

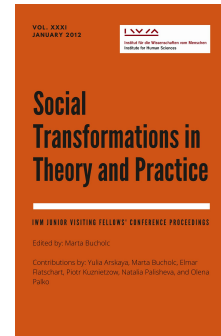
# Critical Dialectics for the Social Sciences: Towards a mediation of Critical Realism and Critical Theory

---

**Elmar Flatschart**

IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXI ©  
2012 by the author

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact the IWM.





In many ways, the 20th century was the age of applied science. The gradual shift towards a “knowledge society”[1] is not only noticeable in the realm of application, it is also pivotal in philosophy, namely the “linguistic turn” and the triumph of a logically sedimented empiricist analytical philosophy of science[2] I would interpret this success of a particularly “Anglo-Saxon” view on science as precise, ordered, logical as a broader movement, which is intrinsically connected to societal developments on a large scale and largely associated with questions of productive forces and their role in shaping the historical ways of thinking. Without being able to go deeper into this matter, I would argue, that it is just logical, that this success gradually affected not only the “precise” and natural sciences (where its origins lay), but also the social sciences. In this light, another important strand, the all too “continental” dialectical approach, became more and more subordinated as a theoretical fundament for social science and with the decline of “leftist philosophy”, mainly that of the Frankfurt School, it started to lose any recognition in scientific practice. In this article, I want to argue that this is a mistake, as it omits major problems in the analytical tradition just as it neglects certain virtues of critical dialectics, which considerably enhance critical social science as such. My basis for this argument will not be the analytical tradition itself, but an already broadened philosophy for the social sciences, Critical Realism. I will shortly present Critical Realism as an advanced, open-minded and in many ways succinct version of a scientifically oriented approach to philosophy, which perceives philosophy – just like the analytic tradition – as an “underlabourer and occasional midwife”[3] of science. I will then indicate the limits of this (and every) analytical approach in its lack of social-theoretical substantiality. Consequently, I shall argue for a vindicated appropriation of dialectics in the light of a simple logical form, that of “strict antinomies”, which not only helps to sharpen the definition of the problem from the perspective of analytical formal logics, but may also be seen as the starting point of a possible resolution. I will argue that this resolution is to be found in critical (social) theory in style of the Frankfurt School. The article will be concluded by remarks about its proper difficulties in terms of style and ability to connect to the more empirical scientific work and point to a possible solution in terms of the explicit denotation of the implied “real contradictions” (*Realwidersprüche*).

### **Abstraction and theory: A starting point in Political Science**

At the beginning of an essay on the importance of abstract ponderings over the role and necessity of philosophy of science and society, a more empirically oriented scholar might at once ask the question: why the entire buzz? The most succinct answer to this would be: because theory matters. It’s not only an issue of political philosophy proper, it pervades all science implicitly. Today’s Political Science often forgets this basic fact and treats theories more like methodologies, like instruments that can be simply “used”. While the deliberate

consolidation of theory and method might be an asset[4], it should be noted that the subject matter of social science prohibits an instrumentalist conflation of theory and method, as – other than in the natural sciences – (social) facts are never “at hands” in an immediate manner: Theorizing and development of concepts have a key role in ordinary research practice. The reason for our maintaining this is actually quite simple. To a large extent, the objects of social science are such social situations, relations, processes and structures that never appear as given facts or as something directly observable.[5]

This demarcates the crucial importance of theoretical conceptualisation in social science. Just as the social world is in the very actual largely based on concepts itself[6], sciences is comprised of qualified (hence scientific), abstract concepts. Good scientists are aware of their conceptual foundation and constantly work on its elaboration and expansion in scope. One will certainly find different levels of abstraction in theory, and not all scientists must “climb to the top”. Yet this level of substantial “metatheory” undoubtedly has its merits and is all too often forgotten in nowadays academic world. Also, it can become a necessary endpoint of a researcher’s pertinent strive for the “foundational mechanisms” of a subject matter. My research interest in political science was originally oriented towards social movements. I thus began with empirical questions on a micro level, but soon noticed, that this was too restricted. More theoretical questions like those after the distinction between the Political and the Economic or the Public and the Private seemed relevant and I soon started to realize, that there is a profound difficulty inherent in these questions, that doesn’t seem to allow “easy” (empirical) answers. In fact, it seemed as though some oppositions are rather aporetic in themselves, that’s to say, either answer seems abundantly unsatisfactory as one always feels obliged to accept that the exact contrary does at well have its justification. It is like with the chicken-egg paradox – which was first? The classical example for this is Social Science’s major question, whether Structure or Agency is to be seen as prior causal determinant. There seems to be an uncrossable line between those, that believe actual human agency to be primordial, as it is after all humans who are, e.g. “doing politics”, thereby producing social forms like the state and the other ones who are convinced that it is the pre-existence of social structures and their influence on actors that is to be given priority when it comes to understand our society or again, the political praxis of individuals. As distinguished from mere intellectual games like the chicken-egg paradox, these questions do matter, for they aim at the heart of scientific inquiry – causation and causal inference. This is also what dialectics is about – to find a middle ground between strictly opposed moments, but retain – pace postmodern approaches – a notion of causal efficacy and systemic stratification.

These questions are substantial ones in terms of applied Social Science, but they can also be viewed from a more epistemological perspective. For once, it can be argued that there is to be found a certain methodological bias with agency-centred accounts and structure-oriented studies alike: while focussing on agency does somewhat suggest a more qualitative, micro-focussed, interpretivist approach, putting structure in its places seems to be rooted in generalization, macro-focuses and empiricist positions. But this diffraction goes even further, as it is a major theme in the history of modern western philosophy. This can be roughly outlined with respect to a rationalist tradition of thought, that in

many ways resembles what is also known as “idealism” on the one side; and on the other an empiricist tradition, highlighting a notion of impressions as source of knowledge and of material causes of our ideas. To name it, is Descartes against Hume.

Now there have been many attempts to overcome the strict division, most famously and explicitly Kant’s, who saw the problem quite clearly[7]. But in terms of the real practices of modern science, his results are unsatisfactory – the concept of a priori synthetic categories is a one-sided solution to the problem, as it focuses unduly on the individual’s capacity to attain knowledge and leaves the material, i.e. societal, conditions of knowledge production aside. It does, at last, stick to a Cartesian heritage rather than taking up the challenge of Humean scepticism, when it comes to innate ideas. The Kantian transcendental question is therefore a purely epistemological one, omitting questions of the reality, which can be seen as necessary condition of human knowledge. This is not only important in the natural sciences, which is (at least implicitly) founded on a non-anthropocentric world, that in principle, might as well work without human interference (be it “practical” or “intellectual”). It can also be shown to be an essential feature of the Humanities, insofar as society and historical structures have to be taken into account. Surprisingly, transcendental questions to how our very reality has to be shaped to permit scientific knowledge are seldom found in Western Philosophy. Critical Realism tries to fill this gap and I will now shortly present its insights for social science.

### **Critical Realism: Putting Ontology in its Place**

The Philosophy of Critical Realism is heavily influenced by the works of Roy Bhaskar (building on his two classical books[8]), but has since its origins in the 1970s developed into a widespread strand of thought, influencing both philosophical and applied scientific ventures. It is in many ways seeking a mediation between the poles of empiricism and idealism, but sticks to the specific tradition of “scientism”, which has already been mentioned as pertaining to the Anglo-Saxon model of philosophy (of science).

Bhaskar’s main point of argumentation is, that the concept of Ontology, that is, the question of “how the world is”, has to be revindicated, complementing and in many ways preceding questions of what we can know about it (i.e. epistemology). „Thus whereas transcendental realism asks explicitly what the world must be like for science to be possible, classical philosophy asked merely what science would have to be like for the knowledge it yielded to be justified[.]”[9]

He hence argues that one cannot get away without ontology: a pre-existing context, a notion of reality is crucial for every act of knowledge production to take place. Focusing on Ontology, Critical Realism is therefore going beyond a sole conjecture, that there has to be *some* reality, it explicitly maintains that the world has to have a certain structure for knowledge to be possible. For the natural sciences, this is extensively discussed by taking the example of the scientific experiment. From its properties, it is inferred, that the world must be structured, stratified and consisting of transfactually working mechanisms that are complexly interwoven and merely actualise themselves in events. Again, events don’t

have to be perceived to take place, that's why the empirical is an even smaller dimension of reality as understood by Critical Realism. These three domains of reality can be graphically depicted in the following table:

*Table 1: Stratified Reality*

	Real	Actual	Empirical
Mechanisms	?		
Events	?	?	
Experiences	?	?	?

They are not normally “in phase” and it is just the artificial “closure” taking place in experiments that enables us to infer from the distilled working of one mechanism to its real function in the open system of reality. Science thus cannot be understood as an addition of atomised thoughts, it is rather to be seen as a social process, namely that of “social production of knowledge by means of knowledge”[10]. Again, this knowledge must always be of something, an ontological object of knowledge. Such a corollary in many ways moderates the problem of a radical split, as an ontological realism (there is a world out there, which really exists) and an epistemological relativism (knowledge of this world is always dependent on “social production of knowledge” and thus spatio-historically relative) are dovetailed.

Implicit in this assumption is a model of inference, which is closely linked to an ontological version of the transcendental question named “Retroduction”. Retroduction bends the formal binary of induction/empirical moment and deduction/ratio-formalistic moment by putting theoretical abstraction in its causal place. By means of counterfactual thinking, social experiments, studies of pathological and extreme cases and comparative case studies, the researcher infers from the (empirical) phenomena at hand to their transfactual conditions. The typical question would be as such: “What properties must exist for X to exist and to be what X is?”[11] Hence, the main thought procedure is not the search for prima facie logical coherence but the aim of consistent models of theoretical abstraction.

One might now toss in, that this all may work for the natural sciences but brings some problems for the social sciences, as there is hardly any way to produce significant experiments and meaning in the Humanities after all is socially co-determined, as the object of knowledge is at the same time part of the subject's knowledge production and in turn affecting or changing the very object. While the first problem mainly concerns the empirical social sciences, the second one, also prominent in what is called the “double hermeneutics”[12], is key problem of the idealist and subject focussed social sciences. In turn, this might again be seen as an example of the abovementioned aporetic contradiction. It may appear as if one still has to decide either for an epistemology that fosters a view of society akin to an empiricist ontology, a world of “solid structures” (positivism); or for a more relativist epistemology, suggesting e.g. an ontology of reality

shaped by language (hermeneutics). Critical Realism wants to stand between these opposites and upholds the transcendental question as to “what properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us” [13]. It thus focuses on the structure-agency problem in terms of a realist account of the very separation: “That is to say, I must show not only that in explanations in the domain of the human sciences social (and psychological) predicates are irreducible (which is consistent with a transcendental idealist interpretation of their status), but that a realistic interpretation of social scientific (and psychological) theory is in principle acceptable; that is, that some possible objects designated by social scientific (and psychological) theory are real.”[14]

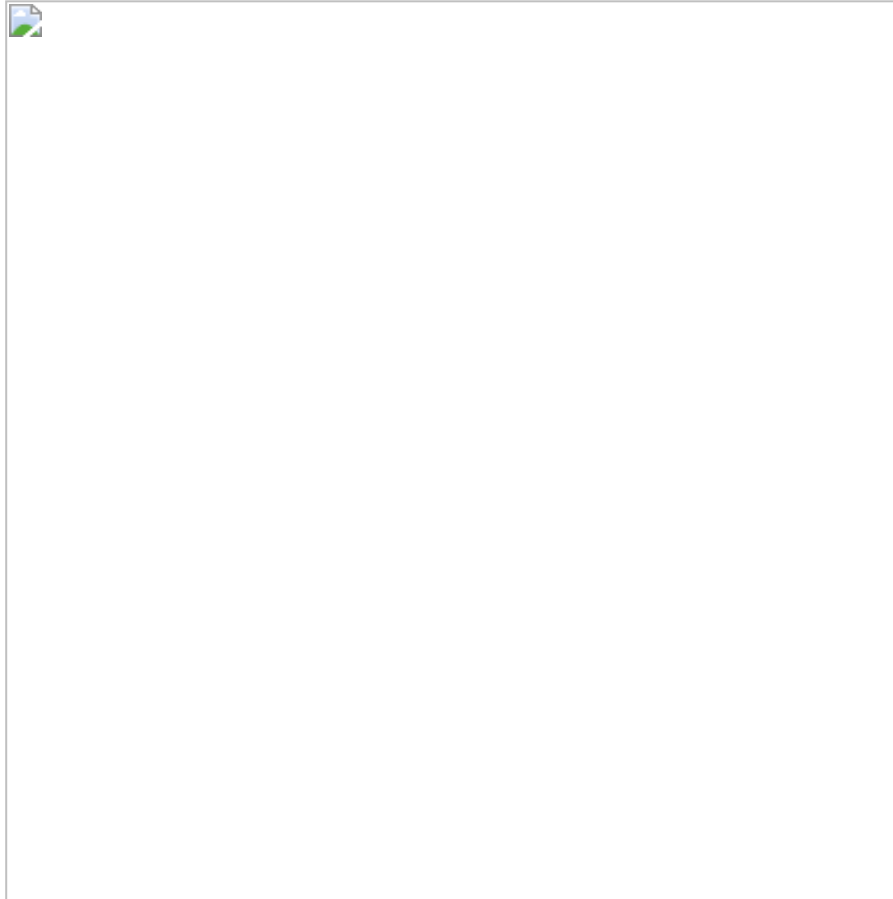
Now this opposition between “social” and “psychological” might seem a little awkward, but it can be seen as a preliminary to what Bhaskar calls a “Critical Naturalism”. The neologism stands for the combination of traits, which are usually subsumed under categories of the social (“critique”) and mechanisms, which are often reduced to the natural (psychology). As a result, it stands for no less than the abandonment of a strict division between the social and natural sciences. A Critical Realist agrees with *Positivism*, that there are causal laws and generalities at work in social life. S/He disagrees when it comes to their reduction to empirical regularities. Social science can therefore never be predictive and always has to be self-reflexive in its explanatory effort. The Critical Realist stands with the *Hermeneutics* to the point that the social sciences deal with a pre-interpreted reality, brought to concepts by social actors. But it doesn’t accept the hermeneutical reduction of social science to mere conceptualism and instead argues for the existence of real structures and mechanisms.

While this stance for itself already seems to be an epistemological asset, the crucial and most difficult issue obviously is ontological, namely to determine the parameters of the alleged “social ontology”. This in fact is the pivot point for any realist approach to objects of social science, as the cornerstone-definitions of society not only define the object itself, but in the long run also influence the situated subjects and thus (scientific) knowledge. CR’s proposition is a generalized and abstract one: it is held, that society as social *sui generis* reality is relatively autonomous and temporally pre-existent towards actual activities[15]. This sounds like a structuralist position. But according to Bhaskar, it is equally true, that human intentional agency is crucial for the social forms (as opposed to the natural). The outcome of this dual argumentation is the *Transformational Model of Social Activity* (TMSA), which tries to bring together both sides. “On this model, then, society is at once the ever-present *condition* and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency: this is the duality of structure. And human agency is both typically work (generically conceived), i.e. normally conscious production, and reproduction of the conditions of production, including society: this is the duality of praxis.”[16]

Bhaskar embraces a “double duality” of structure and agency, interweaving the two of them. Yet, he does still not answer the question to what actually links both, finitely mediating the unsatisfying dichotomy. He further elaborates his view by highlighting the importance of social relations as a key to this problem. The much sought “point of contact” is to be found in a “position-practice system” that determines societal

structuration. „Such a point, linking action to structure, must *both* endure and be immediately occupied by individuals. It is clear that the mediating system we need is that of the *positions* (places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc.) occupied (filled, assumed, enacted etc.) by individuals, and the *practices* (activities, etc.) in which, in virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and vice versa), they engage”[17]

Table 2 : Social Cube (Bhaskar 2009, p. 130)



This firmly confronts atomism and holism and shapes a social ontology of a relational whole, that, combined with the afore mentioned account of structure as “ever present condition” of agency, results in a relational depth-ontology of society, that tries to open up an all too static perspective by taking into account (a) different strata and (b) the time-space-dependence of social ontology. This can be graphically exemplified by the “social cube”:

Even though this model seems very sophisticated and multi-dimensional, two problems are striking: firstly, and most general, the splitting between social structures and human agency is yet not suspended; there is no determination of the actual *principle of mediation*. Secondly, the predominance of structure is further corroborated, up to the point of a seeming conflation of “Society” and “Social Structures”. This not only is a logical disjointedness, as society is (usually) the more abstract definition for the whole, social structure being one feature of that totality; It is also ad odds with Bhaskars own prior definition, that at least boasts 3 dimensions of society: “`Society’ itself may be conceived

in a number of ways: as (i) the totality of social forms; or, more narrowly, (ii) the totality of social structures or generative mechanisms; or, more narrowly still, (as above) (iii) the totality of human relations within which praxis occurs;”[18]

The incoherence is obvious in the definition of (ii). But this threefold conception is itself no less unclear, as it states that a hierarchy of “totalities” can at the same time be called “society”. How are we to make sense of this? I think we aren’t. I would argue that Bhaskars failure to satisfactorily deal with this most general stratum of social theory is founded in his reluctance to apply a truly dialectic approach. While all what we have just heard is implicitly dialectical, insofar as the major problem of the subject-object dichotomy is dealt with in a congenial way, dialectics are not treated as such. This goes hand in hand with a philosophical theoreticism, that extracts problems of social ontology all too much from their substantial, hence socio-theoretical discussion. Critical Realism upholds that all questions of social science must be reducible to philosophical ones insofar as their foundation is a framework of abstract models. While this is a most succinct approach, which in fact elucidates patterns implicit in all (good) scientific inquiry, this doesn’t provide a means of dealing with society. To the contrary, problems of social ontology are remaining purely abstract, forming a super-historical grid of more or less fixed socio-ontological preliminaries. These preliminaries are important for uncovering certain basic guidelines of social scientific practice in the form of analytical binary systems that are related in a topological way. Yet, this thinking has its limits when it comes to ascertain a “dimension of the ground”, the metatheoretical basis for materialist approaches to the social sciences. In many ways, social science builds on a “historically specific ontology”, which has to be grasped in terms of an integral “Theory of Society” (*Gesellschaftstheorie*). So peculiarly, CR’s sole focus on purely abstract models, so to speak a “general social ontology”, is at odds with its most eminent stronghold, the argument for ontology itself: when it comes to actually *name* the way in which individuals and structures (and also individuals and structures among themselves) are linked and shaped on the deepest level of an ontological argumentation, one is confronted with a void.

We thus have to talk about society itself in terms of theory of society, abandoning the possibility of an ultimate retroduction to the purely philosophical. Now this obviously can’t be done in a merely internal way, by means of “normal”, analytical social science. There has to be something external, a nameable something, to maintain such a viewpoint. But this externality mustn’t be an abstract, totally philosophical one, for otherwise we run into the problem of an infinite regress, as one could ask for the ground of the ground and so on. Dialectics offers a way to shift this problem’s shape and deal with it in a way which transcends the limits of formal logic, thereby bending the problem of society-as-totality into a new dimension of illustration that focuses on the inherent contradiction itself.

### **“Strict antinomies” and the frontiers of epistemology**

As it might not have become totally clear what this has to do with dialectics, I will now try to narrow it down to its very basic scheme. This will also give leads for a possible applicability in the social sciences, substantiating concepts that have already been worked out by critical realism. Contrary to Critical Realism, I will for now abstain from a complex



model of ontology, which might be termed “metaphysical”. I will return to the very basic of all analytical science and approach this problem from a purely *epistemological* stance[19], just in order to build the fundamentals of a substantial ontology in terms of Theory of Society.

At the core of formal logics we find the scheme of syllogism as the most instructive model of coherent argumentation. A possible example would be:

Table 3: Syllogism

I.	All Cretans are humans.	M ? P	<i>major premise</i>
II.	Elmar is a Cretan.	S ? M	<i>minor premise</i>
III.	Elmar is a human.	S ? P	<i>conclusion</i>

Analytically, the syllogism is the most simple and still customary procedure of propositional logic. Yet it is still a form of argumentation and as such in principal an expression of language. We can analyse it in terms of the three dimensions of language:

Table 4: 3 Dimensions of Language

I.	<i>Syntactic</i>	The dimension of the formal connection of signs
II.	<i>Semantics</i>	The dimension of meaning of signs
III.	<i>Pragmatics</i>	The dimension of the (implicit) social effect/presupposition of signs

The syllogism and with it the whole of formal logics focuses on syntactical aspects, striving for coherence that can in principle abstract from all semantic issues – it doesn’t matter what we talk about, it just matters *how* we do it. The effect of absolute persuasive efficacy of this scheme could be viewed as its pragmatic moment. Formal logic and with it the general epistemology of most (analytical) scientific approaches will usually not go beyond this basic scheme. Systematically, one could say that we find Deduction (III.) and Induction (II.) encompassed in the syllogism and it can thus also be viewed as an abstractified illustration of what happens in science. The process of coherent inference is put into a formal logical guise so as to analyse it in terms of basic laws of (linguistically and formally correct) reasoning. It is clearly marked what can and cannot be said and therefore truth and scientific objectivity seem to be once and for all established. This was also a main aspiration of 20 th century analytical philosophy and its “linguistic turn”.

The problem with this approach is not only the purely epistemological orientation, which can, with Critical Realism, be accused of omitting problems of ontology. It can also be shown, that it is itself not totally coherent by its own standards. The backbone of logical reasoning as exemplified in the syllogism is the assertion that any proposition is either true or not true. In the abovementioned example, Elmar has to be either a Cretan or not. It is a syntactical necessity to not accept the contradiction that would arise, if there were a third position, “*tertium non datur*”.

But there are special cases that make it impossible to hold this law of non-contradictoriness. Very famous is the so called “Cretan paradox”, which arises when we assume the following constellation:

Elmar, who is, as we have learned above, a Cretan makes the statement:

*“All Cretans are liars.”*

This simple proposition is syntactically correct, as there is no logical inconsistency. Semantically, we are not faced with any problems at first; it might be intelligible, that all Cretans are in fact liars. But when we take into account the specific pragmatic stance that Elmar is a part of the semantic content (Cretan) and thus referring to himself, we have a problem. The difficulty becomes even clearer, when we narrow this sentence down to its basic form:

Elmar makes the statement: *“This proposition is wrong.”*

When we view this proposition we have can (and have to) take two standpoints.

Position A (Proposition A):	X is true
<hr/>	
Position $\neg$ A (Proposition non-A):	X is not true (wrong)

The sentence above implies that *both* positions are equally true. In a peculiar way, syntactical, semantic and pragmatic dimensions seem to be merged into one whole, which is itself permanently producing a binary version of purely syntactical oppositions. One has to constantly jump from one position to the other but there is no end to the problem, no analytical closure as in syllogistic inference. So the syntactical level doesn't suffice. This is so because the proposition's semantic potential collides with the pragmatic criteria of every proposition, namely that it has to be true. I cannot pragmatically assert that a singular speech-act is itself “wrong” – I always convey the social message “what I say is true”. Every single proposition presupposes the pragmatic meta-proposition “this proposition is true”. This again cannot be dissolved out of its pragmatic stance, as it leads to an infinite regress of questions for the truth of each consecutive proposition.

Such kinds of constellations have been termed “strict antinomies” and boast four major qualities, which are linked intrinsically and circularly:

### **I. Self-Reference**

Taking the example of me being a Cretan and stating that all Cretans lie, it is evident, that I talk about myself. Autological assumptions don't have to be contradictory, as in the proposition “This proposition is true”. This brings us to the next condition for the existence of a strict antinomy.

### **II. Negation**

It is therefore necessary that the proposition is not also self-referential but also negative. Again, negative assertions are not themselves a problem, but combined with reflexivity they are.

### III. Contradiction-as-implication

We are thus faced with two contradictory propositions, which are not only equally true, but also imply each other. Simple contradictions like “This Creatan is not a Creatan” are no antinomies, for they are easily deciphered as nonsense. Also, reciprocal implication is no anomaly but rather logical normality. But when contradiction and implication come together, we arrive at the classical setting of strict antinomies: it is not possible to analytically separate one side from the other and so we are forced to constantly switch between them.

### IV. Processuality

We are thus faced with a logical proposition (which implies closure and separation of each possible assertion) that paradoxically only “functions”, when we think it in the constant process of changing sides. We cannot stop that process on one side without losing logical coherence (each proposition has to be true or not true), but in the course of putting the process itself in the foreground we lose grip of the basic logical assumption that there cannot be a third between two strict opposites.

Now why do these abstract antinomies matter for social science? Aren't they purely linguistic problems that should be dealt with in a linguistic way? It's my conviction that they are not; to the contrary, they can be seen as *symptomatic* for the problem of reference that has already been mentioned in connection with ontology. Viz., strict antinomies are not just odd exceptions; they formulate the very basis of the subject-object dichotomy and its contradictions and have as such determined the course of modern western philosophy. The contention can be seen as a major evidence for the necessity of substantial ontology and the impossibility of a purely epistemological standpoint, as it points to the always present social context, which arises in the pragmatical dimension. This can be learned also from (post-modern) studies of the performative nature of discourse – for example Watzlawick's axiom that we “cannot not communicate”[20]. Hence, the problem of strict-antinomies stands archetypically for a specific social nature of communication. From an ontological perspective, the problem can be shown to be in fact purely social, as self-reference doesn't happen when we deal with natural reality, but becomes vibrant as we speak about the social reality in the social form of language. Yet it is not possible to simply stick too pragmatics, as the “performative dimension” of language, like postmodernist accounts claim: pragmatics and semantics (and in the last instance also syntactic issues) eventually go together, as the strict antinomy demonstrates quite cogently.

When we look closer we can decipher major problems of social science in patterns of the strict antinomy. Self-reference brings us to the question of autopoiesis and the nature of social structures. Negation can be read with reference to the relativity of social utterance, insofar it always is actual and individuated, but related to a bigger social hole. The

dimension of contradiction-as-implication at last points to the non-closed nature of social systems and the constant procedural domain that shapes society. Thinking in “determined contradictions” (*bestimmte Widersprüche*) may thus be seen to be at the core of social theory.

At the end, we have to arrive at a position that combines the ontological problem – that is (in social science) the concern of naming society-as-totality – and the epistemological problem – namely the insufficiency of formal logical language and method to grasp the realm of the social sufficiently. Such a position is forced to take into account the dialectical contradictoriness of society and knowledge of it as such. Framing society thus necessitates a search for the social form-logics that constitute the recurrent actualisation of contradictions that are shaped in the way of “strict antinomies”.

### **Real contradictions: A societal-theoretical Framework for the social sciences**

These contradictions have to be seen as “real contradictions” which are as such substantiated in our everyday social world and therefore reach into the scientific view on the social. This leads to the assumption that basic heuristical problems reflect a set of real social contradictions, which can, from a normative perspective, as well be viewed as problems of the main formational laws of this very society. This critical dialectical approach has been source of many mainly (Neo-) Marxist accounts of society. An important reference certainly is the Frankfurt School and its critique of “identity logic”. To conclude this paper, I will now shortly outline strenghts and problems of a particularly Adornian approaches to the inherent contradictoriness of society. This will open the doors for a perspective that seeks to combine abstract theory of society and social-scientific research as grounded on Critical Realism.

Adorno’s theoretical Approach is termed “Negative Dialectics”. This is mainly a mark of distinction against the predominant tradition of modern dialectics, the Hegelian idealist dialectic that strives to sublimate contradictions in an ideational identity principle, the “*Weltgeist*”. This can be seen as an ultimately “positive” dialectics, which affirms central features of society insofar as they are subsumed into the “spirit”. Hegel eventually asserts that the “whole is the truth”. Adorno would vote for the opposite – with a vague and basic normative conception in mind, he asserts the essentially coercive and restraining character of modern capitalist society. In his many studies on culture, aesthetics, education and broader tendencies of societal development in light of the “dialectics of illumination” he develops a theory of society that is negative in its approach to an overwhelmingly intrusive totality of a certain mode of socialisation. As such, negativity is in a way a double concept, as it is not only affirms the immanent negativity of society itself but also fosters a negative approach that abstains from seeking for a final immanent sublation.

This argumentation builds on an epistemological approach to the modern subject-object relationship and identifies this very relation with an alleged historical social ontology, a negative “objectivity”. While Adorno is highly hostile towards formalised theory-construction, his essayist style still secrets a certain “depth logic”, which is in line with the above developed conception of dialectical contradictions as “strict antinomies”. In the

essay “Subject and Object”[21] he posits the object, as a matter of fact, society, as “preponderant”. That is to say, the object is in a specific way prior in relation to the subject (understood as both “acting” and “comprehending” instance): the relation of both is ordered in line of an “identity-logic”, which is the fundamental “principium synthesis”. This is rooted in a rationality of the market and the principle of exchange of equivalents.

“Das Tauschprinzip, die Reduktion menschlicher Arbeit auf den abstrakten Allgemeinheitsbegriff der durchschnittlichen Arbeitszeit, ist urverwandt mit dem Identifikationsprinzip. Am Tausch hat es sein gesellschaftliches Modell, und er wäre nicht ohne es; durch ihn werden nichtidentische Einzelwesen und Leistungen kommensurabel, identisch. Die Ausbreitung des Prinzips verhält die ganze Welt zum Identischen, zur Totalität.“[22]

As such, everything and everybody becomes more and more subjected to the logic of identity, which is in a way “between” the subject and its object. This logic can be understood as strict antinomian, because the specific mode, which shapes the (essentially socio-ontological) dichotomy of subject and object, exhibits a certain reciprocal functionality external to human affairs understood as categorically transparent and self-determined. So the predominant mediation of the opposites in modern, capitalist society has a double tendency: on the one hand, it produces a strict, binary opposition that seems irreconcilable. On the other hand, there exists a forceful yet unconscious logic of identity, this “principium synthesis”, which brings the opposites together. This explains the unexpectedly firm solidity that distinguishes capitalist society despite of all its inherent contradictions. So it is the very nature of “real contradictions”, which are not only seemingly “natural”, but in fact constitute a real, yet socially made “second nature”. The so defined second nature of the identity of commodities is real, yet not real, as it is a social construct that exhibits all traits of naturalness. It is the ultimate form of a societal framework, which is not consciously controlled by mankind but itself shapes social structures and agency on a deep level of social cohesion. This deep ontology of an inherent dialectical contradictoriness is best attainable by an approximation that has the model of the strict antinomy in mind, just because the contradictions are “real” and “necessary”.

„Daß im Übrigen die Konzeption von der Widersprüchlichkeit der gesellschaftlichen Realität deren Erkenntnis nicht sabotiert und dem Zufall ausliefert, liegt in der Möglichkeit, noch den Widerspruch als notwendig zu begreifen und damit Rationalität auf ihn auszudehnen.“[23]

I read Adorno’s extension of rationality towards the necessary contradictions as a constant process of tangential convergence, which cannot be closed as such, but in itself produces a more and more sophisticated framework to understand the relation of ontological and epistemological problems as (historical) process of the (re-)constitution of society as totality. This process is one of real contradictions that arise out of the sedimented contradictoriness of modern society. In many ways, this deep and “mystical” contradictoriness is also what Marx wanted to point at in his notion of an underlying “Fetishism”, which is firmly inscribed in all economic categories[24]. Now, Adorno goes further than Marx in acknowledging the importance of culture, as in the works on culture

industry and the “authoritarian character”. He thus elaborates an approach that expands the original economic perspective of Marx. But while this is clearly an asset, he can also be criticized for the way he makes this move: He exhibits an idiosyncratic type of essayism that is in many ways hostile to scientific theory construction as above exemplified by Critical Realism. His assertions are often vague and tend to be tentative rather than explanatory. This can also be said for his theoretical elaboration of the exchange-principle as logic of identity: while his expansion of scope is clearly laudable, his treatment of modern Fetishism is imprecise and lacks the theoretical clarity of Marx’ Critique of Political Economy. This is especially evident when he declares the exchange-principle to be an ever-present entity of all (civilised) society and traces it back to the ancient Greeks[25]. Such a view misses the *differencia specifica* of modern Capitalism, namely its founding on production, not circulation. Value is produced as surplus-value in the labor-process and not in the act of barter; therefore the identity logic cannot only be attached to exchanging goods but must also be at the heart of value production as “abstract labour”. Such a critique has recently been developed by the German “Neue Marx Lektüre”[26] and is certainly an important fulcrum for a scientific convertibility of abstract Theory of Society. This integral dialectical approach would seek to combine the necessity of formal scientific argument and topological theory-modelling, as indicated by Critical Realism and its immanent restrictions, which stem from the problem of a society that is shaped by “real contradictions”, akin to the formal ones of the strict antinomy. It would thus seek a reconciliation between dialectical and formal logics; and it would keep in mind the need for a separation of ontology and epistemology and at the same time reaffirm its combination in a kind of “determined retroduction”, which would – much like Critical Realism’s retroductive inference – point to the necessary mediation of empirical research and the “negative ontology” of capitalist “real contradictions”.

---

**Elmar Flatschart** studied Political Science and International Development in Vienna. In 2010, he received a DOC-Stipend of the Austrian Academy of Science and is currently writing on his PhD thesis, which compares contemporary neomarxist and feminist approaches to the state. His main fields of interest are political philosophy, critical theory and philosophy of science.

---

Notes:

1. Nico Stehr, *Knowledge Societies* (London: Sage, 1994).
2. P.M.S. Hacker, “Analytical philosophy: What, whence, and whither?,” in *The Story of Analytical Philosophy. Plot and Heroes*, ed. Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar (London: Routledge 1998), 20-40.
3. Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality* (London: Verso, 1989), 182.
4. Berth Danermark et al., *Explaining Society. Critical realism in the social sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 115.
5. *ibid.*, 117.

6. *ibid.*, 35.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Paderborn: Voltmedia 1787), 43.

8. Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (London/New York: Routledge 1998);  
———, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: Verso, 2009).

9. ———, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 2008), 43.

10. *Ibid.*, 185.

11. Danermark et al., *Explaining Society. Critical realism in the social sciences*: 97. .

12. Anthony Giddens, *The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1997), 374.

13. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*: 13.

14. *Ibid.*, 14.

15. ———, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*: 122.

16. *Ibid.*, 123.

17. ———, *The Possibility of Naturalism*: 40f.

18. ———, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*: 129.

19. The following part owes its basic outline to the very instructive elaborations of Jürgen Ritsert and Heiko Knoll, *Das Prinzip der Dialektik* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006). As its content is comprised of basic logical assumptions, I have only cited non-generalised passages and reproduced it in my own selective fashion. Nonetheless, this reproductive effort is meagre compared to the original work.

20. Paul Watzlawick, “Some Tentative Axioms of Communication.,” in *Pragmatics of Human Communication – A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes.*, ed. Paul ; Beavin-Bavelas Watzlawick, Janet ; Jackson, Don D. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 48ff.

21. Theodor W. Adorno, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003).

22. ———, “Negative Dialektik,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M. : Suhrkamp, 2003b), 149.

23. Theodor W Adorno, “Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften,” in *Ausätze zur Gesellschaftstheorie und Methodologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 113.

24. Marx talked not only about commodity fetishism, but also names a money fetish and an overarching capital fetish.

25. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Exkurs I: Odysseus oder Mythos und Aufklärung,” in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984).

26. Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform. Untersuchungen zur marxschen Ökonomiekritik* (Freiburg: ca ira, 1997); Ingo Elbe, *Marx im Westen. Die neue Marx-Lektüre in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2008); Helmut Reichelt, *Neue Marx-Lektüre. Zur Kritik sozialwissenschaftlicher Logik* (Hamburg: VSA, 2008).

---

*Preferred citation:* Flatschart, Elmar. 2012. Critical Dialectics for the Social Sciences: Towards a mediation of Critical Realism and Critical Theory. In: Social Transformations in Theory and Practice, ed. M. Bucholc, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conferences, Vol. 31.