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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Ontological Status of Social Constructs and the Myth of Objectivity in Social Inquiry

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| ABSTRACT
This article investigates the enduring tension within the social sciences between the acknowledgment of social phenomena as constructed realities and the continued pursuit of objective knowledge. It argues that the conventional positivist model of objectivity, often implicitly adopted, is fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the social world. In its place, this paper proposes a revised framework for objectivity grounded in a critical realist ontology. This approach provides a philosophically robust foundation for social inquiry by affirming the real, causal power of social constructs while simultaneously recognizing their dependence on human practices and institutions. By deconstructing the "myth of objectivity" as a value-free "view from nowhere," the article advances a conception of objectivity rooted in the rigor of the research process and the critical engagement of the scientific community. Through an examination of foundational theories in social ontology and a synthesis with the methodological principles of critical realism, this paper outlines a path for the social sciences that avoids the twin pitfalls of scientism and relativism, ultimately affirming the potential for a critical and objective science of the social.

| KEYWORDS

Social ontology, social construction, objectivity, critical realism, research methodology, philosophy of social science

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The social sciences have long grappled with a foundational dilemma: how to reconcile the understanding that their objects of study, i.e. cultures, institutions, identities, and norms, are fundamentally social constructs with the scientific aspiration to produce objective, reliable knowledge about them. This pressure creates a persistent philosophical strain, often pushing researchers towards one of two untenable poles: a positivist mimicry of the natural sciences that ignores the unique nature of social reality, or a slide into relativism that abandons the very possibility of objective claims. The central problem is that the dominant, inherited model of objectivity, which presupposes a clear separation between the observer and an independent, external world, breaks down when the "world" being studied is constituted by the very beliefs, practices, and interpretations of the observers themselves. This article argues that the traditional, positivist conception of objectivity, often characterized as a "*view from nowhere*" (Nagel,1986), is not merely difficult to achieve in social inquiry but is a philosophically incoherent myth. Its pursuit has led to methodological distortions and a misunderstanding of the scientific enterprise as it applies to the social realm. This paper contends that a more robust and defensible model of objectivity is possible, but it requires a fundamental shift in our underlying ontological assumptions. The proposed solution is a framework grounded in critical realism, a philosophy of science that provides a complex way to understand the reality of social constructs

while providing a rigorous foundation for scientific investigation(Bhaskhar,2013). By embracing a stratified ontology that distinguishes between the empirical, the actual, and the real, critical realism allows the treatment of social structures as real, causally efficacious generative mechanisms, even as we acknowledge their constructed and contingent nature. To build this argument, this article will proceed in a series of structured steps. First, it will delve into the field of social ontology to clarify what it means for something to be a "*social construct*," drawing on the foundational work of thinkers like John Searle and Sally Haslanger to establish that constructed does not mean unreal(Searle,2018;Haslanger,2012). Second, it will deconstruct the "*myth of objectivity*," tracing its roots in the Weberian ideal of value-freedom and examining the powerful philosophical and feminist critiques that have revealed its limitations(Longino,2020; Weber et al.,1951). Third, the article will introduce the core tenets of critical realism as a methodological foundation, focusing on its stratified ontology and its distinctive mode of inference, *retroduction*. Finally, it will synthesize these threads to propose a new, critical realist model of objectivity for the social sciences, one that is not value-free but is disciplined, not detached but is critical, and that reaffirms the vital role of social science in generating objective knowledge for the purpose of human development.

2. The Ontology of the Social World: What is a Social Construct?

Before we can assess the possibility of objective knowledge about the social world, we must first clarify the nature of that world. The field of social ontology is dedicated to this task, investigating the existence and properties of social entities such as institutions, money, gender, and law(Epstein,2024). It asks the fundamental question: *What does it mean for something to be "social," and how is this different from being "natural"*? Understanding the ontological status of social phenomena is not a mere philosophical exercise; it is a necessary prolegomenon to any coherent social scientific methodology. If social kinds are fundamentally different from natural kinds, then the methods used to study them must also be appropriately distinct.

2.1. The Domain of Social Ontology

Social ontology, as a branch of metaphysics, is concerned with the basic building blocks of the social world. Brian Epstein (2024) defines it as "*the study of the nature and properties of the social world... concerned with analyzing things in the world that arise from social interaction*" (pp.10). This domain includes a vast array of phenomena that social scientists study, from the macro-level structures of the state and the economy to the micro-level interactions of a conversation. The central challenge is to explain how these entities are "*constructed*" and what gives them their particular character. This inquiry can be divided into two related questions: first, what are the constituents or membership conditions of social things (*What makes a piece of paper money?*), and second, how are these social categories set up or "anchored" in the first place (*What makes it possible for us to have the category of "money" at all?*)(pp. 15-20).

2.2. Foundational Theories of Social Construction

To grasp the concept of a social construct, it is useful to turn to some of the most influential theories in the field. John Searle, in his seminal work *The Construction of Social Reality*, provides a powerful framework for understanding how social facts emerge from physical reality. He draws a crucial distinction between **"***brute facts***,"** which exist independently of human thought, and **"***institutional facts***,"** which depend on human institutions for their existence (Searle,2018). The author argues that institutional facts are created and maintained through a process of collective intentionality, which he encapsulates in the formula: **(**X counts as Y in C**).** This means that a brute object or action (X) is assigned a new status and function (Y) within a specific context of collective agreement or acceptance (C). For example, a specific piece of printed paper (X) counts as a twenty-dollar bill (Y) within the context of the United States' monetary system (C). The function assigned to Y is one that it could not perform solely by virtue of its physical (X) properties; it can be used to purchase goods and services only because we collectively recognize its status. This "*status function*" is the hallmark of an institutional fact. For Searle, language and, specifically, "declarations" (a type of speech act) are crucial for bringing these institutional facts into being and sustaining them over time(Searle,2006). While Searle's account is foundational, other philosophers have highlighted the need for greater nuance. Sally Haslanger, for instance, emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between different senses of "*social construction*" (Haslanger,2012) . She argues that we must be clear whether we are making an ontological claim about the nature of an object itself or an epistemological claim about our concepts or knowledge of it.

Furthermore, she distinguishes between different ways something can be constructed, such as being the causal product of social factors versus being constitutively dependent on them. For example, while a building is causally constructed by social activity, its status as a *university* is constitutively constructed by a web of social agreements and practices. This distinction is vital for avoiding confusion and for understanding the complex ways in which reality is shaped by social forces. This work builds upon the earlier sociological insights of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, whose classic treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality*, described the process by which humans create a shared, inter-subjective social world through processes of externalization, objectivities, and internalization(Simpson et al.,1967). For them, social reality is a human product, but one that comes to confront its creators as an objective facticity.

2.3. The Reality of Social Constructs

A common misunderstanding is to equate "*socially constructed*" with "*unreal*," "*illusory*," or "*arbitrary*." However, as the theories above demonstrate, this is a profound mistake. Social constructs are real in the most meaningful sense: they have objective, observable, and powerful causal effects on the world. The institutional fact of a national border, though invisible and dependent on collective agreement, can determine whether a person lives or dies. The social construct of gender has profound and tangible effects on individuals' life chances, experiences, and material well-being. The value of a dollar is a social construct, but it is a construct that shapes the global economy. Therefore, the ontological challenge for social science is not to question the reality of these constructs, but to understand their unique mode of existence. They are real, but their reality is dependent on the ongoing beliefs and practices of human agents. They are objective in the sense that they are external to and coercive over any single individual, yet they are subjective in the sense that they would not exist at all without collective human consciousness. It is this dual nature that makes the question of objectivity in social inquiry so complex and fascinating.

3. The Myth of Objectivity: Deconstructing the View from Nowhere

The aspiration to objectivity is arguably the defining characteristic of science. It is the basis for its epistemic authority and the source of its cultural prestige. However, the concept of objectivity is far from straightforward, and its application to the social sciences is fraught with difficulty. The dominant conception, inherited from positivism, treats objectivity as a procedural ideal of value-freedom and as an epistemological stance of detached observation. This section deconstructs this traditional view, arguing that it constitutes a "myth" that is both unattainable and undesirable for social inquiry. It examines the philosophical and feminist critiques that have exposed the flaws in this model and points toward a more robust, socially-grounded understanding of objectivity.

3.1. The Weberian Ideal and Its Positivist Legacy

The modern debate over objectivity in the social sciences begins with Max Weber. In his influential essays on methodology, Weber argued for a "value-free" (*wertfrei*) social science (see Weber et al.,1951). He contended that while values are inevitably and legitimately involved in the *selection* of research topics ,an idea he termed "*value-relevance*", they must be rigorously excluded from the process of analysis itself. The goal of the social scientist, for Weber, was to provide a causal explanation of social phenomena, not to make value judgments about them. The validity of a scientific argument should be independent of the researcher's moral or political commitments. However, Weber's position was often simplified and hardened as it was absorbed into the positivist tradition that dominated mid-XXth-century social science. Positivism, inspired by the perceived successes of the natural sciences, sought to unify all sciences under a common methodology. This methodology was characterized by a strict separation between empirical facts and subjective values. Objectivity, in this view, became synonymous with the complete eradication of the researcher's subjectivity. The ideal was to create a mirror of reality, a pure description of "the facts" untainted by personal bias, political agendas, or theoretical presuppositions. This is the essence of what Thomas Nagel famously called the "*view from nowhere*", a perspective-less perspective that captures the world as it truly is, independent of any particular observer (Nagel,1986).

3.2. Philosophical and Feminist Critiques

Over the past half-century, this positivist ideal of objectivity has been subjected to a sustained and devastating critique from multiple quarters. Philosophers of science have demonstrated that a purely neutral, theory-free

observation language is impossible. All observation is "*theory-laden*"; what we see is shaped by the conceptual frameworks we bring to the act of observation(Kuhn& Schlegel,1963). We cannot simply observe "*the facts*" because our theories determine what counts as a fact in the first place. This insight undermines the foundational positivist distinction between the raw data of experience and the theoretical interpretations imposed upon it. Furthermore, the ideal of complete value-freedom has been shown to be untenable. As Helen Longino argues, values are not just a potential contaminant but are integral to the scientific process itself (see Longino,2020). She distinguishes between **"constitutive values,"** which are the internal, epistemic values necessary for the practice of science as accuracy or consistency, and **"contextual values,"** which are the social, political, and cultural values that shape the environment in which science is done. While positivists might concede the role of constitutive values, they insist on the exclusion of contextual values. Contextual values influence which questions are asked and which are ignored, how data is interpreted, and which hypotheses are deemed plausible. The goal, therefore, should not be the impossible task of eliminating values, but of making them explicit and subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Feminist philosophers of science have developed some of the most powerful critiques of traditional objectivity. They have shown how supposedly neutral and objective scientific accounts have often been infused with andocentric biases, naturalizing social hierarchies and rendering women's experiences invisible. Sandra Harding, a prominent figure in this field, argues that the ideal of a detached, dispassionate observer is not only a myth but a politically pernicious one, often serving to mask a dominant, privileged perspective under the guise of universality. In its place, she proposes the concept of **"strong objectivity"** (Harding,1996). Strong objectivity begins by acknowledging that all knowledge is socially situated. Instead of striving for an impossible detachment, it advocates for starting research from the standpoint of marginalized and oppressed groups. The argument is that those on the margins of a social system may be able to see its underlying structures and assumptions more clearly than those at the center, for whom the status quo appears natural and inevitable. This "*standpoint epistemology*" does not reject objectivity but redefines it, arguing that a more complete and less distorted understanding of reality can be achieved by critically examining the social position of the knower.

3.3. Reconceptualizing Objectivity

Taken together, these critiques demonstrate that the myth of a value-free, detached, and purely individualistic objectivity is no longer tenable. If objectivity is to be a meaningful ideal for social inquiry, it must be re-conceptualized. The emerging consensus is that objectivity should be understood not as a property of individual scientists but as a characteristic of scientific communities(Longino,2020). It is not achieved through the impossible purification of the individual mind, but through the social processes of critical dialogue, peer review, replication, and structured debate. An objective claim, in this view, is not one that is free from all perspective, but one that has survived a rigorous process of communal scrutiny from a diversity of perspectives. This social conception of objectivity moves the focus from the virtues of the scientist to the virtues of the scientific community, emphasizing the importance of diversity, openness to criticism, and shared standards of evidence and argument. This revised understanding of objectivity is far more compatible with the nature of social inquiry. It acknowledges the inevitability of values and perspectives while still providing a basis for distinguishing between more and less reliable claims. However, it still requires a solid ontological foundation. If objectivity arises from a community's engagement with evidence, what is the nature of that evidence in the social world? This is where critical realism provides the necessary next step.

4. A Methodological Foundation: Critical Realism

If the social world is composed of real, causally efficacious constructs, and if objectivity is a social achievement rather than an individual purification, then social science requires a philosophical framework that can accommodate both of these insights. Neither traditional positivism, which struggles with the constructed nature of social reality, nor strong social constructionism, which can slide into relativism, provides an adequate foundation. Critical realism, a philosophical movement primarily developed by Roy Bhaskar(2013), offers a powerful and coherent alternative. It provides the ontological depth and methodological rigor needed to ground an objective science of social constructs.

4.1. An Introduction to Critical Realism

Critical realism positions itself as a "third way" between the empirical realism of positivism and the idealism of post-modernist constructivism. It is built upon three core philosophical principles:

1 **Ontological Realism:** This is the foundational assertion that a world exists independently of our knowledge or consciousness of it. This reality is complex, structured, and stratified. This principle stands in direct opposition to any philosophy that would reduce reality to our thoughts or discourse about it.

1 **Epistemological Fallibilism:** This principle acknowledges that our knowledge of this independent reality is always fallible, partial, and socially and historically conditioned. Our access to the world is always mediated by our concepts and theories. This stands in opposition to the positivist belief in direct, unproblematic access to facts.

2 **Judgmental Rationality:** Despite the fallibility of our knowledge, this principle maintains that it is still possible to make rational judgments between competing theories. We can have good reasons to believe that one theory is closer to the truth, more explanatorily powerful, or less false than another. This allows critical realism to avoid the relativism that often plagues strong constructionist accounts.

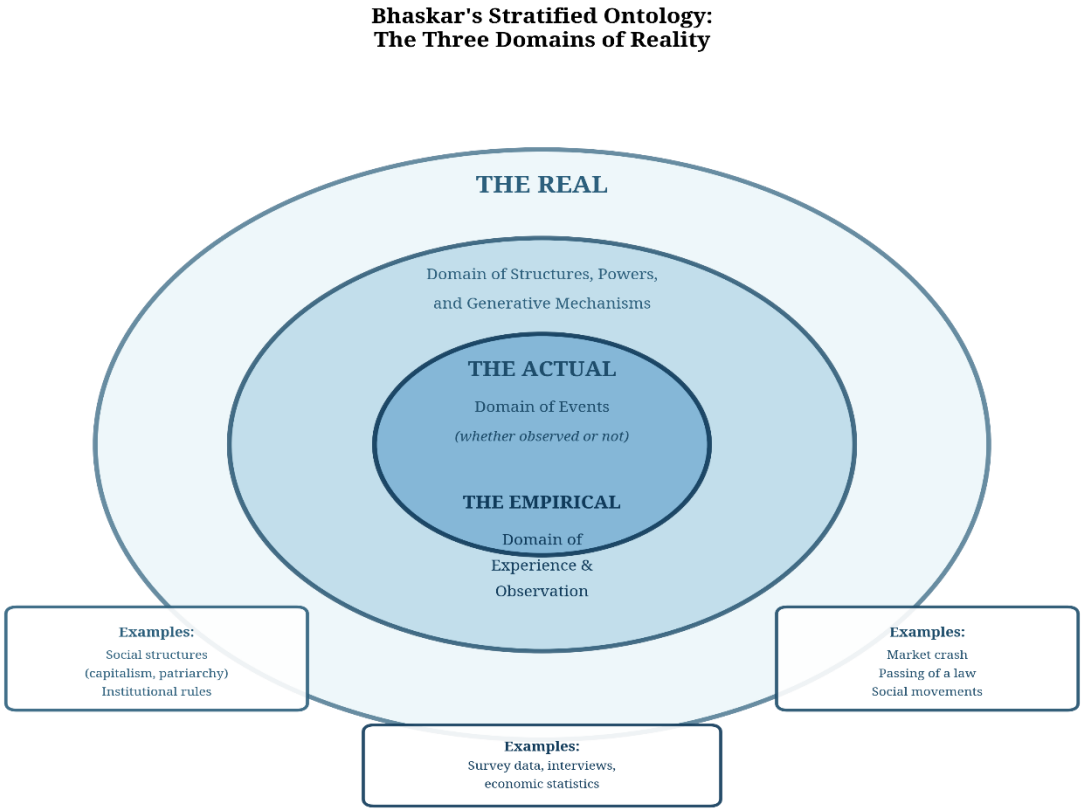
Together, these principles create a philosophy of science that is both realist about the existence of the world and its causal structures, and sophisticated about the fallible, theory-laden process of scientific inquiry. Bhaskar famously asks a transcendental question: "*What must the world be like for science to be possible*?" (Bhaskar,2013). His answer is that the world must be structured and stratified, full of enduring entities and generative mechanisms that exist and operate whether or not we are aware of them.

4.2. A Stratified Ontology

The most distinctive feature of Bhaskar's critical realism is its concept of a stratified reality. He argues that reality is composed of three overlapping domains:

- **The Domain of the Empirical:** This is the domain of our experiences and observations. It is what we see, hear, and measure. For positivists, this is the entirety of reality, or at least the only part that can be scientifically studied.
- **The Domain of the Actual:** This is the domain of events. It includes all events that happen, whether or not they are observed or experienced by humans. The empirical is thus a subset of the actual.
- **The Domain of the Real:** This is the deepest and most fundamental domain. It consists of the underlying structures, powers, and **generative mechanisms** that produce the events in the domain of the actual. These mechanisms are the true objects of scientific inquiry. A mechanism may exist and have the potential to cause events, but it may not be activated, or its effects may be counteracted by other mechanisms, meaning no event occurs in the actual domain. Figure 1 gives a view of this theory.

Figure 1: Bhaskar's Stratified Ontology



This stratified view is revolutionary for the social sciences. It allows us to understand social structures (like capitalism, patriarchy, or the state) as existing in the domain of the Real. They are real generative mechanisms with causal powers. They produce actual events like the passing of a law, some of which we may observe empirically through case studies. These social structures are not directly observable in their entirety, but we can know them through their effects. Their reality is not dependent on our observing them, but it is dependent on the continuation of the human practices and beliefs that reproduce them.

4.3. Methodological Implications for Social Inquiry

The stratified ontology of critical realism has profound methodological implications. If the goal of science is to understand the generative mechanisms in the domain of the Real, then the methods of science cannot be limited to observing regularities in the domain of the Empirical. Positivist methods, which often focus on finding statistical correlations between observable variables, are seen as insufficient because such correlations are merely surface phenomena. A correlation between two variables (A and B) does not explain the underlying causal mechanism that connects them. In place of the deductive or inductive models of positivism, critical realism places **retroduction** (also known as abduction) as the primary mode of scientific inference. Retroduction is a creative and explanatory mode of reasoning that moves from a description of some phenomenon to a hypothesis about the structure or mechanism that could have produced it. The reasoning follows this pattern: "*Here is a surprising empirical phenomenon; this phenomenon would be explained if a particular underlying mechanism existed; therefore, there is reason to believe that this mechanism exists*." The task of the researcher is then to design further studies to test for the existence and operation of this postulated mechanism. This approach provides a rigorous logic for qualitative research, case studies, and theoretical work, which are often marginalized in a positivist framework. It allows the social scientist to move beyond mere description of social life to a causal explanation of why things are the way they are, by identifying the real, socially constructed generative mechanisms that shape our world.

5. Synthesis: A Critical Realist Model of Objective Social Inquiry

The preceding sections have established three key pillars for our argument: first, that the social world is composed of real, causally powerful social constructs; second, that the traditional positivist model of objectivity is a myth and must be replaced by a social, process-based conception; and third, that critical realism offers a sophisticated ontological and methodological framework for understanding a stratified reality. Now we synthesize these pillars to construct a coherent and defensible model of objectivity for social inquiry, a model that is uniquely suited to the challenges of studying a world that we ourselves have created.

5.1. Integrating Social Construction and Realism

A critical realist framework provides the crucial philosophical bridge between the seemingly opposed concepts of social construction and realism. It allows us to affirm, without contradiction, that social structures are both human-dependent creations and real, objective features of the world. The key lies in the stratified ontology. Social constructs like institutions, economic systems, or gender norms are understood to exist in the domain of the **Real** as generative mechanisms. Their reality is not ephemeral or merely discursive; they have real causal powers that generate actual events and empirical outcomes. However, unlike the generative mechanisms of the natural world, the mechanisms of the social world have a unique ontological status. They are **activity-dependent** and **concept-dependent**. They do not exist independently of the human activities that reproduce them and the human beliefs that sustain them. For example, the capitalist economic system (a generative mechanism) only continues to exist because people engage in specific practices (working for wages, investing capital, buying commodities) and hold certain beliefs (about property, value, and exchange). If these practices and beliefs were to cease on a mass scale, the mechanism itself would dissolve or be transformed. This is the central insight that allows critical realism to integrate social construction. The social world is not a collection of brute facts waiting to be discovered, as a naive positivist might assume. It is a set of constructed and reproduced structures that pre-exist and constrain any given individual, functioning as an objective reality for that individual. As Bhaskar notes, society is an "*unacknowledged condition, a necessary presupposition, for all intentional human action*" (Bhaskar,2013) . We are born into a world of pre-existing social structures that we did not create, and these structures provide the material and cultural resources for our actions while also constraining them. This resolves the false dichotomy between agency and structure; human agents reproduce or transform the very structures that make their actions possible.

5.2. A New Model for Objectivity

Building on this synthesis, we can now propose a new model for objectivity in social inquiry. This **critical realist objectivity** is not about achieving a value-free "*view from nowhere*." Instead, it is about the disciplined scientific pursuit of the most accurate and explanatorily powerful account of the real, socially constructed generative mechanisms that produce social phenomena. The objectivity of a claim is secured not by the supposed neutrality of the researcher, but by the rigor of the explanatory critique it offers.

This model has several key features:

3 **Explanatory Power as the Criterion of Objectivity:** The primary goal is explanation, not just description or prediction. An inquiry is objective to the extent that it successfully identifies and elucidates the underlying generative mechanisms that explain an observed social phenomenon. A study that merely documents a correlation between poverty and poor health is less objective, in this model, than a study that uncovers the specific social, economic, and political mechanisms that generate this correlation.

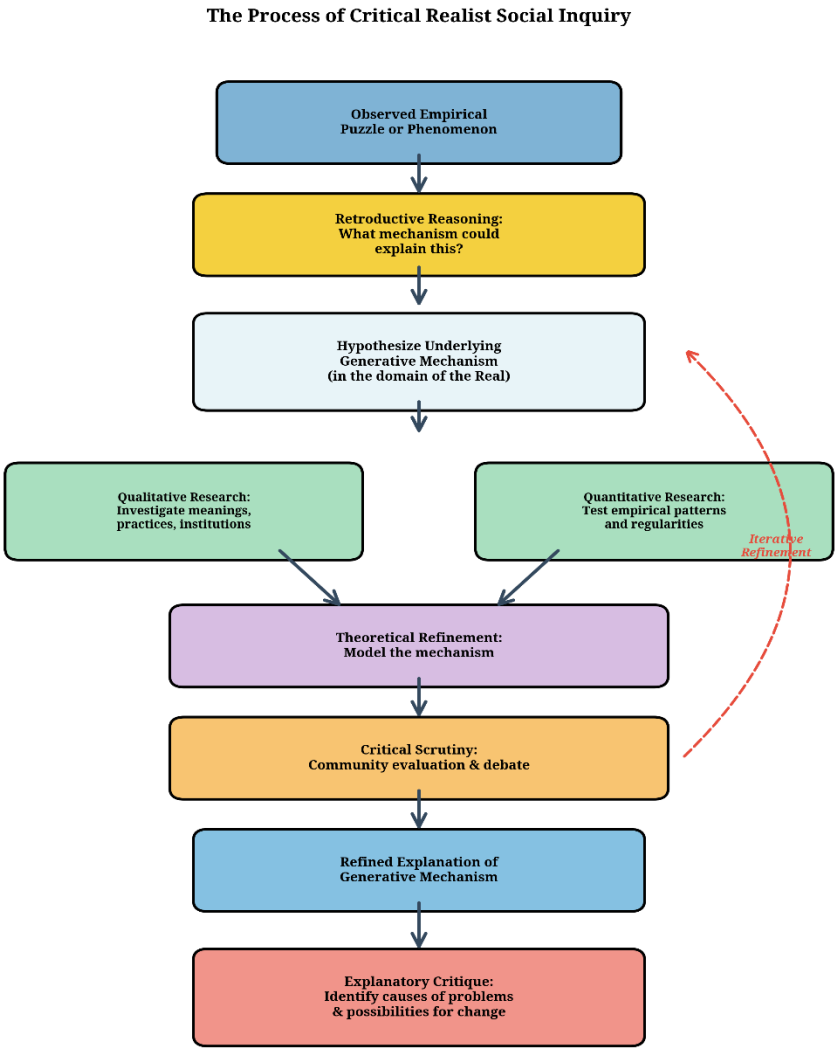
4 **Embrace of Value-Relevance and Critical Intent:** This model acknowledges the role of values in guiding research (value-relevance). Indeed, it often begins with a normative impulse,a desire to understand the causes of a social problem like inequality, injustice, or suffering. Objectivity is not compromised by this critical intent; it is enhanced by it. The goal is to produce an objective explanation *in order to* facilitate a critique of the conditions that cause the problem. This is what Bhaskar calls **explanatory critique**: moving from a factual explanation of what causes a problem to a negative value judgment on those causes, and thus to a practical commitment to changing them.

5 **Methodological Pluralism:** Because generative mechanisms are not directly observable, no single method is sufficient. Critical realist objectivity calls for methodological pluralism. Researchers must creatively combine quantitative methods (to identify empirical patterns and regularities), qualitative methods (to understand the beliefs, meanings, and practices that constitute the mechanisms), and theoretical work (to build models of the mechanisms themselves). The choice of methods is determined by the nature of the object of study, not by an a priori methodological hierarchy.

6 **Objectivity as a Communal, Dialogical Process:** Finally, this model is fully compatible with the social, process-based conception of objectivity discussed earlier. The claims made about generative mechanisms are fallible hypotheses. Their objectivity is tested and refined through a process of critical dialogue within the scientific community. This process involves empirical testing, logical analysis, and debate between competing explanatory accounts. A claim becomes more objectively warranted as it demonstrates its superior ability to explain the evidence and withstand critical scrutiny from a diverse range of perspectives.

The following figure 2 shows the flowchart of the multi-stage process of inquiry in a critical realist framework, moving from empirical observation to the explanation of deep generative mechanisms.

Figure 2: The Process of Critical Realist Social Inquiry



In summary, a critical realist model redefines objectivity for the social sciences. It moves away from the impossible ideal of a detached, value-free observer and towards the practical goal of producing the most powerful and well-supported explanations of the social world. It is an objectivity that takes social construction seriously, embraces its critical potential, and grounds itself in a rigorous, pluralistic, and communal process of inquiry.

6. Discussion and Implications

The adoption of a critical realist framework for understanding ontology and objectivity has profound implications for both the day-to-day practice of social research and the broader identity and purpose of the social sciences. By moving beyond the exhausted debates between positivism and relativism, this model provides a foundation for a more confident, relevant, and critical scientific practice. It reorients the research process and reframes the role of the social scientist in society.

6.1. Implications for Research Practice

At a practical level, a critical realist approach encourages significant shifts in how research is designed, executed, and interpreted. First, it champions **methodological pluralism** not as a matter of convenience, but of ontological necessity. If reality is stratified, then no single method can capture it. Quantitative methods are essential for identifying empirical patterns and regularities at the surface level of reality, providing the *explananda* (the phenomena to be explained). However, they are insufficient for uncovering the underlying generative mechanisms. Qualitative methods, such as ethnography, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis, become crucial for investigating the institutional rules, social relations, and shared meanings that constitute those mechanisms. The goal is to integrate these methods, using qualitative insights to explain quantitative patterns, and quantitative data to test the large-scale effects of qualitatively identified mechanisms. Second, this framework re-legitimizes the role of **theory**. In a purely empiricist framework, theory is often seen as secondary to data. In a critical realist model, theory construction is a central and creative part of the scientific process. The development of abstract models of generative mechanisms (retroduction) is a key research outcome. This encourages researchers to be more ambitious, moving beyond descriptive accounts or low-level statistical models to build rich, substantive theories that offer deep causal explanations. Third, it changes the way researchers interpret their findings. A critical realist researcher is less interested in making universal, law-like generalization, which are rare in an open system like society, and more interested in **contextualized explanation**. The focus is on understanding how specific generative mechanisms operate in particular contexts and in combination with other mechanisms. This leads to a more nuanced and realistic understanding of social phenomena, acknowledging their complexity and contingency without sacrificing explanatory rigor.

6.2. Broader Implications for the Social Sciences

The implications of this framework extend beyond the individual researcher to the collective identity of the social sciences. For decades, the social sciences have been caught in a crisis of confidence, caught between the charge of being "*soft*" or unscientific (by the standards of positivism) and the charge of being complicit in power structures (by the standards of post-modern critique). Critical realism offers a way out of this impasse. It provides a robust philosophical justification for the scientific status of the social sciences that does not require them to mimic the methods of physics. It affirms that social science can and does produce objective knowledge about real causal structures. This provides a firm response to the charge of relativism. At the same time, it fundamentally embeds a **critical and emancipatory impulse** into the scientific process itself. By uncovering the socially constructed and therefore contingent mechanisms that produce social problems like inequality, oppression, or alienation, social science provides the necessary knowledge for challenging and changing those mechanisms. The goal of science is not merely to understand the world, but to understand it in order to change it for the better.

This reframes the relationship between science and society. The social scientist is not a detached, neutral observer but an engaged and critical participant. The knowledge they produce is not meant to be a final, dispassionate word, but a tool for informing public debate and empowering social action. This model provides a powerful rationale for a public-facing social science that is unafraid to tackle the most pressing issues of our time, armed with the confidence that it can do so in a way that is both scientifically objective and socially responsible.

7. Conclusion

This article has navigated the complex and often contentious terrain of ontology and objectivity in social inquiry. It began by highlighting the foundational tension between the constructed nature of social reality and the scientific quest for objective knowledge. The argument advanced here is that this tension can be productively resolved, but only through a significant philosophical reconstruction. The traditional model of objectivity, inherited from positivism and characterized by the myth of a value-free "view from nowhere," was shown to be philosophically untenable and practically unworkable for the social sciences. The alternative developed in this paper is a model of **critical realist objectivity**. This model is built upon a sophisticated social ontology that takes social construction seriously, recognizing that constructs like institutions and norms are both dependent on human activity and real in their causal consequences. By embracing the critical realist principle of a stratified reality, we can understand these constructs as deep generative mechanisms that produce the events and experiences of our social world. This ontological foundation makes possible a new conception of objectivity. Objectivity is not located in the detached mind of the individual researcher but in the rigor and explanatory power of the scientific process itself. It is a process aimed at identifying and explaining the real, underlying causes of social phenomena. This form of objectivity is not value-neutral; it is often driven by a critical impulse to understand and address social problems. It is methodologically pluralistic, theoretically ambitious, and communally validated. Ultimately, this framework provides a path forward for a social science that is confident in its scientific status and clear about its social purpose. It avoids the scientism of positivism and the relativism of strong constructionism, offering a "third way" that is both philosophically sound and practically empowering. By understanding that the social world is a constructed reality, we can recognize that it is also a transformable one. The highest aim of an objective social science, therefore, is to provide the knowledge that is necessary for that transformation—to help us move from the world as it is to the world as it could be.

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