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ABSTRACT

I present an immanent, and explanatory, critique of reflections on the nature of politics and of power within political science. I argue that these reflections are problematic, to the extent that they presuppose an actualist conception of the political, and that this is generated by an empiricist way of thinking on the one hand and a constructivist way of thinking on the other. I show how re-defining politics, power, and the political on the basis of a dialectical critical realist ontology resolves these problems and, thereby, allows us to understand the conditions for social change and the relationship between the political and the economic. My argument has two, important implications: first, that the proposal that those who study politics professionally should celebrate philosophical diversity is dangerous–at least if it makes it difficult to sustain a distinct, emancipatory form of political inquiry; and, second, that the nature of social reality justifies the need both for specialized forms of inquiry, such as politics and economics, and integrative forms of inquiry, such as political economy.

Keywords: politics, power, actualism, dialectical critical realism, social structure, human agency

The Nature of the Political Reconsidered[1]

INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of the political? My aim in this article is to provide an answer to this question by examining, critically, political scientists' reflections on the nature of politics and of power. What appears to be motivating these reflections is a concern that those who study politics professionally lack a secure disciplinary identity. Both Hay and the Executive Council of the European Political Science Network have expressed this concern:

> For, what kind of discipline, we might ask, lacks a clear sense of its terrain of inquiry and the means to adjudicate contending accounts of what occurs within that domain? (Hay, 2002, p. 60)

> We cannot talk about political science as a discipline if those who call themselves political scientists and pretend to teach it are unable to agree on its basic substance and methodology. (Executive Council of the European Political Science Network, as cited in Burnham, Gilland Lutz, Grant & Layton-Henry, 2008, pp. 9–10)

However, despite having reflected on the nature of politics and of power, political scientists appear to be divided still over the question of what is the "basic substance" of political science. Indeed, it would seem that, in Britain at least, the debate has become polarized between those who define politics as an "arena" and those define it as a "process" (Leftwich, 2004a); given the "political" nature of this debate, Leftwich (2004a) concludes that it is unlikely that political scientists will agree completely "on either what politics, as an activity, is or what the appropriate composition of the discipline of Politics should be" (p. 2).

One way of responding to this situation is to argue, as Stoker and Marsh (2010) do, that "both arena and process definitions have their value" (p. 8). However, this sort of argument leaves the dichotomy between the two types of definition intact and thereby takes us back to the original problem of how to secure a coherent professional identity for political scientists.

A second way of responding to this situation is to argue that, despite the dichotomy between the arena and process definitions of politics, what political scientists have in common is a concern with the study of power. Again, Stoker and Marsh (2010) present this alternative type of argument when claiming that politics is "a struggle over power" (p. 8), as does Leftwich (2004a) when identifying the "collective concern with the analysis of the origins, forms, distribution and control of

power" as the "common ground" among political scientists (p. 2). However, to claim that the study of power can be the common concern of political scientists is to displace, once again, the initial problem of lack of agreement; for, as both Stoker and Marsh, and Leftwich, acknowledge, political scientists are also in conflict over the nature of power.

A third type of response is to deny that there is any significant disagreement over the conceptualization of politics and to reduce the level of disagreement from the ontological to the methodological, as when Leftwich (2004a) claims that "the main differences in approach [to the definition of politics]" reflect primarily "explanatory differences about how politics … is to be analysed, understood and taught" (p. 2). Yet, if ontology is inexorable, so that questions of methodology presuppose questions of epistemology and ontology, not to reflect on the nature of politics is to work implicitly with a conception of politics; that is, to analyse, understand, and teach politics is to presuppose a conception of politics and the political whether one is aware of this or not.

The value of reflecting on the British debate about the nature of political science is that it is instructive of the consequences of failing to sustain a coherent conception of an object of social scientific inquiry. In this article I argue that the failure to sustain a coherent conception of the object of political scientific inquiry has three consequences. First, it undermines attempts to produce integrative, interdisciplinary research because it makes it impossible to understand how the political is connected to other specialized objects of social scientific inquiry. Second, it undermines the intellectual justification for the existence of a distinct domain of political scientific inquiry and, in consequence, makes it difficult for political scientists to justify the continuing public funding of political science. Third, it obscures our understanding of the existence, source, and nature of power in the social realm, which is an essential condition for the transformation of social structures and the eradication of sources of oppression. The first and second consequences may be generalized to other social sciences, though, because philosophical incoherence will undermine the understanding of the ontological basis for scientific integration and specialization whatever is the object of inquiry. However, even the third consequence is not unique to political scientists because, to the extent that other social scientists, such as sociologists, who are concerned with understanding the connections between different social structures, take for granted the knowledge that political scientists develop about the existence, source, and nature of power, the failure to sustain a coherent conception of the political will have implications for their understanding of how to transform social systems. In short, without a satisfactory answer to the question of what is the "basic substance" of political science, social scientists in general–not just political scientists–will find it difficult to understand how the political is both distinct from the objects of inquiry of the other specialized social sciences yet at the same time connected to them, and to understand how political, and social, science can be emancipatory.

My argument is organized as follows. In the first section I clarify the basic contours of the debate about the nature of politics, using the classification of approaches to defining politics developed by Leftwich (2004a), and argue by means of immanent critique that, for as long as they take for granted an actualist conception of the political, participants in this debate will fail to reach agreement on the nature of politics. In the second section I turn to questions of power. Here I focus on the debate between Hay (1997) and Doyle (1998) and show–again, by means of immanent critique–that both Hay's and Doyle's revised conception of power is problematic, to the extent that it retains an implicit commitment to an actualist ontology. In the third section I show how re-defining politics and power on the basis of a dialectical critical realist ontology resolves the actualist problematic and helps us to understand, first, the conditions for social change and, second, how the political is both distinct from, yet connected to, the economic. In the fourth and final section I offer some concluding thoughts about the problem of securing a coherent disciplinary identity for political scientists in light of the preceding argument.

Throughout the article I identify political scientists' implicit conceptions of the political. I proceed in this way because, as Lawson (2004) has argued, questions of social scientific ontology presuppose questions of social philosophical ontology. Hence, problems at the level of scientific ontology have to be resolved by returning to the level of philosophical ontology. This is what the method of immanent critique enables me to do. However, I also try to show what is generating an actualist conception of the political and, to this extent, I move beyond the realm of immanent critique into the realm of explanatory critique.[2] I argue that it is an empiricist and a constructivist way of thinking that is generating an actualist ontology. Of course, by showing the extent to which existing conceptions of politics and of power are false (in presupposing an actualist ontology[3]) and by identifying the (intellectual) conditions for this falsity–that is, empiricist and constructivist ways of thinking–I am placing a negative valuation on those forms of thought which are causing the false understanding of politics and of power and a positive valuation on a dialectical critical realist ontology, because it is only on the basis of the latter ontology that it is possible to develop conceptions of politics and of power that are less problematic and thereby more consistent with practice. Hence, my explanation logically entails action directed at eradicating actualist ways of thinking in social science.

POLITICS AS ARENA AND PROCESS

Let me begin, then, by examining the arena and process definitions of politics. To define politics as an arena is to tell us the "place or institutional forum" in which politics takes place (Leftwich, 2004a, p. 13); because this "place or institutional forum" is usually taken to be that of formal government, politics as an arena is characteristically associated with the realm of public politics. By contrast, to define politics as a process is to treat it as a universal phenomenon "occurring pervasively in a much wider range of institutions, activities and groups" (Leftwich, 2004a, p. 14);

in other words, as a general process politics occurs not only in the formal public domain but also in the informal, private one.

One might think, therefore, that the key difference between the arena and process definitions of politics turns on the range of applicability of the political: if the arena definition might be said to reflect a restrictive conception of the political, the process definition might be said to reflect an inclusive one. However, the first point I want to make is that the crucial difference between the two definitions is actually rather superficial because what both have in common is an implicit conception of the political as a particular type of human conduct or activity. For example, Peters (2004), adopting the arena approach, conceives of politics as a particular type of human activity–"making and implementing public policy"–that occurs in a particular place–"a set of institutions of government" (p. 25); and Nicholson (2004) asks "which human actions constitute 'politics'" (p. 41) and argues that the human actions constituting politics are those associated with "the use or potential use of force by the government" (2004, p. 45). Similarly, those who define politics as a process presuppose a conception of the political as a particular type of human activity. Leftwich (2004b), for example, argues that politics "is a universal and pervasive aspect of human behaviour" which "comprises all the activities of co-operation, negotiation and conflict … whereby people go about organizing the use, production or distribution of human, natural and other resources" (pp. 100–103). Weale (1984), too, claims that politics is about the process of decision making that rational individuals engage in when faced with a problem of collective choice–a problem that may arise in "the whole range of human institutions" (p. 51)–while Hay (2007) sets out a "differentiated yet inclusive conception of politics" in which the defining activities are those of "choice," "deliberation" and "social interaction" (pp. 65–70).

Now, to the extent that current arguments about the nature of politics are simply about which human activities are to be classified as political, they are superficial because, given their circular nature, they cannot be resolved: that is, an attempt to limit the definition of politics to one particular activity or set of activities can always be challenged by one that is less limiting, and vice versa. For example, when Peters (2004) argues that politics is about the decisions that governments make, because these are binding on the whole of society in a way that the decisions made by family members are not, he does so by appealing to "relations of power and influence between states and their societies" (p. 25)–an argument that feminists have challenged on the grounds that the "relations of power" that Peters invokes also exist within the family, marriage, and a wide range of other institutions not associated with the activities of public government (Squires, 2004). However, the more inclusive definition of politics that feminists have put forward may be challenged in turn. For example, when Nicholson (2004) sets out the case for limiting the definition of politics to decisions backed by force, he does so on the basis of a critique of definitions rooted in activities such as "disagreement, conflict and their resolution," "government or governance," and "the making of decisions"–that is, definitions that, in his view,

include too much: respectively, "cases of conflict which are nothing to do with politics," "government and governance" pertaining to "schools and banks," and "non-political decisions made by groups and individuals" (p. 44). He claims that this definition is not *too* exclusive because it "satisfies the requirement … that no cases of politics be excluded on moral grounds" (p. 48). However, in excluding from consideration those organizations in which force should not play a role but in actual practice does play a role, is not Nicholson excluding cases of politics on moral grounds? Surely, if force is used in such contexts–whether or not this is legitimate–that is a reason for bringing them into the domain of political inquiry?

If it is circular reasoning that makes the conflict between the arena- and process-based definitions of politics superficial, we should perhaps designate them "*dialectical antagonists*," whose "*tacit complicity*"–that is, the common acceptance of a conception of the political as a type of human activity–makes them, at the same time, "*dialectical counterparts*" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 88). I suggest that what is generating this antagonism is the influence of empiricist and constructivist ways of thinking. On the one hand it is an empiricist way of thinking that generates the arena approach because it is in the arenas of politics that we may observe human activities and it is what is observable that, in empiricism, defines the nature of, and limit to, our knowledge of the political. On the other hand it is a constructivist way of thinking that generates the process approach because it is through the processes of social interaction that human agents create or construct the political. In other words, from a constructivist perspective it is what is meaningful that defines the nature of, and limit to, our knowledge of the political; because people can construct different meanings of the political, politics cannot be limited to one type of context (for example, that of formal government). In short, if what the arena- and process-led approaches to defining politics have in common is that they presuppose a conception of the political as a particular type of human activity, where they differ is that in the former approach it is assumed that political activity is simply given to us immediately in experience–that is, it is a taken-for-granted fact–whereas in the latter approach it is assumed that political activity has to be understood–that is, it is a socially constructed fact. What this means is that the tacit complicity of both approaches is their shared acceptance of an *actualist ontology*; for in both approaches it is assumed that causal powers and liabilities are always actualized. Yet, to assume that the effects of causal powers and liabilities are always actualized is to deny that the effect of a causal power or liability, when in exercise, can remain unactualized owing to the countervailing effects of other causal powers and liabilities. In other words, it is to deny that social structures, as emergent entities, are real–that reality is *stratified*; and, in the same moment, it is to deny that causal mechanisms of different types operate conjointly–that reality is *differentiated*.[4] Hence, the epistemological positions of empiricism and constructivism rest on a fallacy–the "epistemic-ontic fallacy" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 397); that is, they assume, simultaneously and erroneously, that the nature of our knowledge

determines the nature of reality (the epistemic fallacy) and that the nature of reality determines the nature of our knowledge (the ontic fallacy).[5]

An empiricist way of thinking presupposes the empirical form of the epistemic-ontic fallacy because the empiricist assumes, explicitly, that the foundation of knowledge is observation and thereby assumes, implicitly, that only observable objects exist. These assumptions are fallacious because from a transcendental realist perspective knowledge is the product of human reasoning as well as observation–that is, it is produced through the exercise of our powers of intentionality and reflexivity–and because observable objects constitute only one part of reality, the domain of the empirical. By contrast, a constructivist way of thinking presupposes the conceptual form of the fallacy because the constructivist assumes, explicitly, that the foundation of knowledge is human understanding and thereby assumes, implicitly, that reality is constituted through our ideas. Again, from a transcendental realist perspective these assumptions are fallacious because the production of knowledge involves the exercise of our power of observation as well as our powers of intentionality and reflexivity, and because ideas constitute only one part of reality, the domain of the conceptual.[6]

However, the underlying philosophical context of both approaches to defining politics is more complex than one of simple, dialectical antagonism because in both approaches the effect of a transcendental realist way of thinking is evident in the critique of the opposing definition of politics. For example, when defending a conception of politics rooted in the activities of formal government, Peters (2004) starts by telling us that "'politics' … refers fundamentally to the relations of power and influence between states and their societies" (p. 25). I suggest that, when referring to "relations of power and influence," Peters is referring implicitly to a feature of social reality that is not given immediately in experience; that is, he is thinking of the power that governments have to change the rules conditioning social interaction in a way that affects everyone in society–a power whose existence is revealed through the passing of new legislation by Parliament and its enforcement in courts of law. However, Peters' implicit conception of the political as an unobservable, non-actual, yet real object of social inquiry stands in tension with his implicit conception of the political as a particular type of observable human activity.[7] The same sort of contradiction is evident in the work of Nicholson (2004), who argues that definitions of politics based on "class struggle" and "reaching decisions through rational discussion and argument" exclude too much that ought to be included within the domain of political inquiry–that is, societies *not* characterized by class conflict and societies *not* governed through representative democracy (pp. 42–44). But, I suggest that, in making this critique, Nicholson is operating–as Peters does–with an implicit conception of power as an unobservable, non-actual, yet real object of inquiry–a conception whose existence is revealed through, but cannot be reduced to, governments' exercise of force. In short, in both Peters' and Nicholson's accounts of politics we can detect the dual, contradictory influences of actualist and

transcendental realist ways of thinking–with perhaps the influence of the former being much stronger than that of the latter.

One may also detect the influence of a transcendental realist way of thinking in process-led approaches to defining politics. For example, the emphasis on process and social interaction in Leftwich's account, which betrays the influence of constructivist thinking, often sits alongside–indeed, is conflated with–an emphasis on power relations. Thus, Leftwich (2004b) tells us that all social contexts reflect "a particular pattern of interaction between people, resources – and power" (p. 101); that the activities constituting politics "everywhere both influence and reflect the distribution of power, the structure of social organization and the institutions of culture and ideology in a society" (p. 103); and that politics is "constituted by those universal interactions of people, resources and power in the pursuit of desired ends" (p. 107). Elsewhere in the same work, his emphasis on power relations, social structure, culture, and ideology is more explicit–for example, when he tells us that "a concern with power … is the distinctive and defining focus of the discipline of Politics" (p. 110); that "relations of power are an intimate condition of the relations of people" (p. 111); and that social contexts "constitute the relations of power and are normally sustained and legitimated by associated institutions of social organization, culture and ideology" (p. 114). I suggest that the continual references to relations of power, social institutions, culture, and ideology in Leftwich's account attest to the influence of a transcendental realist way of thinking; indeed, the fact that power appears to be such an important aspect of his argument suggests that this way of thinking has had a much stronger effect than it has had for either Peters or Nicholson.

Therefore, the second point arising from my immanent critique of arena- and process-based definitions of politics is that, not only do these approaches, taken together, constitute a dialectical antagonism, grounded in a conception of the political as a type of human activity, but also that both approaches, when considered separately, are philosophically contradictory; that is, they betray the joint influence of actualist and transcendental realist ways of thinking. This is not surprising because it is by virtue of the implicit transcendental realist element in their thinking that theorists on both sides of the debate can develop critiques of one another. Process-led theorists can argue that to limit the definition of politics to activities associated with the arenas of formal government is to place an unjustified restriction on the domain of the political, because power relations are a feature of all types of social structure, not simply those associated with the making of public policy; and arena-led theorists can argue that the activities that process-led theorists choose as defining of politics constitute too broad a range, because not all such activities pertain to the way in which governments exercise power in society.

Consideration of the philosophical contradictions in the arena- and process-based definitions of politics brings me to the third point of this section, which is that it is the continuing influence of empiricist and constructivist ways of thinking that is perpetuating a conception of the political as a type of human activity and that is

thereby blocking the emergence of a philosophically coherent conception of the political. One of the consequences of conceiving of the political as a type of human activity is that it leaves one unable to explain at a philosophical level how the political is both distinct from, yet at the same time connected to, the objects of inquiry of the other specialized social sciences. It is clear, for example, that Leftwich (2004b) understands, implicitly, that the political and the economic are both distinct from, yet connected to, one another when telling us that "many of the urgent problems facing the societies of the world" cannot be addressed by only one discipline (p. 105) and when advocating, in social science, "an interdisciplinary movement of evidence and explanation" (p. 117). The problem, though, is that political scientists such as Leftwich will not be able to develop integrative, interdisciplinary explanations for as long as they continue to conceive of the political as a particular type of human activity. As long as their thinking remains at the level of the actual, which is what their conception of the political as a type of human activity implies, they will not be able to decide which activities are political and which are economic–a decision which they must make if they are to develop integrative, interdisciplinary explanations of concrete phenomena. Of course, both arena and process theorists might claim that what is political is what is conventionally labelled political. However, this is not a solution to the problem because to re-classify human activities as political one must have reasons for doing so that are independent of the activities to be re-classified; otherwise, the re-classification becomes arbitrary and open to continual challenge. Hence, it is not surprising that political scientists such as Leftwich should have introduced–as an independent reason–a transcendental realist conception of power into their accounts of the nature of politics for this is the only way in which they can achieve greater consistency between their theory and practice. However, as we have seen, political scientists are hanging on to an actualist conception of the political, which is making their accounts of the nature of politics theoretically incoherent and thus less consistent with the practices of politics than if they had developed a transcendental realist conception of politics. If we are to develop a transcendental realist conception of politics, therefore, we will need to eradicate the actualist residues from political scientists' ontological reflections. Let us now examine the debate within political science about the nature of power to see if political scientists have managed to move beyond an actualist ontology.

POWER

It is well known that the debate among political theorists about the nature of power has moved through various "dimensions" and "faces" with the publication of seminal works by Dahl (1957), Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963), and Lukes (1974). Along the way the debate has moved from an emphasis on the decisions taken amidst conflicts of interests, via an emphasis on the setting of decision-making agendas, to an emphasis on the shaping of interests. Hay (1997) has contributed to this debate by developing, in response to Lukes' "radical view" of power, his own conception of

power as both "*context-shaping*" and "*conduct-shaping*" (p. 51)–a conception that, in his view, overcomes the weaknesses in Lukes' account. One of the most crucial of these, argues Hay, is the retained commitment to a behaviouralist conception of power, which stems, in Hay's view, from Lukes' desire to challenge the assumption implicit in the work of Dahl, and Bachrach and Baratz, that human agents always know which courses of action are in their best interests.

However, close inspection of Hay's argument reveals that his revised conception of power suffers from weaknesses of its own; for, despite claiming to have rejected the behaviouralist assumptions latent in Lukes' conception of power, in proposing a conception of power as "conduct-shaping"–which is a "direct" form of power, according to Hay, because it reflects the immediate effect of one person's choice of action on that of another person's–Hay retains them.[8] Indeed, Hay describes "direct power" as "immediate, visible and behavioural … manifest in such practices as decision-making, physical and psychological coercion, persuasion and blackmail" (p. 51). In other words, power as "conduct-shaping" is power that is always in exercise; but, if power is always in exercise, that brings us back to the irresolvable question of which human activities or forms of conduct constitute an exercise of power and which do not.

The implicit assumption that power is always in exercise is also a feature of the work of Doyle (1998). For example, when discussing what he calls the "third dimension" of power, Doyle gives us the example of the prisoner who, having been intimidated by the prison authorities, conceals his conflict with them when the prison inspectors show up. Doyle claims that a behaviouralist approach cannot deal with such a scenario because it cannot "penetrate the surface of social relations" (p. 52). Yet, because it retains an implicit commitment to an actualist and empiricist ontology, neither Lukes' nor Doyle's conception of power manages to "penetrate the surface of social relations" sufficiently deeply; for in Doyle's example of the prisoner the decision to conceal the conflict is an actual event, just as a decision to reveal it (in different circumstances) would be. Equally, it is apparent from Doyle's discussion of what he calls the "fourth dimension" of power that the existence of the power relation between A and B depends on the identification of a conflict of interest somewhere in the past–what Doyle calls "an historical B"–and the removal of that conflict by the action(s) of A. In other words, according to Doyle we know we are dealing with a power relation between A and B if we have identified–from an examination of "independent evidence"–the existence of, first, a conflict of interest between A and B and, second, an action by A to change the preferences of B, which, in Doyle's example, is "manipulation." If in the "third dimension," then, there has to have been an observable conflict between A and B, in the "fourth dimension" there has to have been both an observable conflict and an action by A to secure "the contentment of B," if we are to conclude that a power relation between A and B exists (pp. 53–55). Yet, this is to reduce an ontological question–about what is the nature of power–to an epistemological question–about what is the nature of our knowledge of power: it is to

make the existence of power dependent on the identification of an act of conflict and/or manipulation (the epistemic fallacy), which, in turn, is to reduce our knowledge of power to an observable human action (the ontic fallacy). In short, Doyle fails to break completely with the empiricist assumptions underpinning Lukes' conception of power just as much as Hay fails to.

Now, whereas Hay's conception of power as "conduct-shaping" is a "direct" form of power, his conception of power as "context-shaping" is "indirect" because it reflects the way in which one person can transform the rules of the game so as "to redefine the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others" (Hay, 1997, p. 50). What is significant about power as "context-shaping" is that it incorporates a conception of power as a "capacity" or "ability"; in this respect it moves beyond a purely behaviouralist conception of power because it points to the important distinction between the possession and exercise of power. Yet, to suggest that the "direct" form of power is a capacity, too, because the "ability to influence directly the actions and/or choices of another individual or group is but one special case of this more general capacity," is contradictory; for, if "direct power" is a capacity, it need not always be in exercise–in which case it cannot also be "immediate, visible and behavioural" (Hay, 1997, p. 50). Therefore, the first point I want to make about power is that, by reducing it to the effects of its exercise (whether or not these effects are perceived), we deny the possibility that power may be possessed yet remain unexercised and that it may be exercised yet remain unactualized (owing to the countervailing effects of other powers when in exercise); and in denying these possibilities we run the risk of concluding–erroneously–that, just because we cannot observe the expected effects of the exercise of power (whether this is conflict or some other form of human interaction), it does not exist. In short, a behaviouralist conception of power is likely to mislead us as to the true existence of power in society and, to the extent that it does so, may thereby help to subvert challenges to the unequal distribution of power in society.

But, even if we accept the possibility that power may be possessed yet remain unexercised, we can still be confused about the source or location of power–as Hay (1997) also appears to be when setting out his conception of power as "context-shaping." The philosophical problem here is two-fold. On the one hand, in defining "indirect power" as the capacity of a person to transform social contexts, Hay overlooks the structural pre-conditions for such an exercise of power; for by virtue of what, we may ask, does the person have this capacity? Is this capacity a natural property or is it a social property of the person concerned? To the extent, then, that Hay overlooks the structural pre-conditions for the exercise of human agency (in the sense that one must draw on pre-existing rules and resources in order to act), he appears to be working with a latent, voluntaristic conception of social structure, in which social structure becomes the intentional creation of the exercise of human agency. On the other hand Hay overlooks the agential pre-conditions for the reproduction of power relations, arguing that "*indirect*" power is "mediated by, and

instantiated in, structures." Now, this is to reify social structure for, once the new set of rules has been "instantiated in statute," it becomes coercive of human agency–that is, it sets a limit to the "parameters" of action from which the agent can choose and thereby precludes the possibility of the agent choosing an action outside them (pp. 50–51). In short, the second point I want to make is that conflating a voluntaristic conception of social structure with a deterministic conception of human agency leaves us confused about the source of human agents' power; for, if we conceive of power either as a natural property of the human agent or as something external to, and so existing apart from, human agency, we will find it difficult to understand how we might transform unequal power relations.

If political scientists' conceptions of power can be misleading as to the existence and source of power, they can also be misleading as to the nature of power. Let us return to Hay's redefinition of power to see how this can happen. Hay (1997) claims that his conception of power as "context-shaping" can sustain both a "*positive*" conception of power–"*power of*"–and a "*negative*" conception of power–"*power over*" (p. 50). Now, to identify a power relation as "negative," such that it involves the domination and control of one person by another, is to make an implicit *evaluation* of that power relation: it is to imply that to be dominated is not in one's best interests. In other words, a conception of "power over," as Hay defines it, presupposes that power has an ethical dimension or aspect. However, it is this dimension that Hay wants to remove from the analysis of power. In Hay's view,

> the identification of a power relationship … does not imply that the
> political analyst first engage in ethical judgements about the legitimacy
> of the conduct of those involved … Ethical and normative judgements
> can thus be suspended temporarily while the analysis and identification
> of power takes place. (Hay, 1997, p. 51)

But, although the ethical is a distinct aspect of social structure and thus of power relations, because power relations are embodied in social structure, as I argue below, and because social structures are inherently value-laden, it does not exist apart from social structure. Hence, when it comes to identifying and classifying power relations in the social realm, "ethical and normative judgements" are necessarily involved, even if they are made only implicitly.[9] In short, Hay's reconceptualization of power is also philosophically problematic, to the extent that it reflects, implicitly, the contradictory effects of an empiricist way of thinking on the one hand, which underpins the separation of facts from values, and a critical naturalist way of thinking on the other, which acknowledges that facts are value-laden, resulting in ambiguity over the relationship between "power of" and "power over."[10]

The importance of value judgements to the identification of types of power relation in the social realm–the third point of this section–takes me to my fourth and final point, about the nature of *interests*.[11] We need to re-consider the concept of interests because there appears to be a consensus emerging among those political

scientists who have reflected on the nature of power that, when analyzing power relations, we must not decide what is in the best interests of the parties involved because to do so is unjustifiable. As Hay (1997) puts it, to make a judgement about what is in a person's best interests is to become "the supreme arbiter of the genuine interests of the 'victim'" and, thereby, to engage in a "politically offensive" act of condescension (pp. 47–48). Doyle (1998) appears to agree with Hay when he states that "Hay is right to argue that Lukes must avoid making a value judgement in the sense of imputing or ascribing the interests of the affected party" (p. 54).

In defending the inevitability of making value judgements when identifying power relations in the social realm, then, we would seem to be opening ourselves up to the charge of vanguardism in claiming to be in a position to know what is in the best interests of those parties in the subordinate position of a relation of domination. However, in making a judgement about what is in a person's best interests we are not "imputing or inscribing the interests of the affected party" as Doyle claims; on the contrary, we are evaluating a person's *perception* of what is in their best interests– that is, their understanding of what their real interests are. Agents' perceived interests, in other words, may not be the same as their real interests. To assume that they are always the same would be to assume that agents have an infallible understanding of reality. (This, of course, is the presupposition of those epistemological positions, such as empiricism and constructivism, which commit the epistemic–ontic fallacy.) As social scientists we can help people to understand what their real interests are through critique of their falsely perceived interests–that is, by taking other people's perceptions about what is in their best interests as the intransitive object of a social scientific inquiry.

Therefore, contrary to what Hay and Doyle claim, it would not be condescending for a social scientist to pass judgement on the veracity of the beliefs about reality which inform human agents' choices of action; for to shut the door on the possibility of critique is to deny the very raison d'être of the social scientist, which is to transform common-sense beliefs about reality into theories that attempt to express, albeit fallibly, the truth of reality. It is only through critique that social scientists can help lay agents to understand that, because certain courses of action do not help them to meet their needs, these courses of action are not in their best interests. Therefore, to claim that people can be falsely conscious of their conditions of existence and, by implication, that they can develop false perceptions of what is in their best interests, is to say, quite simply, that their understanding of reality is mistaken. In other words, "false consciousness" is not the "spectre" of "contemporary social and political theory" (Hay, 1997, p. 47); rather, it is the very condition for a critical, and thus emancipatory, social science.

Furthermore, if consciousness is contradictory, power can still be exercised and actualized where conflict has yet to be expressed; for, if those in a subordinate position in society have grown up with, and so developed, an understanding of social reality that is sufficiently inadequate, they will not be able to work out what is in their

best interests. Therefore, to propose, as Doyle (1998) does, that we identify a power relation by looking for acts of conflict and their resolution–however far back in the past–is to assume that the parties to the conflict started off with a perfect understanding of social reality such that they were able to determine, accurately, which courses of action were in their best interests. In short, what my conception of interests and consciousness suggests is that the process of securing compliance in a society characterized by the unequal distribution of power is a much more subtle and complex process than Lukes, Hay, and Doyle have realized.

THE POLITICAL AS FUNCTION AND ASPECT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Having identified philosophical problems in contemporary arguments about the nature of politics and power, I now want to set out a conception of the political which is fully consistent with the principles of critical realism, which avoids both the circularity of reasoning characteristic of the debate about the nature of politics and the confusion about the existence, source, and nature of power relations in the social realm, and which, thereby, is a coherent basis on which to define both power and politics and their inter-relationship.

What, then, is a conception of the political that is consistent with the principles of dialectical critical realism? Because this is a question of political philosophical ontology–that is, it is concerned with what all the objects that political scientists study have in common–we need to start by answering a question of political *scientific* ontology–that is, with a question about what exactly are the fundamental entities comprising the domain of the political. In other words, we need to think about the nature of power and of politics and from these reflections develop a conception of the political using transcendental reasoning. Let me start with power. As I have already indicated, if power is to be rendered consistent with the principles of critical realism, it must be conceived as a real, yet non-actual, and non-observable object of political scientific inquiry that is inherently value-laden. What this means is that power must be conceived as a property of social structure: it must be conceived as being embodied in social structure and as taking effect via the exercise of human agency, for it is through the effects of its exercise that we acquire knowledge of power. This does not mean that power exists within two separate entities–social structure on the one hand and human agency on the other–for social structure and human agency are ontologically interdependent; what it means is that social power relations endure by virtue of the internal relations between positions occupied by people.

Now, to say that power is a social structural property is to say that power modifies human agency so that, when people occupy positions in social structures, they are able to act in ways they would not otherwise be able to do. People who possess such powers, though, often think of them as *rights*: for example, the right of the employer to demand obedience from, and to dismiss, the employee (in certain circumstances) and the right of the landlord to demand payment of rent from the tenant and to evict the tenant from the property (in certain circumstances). However,

power is not the only type of social structural property; for, when people occupy positions in social structures, they also acquire liabilities, which they often think of as *duties* or *obligations*: for example, the employer's duty of care towards the employee and the landlord's duty of care towards the tenant. Indeed, what is experienced as a right by one party to a relation may often be experienced as a liability by the other. For example, an employer in the UK has an obligation to pay an employee a wage equivalent to at least the current value of the National Minimum Wage; should the employer fail to meet this obligation, the employee has the right to demand that the employer pay arrears by virtue of the contract of employment that exists between them.

Whether they are explicitly or implicitly understood, powers and liabilities are the pre-existing conditions of our social life: powers enable us to act, while liabilities constrain how we act. Often it is through misusing the powers available to us and through failing to meet our liabilities–whether this is intentional or unintentional–that we discover their enduring reality; and it is though our experiences of not being able to meet our needs when we exercise our rights and fulfil our obligations that we tend to become aware of the unequal distribution of powers and liabilities in society. To return to the example of employment, our experiences of participating in different types of employment may well alert us to the differences that exist in terms and conditions of employment and thus to differences in the nature of the powers possessed by employers. Perhaps, under a contract of permanent employment, when we are earning a regular salary and may be dismissed only in certain, very limited circumstances, we may feel secure enough materially to plan for the future; but, under a temporary contract with variable hours of work, when we are earning an irregular salary and may be dismissed for whatever reason our employer thinks fit, we may feel considerably less secure materially and so less able to make plans for the future. In other words, the relative lack of security that we may experience across different contexts of employment is an indicator of the relative dominance of the employer over the employee.

However, the extent to which we can understand why we cannot meet our needs, given the social contexts we are thrown into, will depend, amongst other things, on how we understand the nature of those contexts; for, to the extent that we think of society as constituted only by individuals and the effects of their actions and, thereby, reduce (implicitly) powers to their exercise and liabilities to their fulfilment, we will misunderstand the true extent, source, and nature of power relations which we must negotiate. In other words, if we take for granted a behaviouralist conception of power, we will tend to identify the existence of power only with situations in which conflict is revealed, and overlook situations in which power is being exercised (and actualized) but in which conflict is not expressed because those over whom power is being exercised do not understand the full extent to which they are in a position of subordination. Moreover, even if we do understand that our lives are structured, if we conflate social structure and human agency, we will find it very difficult once again to

understand how we might change social reality if we wanted to; for, if we believe that social structures are simply mental constructs and human agency is unconstrained, we will believe that we can change social contexts simply by changing how we think. However, changing the way we think is not enough to change social reality: we also have to change our material practices. Hence, if our attempts to think differently run up against the grain of pre-existing material practices, we may jump from a voluntaristic conception of social structure to a deterministic conception of human agency, and conclude that social change is impossible. The crucial point, though, is that our failure to locate, correctly, the source of social power helps to perpetuate the status quo, which may be characterized by inequalities of power and liability and which we may want to change. Believing that powers and liabilities are somehow value-free will only compound this problem because, if we misidentify power in the social realm with power in the natural realm, we will lose a conception of "power over" and become stuck with a conception of "power to" that we will see as natural and so unchangeable.

The upshot of the preceding discussion is that both power and liability are suitable objects of inquiry for political scientists because both are properties of social structure that take effect via the exercise of human agency. However, what sort of conception of the political is presupposed by a focus on the powers and liabilities of social structure? Some political scientists have designated the political an "aspect" or "moment" of the social. Hay (2002), for example, argues that

> Though all social relations may also be political relations, this does not imply that they are *only* political relations, nor that they can adequately be understood in such terms…. The political is … best seen as an aspect or moment of the social, articulated with other moments (such as the economic or cultural). Though politics may be everywhere, nothing is exhaustively political. (p. 75)

I suggest that, in treating the political as an "aspect or moment of the social" Hay is trading implicitly on a transcendental realist conception of the political–that is, he is conceiving of the political as something that is non-empirical and non-actual yet still real. However, Hay's conclusion that "all social relations may also be political relations" suggests that the transcendental realist element in his thinking is being distorted by the effect of a constructivist way of thinking, for to claim that "all social relations may also be political relations" is to reduce social relations to internally-related meanings, the presupposition of a social constructivist epistemology. Furthermore, and by implication, it is to reduce natural necessity to conceptual necessity, and thus to deny the reality of emergence in the social realm and hence the existence of materially-embedded social structures. In short, from a social constructivist perspective what is political about a social relation is purely something that is constructed in thought. By contrast, from a transcendental realist perspective what is political about a social relation is that it is constituted by causal powers and

liabilities and thus by natural necessity. Because social relations constituted by causal powers and liabilities are internal social relations, one cannot then conclude from this perspective that "all social relations may also be political relations"; from a transcendental realist perspective, although social reality embraces both internal and external social relations, such that the former constellationally contain the latter, it is only from internal social relations that social structure, and thus a political "aspect," emerges.

The consequence for Hay of tacitly accepting a constructivist definition of the political is that he is unable to rebut Heywood's claim that to expand the definition of politics and the political "to include all social institutions" is to define "everything as politics" (Heywood, 1994, pp. 25–26, as cited in Hay, 2002, p. 74). Hay (2002) responds to this claim by arguing that the characterization of "all social relations" as political need entail neither seeing "politics everywhere" nor that describing and analyzing social relations "in political terms" is sufficient (pp. 74–75). Yet, this response makes sense only if the social relations to be analysed are internal relations since external social relations, as I have just argued, are not social structures. If the political is to be described as an *aspect* of social reality, therefore, this description must be applied only to internally-related social positions–that is, only to social structures.[12] It follows that a conception of the political as an aspect of social structure is what is presupposed by a focus on the powers and liabilities of social structure; this is the transcendental realist basis of the process-based definition of politics described above. However, I suggest that a conception of the political as a *function* of social structure is the transcendental realist basis of the arena-based definition; for the significance of the arena-based definition is that it points to the existence of a particular set of social structures–those of government–whose powers (and liabilities) when in exercise have consequences that are binding throughout society. This is why the practices made possible by virtue of the existence of such structures–such as "making and implementing public policy"–are often described as having a formal, public character. The crucial point, though, is that it is by virtue of the existence of the structures of government that governing officials have the power to pass new laws and to bring them into effect. In other words, it is because governing officials have the power to change powers and liabilities embodied in other social structures–such as employment and marriage–that we may say that the structures of government have a political function. Of course, none of this is to deny that such structures, qua social structures, also have a political aspect.

We may say, therefore, that the study of the political as an aspect of social structure is *the study of human agency as it is modified by social structure*, because it is only through occupying positions in social structures that people acquire powers and liabilities that they would not otherwise acquire; and that the study of the political as a function of social structure is *the study of social structure as it is modified by the exercise of human agency*, because it is only through human agents exercising their

power to govern that powers and liabilities pertaining to other social structures can be changed.

What sort of conception of politics is entailed by a conception of the political as both an aspect and function of social structure? I suggest that a conception of the political as an aspect and function of social structure justifies a conception of politics as, on the one hand, *the expression through human activity of the modification of human agency by social structure* and, on the other hand, *the reproduction and transformation of social structure through the exercise of human agency.*[13] The advantage of the former conception of politics is that it retains a focus on the ongoing exercise of human agency, which is the valid insight of the arena- and process-based definitions of politics, yet avoids the problem of actualism by locating the essence of the political in social structure. It thereby reminds us that social structure is the pre-existing condition for the exercise of human agency, while allowing us to accommodate all the different activities that political scientists have hitherto selected as indicators of politics without falling into the trap of circular reasoning. The advantage of the latter conception of politics is that it reminds us that social structures would not exist without human agency and, therefore, that it is only through the exercise of human agency that social structures are either reproduced or transformed.

Moreover, I suggest that the extent to which social structures are either reproduced or transformed will depend, ceteris paribus, on the nature of the modification of human agency by social structure–that is, the extent to which social structures prevent human agents from meeting their needs–and on the understanding of social reality that human agents develop when they occupy positions in social structures. For example, if politics is purely conservative in its axiology, so that it is oriented to the preservation of the status quo, existing social structures will be reproduced.[14] However, although they will be reproduced, the moment of reproduction will still be accompanied by a moment of transformation–what I call transformation$_1$–because the exercise of human agency always involves the absenting of some kind of absence, such as a gap in our knowledge of reality. What is characteristic of transformation$_1$, therefore, is that it absents an absence, and, thereby, transforms reality, *but leaves the particular types of structure that made this transformation possible unchanged.* As I have already indicated, normally we do not think of this type of agency as being an expression of politics because the type of transformation involved–the intentional production (in this example, of knowledge)– presupposes the (typically) unintentional reproduction of pre-existing social conditions (in this example, of knowledge production). However, not to recognize this situation as political would be to assume, implicitly, that underlying relations of power and liability, which, as I have argued, are constitutive of social structures, do not exist. Yet, it is just such an understanding that is equally essential to what I call transformation$_2$, which, like transformation$_1$, involves the absenting of an absence, but in which the absence to be absented is the absence of a social structure that is

wanted, precisely because it is conducive to the realization of human needs, and in which the presence of a structure constituted by unequal and oppressive relations of power and liability is *unwanted*, precisely because it is an obstacle to the realization of human needs and thus to human emancipation. By replacing an unwanted with a wanted structure human agents engage in emancipatory politics.

Note that transformation$_2$ constellationally embraces transformation$_1$, in the sense that transformation$_2$ is a transformation of both the social and natural conditions for the exercise of human agency, whereas transformation$_1$ is the transformation of just the natural conditions. This distinction helps us to make sense of Bhaskar's claim that "no transformation is total and all reproduction is transformation" (2009, p. 152). For example, if the intentional production of wanted goods and services through transactions with nature (transformation$_1$) is simultaneous with the unintentional reproduction of capitalist relations of production, reproduction and transformation will be distinct aspects of the same process rather than separate–that is, mutually exclusive–processes. However, if all reproduction is transformation, it is not the case that all transformation is reproduction because transformation$_2$ entails the transformation not only of natural but also of social structures. For example, it is through the transformation of pre-existing capitalist relations of production that socialist relations of production become the intentional product of the human agent, just as much as the production of needed goods and services, which socialist relations of production make possible, is intentional.

However, to the extent that intentional production is informed by a lack of understanding of the properties of social and natural objects, it will have unintended consequences. For example, failure to understand that the structure of gender is internally related to the structures of capitalism would render futile any attempt to eradicate patriarchy and sexism that did not also attempt to eradicate the structures of capitalism. Equally, failure to understand that the structure of gender is an objective social relationship, so that it cannot be understood as nothing more than the interaction of individual men and women, would render futile any attempt to overcome the oppression of women through the instigation of a war of women against men. In both cases it is the misunderstanding of the nature of social reality that undermines the initial intention to overcome the oppression of women, leading, at best, to an "alteration or amelioration of states of affairs" (Bhaskar, 2009, p. 171) as causes become confused with their effects and are left untransformed.[15]

Therefore, I suggest that it is the fallibility of our knowledge of reality that licenses Bhaskar's claim that "no transformation is total." It follows that the emancipation of human agents' understanding from distorted–that is, ideological– ways of thinking is a necessary condition for their emancipation from oppressive social relations. However, whether or not this will be a sufficient condition will depend, ceteris paribus, on the scale of the oppression–that is, the number of people who occupy a subordinate position in social structures. For example, given the global scale of contemporary capitalist relations of production any attempt to eradicate

these would require not simply a change in mass consciousness but also a mass engagement in the practices of politics. By contrast a conservative form of politics would require neither a change in mass consciousness nor a mass engagement. In short, transformation$_1$ and transformation$_2$ are two different types of human agency which become possibilities in different social conditions.[16]

One further advantage of conceiving of the political as an aspect and function of social structure is that it opens the way to understanding how the political is both distinct from, yet at the same time connected to, other objects of social scientific inquiry. As I have just argued, what distinguishes the political as an object of social scientific inquiry is that it refers, on the one hand, to the modification of human agency by social structure and, on the other hand, to the reproduction and transformation of social structure through the exercise of human agency, whether one is considering the political either as a function or as an aspect of social structure. By contrast, what distinguishes the economic as an object of social scientific inquiry is that it refers to the material basis of social life.[17] For example, we may say that social structures have an economic function, to the extent that the effect of their powers and liabilities is to bring about a change in the use of material resources–for example, the transformation of raw materials into finished goods (via relations of production) and the distribution of those goods to new owners (via relations of exchange); and we may say that, although such structures have an economic function, as materially embedded structures embodying powers and liabilities they also have an economic and a political aspect. For example, the relation between capitalist and wage-labourer, although functionally economic, has a political aspect, by virtue of the existence of distinctive powers and liabilities pertaining to the roles of capitalist and wage-labourer, and an economic aspect, in the sense that both capitalist and wage-labourer must consume some of what is produced, if they are to survive. Similarly, although the structures of government are functionally political, they have an economic aspect, in the sense that those who govern must consume some of the economic surplus, if they are to survive, and a political aspect, in the sense that those who govern have a distinctive set of powers available to them, as well as being bound by a distinctive set of liabilities. In short, the different functions and aspects of social structures are *ontologically interdependent*–that is, they come into existence within the same domain of reality rather than constituting distinct, emergent domains.

However, individual social structures may also be related causally, in the sense that their different functions may be interdependent. For example, if it is through the structures of government that laws are made, implemented, and enforced, the potential exercise of the powers and liabilities pertaining to the structures of (capitalist) employment will depend, amongst other things, on the successful exercise of the powers and liabilities pertaining to the structures of government. In other words, the possibility of transforming and distributing material resources under capitalism–an economic function–will depend, amongst other things,

on government officials making, implementing, and enforcing laws successfully–a political function. Equally, if it is the case that it is through the exercise of powers and liabilities pertaining to the structures of (capitalist) production that wealth is generated–an economic function–the successful exercise of the power available to government officials to raise revenue for the public purse through taxation–a political function–will depend, amongst other things, on the successful exercise of the powers available to capitalists to generate wealth. In short, we may say that the political function of the structures of government and the economic function of the (capitalist) structures of production are *causally interdependent.* The modes of differentiation and interconnection of the social structures of government and production are displayed in summary form in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Through the concepts of function and aspect of social structure, and ontological and causal interdependence, we can start to understand the nature of the relationship between the political and the economic, and hence the nature of the relationship between the fields of politics and economics. Indeed, the implication of my argument is that both specialization and integration in social scientific inquiry are justified; that is, it is by virtue of the nature of the political and the economic that distinct fields of political and economic inquiry are needed, just as much as the hybrid field of inquiry of political economy. In this respect Leftwich (2004b) is indeed right to acknowledge the need for political scientists "to open up the disciplinary frontiers to a much fuller and freer interdisciplinary movement of evidence and explanation" (p. 117). As my argument shows, this need not be at the expense of establishing a coherent identity for those who study politics professionally.

CONCLUSION

My objective in this article was to re-examine, critically, debates within political science about the nature of politics and of power. I have argued that these debates will continue to be problematic for as long as the protagonists continue to take for granted an actualist conception of the political, and that this implicit ontological commitment is generated by an empiricist way of thinking on the one hand and a constructivist way of thinking on the other. I have argued that it is possible to resolve these problems by re-defining politics, power, and the political on the basis of a dialectical critical realist ontology in such a way that the new definitions incorporate the valid insights of the old–that politics may be expressed through different types of human activity–but sublate them; as such my re-definitions of politics, power, and the political build on the work of other social theorists in a critical way. Hence, the incorporation of the insights of existing reflections should not be understood as an

eclectic combination; rather, it should be understood either as a critical, expansionary synthesis or as a "non-preservative *dialectical sublation*" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 12). In short, my re-definitions of politics, power, and the political retain what is of value in the old definitions yet not essential to the new ones.

However, if inclusivity is one of the characteristics of a dialectical critical realist approach to ontological theorising, necessity and inexorability are others; for making ontological commitments in social science is unavoidable, and, if ontological positions may be contradictory and implicitly understood, it is only through reflecting on questions of ontology that such positions may be rendered explicit and any contradictions resolved. Indeed, as I hope to have demonstrated, through reflecting on questions of political ontology directly, we can clarify the boundaries of the domain of political inquiry and, thereby, offer those who study politics professionally a clear identity.

I have argued throughout that it is political scientists' continuing commitment to an actualist ontology that has prevented them from developing the transcendental realist conception of power latent within their reflections on the nature of politics and of power and that, in consequence, has made it difficult for them to reach agreement on questions of political (scientific) ontology. If political scientists are prepared to accept my transformed conceptions of the politics, power, and the political, therefore, they need not "celebrate diversity" in political science (Stoker and Marsh, 2010, p. 1); for the danger with indulging in such a celebration is that the persistence of lack of agreement and philosophical incoherence will make it difficult for political scientists to justify the continuing existence of political science as a distinct, publicly-funded discipline, a danger that has become all the more significant recently with the emergence of "economics imperialism" (Fine and Milonakis, 2009, p. 1). The persistence of lack of agreement and philosophical incoherence will also make it difficult for political scientists to engage in integrative, interdisciplinary research and for them to understand the existence, source, and nature of power in the social realm, which is essential if political science is to be emancipatory. However, to call into question the desirability of celebrating diversity in political science is not to argue against theoretical pluralism at a social scientific level; it is just to warn that celebrating theoretical pluralism at a philosophical level has its dangers.[18]

Finally, questions about the existence, source, and nature of power in the social realm apply to political science as a discipline; for, if the activities in which political scientists engage are governed by social and intellectual structures, these activities will be expressions of the modification of human agency by social and intellectual structures on the one hand and the reproduction and transformation of social and intellectual structures through the exercise of human agency on the other. If the distribution of powers and liabilities across the positions in these structures is unequal, we should not be surprised if we find that some forms of political science dominate others.[19] Perhaps it is time, therefore, for political scientists–indeed, all

social scientists–to examine the politics of their profession and the relations of power and liability embedded within it.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for providing constructive comments on an earlier version of this article.

2. I follow Bhaskar's definition of explanatory critique. See Bhaskar, 2009, pp. 177–180. On the difference between immanent and explanatory critique see the entry "critique" in Hartwig, 2007, pp. 105–108.

3. By actualist ontology I mean the assumption that reality consists only of events and states of affairs. Such an assumption presupposes that underlying structures can be reduced to the events and states of affairs that their mechanisms generate, and, thereby, denies the necessary and the possible. For example, the rate of profit of a capitalist system of production and appropriation will fall over the long run, ceteris paribus, by virtue of natural necessity–that is, the causal powers and liabilities constitutive of such a system. However, because other things are not always equal–that is, because other factors (such as an increase in the supply of cheap labour power) may counteract the effect of the factors causing the rate of profit to fall–a reduction in the rate of profit is only a possibility; whether or not the rate of profit does fall depends on the prevailing social conditions. Hence, the effects of causal powers and liabilities may not be actualized. This is why Marx refers to the falling rate of profit as a tendency, since this term embraces the reality of both natural necessity and possibility. For other forms of actualism see Bhaskar, 2008, pp. 234–235.

4. I discuss the stratification and differentiation of reality in greater depth in Holland, 2013, Ch. 2.

5. The two fallacies are usually referred to together as the epistemic-ontic fallacy because they presuppose one another; and they presuppose one another because they constitute a type of "identity theory" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 399).

6. In referring to the concepts of intentionality and reflexivity I am drawing on the work of Archer (2003).

7. When I say that Peters "is referring, implicitly, to a feature of social reality that is not given immediately in experience," I am saying that Peters understands that a relation of power is something that is non-empirical, non-actual, yet real but that he is unable to express this understanding in discourse; in other words, he knows what is wrong with trying to define politics actualistically but is unable to say much about why this is wrong. In making this critique Peters is drawing on tacit knowledge of social reality. However, the causal effect of this tacit (philosophical) knowledge is only a tendency because, as I have argued, he also draws on a tacit understanding of the political as a purely observable human activity and in the process presupposes an actualist ontology.

8. Collier makes the same mistake when discussing Bhaskar's differentiation of power relations into "'power$_1$'" and "'power$_2$'" (2007, p. 112), as Morgan (2007) argues in his response to Collier's intervention.

9. It is precisely for this reason that Bhaskar (2008) distinguishes between "power$_1$ … the transformative capacity intrinsic to the concept of action as such" and "power$_2$ … the capacity to get one's way against either the overt wishes and/or the real interests of others in virtue of structures of exploitation, domination, subjugation and control, i.e. generalized master–slave-type relations" (p. 402).

10. For a definition of critical naturalism see Hartwig, 2007, pp. 91–96. The ambiguity in Hay's thinking is evident in statements such as this: "To suggest that A exercises power over B is to make no claim, within this schema, about the subversion or violation of B's 'true interests' (though such a claim is clearly not precluded by such a statement)" (Hay, 1997, p. 51). To argue that making a value judgement is not precluded by the identification of a power relation as one of "power over" is to admit, tacitly, that the identification of such a relation presupposes the making of a value judgement. Hay cannot then claim, at the same time, that the identification of "power over" does not involve making a value judgement.

11. Following Bhaskar (2009), I define interests as "anything conducive to the achievement of agents' wants, needs and/or purposes" (p. 170).

12. From the perspective of transcendental realism only internally-related social positions are social structures because it is only through internal relations between entities (the parts) that a new, higher-order entity (the whole) emerges. In the social realm the lower-order entities are positions, such as employer and employee, which human agents occupy; and it is from internal relations between these positions that a higher-order entity, in this case the social structure of employment, emerges. As emergent entities, social structures possess distinctive properties which modify–that is, both constrain and enable–the exercise of human agency. Hence, in explanations of concrete phenomena the properties of social structures–that is, causal powers and liabilities–should not be reduced to the properties of people, such as intentionality and reflexivity, through which the causal effect of social structure is mediated.

13. Here I am drawing on the insights of Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity on which see Bhaskar 2009, pp. 122–129 and 2008, pp. 152–158.

14. For a definition of axiology see Hartwig, 2007, pp. 47–49.

15. This is the classic failing of reformism.

16. Note that what I am calling transformation$_2$ is synonymous with what Bhaskar (2008) calls "*transformed … transformative … totalizing … transformist …* praxis" (p. 120). It is "*transformed*" because it depends on the transformation of understanding of what is real and thus of what it is possible for human agents to transform; "*transformative*" because it involves transforming something other than human agency–that is, constraints on the exercise of human agency; "*totalizing*" because in attempting to transform the conditions for the exercise of human agency the agent engages in meta-reflexivity–that is, becomes reflexive about the understanding of

reality developed through engaging in reflexivity–where reflexivity is "the inwardised *form* of totality" (p. 403); and "*transformist*", as opposed to reformist, because it is "oriented to structural change" and "informed by explanatory critique, concrete utopianism and participatory–animating/activating research" (p. 120). Therefore, it is to the extent that human agency remains *un*transformed, *non*transformative, *non*totalizing, and *non*transformist that politics will be conservative in its axiology.

17. Here I am drawing on Lawson's definition of economics as "*the identification and study of the factors, and in particular social relations, governing those aspects of human action most closely connected to the production, distribution and use of wealth, along with the assessment of alternative really possible scenarios*" (Lawson, 2003, p. 152).

18. Note that, by warning of the dangers of celebrating philosophical diversity, I am not implying that dominant philosophical traditions in the social sciences–most notably, positivism and interpretivism–should be banned somehow. As I see it, it is a question of how the intellectual (and social) conditions of knowledge production can be transformed. One of the implications of my argument is that such a transformation will only be possible if it is wanted by a sufficient number of social scientists and the general public.

19. The nature and effects of the social and intellectual structures of knowledge production, in relation to the problem of integrating knowledge through interdisciplinary research, are discussed in Holland (2013).

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Table 1

Relationships between the economic and the political

Type of social structure	Mode of differentiation and interconnection	
	Ontological interdependence	Causal interdependence
Government	Political function ⟷ ⌈ Economic aspect ⌊ Political aspect	Political function ↕ Economic function
Production	Economic function ⟷ ⌈ Political aspect ⌊ Economic aspect	