

Economics and Reality

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Tony Lawson, *Economics and Reality*, Routledge: New York and London, 1997, pp.364 (pbk)

Does economics deserve any respect, even that of a book length critique? Judging by the sins committed in its name since the age of Smith and Ricardo, I would personally think not. However, Tony Lawson thinks otherwise - and hence a book aimed at redressing the ills of economics with moderate (his is a generous temperament) doses of 'realism', a specific take on the nature of being rendered by the genius of Roy Bhaskar. To my prejudiced mind, this is taking economics far too seriously, not as an instrumentalist ideology, and a political program that bids fair today to overrun the world, but as a faulty science that can somehow be set right if only we get the method right; there may be some academic virtue, in the dullest sense of that term, in such a project, but little, if any, realist, i.e. practical, virtue. Still, if the deck chairs on the Titanic need rearrangement, I doubt one can find a better, more painstaking organiser than Tony; let me stress this point: *I recommend this book strongly to anyone who takes economics seriously*: in the realm of method, but only as defined in standard economic discourse, it is not feasible to improve on the realist framework. Tony is cautious, modest and meticulously scrupulous - there's at least a page and a half on every conceivable topic in methodology - in setting out the realist case for a 'science' free of the sins of the mainstream. Indeed were the contest to be an open one, in front of an impartial jury, between a neoclassical and realist preconceptions of economic science, Tony could make off with a Pulitzer, hands down. His work is lucid (in thankful contrast to his mentor, Bhaskar), patient, reasonable, and non-abrasive. This is realist pedagogy at its best: for the aficionado of critical realist methodology, this is the complete text.

But, all is not quite gas and gaiters. For one thing, the admonition to treat society as an open system, to intellectually appreciate the stratified nature of reality, the contextual nature of social action, and the primacy of (qualitative) social relations (the principal theses of critical realism), despite (or is it because of) their utility, will fall on deaf ears (the neoclassicals being too busy laughing all the way to the bank) as have a hundred years of Marxian, and other radical, criticisms (realism is a sophisticated update of Marxism, but only in the domain of philosophy); for another, Tony accepts various ideological concepts such as 'science' and the legitimacy of an academic discipline called 'economics' at face value. To believe that getting the method right is to offer us the possibility of human and scientific redemption (by means, no less, of a transformed economics!) is at best naive, and at worst bizarre: *knowledge is an art, wisdom an insight, and 'method' a mere meretricious artifice*. To take on the extra heavy baggage of realism merely to qualify for the exalted post of underlaborer for science is distressingly close to inviting ridicule; at least Marxists of

yesteryear claimed to be digging graves (horrible as the metaphor is) for the bourgeois order not moonlighting as underlaborers for an elite project that privileges only a few amongst the establishment. The errors of neoclassicism, such as they are, are not methodological but profoundly strategic: i.e. ideological and political. The ruling class makes methodological errors, but only in its own favor: contra Tony, there is method to their madness. Strikingly, a philosophy that claims to be set at emancipation is astonishingly apolitical in its principal thesis. There is, implicit in the realist imagination, what I term a brahmin view of science as a lofty discourse of the gods free of malice and prejudice and the nasty business of everyday struggles for hegemony, control and repression. Does Tony know of Ricardian and Malthusian involvements in policy and politics (Kanth, 1986) to see for himself how these affected their makeshift, catch-as-catch-can 'science' and 'methodology' (i.e., for the mainstream, 'methodology' is only a feint, a ruse, and a cover)? Was Friedman simply getting the method wrong when he sanctioned the rule of the Chicago boys in Chile. Let's get real.

Such a positive, purist view of science, simply cannot sustain a meaningful account of the politics of paradigm shift, as Feyerabend once showed to stunning effect. Getting the science right is an effete endeavour in social science; getting the praxis right is a whole lot more prior and far reaching (and no, science is not the precondition for the latter, indeed real knowledge arises through engagement not 'reflection'; theory is simply another name for a practice that is/has been comprehended more generally). The social world is a realm of values, and science, in one view, is a far lower order value in relation to say, freedom, mercy, charity or compassion - and there is no Archimedean standpoint from which one can pontify the rules of science, or its specific ranking at the apex of such values. The 'real' problem is the modesty of the task Tony sets for himself: he is an economist, so economics becomes a legitimate cosmos to be investigated. This is to accept epistemic delusions to be ontic truths: there is no capitalist economics that is not pure ideology, fetishism, and rationalisation. Marx didn't find it necessary to write separate treatises on politics, sociology and psychology - of the social formation he abhorred; enough to specify the regime of capital to establish the contours of these various sites of praxis. What passes for the world view of the economist is an aliquot part of the eurocapitalist weltanschaaung embracing values of rationalism, materialism and a speciously self-serving ideology of progress: a critique of even a sub-part such as 'economics' needs to begin with an examination of these undergirdings of the project of enlightenment based modernist science, itself part of the philosophical outlook engendered by a specific combination of calvinism and capitalism interlarded with racism, sexism, elitism and anthropocentrism (matters that are not, in inspiration, methodological: see, Kanth, 1997)). I invite Tony to stop defining himself as an 'economist' (what a stultifyingly hideous caricature of a free human being!!) - and to cease naturalising social actions, and their study - and start to ponder the interconnected oppression of the capitalist world around him with non-specialised, ordinary, even humble eyes - *from, perhaps, the vantage point of the weak and the hapless*, so as to free them from the generalised serfdom that is our modernist lot. A free society of self-directed humans would have no need for social science, least of all economics (not even of the realist kind), though it would recognise that even parasites of that sorry, misanthropic ilk have a right to exist and flourish. In a human society, freedom is the repudiation of necessity, not its capitulative recognition.

Men in patriarchy are inherently law givers, and Tony is proposing, but unwittingly, a new regime to rule over the scientific kingdom; as such, realism is not the pedagogy of the oppressed, but the litany of dedicated intellectual revolutionaries - and the victims of the sciences need to take heed: women, minorities, the poor, the weak, workers and the like have little to gain from another world order of European provenance (it is not your friendly neighborhood science, nor scientists, that comes/came to the aid of the peasants of Vietnam, the Afro-Americans and Chicanos in the ghettos of LA, nor women on the streets come nightfall virtually anywhere in this world when they come/came to grief). They might consider it well to offer passionate resistance to realism as with any ism that will ultimately ride on their backs to an effete, quite meaningless glory. Realism was not commissioned on their behest; it will not work on their behalf; it will not lighten their burden, nor warm their lives. It is as arid, sullen, drab and cheerless as the grim prison the European has built in the name of capitalism and freedom. Not analysis, but empathy; not science, but caring: we need to (autonomously) reclaim reality, not objectify it. *Contra the theses of realism, science, let alone economics, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for human emancipation.*

References

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- Kanth, R. *Breaking With the Enlightenment*, Humanities, NJ: Atlantic Highlands, 1997.