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Society, Person and Their Connections: A Bhaskarian Formulation

Toplum, Kişi ve Bağlantıları: Bhaskarcı Bir Formülasyon

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Abstract: How the agency relates to society is a classic problem in the social sciences. The literature, for the most part, has long been dominated by two main methodological positions, namely methodological individualism, and methodological holism. These consider individuals and collectivities respectively as constituent parts of society. While the former suffers from an atomistic, a-historical and a-social conception of social reality, the latter tends to dissolve the person into the social object and considers it as reified. The present study explores Roy Bhaskar's conception of the connection between society and person connection through his key texts. The study argues that contrary to methodological individualism and methodological holism, society is composed of relations. Furthermore, although society pre-exists the person, its survival depends upon human praxis, creating an ontological gap between them. Such an analysis has important implications for political science and political sociology. Methodological individualism underpins liberalism, utilitarianism and the neoclassical economy, methodological holism underpins nationalism, fascism, and Stalinism. In contrast, methodological relationism acknowledges both the distinctive ontologies of the person and society, which could enable the transformation of existing socio-political structures and the democratization of politics.

Keywords: Society, person, individualism, holism, dialectism, relationism, transformational model of society

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Introduction

Margaret Thatcher once said, "There is no such thing as society." Despite its polemical tone, this claim has some merits by opening up society for discussion. One might even wonder about what there is to discuss. How could society not exist, given that we live in it, act in it and ultimately die in it. While, this question seems highly plausible at first glance, further investigation might reveal that it relies on certain assumptions about society and its relation to agency.

Despite long being of great interest in the social sciences, society and agency are mostly conceptualized uncritically, with their existence and meaning(s) generally taken for granted. This uncritical engagement has led social scientists to repeatedly reproduce two main positions. The individualist one argues that, society is composed of individuals, exists in virtue of them and can be studied by being reduced to them. The collectivist position argues that society is not the sum of individuals, but it has its own dynamics independently of human beings and cannot be understood by reducing it to individuals. In this respect, the wide range of positions in the social sciences, e.g. utilitarianism, structuralism, and functionalism, roughly fall into one or other camp. The problem is that, being based on them, the various methodological positions suffer from the two position's ontological, epistemological and methodological shortcomings.

This paper explores British philosopher Bhaskar's formulation of society and agency and the ontological status of their relationship. The primary aim is to contribute to the understanding of the ontology of society and agency, which will in turn help to review our existing hypotheses about epistemology and methodology. By creating new epistemic routes, such an enquiry may also help us to avoid falling into the pitfalls of prolonged and infertile debate between positivism and hermeneutics. The central question in this study is as follows: "What is society and what is its relationship to agency?" While the focus is mainly on Bhaskar, other canonic writers, such as Weber and Durkheim, are invoked when needed. Because a full discussion of society and agency is beyond the scope of this study, it, confines itself to the thought of Bhaskar regarding the connection between society and agency.

After considering the concept of ontology as reintroduced by Bhaskar, the paper critically discusses the two predominant methodological positions concerning society, namely methodological individualism and methodological collectivism. It, then presents Bhaskar's own methodological position, methodological relationism, as a response to the problems associated with the two other methodological positions. Finally, it outlines four models of society-agency connection.

Reclaiming Ontology

All scientific studies reveal their specific methodology through their implicit or explicit reliance on certain assumptions. Therefore, anyone who wishes to understand a scientific text deeply should consider its underlying ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings. Social scientific studies are no exception since they are all built on socio-ontological premises. Unlike natural sciences, the subject-matter of the social sciences is the "social", which, depends on social activity and cannot subsist without it. This means that social objects inevitably involve human engagement, which mainly takes the form of human aggregations, collectivities, or societies. The concept of society is thus one of the fundamental issues of social scientific study; since it underpins broader assumptions. Therefore, one of the most important meta-methodological issues of the social sciences is the relationship between the person, and/or agency and society.

The British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1944-2014) is famous for his prime role in the formation of critical realism (henceforth CR), a multi-dimensional, multi-layered and inclusive philosophy of (social) science. Bhaskar's main investigation was an ontological one. He reintroduced a renewed concept of ontology to Western philosophy, which he claimed had long been guilty of disregarding the concept. Bhaskar's main concern was developing a philosophy of science without the shortcomings of the positivist or hermeneutic traditions. CR was a non-positivist pro-science philosophy that mainly focused, on the "possibility of naturalism" in social science.

Bhaskar's point of departure was his ontologically realist and anti-anthropocentric view that the world out there exists independently of our

beliefs, sentiments and ideas about it (Sayer, 1992, p. 4). This ontological principal was accompanied by an important argument that most philosophical studies have committed and are still committing the "crime" of epistemic fallacy, an approach reducing knowledge of the world to its very existence (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 5). To avoid this error, Bhaskar suggested a three-layered conception of reality: empirical, actual and real. The first layer hosts the empirical phenomena of experiences; the second involves experiences and events; and the third consists of experiences, events and the generative mechanisms causing events and empirical facts (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 37).

Based on this model, Bhaskar criticized positivism for its commitment to a "flat ontology" by confining itself to the first layer of reality. He accused hermeneutics of non-realism and loyalty to a super-ideal, anthropocentrically-fashioned reality. That is, hermeneutics considers that reality is dependent on, conditioned and to some extent, created by the human mind, beliefs, values, feelings, etc. In contrast to positivism and hermeneutics, Bhaskar's non-anthropocentric and non-flat ontology brings "depth" to ontological matters, which paves the way for more sophisticated epistemological and methodological assumptions.

Three Methodologies of Society

This re-philosophizing of reality is also applying to the conceptualization of society. Bhaskar accepts the view that the society is also an ontological phenomenon that it is *real*. This makes it possible, at least in theory, to know about it. According to Bhaskar, society is conventionally treated within two different methodological frameworks. The first one is "methodological individualism", which "is the doctrine that facts about societies, and social phenomena generally, are to be explained solely in terms of the facts about individuals." (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 29). It follows that society can be reduced to individuals and that it can be understood by the individuality of its members. As should be clear by now, methodological individualism is the "official" social-ontology of the liberal and positivist or liberal-positivist canon. "Utilitarianism, liberal political theory and neo-classical economy" are all based upon these premises (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 31). The whole liberal tradition regards social phenomena as a

consequence of the mostly mechanical operation of individuals' neuro-physiological and neuro-psychological impulses and motivations. For instance, fear and desire in Hobbes, or suffering and pleasure in Hume, Bentham and Mill are the real driving forces of the behaviors that in turn constitute the social structures (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 32). This approach sees individuals, as Marx (1990, p. 187) puts it, as atomistic entities that remain unchanged across history and societies while neglecting the socio-historical and relational aspect of the individual. It thus is a-social and a-historical: everyone is a Robinson Crusoe living on their own island.

Methodological holism, on the other hand considers social objects as autonomous, external, repressive and having their own lives independently from individuals. Durkheim provides the best example of this approach in that agency is the "slave" of social objects, lacking any kind of autonomy. In his *Opus magnum*, *Suicide*, considered one of the most prominent examples of positivist sociology, Durkheim presents suicide as an independent social object from individuals. Suicide occurs every year in roughly the same numbers, in almost every society which confirmed for Durkheim, that individual motivations, depression, feelings, and rationalizations, reasons, etc. are irrelevant. Instead, suicide is a social phenomenon, autonomous from the subject itself. Since reasons and motivations cannot be revealed empirically nor tested, Durkheim argued that they must be rejected as a form of explanation and replaced by a sociological analysis that, excludes any possibility of psychological explanation. Methodological holism, then, involves objectification, reification and externalization. Here, contrary to Durkheim's positivist orientation, society is undoubtedly taken as a metaphysical element. That is society in Durkheim cannot be reduced to individuals as in positivism-behaviorism. Rather, Durkheim conceptualized society as always more than the sum of its individuals (Keat & Urry, 1975, pp. 8081).

Against these two methodological positions in terms of their view of the ontological status of society, Bhaskar suggests a third, namely methodological relationism. Put simplest, that the society is composed neither of individuals nor collectivities but of relations. A similar approach can be found in Marx (1990, p. 932). who, following Edward Gibbons Wakefield, argued that "the capital is not a thing but a social relation between per-

sons which is meditated through things". Hence, "society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand" (Marx, 1993, p. 265).

Accordingly, society consists of relations, such as worker-capitalist, teacher-student, wife-husband, MP and constituent (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 31). These relations are relatively enduring and, to some extent, crystalized. Their material foundations, such as laws, rules and norms, are inscribed into the institutional structure of the state, culture and social body. They are also internally related: one cannot exist without the other. For example, a worker is only a worker if there are capitalists and a wage labor system. Similarly, the existence of MPs and constituents presupposes political and electoral systems, and the rule of law. Relations are thus materially and immaterially mediated through various elements. One of the implications one might draw from this approach is that the subject-matter of the social sciences in general and sociology in particular neither individuals nor collectivities; but socially established, materially meditated and relatively enduring relations.

Four Models of Society-Person Connections

Bhaskar does not stop here in his search for a non-positivist, non-hermeneuticist, pro-science philosophy and a compatible conception of society. One of the main problems of a conception of the society is its relationship to the person and/or agency. We have already seen that, *contra* methodological individualism, society is not constituted by the aggregate of individuals. Nor, *contra* Durkheim is it independent of individuals and their socialized activity. This Durkheimian approach could take us to two extreme forms of collectivism. The first is right-wing collectivism, nationalism or even fascism that dissolves individuality within the masses. The other is a left-wing version, most clearly expressed in Stalinism and laborism (Bhaskar, 2011, p. 8).

Bhaskar introduced four models of agency-society relations. The first, methodological individualism can be associated with Weber in accepting that society is the immediate product of intended, meaningful human actions. The second, methodological holism is Durkheimian in arguing that social structures are self-governing, stand-alone entities with

nothing to do with individualistic reasons, motivations, feelings, meanings or behaviors. The third, methodological dialectism, which was espoused by Berger et al. (1965) synthesizes the two previous approaches by suggesting persons and society simultaneously create each other in a "dialectical process" (1965, p. 197). The fourth one proposed by Bhaskar is methodological relationism what Bhaskar named the transformational model of human social activity (TMSA). According to Bhaskar, the first model (Weberian) focuses on actions, the second model (Durkheimian) concentrates on social conditions and the third (Berger et al.) does not make distinctions between the two. In Bhaskar's own model, individuals do not create society, society is prior to individuals and the very existence of social structures necessarily depends on human praxis. Having been born into a society that existed before themselves, individuals reproduce and transform society through their social actions. This formulation is quite similar to Marx: " Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (1972, p. 10).

Thus, TMSA neither grants full liberty to the agent as methodological individualism does, nor conceives of it as a passive extension of the social structure as in methodological holism. Rather, it accords relative autonomy to the agent, acknowledging both the "transformative power of agency" and the "constraining/enabling power of society" (Jessop, 2005, p. 43). Socialization, then, can be defined as a variety of forms taken by individuals in the context of their unavoidable relationship with the social.

Bhaskar argues that the reproduction and transformation of society should therefore be considered an "achievement" rather than a mechanical act of individuality. As hermeneutists rightly claim that individuals rightly or wrongly conceptualize the social reality through their own beliefs, values, feelings, ideologies, opinions, etc. and act according to their imaginations. This is the "performative", conscious aspect of society whereby individuals secure the existence and transformation of social structures through their ideationally informed creative actions. Such an approach leaves room for both individual reasons, motivations and the collective actions destined to transform social structures.

According to Bhaskar, society not only provides the necessary conditions for the intentional human praxis but cannot endure without it. However, the point to emphasize is that the society does not dissolve the individual; neither is the society is an entity that individuals carry in themselves. The two cannot be reduced, derived or reproduced from each other. It follows that individuals cannot reproduce the society immediately in any way they desire as this would commit the fallacy of voluntarism; that we can shape society immediately and directly according to our plans. Since neither the individual nor society can be reduced to each other, there must be an ontological gap between them. In Bhaskar's account, therefore, the agency and society are ontologically separated into two distinct and autonomous entities.

Yet, if society pre-exists agency, what are the characteristics of their encounter? Bhaskar claims that agency works on given materials. Like a sculptor works on stone using tools to turn it into a sculpture, agency acts using to pre-existing social forms, such as language, norms, culture and laws. This means that agency must engage with the existing social material in order to be active at all. Accordingly, just as a sculptor is not a sculptor without stone and tools, the very existence of agency presupposes the existence of society. Agency does exists in virtue of society while society cannot subsist without human praxis. As Bhaskar puts it,"Society is both the ever-present condition and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency" (1998, p. 37). Just as society has a dual character as both the necessary condition and outcome of agential acts, human praxis also has a dual character: it is in one sense, conscious production and, in the other, unconscious reproduction of the conditions of production.

This ontological premise provides the basis on which Bhaskar builds his conception of the society-person connection. A person enters a ready-made society with, norms, regulations and notably language. People are born into a world of language that they played no part in forming. Nor do they consciously accept to become a speaker. Rather, they internalize it knowingly or mechanically. Like society, language cannot exist without people who are speak it. Moreover, a person cannot voluntarily change a language. However, the language s/he learns and speaks when s/he is old is somewhat different. That is, people do not create but rather transform

language, whether deliberately or not (Collier, 1994, p. 146). Hence, one might think of the person-society connection as similar to the relationship between language and speaker.

Bhaskar suggests separating human intentionality from the reproduction or transformation of social structures and society. Although people act purposefully, the general results may not reflect their original aims. For instance, while a person probably does not marry to reproduce society, this is the inevitable outcome. Thus, Bhaskar proposes that the psychological and the social are independent while their interaction in a given context he class socialization. Bhaskar warns that even though the reproduction and transformation of society is mostly "unconscious", it still is an "achievement", a performance, that depends people's conceptualizations about the world. That is, it is not a mechanical, technical or linear phenomenon (Bhaskar, 1998, pp. 38-39).

People's actions are conditioned by the social contexts that in turn themselves depend on human beings. However, they cannot be conflated, because there is always a space between them that is also the precondition of any possible connection. The first model argues for actions but not conditions whereas; the second argues for conditions while failing to leave space for actions and; the third model makes no distinction between actions and conditions. In contrast, Bhaskar's transformational model implies that although society is not the direct product of the person, it is still open to both unconscious and conscious transformation of social structures (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 40).

Bhaskar claims that his model is compatible with a concept of change and history. In doing so, he argues that Marx came closest to his understanding of history, see in this comment by Marx and Engels in *German Ideology*:

> ...history does not end by being resolved into 'self-consciousness' as 'spirit of the spirit', but that in it at each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also, on the other, prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite develop-

> ment, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances (2000, p. 189).

Thus, Bhaskar's model converges with Marx and Engel's conception of history in terms of the social circumstances created by and conditioned the human praxis. As already noted, this approach also strongly echoes with Marx's famous formulation in *18th Brumaire* according to which people make their history but not in the circumstances they chose.

Bhaskar claims that his model is superior to the other three he outlines. While the Weberian model explains change by "contrast" and the Durkheimian one by "exogenous" factors, the third model implies a mechanical and cyclical social change due to the dialectical movement of person and society. Bhaskar, however, argues that his model has the potential to explain historically meaningful "events...ruptures, mutations or more generally transformations...such as [the] French Revolution" (Bhaskar, 1998, pp. 40-41).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide a better understanding of the society-person connection in Bhaskar's thought. It presented three main methodologies of society in the literature. The first one, methodological individualism reduces society to its individuals and conceives of society as merely the sum of individuals. The second, methodological holism, regards society as autonomous from and more than the aggregate of individuals. The third one, methodological relationism, proposes that society is not made of individuals nor collectivities but rather relations.

The paper also identified the implications of Bhaskar's four models of the society-person connection: Methodological individualism implies that individuals create society through their meaningful activities while methodological holism suggests that society autonomously and coercively shapes the individual. Methodological dialectism argues that person and society dialectically generate each other whereas Bhaskar's own model, the methodological relationism, TMSA contends that society is ontologically autonomous from individuals. That is, although the individual plays no role in creating society exists independently of the person, society's survival depends on people's social activities.

These arguments have significant implications for our understanding of the relationship between social ontology, political epistemology and human praxis. One might argue that the very conceptions of society and agency are closely related to the ways in which politics itself is imagined. Thus, Bhaskar's relational methodology has several advantages over the two prevalent approaches of, namely methodological individualism and methodological collectivism. While the former underpins utilitarianism, liberalism and neo-classical economy, the latter underpins nationalism and/or fascism and Stalinism. In contrast, by leaving space for both personal (psychological) and social actions (sociological), and by recognizing the autonomous existence of these two separate entities, TMSA may provide a more robust ontological, epistemological and methodological basis for the transformation of the socio-political structures towards democratic politics.

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Öz: Failin toplumla ilişkisi, sosyal bilimlerde klasik bir sorundur. Literatür, çoğunlukla ve uzun zamandır iki ana metodolojik pozisyonun, metodolojik bireyciliğin ve metodolojik holizmin hakimiyeti altındadır. Bunlar sırasıyla bireyleri ve kolektiviteleri toplumun kurucu parçaları olarak görürler. İlki, toplumsal gerçekliğin atomistik, tarih ve toplumsallık dışı bir anlayışından muzdaripken, ikincisi, kişiyi toplumsal nesnede eritme eğilimindedir ve onu şeyleşmiş bir varlık olarak görür. Bu çalışma, Roy Bhaskar'ın düşüncesindeki toplum ve kişi bağlantısı kavramsallaştırmasını anahtar metinleriyle incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, metodolojik bireycilik ve metodolojik holizmin aksine toplumun ilişkilerden oluştuğunu savunmaktadır. Ayrıca, toplumun varlığı insana önceldir, fakat var kalabilmesi için insan praksisine bağımlıdır ve bu ikisi arasında ontolojik bir boşluk vardır. Böylesi bir çözümlemenin siyaset bilimi ve siyaset sosyolojisi açısından önemli içerimleri vardır. Metodolojik bireycilik liberalizm, faydacılık ve neo-klasik ekonominin temelini oluştururken, metodolojik holizm milliyetçiliği, faşizmi ve Stalinizmi payandalamaktadır. Kişi ve toplumun kendine özgü ontolojilerini tanıyan metodolojik ilişkiselcilik ise mevcut sosyo-politik yapıların dönüşümüne ve siyasetin demokratikleştirilmesine zemin hazırlayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplum, kişi, bireycilik, holizm, diyalektizm, ilişkiselcilik, dönüşümsel toplum modeli.