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On the intransitive objects of the social (or human) sciences

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ABSTRACT

This paper strengthens Bhaskar's case for the possibility of naturalism. Building on Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* and *The Possibility of Naturalism*, and on more recent contributions by Douglas Porpora, it traces the evolution of Bhaskar's concept of 'intransitive' and follows his suggestion to treat social structure as an intransitive generative mechanism analogous to the generative mechanisms of the natural sciences. It is suggested, building on Porpora, that the constitutive rules of the market are usefully regarded as generating an intransitive 'basic social structure.' That this same intransitive object is reasonably regarded as continuing to exist and act under different descriptions is illustrated by citing how different scholars have approached it with different concepts and vocabularies. It expands on Bhaskar's first example of an intransitive object of social science, the mass unemployment that provided a 'motor' for Keynes, and on Porpora's examples of the causal powers of social structures.

KEYWORDS

Critical realism; philosophy of science; economic theory

When Roy Bhaskar first introduced his concept of intransitive objects of knowledge in *A Realist Theory of Science* (Bhaskar [1975] 2008, henceforth RTS), his first examples of such objects were the specific gravity of mercury, the process of electrolysis, the mechanism of light propagation, sound and heavy bodies falling to earth¹ (RTS, 22). Such objects would continue to exist in a world where there was no science to know them. In such a world, which has existed in the past and which might come again, the causal laws that science has now discovered would prevail in the absence of knowledge of them.

... the intransitive objects of knowledge are in general invariant to our knowledge of them: they are the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world; and for the most part they are quite independent of us (RTS, 22).

Elaborating on Bhaskar's words: in a world without science, without knowledge, and without humans, the specific gravity of mercury would continue to be 13.6 when the mercury is liquid and its temperature 25°C, even though there would be no periodic table of the elements naming 'mercury' the element with atomic number 80, even though there would be no measurements comparing the weight of a litre of mercury under the earth's gravitational pull with the weight of pure water under a similar pull at 4°C, even though neither its volume nor its weight nor its mass nor its temperature had

ever been measured, even though there would no mathematics and no numbers. There would still operate physically in nature a ratio of masses of mercury to masses of water even in the absence of any animal capable of forming the concept of 'ratio' or of purifying water. Such was the world as it actually was before there were scientists.

Bhaskar's original sense of 'intransitive' asks readers to make rather difficult thought experiments. When scientists ordinarily use a phrase like 'specific gravity of mercury' or a word like 'electrolysis' their referents are ordinarily identified with standard scientific descriptions, which in turn depend on standard definitions, standard measurements, and the standard laboratory and industrial instruments used to make the measurements. Imagining the continuing operation of physical realities in the absence of any and all of the ways those realities are thought and manipulated by humans requires emptying them of their standard meanings. The identity of the beings that are the objects of scientific knowledge becomes independent of standard descriptions of them and indeed independent of any descriptions at all, and independent of the minds and doings of creatures like humans capable of engaging in the activities called 'describing' and 'measuring.' When we say that the entity described by the words 'specific gravity of mercury' is an intransitive object of knowledge we are saying more than that the same entity might also be described in other ways. We regard it – at the beginning of RTS – as being or having causal powers that would exist even if there were no humans. I suggest that it is a useful thought experiment to perform before considering how Bhaskar revised his initial definition, to try to think of a concept like specific gravity of mercury as referring to an entity that retains its identity even when we have subtracted from it everything or almost everything that currently identifies what the concept refers to.

Bhaskar goes on to contrast 'intransitive' and 'transitive' objects of knowledge, using as his example Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's theory has both a transitive and an intransitive aspect. Darwin's 'transitive' objects of knowledge included observed facts of natural variation, the theory of domestic selection in the breeding of animals and plants, and Thomas Malthus's theory of population. Bhaskar likens these 'transitive' sources of Darwin's thought to Aristotle's material causes, the bronze out of which a sculptor makes a statue or the wood out of which a carpenter makes a bed. In contrast, the 'intransitive' fact of evolution is a process 'too slow and complex' to be perceived. It had been going on for millions of years before Darwin was born. To think of evolution as an intransitive object of knowledge, the word 'evolution' must be taken to refer to a natural process as it can be imagined to have been happening before there was anyone to name it, think about it, or study it.

Let me detour a moment to differentiate between the terms 'material', 'matter' and 'materialism.' For good reasons, Bhaskar persists in likening the transitive objects of knowledge to Aristotle's material causes (for example, RTS, 158). However, the context is different when he writes of the emergence of living things from inanimate matter (RTS, 113). Then the 'material' or the 'matter' from which life emerged, and to which life cannot be reduced, must be reckoned to the intransitive side of the ledger, as similarly it must be counted as a reference to intransitive objects of knowledge when in *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Bhaskar [1979] 2008, henceforth PON). Bhaskar makes the causal criterion for the reality of a posited object turn on its capacity to bring about changes in material things (PON, 12) or endorses synchronic emergent powers materialism (PON, 97). Although counting material things as intransitive is often what Bhaskar must mean, he does not

literally say so in RTS. He appears to avoid writing of intransitive material objects, choosing to write ‘physical’ or ‘natural’ instead of ‘material.’ However, he perhaps implicitly refers to material intransitive objects in RTS in the very act of describing Darwin’s, or anybody’s, knowledge production process as ‘material.’ Aristotle aside, Bhaskar uses the word ‘material’ when making the point that knowledge production, like anything else that happens, can usefully be thought of as a natural process. Calling Darwin’s social process of knowledge ‘material’ suggests both the materials Darwin worked with and the fact that the social production of knowledge is itself a natural, and therefore material and physical, process (PON, 97).²

Although Bhaskar initially coined the phrase *intransitive objects of knowledge* to describe objects not depending on human activity, which would exist and act in the same ways if there were no humans (RTS, 21) he soon goes on to enrich its meaning. Most importantly, he discerns the real basis of causal laws and of natural necessity in an analysis of experimental activity (more precisely, of the kind of experimental activity that simulates a closed system) that adds significance to his initial account of intransitivity. Knowledge production as it often happens – scientists constructing artificial closed systems in order to acquire knowledge of generative mechanisms that act in open systems – would not be possible if causal laws did not have an underlying real basis independent of patterns of observed events. The ‘real basis’ is identified as ‘structures, generative mechanisms and active things.’ (RTS, 45–6) That there must be such a real basis is something we learn from reflection on what must be the case for science to be possible, independently of any actual scientific knowledge. (RTS, 39; PON, 5–6).

It appears to me that many of the key phrases developed in RTS following the initial coining of the phrase ‘intransitive objects of knowledge’ denote the same items that Bhaskar will call in PON ‘the intransitive world of things’ (PON, 185).³ This would be the case of the phrases just mentioned in quotes and also of transcendental realism, of natural necessity, of the real as distinct from the actual, and of the irreducibility of structures to events. They form what Bhaskar will later call, in the course of replying to the objection that he had defined and used ‘intransitive’ in one way and then went on to redefine it and use it in different ways, a family or constellation of concepts that are interdefined (PON, 169). They denote the same intransitive objects of knowledge while casting light on them from somewhat differing viewpoints. Using a number of different terms facilitates communication because different terms will ‘latch on’ to the differing experiences and different vantage points of different readers. (Id.) They refer to the same intransitive objects under different descriptions.

In the latter parts of Chapter One of RTS, the stage was already being set for one of the interdefined criteria used to define intransitivity, the initial one, to be relaxed so that Bhaskar no longer requires that the objects would act in the same way if there were no human beings, but only requires that the object be invariant with respect to the transitive process of its discovery. In due course, there will also be conceptual space for intransitive objects of scientific study that are in part constituted by the study of them, as – this is my example, not Bhaskar’s – the institutions of economics have in part been constituted by the economic science that studies them (Mitchell 2005; Richards forthcoming, Chapter Two). There will be conceptual space for regarding objects of social scientific study as intransitive even when they have been causally affected by social science (PON, 47).

In the last chapter of RTS, Bhaskar sums up its main arguments and makes a few remarks about social science. Summing up, the central argument establishes an ontological distinction between causal laws and patterns of events. It turns on an analysis of the possibility of experimental activity (RTS, 244). It would appear, then, that Bhaskar himself in RTS, and before writing PON, had already moved away from the view suggested by his initial remarks when he coined the term. It appears that he no longer thinks, if he ever did, that the one and only criterion for deciding whether an object of knowledge is or is not intransitive is whether it would go on existing and acting in exactly the same way if there were no human beings. The distinction between causal laws and patterns of events is already overshadowing the distinction between a world with humans in it and a world with no humans in it. Having made central the possibility of experimental activity – and not what would happen if there were no humans – Bhaskar goes on to consider briefly in RTS the consequences of his views for social or human sciences in which no experiments simulating closed systems are possible.⁴

At the end of RTS, Bhaskar says that the better philosophy of natural science he has just developed, while acknowledging predecessors like Harré and Madden, (1975), makes it easier to see that the central problem of social science is to devise or reconstruct analogous procedures to the experimental activity that enables natural scientists to find the real basis of causal laws. It also makes it easier to see the great gulf that must separate natural science from social science in the absence of such analogous procedures. (RTS, 245) Since the point and purpose of *The Possibility of Naturalism* is to show that when social science is properly understood there is no such great gulf, it follows that what social science should be doing on Bhaskar's view is finding the real basis of causal laws in structures, generative mechanisms, and active things. If I am right in seeing a cluster of 'interdefined' Bhaskarian terms as several descriptions, each illuminating in its own way the intransitive objects of knowledge, and if Bhaskar is right in PON to devote so many pages to arguing for the recognition of intransitive objects in the social sciences, then the search for structural generative mechanisms and the search for intransitive objects is the same search. Objecting that Peter Winch takes ideas to be exhaustive of social reality (PON, 136), and objecting that Winch collapses the intransitive dimension (PON, 149), is the same objection.

Of course, when Bhaskar uses the phrase 'causal laws' when identifying the central argument of RTS as distinguishing causal laws from patterns of events, and as revealing what really explains them, he does not refer to laws in a Humean sense, but to laws regarded as 'enduring mechanisms that bind some but not other events together and that exist as the powers of things' (RTS, 238).

While the specific gravity of mercury was Bhaskar's first example of an invariant object of knowledge in the physical sciences, the example Bhaskar gives on the next page (RTS, 246) (the page after he states the need to bridge the great gulf with an analogous procedure for detecting generative mechanisms) may be taken as Bhaskar's first example of an intransitive object of knowledge in social science. The example is the mass unemployment of the 1930s that provided what Bhaskar calls the 'motor' for Keynes' demonstration of the possibility of market equilibrium with unemployment. It seems unlikely that Bhaskar thought of the mass unemployment as 'motor' in the transitive sense that made observations of natural variation one of the Aristotelian material causes that Darwin worked up to formulate his theory of evolution. In this later context, Bhaskar

appears to be looking for an example of the failure of the normal social process of knowledge production due to a too-big-to-ignore intransitive reality that drove an innovative scientist to adjust thought to being, using what Mervyn Hartwig has called ‘an essentially retroductive procedure from the empirical to the real, not of constant conjunctions of events but of intelligible connections between manifest phenomena ...’ (Hartwig 2008, Location 343). He is finding an example of what he is looking for in the mass unemployment that moved Keynes to break out of classical orthodoxy. Below I will consider this example in more detail.

Early in PON Bhaskar sends the phrase ‘intransitive object of knowledge’ coined in RTS back to the mint and recoins it.⁵ Now it is the natural mechanisms (the causes) that tend to produce events, independently of their identification, that ‘may be termed’ intransitive objects of scientific inquiry (PON, 10). It is the intransitive dimension that makes changing knowledge of unchanging objects possible (PON, 11).

In the intransitive dimension, what is discovered exists independently of its discovery. (PON, 11) This point – the independence of existence from discovery, prepares the way for the further claim in Chapter Two of PON that even if social science causally affected the coming-into-being of its object of knowledge, then that object can still be ‘existentially’ (PON, 47) intransitive. It is what it is regardless of how it came into being, as well as regardless of how it was discovered. The essence of science lies in the movement from knowledge of manifest phenomena to knowledge of the structures that generate them i.e. to knowledge of intransitive objects. The question to be addressed in PON is: To what extent is a comparable movement possible in the human sciences? (PON, 13)

In the postscript to the second edition of RTS, Bhaskar makes it clear that ‘changing knowledge of unchanging objects’ refers to relatively unchanging objects, not necessarily to absolutely unchanging objects (RTS, 257). This removes an obstacle to regarding social structures as intransitive objects of science, since social structures are, obviously, only relatively unchanging (PON, 38). When he again takes up the transitive/intransitive distinction in *Reclaiming Reality*, he emphasizes that intransitive objects of knowledge exist and act independently of their identification by human beings. Since the transitive dimension refers to the cognitive objects produced within science (Bhaskar 2011, 27), a variety of different scientific approaches might conceptualize social structure differently. They might produce different cognitive objects while studying what could reasonably be regarded as the same intransitive object. This paves the way for social structure to be an intransitive object of the social sciences even when it is not identified as the social structure by the scientists studying it. It could be identified, for example, as in Marx, as *Verhältnisse*.

Seen in the light of the search for a movement from manifest phenomena to the structures that generate them in the social sciences similar to that in the natural sciences, the question, ‘What properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?’ is equivalent to asking what the intransitive objects of the social (or human) sciences are. This question can be regarded as the *Leitfaden* that stitches together the text of PON. ‘... knowledge must be viewed as produced means of production with intransitive objects existing and acting independently of it’ (PON, 14–15). If the aim of PON is to show science as unified, albeit differentiated, in its essential method (PON, 18), then its aim is to show intransitive objects of social knowledge. To accomplish this aim Bhaskar assigns himself the task of exhibiting the *structures* of

social life (PON, 20). As part of that project, he will demonstrate the *intransitivity* of both beliefs and meanings (PON, 21–2).

In a context where he regards both the meanings that are foundational for Weberian sociology and the social facts foundational for Durkheimian sociology as intransitive (PON, 40), Bhaskar advocates a relational sociology⁶ (PON, 30). The relational sociology will study social forms that pre-exist human intentional action (PON, 25). The social forms are, or establish, relations. The relations define positions. The pre-existence of the social forms establishes their autonomy. Their causal powers establish their reality. To say they are autonomous and real is equivalent to saying they are intransitive (given what ‘intransitive’ now means). Against this background, Bhaskar views social structure as the appropriate mechanism-analogue in the social sciences to the structural generative mechanisms of the natural sciences (PON, 38).

At this point, I turn to subsequent contributions from Douglas Porpora, but I will be back to Bhaskar in a moment.

In an article published in 1993 (Porpora1993), Porpora proposed a concept of social structure as emergently material social relations. He distinguishes three analytical moments: the constitutive rules that establish the relations,⁷ the relations themselves, and the situated behaviour and self-understanding of actors. ‘The relations discussed above are emergently material in that they have an ontologically objective and socially consequential existence, whether or not any actors are aware of them’ (Porpora 1993, 222). They are, therefore, in Bhaskar’s terms, intransitive. The material relations are pre-existing and causally efficacious intransitive objects of knowledge that Bhaskar always said (in spite of his proclivity for saying essentially the same thing with a ‘family’ or ‘constellation’ of ‘interdefined’ terms instead of settling for just one) were the object of study of sociology. They can (I claim) be regarded as the objects of study that make it legitimate to regard sociology as a science in the same sense as the natural sciences are sciences. They form the ‘social structure’ that is the ‘analogue’ of the ‘structural generative mechanisms’ of nature.

The ‘relations discussed above’ to which the above quote from Porpora refers feature the wage relation, the employer–employee relation, the very relation many Marxist writers regard as the essence of capitalism. (For example, Aglietta 1979) One could, at this point, classify the wage relation as a species of buying and selling, the employer being a buyer and the employee a seller. That is the option I will be recommending when I recommend calling the rules that constitute markets ‘basic.’

Although there are other phenomena that fall within the denotations of ‘social relation’ and ‘social structure’ in Bhaskar and in Porpora the positions and relations created by the constitutive rules that make capitalism possible would appear to be first and foremost what they have in mind. It is clear that when Bhaskar says social relations are the intransitive objects of study of sociology, the study of capitalism is at or near the top of his mind. Porpora for his part is deliberately synthesizing the Winchian and Marxian traditions in a way that amends Winch and Giddens to make it clear that cultural rules are material forces with material consequences and that rule-talk needs to be supplemented by talk of relations and positions. Although Bhaskar might balk at saying that capitalist social relations are created by cultural constitutive rules, he certainly makes it a central part of his case for the possibility of naturalism that rules can be causes. He regards rules as intransitive generative mechanisms (PON, 145). In social science, the movement from manifest

phenomena to the rules that make them possible parallels the movement in natural science from manifest phenomena to the structures that produce them. Winch is therefore not mistaken to advise social researchers to focus on rules (PON, 147). Winch is mistaken because the causal efficacy of reasons and rules means there is an intransitive dimension. Winch is mistaken because ‘society is not constituted by the way it makes itself intelligible to itself’ (PON, 146). Unlike Winch (and, as Porpora will emphasize later, unlike Giddens and his followers), because it recovers the intransitive dimension, critical realism is able to deal with class and power (PON, 147).

One might object here that when Porpora contrasts cultural rules with material relations in the process of synthesizing the two (Porpora 1993, 212–13); and when Bhaskar criticizes Winch for disregarding the material causal efficacy of rules (PON, 145–46); Porpora and Bhaskar are not using the word ‘rule’ in exactly the same way. I do not see this as a problem. Their contributions can be complementary even if their terminology is not identical. I would suggest that something similar may often be true of the varying employments of ‘social structure’ found in Dave Elder-Vass (Elder-Vass 2010), Peter Manicas (Manicas 2006), Ted Benton (Benton 1998), and Margaret Archer (Archer 1995).

When one examines Bhaskar’s arguments against Winch, one finds that they reduce, in essence, to just one. Winch denies that the social sciences study intransitive objects. In Winch, the collapse of the intransitive dimension of the objects of the social sciences leads to a solipsism of forms of life, outside time and outside the relations of the material world. Rational discourse becomes impossible. (PON, 133, 149)

For Bhaskar, in contrast to Winch, it is important to say that social structure, like the structural generative mechanisms of nature, may be opaque to human understanding (PON, 104). Bhaskar’s words are reminiscent of Marx’s point that if the truth were in surface appearances there would be no need for science. (Marx 1894, 797)

Winch quotes section 5.4711 of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: ‘To give the essence of proposition means to give the essence of all description, therefore the essence of the world.’ (Winch 2008, 13) He continues in his own words:

The concepts we have settle for us the form of the experience we have of the world. It may be worth reminding ourselves of the truism that when we speak of the world we are speaking of what we in fact mean by the expression “the world”: there is no way of getting outside the concepts in terms of which we think of the world ... (Winch 2008, 14)

For Bhaskar, this sort of talk expresses a linguistic form of the epistemic fallacy (PON, 133). It confuses being with thought. It collapses reality into talk. In equivalent terms, it denies that the objects of scientific study are intransitive.

Bhaskar’s critique of Winch identifies two kinds of intransitive objects of the social sciences. The first kind is emergent social objects like those named by the very same key-words Winch deploys to distinguish the social sciences from the physical sciences: concepts, meanings, reasons, and rules (PON, 138). According to Winch, in the absence of the mental entities such words designate, objects of scientific study are not social. Their cognizance falls outside the domain of social science. With its domain thus restricted, social science can only be about intelligible relationships among meanings; it cannot be about causal relationships among things. Bhaskar turns the tables. Concepts are constructed (PON, 8). Meanings are produced (PON, 60). Reasons can be causes (PON, 83). Rule-following needs causal explanation (PON, 144). All of this happens in the material

world. Thus, the very entities used by Winch as criteria for identifying what is social are products of and participants in natural causal processes. This very general ontological point has a specific corollary that Porpora further develops, although without using the word 'intransitive': a social structure established by constitutive rules is an intransitive object for science to study.

A second kind of intransitive object of the social sciences is the same as the intransitive objects of the natural sciences. Bhaskar implies that this is so in passages like this:

Winch, correctly perceiving ideas to be distinctive of social reality, incorrectly infers them to be exhaustive of it. His own examples show this. Being in prison or fighting in a war is not just (or even perhaps necessarily) possessing a certain idea of what one is doing: it is being physically separated from the rest of society or being party to an armed conflict; and without the separation and the conflict, the concepts would lack the material substrate, as it were, essential for their correct application (PON, 136).

Social meanings, concepts, reasons, and rules require a material substrate because social life is life. Like non-social life, social life requires water, energy, and DNA to guide the growth of tissues. Whatever may be the division of labour among the departments of a university, and even if sociologists studying, say, a city, find themselves incompetent when it comes to understanding, for example, the city's water supply, and have to assemble an interdisciplinary team; any really existing living and breathing society is necessarily generated by physical, chemical, and biological structures as well as by social structures. The intransitive objects of the study of societies include, in addition to intransitive social objects like money, also intransitive natural objects such as water, carbon dioxide, and genes.

It may be perhaps useful to apply the idea that intransitive objects can be natural or social to what I have taken to be Bhaskar's first example of an intransitive object of social science, the depression of the 1930s that provided what Bhaskar termed the 'motor' for Keynes' contributions to transforming classical economics. Hungry people standing in line for a bowl of soup can perhaps be counted as representative of the 'intransitive natural objects' motivating an intellectual revolution, at least with respect to physical malnutrition; and probably also with respect to humiliation insofar as susceptibility to humiliation is a physically hard-wired emotional liability of the species (Lindner 2006). On plausible understandings of cause-and-effect relationships linking economic disaster to political disaster, the physical violence of tyrannies and wars might also be regarded as part of the material substrate that motivated rethinking classical economics in the 1930s.

With regard to 'intransitive social objects,' I am proposing to follow Bhaskar's suggestion to regard social structure as the analogue for the social sciences of the generative structures of the natural sciences. I am also proposing to follow Porpora's more recent contributions to elaborating the concept of social structure. Elaborating a bit now on Keynes will prepare the way for something I want to say about Porpora: although he is mainly concerned to reconcile the Winchian and the Marxian traditions, his conclusions also apply to other traditions. One of the other traditions is the Keynesian.

Keynes makes it easy to detect the social structure that frames his economic reasoning. In most of his *General Theory*, he makes it clear that his arguments assume market-oriented behaviour in the modern institutional context that Max Weber describes as rational rules enforced by the state that make the consequences of economic decisions *kalkulierbar*.⁸

(Weber 1978, 337) For example, Keynes begins his chapter on the marginal efficiency of capital (Keynes, 1936, chapter 11) writing:

When a man buys an investment or capital asset he purchases the right to the series of prospective returns, which he expects to obtain from selling its output, after deducting the running expenses of obtaining that output, over the life of the asset.

Such language shows that the object of study, the market, is the social structure established by the constitutive rules Marx famously summarized as Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham. The same basic social structure can be and has been denoted under other descriptions. Obviously, there are many markets and many kinds of markets. Nevertheless, Marx's famous summary of the rules of the market game, for example, denotes (if one may use the word 'denotes' to refer to a generative mechanism that retains its identity under diverse descriptions) something that is commonly, and, I think, legitimately, called 'the market.' When, instead, one uses the plural, 'structures,' it would seem to carry the connotation that more than one rule and more than one position are involved; for example, the wage relation discussed by Porpora involves rules of property and contract, and positions of employer and employee.

Given this basic social structure, Keynes shows how a low-level equilibrium is possible. The constitutive rules of the market organize exchange. An exchange is voluntary. That someone desperately needs to sell labour-power in order to be able to buy the necessities of life obliges no one to hire or to buy. Given the rules of the game, it is no surprise that the outcome of the game is that simultaneously workers are unemployed, resources are unused, and needs are unmet. Keynes specific argument for this possibility depends on his concept of liquidity preference. More fundamentally, at an ontological level where it is clear that Keynes and Marx and others are using somewhat different vocabularies to refer to the same social structure, it depends on the structural norm (a corollary of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham) that '... though men have the power to purchase, they may not choose to use it' (Keynes 1936, 19, quoting J. A. Hobson). Since production depends on investment, and since investment depends on the confidence of investors that investment will be profitable, and since profits depend on sales, and since buyers may prefer liquidity and choose not to buy, there is no guarantee that there will be enough investment to create enough production. Job-seekers may fail to find work; capacity may lie idle; needs may remain unmet. Keynes recommends, consequently, that '... the policy of the state ought to be directed to increasing and supplementing the inducement to invest ...' (Keynes 1936, 310). Crucial parts of the general context and background, what Foucault might call 'historical conditions of possibility'⁹ (Foucault, 1965) of Keynes' more specific findings and recommendations are provided by the social structure. Keynes himself acknowledges this when, as he occasionally does, he remarks that his conclusions apply to the world as it is, and not to the world as it necessarily must be (For example, Keynes 1936, 254).

Before saying more about Porpora's concept of social structure, and more about how it can be regarded as an intransitive object of social science that retains its identity at the level of ontology when it is re-described with different concepts and different words, it may be well to reply to an objection to a re-description I have already employed. It can be objected that Marx's classic formulation of the constitutive rules of markets as Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham, was not intended to describe the true social

structure, but rather its illusory appearance in bourgeois ideology as a ‘very Eden of the innate rights of man.’ An implicit premise of this objection is that the relations of production, where exploitation occurs, exist on their own and rely on the cultural rules that constitute market exchange only for legitimation. Porpora replies to it that relations of production,

... are generated by culturally developed constitutive rules and thus derive from those rules, which create the very possibility of distinctive kinds of economic transactions. Thus, at least ontologically, culture must precede material relations. Actually, Marxists also must recognize this at some level because their goal is to change the rules of property ownership in order to eliminate the adverse property relations to which those rules give rise. (Porpora 1993, 218).

I would add that even though Marx’s famous formulation of the constitutive rules of markets is part of setting the scene for an argument that the secret of profit-making is to be found in the sphere of production and not in the sphere of circulation, the causal powers of the material relations (or positions) of buyers and sellers remain central for Marx. In Chapter One of *Capital*, Marx makes the foundational point that commodity producers, without being aware of it, relate their products *in exchange* as values.¹⁰ In the cycle M-C-M, the first phase, the exchange of money for commodities, is a purchase. The second phase, the exchange of commodities for money, is a sale. Were market exchange, and consequently the rules that constitute the market, not central to the analysis, little sense could be made of saying that the objective of the capitalist is surplus value in the form of money, or of saying that with the accumulation of capital the specifically capitalist mode of production develops.¹¹

In his most recent formulation of the concept of social structure, Porpora advocates what he calls the critical realist definition of it as ‘material relations among social positions and social constructs’ (Porpora 2016, 96).¹² An important point is that the relations are intransitive. They are material. They exist and act whether or not actors are aware of them, even though their existence depends on rule-following and even though rule-following depends on intentions. I believe it is consistent with this definition to enrich it with Tony Lawson’s point that social structures are systems of internal relations (Lawson 2003, 227–28).

Whatever may be the best approach to crafting a general definition of social structure, it is important to think about the particular social structure that underlies a capitalist economy.¹³ In this connection, I have already used three times the word ‘basic.’ Now I would like to explain briefly my use of this word, and to explain why I find it useful for selecting among all the social structures one that especially concerns Marx, Keynes, Bhaskar, Porpora, and ourselves. Among the motivations for the choice of the word ‘basic’ is the point made by Bronislaw Malinowski, in the course of founding the functionalist school of anthropology that cultures that do not succeed in meeting the basic needs of the people necessarily cease to exist. He used the word ‘primary’ where I use ‘basic.’ Malinowski writes:

Thus man has, first and foremost, to satisfy all the needs of his organism. He has to create arrangements and carry out activities for feeding, heating, housing, clothing or protection from cold, wind and weather. He has to protect himself and organize for such protection against external enemies and dangers, physical, animal or human. All these primary problems of human beings are solved for the individual by artefacts, organization into cooperative groups, and also by the development of knowledge, a sense of value and ethics. (Malinowski 2013, Location 502)

Marx and Engels made a similar point earlier in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels [1846] 1968, 8) when they wrote of the ‘first premise’ (*erste Voraussetzung*) and the ‘first fact’ (*erste Tatbestand*). ‘The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.’ This ‘first premise’ itself depends on the production of the means of subsistence. ‘Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.’ I would suggest that here ‘physical organisation’ (*körperliche Organization*) can be regarded as a predecessor of Porpora’s definition of social structure in terms of material positions.

Amartya Sen is perhaps my closest precedent. He also motivates me to use the words ‘basic’ and ‘social structure’ without using precisely those terms himself. In his study of famines, he brings together the idea of meeting a basic need, namely food, with the idea of legal entitlement. The laws he is talking about concern who owns food and who does not – a topic that could not be more central to material positions defined by constitutive rules. Sen showed that in the most important recent famines, the decisive criterion determining who lived and who died was legal entitlement to food. There was in each famine, at a physical level, sufficient food available. Who had a right to eat it depended, in the terminology I am suggesting, on the basic social structure (Sen, 1981).

Let me now elaborate on the idea of ‘basic social structure’ and at the same time elaborate the point that although Porpora has succeeded in showing the continuing relevance of a Marxian concept of social structure, he has also described an underlying generative mechanism that can be and has been described by scholars who are not Marxists. I have been using the expression, ‘constitutive rules of the market’ to name what I am proposing to call the ‘basic social structure.’ This expression can be adapted to Porpora’s vocabulary by saying that the cultural constitutive rules define the material social positions (or relations). The constitutive rules of the market can be called the basic cultural structure. Relations of market exchange and the positions of persons in those relations can be called the basic social structure.

I have already implied that Keynes and Weber are among those who study what I am calling the basic social structure while describing it in their own words. Many others do too. Friedrich von Hayek writes rather of the legal and moral framework of an extended order (von Hayek, 1989). Although von Hayek is an advocate and not a critic of capitalism, the rules of the framework are the same rules identified by Marx – and indeed the same rules discussed by Adam Smith and other earlier advocates of capitalism whom Marx mocks when he calls the basic cultural structure an ‘Eden.’ They are also the same rules Karl Renner discusses when he analyses the institutions of private law and their social functions (Renner [1905] 1976). Renner, who was an early socialist president of Austria, was arguing that the legal framework of private law that Europe had inherited and adapted from Rome, could be retained in the transition from a capitalist Europe to a socialist Europe. Writing as an Austro-Marxist jurist, Renner can be regarded as describing, in a different vocabulary, the property and contract relations others discuss as economists or as sociologists. Gillian Rose (Rose 1984) writes about how the early sociologists took over concepts that had previous histories in jurisprudence. Not surprisingly, some of the main concepts taken over describe and/or constitute market positions and relations and/or their historical predecessors. Joseph Schumpeter, in his history of economic analysis writes of such positions and relations under the label ‘the institutional frame of the economic process’ (Schumpeter 1954, 544 ff). Sir Henry Maine, writing in 1861, described

the emergence of modern society as a movement from relations established by status to relations established by contract (Maine 2005, 1861). Louis Dumont wrote about the rise of 'economic ideology' in Europe and contrasted Europe with the traditional societies of India, concerning which he was also an expert, and which had a much different social structure (Dumont 1977); while Karl Polanyi describes the gradual growth of what he called 'market economy' that commodified even land, labour and money; and to a large extent replaced older social structures whose constitutive principles tended to be reciprocity and redistribution (Polanyi 2001). Charles Taylor wrote of the constitutive rules of a 'bargaining society' (Taylor 1971).

Once one accepts Bhaskar's view, that for social science to be possible it must, like natural science, have a real basis; and once one accepts his view that there can be no incorrigible account of it or single correct description of it; then, I submit, the panorama of divergent viewpoints I have just sketched, is what one would expect. Similarly, to vary the old story about the blind men touching an elephant and reporting what they feel, suppose that the elephant patiently stands still while the blind men move around and make fairly comprehensive reports on their tactile experiences. Then one would expect that although they would say different things about it, the various things they say would bear Wittgensteinian family resemblances, not by accident but because there really is an elephant.

Bhaskar helps us to see that there are no ways of talking that are definitively correct because they forever wed thought to being. But one can offer reasonable proposals crafting concepts intended to be useful. It is in this spirit that I adopt Bhaskar's views on intransitivity and Porpora's on social structure (without pretending to answer everybody who has found one or the other unclear, ambiguous or mistaken) and offer my own additional suggestion to think in terms of an intransitive 'basic social structure.' On the view I am proposing, the writers cited, from Keynes to Taylor, and many others who could be cited, provide support for Bhaskar's claim that intransitive objects of the social sciences (generative mechanisms, social structures) retain their identity at an ontological level while at a transitive level they may be approached and described in various ways. I suggest that they also provide support for the claim that the social structures whose existence Marxian writers have recently struggled to assert in an intellectual climate where they have been systematically ignored,¹⁴ have long been acknowledged to exist by non-Marxian writers looking at them from a number of different viewpoints.

Porpora gives important examples of the causal powers of social structure, in addition to those involved in the wage relation already mentioned. One is the causal role of social structure in establishing the objective interest of capitalists in maximizing profit (Porpora 1993, 224). Any capitalists (here perhaps it would be better to say 'any firms') that succeed in accumulating more profits than their competitors are threats to their competitors. With their greater assets, they can do things to lure customers away from them and toward themselves. They can acquire more efficient technologies, run more and better advertising campaigns, and so on. This is an objective material fact; it is a consequence of the social structure. Given that the smart ones, the ones that survive, are the ones who maximize profits, they tend to neglect safety, move operations to where wages are lower, damage the environment, and so on.

Here I would add that it is important to bear in mind Bhaskar's point that the causal powers of (relatively) invariant social structures only ever manifest themselves as tendencies in open systems (PON, 53). To continue with the same example, although it would be irresponsible to study society without taking into account the structures that

establish the objective interest of capitalists in maximizing profit, it would also be irresponsible not to take into account many other factors that influence or might influence what capitalists do.¹⁵

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I believe I am entitled to suggest that the considerations here advanced strengthen the case for saying that after a number of false starts, the social (or human) sciences can, as Bhaskar claimed, become sciences in the same sense that the natural sciences are sciences. This conclusion should be tempered by Bhaskar's confession in the postscript to the second edition of PON that were he to rewrite that book he would pay more attention to how the social order is embedded in the natural order (PON, 173). It should also be tempered by his principle that, no matter how confidently we may feel that this time we got it right, all conceptualizations are corrigible (PON, 152). I have tried to show, admittedly not in the form of an air-tight proof, that Bhaskar's proposal to treat the social structure as an analogue to the generative mechanisms studied by the natural sciences is valid and feasible. Although Bhaskar initially defined intransitivity to refer to objects that would exist even in the absence of human beings, he gradually amplified and refined the concept until it became able to refer even to objects whose coming into being was causally affected by the science that studies them. For example (my example, not his), even though the views of Adam Smith, a leading founder of the science of economics, contributed to constituting economic society and not only to describing it; the social structures of economic society, described by Porpora and studied by economists as well as by other social scientists, are nevertheless objective, material, relatively invariant and intransitive. They are positions and relations with causal powers. It has here further been shown that it is reasonable to say that the same basic social structure analysed by Marx and Porpora can be and has been approached from different directions using other concepts and other words. Its causal powers – for example, the 'systemic imperative'¹⁶ that drives capitalists to maximize profit – exist independently of their roles in scientific conceptualizations of them. When, for example, Milton Friedman writes that a businessman who does not maximize profits is unlikely to remain in business for long (Friedman 1953, 22) he can be taken to refer to the same intransitive basic social structure through the lenses of a different transitive conceptual apparatus. It has also been noted in this paper that an intransitive basic social structure plays an important causal role in explaining the phenomena behind other seminal concepts in social science not included among Porpora's examples, such as accumulation in Marx, insufficiency of effective demand in Keynes, and equilibrium below full employment in Keynes. Surely this short list could be expanded, both by encouraging new studies in social science that delve beneath the surface to improve knowledge of underlying generative mechanisms; and by re-reading old studies in the light of the recent conceptual improvements that Bhaskar and Porpora (and many others) have proposed.¹⁷

Notes

1. Also, on p. 17 in an Introduction that clearly introduces a book already written, Bhaskar says RTS argues for an intransitive dimension of knowledge that is about real structures or mechanisms that exist and act quite independently of men and the conditions which allow men

access to them. In general, when I cite a page, it is often the case that Bhaskar makes the same point also on another page or pages.

2. See also, for example, the second paragraph of RTS, 182.
3. The intransitive world of things is contrasted to the social world of science.
4. Later in his postscript to the second edition of PON, he agrees with Ted Benton that more attention should be given to non-experimental natural science.
5. Ted Benton (Benton 1998) also notes that Bhaskar recoins 'intransitive' in PON and goes on to find that Bhaskar overstates the differences between the natural and the social sciences. Bhaskar replies to Benton in the Postscript to the second edition of PON.
6. A relational sociology might also be called a Marxist or post-Marxist sociology, given the ubiquity and centrality of *Verhältnisse* in *Das Kapital*. Or, reversing the labels on the circles of the Venn Diagramme, Marxist sociology might be classified among the relational sociologies.
7. 'Constitutive' rules establish the relations that create an institution or practice, for example, market exchange or the game of chess. For extensive discussions and applications of this concept see Searle 1969, 1995, 2009.
8. I have replaced 'calculable' with Weber's original German.
9. Foucault argued that madness (*la folie*) could not come into existence until the practices and discourses establishing its historical conditions of possibility came into existence.
10. The generic point that exchange relations remain part of the causal analysis even when the value equivalence of different products is said to be only possible because they all have in common being products of labour, does not depend, as far as I can tell, on the outcome of the controversies regarding the meaning of 'abstract labour' discussed, e.g. by Hostettler (2012) in his chapter 7.
11. The point that capitalism as a specific mode of production develops with accumulation is found in section two of chapter 25. M-C-M is analysed in chapter 4, while the analysis of exchange begins in chapter 1.
12. For further discussion of Porpora's views on social structure, see, in addition to his own writings, including Porpora (1998), Elder-Vass (2010, 83–5 and 172–75). Porpora situates his own view, which I am adopting, among other views of the social structure, in chapter four of Porpora (2016).
13. I find it hard to express myself here without being prolix or misleading or both prolix and misleading. I want to identify the basic social structure not with capitalism but with market economy, and to think of capitalism as only one form of market economy, i.e. the form driven, or to a large extent driven, by capital accumulation. The two are connected, not least because capitalism tends to be the historical outcome of the evolution of a market economy. 'Market economy' is a relatively rare phrase used by Polanyi. 'Capitalism,' coined by Marx, everybody knows. Here, I have settled for saying the basic social structure 'underlies' capitalism. Earlier I settled for 'constitutive rules that make capitalism possible.'
14. Porpora: 'Would-be advocates of a structural view are deprived even of the words with which to speak.' (Porpora 2016, 96)
15. Indeed, there is a school of thought in management science which finds that managers rarely seek to maximize any objective. What they mainly seek to do is 'satisfice.' One of its classics is Simon (1979).
16. I borrow the phrase 'systemic imperative' from Wood (2003).
17. I myself have applied a concept of basic cultural structure, in various versions, to study the decline of social democracy (Richards and Swanger 2006), the rise of the global economy (Richards 2004), and the history of philosophy (Richards 1995).

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