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Andrew Sayer

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ANDREW SAYER

Biographical details and theoretical context

Andrew Sayer completed his undergraduate degree, BA (Hons.) Geography, at Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology (later Anglia Polytechnic University) in the late 1960s, completing an MA and DPhil in Urban and Regional Studies at Sussex University in the early 1970s. He was subsequently appointed to a lecturing post at the same university. In 1993, he moved to the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University where he is now: Professorship of Social Theory and Political Economy. Sayer's scholarly work is wide-ranging but has two major themes: social theory and political economy, and philosophy and methodology in the social sciences. The first strand is illustrated by empirical work on topics in economic geography - for example, *Microcircuits of capital* (Sayer and Morgan, 1988), and *The new social economy: reworking the division of labour* (Sayer and Walker, 1992) - as well as in more theoretical discussions that have discussed the restructuring of the political economy (Sayer, 1995) and the ensuing relationships between political and moral economies (Ray and Sayer 1999). The second strand is clearly indicated by *Method in Social Science* (Sayer, 1984, with a second edition published in 1992) and *Realism and Social Science* (Sayer, 2000).

Andrew Sayer's best-known contribution to the field of human geography, and subsequently to the social sciences, has been his explication and development of Critical Realism. His arguments about space are not his central point, but they flow directly from this project. It is important here to appreciate the context in which the debate about Critical Realism was played out if we are to understand the appropriations of, and reactions to, Sayer's position by those exploring the constitutive role of space (and time) in contemporary life. In the late 1980s Critical Realism became, in the Anglo-American context, a major touchstone for economic geographers struggling with two issues: first, the waning of interest in Marxist structuralism (and/or the perceived lack of analytical rigour in structuralist accounts of economic restructuring); second, the perceived lack of explanatory power accorded to positivist descriptions of economic restructuring. Critical realism seemed to address these lacunae and offer a new way of approaching economic geography; accordingly, critical realism briefly shifted into a hegemonic position in the discipline of geography, as well as the sub-discipline of economic geography, only to be quickly displaced by postmodernist and poststructuralist critiques in the 1990s. Even so, it is a moot point whether the popular support for critical realism was translated into practice and understanding, or whether it simply acted as a flag of convenience for 'business as usual'. Sayer (2000) has subsequently argued that not only was/is critical realism unfairly painted as oppositional to poststructuralism, but also that the popularly assumed critical realist position that 'space matters' is a misinterpretation of its key tenets. Critical realists argue that the central point is how space matters. However, an answer this question can only be reached via a re-theorisation of space.

Sayer's intellectual trajectory is significant. He began as a geographer, and then was a student, lecturer and researcher in a multidisciplinary setting; he is currently located in a Sociology Department where he defines himself as 'post-disciplinary'. Sussex University, whose organisational structure is characterised by broad overarching schools, such as Social and Community Studies, rather than traditional disciplines and faculties presented an opportunity to develop and test Sayer's ideas in a broader social science context than that afforded most Geographers. Moreover, teaching, in the Graduate Division of Urban and Regional Studies, brought together a diverse range of staff in what turned out to be a productive and challenging environment (his colleagues included, among others, Peter Saunders, Kevin Morgan, Simon Duncan, Mike Savage, Susan Halford, James Barlow, Peter Dickens, Peter Ambrose and Tony Fielding). Sayer's rigorous attention to social theory and methodology while at Sussex led him to question a range of issues surrounding the formation of knowledge and how we both acquire and apply it. The attention to internal relationships and causality has led him to work against what he views as disciplinary parochialism that is prone to 'reductionism, blinkered interpretation and misattribution of causality' (Sayer, 2000: 7). As we will note below, this position has not tended to court easy support for his ideas amongst those more wedded to disciplinary norms; or, amongst those who have sought to mobilise notions of 'space' to strengthen the discipline of geography. Nonetheless, Sayer's commentary on critical realism and the relations between theory and empirical work in the context of the social sciences has been particularly influential within the discipline of Geography. His ideas have also found their way directly into Sociology, and, to a lesser extent, Economics; furthermore,

methodologically, they have had an impact across the whole of the social sciences by popularising and demonstrating the application of critical realism.

Geographical contributions

Sayer's position on 'space' is inextricably woven with his exposition of Critical Realism, and the critique of positivism. Sayer's 'turn to Realism' was prompted by an attempts to resolve questions in his doctoral thesis about 'urban modelling'. Urban modelling was, at the time, a dominant mode of conceptualising social and economic, and spatial, interaction in the form of systemic modelling that could be operationalised with quantitative measures often through the application of 'social physics' models such as the gravity model (in passing, we might note that such approaches experienced something of a revival in the late 1990s). Sayer's (1976) reaction against closed systems and the search for causality in regularity that these models assumed, led him to explore critiques of positivism upon which such approaches we based (albeit unacknowledged). Sayer looked to the newly-minted literature on Critical Realism (for example, Bhaskar, 1975; Keat and Urry, 1975; and Harré, 1972) for insight. Simultaneously, this philosophical framework provided him with a means of distancing himself the limitations of the 'grand narratives' and 'over-determination' that characterised the dominant structural Marxism of the time.

Sayer's point of entry was via a discussion of 'abstraction'. The 1981 paper of that title, the 1982 paper 'Explanation in economic geography', and finally the 1984 book,

Method in Social Science, clearly laid out the case for critical realism for a social science audience. Critical realism places central importance on the notion of a 'depth ontology' that admits the possibility of a debate about the 'necessary', or 'internal' relations that constitute the 'causal powers' of things which then can be seen to have the potential to be mobilised in particular settings (i.e they are contingent relations). Critically, this ontologically-rich account of social reality implies a generative, as opposed to a successionist, view of causality. In contrast, positivist approaches have an atomistic (as opposed to relational) view of interaction; they have no ontological depth (what you see is what you get); and, causality is inferred from regularity: the whole is based upon the idea of closed, rather than open, systems.

This philosophical grounding allows Sayer to make some significant points about 'space'; the main one being that there is very little that one can say about space *in the abstract*. Therefore, there is no recourse to a theory of space that might, *pace* **David Harvey** (1985), create bedrock, and a justification, for geography. Thus, there was no magic spatial insight that geographers might claim knowledge of, which, *pace* **Ed Soja** (1985), if applied to other social theories (which are notably a spatial), would revolutionise them.

This does not mean that Sayer had nothing positive to say about 'space'. His point about abstract space, particularly, the tendency of geographers to 'rake over' sociology and to accuse it of aspatiality, is that the degree of 'violence of abstraction' is variable. For example, the injury done by ignoring space in an abstract debate about social stratification may be negligible. However, the discussion of particular instances

of stratification will require the consideration of 'physical space'. It is this notion of 'physical space' that Sayer stresses: the manifestation of a 'space-time-matter' combination. Sayer argues that abstraction tends to 'scramble' our understanding of causality. We can point to two types of examples: on one hand, empiricist accounts that look for regularity in relation to an abstract model; and, on the other hand, abstract theories of space that seek to selectively abstract concrete situations (substance and space) and recombine them in inappropriate ways. Both instances are akin to taking apart a machine and putting it back together incorrectly; metaphorically speaking, causality is disrupted: the machine doesn't work. By way of explication, we can point to the common tendency in geography to recombine processes in discrete spatial units (global, nation, region and locale); spatial or analytical units that may not be the relevant ones to the processes under investigation. It should be pointed out that Geographers have been less culpable than those working in other disciplines who commonly uncritically recombine processes at the national scale. Thus, Sayer contends, it is crucial for empirical work to be carried out attending to the specificity of concrete processes and their temporal ordering lest one falls into the trap of spatial fetishism and reductionism.

Key advances and controversies

The reaction to Sayer's ideas have been varied. At one level his interventions have been widely cited; the notion of critical realism, and the need for a particular kind of theoretically informed concrete research certainly struck a chord. Notable development of realist work was carried out by John Allen and **Linda McDowell**; as

well as **Doreen Massey** at the Open University (Massey, Allen and Sayer met as an informal group ‘the Brighton Pier Space and Social Theory Group’). Duncan and his collaborators (Savage and Goodwin) based at Sussex/London also were key propagandists. Finally, the ‘Lancaster Regionalism’ group (amongst them, Urry, Bagguley, Mark-Lawson, Sharpiro, Walby, and Warde) also adapted both the ideas and terminology of critical realism although most of this group would not see themselves as realists. Yet one has to be more sceptical as to whether Geographers, or Social Scientists, do social science any differently as a result of Sayer’s espousal of critical realism. One of the infuriating points for many has been that critical realism requires some basic philosophical rethinking on behalf of users, and that there is no ‘off the shelf’ ‘toolkit’ (see Pratt, 1995). But, it may well be argued, this is the point: to re-think the way we do research rather than follow ‘business as usual’.

It is here that we should note that Sayer’s critical comments on space were of interest to sociologists in the wake of Sociology’s ‘turn to space’ - a ‘turn’ partly prompted by most notably pointed up by **Anthony Giddens’s** (1984) structuration project which was given significant momentum by Urry (himself a Realist Sociologist, although he moved away from realism in the late 1980s). The edited book, *Social relations and spatial structures* (Gregory and Urry, 1985), pulled together a number of key writers to debate the role of space in the constitution of social life (namely: Cooke, Giddens, Gregory, Harvey, Massey, Saunders, Sayer, Soja, and Urry). Interestingly, we can perhaps date the arrival of human geography as a ‘new kid on the block’ of social science to this time. As noted above, Soja (1985) was seeking to radically overhaul the social sciences by ‘re-thinking them spatially’; Harvey (1985) continued to aspire

to a geo-historical materialism; Giddens' (1985) pointed the way to mid-range theories. The tenor of the times was almost an inoculation metaphor; to inject some Geography into Sociology in particular, and the Social Sciences in general. The whole debate was given an extra spin by the growing awareness of space by postmodernist writers, especially urban theorists (including members of the so-called LA School - Davis, Dear, Scott, Storper and Soja). Due to the configuration of the debate, it was not long before Cultural Studies began to look to Geography for some spatial concepts. In this context, the Geography cupboard was not exactly full of ideas, so some frantic writing followed. However, Sayer's (1985) response was a let down for the incipient geographical colonisers: as we noted above that there is no 'bolt on' spatial theory, and abstract spatial concepts will not help us either.

The application of Critical Realism to practice, and to physical space, should have been the key moment in the debate. It turned out to be so, but in a rather complex manner that reminds us that ideas never simply pass through the world as their makers may have imagined. The key debate to focus on here is that of 'localities'. This debate has its roots in an ESRC research project that was to examine the differential economic and social restructuring on place (see Cooke, 1989). The study was based on five case studies: the 'localities'. Cooke, the project director, had drawn upon Massey's (1984) *Spatial Division of Labour* for both an empirical focus and a broad conceptual steer. However, at the first airing of the debate at an Institute of British Geographers conference (before concrete research actually began), Cooke drew withering attacks, notably from **Neil Smith** (1987). The main charge was one of empiricism, and that this represented a return of geography to its idiographic roots.

This attack re-doubled the theoretical debates about space (does it matter, how and why?), as well as increasing the tension between theoretical and empirical work. The debate ran through economic (and, to a lesser degree, social and political) geography for much of the next decade although the localities project lasted just two years: Duncan's (1991) special edited issue of *Environment and Planning A* which sought to have the last word on this topic.

The 'Localities' project thus became a lightning conductor for a number of debates. Smith's castigation of the localities project was allied to an attempt to defend a mode of theorising that did not admit the possibility of contingency, and was exclusively concerned with internal relations (see Smith, 1984); yet at the same time wanted to include every diverse event. It is not surprising that Smith (1987) not only criticised Cooke, but also along with Archer (1987) and Harvey (1985; 1987), sought to demolish the case for Critical Realism too (with Harvey aspiring to construct a theory of the concrete and particular in the context of the universal and abstract determinations of Marx's theory of capital accumulation). Cooke's pragmatism (practical, and later philosophical) led him to propose local labour markets as the key template for the locality studies. This view was heavily criticised by Duncan (1989), from a position close to Sayer's, arguing that local labour markets were not always the relevant causal structure for the examination of phenomena. Interestingly, Sayer's early work had been spurred on not only by an attempt to distance himself from positivist urban modelling, but also the structuralism of **Manuel Castells** (1977). In *The Urban Question*, Castells rejects the notion of the urban as an example of spatial fetishism, he argues that spatial effects should be considered social effects. Sayer

(1983) agrees with part of this critique of spatial fetishism, but still argues that space matters. Space only has effects via the particular objects, with causal powers, that constitute it.

Sayer's argument is that just because spatial relations are constituted by social and natural objects it does not follow that spatial relations can be reduced to their constituents. We have to examine *how* space makes a difference: this requires attention not only to the abstract theory and the specification of necessary relations, but also to the particularity of the contingent conditions that may or may not combine to produce a spatial 'effect'.

Sayer (2000) has also sought to consider further another theme raised in the localities debate; the tension between analysis and narrative, or between law-seeking and contextual approaches. Here he notes that the 'old' debate of regional geography was characterised by these problems, and that the same charge was laid at the door of critical realists analysing at localities. Specifically he accuses positivists of focusing upon temporal succession but neglecting synchronic relations. This neglect leads to positivists making a fallacious link between the unique and the independent, and that regularity between events equals interdependence. Sayer argues instead for a notion of causality that recognises variety and interdependence, whilst at the same time cautioning that many interdependencies tend to be unique and not transferable.

Sayer (2001) has recently turned his attention to the problems of cultural political economy, and specifically the new economic geography. Here he calls for a more critical analysis of the social and cultural embedding of economic activities that considers both embedding and disembedding. First, he urges caution against the tendency to either 'flip' from systemic analyses of traditional political economy and its attendant concerns with the politics of distribution to the lifeworld focus of cultural political economy and its focus on questions of difference. He argues for a re-theorisation of the relations between these two dimensions of society. Second, he points out that system and lifeworld should not be seen as having a necessary correspondence with particular physical spaces. For example, that lifeworld is not limited to the private sphere of the home, or the public realm that of political discourse. Or, economic organisations, such as firms, should not be considered as lying only in the system, but should also be considered part of the lifeworld.

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