Critical Realism and Semiosis

Norman Fairclough, Bob Jessop, Andrew Sayer

Abstract:

This paper explores the mutual implication of critical realism and semiosis (or the intersubjective production of meaning). It argues that critical realism must integrate semiosis into its account of social relations and social structuration. This goes well beyond the question of whether reasons can be causes to include more basic issues of the performativity of semiosis and the relationship between interpretation (verstehen) and causal explanation (erklären). The paper then demonstrates how critical realism can integrate semiosis into its accounts of dialectic of structure and agency through an evolutionary approach to structuration. It also demonstrates how critical semiotic analysis (including critical discourse analysis) can benefit from critical realism. In the latter respect we consider the emergence of semiotic effects and extra-semiotic effects from textual practices and give two brief illustrations of how this works from specific texts. The paper concludes with more general recommendations about the articulation of the discursive and extra-discursive aspects of social relations and its implications for critical realism.

This paper explores the mutual implication of critical realism and semiosis. At least three major sets of questions can be posed in this regard1 First, we consider whether critical

realism can afford to ignore semiosis, provisionally defined as the intersubjective production of meaning,2 in its more general approach to social relations, their reproduction and transformation (see Section I). In discussing this issue we interpret social relations broadly to include not only individual actions and interactions but also the emergent properties of institutional orders and the domain of the lifeworld. Apart from addressing the closely related, controversial, but nonetheless analytically distinct, issue of whether reasons can also be causes, critical realists have paid little attention to the nature and significance of semiosis. Prioritizing the former at the expense of the latter is quite unjustified because reasons are merely one (albeit important) aspect of the causal efficacy of semiosis. In addition, their effectiveness can only be understood in and through the operation of semiosis. Second, and equally important for our purposes, we inquire into the social preconditions and broader social context of semiosis. This set of problems is well suited to the application of critical discourse analysis because the latter can contextualise the production, communication, and reception of semiosis (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). But we also show that, depending on the explicandum, it may be necessary to supplement critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) through more concrete-complex analyses of extra-discursive domains. This implies that, insofar as semiosis has been studied in isolation from its context, this is bound to lead to an incomplete account of social causation and therefore risks committing one or more kinds of reductionism (see section II). Finally, we turn to a third set of questions. These concern the nature of semiotic structures, their emergence from texts and textual practices, and their role in social structuration (see section III). We exemplify these issues by drawing on critical semiotic analysis (especially CDA), which is a form of text analysis that is not only compatible with critical realism but also provides major insights into the role of semiosis in social structuration (see section IV). Overall these two sections seek to show that semiosis involves mechanisms that are intelligible from a critical realist point of view. Our concluding section draws these different themes together to argue that semiotic analysis might benefit from paying attention to other aspects of critical realism and that critical realism might benefit from paying more attention to semiosis when exploring the social world.

Addressing these three sets of questions involves identifying and exploring the real mechanisms of semiosis as a first step towards making progress on the larger problem of mind-body-semiosis-sociality-materiality This is clearly an ambitious project and we do not expect to produce a solution in this paper. Moreover, since critical realism *qua* philosophy does not entail commitments to any particular substantive social or psychological theory, alternative critical realist accounts of semiosis could also be advanced. If so, we hope our own proposals will stimulate fellow critical realists to present them.

I. Why Critical Realism Must Address Semiosis

Critical realism has tended to take semiosis for granted. For example, its practitioners often defend the claim that reasons can be causes without making any substantial reference to semiosis as such. Our first objective is to oppose this neglect. We will then demonstrate how a critical realist approach might be used to illuminate semiosis.

Social theorists and discourse analysts routinely defend semiotic analysis on the grounds that semiosis has real effects on social practice, social institutions, and social order. They argue, in short, that semiosis is performative. Though it is certainly possible for us to communicate unintentionally, we normally speak or write in order to produce some kind of response. Yet answers to the question of how semiosis produces effects are generally conspicuous by their absence. This could well be due to the many uncertainties and/or controversies over the nature of explanation in the social sciences. For some social theorists, explaining how semiosis produces effects would require a causal explanation that first identifies what it is that produces observed effects and then attributes causal responsibility thereto in terms of an underlying causal mechanism (or mechanisms). But many other theorists reject causal explanation as being wholly inappropriate to the study of semiosis. For example, hermeneutics is generally taken to reject causal explanation (*erklären*) in favour of interpretive understanding *(verstehen)*. Its advocates deny that semiosis and its effects can be explained in the same way as the production of chemical reactions and their effects; all that is possible (and all that is required) is to elucidate what a specific text 'means'. This rejection of *erklären* in favour of *verstehen* is often tied to a Humean account of causal explanation in terms of

'constant conjunctions' between causes and effects.3 Thus advocates of *verstehen* argue that, because such regularities either do not characterise communication or are irrelevant to its understanding, causal explanation is either totally excluded or simply redundant. Given the semiotic character of reasons (see below), this argument is linked to their conclusion that reasons are not to be treated as causes of behaviour. Instead, according to advocates of *verstehen*, reasons are propositions that precede or accompany behaviour and must simply be 'understood'. If this line of reasoning were to be accepted, however, it would be meaningless and/or pointless to inquire into the causal efficacy of semiosis.

In contrast, we argue that semiosis is both meaningful and causally efficacious, and we therefore need to demonstrate, using critical realist concepts, how it produces effects. To do this we need to recall some key features of critical realist philosophy.

First, critical realists distinguish the real from the actual and the empirical. The 'real' refers to objects, their structures or natures and their causal powers and liabilities. The 'actual' refers to what happens when these powers and liabilities are activated and produce change. The 'empirical' is the subset of the real and the actual that is experienced by actors. Although changes at the level of the actual (e.g. political debates) may change the nature of objects (e.g. political institutions), the latter are not reducible to the former, any more than a car can be reduced to its movement. Moreover, while empirical experiences can influence behaviour and hence what happens, much of the social and physical worlds can exist regardless of whether researchers, and in some cases other actors, are observing or experiencing them. Though languages and other semiotic structures/systems are dependent on actors for their reproduction, they always already pre-exist any given actor (or subset of actors), and have a relative autonomy from them as real objects, even when not actualised.4

Second, CR views objects as structured and as having particular causal powers or liabilities. That is, they are able to act in certain ways and/or suffer certain changes. Thus a person who has learned a language has a rich set of (causal) powers to communicate, and they have these powers even though they do not use them all the time.5 These powers exist (often, of course, in latent form) but they can be activated in certain situations. If and when they are activated, the effects depend on the context. Thus if we ask someone the way to the Town Hall, the effects of the question will depend on whether she speaks the same language, whether she knows the area, and so on. But regardless of whether the answer is 'round the corner', 'I'm sorry I don't know', or 'why do you want to know?', it is at least co-produced by the question, and this is true irrespective of whether the relationship between the question and answer is regular or irregular. Causation is about what produces change (the activation of causal powers) not about (whether observers have registered) a regular conjunction of cause events and effect events. Hence, regularities are not necessary for explanation, whether of physical or social phenomena. Even where we do find regularities they still have to be explained in terms of what produces them. Thus critical realism rejects the Humean, constant conjunction view of causation.

Third, as the preceding example suggests, critical realists argue that reasons can operate as causes, that is, can be responsible for producing a change. Indeed, when someone tries to persuade us that we are wrong to make this argument by giving us reasons, they in turn presuppose that offering reasons can be causative. This applies irrespective of whether there are regularities for us to record. For the general absence of regularities between giving or recognizing reasons and subsequent behaviour is not fatal to causal explanation. On the contrary, as we have seen, regularities are not essential for causal explanation even in the physical sciences. The effects produced by semiosis certainly depend on texts being understood6 in some fashion but not necessarily just in one, and only one, fashion. Thus a speech made during an election campaign may offer people strong reasons for voting in a certain way. The fact that the speech might be construed differently by different individuals (even leading them to vote contrary to the reasons adduced) and hence does not form part of a constant conjunction or event regularity does not mean that it can have no influence on voting (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994).7] Understanding (*verstehen*) and explanation (*erklären*) are therefore not antithetical.

Crucial though this issue of reasons as causes has been in the philosophy of social science, it fails to address the specific nature of 'reasons' and how they come to motivate action. In

particular, it ignores the semiotic character of reasons and, in the most extreme cases, treats them as simple, singular triggers of action. Yet reasons are diffuse and hard to identify unambiguously. Indeed, it would be better be think of them as emergent elements in more extensive networks of concepts, beliefs, symbols, and texts. As we show in section II, they presuppose languages, intentionality, particular concepts and prior understandings and interests, intertextuality, conventions of inference and evidence, and so on. Even a brief reflection on the implications of this semiotic and social embedding of reasons is enough to bring home the inadequacy of a simplistic treatment of reasons. In addition, if we reflect more broadly upon what kinds of semiotic features and events can bring about changes in behaviour (if only at the level of how people think or feel), we notice that it is not only reasons that change what we do. We may be influenced more by the tone (e.g. warmth, hostility) or imagery of a speech than by any reasons for action that it might present. Consideration of these expressive qualities of communication exposes the narrowly rationalist character of the reasons-as-causes answer to the question of how texts produce effects. We therefore need to go beyond the reasons-as-causes argument, important though it is, to examine the nature of semiosis more generally and its place within the overall logic of the social.

II. The Social Preconditions and Context of Semiosis

Social scientists who have shown interest in semiosis have tended to ignore its broader social context. We aim to correct this bias in the semiotic turn by putting semiotic processes into context. This means locating them within their necessary dialectical relations with persons (hence minds, intentions, desires, bodies), social relations, and the material world – locating them within the practical engagement of embodied and socially organised persons with the material world.

Semiosis – the making of meaning – is a crucial part of social life but it does not exhaust the latter. Thus, because texts are both socially-structuring and socially-structured, we must examine not only how texts generate meaning and thereby help to generate social structure but also how the production of meaning is itself constrained by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structure. For example, an interview is a particular form of communication (a 'genre' in the terminology we introduce below) that both creates a particular kind of social encounter and is itself socially-structured, for example by conventions of propriety, privacy and disclosure, by particular distributions of resources, material and cognitive. In short, although semiosis is an aspect of any social practice (insofar as practices entail meaning), no social practice (let alone all behaviours) is reducible to semiosis alone. This means that semiosis cannot be reduced to the play of differences among networks of signs (as if semiosis were always purely an intra-semiotic matter with no external reference) and that it cannot be understood without identifying and exploring the extra-semiotic conditions that make semiosis possible and secure its effectivity. We therefore reject the Foucauldian-inspired conflation of discourses and material practices as one more instance of the 'discourse-imperialism' that has infected social theory for the last two decades. This conflation also eliminates the distinction – so crucial for critical realism – between the transitive and intransitive dimensions of scientific inquiry. It thereby produces the epistemic fallacies associated with strong social constructionism (Sayer, 2000).

The intersubjective production of meaning and other semiotic effects is exceptionally difficult to explain, not least because it involves more or less inaccessible mental processes. Thus, although we offer a way of explaining the power of semiosis to generate meaning, and even though semiosis involves the listener/reception as much as speaker/production, it leaves open the question of how minds make sense of *texts*. Whilst meaning and motive are emergent phenomena of semiosis, they need minds with certain capabilities to co-construct social action and interaction (and bodies to enact them).

Accordingly, our approach to semiosis depends on more than semiotic systems (including languages) and texts. Language acquisition itself is both preceded by, and ongoingly presupposes, various bodily and practical forms of non-linguistic knowledge or know-how, skills and sense. In this context, we acknowledge Margaret Archer's demonstration of the importance of the embodied, practical and non-semiotic, indeed non-social (in the sense of intersubjective) dimensions of human practice, and their status as preconditions of language-

learning and use (Archer, 2000). Thus infants have to learn a considerable amount without the aid of semiotic systems before they are able to acquire the latter. In addition, text producers and interpreters subsequently continue to rely heavily upon on non-semiotic knowledge, bodily awareness or know-how in order to carry out both simple and complex tasks. This is reflected in two facts: first, we are often only more or less subliminally aware of 'events' at the margins of our fields of perception and, second, we may also respond more or less subconsciously to 'events'. Further, if we were not intentional, desiring beings with needs, semiosis would be redundant, for it would simply not matter what existed in reality or actuality (which provides part of the overall basis for the referential function of semiosis), there would be no performativity, and no affect or expressive communication. More generally, semiosis presupposes embodied, intentional, practically-skilled social actors, social relations, material objects and spatio-temporality.

Semiosis is also influenced by the habitus, i.e., by the semi-conscious dispositions that people, particularly in their early lives, acquire through social/material interaction with their habitat and through the social relations in their part of the social field (Bourdieu, 2000). Habitus and the feel for particular games that it provides can include different degrees of facility with respect to language use, for example differing capacities to deal with and learn new discourses or genres or styles (see below) (Bourdieu, 1991).

The relationship between these elements – actors, language, texts, social relations, practical contexts – is one of dialectical internal relations, i.e., although distinct, they are not discrete (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Harvey 1996; Ollman 1993). Nonetheless the relative weight of these different elements within the overall configuration of a social action is bound to vary from case to case. In this regard it is worth noting that there is a range of 'semioticity' insofar as different social actions, events, or social orders may be more or less semioticised. Indeed, one might be able to construct a continuum ranging from technological systems through to religion in terms of the relative weight of semiosis and materiality in their overall.

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

Semiosis has a dual presence in the production and identification of social events. On the one hand, social action and social processes may be more or less semiotic in character. Thus, referentially, expressively and in terms of social relations, such action and processes will typically engage the ways of thinking, specific identities, emotional responses or commentaries, vocabularies of motives, goals, and reasons for action that are available to the various actors and frame the situation in which the actors 'find' themselves. Whether these semiotic features of social action and social processes come from public communication or inner conversations, they can be related to real semiotic causal powers and thus one of our main tasks is to try to illuminate semiotic causal powers and how they might be actualised (their mechanisms). And, on the other hand, the identification of an 'event' and its constitutive elements (persons, objects, places etc) from the ongoing flow of social action and social processes necessarily requires some act of semiotic interpretation, even if what happens is totally non-semiotic (i.e., purely material, physical action). This holds true even though (and, perhaps, precisely because) much of social life escapes the notice of any particular observer and, perhaps, all possible observers.

Semiosis is multi-functional (Jakobson 1990; Halliday 1994). It is simultaneously referential (or propositional, or ideational), social-relational (or interpersonal), and expressive. Thus, in the Habermasian terms introduced earlier, semiosis raises validity claims of truth, appropriateness and truthfulness/sincerity. Though it should hardly need saying, we insist on the importance of all three, including, contra Saussureans, the role of reference: there are not only signifiers (e.g. words) and signifieds (concepts) but also referents; the 'play of difference' among the former could not be sustained without extensive embedding of semiosis in material practice, in the constraints and affordances of the material world. Just because the relation of reference between individual lexemes or phrases and objects to which they refer is not one-to-one or self-sufficient, it does not follow that language and ways of thinking are unconstrained by the world. Not just anything can be constructed.8 This does not mean that the differentiations and qualities of the world dictate the content of knowledge – for the latter is a fallible construction and to assume otherwise is to commit the ontic fallacy. But nor is the world or being dependent on knowledge – if one assumes that it is, one commits the epistemic fallacy. This pair of arguments is important in helping us to disambiguate 'construction' into its two moments of construal (the fallible ideas that inform it) and construction (in the sense of the material processes, if any, that follow from it) (cf. Sayer 2000). Indeed, even in the case of social constructions such as institutions, what gets constructed is different from how it is construed; and the relative success or failure of this construal depends on how both it and the construction respond to the properties of the materials (including social phenomena such as actors and institutions) used to construct social reality. Of course, the construal need not refer to the material world: it could also refer to other semiotic phenomena, to images, smells, sounds or feelings and states of mind.

III. The Role of Semiosis in Social Structuration

A critical realist account of social structuration must be sensitive to the complex dialectic that is entailed in the emergence, reproduction, and transformation of social structures from social actions and the reciprocal influence of these emergent structures on ongoing social action (see Bhaskar 1979; Archer 1982; Jessop 2001). An important aspect of this dialectic is the operation of the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention that shape the relationships between semiosis and social structuration. These mechanisms are common to natural and social evolution (a distinction that itself becomes less distinct, of course, as human action acquires an increasing role in natural evolution) but, as suggested earlier, their operation in the social world is bound to involve semiotic as well as extra-semiotic factors.

Accordingly, we now want to highlight three interrelated semiotic aspects of social structuration. First, semiotic conditions affect the differential reproduction and transformation of social groups, organisations, institutions, and other social phenomena. Second, these mechanisms are reflexive in the sense that semiotic conditions affect the variation, selection and retention of the semiotic features of social phenomena. And, third, semiotic innovation and emergence is itself a source of variation that feeds into the process of social transformation. Overall, then, semiosis can generate variation, have selective effects, and contribute to the differential retention and/or institutionalisation of social phenomena.

We can elaborate these arguments by listing some semiotic conditions involved in the variation, selection and retention of the semiotic and extra-semiotic features of any social phenomenon:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the preceding list has been phrased to emphasise the role of semiosis in securing social reproduction, semiotic conditions may also militate against this. For example, relationships of contestation between discourses (i.e., relationships of contestation internally between agents in their semiotic aspect, and/or relations of contestation between the phenomenon in question and other associated phenomena in their semiotic aspect) may impede the selection/privileging of particular discourses for interpreting events, legitimising actions, and (perhaps self-reflexively) representing the phenomenon and associated phenomena. Where such contestation occurs, factors (b)-(g) in the preceding list will either be absent or, at least, limited in their overall operation. This will create in turn conditions favourable to successful innovation in the semiotic and extra-semiotic dimensions of the social world in the sense that significant variations are selected and retained to produce a durable transformation in that world. Among the relevant semiotic conditions here are the internal relations between discourses (including intertextuality) and the external relations that obtain between discourses concerned with associated social phenomena. These should be such that a new selection/privileging of discourses is possible, allowing the development of factors favouring the retention of selected discourses (b)-(g). Examples of this would include the absence/weakening of competing discourses internally or the development of new relations between such phenomena of a (partially) semiotic character favouring the recontextualisation of external discourses with regard to that phenomenon. Rather than pursue such arguments in the abstract, however, we will illustrate how these mechanisms actually operate.

IV. Semiotic Formations and their Emergent Properties: from Abstract to Concrete

It is precisely because semiosis is the making of meaning through recourse to language and other semiotic systems that, as critical realists, we need the tools and skills of critical semiotic analysis (linguistic analysis, discourse analysis etc) to reflect (critically) on any text. Competent language users typically get by on a day-to-day basis, of course, without knowing about the arcana of critical semiotic analysis (hereafter CSA); but, if, as critical realists, we are interested in how actual semiotic effects are generated, we must focus on the complexities of the real mechanisms that, according to semantic content and overall context, produce effects that tend to escape the attention of lay persons and non-specialist social scientists alike. This is the *semiotic* aspect of critical semiotic analysis. As regards its *critical* aspect, CSA (e.g. 'critical discourse analysis') is concerned with *the truth, truthfulness and appropriateness* of texts, their production, and their interpretation. That is, it is concerned with the relationship between semiosis and the material and social world; persons and their intentions, beliefs, desires etc; and social relations. It is concerned with the description of

texts, the interpretation of how people produce and interpret texts, judgements of texts in terms of truth, truthfulness and appropriateness, and explanation of the social causes and effects of texts.

Thus a CR approach to the explanation of concrete phenomena such as semiosis analyses them as conjunctions of structures and causal powers co-producing specific effects. To do this it abstracts these structures, identifying them and considering their respective causal powers and liabilities. Having done this, it then moves back towards the concrete, combining the abstracted constituent elements, noting how they combine, with what consequences. While, for the sake of simplicity of exposition of critical realist method, it is usual to consider simple cases involving discrete structures and mechanisms, semiosis is an extreme case where concrete phenomena are the product of dialectically-related elements, and hence whose interaction is non-additive. Hence the abstractions made by CDA are analytical distinctions that have to be used in a way which acknowledges their dialectical interdependence. Concrete events have a more or less semiotic ('textual') character (a football match is an event that is not primarily semiotic in character, though it has semiotic aspects, whereas a lecture is a primarily semiotic event) but even primarily semiotic events are co-produced by mental, social and material as well as specifically semiotic structures.

Semiotic structures include semiotic systems – most obviously languages – which have distinctive properties (e.g., the properties formulated in grammatical rules) not found in other structures. Nevertheless, even languages show the dialectical interpenetration of otherwise operationally autonomous structures – i.e. they are overdetermined by other structures. Thus there is a differentiation of major components of grammatical systems corresponding to the referential and social relational functions of language (Halliday 1994). But semiotic systems can only partially account for texts (semiotic facets of events). In CR terms the gap between the productive potential ('real') of semiotic systems and the 'actual' of semiotic facets of events is such that other structures need to be postulated at lower (i.e., closer to the concrete) levels of abstraction. We call these 'semiotic orders'.

Semiotic orders constitute the social structuring of semiotic variation. Their main elements are genres, discourses and styles. Genres are ways of acting and interacting in their specifically semiotic aspect; they are ways of regulating (inter)action. An example would be (a specific form of) interview. Discourses are positioned ways of representing – representing other social practices as well as the material world, and reflexively representing this social practice, from particular positions in social practices. An example would be a particular political discourse – let us say the political discourse of the 'third way' (New Labour). Styles are ways of being, identities in their specifically semiotic (as opposed to bodily/material) aspect. An example would be the 'new' managerial style described by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). A semiotic order is a specific configuration of genres, discourses and styles, which constitutes the semiotic moment of a network of social practices (e.g., a field in Bourdieu's sense, for instance the political field).

The relationship between genres, discourses and styles is dialectical. Thus discourses may become enacted as genres and inculcated as styles. What enters a practice as a discourse such as the discourse of 'new public management' may become enacted as new ways of (inter)acting, which will in part be new genres (new ways of (inter)acting discursively). And such a discourse may become inculcated as new ways of being, new identities, including both new styles and new bodily dispositions. Moreover, in addition to the intra-semiotic flows between discourses, genres, and styles, there are also flows between semiosis and other elements/moments of social practices. For example, it may become materialised in new buildings, new technologies, etc. It is important to stress again 'may': there is nothing inevitable about these 'socially constructive' effects of discourse, they are conditional upon the specificity of the practice.

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

semiotic orders are more concrete and complex (i.e., overdetermined by the categories of other structures, e.g., 'discourse', 'genre', 'dialect').

Thus, whilst critical semiotic analysis attributes causal effectivity to semiotic/linguistic forms, it does so without falling into a semiotic/linguistic formalism. The effectivity of forms depends upon their semantic content and their social context. For example, processes in the material world may be semiotically represented events or as objects, in the linguistic form of finite clauses (e.g., 'Multinational corporations are changing the ways in which different countries trade with each other') or of nominalisations (e.g., 'The modern world is swept by change'). But the social effectivity of nominalisation depends upon what is nominalised (reducing processes to their effectivity and thus concealing details of both process and agency) and on the specific social context in which it occurs (for more extended examples, see below). Attending to nominalisation as a linguistic form is germane to the critical analysis of the social effectivity of semiosis but this attention must be combined with an account of meaning and how meaning is mediated in and through textual interpretation. It would make a difference, for example, whether or not there were widespread critical awareness of such features of texts. This lack of one-to-one relations between formal features of texts, interpretations, and social effects implies that generalisations about semiosis are difficult. However, there is nothing exceptional about this. Social systems – and, indeed, most physical systems – are open and hence unpredictable. As critical realists have emphasised, the contingent emergence of new phenomena in and through the complex interactions between systems and their environments makes constant conjunctions rare.

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

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

Semiotic emergence is tied not only to shifting articulations of discourses, genres and styles as such, but also to texts as processes, the 'texturing' of texts, the working together of diverse elements in texts over time and in space. In other words, it depends upon the causal powers of agents in texturing. The following texts illustrate the processes at work here. The first text is an extract from a meeting of (mainly) supervisors in an Australian subsidiary of an American multinational company, discussing the introduction of team management (the data was collected by Lesley Farrell):

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

Sally   yeah

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

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

James   the team leader

 [..]   yeah

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

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

 [..] yeah

Peter   I just can't maintain it at the moment you know a couple of days you know a couple of days crook there and you know just the amount of work that builds up it just goes to the back of the queue sort of thing it's shocking

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

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

Ben what I'm trying to get across

Peter   cause

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

 [..] yeah

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

Sally   yours

This extract shows an element of the (new) 'global' discourse of team management ('facilitating') being locally appropriated by being worked in the course of the interaction into a relationship of equivalence with elements of existing discourses (e.g. 'keep them on the right track', 'they've got to really rely on each other', 'people … start their own teams'), and into a relationship of difference from other elements of existing discourses (e.g. '(being) the team leader', 'direct people onto the path', 'be in charge of the meeting'). The 'work' of texturing these relations of equivalence and difference is evidenced in the high incidence and the distribution of 'hedging' expressions such as 'or something', 'just', 'kind of', 'sort of', and 'modalising' expressions such as 'maybe', 'we thought', 'I think', which mitigate in various ways degrees of commitment to propositions and proposals. The texturing of such relations of equivalence and difference can cumulatively produce new configurations of discourses and, in so far as they are enacted and inculcated, of genres and styles (in this case, the meeting itself can be seen as a generic enactment of the new discourse which it is locally appropriating). If we assume a social theory of learning as active participation in the innovative meaning-making practices of a community (Lave 1998, Wenger 1998), such examples can be seen as instances in cumulative processes of organisational learning that can produce changes in knowledge, social relations, and social identities (semiotically: in discourses, genres, and styles).

To show how instances of semiotic emergence figure in processes of social transformation we must also consider the resonance of emergent semiotic properties within orders of discourse. The second example is a preface by Tony Blair to a White Paper on Competition produced by the Department of Trade and Industry (1998).

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Government, in business, in our universities and throughout society we must do much more to foster a new entrepreneurial spirit: equipping ourselves for the long term, prepared to seize opportunities, committed to constant innovation and enhanced performance. That is the route to commercial success and prosperity for all. We must put the future on Britain's side.

    Tony Blair (signature)
The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister'

This example shows the texturing together of the spacetime of 'global' economic change and the spacetime of national policy formation. The text is organised on a problem-solution model: the problem is defined in 'global' spacetime in terms of irresistible processes without social agents (e.g., 'new markets are opening up', not for instance 'business corporations are opening up new markets') in a timeless present and an undifferentiated 'universal' space'; the solution is defined in a national spacetime in terms of what national agencies ('we', '[the] government', 'business') 'must' do. Any social formation is faced with the problem of articulating different space-times (Harvey 1996; Jessop 2000), and such articulation tends to become a banal accomplishment of everyday life events, and a banal accomplishment in texturing. *IIII* One aspect of contemporary social transformation associated with neo-liberalism is the sort of articulation of global and more local spacetimes illustrated here, and now a pervasive feature of neo-liberal discourse in business, government, education etc, and at international (e.g., agencies like the OECD), national, regional and local levels. Unlike the first example, the Blair text does not show semiotic emergence in process, but is rather one of many possible illustrations of the extraordinary resonance and 'flow' between fields and across scales of a recently emergent semiotic re-articulation of spacetimes.

V. Conclusions

We wish to draw three main conclusions from this first cut at promoting a debate between critical realists and critical discourse analysts. First, we have argued that the study of semiosis would benefit from articulation with critical realism. This has already occurred in critical discourse analysis, of course, with its even-handed concern with context as well as text. But we suggest that it should be extended to other forms of semiotic analysis. This does not mean that we reject the hermeneutic approach; rather, we argue that hermeneutics by itself cannot provide an adequate explanation of social phenomena even at the level of face-to-face communication and interaction. There is always an extra-semiotic context to the operation of hermeneutics (especially if this is extended to the notion of the 'double hermeneutic' practised by social scientists) and any serious explanation of social phenomena must be adequate both at the level of meaning and at the level of social (extra-semiotic) causation. Once we reject a Humean account of causation in terms of constant conjunction, *verstehen* and *erklären* are not so much antithetic as complementary. Given the prolific nature of semiosis with its infinity of possible meaningful communications, understandings, and (mis)understandings, it is important to explore the various extra-semiotic mechanisms that

contribute to the variation, selection, and retention of semiosis as well as the contribution of semiosis to the reproduction and transformation of social structures.

Second, we have argued that critical realism would benefit from sustained engagement with semiotic analysis. For critical realism has tended to operate with an insufficiently concrete and complex analysis of semiosis. It has tended to take symbol systems, language, orders of discourse, and so on for granted, thereby excluding central features of the social world from its analysis. One consequence of this is that critical realism cannot give an adequate account of the complex semiotic, social, and material overdetermination of that world. Semiosis has its own distinctive elements, necessary properties, and emergent effects and, even though (and precisely because) these qualities and their associated causal powers and liabilities interpenetrate, interfere with, and overdetermine other types of social relations and institutional orders, they must be integrated into a more comprehensive critical realist analysis of the social world. In this way we can move to provide explanations that are 'socially (or semiotically) adequate' as well as 'objectively probable' in the sense that they establish the discursive as well as extra-discursive conditions of existence of the explicandum at an appropriate level of concretisation and complexification.

And, third, in exploring the distinctive features of semiosis, we began by emphasising how semiosis frames social interaction and contributes to the construction of social relations. Within this context we then discussed the construction of identities, modes of calculation, vocabularies of motives, etc.; and their role in providing the motivational force behind actions. At the same time we took pains to argue that semiosis works in conjunction with extra-semiotic (or extra-discursive) elements. By mapping some key aspects of semiosis, especially its extra-discursive conditions of existence and effectivity, we attempted to block off a purely rationalist or ideologist view of social relations. In developing this argument, we oppose theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who, in a manner reminiscent of the analysis of the production of commodities by means of commodities offered by Sraffa (1960), one-sidedly emphasise the discursive production of discourse from discourse. This leads them to neglect the extra-discursive as well as the discursive factors that shape the resonance of semiosis and the willingness and capacity of actors (and other social forces) to respond to interpellations, appeals to their identities and interests, hegemonic projects, etc. Against this, we argue for at least equal weight to be given to the consumption of semiosis as well as its production. In particular, we have stressed that both the production and the consumption of symbolic systems (orders of discourse, etc.) are overdetermined by a range of factors that are more or less extra-semiotic.

References

Archer, Margaret S. (1982) Morphogenesis versus Structuration: on combining Structure and Action. *British Journal of Sociology*, 33(4), 455-83.

Archer, Margaret S. (2000) *Being Human*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Benton, Ted (1981) Realism in Social Science. *Radical Philosophy*, 27, 13-21.

Bhaskar, Roy (1979) *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Hassocks: Harvester

Bhaskar, Roy (1989) *Reclaiming Reality*, London: Verso.

Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve (1999) *Le nouvel ésprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity

Bourdieu, Pierre (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*, London: Verso.

Butler, Judith (2000) Dynamic Conclusions, in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso, 263-280.

Chouliaraki, Lilie and Fairclough, Norman (1999) *Discourse in Late Modernity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Collier, Andrew (1994) *Critical Realism*. London: Verso.

Department of Trade and Industry (1998) *Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy*, London: HMSO. http://www.dti.gov.uk/comp/competitive.wh_int1.htm

Habermas, Jürgen (1987) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures,* Cambridge: Polity.

Halliday, Michael A.K. (1994) *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 2nd edition, London: Edward Arnold

Harvey, David (1996) *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Jakobson, Roman (1990) *On Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jessop, Bob (2000) The Crisis of the National Spatio-Temporal Fix and the Ecological Dominance of Globalizing Capitalism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, 24(2), 323-360.

Jessop, Bob (2001) Institutional (Re)turns and the Strategic-Relational Approach. *Environment and Planning A*, 33(7), 1213-37.

Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: New Left Books.

Lave, Jean (1998) *Cognition in Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Ollman, Bertell (1993) *Dialectical Investigations*, London/New York: Routledge.

Ringer, Fritz K. (2000) *Max Weber's Methodology: the Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sayer, Andrew (2000) *Realism and Social Science*, London: Sage.

Sraffa, Piero (1960) *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities: Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, Etienne (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Author

Bob Jessop, born 1946, is Professor of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, United Kingdom.

Endnotes

1 A fourth question that some may want to raise is that of naturalism and, more specifically, whether semiotic analysis can be assimilated to the methodology of the natural sciences. We regard this question as misguided. What is important is not whether they match those of the natural sciences but whether the chosen approaches or methodology are appropriate for their subject matter. Answering the former question incidentally supplies a response to the latter, of course; our paper answers yes and no to the latter question. For the study of semiosis requires both similar and different methods from those of natural science.

2 We use the term 'semiosis' throughout this paper. Although we initially gloss it as the inter-subjective making of meaning, our understanding of semiosis as an element/moment of 'the social' is necessarily relational and will therefore emerge more fully during the paper. We prefer 'semiosis' to 'language' and 'discourse' (used as abstract nouns) for two reasons. First, semiosis involves more than (verbal) language – it also involves, for example, 'visual language' (photographs, pictures, diagrams, etc.). And, second, 'discourse' as an abstract noun is a notoriously problematic and confusing term. In any case, we later use 'discourse' as a count noun for particular positioned ways of representing aspects of the world. Likewise, we shall later use 'languages' (count noun) for particular language systems (e.g., English). When referring to concrete social events from a semiotic perspective, we use the term 'texts' (count noun) in an extended sense to include not only written texts but also spoken conversations,

'multi-semiotic' texts such as TV ads (which mix words, images, sound effects, etc.), and so on. This extended use of 'texts' is common in certain areas of linguistics, though we recognise that it is not a very satisfactory term.

3 For example, in her critique of Bourdieu, Judith Butler (2000) assumes a Humean concept of causation. Unsurprisingly, then, she fails to note that to acknowledge performativity is to concede the causal efficacity of discourses.

4 Critical realists have debated whether social structures, such as those of language, exist independently of their enactment (Bhaskar, 1979; 1989; Benton. 1981; Collier, 1994).

5 This is an example of a set of powers that needs a certain amount of use if they are to be sustained but, at least in the short run, we have these powers even though they are only activated intermittently.

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

7 Interestingly, according to Ringer (2000), this view was shared by Max Weber, one of the founders of interpretive sociology. While Weber is widely associated with an allegedly unsuccessful attempt to unite explanatory (causal) and interpretive (hermeneutic) analysis, this negative judgement arises because most interpreters have assumed that Weber followed a Humean model of causation based on constant conjunctions. However, Ringer shows that Weber rejected this model as well as related arguments that anticipated Hempel's neo-positivist, deductive nomological 'covering law' model of causal analysis. Weber came to appreciate that that 'reasons' could be causes. He concluded that an adequate explanation of a specific historical, cultural or social phenomenon must be adequate both in terms of motivational intelligibility (i.e., its social meaning for the relevant actors) and its production through the contingent interaction of causal processes in specific circumstances. Bhaskar's first critical realist defence of the possibility of naturalism incorrectly cites Weber as seeing constant conjunctions as necessary for an adequate explanation (1989: 2, 137-8). He presents Weber as combining a neo-Kantian methodology with methodological individualism and contrasts this approach with Marx's realist methodology and relational ontology (1989: 31). He also argues that there are two key differences between Weberian sociology and transcendental realism: (a) whereas Weber accepts, realism rejects, constant conjunctions; (b) whereas Weber denies, realism accepts, that correction of agents' perceptions may be a necessary part of a social scientific investigation (1989: 135-8). Bhaskar is wrong on both counts since Weber also discussed 'wrong thinking' and other forms of irrationality. Another problem that is directly relevant to our own analysis below is that Weber does not adequately distinguish between the actual and the real. In using terms such as 'pressing toward', 'developmental tendencies', 'moving forces', and 'impeding' factors, Weber supported a dynamic conception of causal analysis. But he also argued that such notions do not constitute 'real causal interconnections' at an 'elementary' level but involve no more than tactically useful constructs in the practice of historical reasoning (Ringer 2000: 76).

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