# Overlapping traditions with divergent implications? Introduction to the special issue on pragmatism and critical realism.

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Intellectual traditions can be seen as complex patchworks of ideas, constructed differently by each observer as they learn about the tradition, and harmonised to an extent through the boundary work done by those interpreters who come to be seen as most authoritative for the tradition concerned (Elder-Vass and Morgan 2022; Elder-Vass 2022; Gieryn 1983). From this perspective, different traditions may sometimes overlap or interleave, and yet also sometimes conflict, with different interpreters forming different understandings of those overlaps and conflicts.

This special issue provides ample evidence to support this view of the relationship between critical realism and pragmatism. That the traditions overlap should be no surprise given that leading critical realists have in places drawn, implicitly or explicitly, on the work of leading pragmatists. Roy Bhaskar himself mentions that the people who influenced him - namely the 'anti-deductivists', who included his supervisor Rom Harre - were themselves influenced by, amongst others, the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, although he also critiques these influences for their lack of an ontology (Bhaskar 2009, 2). Bridget Ritz’s recent paper on abduction and retroduction in the two traditions seems to suggest that these concepts, for example, came to critical realism from Peirce, and critical realists have then developed their own variation of the concept of retroduction (Ritz 2020) (also see Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019, 109–122). Margaret Archer draws more explicitly on George Herbert Mead's work on the internal conversation in her influential work on reflexivity (Archer 2003).

We also find intriguing parallels between the traditions even in cases where lines of influence are invisible and perhaps unlikely. Roy Bhaskar's understanding of language and its relation to the world is remarkably similar to the work of Charles Peirce though it is unclear whether he was directly influenced by Peirce’s work (Nellhaus 1998). They are certainly close enough for Kieran Cashell to argue recently that we need a synthesis of Peirce and Bhaskar’s work on representation (Cashell 2009). Stephen Pratten provides another example in this issue in his comparison of Tony Lawson and his Cambridge group’s social positioning theory with the neglected work of John Dewey on the concept of the *offices* that people and things may occupy (Pratten 2022). Even in the absence of lines of influence, parallel theory developments like this suggest some similarity in the broad philosophical orientations of pragmatism and critical realism, and some potential for these traditions learning more from each other. Jamie Morgan, for example, has suggested that critical realists would find value in the work of the leading contemporary pragmatist Nicholas Rescher (Morgan 2019).

Further evidence of affinity is provided by scholars who have passed through both traditions and indeed often continue to find both useful for their work (see, for example, Vandenberghe 2014). This, indeed, is one of the unexpected themes to emerge from our roundtable discussion in this issue (Barman, Porpora, and Carrigan 2022). Although we expected this to take the form of a debate between contrasting views, our contributors Emily Barman and Mark Carrigan instead delivered biographical narratives that demonstrated how superficially distinct traditions may overlap and interleave at the personal level as well as in more abstract terms.

Yet at the same time scholars have found elements of conflict or contradiction between the two traditions. Perhaps the most substantial critical realist engagement with pragmatism is Bhaskar's book on Richard Rorty (Bhaskar 1991), which acknowledges the contribution of Rorty's critique of the epistemological tradition in philosophy but also chastises him for failing to extricate himself fully from the epistemological problematic (Elder-Vass 2022). Bhaskar himself thus appears to take something like an 'overlapping patchworks' approach to the relation between pragmatism and critical realism. Dave Elder-Vass's paper in this issue offers one way of mapping out these patchworks in the form of a survey of the key commitments of the two traditions and some of the debates that have taken place between them. These debates, however, are not merely philosophical, since they have implications for how we approach more substantive areas of study, and Elder-Vass also looks more briefly at how one area in particular – recent sociological studies of value and valuation – has been affected by a tendency to align with a pragmatist perspective, with the consequence that it has tended to neglect structural forces (Elder-Vass 2022).

This suggestion that critical realism may provide a stronger ontological basis for applied research is also a theme of the contribution by Tran and her colleagues to this issue (Tran et al. 2022). In their work on the challenges faced by Asian migrants to Australia with regard to integrating into workplaces, they moved away from an initial pragmatist approach to adopt critical realism. Critical realism, they argue, made it possible to develop a fuller understanding of the causal relationships involved and thus to navigate the complexity of their case and in particular the contributions of underlying structures.

At times, the adherents of different intellectual traditions can seem to become warring clans, who delight in finding reasons to disagree. Pragmatists have sometimes been positively hostile towards critical realist ontology (e.g. Kivinen and Piiroinen 2004), and critical realists have sometimes criticised pragmatism in fairly robust terms, as Doug Porpora does in his first contribution to our roundtable (Barman, Porpora, and Carrigan 2022). Those disagreements have sometimes become quite heated, such as the debate between Christian Smith and John Levi Martin, although it is intriguing that the critical realist Smith begins with an olive branch and it is the pragmatist Martin who chooses battle instead (Martin 2013a; Smith 2013a; Smith 2013b; Martin 2013b). One of our objectives in editing this issue has been to take some of the heat out of the debate by showing that the relationship between the two traditions is far more complex than many of the more antagonistic reactions might suggest.

That complexity only increases when we introduce further traditions into the conversation, as Stephen Kemp does in his paper in this issue (Kemp 2022). As Kemp points out, Actor-Network Theory has retrospectively discovered significant common ground with American pragmatism (Hennion 2016; Marres 2019). One part of that common ground - with at least some variants of pragmatism - is a shared antipathy to structural explanation in the social sciences and thus to one of the core commitments of all versions of critical realism. Kemp deploys the work of Bruno Latour, the leading figure in Actor-Network Theory, as an advocate of a “pragmatist-ish” position on social structure to argue that critical realist understandings of organisations fail to fully recognise the contingency and instability of organisational interactions.

There is, finally, a sense in which traditions develop through their interactions with their others. The papers in this special issue suggest that critical realism, as the more recent tradition, has been shaped in part by its interactions with pragmatism, both positive and negative. On the one hand it has drawn on the anti-foundationalism and fallibilism that are core commitments of pragmatism. On the other, it has also defined itself by the distance it has taken from other classic pragmatist commitments, most strikingly in its advocacy of a substantive realist ontology and its application to notions of social structure. There is less evidence, to date, of influence running in the opposite direction. We hope that this special issue can encourage adherents of both traditions to engage with the other. At times, no doubt, the other will function as a useful foil against which scholars can understand their own position better, but at others, as we hope we have shown, it may also provide material that can be adopted, adapted and integrated.

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