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## Putnam's Realisms: A View from the Social Sciences

### I

For the last three decades, the discussion on Hilary Putnam's provocative suggestions around the issue of realism has raged widely. Putnam's various formulations of, and arguments for, what he called internal realism in contrast to what he called metaphysical realism have been scrutinised from a variety of perspectives. One angle of attack has been missing, though: the view from the social sciences and the ontology of society. This perspective, I believe, will provide further confirmation to the observation that Putnam's two concepts of realism are all too aggregative in that they conflate elements that had better be kept distinct, at least for many important purposes (e.g. Niiniluoto 1996).

The present essay can be read as an argument for a topic-specific examination of realism. This means that it challenges the overall validity of Richard Boyd's arguments against what he calls "realism about", that is, against "a certain fragmented conception of scientific realism, one according to which realism is deeply topic specific" (Boyd 1990, p. 175). Boyd takes the 'x' in "realism about x" to designate two kinds of things: entities postulated in scientific theories ("realism about the ether" and "realism about higher taxa") and scientific disciplines ("realism about physics" and "realism about biology") (ibid., pp. 175, 190). He also suggests that "it seems possible cogently to accept realism about the natural sciences while denying it about at least some of the social sciences" (ibid., p. 191). In Boyd's view, the possibility of realism about social sciences is undermined by their weak instrumental success; it is the instrumental reliability of method that he takes as the basis for a realist account of science. I do not underwrite this connection between realism and instrumental success, thus I am not compelled to reject realism about social sciences on these grounds; and, as we shall see, social sciences have other peculiarities as well (see Mäki 1996). I think we should, at least to some degree, disaggregate

and relativize the issue of realism. I do have sympathy with Boyd's strategic arguments against "realisms about", but yet I believe realists will be better off by adopting a more concrete and localized approach to the issue (Mäki 2005). Social objects and social sciences deserve a separate treatment.

There are two strategies that can be followed in examining a realism about *x* (type of entity, theory, discipline). One is to first fix the meaning of 'realism' and then specify the extension of '*x*'. This is Boyd's strategy. The other is to fix some part of the extension of '*x*' and then adjust the meaning of 'realism' so as to accommodate whatever peculiarities the *x* in question may have (and finally to check whether the adjusted meaning of 'realism' meets the criteria of a minimal notion of realism; it would be here that we encounter a relatively fixed idea of some minimal realism, or a set of realist intuitions). The latter is my approach here.

I begin with the interconnected ideas of "realism about social objects" and "realism about social sciences". I am not only interested in what comes after 'about'; I am also interested in what goes before it, namely 'realism' itself. Here is one premise of the discussion: the issue of proper forms of realism for dealing with specific problems is an issue to be settled at least partly *a posteriori*. Here is the problem for which a solution will be sought: what constraints, if any, does what we know about the social sciences and society (as depicted by the social sciences and our commonsense views) impose upon the forms of realism that can justifiably be adopted about them?

This paper suggests to offer only some partial insight into this issue. It seeks to do so indirectly by discussing Putnam's characterizations of internal and metaphysical realism. The focus will be on two aspects of Putnam's realisms: [1] the role and kinds of independence and dependence (in relation to the human mind and related things); and [2] the possibility of error. It is shown that the nature of social objects has implications concerning the appropriate constraints on [1] and [2], and thereby on the kinds of realism that are available to social scientists.

## II

For later commentary, we need a list of some of Putnam's characterizations of aspects of the two realisms. Consider first "metaphysical realism".

Metaphysical Realism, aspect 1. "... the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects." (1981, p. 49)

Metaphysical Realism, aspect 2. "... the world is, after all, being claimed to contain Self-Identifying Objects, for this is just what it means to say that the *world*, and not thinkers, sorts things into kinds." (1981, p. 53)

Metaphysical Realism, aspect 3. "There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'." (1981, p. 49)

Metaphysical Realism, aspect 4. "Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things." (1981, p. 49)

Metaphysical Realism, aspect 5. "... *truth* is supposed to be *radically non-epistemic* – we might be 'brains in a vat' and the theory that is 'ideal' from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, 'plausibility', simplicity, 'conservatism', etc., *might be false*." (1978, p. 125)

Of these aspects, 1, 2, and 5 will be the most relevant to our endeavour.<sup>1</sup> That is, in Metaphysical Realism, we will focus on the ideas of mind-independent and self-identifying objects and the idea that even an ideal theory may be false. Let us then turn to a few of Putnam's characterizations of "internal realism", year model 1981:

Internal Realism, aspect 1. "'Objects' do not exist independently of conceptual schemes." (1981, p. 52)

Internal Realism, aspect 2. "*We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description." (1981, p. 52)

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<sup>1</sup> There is no reason to divide aspect 3 into two further aspects – one concerning truth, the other concerning completeness – because the idea of only one true description seems to be intelligible at most if it is also required to be a complete description. Yet, this idea is intelligible only in a weak way; it is not obvious that any philosopher ever has held it. As soon as aspect 1 is further decomposed into the mind-independence, totality, and fixed list of objects (as it should), similar queries can be raised; for example, why should the list of objects be fixed? (See, e.g. Hacking 1983, p. 94; however, see Smart 1995, p. 311.)

Internal Realism, aspect 3. “‘Truth’ ... is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent ‘states of affairs’.” (1981, pp. 49–50)

The import of these three aspects of Internal Realism is intuitively sufficiently clear, but let it be separately emphasized that, according to aspect 3, because the truth of a theory amounts to its idealized rational acceptability, based on the perception that it meets a set of theoretical and operational constraints, no theory that is ideal in this sense can fail to be true. This denies aspect 5 of Metaphysical Realism.

### III

Consider then the nature of social objects. Let us focus on mind-independence in aspect 1 of Metaphysical Realism. We are immediately able to question this idea: social objects are typically depicted as being mind-dependent rather than mind-independent by social scientists (and philosophers writing on social ontology). I think it is fair to say that this peculiarity is regularly neglected in the writing on realism in general; there tends to be an implicit premise of physicalism involved in the general characterizations of realism in terms of mind-independence. An example is Rozema (1992, p. 293) who characterizes Putnam’s Internal Realism as “essentially a post-Kantian form of idealism” which claims that

[us1] “it is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of *us* that determines the fundamental structure and existence of *all* ‘things’”.

This perspective is too aggregative, exemplified here by expressions such as “us” and “all”. [us1] presents itself as a global thesis about all there is. Now if we replace “all” by “social” we end up with a claim that is not a post-Kantian form of idealism and is most likely true in light of what the social sciences say about the nature of the social world. Indeed, from a realist point of view, it seems unproblematic to say that

[us2] It is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of *us* that determines the fundamental structure and existence of *social* things.

I say [us2] is unproblematic from a realist point of view because it seems to describe an evident feature of social reality. On the other hand, it is a highly problematic statement for a realist, because it is also an invitation to reconsider the very notion of realism in this context.

There are many approaches to defining social objects of various kinds that conform to [us2]. Among the definentia of the concept of a social object we find mutual expectations, consensual beliefs, common knowledge, shared meanings, collective acceptance, plural subjects, collectively intentional design, unintended consequences of intentional actions, and other similar notions (see, e.g., Lewis 1969; Collin 1997; Gilbert 1989; Tuomela 1995; Searle 1995). Whatever the details of any particular account, it shares with others the idea that the existence and properties of social objects are dependent on human minds. Take away the minds of people, and you will have taken away social reality. In other words, [us2].

This means that aspect 1 of Metaphysical Realism is incorrect and [us1] as a reading of the respective element of Internal Realism is correct about social objects. Such objects do not exist mind-independently, regardless of whether physical objects do.

#### IV

Let us then look at social objects from the point of view of the possibility of being mistaken about their existence and characteristics. Putnam's Metaphysical Realist thinks that even an ideal theory may be false. This means that a non-ideal theory may also be false – even more likely so. The Metaphysical Realist must think that whatever the warrants of a theory, it is always possible that the world is not the way it is described to be by the theory. Now consider an argument that implies that this Metaphysical Realist picture does not fit with a certain class of social objects. The argument is David-Hillel Ruben's (1989, pp. 70–74), the conclusion concerning Metaphysical Realism is mine.

Ruben discusses social objects defined in terms of their ascribed purposes or functions, such as money (or prison or purchase). Functions can be divided into those that objects actually have and those that they are thought or intended to have. Social objects can be divided into types and tokens (such as money as a generally accepted medium of exchange and a particular bank note in my pocket now). Consider first social token objects. The question is whether we

can be mistaken in classifying certain particular items as money. And it seems that we indeed can be so mistaken. Even though I and all others involved may believe that a certain item is a token of money, an instance of the social kind of money, and proceed using it as if it were, it still may fail to be a money token – because it is a counterfeit, for example. We may fail to correctly classify the item, even if we all believe to be correct about it. Our singular classificatory beliefs don't make the item a money token. There is a sense in which money tokens would seem to be among the objects that aspect 2 of Metaphysical Realism talks about.

The same conclusion does not hold for social types. General classificatory beliefs, if held by everybody, cannot be mistaken in the same way as singular beliefs can. It is not the case that if everyone in a society shares a particular general classificatory belief, then this belief may be false. As Ruben puts it, “there is no distinction at this point to be drawn between a general illusion about the social world and the reality of such a world” (Ruben 1989, p. 72). If everyone in a society believes that there is the institution of money in this society and acts accordingly – that is, according to the rules and conventions defining money – then it has to be the case that the institution of money obtains.<sup>2</sup> Even if general error were possible concerning the physical world, this does not seem possible in the case of (many) social types. To put it in other words: collectively held beliefs often constitute social objects; claim [us2] is true about these objects. Metaphysical Realism does not fit.

These reflections have further implications for the issue of truth. Consider the following formulation of aspect 4 of Putnam's Metaphysical Realism: “There is supposed to be something that the world is like independent of how we conceptualize it. To express a truth, then, should be to give an accurate account of what that unconceptualized world is like. Giving such an account requires a correspondence between an utterance and the unconceptualized world.” (Heller 1988, p. 114) If this is how a Metaphysical Realist should think about truth, then it seems that Metaphysical Realism is not an option when it comes to the truth about a certain class of social objects. As we have seen, these objects are not independent of how we conceptualize them.

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<sup>2</sup> Further qualifications are needed on this statement, but they will be given elsewhere. Without such qualifications, the idea would be disputable.

It should be noted that while aspect 3 of Internal Realism defines truth in terms of idealized rational acceptability, I have not invoked this notion in the above argument. I have suggested that at least some social objects exist in the sense required by aspect 1 of Internal Realism. However, this is not yet to say that the beliefs constitutive of those objects meet the condition of ideal rational acceptability. If it is the case that “the only criterion for what is a fact is what it is [ideally] rational to accept” (1981, p. x), then I am afraid we have to conclude that this criterion is typically not met by the relevant beliefs under consideration. It is often sufficient for the existence and properties of a social object that there is collective acceptance, without the constituent beliefs satisfying such ideal rationality requirements. Thus, it would appear that there are social objects about which aspect 1 (and perhaps aspect 2) of Internal Realism is correct, while aspect 3 is not. Interestingly, this appears to make the conclusion even more radical than if aspect 3 were also satisfied. Mere consensual acceptance may be sufficient to constitute the “reality” of at least some social objects.

## V

There is an important issue concerning claim [us2] that must not be neglected. Consider again [us2], “it is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of *us* that determines the fundamental structure and existence of social things”. The issue I have in mind is related to the extension of ‘us’ here. There are two relevant options available, namely people in roles other than social scientists and people in their roles as social scientists. If ‘us’ is taken to refer to human beings *qua* “members” of society, then the version of (internal) realism that the argument outlined in Section IV above supports is not a form of *scientific* realism. It is rather an idea about the general mind-dependent character of social objects. In this case we would be entitled to accept claim [us3]:

[us3] It is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of people other than social scientists *qua* social scientists that determines the fundamental structure and existence of social things.

If, on the other hand, ‘us’ is taken to refer to social scientists, then what would be at stake would be a form of *scientific realism*. The issue would be about claim [us4]:



[us4] It is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of social scientists *qua* social scientists that determines the fundamental structure and existence of social things.

In this case, the argument of Section IV would be insufficient to resolve the issue; the issue would have many other facets that would require a separate treatment. This is because the existence of the kinds of social objects that we talked about above does not seem to be essentially dependent on “the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour” of social scientists *qua* social scientists. This requires a qualification that will be discussed next.

## VI

Another important ambiguity about [us4] concerns the notion of *determination*. Let us distinguish between two types of determination or “construction”, and let us call them conceptual and causal construction or determination. According to the first idea, social reality is conceptually constructed by theoretical representations of it. According to the second one, social reality is causally constructed by theories about it. (See Mäki 2002; 2005.)

The argument from *conceptual construction* is a version of the idealist doctrine according to which the world is essentially dependent on our thoughts of it, e.g., the world is a creation of our thinking. The version that we are discussing makes the world dependent on our ways of conceptually representing it. There cannot be any gap between the world and our representations, since we make worlds by means of conceptual representations. Accordingly, conceptually representing amounts to world-making rather than world-uncovering or world-discovering.

The argument from *causal construction* is a popular claim and has sometimes been used against realism about social sciences. The implementation of a plan based on a theory is an exemplification of this idea: the world is shaped after a blueprint suggested by the theory. The phenomena of so-called self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecies are also often referred to in this context. In general, the idea is that of the causal materialization of thoughts (plans, expectations, hopes, fears) that are inspired or shaped by social scientific theories.

The first clarificatory point to make is this. It is certainly not the case that *theories* causally produce their objects in society, even though the idea is often formulated in this fashion. Unfortunately, the very phrasing of one of the ideas is misleading here: it is as if the prophecies themselves fulfil or defeat

themselves. At most, if the argument is to make sense, it has to be phrased so as to state that *people* having the contents of those theories as the contents of their beliefs may act so as to causally help produce social realities and changes in them in ways that have consequences for the truth values of those theories.

This suggests a distinction between two statements:

- (A) People inspired by theory T or the prediction it entails engage in action that produces or reproduces a social fact described by T – and they act in that way *because* they are inspired by T or the prediction. T is made true – or the object of T is made real – by people acting on T.
- (B) The act of representing the social world by T creates a social fact – not only does it (re)conceptualize our view of the world, but it also (re)constitutes the structure of the world. T is made true – or the object of T is made real – by people inventing or holding T.

By incorporating this ambiguity about ‘determination’, we get two specified versions of [us4]:

[us5] It is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of social scientists *qua* social scientists that *causally determines* the fundamental structure and existence of social things.

[us6] It is the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of social scientists *qua* social scientists that *conceptually determines* the fundamental structure and existence of social things.

It seems that [us5]<sup>3</sup> is consistent with much of Metaphysical Realism, albeit not with mind-independence, viz. its aspect 1. In particular, claim [us5] is consistent with the denial of aspects 1 and 2 of Internal Realism, provided that the relevant specifications have been made: it is possible, without contradicting oneself, to accept [us5] and reject both “Social ‘objects’ do not exist independently of social scientific conceptual schemes” (aspect 1) and “Social scientists cut up the world into objects when they introduce one or another scheme of description” (aspect 2).

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<sup>3</sup> It is clear that [us5] would require further qualifications. For example, it is usually not the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of *social scientists alone* that might have the causal potency in question.

On the other hand, claim [us6] about conceptual determination is clearly in line with aspects 1 and 2 of Internal Realism and is not open for an externalist interpretation, thus it is incompatible with Metaphysical Realism. Now [us6] is beset with two interesting problems. First, because [us6] talks about social sciences and the role of scientific theories in constructing social reality, it reintroduces the issue of ideality of rational acceptance. Recall this idea was part of Putnam's formulation of Internal Realism. The problem is that it seems that in the social sciences, meeting the condition of ideal conditions or even telling what it would mean to meet it, is harder than in much of the natural sciences. This may be taken as an additional problem to the Internal Realist.

Second, a further complication arises as we add to the picture another characterization of Metaphysical Realism: its aspect 5 says, "the world is, after all, being claimed to contain Self-Identifying Objects, for this is just what it means to say that the *world*, and not thinkers, sorts things into kinds" (1981, p. 53). Elsewhere Putnam characterizes Metaphysical Realism in terms of a pre-categorized, ready-made world (Putnam 1982). Now we have seen that social reality is largely pre-categorized, pre-conceptualized – the subject matter of the social sciences has its own version of what social reality is like: the world and thinkers are not distinguishable as it is the latter that help constitute the former. The social world has its own self-conceptualization and at least many of its objects are self-identifying. Interestingly, then, it appears that a tenet of Metaphysical Realism – described metaphorically as Putnam does – is almost trivially met in the social sciences!

Now we should further disentangle two versions of the idea that social objects are self-identifying. Both can be put in terms that Putnam himself uses (but does not utilize to separate the two versions I am suggesting). One idea is that the social world is pre-categorized. The other is that it is ready-made. To hold that the social world is *pre-categorized* is neutral with respect to the question of whether it should be *re-categorized* by social scientists in terms of theories. To say that society is *ready-made* may be taken to imply that no (or at least no radical) re-conceptualization is called for, rather it is the task of social scientific theorizing to mirror the ready-made categorization out there in society.

Once again, the prevalent views held in the social sciences and their philosophy appear to be mixtures of Internal Realism and Metaphysical Realism. Many of those who are identified as holding a realist philosophy of social science combine the ideas of pre-categorization and re-categorization: the social

world is pre-conceptualized by social actors, but because this “commonsense” view is not flawless (it might be radically misguided in some cases), it is the task of social science theory to offer a less flawed picture of social reality. On the other hand, people like Alfred Schutz and Peter Winch, customarily identified with phenomenology and hermeneutics rather than scientific realism, view the social world as ready-made and impose it as the duty of social theory to conform to its inviolable pre-conceptualization (Schutz 1945; Winch 1958). It is the latter positions that, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, turn out to be closer to the composite view Putnam calls Metaphysical Realism.

## VII

Summing up, some sort of internal realism seems appropriate for characterizing at least some classes of social objects: *realism about social objects* should be of a sort that allows their existence to be dependent on “the cognitive, linguistic, and physical behaviour of” people other than social scientists *qua* social scientists. On the other hand, this concession does not yet settle the other issue of the appropriate sort of (scientific) *realism about social scientific theories*. The above reflections appear to suggest that there is a fairly clear difference between the issue of realism about social objects and the issue of realism about social scientific theories. This is, indeed, how I am inclined to think. The reasons for thinking so have to do with some peculiarities that characterize social sciences: First, the social sciences deal with a mind-dependent and pre-conceptualized subject matter. Second, much of social science modifies those prior conceptualizations and revises commonsense beliefs, but rarely postulates objects of an entirely new kind relative to the commonsense objects (Mäki 1996).

The simple upshot of the observations of this essay is that the nature of social reality and social sciences as we know them appear to fit with Putnam's characterizations of both metaphysical and internal realism, albeit with different aspects of each. An obvious conclusion is that Putnam's two realisms are overly burdened artificial conglomerates and that their components have to be disentangled and treated separately. Moreover, to develop an adequate realism about social objects and social sciences is a challenge that has to be met in a genuinely “naturalist” spirit as a local and *a posteriori* project.

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