claims of this sort sparked two major debates around realism in human geography.

(d) The appeal to ‘knowledgeable and capable human subjects’ was intended to distance realism from ESSENTIALISM (the belief that there is an essential reality lying ‘behind’ the surface particulars of the world) and from STRUCTURALISM (which displaces the human subject altogether). If this appeal is taken seriously, however, then it has to be allowed that the human and social sciences confront a world that is pre-interpreted, and that those interpretations are of basic importance to any explanatory account. As Keat and Urry (1981) recognized, this makes the abstractions of realism insufficient. For the fact is that most of us most of the time do not make sense of the world through the clean and clinical abstractions that lie at the centre of the realist account; our ‘lay’ constructions must not be severed from the ‘scientific’ explanations provided by realism. As Sayer (1985b) put it:

In closed system ... science the contingencies of spatial form are either rendered constant or a matter of indifference where they concern spatial relations between objects which do not causally interact. ... In an open system there is a continually changing jumble of spatial relations, not all of them involving objects which are causally indifferent to one another. So even though concrete studies may not be interested in spatial form per se, it must be taken into account if the contingencies of the concrete and the differences therefrom to outcomes are to be understood. (Sayer 1984a; see also 1985b)

This was an important conclusion for the human and social sciences as a whole, but not just human geography, because it effectively undermined the possibility of any spatial social science. But some critics regarded it as the weak version of a much stronger thesis. In their view spatial configurations are important not only for concrete research but also for ‘abstract research’. To use Sayer’s own example: gunpowder is constituted as gunpowder, and hence possesses its specific causal powers, by virtue of the time-space relations which exist between its elements. This means that its constitution cannot be accounted for either by its time-space relations alone (the error of spatial science) or by its elements alone (the error of any composition approach): they must be considered together. This turned out to be of decisive importance in providing an ontology for a socio-spatial science. As Urry (1985) put it, ‘the social world should be seen as comprised of space-time entities having causal powers which may or may not be realised depending on the patterns of spatial-temporal interdependence [between them]’ (see also Bhaskar, 1986).

Realism was a powerful presence in human geography in the 1980s, but its star seemed to wane in the 1990s. In part, perhaps, this was the result of the connections made between realism and HISTORICAL MATERIALISM and between realism and STRUCTURATION THEORY. The retreat from (or advance beyond) these formulations seems to have gone hand in hand with a displacement of realism from the centre position it had assumed within post-positivist human geography (cf. Harvey, 1987; Pratt, 1995). In part, perhaps, this was also the result of a profound uncertainty about how accounts conducted under the sign of realism were to be written. Here one needs to remember that ‘realism’ refers not only to a twentieth-century philosophy but also to a mode of REPRESENTATION in the visual arts and literature which was particularly prominent in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. This is not to say that realism has no relevance to realist aesthetics – they almost certainly do not – but simply to note that the attentiveness to theoretical work which realism succeeded in making so important for analysis during the 1980s was, in the next decade, extended to equally searching philosophical reflection on description (cf. Sayer, 1989). This ‘crisis of representation’ called into question not only realist methodologies – the almost forensic precision of its ‘rational abstractions’ was increasingly seen as problematic – but also, in the case of some, the politics of realism. Some forms of POSTMODERNISM made ‘ontological depth’ yield to ‘depthlessness’, for example, while the rise of POST-STRUCTURALISM induced considerable suspicion towards the sort of ‘structures’ envisaged by realism and

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also fostered the development of a new ‘analytic of the surface’ (see also NON-REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY).

References

Suggested Reading

recreational recreation Any pursuit, activity (or even inactivity) which is undertaken voluntarily during leisure time primarily for the purposes of pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction. There is considerable overlap between studies of recreation, LEISURE and TOURISM. Indeed, in many cases the activities involved are the same, although the location, duration and consumer motivations of each can be very different. As Butler et al. (1998) suggest, ‘in recent years the differences between recreation and tourism in particular, except at a philosophical level, have become of decreasing significance and distinctions [have become] increasingly blurred’ (p. 4).

Studies of recreation have tended to categorize recreational activities according to three principal lines of division (Patmore, 1983). First, active recreation is differentiated from passive, according to the degree of physical exercise involved. Here there are connections, for example, with geographies of sport. To play in a football match is active; to watch is passive. Certain forms of active recreation, particularly those relating to health and leisure