Critical Realism and Semiosis

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Paper presented to International Association for Critical Realism Annual Conference, Roskilde, Denmark, 17-19th August 2001

Introduction

This paper explores the mutual implication of critical realism and semiosis. Three key questions[1] can be posed in this regard. The first concerns how far semiosis, provisionally defined as the intersubjective production of meaning,[2] involves mechanisms that are intelligible from a critical realist viewpoint. This is an important issue. For, apart from addressing the closely related, controversial, but nonetheless analytically distinct, issue of whether reasons can also be causes, critical realists have paid little attention to semiosis. Their neglect is unjustified because reasons are merely one (albeit important) aspect of the causal efficacy of semiosis and can, in any case, only be understood in and through the operation of semiosis. Second, and equally important for our purposes, we will show how semiosis in turn depends on a broader social context – which implies that, insofar as semiosis has been studied in isolation from its context, it offers an incomplete account of social causation and risks falling into one or more kinds of reductionism. This is where critical discourse analysis has much to offer but may still need supplementation through more concrete-complex analysis of extra-discursive domains. Third, we examine how far critical realism needs to include semiosis in its more general approach to social relations, their reproduction and transformation. In exploring this issue we interpret social relations broadly to include not only actions and interactions but also institutional orders and the lifeworld. We conclude that critical realism is compatible with critical semiotic analysis (particularly 'critical discourse analysis', Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999) and that non-semiotic approaches are best combined with semiotic approaches (and vice versa).

The Dialectics of Semiosis and Critical Realism

Critical realism has tended to take semiosis for granted. For example, its practitioners often defend the claim that reasons can be causes without making any substantial and/or substantive reference to semiosis as such. One aim of our paper is to address the nature of semiosis without, however, as often happens with the semiotic turn (the turn to 'discourse', taking semiotic processes out of their broader context. Putting semiotic processes into context means locating them within their necessary dialectical relations with persons (hence minds, intentions, desires, bodies), social relations, and the material world – locating them within the practical engagement of embodied and socially organised persons with the material world.

Semiosis presupposes non-semiotic properties or abilities of humans as intentional or desiring embodied beings who are practically-involved in the world (Archer, 2000). This means that semiosis cannot be reduced to the play of differences among networks of signs and cannot be understood without reference [explain]. Thus we need to explore not only the semiotic conditions of possibility for social events but also the non-semiotic conditions of possibility for semiosis (see below). It is no less important, for laypersons and social scientists alike, to relate meaning and interpretation to questions of (in Habermas's terms) truth, truthfulness (or sincerity), and appropriateness.

- Questions of truth -- the relationship of meanings to material realities is a matter for interrogation (the pursuit, in the tradition of Saussurean linguistics, of a purely 'internal' analysis of semiotic systems which divorces meaning from reference also leads to the divorce of semiotic analysis from social analysis).
- Questions of truthfulness -- the relationship of (ostensible) meanings to intentions and desires is a matter for interrogation.
- Questions of the normative appropriateness of meanings for particular situations (Habermas, 1987).

Isolating semiosis, persons, social relations or the material world from these dialectical relationships leads to various forms of reductionism. These include voluntarism (reducing actions to intentions) and semiotic structuralism (reducing actions to the effects of semiotic systems).

Social theorists and discourse analysts routinely defend semiotic analysis on the grounds that semiosis has real effects on social practice, social institutions, and social order. They are less clear on how semiosis produces effects. Indeed, answers to this question are generally conspicuous by their absence. This could well be due to the many uncertainties and/or controversies over the nature of explanation in the social sciences. For some social theorists, explaining how semiosis produces effects would require a causal explanation that first identifies what it is that produces observed effects and then attributes causal responsibility thereto in terms of an underlying causal mechanism (or mechanisms). But many other theorists reject causal explanation as being wholly inappropriate to the study of semiosis. For example, hermeneutics is generally taken to reject causal explanation (*erklaeren*) in favour of interpretive understanding *(verstehen)*. Its advocates deny that semiosis and its effects can be explained in the same way as the production of chemical reactions and their effects; all that is possible (and all that is required) is to elucidate what a specific text 'means'. This rejection of *erklaeren* in favour of *verstehen* is often tied to a Humean account of causal explanation in terms of 'constant conjunctions' between causes and effects.[3] Thus advocates of verstehen argue that, as such regularities either do not characterise communication or are irrelevant to its understanding, causal explanation is either totally excluded or simply redundant. Given the semiotic character of reasons (see below), this connects to their conclusion that reasons are not to be treated as causes of behaviour but as propositions that precede or accompany behaviour and that must simply be 'understood'. If we were to accept this line of reasoning, however, our second question would be meaningless and/or pointless. If semiosis does not produce effects, then it does not belong within a critical realist analysis.

We do not, of course, accept this conclusion. We believe that semiosis is both meaningful and causally efficacious. Thus our first aim must be to demonstrate how semiosis produces effects in and through the making of meaning.

As critical realists, we will use an alternative account of causation, which is not tied to the occurrence of constant conjunctions between causes and effects, and which also allows that both reasons and other aspects of semiosis can be causes, thereby avoiding the problems just noted. In so doing we seek to illuminate how semiosis can be performative. If this is the case, it also means that critical realism needs to take semiosis far more seriously. Thus we also raise the question of the appropriate place of semiosis in a critical realist philosophy of social science.

As this is a highly ambitious project, we want to enter two caveats at once. First, as a philosophy, critical realism does *not* entail commitments to any particular substantive social or psychological theory, such as those of Weber and Freud respectively. What critical realism in general does is to identify basic principles for a scientific analysis and to indicate what is involved in constructing explanatory theories and accounts. Thus other critical realist accounts of semiosis could well be developed that differ from the one we suggest below. If so, we hope our own proposals will stimulate others to present them. Second, we accept that the production of meaning and other semiotic effects is exceptionally difficult to explain, not least because it involves more or less inaccessible mental processes. Thus, although we offer a way of explaining the power of semiosis to generate meaning, and even though semiosis involves the listener/reception as much as speaker/production, it leaves open the question of how minds make sense of *texts*. Whilst meaning and motive are emergent phenomena of semiosis, they need minds with certain capabilities to co-construct social action and interaction (and bodies to enact them). We do not expect to resolve such issues in this paper and, in any case, as Weber noted when addressing a similar problem in his own work, it would frequently be practically impossible (as well as, in many cases, theoretically redundant) to follow causal relationships down to the microscopic level of necessary connections among the elementary constituents of reality (Ringer 2000: 71-2). There is certainly scope for more work on this issue but we still

believe that we can advance a critical realist analysis of the real mechanisms of semiosis as a first step towards making progress on the larger problem of mind-body-semiosis-sociality - materiality.

Critical Realism, Reasons, Causes and the Preconditions of Semiosis.

Before we provide a critical realist account of semiosis we must first recall some key features of critical realist philosophy (hereafter 'CR'). First, CR views objects as structured and as having particular causal powers or liabilities. That is, they are able to act in certain ways and/or suffer certain changes. Thus a person who has learned a language has a rich set of (causal) powers to communicate, and they have these powers even though they do not use them all the time.[4] These powers exist (often, of course, in latent form) but they can be activated in certain situations. If and when they are activated, the effects depend on the context. Thus if we ask someone the way to the Town Hall, the effects of the question will depend on whether she speaks the same language, whether she knows the area, and so on. But regardless of whether the answer is 'round the corner', 'I'm sorry I don't know', or 'why do you want to know?', it is at least co-produced by the question, and this is true irrespective of whether the relationship between the question and answer is regular or irregular. Causation is about what produces change (the activation of causal powers) not about (whether observers have registered) a regular conjunction of cause events and effect events. Hence, regularities are not necessary for explanation, whether of physical or social phenomena. Even where we do find regularities they still have to be explained in terms of what produces them. Thus critical realism rejects the Humean, constant conjunction view of causation.

Secondly, critical realists distinguish the real from the actual and the empirical. The 'real' refers to objects, their structures or natures and their causal powers and liabilities. The 'actual' refers to what happens when these powers and liabilities are activated and produce change. The 'empirical' is the subset of the real and the actual that is experienced by actors. Although changes at the level of the actual (e.g. political debates) may change the nature of objects (e.g. political institutions), the latter are not reducible to the former, any more than a

car can be reduced to its movement. Moreover, while empirical experiences can influence behaviour and hence what happens, much of the social and physical worlds can exist regardless of whether researchers, and in some cases other actors, are observing or experiencing them. Though dependent on actors for <u>their</u> reproduction, languages and other semiotic structures/systems always already pre-exist any given actor (or subset of actors), and have a relative autonomy from them as real objects, even when it is not actualised.[5]

Thirdly, critical realists argue that reasons can operate as causes, that is, <u>can</u> be responsible for producing a change. Indeed, when someone tries to persuade us that we are wrong to make this argument by giving us reasons, they in turn presuppose that offering reasons can be causative. This applies irrespective of whether there are regularities for us to record. For the general absence of regularities between giving or recognizing reasons and subsequent behaviour is not fatal to causal explanation. On the contrary, as we have seen, regularities are not essential for causal explanation even in the physical sciences. The effects produced by semiosis certainly depend on texts being understood[6] in some fashion but not necessarily just in one, and only one, fashion. Thus a speech made during an election campaign may offer people strong reasons for voting in a certain way. The fact that the speech might be construed differently by different individuals (even leading them to vote contrary to the reasons adduced) and hence does not form part of a constant conjunction or event regularity does not mean that it can have no influence on voting (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994).[7]

Crucial though this issue of reasons as causes has been in the philosophy of social science, it remains seriously incomplete. For it evades the question of the specific nature of 'reasons' and how they come to motivate action. In particular, it ignores the semiotic character of reasons and, in the most extreme cases, treats them as simple, singular triggers of action. Yet reasons are diffuse and hard to identify unambiguously. Indeed, it would be better be think of them as emergent elements in more extensive networks of concepts, beliefs, symbols, and texts. They presuppose languages, intentionality, particular concepts and prior understandings and interests, intertextuality, conventions of inference and evidence, and so on. Even a brief reflection on the implications

of this semiotic and social embedding of reasons is enough to bring home the inadequacy of a simplistic treatment of reasons. In addition, if we reflect more broadly upon what kinds of semiotic features and events can bring about changes in behaviour (if only at the level of how people think), we notice that it is not only reasons that change what we do. We may be influenced more by the tone (e.g. warmth, hostility) or imagery of a speech than by any reasons for action that it might present. Consideration of these expressive qualities of communication exposes the narrowly rationalist character of the reasons-as-causes answer to the question of how texts produce effects. We therefore need to go beyond the reasons-as-causes argument, important though it is, to examine the nature of semiosis more generally and its place within the overall logic of the social.

More generally it can be argued that if a cause is whatever produces any change, then semiosis and texts must be causal. They would be redundant if they changed nothing. Though we can communicate unintentionally, we normally speak or write in order to produce some kind of response. Sometimes the change may be discernible and public, as in the case of giving an answer to a question, following a command or laughing at a joke, but there may also be more private and less discernible effects within individuals' inner conversations (which also themselves produce changes in states of mind), such as memorising a name, feeling reassured, triggering a daydream or boredom[8]. Thus understanding should not be seen as antithetical to causation and explanation: our coming to understand what someone says is a change that must have causes. However, again we need to avoid an overly rationalist view of the matter as much of semiosis involves affective responses which are not reducible to 'understanding'.

Further, and in line with this last criticism of overly rationalist accounts of semiosis, we acknowledge Margaret Archer's demonstration of the importance of the embodied, practical and non-semiotic, indeed non-social (in the sense of intersubjective) dimensions of human practice, and their status as preconditions of language-learning and use (Archer, 2000). Not only do infants have to learn a considerable amount without the aid of semiotic systems before they are able to acquire them; but text producers and interpreters subsequently continue to

rely heavily upon on non-semiotic knowledge, bodily awareness or know-how in order to carry out both simple and complex tasks. Further, if we were not intentional, desiring beings with needs, semiosis would be redundant, for it would simply not matter what existed in reality or actuality (which provides part of the overall the basis for the referential function of semiosis), there would be no performativity, and no affect or expressive communication.

Semiosis is multi-functional (Jakobson, Halliday) – it is simultaneously referential (or propositional, or ideational), social-relational (or inter-personal), and expressive. Thus, in the Habermasian terms introduced earlier, semiosis raises validity claims of truth, appropriateness and truthfulness/sincerity. Though it should hardly need saying, we insist on the importance of all three, including, contra Saussureans, the role of reference: there are not only signifiers (e.g. words) and signifieds (concepts) but also referents; the 'play of difference' among the former could not be sustained without extensive embedding of semiosis in material practice, in the constraints and affordances of the material world. Just because the relation of reference between individual lexemes or phrases and objects to which they refer is not one-to-one or self-sufficient, it does not follow that language and ways of thinking are unconstrained by the world. Not just anything can be constructed.[9] This does not mean that the differentiations and qualities of the world dictate the content of knowledge – for the latter is a fallible construction and to assume otherwise is to commit the ontic fallacy. But nor is the world or being dependent on knowledge – if one assumes that it is, one commits the epistemic fallacy. This pair of arguments is important in helping us to disambiguate 'construction' into its two moments of construal (the fallible ideas that inform it) and construction (in the sense of the material processes, if any, that follow from it) (cf. Sayer 2001). Indeed, even in the case of social constructions such as institutions, what gets *constructed* is different from how it is construed; and the relative success or failure of this *construal* depends on how both it and the construction respond to the properties of the materials (including social phenomena such as actors and institutions) used to construct social reality. Of course, the construal need not refer to the material world: it could also refer to other semiotic phenomena, to images, smells, sounds or feelings and states of mind.

Semiosis and the Social

Given the limitations of space and the preliminary nature of our arguments, we now move to a more telegrammatic series of theses about semiosis. We freely concede that they remain underdeveloped but we believe that it is still useful to present them as a basis for discussion.

1. Semiosis -- the making of meaning -- is a crucial part of social life <u>but does not exhaust the latter</u>. Indeed, as noted above, language acquisition is both preceded by, and ongoingly presupposes, various bodily and practical forms of non-linguistic knowledge or know-how, skills and sense. Semiosis depends on more than semiotic systems (including languages) and texts; it presupposes embodied, intentional, practically-skilled social actors, social relations, material objects and spatio-temporality. It is also influenced by the habitus**, I.E.,?** by the semi-conscious dispositions that people, particularly in their early lives, acquire through social/material interaction with their habitat and through the social relations in their part of the social field (Bourdieu, 2000). Habitus and the feel for particular games that it provides can include different degrees of facility with respect to language use, for example differing capacities to deal with and learn new discourses or genres or styles (see below).

2. While it was once common, under the influence of Foucault, to define discourses as including material practices, the latter were usually ignored in the accounts of discourse that followed. Yet, while semiosis is an aspect of any social practice (insofar as practices entail meaning), no social practice (let alone all behaviours) is reducible to semiosis alone. We therefore reject this conflation as an instance of <u>the</u> 'discourse-imperialism' that has infected social theory for the last two decades. This conflation also eliminates the distinction between the transitive and intransitive, producing the epistemic fallacies of strong social constructionism.

3. The relationship between these elements – actors, language, texts, social relations, practical contexts - is one of dialectical internal relations, i.e.,

although distinct, they are not discrete (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Harvey 1996). Nonetheless the relative weight of these different elements within the overall configuration of a social action is bound to vary from case to case. In this regard it is particularly worth noting that there is a range of 'semioticity' insofar as different social actions, events, or social orders may be more or less semioticized. Indeed, one might be able to construct a continuum ranging from technological systems through to religion in terms of the relative weight of semiosis and materiality in their overall logic (see figure 1 at the end of this paper).

4. Semiosis has a dual presence in the production and identification of social events: (a) social action and social processes may be more or less semiotic in character; and (b) the identification of an 'event' and its constitutive elements (persons, objects, places etc) from the ongoing flow of social action and social processes necessarily requires some act of semiotic interpretation, even if what happens is totally non-semiotic (i.e., purely material, physical action). This holds true even though (and, perhaps, precisely because) much of social life escapes the notice of any particular observer and, perhaps, all possible observers.

5. As already noted, the semiotic identification-interpretation of events may be public (explicitly formulated in texts - talk or writing - and, even, given some material form) or internal (thought, felt). There is also more or less subliminal awareness of 'events' at the margins of our fields of perception; and there can also be more or less subconscious responses to 'events'.

6. Any actual social event involving more or less active participants necessarily rests upon the operation of real causal powers and their mechanisms, tendencies, counter-tendencies, etc. These typically include real semiotic causal powers. Descriptively, performatively and expressively, these engage the ways of thinking, specific identities, emotional responses or commentaries, motives that are available to the various actors and frame the situation in which the actors 'find' themselves. Our main task is to try to illuminate semiotic causal powers and how they might be actualized (their mechanisms).

7. Semiosis is a condition of the existence of social actors, including acting on reasons, whether these come from public communication or inner conversations, developing identities, interests, motives, reasons, and goals for actions and acting on these in ways that others can understand. While it is hardly contentious to assert that actors inter-subjectively construct meaning in the course of situated action, the role of semiotic forms in this process requires examination.

8. No account of semiosis can evade the issues of truth, truthfulness, and appropriateness; in Habermas's terms, the production and interpretation of any text rests upon generally implicit (and often counterfactual) validity claims with respect to what is the case, the intentions, beliefs etc., of agents, and the nature of social relations. The interpretation of texts by social agents in the course of social events involves not only the attempt to understand what is meant but also judgements of truth, truthfulness and appropriateness, and potentially the attempt to arrive at explanatory accounts of the motives of other social agents for speaking or writing as they have, and of less immediate social causes. This does not mean that understanding implies agreement, though some disagreements (and agreements) may be based on misunderstanding. Of course, such interpretative effort is applied very selectively to texts and many receive scant attention, and the interpretability of texts (and even their comprehensibility) depends upon a measure of shared assumptions between social agents about what is the case, intentions and beliefs, and social relations. (For instance, religious or various types of expert (eg technical) texts may be incomprehensible to certain social agents because of radical disparities in assumptions about what is the case.)

9. It is precisely because semiosis is the making of meaning through recourse to language and other semiotic systems that we need critical semiotic analysis (hereafter CSA). As regards the semiotic aspect of CSA, we need the tools and skills of semiotic analysis (linguistic analysis, discourse analysis etc) to reflect (critically) on any text. That this is so may not be immediately obvious. It might seem that as competent language users,

involved in material social practices where we have routinely to produce and interpret texts, be it a simple everyday matter such as following roadsigns or something as complex, subtle and difficult as counselling a friend, that we must already have an understanding of semiotic resources and processes. Just as we don't need to know how a computer works in order to use one and indeed to know whether it's working properly, so we don't need to know about arcane things like 'nominalisations', 'equivalences', 'paratactic lists' or 'grammatical moods'. To some extent we can of course get by, and indeed evaluate texts critically without such analytical tools. However, to imagine that many people have the time to focus critically on texts – even contentious ones such as political speeches - is one of the illusions of the scholastic attitude acquired and taken for granted by academics (Bourdieu, 2000). Particularly because people hear or read so much while doing or being distracted by other things, and have limited opportunities to develop critical skills of discourse analysis, it is important to draw attention to the ways in which particular linguistic and other semiotic forms can, according to context and according to the semantic content, produce effects which tend to escape the non-specialist. Precisely because semiosis, meaning, truth, truthfulness and appropriateness particular cannot be separated, we cannot take the first of these for granted.

10. As regards its *critical* aspect, CSA (e.g. 'critical discourse analysis') is concerned with texts, the production of texts and the interpretation of texts in terms of truth, truthfulness and appropriateness. That is, it is concerned with the relationship between semiosis and the material and social world; persons and their intentions, beliefs, desires etc; and social relations. It is concerned with the description of texts, the interpretation of how people produce and interpret texts, judgements of texts in terms of truth, truthfulness and appropriateness, and explanation of the social causes and effects of texts. On the question of truth, critical semiotic analysis is concerned to (a) explicate the truth claims – including assumptions and presuppositions – in a text; (b) relate truth claims to questions of truthfulness – evasion, deception, rationalisation etc; (b) explicate interpreters' responses to truth claims; (c) evaluate truth claims against other plausible (eg social scientific) accounts of what is the case; (d) explain

the social causes and social effects of such truth claims. By contrast a crypto-normative (to borrow Habermas's term[10]) discourse analysis appears both to question and doubt everything and nothing simultaneously. In refusing to acknowledge any assessments of truth-status and truth-conditions it disables any critical potential. To doubt A we need to doubt it by reference to something else - B - about which we are at least provisionally satisfied.

11. Critical semiotic analysis attributes causal effectivity to semiotic/linguistic forms, without being a semiotic/linguistic formalism. The effectivity of forms depends upon their semantic content and their social context. For example, processes in the material world may be semiotically represented events or as objects, in the linguistic form of finite clauses (eg 'Multinational corporations **are changing** the ways in which different countries trade with each other') or of nominalisations (eg 'The modern world is swept by **change**'). But the social effectivity of nominalisation depends upon what is nominalised (reducing processes to their effectivity and thus concealing details of both process and agency) and on the specific social context in which it occurs. For example, the pervasive nominalisation of processes of economic change and the consequential elision of agency in and responsibility for those processes in the policy texts of international agencies such as the IMF and of national governments is quite different in its social effectivity (one might say it contributes to the naturalisation of change, the construction of contemporary economic changes as inevitable etc) to the nominalisation of a pyschological condition as schizophrenia in a medical textbook. Attending to nominalisation as a linguistic form is germane to the critical analysis of the social effectivity of semiosis, but only in conjunction with attention to meaning and mediated by how such texts are interpreted in this regard, whether for instance there is or is not a widespread critical awareness of such features of texts.

12. This lack of one-to-one relation between formal features of texts, interpretations, and social effects implies that generalisations about semiosis tend to be difficult. However, there is nothing exceptional about

this. Social systems - and indeed most physical systems - are open and hence constant conjunctions are rare.

13. Texts are both socially-structuring and socially-structured. For example, an interview is a particular form of communication which both creates a particular kind of social encounter and is itself socially-structured, for example by conventions of propriety, privacy and disclosure, by particular distributions of resources, material and cognitive.

14. The semiotic aspect of the conditions of existence of the reproduction and transformation of social structures, institutions etc
    a) The conditions of existence of the reproduction and transformation of social groups, organizations, institutions, and other social phenomena include the conditions of existence for the variation, selection, and retention of their various features.
    b) The variation, selection and retention of these features includes the variation, selection and retention of their semiotic features
    c) The conditions of existence of the variation, selection and retention of these various features of social phenomena generally include semiotic as well as other conditions of existence. In other words, semiosis itself can generate variation, have selective effects, and contribute to the differential retention and/or institutionalisation of social phenomena.

15. The **semiotic** conditions of existence of the variation, selection and retention of features favouring the **reproduction** of any social phenomenon comprise:
    a) The *selection* of particular discourses (the privileging of particular discourses over others available internally and/or externally) for interpreting events, legitimising actions, and (perhaps self-reflexively) representing social phenomena. Semiotic factors operate here by influencing the differential resonance of discourses. Some resonant discourses will subsequently become retained (e.g., through their inclusion into widely accepted hegemonic projects or their inclusion into an actor's habitus).

b) The enactment of these selected discourses as ways of acting, both semiotically (in genres) and non-semiotically (e.g., in organisational procedures)

c) The inculcation of these discourses in the ways of being/ identities of social agents both semiotically (e.g., ways of talking) and somatically (bodily dispositions).

d) The objectification of these discourses in the built environment, technology, etc., in organizational practices, and in the body/bodies.

e) The development of filtering devices within procedures for selecting these discourses and filtering out others, including genre chains (for instance chains of genres in policy formation which might include policy proposals, consultations in meetings of stakeholders, and reports recommending policy decisions. A variety of different and potentially conflicting discourses may figure eg within stakeholder meetings, but insofar as the genre chain is legitimised these may be unproblematically filtered to favour selected discourses in a report.)

f) The selection of strategies for agents (strategies for acting and for interpreting) which privilege these discourses (genres, styles).

g) The resonance of these discourses (genres, styles, strategies) within the broader ensemble of social phenomena to which the relevant social phenomenon belongs as well as the complementarity of these discourses (etc) with others within the network.

h) The capacity of the relevant social groups, organizations, institutions, etc., to selectively "recruit" and retain social agents whose predispositions fit maximally with requirements (a)-(g).

16. The **semiotic** conditions of existence of the variation, selection and retention of features impeding the **reproduction** of a given social phenomenon comprise:

relationships of contestation between discourses (i.e., relationships of contestation internally between agents in their semiotic aspect, and/or relations of contestation between the phenomenon in question and other associated phenomena in their semiotic aspect) that impede the selection/privileging of particular discourses for interpreting events,

legitimising actions, and (perhaps self-reflexively) representing the phenomenon and associated phenomena. Where such contestation occurs, factors (b)-(g) in (14) above will either be absent or, at least, limited in their overall operation.

17. The **semiotic** conditions of existence of the variation, selection and retention of features favouring the durable **transformation** of a given social phenomenon can be stated as follows. The internal relations between discourses and external relations with the discourses of associated social phenomena should be such that a new selection/priovileging of discourses is possible, allowing the development of factors favouring the retention of selected discourses (b)-(g). Examples of this would include the absence/weakening of competing discourses internally or the development of new relations between such phenomena of a (partially) semiotic character favouring the recontextualisation of external discourses with regard to that phenomenon.

Abstraction and explanation

A CR approach to the explanation of concrete phenomena such as semiosis analyses them as conjunctions of structures and causal powers co-producing specific effects. To do this it abstracts these structures, identifying them and considering their respective causal powers and liabilities. Having done this, it then moves back towards the concrete, combining the abstracted constituent elements, noting how they combine, with what consequences. While, for the sake of simplicity of exposition of critical realist method, it is usual to consider simple cases involving discrete structures and mechanisms, semiosis is an extreme case where concrete phenomena are the product of dialectically-related elements, and hence whose interaction is non-additive.

Hence the abstractions made by CDA are analytical distinctions that have to be used in a way which acknowledges their dialectical interdependence. Concrete events have a more or less semiotic ('textual') character. For example, a football match is an event that is not primarily semiotic in character, though it has semiotic aspects, whereas a lecture is a primarily semiotic event. Even

primarily semiotic events are co-produced by mental, social and material as well as specifically semiotic structures.

Semiotic structures include semiotic systems – most obviously languages – which have sui generis properties not found in other structures. Nevertheless, even languages show the dialectical interpenetration of otherwise operationally autonomous structures – i.e. they are overdetermined by other structures. [This is a presupposition of 'functional' theories of language such as 'systemic functional linguistics' (Halliday 1975).]

Semiotic systems can only partially account for texts (semiotic facets of events). In CR terms the gap between the productive potential ('real') of semiotic systems and the 'actual' of semiotic facets of events is such that other structures need to be postulated at lower (i.e. closer to the concrete) levels of abstraction. We call these 'semiotic orders'.

Semiotic orders constitute the social structuring of semiotic variation. Their main elements are genres, discourses and styles. Genres are ways of acting and interacting in their specifically semiotic aspect; they are ways of regulating (inter)action. An example would be (a specific form of) interview. Discourses are positioned ways of representing - representing other social practices as well as the material world, and reflexively representing this social practice, from particular positions in social practices. An example would be a particular political discourse - let us say the political discourse of the 'third way' (New Labour). Styles are ways of being, identities in their specifically semiotic (as opposed to bodily/material) aspect. An example would be the 'new' managerial style described by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). The relationship between genres, discourses and styles is dialectical. Thus discourses may become enacted as genres and inculcated as styles. What enters a practice as a discourse such as the discourse of 'new public management' may become enacted as new ways of (inter)acting, which will in part be new genres (new ways of (inter)acting discursively). And such a discourse may become inculcated as new ways of being, new identities, including both new styles and new bodily dispositions. Moreover, in addition to the intra-semiotic flows between discourses, genres, and styles, there are also flows between semiosis

and other elements/moments of social practices. For example, it may become materialised in new buildings, new technologies, etc. It is important to stress again 'may': there is nothing inevitable about these 'socially constructive' effects of discourse, they are conditional upon the specificity of the practice.

Semiotic orders such as genres are overdetermined to a greater extent than semiotic systems through their dialectical articulation with other structures. For this reason, whereas as semiotic systems can be studied in relatively abstract-simple terms, semiotic orders are best studied in relatively concrete-complex terms. The categories of semiotic systems are abstract-simple (ie relatively autonomous from other structures, eg 'noun', 'sentence') whereas the categories of semiotic orders are more concrete and complex (ie overdetermined by the categories of other structures – e.g. 'discourse', 'genre', 'dialect').

Semiosis is an instance of emergence par excellence and in moving back towards the concrete we attempt to register how meanings emerge from the constituent elements. When post-structuralists emphasize the endless possibilities for meanings to emerge from the play of difference, they are unknowingly referring to emergence. Intertextuality is a crucial property of semiosis in terms of emergence. It has more concrete and more abstract aspects. Concretely, particular texts report, echo etc., particular other texts for both speaker and listener. More abstractly, texts may stand in complex relationships to semiotic orders – they may articulate different discourses, genres and styles together in complex ways.

The objection to post-structuralist accounts of emergence is that they idealise semiosis – they ignore reference and truth conditions and attribute properties to semiosis as such in a way which ignores the dialectical interpenetration of semiotic and non-semiotic facets of social events. The 'play' of difference is materially, socially and psychologically constrained. This is clear if we think about intertextuality. Texts may and do articulate different discourses, genres and styles together in innovative ways, but these semiotic articulations are at

the same time articulations of social fields, social groups, social activities, space-times, desires etc.

Semiotic emergence is tied not only to shifting articulations of discourses, genres and styles as such, but also to texts as processes, the 'texturing' of texts, the working together of diverse elements in texts over time and in space. The following texts provide examples. The first is an extract from a meeting of (mainly) supervisors in an Australian subsidiary of an American multinational company, discussing the introduction of team management. It shows an element of the (new) 'global' discourse of team management ('facilitating') being locally appropriated by being worked in the course of the interaction into a relationship with elements of existing discourses (eg 'keep them on the right track'):

Ben   we thought you know maybe maybe I should be the facilitator for Grace's group or something where I'm away from the people a bit and um

Sally   yeah

Ben   just have a background in what's going on but just sort of keep them on the right track and let them they've got to really then rely on each other instead of relying on the supervisor to do the work

Grace   well I think kind of in the groups that are gonna come along that's what's gonna have to happen. I mean I know the the first ones that start off I think we have to go down this path to try to direct people onto the path and therefore we kind of will be in charge of the meeting but then we have to get people to start their own teams and us sort of just being a facilitator rather than

James the team leader

 [..]   yeah

Grace I mean it's hard to get started I think that's where people are having trouble and that's why they're kind of looking to you Ben and you know things like that

Peter I'm not the only one I'm having trouble maintaining the thing

 [..]   yeah

Peter I just can't maintain it at the moment you know a couple of days you know a couple of days crook there and you know just the amount of

work that builds up it just goes to the back of the queue sort of thing it's shocking

James so what you really want is the um you've got a a group you start a group and you want one of those people to sort of come out and [..] facilitate the group

Peter just to maintain the group you know like just to keep it just keep the work flowing

Ben   what I'm trying to get across

Peter cause

Ben   is I'm too close to those people because I

[..]   yeah

Ben   already go outside of the group and then I'm their supervisor outside on the on the floor where maybe if I was facilitating another group where I'm not I'm not above them you know I'm not their supervisor or whatever um I can go back to my job they can go back to theirs and they still um you know it's this their more their team than

Sally   yours

This extract shows an element of the (new) 'global' discourse of team management ('facilitating') being locally appropriated by being worked in the course of the interaction into a relationship of equivalence with elements of existing discourses (e.g. 'keep them on the right track', 'they've got to really rely on each other', 'people … start their own teams'), and into a relationship of difference from other elements of existing discourses (e.g. '(being) the team leader', 'direct people onto the path', 'be in charge of the meeting'). The 'work' of texturing these relations of equivalence and difference is evidenced in the high incidence and the distribution of 'hedging' expressions such as 'or something', 'just', 'kind of', 'sort of', and 'modalising' expressions such as 'maybe', 'we thought', 'I think', which mitigate in various ways degrees of commitment to propositions and proposals.

The second is a preface by Tony Blair to a White Paper on Competition produced by the Department of Trade and Industry (1998). It shows the texturing together of the spacetime of 'global' economic change and the spacetime of national policy formation:

'The modern world is swept by change. New technologies emerge constantly, new markets are opening up. There are new competitors but also great new opportunities.

Our success depends on how well we exploit our most valuable assets: our knowledge, skills and creativity. These are the key to designing high-value goods and services and advanced business practices. They are at the heart of a modern, knowledge driven economy.

This new world challenges business to be innovative ad creative, to improve performance continuously, to build new alliances and ventures. But it also challenges Government: to create and execute a new approach to industrial policy.

That is the purpose of this White Paper. Old-fashioned state intervention did not and cannot work. But neither does naïve reliance on markets.

The Government must promote competition, stimulating enterprise, flexibility and innovation by opening markets. But we must also invest in British capabilities when companies alone cannot: in education, in science and in the creation of a culture of enterprise. And we must promote creative partnerships which help companies: to collaborate for competitive advantage; to promote a long term vision in a world of short term pressures; to benchmark their performance against the best in the world; and to forge alliances with other businesses and employees. All this is the DTI's role.

We will not meet our objectives overnight. The White Paper creates a policy framework for the next ten years. We must compete more effectively in today's tough markets if we are to prosper in the markets of tomorrow.

In Government, in business, in our universities and throughout society we must do much more to foster a new entrepreneurial spirit: equipping

ourselves for the long term, prepared to seize opportunities, committed to constant innovation and enhanced performance. That is the route to commercial success and prosperity for all. We must put the future on Britain's side.

Tony Blair (signature)

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister'

This example shows the texturing together of the spacetime of 'global' economic change and the spacetime of national policy formation. The text is organised on a problem-solution model: the problem is defined in 'global' spacetime in terms of irresistable processes without social agents (e.g., 'new markets are opening up', not for instance 'business corporations are opening up new markets') in a timeless present and an undifferentiated 'universal' space; the solution is defined in a national spacetime in terms of what national agencies ('we', '(the) government', 'business') 'must' do. The example illustrates how particular ways of texturing relations between elements become conventionalised and 'flow' between fields and across scales: texturing 'global' and national spacetimes together on this problem-solution pattern is now a pervasive feature of neo-liberal discourse in business, government, education etc, and at international (eg agencies like the OECD), national, regional and local levels.

Conclusions

We wish to draw three main conclusions from this first cut at promoting a debate between critical realists and critical discourse analysts. First, materiality and embodiment are not only accompaniments of semiosis but <u>also constitute</u> preconditions of it. Semiosis has its own distinctive elements, necessary properties, and emergent effects and, even though (and precisely because) these qualities and their associated causal powers and liabilities interpenetrate, interfere with, and overdetermine other types of social relations and institutional orders, they must be integrated into a more comprehensive critical realist analysis of the social world. In this way we can move to provide explanations

that are 'socially (or semiotically) adequate' as well as 'objectively probable' in the sense that they establish the discursive as well as extra-discursive conditions of existence of the explicandum at an appropriate level of concretization and complexification.

Second, in exploring the distinctive features of semiosis, we put special emphasis in the first instance on how discourse frames social interaction and contributes to the construction of social relations. Within this context we then discussed the construction of identities, modes of calculation, vocabularies of motives, etc.; and their role in providing the motivational force behind actions. At the same time we have taken pains to argue that semiosis works in conjunction with extra-semiotic (or extra-discursive) elements. By mapping some key aspects of semiosis, especially its extra-discursive conditions of existence and effectivity, we have attempted to block off a purely rationalist or ideologist view of social relations. In opposition to theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who one-sidedly emphasise the discursive production of discourse from discourse (cf. Ricardo on the production of commodities by means of commodities) and neglect the extra-discursive as well as the discursive factors that shape the resonance of discourse and the willingness and capacity of actors (and other social forces) to respond to interpellations, appeals to their identities and interests, hegemonic projects, etc., we argue for at least equal weight to be given to the consumption of discourse as well as its production. In particular, we have stressed that both the production and the consumption of symbolic systems (orders of discourse, etc.) are overdetermined by more or less extra-semiotic factors.

And, third, in addition to arguing that the study of semiosis would benefit from an articulation with critical realism – as is the case with critical discourse analysis and its even-handed concern with context as well as text, we have argued that critical realism would benefit from sustained engagement with discourse analysis. For critical realism has tended to operate with an insufficiently concrete and complex analysis of semiosis. It has tended to take symbol systems, language, orders of discourse, and so on for granted, thereby leaving important features of the social world out of its analysis and being

unable to provide an adequate account of its complex semiotic, social, and material overdetermination.

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[1] A fourth question that some may want to raise is that of naturalism, and more specifically whether the analysis of semiosis can be assimilated to the methodology of the natural sciences. We regard this question as misguided. What is important is that approaches or methodology are appropriate for their subject matter, not whether they match those of the natural sciences. Of course, answering the former question incidentally supplies an answer to the latter, and it will be apparent from this paper that we think the answer to this latter question is yes and no; i.e. the study of semiosis requires both similar and different methods from those of natural science.

[2] We use the term 'semiosis' throughout this paper. We can initially gloss it as the inter-subjective making of meaning, but our understanding of semiosis as an element/moment of 'the social' is necessarily relational, and will emerge during the course of the paper. We prefer 'semiosis' to 'language' and 'discourse' (used as abstract nouns) because (a) semiosis involves more than (verbal) language – it also involves eg 'visual language' (photographs, pictures, diagrams etc), (b) 'discourse' as an abstract noun is a notoriously problematic and confusing term, and, besides, we shall later use 'discourse' as a count noun for particular positioned ways of representing aspects of the world. We shall also later use 'languages'

(count noun) for particular language systems (eg English). When referring to concrete social events from a semiotic perspective, we shall use the term 'texts' (count noun) in an extended sense to include not only written texts but also for instance spoken conversations, or 'multi-semiotic' texts such as TV ads (which mix words, images, sound effects etc). This extended use of 'texts' is common in certain areas of linguistics, though we recognise that it is not a very satisfactory term.

[3] For example, in her critique of Bourdieu (Butler, 2000),Judith Butler assumes a Humean concept of causation and so, unsurprisingly, fails to note that to acknowledge performativity is to acknowledge the causal efficacity of discourses.

[4] This is an example of a set of powers that needs a certain amount of use if they are to be sustained, but at least in the short run we have these powers even though we might not use them at certain times.

[5] There has been a debate within critical realism about whether social structures such as those of language exist independently of their enactment (Bhaskar, 1979; 1989; Benton. 1981; Collier, 1994).

[6] 'Felt' or 'sensed' might better describe some of the less discursive responses.

[7] Interestingly, according to Ringer (2000), this view was shared by Max Weber, one of the founders of interpretive sociology. While Weber is widely associated with an allegedly unsuccessful attempt to unite explanatory (causal) and interpretive (hermeneutic) analysis, this negative judgement arises because most interpreters have assumed that Weber followed a Humean model of causation based on constant conjunctions. However, Ringer shows that weber rejected this model^ as well as related arguments that anticipated Hempel's neo-positivist, deductive nomological 'covering law' model of causal analysis. Weber came to appreciate that that 'reasons' could be causes. He concluded that an adequate explanation of a specific historical, cultural or social phenomenon must be adequate both in terms of motivational intelligibility (i.e., its social meaning for the relevant actors) and its production through the contingent interaction of causal processes in specific circumstances. Bhaskar's first critical realist defense of the possibility of naturalism incorrectly cites Weber as seeing constant conjunctions as necessary for an adequate explanation (1989: 2, 137-8). He presents Weber as combining a neo-Kantian methodology with methodological individualism and contrasts this approach with Marx's realist methodology and relational ontology (1989: 31). He also argues that there are two key differences between Weberian sociology and transcendental realism: (a) whereas Weber accepts, realism rejects, constant conjunctions; (b) whereas Weber denies, realism accepts, that correction of agents' perceptions may be a necessary part of a social scientific investigation (1989: 135-8). Bhaskar is wrong on both counts since Weber also discussed 'wrong thinking' and other forms of irrationality. Another problem that is directly relevant to our own analysis below is that Weber does not adequately distinguish between the actual and the real. In using terms such as 'pressing toward', 'developmental tendencies', 'moving forces', and 'impeding' factors, Weber supported a dynamic conception of causal analysis. But he also argued that such notions do not constitute 'real causal interconnections' at an 'elementary' level but involve no more than tactically useful constructs in the practice of historical reasoning (Ringer 2000: 76). This is where Weber's account of ideal types proves less than helpful in elucidating the distinctiveness of his position. For ideal types could be seen as tactically useful constructs intended to simplify the analysis of a particular event or process and to facilitate comparison among such events or processes; but they could also be seen as scientific constructs intended to identify specific dynamic properties (causal powers and liabilities, tendencies and counter-tendencies, etc.) that are the naturally necessary features of real objects. It sometimes seems that ideal types are no more than useful tools for comparative analysis. But confining their conceptual status in this way fits ill with Weber's emphasis on such apparently realist notions as 'objective probability' and 'counterfactual analysis'; his praise for Marx's identification of the 'laws' of capitalism as long as these laws are not reified or naturalized; his recognition that knowledge of social laws is not the same as knowledge of social reality, since general laws are low in content; or his view that social orders can only be said to exist to the extent that their associated forms of conduct are reproduced. In short, there appears to be a serious ambiguity in Weber's 'causalism' that is rooted in his failure to draw a clear distinction between the real and the actual.

[8] cf. J.L.Austin on 'illocutionary' and 'perlocutionary' effects.

[9] See Archer (2000) for an interesting argument on the pre-linguistic and material bases of logic.

[10] Habermas coined this term in his critique of Foucault (Habermas, 198?).