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Realism and Feminism: End Time for Patriarchy?

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ests and in what conditions they can mobilise around them to bring about structural change.

A hidden ethic of human needs

Feminist poststructuralists' political aim is not to mobilise women against their oppression on the basis of their common interests, but to "disidentify", to welcome the "undecidability" of politics and the impossibility of saying what women are. Thus Elam recommends a "groundless solidarity", a "politics without the subject" which refuses "to close down the question of difference" (1994, 85). Butler wants us above all to avoid totalization and exclusion.

It seems as though the key feature of their feminist politics is that it leaves open the question of who can join in and what it is for!

However, poststructuralists increasingly recommend the *tactical* use of the term "women" as a basis for feminist mobilisation. Butler concedes that "there is some political necessity to speak as and for women". She recognises that while her own work

has been concerned to expose and ameliorate those cruelties by which subjects are produced and differentiated... this is not the only goal... there are questions of social and economic justice which are not primarily concerned with questions of subject formation (1995, 141).

Like most poststructuralist feminists, Butler refers to the wrongs done to women. Yet it is hard to see why cruelties matter, whether suffered by women or men, without some implicit moral realism. Why, for "tactical" reasons, do we want feminism to bring together the disparate groups of women? Why not let feminism itself go the way of gender, the target of the "subversive bodily acts" Butler recommends - i.e. of discursive, deconstructive ones?

It can only be because Butler, and others, care about the real conditions of women's lives, and want to see them ameliorated, which only makes sense in terms of a hidden ethic of human needs, and collective interests in the light of these.

Again, critical realism has the tools to deconstruct - and thus expose — the limits post-structuralists put on their own deconstructions.

The necessity of (critical) realism

In this case, as in others, poststructuralists inevitably return to

realism.

In "Situated Knowledges", Haraway famously retreats from her earlier view that feminist politics should be grounded, not on the category "woman", but on an "ironic political myth" of the self as cyborg (1991, 145). Instead, she now returns to the notion of a "successor science", because

My problem and "our" problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, and a no nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world... (Haraway 1991, 187).

Yet even after this clear statement she adds: "the approach I am recommending is not a version of realism, which has proved a rather poor way of engaging with the world's active agency" (*ibid.*, 197).

She simply does not realise that realism can recognise the historicity of theories and knowledge claims without assuming that what is true of our constructions need be true of their referents (Sayer 1997, 468).

Feminism makes claims about the nature of social relations, and adduces various sorts of evidence for these. It points out the falsity of dominant accounts of the social world and argues on the basis of rival accounts that deep and wide changes should take place.

A realist approach (and an ethically naturalist one) is therefore essential to the feminist project. To deal with the poststructuralist challenge, this realism needs to be critical.

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Realism and Feminism: End Time for Patriarchy?¹

Rob Archer

Critical realism has as yet all too infrequently been deployed in detailed empirical work. Rob Archer shows the way in the history of ideas about sex hormones, reconceptualizing patriarchy while he's at it.

A morphogenetic reconceptualization

Recent work by Margaret Archer (1995) has provided sociology with a practical methodological framework.² Central to her "morphogenetic approach" is the claim that structure, culture and agency are ontologically distinct levels of social reality, the relative interplay of which may be theorized via what she terms "analytical dualism".

This paper will briefly explore the explanatory potential of ana-

lytical dualism for the analysis of one particularly contentious concept within social science, namely patriarchy. The claim advanced here is that (a) patriarchy, if it is to have any explanatory import, be held to refer to *ideas* about men and women which can be rendered in propositional form in various ways ("women are naturally suited to domestic labour"); (b) as *ideas* they are socially inefficacious until taken up by agents; and (c) when they are taken up by agents, such ideas entangle agents in

specific logical relations which, in turn, predispose them towards specific courses of action. Thus (c) refers to the interplay of emergent relations between ideas (Archer's "propositional register" of society) and human agency.

However, it should be noted that there is no *necessary* reason why patriarchy should be approached in the manner delineated here. I am simply proffering a realist alternative for those who wish to retain it as part of their theoretical nomenclature and simultaneously eschew its evident elision of distinct strata of social reality. The irony of my "morphogenetic" reconceptualization of patriarchy is that those wholly dismissive of its employment in whatever guise could readily theorize this paper in terms of my own use of Archer's exposition of a "constraining contradiction" (see below), namely that in "rescuing" the concept of patriarchy, I am forced to truncate it in order to effect the sinking of the glaring differences between extant defenses and stringent critiques yet ultimately remain unsuccessful in rehabilitating it, as will be discussed.

Culture and agency: ideas and their users

Archer holds culture to be "all items of intelligibilia, that is...any item which has the dispositional capacity of being understood by someone" (1988, *xvi*). Within this she distinguishes "that sub-set of items to which the law of contradiction can be applied" (*ibid.*). Archer terms this the Cultural System (henceforth CS) and what agency makes of it Socio-Cultural Interaction (henceforth S-C).

As Archer points out, we are all born involuntaristically into a cultural system which is not of our making but which differentially conditions what we can do. For instance, culture constrains what can and cannot be said in a particular language and moreover introduces certain problem-free or problem-ridden situations via the relations between cultural parts, namely, for example, the problems upholders of beliefs/theories/ideologies necessarily face when such CS components are *socially* recognized as clashing. The CS can be analyzed in terms of its *logical consistency*, that is, the degree of consistency between the component parts of culture which exist independently of knowing subjects. Cultural *effects*, on the other hand, are properties which pertain solely to people and their activities, and can thus be analyzed in terms of *causal consensus*, that is, the degree of uniformity produced by the imposition of ideas by one set of people on another.

It is worth quoting Archer at length here:

...it is the pre-existence, autonomy and durability of... the CS which enables [its] identification as... distinct from the meanings held by agents at any given time. The distinction is made by virtue of the fact that there are *logical* relations prevailing between [CS] items, whereas it is *causal* relations which maintain between cultural agents. The logical consistency or inconsistency which characterizes relationships with the CS is a property of the world of ideas... or, if preferred, of the contents of libraries... we utilize this concept every day when we say that the ideas of X are consistent with those of Y... These are quite different from the other kind of everyday statement, to the effect that the ideas of X are influenced by those of Y, in which case we are talking about causal effects which are properties of people.... (Archer 1995, 179).

However, I am concerned with the effects of upholding or assenting to specific theories or beliefs which stand in particular logical relationships (of contradiction or complementarity)

to other theories or beliefs. Archer (1988; 1995) argues convincingly that upholders necessarily embroil themselves in one of *four* "situational logics". The CS is held to influence, not determine, those who uphold some of its components. For reasons of brevity, I am concerned with one particular situational logic, namely the "constraining contradiction" (necessary incompatibility). A necessary contradiction is a property of the CS (namely one of logical inconsistency between theory/belief A and theory/belief B) and *exerts a constraining influence* upon the S-C level if any agent(s) want to uphold a theory or belief. Importantly, there is nothing metaphysical about this, "no idealist overtones of superordinate battles between ideas: pure ideas purely sleep on in books until awoken by actors. It is dependence which generates the 'strain', which enforces the fraught relationship between A and B yet simultaneously prevents their divorce" (1995, 230). Briefly, a constraining contradiction (between A and B) confronts those committed to A who also have no option but to engage with B with a particular *logic*. This logic enforces (only whilst commitment remains) engagement with something antithetical but nonetheless indispensable. Repudiation of B is not on the S-C menu for exponents of A. Given that no genuine resolution is possible, and if B remains unaltered, then inevitably A's credibility is simply lost. As a result, the logic generated by their necessary incompatibility necessitates correction. The situational logic generated by the constraining contradiction generally results in the sinking of differences to achieve unification (*ibid.*, 233).

Patriarchal ideas and the case of sex hormones

As Pollert notes, the role of patriarchy in explaining the production and reproduction of women's oppression has been "exhaustively examined over fifteen years" (1996, 654). Like many unhappy with its ostensible explanatory role, Pollert retains the concept simply as a short-hand *descriptor*. She maintains that "(w)e need far more complex metaphors to understand class and gender than 'patriarchy' can provide" (*ibid.*).

Yet realism is quintessentially about *explanation*; the development of concepts, not metaphors, that refer to *real* phenomena. Whilst patriarchy *qua* descriptor may point the sociologist or social historian in the direction of "women's oppression", the problem still remains as to *how* such oppression occurs. If feminist sociologists and social historians wish to retain the notion of patriarchy, then its portmanteau/descriptive status must surely be rejected.

In a similar vein, Ramazanoglu notes that patriarchy is *central* to feminist sociological writings and "encapsulates the mechanisms, ideology and social structures which have enabled men... to gain and to maintain their domination over women. *Any term with such a wide-ranging task is likely to present problems*" (1989, 23, my emphasis).

Indeed, the realist distinction between necessity and contingency becomes unashamedly *conflated* as witnessed in the juxtaposition of ideology *and* social structure. It is not being denied that the two intertwine and are mutually influential. Rather, I wish to maintain that the two are ontologically distinct, neither one depending ontologically upon the other (although ideas would not, of course, exist without a prior materiality from which to emerge).

In fact, to elide capitalist social relations and ideas under the catch-all concept of patriarchy is to contradict many feminist analyses that rightly point to the essential *contingency* of sex-segregation, lower levels of remuneration, etc. Capitalism, grounded in internal and necessary relations (Capital : Labour),

does not presuppose that women be treated differentially *vis-à-vis* men for its existence.

However, Ramazanoglu goes on to write that patriarchy refers to ideas *and* practices, “ranging from the most intimate of sexual encounters to the most general and economic and ideological factors” (1989, 34). Referentially speaking, patriarchy is being *overloaded*. It is precisely because of its all-encompassing nature that the concept ends up being a nebulous descriptor. I submit that perhaps a more analytically-rigorous approach would be to hold patriarchy to refer to the changing corpus of ideas about men and women -- of which sexism is a component part -- that is, specific denizens of Archer’s CS.

Walby, for example, conceptualizes patriarchy as composed of six structures: “the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in institutions... The six structures have causal effects upon each other, but are relatively autonomous” (1990, 20). Yet this leaves one wondering what precisely *is* patriarchy? To maintain that patriarchy is, *inter alia*, the patriarchal mode of production is tantamount to saying that capitalism is capitalist patriarchy!

Clearly the concept is being ontologically overloaded. For (i) male violence and issues pertaining to sexuality are wholly independent of the internal and necessary relations that constitute class structure and the state (notwithstanding the fact that some states explicitly endorse, or attenuate the seriousness of, male violence and related issues surrounding sexuality via its laws); and (ii) matters cultural need distinguishing at two levels: the CS and S-C, where the CS is relatively independent of things structural but influences and is influenced by the latter, and where S-C interaction entails the use of structural resources in attempts at ideological manipulation and so on.

Given that Walby wants to use patriarchy as an umbrella concept to refer to class structural relations *and* cultural phenomena, it makes sense in view of the foregoing to *reduce its ontological purview and hold patriarchy to refer to propositional (CS) items*. I want the concept to draw attention to the fact that the practical analyst is looking to focus on propositions which are used ideologically, i.e. to promote the interests of men at the expense of women. Such propositions are not materially groundless: they are necessarily grounded in class structural relations which at present invest men with objective vested interests in maintaining their generic position against women *and* in objective biology.³

Patriarchal ideas and agency: the case of sex hormones

To illustrate briefly the conditional influence of a constraining contradiction, one can take the development of sex hormones as an apposite example. Indeed, the development of endocrinology during the 1920s and 1930s neatly highlights the dynamic interplay of patriarchy and agency (i.e. S-C interaction).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, sex endocrinology was characterized by two different approaches: the biological and the chemical. Both disciplines were (and are) concerned with *theorising* the generative properties of the body. Thus when both disciplines are accentuated simultaneously, each must *necessarily* contend with the theoretical propositions of the other. However, in the early years, the study of sex hormones was dominated by a biological approach; namely by physiologists, gynaecologists, anatomists and zoologists (Oudshoorn 1994, 15). Importantly, such scientific endeavours were considerably affected by pre-scientific ideas (the CS level) about masculinity and femininity. Indeed, the idea of testes and

ovaries as agents of masculinity and femininity was paradigmatic in underpinning all scientific activity *vis-à-vis* the body. The concept of hormones as substances playing a regulatory role in physical processes in organisms had a considerable impact upon physiology. The chemical messengers believed to originate from the gonads (sex glands) were designated sex hormones, with male sex hormones designating the secretion of the testes and female hormones designating ovarian secretion. It was suggested at the time that *the key had been found to understanding what made a man a man and a woman a woman*. Oudshoorn notes that gynaecologists were especially attracted to the concept of female sex hormones for it seemed to promise a better understanding and thus greater control over the disorders in their female patients (*ibid.*, 19). The immutable dualism of men versus women which permeated work on sex hormones between 1905 and 1920 fitted well with, and was buttressed by, patriarchal propositions about women’s “biological destiny”. Indeed, the ostensible antagonism between sex-specific hormones was invariably compared with the relationship between men and women.

However, as the field of endocrinology became more specialized, the dualism which underpinned all research was seriously challenged, to the extent that the biologists, in their unremitting commitment to dualist ideology, were confronted with the determinate effects of a constraining contradiction. The challenge came from the biochemists. Only very briefly could the biologists ignore the counter-theoretical formulations which were firmly grounded in the cumulative evidence. Such evidence clearly showed the presence of the same hormones in *both* sexes. Given that the biologists remained firmly wedded to patriarchal dualism, it is hardly surprising that they were compelled to look for other theories to account for such “anomalies”.

Indeed, scientists started looking for

a plausible theory to explain the source and identity of these “heterosexual” hormones... In the 1930s, different hypotheses were proposed to explain the presence of female sex hormones in male organisms... *scientists tried hard to maintain the dualistic conceptualization of sex...* In 1929 [it was] suggested that female sex hormones were not produced by the male body itself, *but that they originated from food...* Despite criticism, the food hypothesis remained popular (Oudshoorn 1994, 27, my emphasis).

Whilst conveniently they did not publish reports explaining the presence of male sex hormones in females with regard to food-intake, the situational logic of a constraining contradiction meant that the search continued, ultimately leading to a conceptual shift. Female sex hormones were no longer conceptualized as restricted to female organisms and this applied equally to males. It did not take long for the concept of an exclusively sex-specific function of sex hormones to be reconsidered. Here, again, exponents of dualist theorising suggested that female sex hormones in all probability had no function in the male body because of a low concentration. Indeed, it was postulated that female sex hormones caused sexual and psychological disorders! However, by the turn of the century, “heterosexual hormones” were taken as axiomatic.

Yet whilst the biochemists in turn preferred to prefix female/male hormones with “so-called”, in the end suggesting a complete abandonment, the biologists did exactly the opposite. Instead, a more specialized terminology was developed — oestrogen and testosterone. Thus on the one hand, sexual speci-

ficity was abandoned, related terminology was not:

from the 1930s until recently, the names male and female sex hormones have been kept in current use... *In this respect the biological perspective overruled the chemical perspective (ibid., 36, my emphasis).*

Yet it is not so much that the biological perspective overruled the biochemical one, for the dualist biological propositions (theory "A") were corrected somewhat in order to be consistent with the compelling arguments for "heterosexual" hormones (theory "B"). Given the evidential force adduced by proponents of "B", the proponents of "A" were confronted with a situational logic that led, among other things, to *ad hoc* reformulations designed to rescue patriarchal dualism. Ultimately, of course, patriarchal dualism *per se* lost out, although a residue of such dualism remained in the form of mere labels. Implicitly all knew who had "won". The constraining contradiction resulted in one-sided correction, namely $A > B$.

Success at last or another constraining contradiction?

Above all, it should be clear from the foregoing that "patriarchy" has been overburdened, carrying a crippling weight of structures, practices, ideas and sexual relationships. By lightening the load and seeing patriarchy as ideational, the concept can be accorded greater analytical purchase.

However, the process by which I have reconceptualized "patriarchy" may itself be legitimately theorized in terms of a "constraining contradiction" by those who dismiss its explanatory potential, for here it may be countered that, as a result of upholding theory "A", I have been forced to correct it (in this case to "chop off" bits) in order to sink the differences between "A" and its contradictory counterpart, "B". Yet ideational unification is not achieved for it still remains the case that (reconfigured) patriarchy *qua* corpus of propositions cannot withstand *the* most damning riposte proffered by some feminist commentators 4, viz. that patriarchy should simply revert to its erstwhile meaning, "rule of the father".

Thus since its initial elaboration, "patriarchy" has *ever* remained a nebulous descriptor, providing practical social analysis with no theoretical purchase. Indeed, it may reasonably be countered that sexism, which I mention as a component of patriarchy, could equally do the job in hand; a job which eschews the elision of irreducible strata and the conflation of necessity and contingency.

Successive syncretic endeavours that attend to its theoretical redundancy, brought about by its unavoidable entanglement with Weber's *description* of patriarchy as referring historically to a particular type of authority relationship within the household (1964, 346), are exemplified by Beechey (1977), Hartmann (1981), Delphy (1977), Mitchell (1975), Harding (1981), Witz (1992) and Walby (1990). As in the case of the biologists above, the latter have engaged in a process of corrective adjustment. The conditional influence of a constraining contradiction entails that protagonists of "patriarchy" correct their propositions, a process the length of which cannot be decided *a priori*.

Thus, for example, Hartmann's corrective formulation, following S-C accentuation of its inconsistency, gave way to what seemed to be more precise and sophisticated one-sided correction. But as Archer points out

... this corrective adjustment of A to some version of B spells a radical change in its character: a

shift to an A^n which often indicates the social demise of the theory or belief in relation to the salience originally achieved for A and a degenerating problem-shift within the theory or belief itself (1988, 168).

Indeed, the corrective adjustments simply resulted in ontological displacement of the initial problem. In other words, the successive endeavours to equip (feminist) social theory with a hard-cutting *tool* focused syncretic energy on rejigging patriarchy to fit completely different jobs, viz. "analysis" of: all historical civilizations (Millet, 1971); men's control over women's labour power (Hartmann, 1981); personal psychology (Mitchell, 1975; Harding, 1981); the domestic mode of production and capitalist social relations (Walby, 1990).

Each successive corrective manoeuvre nevertheless remains fundamentally untenable. Such untenability, it must be remembered, is a CS affair and is derived from the logical contradiction that necessarily obtains between extant "theoretical" conceptions and their historical precursor. At the S-C level, the latter constitutes a constraining or problem-ridden situation in which protagonists of "patriarchy" ineluctably embroil themselves.

The problem-ridden situation in which I have embroiled myself still remains. Whilst I have proffered a specifically *critical realist* reappraisal, one is still left with the logical issue of its precise theoretical import. The issue is a matter of logic for one still has to face the unpalatable issue of its initial genesis *qua* historical descriptor. A sympathetic critic would conceivably suggest the alternative of theorising the changing nature of "women's oppression" via an analysis of the relative interplay of structure (capitalist social relations, education system, etc.) and specific ideas (sexism). Central to the latter enterprise is the necessity of agential mediation, the outcome of which cannot be decided *a priori*.

Indeed, Bradley (1989, 51) has rightly recognized the *logical impossibility* of the theoretical pretensions of "patriarchy". In criticizing one of the more recent syncretic formulations, she writes of Walby thus:

But the attempt to characterize patriarchy as *both* a domestic mode of production *and* a set of structures external to it seems to me theoretically dubious. If patriarchy really is a mode of production, all those elements must surely be included within it? This seems a clear attempt to have your cake and eat it (*ibid.*, 55).

But even *if* patriarchy is a mode of production, we still end up with unhelpful description. Bradley needs to bring home the full force of her critique, namely the *conflation* of necessity and contingency that underpins Walby's work; that the capitalist mode of production has no *necessary* causal dependence upon the exploitation of women *qua* women. Interestingly, Bradley maintains that the (logical) impossibility of a resolution

... need not in itself invalidate the concept... I believe we have to go on talking about patriarchy, if only on the grounds of conventional usage. This [patriarchy] has become the key concept in the new history and sociology of women and cannot be rejected. *De facto*, it has become indispensable (*ibid.*, 56).

This is a useful juncture at which to conclude. For (i) whilst the CS is quintessentially composed of *logical* relations among its components, S-C interaction does not entail that agents must

live logically; and (ii) whether syncretic repairs actually stick also remains a matter of contingency, and therefore enjoins an analysis of, *inter alia*, S-C manipulation of power and resources. In other words, there are clear material constraints that predispose Bradley towards retaining *some* version of “patriarchy”, namely the academic community in which she works and where the government-imposed need to publish remains uppermost in most academics’ thoughts. Of course, the logical impossibility of resolution has left Bradley unable to pinpoint its continuing theoretical utility. Or perhaps this is just patriarchal cynicism on my part?

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Notes

- 1 This is a revised section of a paper (Carter and Archer 1997) presented at the Inaugural Conference of the Centre for Critical Realism at Warwick University, August 1997. I wish to thank Margaret Archer, Bob Carter and the conference participants.
- 2 Other equally robust realist methodological frameworks have been provided by, among others, Andrew Sayer (1994) and Derek Layder (1990, 1997).
- 3 See Assiter (1992) for an excellent discussion of the origins of the development of patriarchal ideology.
- 4 For example, Michele Barrett (1980).

ACTIVITIES

Towards an Ontological Aesthetics

Gary MacLennan

This article is intended to serve a dual purpose: to initiate a debate in these pages in the important area of its subject matter; and to provide readers with an example of the rewards obtainable from posting their work-in-progress on the Bhaskar List. To the latter end we publish as a postscript an edited exchange between Gary and Tobin Nellhaus which followed Gary’s three posts to the List.

*Though the Philistines may jostle
You will rank as an apostle
In the high aesthetic band
If you walk down Piccadilly
With a poppy or a lily
In your medieval hand.*
(Gilbert)

Introduction

This paper is a summary of three posts to the Bhaskar List and incorporates points made in response. My intention is to continue the discussions. These began when I suggested that the concept of absence may be a fruitful one to explore in the devel-

opment of a critical realist aesthetics primarily because such an aesthetics would be ontological and absence lies at the heart of critical realism.

Which aesthetics?

For Adorno the history of aesthetics can be understood as a shift from aesthetics as the philosophy of beauty (Kant) to aesthetics as the philosophy of art with the emphasis on “the constitutive relationship between art and freedom” (Schiller, Hegel) (in Jameson 1990, 219).

Where, though, is one to place Bhaskar in this schema? His remarks on aesthetics take up a single paragraph of *Plato Etc* (1994, 155-6). There he distinguishes between (a) ideologies of the aesthetic, (b) aesthetic experience, and both from (c) the theory of art, and (d) art criticism.

For Bhaskar aesthetic experiences are ideological when offered to us as “dummy resolutions” for the problems generated by a society which is marked by power relations of exploitation and domination. This conflicts with the genuine element within aesthetic experience, which is the moment of desire, hope, and