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## Chapter 2

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### Realism, inside and outside texts

[pp. 23-41]

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John Lister (*Socialist Outlook* No 14) says ‘thoughts ... are material things ...’. They are not. Matter is that which exists independently of thoughts. There is no other definition. If thoughts are matter, how can matter exist independently of them? To say that thought is material is no better than saying matter is ‘mental’, and turns materialism into a nonsense. Both say ‘matter and thoughts are the same stuff’. Cliff Slaughter, Leeds. PS I must correct Mike Pearse’s letter on the WRP. The WRP’s crisis of 1985 was not ‘terminal’.

(Slaughter, 1989: 33)

Is discourse ‘real’, and is discourse analysis picking up ‘real things’? How do discourses relate to the ‘real world’? If we changed discourse, would that change the order of things? These questions frame and trip up critiques and defences of discourse-analytic research. There are old debates at work here, longstanding positions, in discourse, being rehearsed, and it is important to acknowledge the way two of the most important of these bear down on those of us who are trying to disentangle ourselves from the confused mess of traditional psychology and social science.

The first debate revolves around an ontological problem (to do with the nature of beings and things) with political consequences for how and where we direct our energies to understand and change the world. The two key opposing positions are materialism, in which everything that exists depends on matter, a real world, and idealism, in which ideas are independent and creative of the things we think are real. A materialist position entails a thorough scepticism about spiritual explanations of phenomena (archetypes, gaia, gods and so forth) and looks to an evolutionary account of the development of [24] the material preconditions for language and thought. Interpretation here is only the prelude to a process of active engagement with real structures and attempts to change them. For a materialist, discourse must be related to the material world and discourse analysis must be connected in some way to other scientific modes of investigation. An idealist position, on the other hand, either leads to universalist accounts of the order of things, in which spiritual arrangements in hidden realms explain our experience, or to relativism, in which the power of thought to create things means that there is nothing more real than our different accounts, stories and theories. Instead of trying to change the world, the point is merely to reinterpret it. For an idealist, discourse is an independent and creative force, and science is just another discourse.

The second debate concerns an epistemological problem (to do with the nature and source of knowledge) with a more specific academic remit, but no less political consequences for how we defend a form of research which is able to, at

least, empower those we study. The key opposing positions are brutally simplified here, but these are the ways ideas from the past weigh down like nightmares on the minds of those living in psychology now. On the one hand behaviourism sustains the positivist science world-view and empiricist method in which only things that can be observed are worth studying (and anything that is worth studying can be measured). Language, discourse, in the crasser formulations of this view, is merely verbal behaviour. At the other side stands humanism, an umbrella term for the different alternative approaches which value varieties of experience and understanding (which are not reducible to correlations and statistical tests). It is within this alternative humanist strand that the turn to language during the crisis in social psychology has given birth to discourse analysis.

A problem is that these debates hook into one another. The positions seem to map onto each other. Competing materialist and idealist discourses here become tangled up with behaviourist and humanist discourses. This tangle has had the effect of pulling radicals in psychology in different surprising directions. There are two traps here. On the one hand, a first trap, there is a strong temptation for some to hold firm to a materialist view, to equate idealism with humanism, and to end up defending some version of traditional behaviourist psychology. While there are politically radical behaviourists, this route often leads to a sharp split between a critical [25] position and a simple dehumanising academic or clinical psycho-logical practice. On the other hand, a second trap some radicals are just as keen to adopt an anti-positivist stance, to equate behaviourism with materialism, and to end up being sucked into some version of idealism. Again, there are humanist action researchers into empowerment, but this route also all too often leads to passive, cynical and ultimately obstructive views of politics.

The mistaken idea that discourses create all we know and could know, all there is, falls into and fuels that second trap. It is not surprising that there is a 'worried about the real' discourse now which circulates among discourse analysts and their critics, and it is necessary to clear some way through two positions which are reproduced in speculations about the nature of the 'objects' that discourses contain: (i) one position is that things which become objects of discourse then exist only inside texts. To say this would be to adopt an extreme 'linguistic realist' argument, a current code phrase for relativism, here idealism; (ii) an alternative line, that things have no reality in discourse because things 'really' exist only outside texts, is pursued by extreme brute empiricists keen to reduce phenomena to observable behaviour. Neither of these positions is right.

It is clear that we need some way of talking about real things to ground discourse analysis, a materialist view sensitive to the powers of discourse which develops a critical realist position for psychology. In this chapter I will first of all briefly outline the bare bones of a realist position, and then, second, go on to relate this to ways of understanding the powers of discourse. In the third section I will turn to the ways in which a realist view of discourse could connect with conceptions of social structure and then, in the final section, address questions of change. First, then, realism.

## **REALISM**

There are four features of the new realist position that has emerged in psychology in the last two decades (Manicas and Secord, 1983). These features effectively distil the realist philosophies of science elaborated by Harré (1970, 1986b) and then, in a critical realist

fashion, by Bhaskar (1978, 1989).

The first point concerns ontology, the nature or, better, the natures of things. This point immediately addresses some of the concerns of humanists, for a realist view focuses on the manner in [26] which things are complex composites of interacting structures. For example, a human being as a thing is a complex of biological structures, and this complex is able to move, speak, monitor movements and speech and also engage in a 'second-order' monitoring of the monitoring. The statement in the 'ethogenic' new-paradigm literature that we should 'for scientific purposes treat people as if they were human beings' (Harré and Secord, 1972: 84) flowed, in part, from a concern with the particular powers of second-order monitoring creatures. It is in the nature of a human being that it is reflexive, one of the powers with which it is endowed by virtue of its structure. The speech (and other communication) of a human being is structured into language(s) such that when groups or networks are formed an individual can move in and out of them, sharing all or part of the rules and tacit knowledge that hold them together. The study of a social world, then, cannot proceed by breaking it down into bits, into individuals. Explanations of the powers of these structures then need to address the way a complex works at a particular level. It is not possible to explain, or explain away, a pattern of behaviour by breaking it up into smaller bits. This is why people, by virtue of their nature, resist a reductionist account.

The second point is to do with epistemology, what we can know and how we know it. Scientific laws concern, and should concern, the causal properties of structures, and here it is necessary to make a distinction between, on the one hand, statistical probabilities which may merely pick up some connections or correlations, and, on the other hand, the way in which the powers of things are understood as possibilities or potentials. In this second sense, scientific laws are attempting to express patterns which occur and to picture the tendencies of things to act or react in particular ways. In some of the physical sciences it is possible to construct almost closed systems (test-tubes and suchlike) in which the tendencies of materials in different conditions can be studied, and the powers of those materials, their natures, described. Even in the physical sciences, however, factors such as gravity make a complete closed system impossible. It is necessary, then, to have theories about these operations under hypothetical conditions of complete closure. In the human sciences, closed systems exist only in the fantasies of hardened positivists. The theories we have about human nature can specify powers, but many of these powers can be exercised only by virtue of the engagement of a human being with others. Different, higher-level, [27] rule-governed social worlds or communities are, in turn, not closed but open systems. All patterns of human interaction can only exist, as it were, in a state of uneven and combined development with those around them.

The third point revolves around questions of moral/political concern in knowledge, the way knowledge is structured. For a critical realist, the role of theory is crucial not only in the way it structures phenomena (and facilitates the identification and description of structures) but also in the apparatus of science. Knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is historically produced but aims to represent the world outside. There is a tension here. On the one hand, scientific knowledge employs rational criteria which have been developed in particular ways in particular cultures with varying views of rationality. On the other hand, there is an appeal to rationality because there is a world existing

independent of experience. This means that scientific knowledge is at once historically bounded, provisional, and is also practical, true. This tension is not to be resolved (as if it were a problem), for it is actually one of the conditions for the production of knowledge. The empiricist fantasy of falsification as the simple knock-out criterion for saying which facts are incorrect tries to resolve that tension. For a realist, the way knowledge 'represents', works in the world can be both right as an overall research programme and wrong in specific details. There is no one-to-one relationship between a description and what it describes.

The fourth point concerns practice. The issue is to do with the connection between prediction and control on the one hand, and the relation between explanation and discipline on the other. The problem of creating closed systems is a largely technical one in the physical sciences, though one which gives rise to a lot of rhetoric about replicability (e.g., Potter and Mulkay, 1985). For the human sciences, the problem is both technical and deeply political. Because structures interact with those they are a part of, and with others, it is not possible to predict social behaviour at any level without controlling it. An abstract way of putting this point is to say that it is possible to make explanation and prediction symmetrical only under conditions of complete closure. A more concrete way of expressing it is to say that explanations of human behaviour can work only if there is the possibility of constructing closed systems in which there are no points of influence from without or resistance from within. Complex dehumanising social relationships are the prerequisite for controlled [28] behaviour, and positivist psychology. The pity is that much positivist psychology does work, and this is, in part, because~ once particular social arrangements are in place, they then operate as relatively enduring structures with their own knowable causal properties.

These four features of realism - the nature of things as complex structures, the use of theories about their tendencies under conditions of closure, the nature of rational knowledge as presupposing a world independent of experience, and the relationship between explanation and prediction - usefully provide a means for understanding the powers of discourse and the relationship between discourse and social structure, as I will go on to show.

## **POWERS OF DISCOURSE**

Discourse (language organised into sets of texts) and discourses (systems of statements within and through those sets) have a power. To say this is not to attribute agency to a system, but simply to acknowledge constraining and productive forces. There are forces of institutional disadvantage and division, for example, which do not flow from individual intentions, and the phenomena of power and ideology need not be traced to conspiratorial machinations. To understand the powers and dynamics of discourse here we do not have to go outside the texts to hidden authors. In some cases (such as conspiracy theories) it would be dangerous to attempt to do so. It is necessary to focus on language as a structured system in its own right, and discourse analysis unravels the conceptual elisions and confusions by which language enjoys its power. It is implicit ideology critique. But there is also more than language, and discourse analysis needs to attend to the conditions which make the meanings of texts possible. It may be useful to conceive of things (in the broadest sense of the word) as being endowed with one of three

possible 'object statuses', in one of three possible categories (but with many things appearing, in different forms, in more than one of the categories).

### **Ontological object status**

There is, first of all, the realm in which things have ontological status. There are material conditions for the production of thought, and these include, though not in the way that reductionists would have it, the 'biological bases of behaviour', molecules, cells, neural networks, [29] brains. When we are specifying such bases for thought we have to take care that the autonomy of this realm is not overrated. Thought, for example, is an attribute of beings embodied in, interacting with the world. This is why computer 'intelligence' cannot replicate the nature of thought (Dreyfus, 1967). Further, the nature of memory is largely a function of relationships, communities, and requires the material existence of many bodies structured into positions where habitual communication is possible (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). For a realist, such as Bhaskar (1989), such things belong to an 'intransitive' realm of physical structures endowed with particular powers. Much of the 'practical' sphere that Harré (1979) describes is made up of things which have ontological status.

The first realist point about the nature of things as complex structures is relevant here. A threefold problem arises in the way such things are understood by traditional psychology. Not only does brute empiricism: (i) try to reduce phenomena to a biological level as if it were the only material basis; and (ii) claim that things with ontological status can be directly known, unmediated by the structured relationships that a researcher is herself part of; but it also (iii) refuses to understand the particular natures of the objects it studies, treating, for example, groups as if they were people, people as if they were brains. It is not possible to describe or replicate precisely behaviours and responses, or to say, as some social psychologists have in critiques of discourse analysis, that it should 'demonstrate its superiority in dealing with the same phenomena and issues that concern social psychologists' (Abrams and Hogg, 1990: 219). We are not dealing with the 'same phenomena'.

### **Epistemological object status**

There is no simple correspondence between things with ontological status and the things we have given meaning to, talk about, know about. Here, objects are on the edge of or have entered discourse, and things known are in a second sphere. These are things with epistemological object status. This does not mean that the things known, experienced through discourse, are not also endowed with ontological object status, but the point is that for a knowledge to exist, ontological object status is not enough. For a realist, it is not possible to obtain knowledge about things with only ontological status, those in the intransitive realm, without a pre-existing array of [30] knowledge (and techniques) which lie in this second 'transitive' realm (Bhaskar, 1989).

The second two points of a realist view are relevant here. The point that it is necessary to use theories to picture the tendencies of things under hypothetical conditions of closure necessitates an historical account of the growth of knowledge. Here Kuhnian and Lakatosian descriptions (which are concerned with paradigm revolutions and

research programmes) of assumptions which frame and drive the development of science give to the realist account a sensitivity to the social grounds of knowledge as material grounds. The point that systems of rational knowledge presuppose a world independent of experience draws attention to the need for (i) a form of relativism which respects the different and provisional culturally bounded explanations of the nature of things (and what things there are) which does not slide into (ii) the Nietzschean perspectivism of high post-structuralists for whom there are only ever competing stories. The first, (i) relativism, can also be grounded in the assumption that there is a real outside discourse which we are trying to understand (and in rules of discourse which value forms of argumentation, rhetorical debate about the real). The second, (ii) perspectivism, values only the struggle of different versions and forms of resistance in which appeals to rational criteria are seen as mere tactics to get one version into a dominant position (Descombes, 1980).

### **Moral/political status**

Harré's (1979) 'expressive' order includes the knowledge we have of things, but I also want to mark out a third realm which is within the expressive order, within discourse, in which things have a moral/political status. Much talk about psychological phenomena is ideologically loaded such that objects such as 'intelligence', 'race', 'attitudes', etc., can be called into being, and thus given a 'reality'. In this third realm of things with a moral/political status, and it is a realm we cannot wish away (it is necessary to human society), we can always remind ourselves that such objects are being advanced for strategic reasons - we can treat them 'as if, they were there. Discourses and texts, having emerged from the third realm, now have epistemological status for some analysts, a status which is contested by others (e.g., Potter *et al.*, 1990). [31]

The fourth point made by realists, that concerning the relationship between explanation and prediction, is relevant here, for it is not possible to produce knowledge without being implicated in some way with political matters. The conditions of complete closure, for example, which guarantee a knowledge of human activity have been traced historically to the emergence of systems of control and surveillance. Foucault (1977), for example, describes the way that the regulation of prison populations, and then the population outside prisons, forged a link between prediction and control. Many of the phenomena observed by experimental psychologists are produced under conditions of enforced physical closure, in which the replication of those phenomena is necessarily predicated on the disempowerment of 'subjects' outside the laboratory.

There are two general related issues which arise from the notion that there is a third realm of objects with moral/political status. The first is that the (second) epistemological realm contains 'objects' of knowledge which are derived both from research into the ontological realm (with much of the translation in the modern world in this respect conducted by science) *and* from the objects produced in the moral/political sphere (with much of this translation process functioning as the production of fake intransitive material). The epistemological status of things, then, is often contested because such things pretend to represent the real (they derive from objects that really exist) when they actually merely represent items constructed in a political rhetoric (they derive typically from ideological pictures of the real). Take the notion of 'schizophrenia', for example,

which has a status as an object of knowledge (epistemological), which is now supposed to rest in chromosome 5 (ontological) but which is actually distilled from debates in medical psychiatry (moral/political).

The second issue is that the moral/political realm reflects, and reproduces, dominant cultural forms of thought. Here it is not only that social arrangements become (relatively) enduring structures, but that we account for those structures and the causes of things in particular ways. In higher education and research, for example, there is a dynamic towards individual choice in which a range of forces (companies, local authorities, students, parents) are encouraged to determine what is taught (and researched) in the academic institutions. Deliberate policy decisions make places of education into self-governing corporate bodies, but the motivating forces for the transformation of academic issues into matters susceptible to a [32] cost-benefit analysis seem to be the newly 'empowered' consumers. In a sense, this is true, but the nature (and 'powers') of individuals at any time flow not so much from their 'attitudes' or 'motivations' (which they then 'communicate' to others), but from the overall ideological context. We can tease apart that context through analysis of the discourses (of 'choice', 'individualism', 'efficiency') which set the ground rules for action. People 'make' discourse, but not in discursive conditions of their own choosing.

### **Relations between the three realms**

There are three further points about the relationship between object status in the three realms. The ways in which things appear in material form, as knowledge, and as politically contested phenomena (and sometimes all at once) is the source of much confusion and ideological mystification.

A first point is to do with the way brute empiricism in traditional psychology seems to be comfortable only with either/or categories, and so treats the objects it conjures into existence as real in the way everything else is real. There is a continual appeal to the real, but it is a fantasised 'real' which owes a lot to individualism (with the 'individual' as an object brought into discourse as a moral/political object). It is *not* possible to discover meanings, for example, by going to the real 'source', for 'communication' is *not* the transfer of 'intentions' from one individual head to another (Easthope, 1990). To translate terms from discourse analysis into 'dependent variables' and suchlike would simply replace a focus on the organisation of language with the traditional attempts to define, predict and control 'behaviours', 'cognitions', etc. (things which are not really there).

The argument has been advanced that 'everyday human activities do not just *appear* vague and indefinite because we are still as yet ignorant of their true underlying nature, but that they are *really* vague' (Shotter, 1990a: 9). Reductionism appeals to the real, but its objects are called into being in the moral/political sphere, and are made to operate 'as if' they were true (as part of the apparatus of regulation which is the psy-complex). This is not to say that we do not need 'models of the person' compatible with a discourse approach (and I take up this question in Part III of this book), but discourse analysis is mainly concerned with the ways in which such 'objects' arose and the functions they serve in language and social relations. [33]

Second, it should be clear that the (re) definition of a field of study by discourse analysis as consisting of 'texts' and 'discourses' should not necessarily lead to us, as

experimental social psychologists have charged (Abrams and Hogg, 1990), being unable to believe that there is anything else outside language. This accusation also flows from the problem positivist psychologists have with a flexible, fuzzy sense of reality. When something can be interpreted (and so becomes a text) it does not dissolve and lose all other object status. When experimental social psychologists define their object of study, they want to see it in all places - claiming, for example, that 'social behaviour can occur everywhere, including a crowded subway' (Deaux and Wrightsman, 1984: 5). Even they need not wish away everything else as if it did not exist, though it does sometimes appear that they are tempted by this wish.

It is true that to talk of discourses as if they were things capable of intersecting, overlapping, positioning subjects can also lead to an abstraction and reification of theoretical constructs, constructs which are often politically loaded. The risk is worth taking, for it is crucial that we hold to some conception of the *difference* between discourses, and show how contests between different structures of meaning operate as part of the architecture of society. This happens as we move beyond 'common sense'. Just as there are different discourses, there are dominant and dominated cultures, different 'common senses'. To identify a discourse is to take a position, and the ability to step outside a discourse and to label it in a particular way is a function of both the accessing of dominant cultural meanings *and* the marginal (critical) position which the researcher takes (within or alongside another discourse or sub-culture or 'common sense').

There is a third point which concerns the importance of the setting for the operation of discourses: the way different settings give rise to different meanings, and the position of the researcher in the construction of those meanings (Sherrard, 1991). Here, it is important to note that for traditional psychologists to point to 'situational factors' as part of an attempt to devalue discourse research (e.g., Abrams and Hogg, 1990) is to repeat the mistaken assumption that the things a psychologist studies are discrete entities which interact with one another in, at least potentially, predictable ways. It would be possible to ask questions about differences in discourse in different circumstances, but such questions should be framed in terms of the conditions for the employment of different discourses and their [34] intersection at different subject positions in institutions governed by relations of power and ideology.

It is in this context, of practice, that the issue of 'empowerment' could seriously be addressed, for it is only when the wider context is understood that one gets a sense of how particular discourses reproduce a dominant culture. Just as certain objects are called into being, given a moral/political status, then researched (given epistemological status) and treated as if they really are there (as if they had ontological status), so, as a critical response, certain objects can be studied as objects (solely, perhaps) of a discourse and thereby be deconstructed. Here, the researcher is caught up in moral/political choices concerning the reproduction and transformation of discourses. These choices also concern the reproduction and transformation of relationships with research participants (Bhavnani, 1990).

To move beyond traditional psychology, beyond an obsession with 'facts' about things as if they were all of the same kind, beyond an inability to believe that things could both be inside and outside texts and beyond a limited notion of situations as context for behaviour, is also to move into the realm of power and ideology. The relationships which frame discourse research are part of wider social structures, and

our understanding of those structures is intimately linked with our understanding of change.

## **STRUCTURE**

There are many notions of social structure. Four concepts of social structure have been usefully outlined recently (Porpora, 1989), and I will briefly mention some of the implications of each, spending a little longer on a realist account. These four concepts are hotly debated, as one would expect, in sociology, and they have direct relevance to a discourse-analytic psychology.

A first view is one that is most directly compatible with tacit theories of the social in orthodox psychology. Here, social structures are simply patterns of behaviour which are stable enough to be measured and predicted. There is no such thing as 'social class', 'culture' or the 'state'. There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women. Even the family is a collection of individuals behaving in predictable ways. In this account, and this is what most psychologists do as easily as breathing, we are invited to [35] adopt a 'microviewpoint', look at 'microrepetition' of 'micro-behaviours' in 'micro-interaction' in 'microsituations', engage in 'microtranslation' (Collins, 1981). If we adopted this account, it would be virtually impossible to do discourse analysis, for discourses are structured sets of terms, tropes, metaphors, structures which are realised when they are used, but are more than 'micro-verbal-behaviour'. This account is so determinedly reductionist that it really has no account of social structure.

This view is mirrored in traditional sociology by a second account which treats structure as a system of regularities which have reality as 'social facts'. Because the regularities are there to be found independently of the conceptions of social structure used by individuals, they can be described in an objective (and quantifiable) way. This view, which flows from a Durkheimian tradition, does not have much to say about the activities of individuals, and deals with that issue by splitting 'science' into a type which studies social structure, sociology, and that which studies individual behaviour and minds, psychology (Parker, 1987a, 1989a). This account is positivist, and represents some of the worst 'anti-humanist' features of orthodox structuralism in which persons are simply ciphers of systems of meaning. Apart from devaluing the reflections, choices and struggles with the organisation of discourse that an individual does engage in, this notion of structure would have us believe that discourse 'analysis' would be only an objective matter, when it does also always require moral/political choices about terminology, positions and effects of identifying particular discourses.

One middle way through these first two accounts would be to adopt something akin to a third 'structurationist' position advanced by Giddens (1979). There are strong echoes of this position in the new social psychologies which look to some system of rules (of which no one individual is wholly cognisant) while respecting the accounts and agency of persons employing those rules as resources for acting out the dramas of social life (Harré, 1979). Social structure here is seen as the collective rules and resources which give a sense and pattern to action. This position is close, almost close enough, to the realist accounts I described earlier, for Giddens (1979), describing norms independent of individual choice, and Harré (1983), identifying primary structures of self and identity,

are concerned with causal mechanisms. Discourse analysis linked to this tradition would be able to connect its description of a system of meanings with [36] individual twists and transformations of those meanings by human agents.

However, the coercive reality of social structures, in this view, is not quite marked strongly enough. Giddens, for example, as Porpora (1989) points out, takes care to insist that social structures always rest on the tacit knowledge of individual participating agents. Such structures are culturally given, and have a power to frame what people may do, but they are not materially rooted in conditions of life, conditions which a person may never understand. In recent forays into discourse theory, Harré has adopted a similar cautious position: 'there are only actual conversations, past and present whatever concretely happened before, and ... human memories [of them] ... form both the personal and cultural resources for speakers to draw upon in constructing the present moment' (Davies and Harré, 1990: 44). The problem is that this 'immanentist' view would prevent an historical analysis of the development of discourses and the ways they meet to confirm or challenge structures of oppression outside memories of what concretely happened before.

The fourth position, that of critical realism (e.g., Bhaskar, 1989), is concerned to allow analysis to move beyond, outside, versions of intersubjective reality. The realist conception of social structure offers a version of materialism which takes account of different senses of reality, and of reality outside sense. Alongside the material basis for, potentials for, and constraints on action that are rooted in biology (Timpanaro, 1980), there are systems of relationships and positions which make certain actions and accounts possible, and some impossible. The category of ontological object status here includes the physical location of bodies in space. In a capitalist economy, for example, industrial workers are physically located for much of the time together with others, and certain types of collective action make sense. In patriarchal societies in the West, women are physically located in homes for much of the time and certain types of collective action do not make sense. In a world organised by structures of imperialism, victims outside and inside the industrial centres can only act, accept, or resist, in particular ways. Bhaskar (1989) argues that if we are to call some set of beliefs 'ideological', then this must be because we are asserting that they are necessary in some way. We have to account for the reasons why such beliefs may be held. Ideological beliefs are not superficial or irrelevant; they are part of the very structures we want to understand. [37]

When we want to understand the function of particular discourses, the way they position their subjects in relations of contempt and respect, of domination and subordination or of oppression and resistance, we pass quickly and ineluctably from conceptual critique to social critique. It is one of the peculiar characteristics of social science, as Bhaskar points out, that the explanation that we give of structures, insofar as they give rise to illusory beliefs, entails criticism and then the transformation instead of the reproduction of those structures:

In the full development of the concept of ideology, theory fuses into practice, as facts about values, mediated by theories about facts, are transformed into values about facts. The rule of value-neutrality, the last shibboleth of the philosophy of social science, collapses, when we come to see that values themselves can be false.

(Bhaskar, 1989: 87)

This model of social structure, then, is one in which people are unaware much of the time of the conditions in which they act. However, the realist view does not explain away the activities of individuals as active agents, dissolving them into sets of biologically based or conditioned behaviours or as subject positions in discourse. The ways in which the social world may be opaque to the most skilled and reflexive have been described as follows: ‘activities may depend on or involve (a) unacknowledged conditions, (b) unintended consequences, (c) the exercise of tacit skills, and/or (d) unconscious motivation’ (Bhaskar, 1989: 4). Whilst the images of individuality, responsibility and autonomy which post-structuralists describe as part of the disciplinary and confessional symbolic architecture of the dominant culture in the West do become bizarrely internalised and so self-fulfilling (Foucault, 1977, 1981), a realist view sees in those very capacities to reflect and remake the self the powers to change it. Because of the existence of society as something that stands always already there in relation to persons, it is not possible to say that we create society, rather we must either *reproduce* or *transform* it (Bhaskar, 1989).

## CHANGE

As we confront the structures of the social, we have to reflect on why it might be that the use of alternative discourses does not lead automatically to alternative social forms. There are a number of [38] reasons. I will discuss four and, in the process, trace some ways in which the real is mediated level upon level by discourses, and always by discourses which never fully escape the material conditions in which they are reproduced and transformed.

A first and important one is the role of direct physical coercion. One, sometimes neglected, aspect of the development of poststructuralism is the resurrection of Nietzschean ideas of struggle underlying and informing language. Foucault, for example, argues for a genealogy of relations of force in which the role of language is secondary to threatened or actual violent conflict: ‘The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning’ (1980: 114). Billig *et al.* (1988: 161) cite a later point in this passage (in a different translation) where Foucault refers to the ‘violent, bloody and lethal’ reality of conflict which is hidden by studies which focus on ‘the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue’ (Foucault, 1980: 115). It is necessary to have the physical possibility to develop new discourses. For many women, for example, the family is a site of physical coercion where it is simply not possible to speak. In Central America, for example, coercion is structured into the operation of dictatorships such that the personal is politicised, and so immediately becomes caught up in forms of war. The real always lies on the edge of discourse, making some moves in language games impossible.

A second block on the development of alternative forms lies in the material organisation of space, and the closing of spaces where certain forms of talk can be practised and elaborated. Ways of talking take hold when it makes sense, or when there are sub-communities which are organised such that alternative ideas make sense. It is necessary to have the space to develop new discourses. It is possible to develop new forms of therapeutic and political reflection, for example, in already constituted spaces

such as religious buildings in Central America or Palestine (though the weight of clerical power and ideology also squeezes popular discourses here in progressive and reactionary directions). Another example is to be found in the way higher education institutions function as spaces for students away from the family for the exploration of alternative forms of sexuality. Texts are available (written, spoken), and there are discourses around which make sense in a way they could not 'at home'. There is a sense in which we should look for the meaning of a discourse only in its *use*, and certain discourses can be used only in [39] certain places. The material organisation of space and the structure of institutions which hold and divide space, then, is a real force which frames discourse. A third block lies in the habitual, physical orientation of the individual to discourse of different kinds, the problem of breaking from the past, either in the form of 'tacit skills', understood through ecological psychology perhaps (a line I pursue in Chapter 5) or in the struggle against 'unconscious motivation', defences such as resistance understood using psychoanalysis (an approach I discuss in Chapter 6). Either way, it is necessary to have the *break* to develop new discourses. Leaving aside the psychoanalytic model for the moment, one example would be the abrupt break from home and the immersion in student politics (politics in a wider sense than exposure to union hacks), and the sudden enforced assumption of new rules, new repertoires. Another example, on a slightly larger scale, is the break from the past that occurs with forms of revolution. If the critical realists are right, then such sudden breaks are necessary for the elaboration of new discourses, for such elaboration on the bones of an old social structure is impossible for the body politic to bear for long. Here, the notion of 'interpretative repertoire' does have an edge over the term 'discourse', for it can catch the way a speaking body is engaged in action as it follows the tracks of dominant representations of the world. The behavioural aspect to patterns of speech and the 'reading' of texts is ingrained habit. The real body, bent in a variety of postures of deferment and position in different discourses, is such that only a shock, a break can release the potential for the development of new repertoires.

The fourth block on change is that one which is focused on studies of discourse which describe the positioning of selves, or the constitution of subjectivity in language (and here psychoanalytic accounts are often brought in to supplement a post-structuralist approach). The sense of the possibilities of change is relayed by discourses, for example, which position the 'subject' as being able to take on new roles. More to the point, the sense of exhaustion and despair in the face of direct threat or institutional sanctions is fed by discourses which relay the moral that things can never be changed and it is unrealistic to try. Both the hope and the hopelessness are reproduced and transformed in discourse as we engage, for example, in readings of other events in which change has happened. The Sandinistas seizing power also supported discourses in which [40] oppressed subjects and those in solidarity read (and experienced) a narrative of change, liberation. Their defeat reproduced discourses in which the world would never change and individuals should content themselves with little narratives containing passive pliable subjects (in which they experienced themselves as those subjects). The meanings of representations of places outside the dominant culture of the West are informed, in this example, by an array of discourses which either excuse or condemn oppressive regimes and the struggle for political solidarity has to include the elaboration of discourses of resistance. Here again, alternatives are premised on a change in real conditions outside texts. The articulation of counter-discourses occurs in the *material* spaces (enclosed free areas,

different relationships, the reading of new texts) which open in the gaps and contradictions in discourse and in the real.

The realist view of social structures is important not only for theoretical reasons, but also, and this is where the stance becomes critical realist', in the prospects for change that flow from it. Discourse analysis is implicit ideology critique, because the position of the researcher is reflexive. When there is attention to the dynamics of discourse linked to social structures this reflexivity can be grounded so issues of ideology and value become explicit. Different discourses carry with them different prescriptions for social relations, and those alternative discourses that both re-describe and provide a critical distance from language and power are also the basis for alternative social relations, alternative societal forms.

The notion that social structure is a precondition for discourse means that discourse analysis must draw on other theoretical and empirical work which uncovers the material basis of oppression (capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy). The mistaken idea that discourses are as real as anything, or everything, else is a crucial one to tackle, for versions of discourse theory are currently wreaking havoc within traditionally materialist political frameworks. The delusion that the world has arrived at the end of history and culture has settled into a postmodern condition has pulled not a few radicals away from any kind of ideology critique into varieties of post-Marxism' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). More worrying, perhaps, is that those fascinated by the power of discourse cut loose from any connection with a real outside texts are becoming the vehicles for the radical' expression of a purely pragmatic 'new realism' which has lost any desire to take underlying structures of oppression and resistance [41] seriously. (To deny that thought is material, as in the mystifying quote at the beginning of this chapter, is no better.) The downside of post-structuralism, one of the most rabid anti-realist approaches in the social sciences at present, is that it provokes an 'exhorbitation of language' at the expense of everything else, including politics (Anderson, 1983). There are equally serious political consequences which flow from analyses which proclaim the end of modernity and the dawn of a 'postmodern' age in which all the worst aspects of post-structuralism seem to have come 'true', written out over the whole of culture. These supposed cultural transformations are connected with economic and structural changes in the West, but the systems of reflection, despair and celebration over the changes are rooted in discourse. This means that if discourse analysis is to play a helpful part in cultural analysis it must attend to the formation of modernity and the current threats to the modern project of individual, social and political enlightenment. I turn to these matters in Part II. [end of page 41]