

On the Intransitive Objects of the Social (or Human) Sciences

When Roy Bhaskar first introduced his concept of intransitive objects of knowledge in *A Realist Theory of Science*¹, 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 earth.² 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."³

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 Celsius, 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 water under a similar pull at 4 degrees Celsius, 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." Such was the world as it actually was before there were scientists.

It is easy to misunderstand, and hard to understand, the claim that the specific gravity of mercury or the electrolysis of copper sulphate is an intransitive object of knowledge because when we ordinarily use these words their referents are ordinarily identified with their ordinary 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. Ontology relativizes the words and the numbers. 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 that 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. It is hard to think of a concept like specific gravity of mercury as referring to an

¹ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*. London: Verso, 2008. (1975) (henceforth RTS)

² RTS p. 22. 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.

³ RTS p. 22

entity that retains its identity even when we have subtracted from it everything or almost everything that gives the concept of specific gravity of mercury its meaning.

Bhaskar goes on to contrast “intransitive” and “transitive” objects of knowledge, using as his example Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. That 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 try to sort out a little some uses of the word “material” and of related terms like “matter” and “materialism.” For good reasons Bhaskar persists in likening the transitive objects of knowledge to Aristotle’s material causes.⁴ However, the context is different when he writes of the emergence of living things from inanimate matter.⁵ 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* (PON) Bhaskar makes the causal criterion for the reality of a posited object turn on its capacity to bring about changes in material things,⁶ or endorses synchronic emergent powers materialism.⁷ 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.⁸

Although Bhaskar initially coined the phrase *intransitive objects of knowledge* to describe objects not depending on human activity, which would exist and act in exactly the same ways if there were no humans,⁹ 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 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

⁴ For example, at RTS p. 158.

⁵ RTS p. 113.

⁶ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Fourth Edition. London: Routledge, 2004. (1979) p. 12.

⁷ PON p.97.

⁸ See for example the second paragraph of RTS p. 182.

⁹ RTS p. 21.

patterns of observed events. The “real basis” is identified as “structural generative mechanisms.”¹⁰ Similarly, Bhaskar writes of “enduring and transfactually active mechanisms.”¹¹

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 of what Bhaskar would call in PON “the intransitive world of things.”¹² This would be the case of those 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 a family or constellation of concepts that are interdefined.¹³ They denote the same intransitive objects of knowledge while casting light on them from somewhat differing perspectives. They refer to them under different descriptions. The stage is already being set for one of the descriptions, the initial one, to be relaxed so that it no longer requires that the objects would act in exactly 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 the institutions of economics have in part been constituted by the economic science that studies them.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ It would appear, then, that Bhaskar himself toward the end of RTS even 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 beginning to overshadow 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 the consequences of his views for social or human sciences in which no experiments are possible.

At the end of RTS, Bhaskar says that the better philosophy of natural science he has just developed, while acknowledging predecessors like Rom Harre and E.H. Madden,¹⁶ 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 in structural generative mechanisms. It also makes it easier to see the great gulf that must separate natural science

¹⁰ RTS pages 45-56.

¹¹ RTS p. 183.

¹² PON p. 185. The intransitive world of things is contrasted to the social world of science.

¹³ PON 169 while replying in a postscript to the fourth edition to the objection that he starts with one definition of intransitive and then switches to another.

¹⁴ Timothy Mitchell, “Economists and the Economy in the Twentieth Century,” in George Steinmetz (ed.) *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Pp 126-141.

¹⁵ RTS p. 244.

¹⁶ Rom Harre and E.H. Madden, *Causal Powers*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975. This follows earlier work by the same authors on the same subject.

from social science in the absence of such analogous procedures.¹⁷ 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 structural generative mechanisms. If I am right in seeing a cluster of Bhaskarian terms as several descriptions, each illuminating in its own way the world of invariant 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 invariant objects is the same search.

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."¹⁸

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 (the page after he states the need to bridge the great gulf with an analogous procedure for detecting generative mechanisms) may perhaps be taken as Bhaskar's first example of an invariant object of knowledge in social science. The example is the mass unemployment of the 1930s that provided what Bhaskar calls the "motor" for J.M. 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 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 use 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..."¹⁹ 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. 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.²⁰ It is the intransitive dimension that makes changing knowledge of unchanging objects possible.²¹ In the intransitive dimension, what is discovered exists independently of its discovery.²² 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?²³

¹⁷ RTS, p. 245

¹⁸ RTS, p. 238.

¹⁹ Mervyn Hartwig in his Introduction to the fourth edition of PON, Kindle Edition location 343.

²⁰ PON p. 10.

²¹ PON p. 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ PON p 13.

Seen in this light 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.”²⁴ If the aim of PON is to show science as unified, albeit differentiated, in its essential method,²⁵ 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.²⁶ As part of that project, he will demonstrate the *intransitivity* of both beliefs and meanings.²⁷

In a context where he regards both the meanings that are foundational for Weberian sociology and the social facts foundational for Durkheimian²⁸ sociology as intransitive, Bhaskar advocates a relational sociology²⁹. The relational sociology will study social forms that pre-exist human intentional action.³⁰ 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.³¹

At this point I would like to interrupt my comments on Bhaskar in order to comment briefly on subsequent contributions from Douglas Porpora.

In an article published in 1993³² Porpora proposed a concept of emergently material social relations. He distinguishes three analytical moments: the constitutive rules that establish the relations, 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.”³³ 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 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.

²⁴ PON pp. 14-15

²⁵ PON p. 18

²⁶ PON p. 20

²⁷ PON pp. 21-22.

²⁸ PON p. 40

²⁹ PON p. 30. 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.

³⁰ PON p. 25

³¹ PON p. 38

³² Douglas Porpora (1993) *Cultural Rules and Material Relations, Sociological Theory*.

³³ *Id.* P 222

The “relations discussed above” to which the above quote from Porpora refers feature the wage relation, the employer-employee relation, the very relation that many Marxist writers regard as the essence of capitalism.³⁴ 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 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 the entities Winch calls concepts, rules, reasons and meanings can be causes.

Before saying more about Bhaskar on Winch, I would like to devote a few paragraphs to what might be called a little bit of decentring of Marx’s critique of political economy and of capitalism. Marx is the *eminence grise* behind Bhaskar and Porpora; and on some accounts Marx’s critique of capitalism hovers in the background if not the foreground of all contemporary social thought. Marx’s seminal ideas –which include the idea of capitalism-- hover in the background of the thoughts of advocates of capitalism and of reformers of capitalism and of thinkers whose visions are post-capitalist or non-capitalist. Capitalism is the concrete reality of our daily lives whatever may be our options at the levels of general ontology, general epistemology and general social theory. I fear that if I do not say something at this point about my views on Marx and on capitalism I will be misunderstood because people will read what I have to say about Porpora and Bhaskar in the light of standard views of them that are not mine. By “decentring” I mean putting Marx’s critique of political economy, political economy itself, and capitalism itself in the wider context of the earth story and more specifically in the context of the story of *homo sapiens*, the cultural animal. The little bit of decentring I want to do here borrows from Bronislaw Malinowski the idea that whatever else a culture does, it must provide for meeting people’s basic needs. If it fails to do so, it ceases to exist.

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.”³⁵

Although there may be valid objections to Malinowski’s functionalism, I do not believe there is any valid objection to his principle that any culture in order to survive must provide for meeting basic needs. David Graeber has presented impressive evidence tending to show that most people most of the

³⁴For example, Michel Aglietta

³⁵Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and other Essays*. London: Read Books, 2013. Location 502 of Kindle Edition. Marx and Engels say virtually the same thing in *The German Ideology*: “...the first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy those needs; the production of material life itself.” P. 48 of the edition published in London by Lawrence and Wishart in 1974.

time are more concerned with non-functional displays to win prestige than with meeting basic needs.³⁶ Nevertheless, granting the point I attribute to Graeber, it remains true that if basic needs are not met a culture is not viable. Further, I agree with Porpora that Giddens (who Porpora counts as similar to Winch) overestimates the extent to which people are motivated to go to work day after day to preserve their ontological security. Giddens underestimates the extent to which people go to work day after day to earn money to meet their needs.

Seen in a decentred light, the constitutive rules of “that form of society whose wealth appears as a vast collection of commodities” create only one of innumerable many cultures humans have organized to meet needs. Below I want to offer a brief historical perspective on how today’s basic social structure came about, with implications for understanding what it is today and might become tomorrow. To the best of my knowledge my perspective is not quite the same as anyone else’s perspective. I want to say that the key relation of today’s dominant social structure is that of buyer and seller. The wage relation, where one party stands in the position of employer and another party stands in the position of employee, is one major instance of the more general relation of exchange. Marx was right to characterize what today we call the constitutive rules of markets as “Freedom, Property, Equality and Bentham,” although he was wrong if he meant to treat the markets organized by them as a sphere of circulation ontologically outranked by –perhaps even causally determined by– the relations of production. Bhaskar is right to say that the intransitive objects of scientific knowledge remain ontologically the same under different descriptions. Bhaskar’s concepts of changing knowledge of unchanging objects, and of the same object retaining its identity under different descriptions, are consistent with Freedom, Property, Equality and Bentham also being described as private law³⁷, as the institutional frame of the economic process³⁸, as the legal framework of an extended order³⁹, and in other ways. Bhaskar is also right to say that social structure, like the structural generative mechanisms of nature, may be opaque to human understanding⁴⁰ –echoing Marx’s point that if the truth were in surface appearances there would be no need for science.⁴¹

Historically, markets came before capitalism. Marx’s account of forms of value in the first chapters of *Capital* can be treated –although it is not clear to me that Marx meant it that way– as a guide to how history tends to evolve materially in real time. Selling in order to buy becomes buying in order to sell, which becomes buying in order to produce. In order to sell, which eventually becomes a way of life whose principal motor is capital accumulation, leading to regimes of accumulation⁴² in which every aspect of life has to be compatible with the overarching necessity to keep the wheels of industry turning and the ploughs of agriculture churning by doing whatever can be done to make investors confident that their investments will be profitable. Once a society becomes an exchange society, where people depend for their daily bread, meat and beer on selling in order to buy, generative mechanisms emerge that tend over time to produce results that may appear to be –but are not– inevitable.

³⁶ David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

³⁷ Karl Renner, *The Institutions of Private Law and their Social Functions*. London: Routledge, 1976.

³⁸ Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*. New York: Oxford, 1954. p 544 ff.

³⁹ Friedrich von Hayek *The Fatal Conceit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

⁴⁰ PON p. 104

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. 3. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1894. P 797.

⁴² Although the idea of regime of accumulation began in the Grenoble regulationist school of economics, and with respect to education was anticipated by Bourdieu and Passeron, it was developed in the sense used here by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

Societies will trend over time toward capitalism, becoming ever more dependent on investor confidence to create employment and to produce the goods and services needed to keep life going. Institutional evolution will be driven by something like Alfred Marshall's law of substitution, according to which less expensive –and therefore more profitable– ways of doing business tend to expand and to make obsolete older and less efficient techniques; and to be driven by Bohm-Bawerk's principle that capital- and-knowledge-intensive roundabout production tends to replace and eliminate simpler production.

I prefer to say that the constitutive rules of the presently globally dominant global system are those of markets (i.e. Freedom, Property, Equality and Bentham). They are not specific to capitalism. Capitalism I prefer to define more narrowly (using one of at least three definitions of it found in Marx, the other two being one that emphasizes commoditisation and one that emphasizes the exploitation of labour) as production (and unproductive speculation) driven by capital accumulation. Today's worldwide liberal juridical order makes space for a number of sectors, among which only the sector driven by capital accumulation is the one I recommend identifying as the capitalist sector.

Any society has a basic social structure, or, speaking as one tends to speak when decentring western modernity, a basic *cultural* structure. Building on Porpora's 1993 article, and calling on the polysemic and indispensable workhorse "culture" to play a role as a flexible and inventive creator of language games with physical causes and consequences, hence of social structures, enables me –in my own mind at least—to be an idealist, by seeing ideas as causes; and at the same time to be a materialist, by seeing ideas as material.⁴³ Culture figures as a cause of structure. Thus, while it is indeed true that once the cultural rules of Freedom, Property, Equality and Bentham are in place, the social structure tends to act like an analogue of the generative mechanisms of the natural sciences, generating among other things regimes of capital accumulation, it is not true that people always and everywhere must follow those rules. Although it is true that a number of structural traps –such as the trap of building a welfare state that raises the cost of doing business and drives capital away, leading to left governments being voted out or thrown out⁴⁴—make capitalist modernity very much like the iron cage Max Weber said it was; it is not true that the bars of the cage are fixed principles of human nature.

When I say "basic social structure" I use "basic" in the sense of Malinowski to refer to meeting basic needs, and I use "social structure" in the critical realist sense articulated by Porpora as "material relations among social positions and social constructs,"⁴⁵ adding Tony Lawson's emphasis on systems of internal relations.⁴⁶ In our contemporary societies the basic social structure is the market. As Jürgen Habermas emphasizes, the market is the primary institution; governments are secondary institutions.⁴⁷

Having done a detour to sketch the perspective that frames my comments on Porpora on social structure and on Bhaskar on Winch, I return to Bhaskar on Winch. When one examines Bhaskar's arguments against Winch, one finds that they reduce, in essence, to just one. Winch denies that the social sciences (or any sciences) study intransitive objects. In Winch the collapse of the intransitive

⁴³ Victor Turner (1983), "Body, Brain and Culture", *Zygon*. 18: 221-245.

⁴⁴ Howard Richards and Joanna Swanger, *The Dilemmas of Social Democracies*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.

⁴⁵ Douglas Porpora, *Reconstructing Sociology*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016. p. 96

⁴⁶ Tony Lawson, *Reorienting Economics*. London: Routledge, 2003. Pp, 227-28.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

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.⁴⁸

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."⁴⁹ 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..."⁵⁰

For Bhaskar this sort of talk expresses a linguistic form of the epistemic fallacy.⁵¹ 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 are 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.⁵² In the absence of the mental entities such words designate, an object of scientific study is, according to Winch, not social. Its 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.⁵³ Meanings are produced.⁵⁴ Reasons can be causes.⁵⁵ Rule-following needs causal explanation.⁵⁶ Thus the very entities used by Winch as criteria for identifying what is social are products of and participants in causal processes in the material world. This very general ontological point has a specific corollary dear to my heart: 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."⁵⁷ 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 its 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

⁴⁸ PON, p. 133, p. 149.

⁴⁹ Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*. London: Routledge, 2008 (1958). P.13; PON p. 163.

⁵⁰ Id. P. 14.

⁵¹ PON p. 133

⁵² PON p. 138

⁵³ PON p. 8

⁵⁴ PON p.60

⁵⁵ PON p.83

⁵⁶ PON p. 144

⁵⁷ PON p. 136

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 like 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.⁵⁸ 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.

On the side of "intransitive social objects," I propose to follow Bhaskar's suggestion to regard social structure as the analogue for the social sciences of the generative structures of the natural sciences. 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*.⁵⁹ For example, Keynes begins his chapter on the marginal efficiency of capital⁶⁰ 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 of Property, Freedom, Equality and Bentham. As noted above, the same basic social structure can be and has been denoted under other descriptions.

Given this basic social structure, a low-level equilibrium is possible. Today's global *Grundnorm* is exchange. It is Adorno's *Tauschprinzip*.⁶¹ 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 the possibility of low level equilibrium depends on his concept of liquidity preference. Winch (as Bhaskar notes) cites "liquidity preference" as an example of a technical term in social science used by economists but not by lay persons.⁶² Winch's point is that the technical

⁵⁸ Evelin Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict*. London: Praeger, 2006.

⁵⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1978. P. 337. I have replaced "calculable" with Weber's original German.

⁶⁰ John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. London: Macmillan, 1936. Chapter 11. In Chapter 24 and occasionally elsewhere Keynes says his rather pessimistic conclusions would not necessarily follow if the institutional frame (my "basic social structure") were different.

⁶¹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

⁶² Winch op. cit. pp. 83-84.

term only has meaning because it is logically tied to business concepts in everyday use, such as money, profit, cost and risk. My point is that the everyday concepts, in turn, are employed and acquire their meanings in “that form of society whose wealth appears as a vast collection of commodities,” i.e. in a society whose basic social structure is (to describe an intransitive object of the social sciences under one of its descriptions) Adorno’s *Tauschprinzip*. Even before Keynes made up lists of reasons why individuals, firms, and governments normally want to keep some of their money instead of spending it all, the possibility of such conduct was already a corollary of Property, Freedom, and Bentham. In words Keynes quotes: “...though men have the power to purchase, they may not choose to use it.”⁶³ 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, in words that have had and continue to have innumerable echoes, that “...the policy of the state ought to be directed to increasing and supplementing the inducement to invest...”⁶⁴

Anti-Keynesian writers have been during nearly a century now devising counter-arguments to attack Keynes’ reasoning⁶⁵ –even though what Keynes argues to be possible in theory is what in practice happens all the time; and even though the theoretical ideal of Walrasian equilibrium defended with variations by most of Keynes’ critics never happens. Here I will not mention or reply to any of them. Here I only want to suggest that Bhaskar chose a good example of an intransitive object of social scientific study. It is a good example first because the depression of the 1930s really did put the thought-world of classical economics on notice that being and thought are not identical. It motivated efforts to change the latter. And second because whatever one’s ultimate conclusions may be, this example illustrates my claim (and Bhaskar’s) that studying society striving to identify and to understand the workings of structural generative mechanisms analogous to those studied by the natural sciences is a valid way to do science.

⁶³ Id. P. 19 quoting J.A. Hobson who in turn is quoting Alfred Marshall

⁶⁴ Id. P 310

⁶⁵ J.E. King, *A History of Post Keynesian Economics since 1936*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002. Paul Krugman argues that the facts of the crisis of 2008 and a series of prior crises settle the theoretical argument in Keynes favour. There really is a chronic insufficiency of effective demand. *The Return of Depression Economics*. New York: Norton, 2009.

