

New Horizons for Critical-emancipatory Educational Research: the Contributions of Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism*

[English Version]

Nuevos horizontes para la investigación educativo crítico-emancipatoria: aportes del realismo crítico de Roy Bhaskar

Novos horizontes para a pesquisa em educação crítica-emancipatória: as contribuições do realismo crítico de Roy Bhaskar

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Abstract

Objective: The following text shows the potential contributions offered by critical realism when it comes to generating an educational research structure that allows bringing to light knowledge that traditional educational research fails to show. **Methodology:** To do this, the following text reflects theoretically on how the study and analysis of social inclusion and anti-poverty programs existing in advanced Western societies could be approached through the analytical prism of critical realism. **Results:** Thus, from the analytical tools of critical realism, the limitations of these programs will be shown, both in their basic foundations and in their educational proposals for training for employability. **Conclusions:** Based on such limitations, alternative paths can be indicated in order to achieve a fairer society, among others the proposal for a

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universal basic income.

Key words: Critical Realism; Critical Education; Social Inclusion; Critical Educational Research; Marxism.

Resumen

Objetivo: el siguiente texto muestra los potenciales aportes que ofrece el realismo crítico a la hora de generar una estructura de investigación educativa que permita sacar a la luz conocimientos que la investigación educativa tradicional no logra mostrar.

Metodología: para ello, el siguiente texto reflexiona teóricamente sobre cómo podría abordarse el estudio y análisis de los programas de inclusión social y antipobreza existentes en las sociedades occidentales avanzadas a través del prisma analítico del realismo crítico. **Resultados:** así, desde las herramientas analíticas del realismo crítico, se mostrarán las limitaciones y carencias de estos programas, tanto en sus fundamentos básicos como en sus propuestas educativas de formación para la empleabilidad.

Conclusiones: a partir de tales limitaciones, se pueden señalar caminos alternativos para lograr una sociedad más justa, entre otros la propuesta de una renta básica universal.

Palabras clave: Realismo crítico; educación crítica; inclusión social; investigación educativa crítica; Marxismo.

Resumo

Objetivo: o texto a seguir mostra as contribuições potenciais oferecidas pelo realismo crítico quando se trata de gerar uma estrutura para a pesquisa educacional que traga à tona o conhecimento que a pesquisa educacional tradicional não consegue mostrar.

Metodologia: para esse fim, o texto a seguir reflete teoricamente sobre como o estudo e a análise dos programas de inclusão social e combate à pobreza existente nas sociedades ocidentais avançadas poderiam ser abordados pelo prisma analítico do realismo crítico. **Resultados:** assim, a partir das ferramentas analíticas do realismo crítico, serão mostradas as limitações e as deficiências desses programas, tanto em seus fundamentos básicos quanto em suas propostas educacionais de formação para a empregabilidade. **Conclusões:** com base nessas limitações, podem ser apontadas formas alternativas de alcançar uma sociedade mais justa, incluindo a proposta de uma renda básica universal.

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Palavras-chave: Realismo Crítico; Educação Crítica; Inclusão Social; Pesquisa Educacional Crítica; Marxismo.

Introduction¹

This paper showcases my first foray into critical realism. I aim to demonstrate its potential as a philosophical basis for research in the social sciences and especially in the field of education, where it has had an increasing influence and importance in recent years (Parra, 2015 & 2016). In doing so, I will show that critical realism offers tools for critical-emancipatory educational research, overcoming the limitations presented by traditional empiricist and subjectivist approaches (Khazem, 2018). My interest in critical realism has continued through my pre-academic professional career prior and into my work as a university professor where I have used it to research the issue of guaranteed minimum income as an arm of social and educational policy aimed at combating poverty.

My Journey to Critical Realism

My interest in critical realism began while a university student of Pedagogy. I always felt uncomfortable with visions presented that portrayed education as simply a technical activity. Approaching issues such as teaching methodologies, school organization, assessment and curricular design from a frame of reference of, what I now understand as, positivist science seemed limited. The assumptions of value freedom and commitment to empiricism underpinning positivism did not align with the reality of educational praxis: a complex social and ethical project built on communicative relationships for social justice. Not only did understanding education require more than noting what was apparent (the Domain of the Actual in Bhaskar's terms), but also that it could not be divorced from the world of values. Even as a student, I knew this. However, until engaging with critical realism, I did not have the language and concepts to explain what I intuitively knew: education had to be inserted into the real world and understood in its historical, cultural, ideological, and biographical contexts. And this insertion meant that education was more than what simply happened in classrooms. It had to be for something. It had to be grounded in real things that mattered and it had to express an inalienable ethical-political commitment to justice and social change. Against the language of positivism where education is too easily reduced to a mere mechanism for the transmission and accumulation of knowledge, critical

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Grant Banfield for his suggestions and ideas for this paper, which is the result of an academic visit to the *Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion* of the University of South Australia in 2019-2020, where Professor Grant Banfield was my academic host.

realism opened a conceptual space to see it as capacity building to read the world as well as change it.

Prior to my career as a university teacher and researcher, I worked as a social educator implementing social inclusion programs in Spain for almost 10 years. At first, I thought that these types of programs contributed powerfully to social change and the achievement of greater equality. However, as time went by, the limitations that these programs had in reducing (let alone eradicating) poverty became obvious to me. As a result of this discontent, I began to reflect on these social problems from a Marxist perspective. Though the relationship between critical realism and Marxism is a controversial one, to my mind there are clear links between both schools of thought, more especially with regard to their understanding of reality and the potential for emancipatory social change. I fully recognize that critical realism and Marxism are different, but also I argue that there are strong linkages between both and that critical realism provides solid philosophical foundations for Marxist theory. To know more about this heated debate on critical realism and Marxism, Gunn (1989) and Brown, A., Fleetwood, S., & Roberts, J. M. (2003), among others, can be consulted. I came to understand that these anti-poverty programs, as well as other socio-educational actions for the most disadvantaged, were not aimed at eradicating the root causes of social inequality, but rather designed (intentionally or not) to merely have a cosmetic effect. They were focused on the superficial and not any deep underlying causes. Both professional practice and educational research operated in the world of appearances or, as Marx would say, a fetishized world. Coming to understand the social world as structured where it is only partially open to both observations and direct experiences of it provided fertile ground for my future interest in critical realism.

The research I conducted through my PhD opened my mind to critical realism and its emancipatory possibilities. The surprise was unexpected, but pleasant. Critical realism became the methodological partner to Marxist theory I needed. It provided the means to unravel the causal mechanisms of the social phenomena that I was interested in understanding and changing.

In the following sections, I will outline the ways in which I have employed critical realism to understand and critique social exclusion programs. In particular, I will emphasize the point that the deep ontology of critical realism expresses the realism of Marx. This is what initially drew me to the philosophical resources of critical realism.

Pushing Beyond Positivism and Hermeneutics

Like many post-graduate social science and education students I was schooled in the view that the social and human sciences were framed within two competing philosophies: positivism and hermeneutics. I came to know them as representing significantly different philosophical and practical approaches to research. Not only did they hold opposing views of the nature of reality and knowledge but also that of the relationship between researcher and subjects researched. I recall being attracted to hermeneutics for its recognition of the humanness of the social world and the implication it carried of the possibility of human agency. However, reading Andrew Collier's (1994) excellent introductory text to critical realism brought new light to the positivism-hermeneutics problematic. I found his use of the metaphor of the ant and the spider particularly instructive.

According to Collier, the metaphor that best exemplifies the work of positivist researchers is that of the ant. These researchers labor like ants, gathering information as if it were part of a pre-determined puzzle. The positivist ants try to complete the puzzle by piecing together scraps of data extracted from an external reality. Their job, as they understand it, is to capture as much empirical data as possible with regard to a given phenomenon so as to piece together the most accurate and realistic picture possible of the object under study. Empirical data are understood to be snapshots of reality and researchers are like photographers taking those shots. Accordingly, positivist ants see a direct correspondence between the information collected about an object and the object itself. Or, in other words, they understand scientific knowledge as a pure and faithful reflection of a world completely external to and independent of the scientific investigator. In this way, it is thought that objectivity is secured by: a) an appropriate experimental design that ensures researcher neutrality, and (b) the use of data collection techniques that provide direct access to reality, as well as produce universally valid knowledge that can be replicated in other contexts. In the world of ants, the function of science and scientific knowledge is to formulate universal laws that allow for prediction and enable intervention. Positivism is unquestionably hegemonic in the experimental or "hard" sciences (Parada 2004, p. 409; Scott, 2010 & 2014; Parra, 2015). However, despite the difficulties entailed in applying positivism to open systems such as human societies, positivism remains influential in the social sciences (Bhaskar, 1998).

In contrast, Collier describes the work of hermeneutic researchers being more like that of the spider, as conceptions take a diametrically opposed view, believing that establishing a clear-cut separation between a researcher's conceptions and reality is impossible. This stance thus denies the existence of a sharply

defined divide between researcher and subject, or the possibility of direct, effective access to the reality investigated. Reality is not considered an external entity that can be broken into separate parts and studied in experimental contexts, as the positivists argue. According to hermeneutics, reality does not exist beyond one's understanding of it, since it is entirely constructed through one's ideas, concepts, practices, language and so on. It is the researcher's viewpoint that dictates a given conception of reality.

From the standpoint of hermeneutics, creating experimental situations that replicate a particular phenomenon is unnecessary; instead, the researcher's interpretations of the subject in context are what is important. The most extreme arguments within this conception deny the existence of a material reality beyond one's minds: those researches who hold these conceptions can be well considered anti-realists.

Through interpretations one reaches a profound understanding of the subject under study and produces information that is meaningful in similar situations and contexts. The goal is not so much to make predictions that can be extrapolated to other settings, as to produce meaningful knowledge about a given social phenomenon through argumentation. According to Andrew Collier (1994), the metaphor that best reflects this conception is that of a spider weaving its web. Thus, hermeneutic researchers produce knowledge as a result of their reflections and conceptions, as if that knowledge were a thread emerging from their minds. To paraphrase the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), researchers hang from the meaningful webs that they themselves have spun. This is the most commonly used approach in the social sciences and encompasses research strategies such as ethnography and data collection techniques such as participant observation (Taylor, 1985).

As regards how one approaches and understands reality, these two conceptions have a respective long and broad tradition in research in the natural sciences and in the human sciences. However, they each present a number of limitations in terms of their contributions to social change and emancipation.

Positivistic conceptions prioritize the aseptic collection of data and information, losing sight of the multiple ways in which the very action of research influences and conditions the reality investigated. A further limitation of these approaches is that the structural aspects that explain the reality investigated are relegated to the background. An emphasis on precise experimental design, exhaustive data collection and strictly observed experimental—and thus artificial—conditions means that the structural aspects which subtly construct the subject under study are overlooked.

Meanwhile, hermeneutic conceptions stress the production of idiographic knowledge derived from the subjectivity argued by the researcher (Nuñez, 2013).

This conception presents clear limitations, not least as regards emitting scientific conclusions whose validity can be generalized to other settings and contexts. Furthermore, a hermeneutic perspective tends to lead to relativistic positions that limit the capacity to reach scientific conclusions with any real predictive value.

Below, an attempt is made to demonstrate the possibilities offered by critical realism in the social sciences to overcome some of these limitations.

Lessons from Critical Realism

From a positivist perspective, the progress of science is seen as a linear accumulation of information gleaned from experimental procedures that ensure neutral access to a mind-independent reality. According to positivism the only reality of interest to science is that which is available empirically and thus can be measured and subdivided; it is empirical. In contrast, hermeneutics reduces reality to that which has meaning for the researcher, to the subjective. It is researchers, through their work of inquiry, who construct the subject under study, reality. Thus, meaning making is paramount in hermeneutic approaches.

However, critical realism offers a more complex conception of research and reality, one that is based on the idea that reality is stratified. According to Andrew Collier (1994):

[...] for empiricism, science collects discrete bits of knowledge and accumulates them in its mental bucket; for relativism, scientific changes are like gestalt switches 'coming to see the world differently.' Both of these metaphors have their place, but if transcendental realism is right, the metaphor of digging deeper catches far more essential features of the process (p. 50).

The Stratified Nature of Reality

According to critical realism, reality is essentially an open system, but it can sometimes be manipulated as if it were a closed system that conducts experiments and thus confirms or rejects theoretical hypotheses. Despite its fundamentally open nature, reality as theorized by Bhaskar (1975; 1998), is not chaotic or random

but is, instead, structured and orderly. He argues that reality, whether natural or social, is a stratified totality consisting of three overlapping levels or domains. The first of these is the empirical domain. Initially, Bhaskar described this domain referring exclusively to concrete experiences. However, as Hartwig (2007) notes, he “later extended the domain of the empirical to that of ‘the subjective,’ to embrace concepts as well as the empirical” (pp. 400 -401). The second is the actual domain. It refers to the world of events where various experiences and interpretations of them occur in defined spaces and time. The third is the real domain, which refers to the generating mechanisms and structures. These are enduring rather than episodic, are responsible for causal effects and ultimately explain the occurrence of observable events. Thus, the empirical domain is a subset of the actual domain, which in turn is a subset of the real domain. In this way, all domains are real. However, it is important to stress that causation does not occur in events, empirical phenomena, or subjective interpretations but in generative mechanisms.

This stratified conception of reality bears marked similarities to the logic of Marxist materialist thought (Banfield, 2010). Hidden forces and structures create certain conditions and generate a series of events, in which subjects' actions contribute in part to their reproduction and/or transformation. Therefore, according to critical realism, the subject is not the universal, ubiquitous subject of Cartesian thought: the ones at the generative center of the social fabric modifying the environment according to their subject's interests, desires, and objectives. Neither is the subject the determined outcome or product of the social fabric.

Furthermore, while taking reality to be structured and ordered, critical realism also insists it is ontologically emergent. In other words, the mechanisms that explain the social phenomena and events perceived appear ordered, from the most basic and distant mechanisms to the most concrete and closest to the event they generate. Thus, each of these mechanisms can be explained in emergent form by different scientific theories, in which those that correspond to the most basic levels neither exhaust nor reduce the theories located at the most concrete levels close to the event under study. For example, the explanation of human behavior is not reduced solely to a biological-physiological explanation (with the contributions of chemistry, biology or psychobiology), but also includes a cultural and social explanation (anthropology, sociology, linguistics, semiotics, etc.), a psychological-educational explanation (education, teaching, etc.) and so on, where each theory provides an explanation—in emergent form—that is relevant to the stratum to which it belongs.

Vertical and Horizontal Explanations of Reality

One way to analyze social reality that respects its stratified, ordered nature is by means of a vertical explanation and a horizontal explanation (Banfield, 2010 & 2016). This proposal is a highly innovative research strategy in the social sciences that goes beyond positivist and hermeneutic approaches. It is unquestionably one of critical realism's most original contributions to the philosophy and the practice of science.

In combination, the horizontal and vertical explanations shed light on the integrated nature of phenomena under study. They push beyond the empirical and the subjective to illuminate the role of hidden structures and mechanisms that give rise to the events and phenomena perceived in reality.

A Proposal for a Critical Realist Analysis. The Case of Social Inclusion Schemes against Poverty

The main socio-educational actions against poverty in countries within the European context are Minimum Incomes for Integration, here termed Guaranteed Minimum Incomes (G.M.I.s). Schemes of this sort emerged at the start of the 1990s thanks to Council Recommendation 92/441 of 24 June 1992, encouraging member States of the European Union (E.U.) to develop programs guaranteeing their citizens a minimum income. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 21st century various E.U. countries have gradually rolled out this type of scheme (EUROSTAT, 2018). They did so with considerable heterogeneity directing them, at least formally, toward combating social exclusion and achieving more cohesive and egalitarian European societies (Malgesini, 2017). Despite their heterogeneity, minimum income schemes —across Europe but in Spain in particular (Frazer & Marlier, 2016)— can be seen to have two common characteristics. In all, a periodical payment is made and every program (to a greater or lesser extent) links receipt of this payment to recipient performance across a range of activities related to social and work integration. These activities may take place in a number of contexts (for example, family, personal, health, educational, or workplace). They follow the completion of a Personalized Integration Route-map that includes the recipient's commitment to participate in certain activities proposed by social services. Amongst these, pride of place often prompts completing training courses enhancing employability. Here, it is worth noting the following quote by Marx (1894) “[...] vulgar economics feels completely at home, these

relationships appearing all the more self-evident to it, the more their inner connections remain hidden, even though they are comprehensible to the popular mind.” (p. 797). So, capitalism is the source of poverty and the solution to poverty is... more capitalism!

A Critical Realist Approach to the Study of Vocational Courses for the Unemployed. A Vertical and Horizontal Explanation

Positivistic approaches tend to analyze vocational programs by collecting data related to specific target populations. Thus, data might be collected on the number of unemployed people, statistics compiled on the duration of unemployment, and profiles constructed of socially excluded people along with the number of people in situations of mild, moderate, or severe exclusion. Questionnaires might be designed, survey interviews conducted, and previous reports consulted. The same information gathering process would be conducted in other dimensions that comprise the subject under study, such as the characteristics and amount of economic aid and the number and content of vocational courses. This is the model generally employed by public administrations and it is directly linked to the positivistic conception. It is necessary because it facilitates the collection of data on the selected event, but it is insufficient to reach a deep understanding of that event.

Meanwhile, hermeneutic approaches generally focus on exploring the subjective perceptions of the agents involved in the social event, including the course participants, the social service professionals responsible for organizing and managing these courses and the political representatives who approve their launch. To this end, interviews are conducted with the subjects involved, participant observation sessions are held during the courses and the researchers may undertake total immersion in the reality studied, accompanied by a field diary that provides a dense explanation of the context studied. The goal is to collect meaningful information that enables the researcher to construct an argument that explains the complexity of practices in this social reality. This approach to the event is based on the researcher's subjective —albeit reasoned— interpretation. The information yields an in-depth understanding of hidden aspects of the reality studied but is limited as regards extrapolation to other contexts: what is valid and relevant to the case study analyzed is not necessarily so in other cases.

Both approaches provide valuable insight but separately or in combination are insufficient. They lack the capacity to illuminate generative mechanisms underpinning the structured and experiential reality of poverty. In short, the approaches have limited explanatory power and are restricted in their potentials to contribute to meaningful social change and concrete human emancipation. In this light the attractiveness of critical realism became obvious. Critical realism offered ways of explaining how training programs might be employed to combat social exclusion. Horizontal explanation of the subject under study (i.e. an explanation of the event through mechanisms and the causes that these generate and are experienced) and vertical explanation of the subject under study (i.e. how one mechanism explains another, more causally efficacious mechanisms (Shipway, 2010). They could work dialectically to develop a deep understanding of social problems and are related to the real world, and with each horizontal and vertical move, new vantage points (Banfield, 2013 & 2016) emerge.

In combination, the horizontal and vertical explanations thus shed light on the integrated nature of the phenomena under study, going beyond the empirical, observable surface of positivist approaches and the subjective interpretations of hermeneutic approaches, both of which lose sight of the role of hidden structures and mechanisms that give rise to the events and phenomena we perceive in reality.

A vertical explanation—see table 1—of the event of guaranteed minimum incomes and their courses would have to take into account the role of the different strata and the corresponding emergent theories that shed light on this event. For example, from the most basic to the most concrete level, first there is the conception of subject and society in the stratum of neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal conception of the subject finds its maximum expression in social organization based on the model of the residual welfare state, in which public management plays a marginal role compared with the prominent role of private initiative and individual responsibility. Following these conceptions of subject and social organization is the economic theory of human capital, in which people compete for access to the world of work through individual investment in vocational qualifications. The stratum closest to the studied event is the model of professional competencies, with a focus on curriculum design.

Table 1. A vertical explanation proposal for vocational courses associated with Guaranteed Minimum Income Programs.

Event: training actions associated to anti poverty programs	
Curricular design	Expert education rationality
Education	Skills-based model of education
Economics	Human Capital Theory
Sociology	Residual Welfare State
Ideology	Neoliberalism
STRATA OF REALITY	EMERGENT THEORIES

Meanwhile, a horizontal explanation —see table 2— would have to show how a group of mechanisms (e.g. human capital theory, neoliberalism, and the skills-based model) explain the implementation of a series of events (i.e. training actions for people at social risk), and how they lead to a number of consequences and experiences associated with the subject under study (e.g. budget allocated for training, number of training actions, rates of new employment, unemployment rates, professional profiles of workers who organize the actions, public or private management of training actions and characteristics of training actions), in other words, the experiences that are lived and are located on the plane of the purely empirical.

Table 2. A horizontal explanation proposal for vocational courses associated with Guaranteed Minimum Income Programs.

Mechanisms	Events	Experiences
Expert curricular design		Type of course, contents, resources and teaching methods, role of teacher, educator-learner relationship, system of evaluation and certification, etc.
Skill-based education model	Training actions for socially excluded adults	Rates of unemployment, poverty, job insecurity, etc.
Human Capital Theory		Economic funding for policies against poverty.
Residual social welfare state		Amount of economic aid to recipients.
Neoliberalism		Type of management: public or private, public-private partnership, etc. Professional profiles, functions, tasks and instruments involved in these programs.

An Integrated Analysis of the Stratified Nature of Social Inclusion Policies to Combat Poverty

In line with neoliberal discourse, the subject is essentially individualistic, competitive, and calculating, and achieves self-realization and fulfilment by acquiring and possessing material goods, in competition with one’s counterparts. Given this essential nature, society should be organized according to the logic of private enterprise, because this is the model that is most conducive to the development of the neoliberal subject’s essential nature. This is at the root of the logic of privatization and commodification of the public sectors that form the backbone

of society —i.e. education, health, health care, and the labor market— because it favors the development of the subject's competitive, individualistic and entrepreneurial nature and ultimately the advance and progress of society. The logic of privatization is given tangible form in the neoliberal model of the social welfare state, which is essentially based on the provision of services by private entities, reducing the role of the State in the regulation and organization of society to an absolute minimum. This model lays stress on the subject's individual responsibility in decision-making.

These neoliberal ideas about society and the individual have given rise to human capital theory in the discipline of economics (Becker, 1964). According to this theory, education is an individual investment with exchange value in the labor market (Schultz, 1962). Thus, education increases a person's employability and is directly related to increased productivity, economic growth and ultimately to a higher quality and number of available jobs. Consequently, as reflected in the main European strategies and directives in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, poor people need to acquire the training and skills required by the productive system to increase their employability and thus effectively enter the labor market.

However, these approaches present serious difficulties as regards achieving their objectives. First, the existence of a direct, mechanical relationship between training, employment, increased productivity, and improved labor standards as a result of economic growth generated by better-educated workers is questionable (Chang, 2012). Young people in contemporary societies have received more and better education than previous generations, and yet there has been no reduction in unemployment or job insecurity in recent years. Working conditions and the number of jobs in a country or region do not depend on levels of training achieved or the education system, but on the power relations between capital and labor, a balance that has witnessed radical change in favor of the former as a result of neoliberal economic policies, especially since the 2008 crisis (Harvey, 2012 & 2013).

Second, education plays a passive role, devoted solely to providing training in the skills required by the labor market. Thus, the primary function of education at all levels of the education system —whether it be primary or secondary education, formal or non-formal education— is viewed as being that of equipping people to compete in the labor market. From this standpoint, the teaching method best suited to these approaches is the skills-based model. This model assumes that it is possible to break down a given profession into its various skills to subsequently design specific training actions for each competence or technique. This is a simplistic conception of the complex professional sphere, in which work is reduced to a mere stock of professional skills and workers to mere mechanics.

This mechanical conception loses sight of the ethical, social, and cultural factors that influence professionals and paints an artificial and simplified picture of the complexity of the tasks and processes that workers perform in their jobs, aspects which cannot be reduced solely to knowledge and use of professional skills (Schön, 1992).

Third, this approach to public education transforms education into a consumer product with an exchange value in the labor market, increasing the employability of the person who has acquired it, putting that person in competition with other people in that market. In turn, this promotes consumerism in education and the organization of education systems according to the principles of the market and free competition. The idea of life-long learning also reinforces this consumerism, driving people to consume education throughout their lives to remain productive and employable and taking individual responsibility for the costs involved in “life-long” training. Education thus becomes simply another private business niche, similar in terms of economic exploitation to the international car industry (Hill, 2013).

Lastly, human capital theory applied to education offers a purely technical and meritocratic vision of the relationship between employee and employer, without considering the ideological and structural aspects that influence recruitment conditions in the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 1975).

The theory of human capital that forms the basis of social and educational policies to combat poverty assigns a core role to education, considering it a central element in facilitating the subject’s integration in society and the workforce. Thus, poverty and social inequality are viewed as social problems that can be solved simply with more education, and above all with an education more closely linked to the world of work. From this perspective, unemployment and poverty are variously the result of an education that is insufficiently tailored to market needs and demands, teachers who fail to employ methods that reflect the business management model in which students should be “trained,” educational institutions that are not organized according to the principles of a private entrepreneurial business, or individuals in situations of social exclusion or job insecurity who have failed to harness the learning, educational, and labor opportunities that have been available to them throughout their lives.

From the perspective of human capital theory and neoliberalism, the mechanical rationalization of education and the skills-based model are the most functional decisions in the field of education. Vocational training programs aimed at combating poverty thus emphasize the transmission of professional skills and/or diverse aspects of knowledge intended to instill “good citizenship” or create “good workers,” reinforcing the notion that social exclusion is the fault of the subject, who lacks such skills. Rather than being an educational action aimed at

critical reflection on questions that explain relations of oppression and workforce exploitation, it seeks to insert people into an increasingly precarious labor market with worse working conditions.

Conclusions

This contribution has explored the possibilities critical realism offers critical social science research via my experiences with vocational courses related to Guaranteed Minimum Income Schemes. Most common analysis in social science only scratches the surface, without paying attention to the social determining structures, which is a big limitation not only in terms of social science, but more importantly in terms of potentially emancipatory knowledge. This idea strongly resonates in the Marxist concept of mystification, a powerful concept which can be used to descriptively understand a condition in which there is prevailing perceptions that masks and obscures a deep reality of the capitalist mode of production that creates inequality (Maisuria, 2018, p. 436). Critical realism's aim is to shed light on the underlying mechanisms and by doing that, better understand the social and physical reality. It also has great potential for social transformation. The stratified nature of reality and the horizontal and vertical explanation in critical realism can be considered useful tools for a critical-emancipatory researcher's toolbox.

This paper is an introductory attempt to shed light on the potential of critical realism as an optical tool to critically read and change social reality. It is a first foray into this complex school of thought, in this particular case of the educational programs to combat poverty in the EU. In this sense it can be considered as a work in progress, which to improve in the future will have to fully recognize the key importance of the role of individual agency. This paper has focused on the relevance of understanding the layered nature of social reality and how critical realism provides a philosophical foundation to Marxism, leaving the importance of human agency without proper development. Future research work delving into critical realism will be necessary to include this aspect.

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