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Critical realist anthropology – exemplification of a non-conflationary perspective

SUMMARY

The article illustrates the analytical utility of the perspective of critical realism as applied to a debate on the quality of public eldercare in Norway. Inspired by the philosopher Roy Bhaskar, I argue for an anthropology that acknowledges ontological complexity, particularly as regards the distinction between structure and agency in the formation of social practice. While dominant perspectives in anthropology tend to project unidimensional forms of analysis, often in a conscious attempt to debunk 'Western dualisms', I draw on Bhaskar to argue that such epistemological distinctions reflect aspects of reality. Thus framed – as non-reducible ontological levels – structure and agency need to be analysed in their own separate terms; hence, we should adopt a multifaceted, non-conflationary analytical approach. Applying this perspective, I attempt to mediate between the polar positions in the debate on eldercare and suggest an anthropology that seeks to go beyond empirical phenomena to uncover underlying formative mechanisms, that emphasises temporality in the formation of social praxis, that recognises the existence of ontological levels, and that dares to assess human knowledge about reality.

NORSK SAMMENDRAG*

Med utgangspunkt i en disputt om betingelsene for kvalitet i offentlig norsk eldreomsorg eksemplifiserer jeg sider ved en kritisk realistisk tilnærming til sosialt liv. Inspirert av filosofen Roy Bhaskar argumenterer jeg for en antropologi som anerkjenner ontologisk kompleksitet. Artikkelen fokuserer særlig på skillet mellom strukturelle og handlingsdrevne nivåer i utformingen av sosialt liv. Mens toneangivende antropologiske perspektiver fremmer én-dimensjonale analyser, ofte i en kamp mot «vestlige dualismer», hevder jeg med Bhaskar at slike epistemologiske distinksjoner reflekterer sider ved virkelighetens karakter. Forstått slik – som ikke-reduserbare ontologiske nivåer – må struktur og agens analyseres ut fra sin egenart, ergo er det behov for en mangefasettert analytisk tilnærming. Artikkelen forsøker dermed å formidle mellom de standpunktene som kom til uttrykk i disputten og foreslår mer konkret en dybdeorientert antropologi som går bakenfor empiriske fenomener for å avdekke formative mekanismer, som vektlegger tidsdimensjonen i utforming av sosialt liv, som anerkjenner ontologiske nivåforskjeller og som tillater seg å evaluere menneskelig kunnskap om virkeligheten.

ONTOLOGY | EPISTEMOLOGY | CRITICAL REALISM | STRUCTURE | AGENCY | TEMPORALITY | ELDERCARE

*Translated from Norwegian by John G. Taylor.

The Norwegian Research Council's evaluation of Norwegian anthropology praised the academic community for a solid ethnographic tradition and a willingness to make the discipline relevant to society (Hastrup et al. 2011). On the other hand, the evaluation team was not equally satisfied with researchers' theoretical ambitions: Norwegian anthropology contributes to the development of perspectives and method internationally to only a limited degree. In the follow-up of the evaluation (financed by the Norwegian Research Council through the ISP programme) the academic community took up the challenge in an interesting manner. The ISP projects hold that the academic strength in Norwegian anthropology must be preserved but that it should inform theoretical developments to a larger extent. The academic community's comprehensive ethnographic insights shall provide the basis for the development of perspectives, and it continues to be an aim to contribute to socially relevant theory that focuses on people's life circumstances in the contemporary world.

The ISP projects therefore deal with contemporary themes, and this also holds true for theoretical approaches. Researchers attempt to contribute to the exchanges that currently influence leading international academic journals. While commendable, I have permitted myself to problematize this approach (Bråten 2015) since it is not obvious that the 'hottest' theoretical debates serve to advance the most fruitful perspectives. We have no guarantee that present trends will stabilise, and focusing all our efforts on theory reflecting current thinking may emerge as imprudent in the long term. I repeat here (2015:164) that it is, of course, unwarranted to criticise individual researchers for following their own theoretical interests, but it is nevertheless important to be aware of the collective implications of the choices being made. Alternatively, I suggest it is possible to glance back to debates in Norwegian anthropology and consider whether 'old' perspectives might contain theoretical rudiments of analytical value in current contexts. The perspectives I allude to are what I call (2015) 'classic Norwegian social anthropology' (CNS), particularly the generative process analysis such as developed by Fredrik Barth and associates in the 1960s and 70s (see e.g., Barth 1959, 1981a, 1981b). It is worth noting that the ongoing ISP projects do not refer at all to this theoretical tradition. This, I believe, does not necessarily reflect the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the 'old' perspectives, but rather an excessive degree of 'presentism' in choice of intellectual orientations.

There are certainly valid reasons for this evasion since the generative process analysis is based on quite problematic theoretical presumptions. The approach cultivates empiricism and methodological individualism in a manner that results in the perspective being singularly one-dimensional (Bråten 2015). In the following, I argue that CNS is appropriate to analyse certain *levels* of social life, but that it is insufficient to engender a general social theory. Reidar Grønhaug took Barth's perspective several – promising – stages further in his field/scale theory (1975, 1978), which is centrally concerned with levels of complexity in society. But he, too, evaded the profound theoretical problems at the base of process analysis (Vike 2010, Bråten 2015).

What is essential, in my opinion, is to preserve the basic *realist position* in the perspective. The methodological naturalism that follows from Barth's orientation upholds a clear boundary between epistemology and ontology that unfortunately collapses in much of today's anthropology. As several scholars have pointed out (Holbraad 2012, Graeber 2015), since the 1970s the discipline has focussed quite unilaterally on epistemological dimensions – broadly understood as human *conceptions* of reality. CNS for its part recognises the existence of a reality beyond human conceptualization thereby acknowledging a complex *relation* between 'the map and the terrain'. By sticking to this basic orientation while simultaneously critiquing the position with the aid of philosophers and philosophers of science that have investigated the hallmarks of realism, it should be

possible for the tradition of Norwegian social anthropology to make a greater impact in international discourse.

I have previously discussed (2015) some important stages in such a reorientation commencing with philosopher and scientific theoretician Roy Bhaskar's critical realism. This perspective is extremely complex, and there is insufficient space here to outline an adequate introduction to Bhaskar's ideas or to investigate their theoretical basis (see Collier 1994 for a good introduction, and Bråten 2016 for a Bhaskar-inspired critique of Holbraad's perspectivism).[1] The intention of this article is to utilise these perspectives in a specific, ongoing debate in order to illustrate the empirical-analytical potential in Bhaskar's approach. I choose to illustrate my points, not with an exotic example that would have demanded expert knowledge or a comprehensive ethnographic introduction, but with a Norwegian example that I assume the majority of readers can relate to: the daily life in a public health institution – mealtime in a nursing home. I attempt to show how a Bhaskar-inspired anthropology can add analytical depth to the debate on the quality of care. I commence with the case – situation and interpretations – and sketch the theoretical premises that may provide the basis for a 'rehabilitated' social anthropology.

Mealtime in a nursing home

The point of commencement is Heidi Haukelien's doctoral disputation in Bergen in 2013, and the discussion that arose between her and opponent Frode Fadnes Jacobsen concerning different perspectives on the teamwork at a nursing home where Haukelien had undertaken fieldwork. Since they argued different approaches to an understanding of the micro level – the primary study area of anthropology – the debate is well-suited to illustrate absolutely central theoretical controversies. The polemic form that characterises the defence of a PhD thesis often establishes clear positions, and consequently we attain a good starting point for identifying divergent standpoints and for examining the possibilities for mediation between theoretical positions.

I should emphasise that in the following Haukelien and Jacobsen emerge more as discursive figures than real persons; the cultivated positions they represent in the text are not necessarily representative of their wider professional orientation as researchers. This particularly applies to Jacobsen who – inherent in his role as opponent – is expected to take clear, alternative positions in challenging the candidate's orientation.[2]

In her thesis (2013), Haukelien (hereafter HH) focuses on the dilemmas that health staff, particularly those in front-line service, encounter under the ongoing reform of the public sector in Norway. She argues that a tighter economic framework and prevalent management regimes (New Public Management) place new demands on work practice and influence staff opportunities to carry out good care. There is an undertone in the argument that working conditions are worsened, that quality of care has deteriorated, and that front-line workers are quite without power in the face of this development. The empirical focus in the thesis, broadly stated, is how these dilemmas are handled in the daily routines in health institutions, but HH extends well beyond the specific teamwork situations in her analysis of the development. She is particularly concerned with the institutional and structural circumstances that affect the area of healthcare. Much of Jacobsen's opposition focussed on this analytical choice.

With her interest in the macro circumstances, HH enters a multidisciplinary field, and in her thesis she draws actively on contributions from philosophy, sociology, political science, history and economics. A number of macro contexts are discussed: current management reforms that in turn transform working conditions and the qualitative aspects of care, the increase in social trust as a secondary effect of the historical development of the welfare state, a confidence that is now being undermined in the reorganisation process

in the workplace, and the institutional gendering of work-roles in the sphere of health that contributes to the loss of power by the front-line – mainly comprising women. The final analysis takes us some considerable distance from the specific teamwork situations in the ethnographic setting. With reference to Jorun Solheim's analyses (2002), among others, HH entrenches gender differences at a deep structural level in the advance of capitalism in the 1700s, but she also discusses more current mechanisms which uphold the divisions, not least nurse training.

During the defence, Jacobsen (hereafter FFJ) challenged this basic perspective, using an ethnographic case from the thesis as an illustrative example: a mealtime at a nursing home for persons with dementia (Haukelien 2013:229–231). Here, HH shows how the use of space, and the staff's tempo, body language, tone of expression etc., is adapted to the residents' dementia, thereby creating a qualitatively meaningful mealtime. Through specific knowledge of individual residents, experience with their forms of interaction, strong social skills, and the willingness to do a good job, in one way or another the staff are able to overcome weaknesses in the framework conditions. This case-study consequently illustrates that it is fully possible to establish optimal situations in spite of management reforms and tight budgets.

FFJ's theoretical point is that care is an activity with a distinctive character, a situated social practice that is carried out with reference to its inherent 'nature'. It is, so to say, constitutive of reality from within and from below, relatively independent of framework conditions – and consequently durable and potent. FFJ points to the fact that there is largely historic continuity in care practice in spite of changing macro circumstances (see also Jacobsen 2010, 2014). This continuity can be attributed to the fact that care is largely a bodily phenomenon. Care demands the same form of engaged presence that characterises family life, and these aspects of the home's reproductive order spill over into public care. FFJ formulates this in an article as follows (2010:2014): 'Work in the nursing home is reproductive in the same manner as care in the home since it maintains and preserves life itself.' There is an undertone in the argument whereby the health sector has 'always' been under pressure and that the staff have managed to overcome the limitations of the framework.

My opinion is that FFJ is articulating the typical anthropological standpoint here, and that this orientation has become the hegemonic position in recent international anthropology. We value what is specific in a broad phenomenological sense, and give precedence to studies of situated practices ('the micro level'). It is so to speak here that the 'real' reality is found. In contrast, HH's focus on encompassing institutional and structural circumstances is untypical and can appear 'old-fashioned'. In this article I argue that there is room for both positions – more precisely that both positions are necessary in order to achieve a deeper insight into social life. It follows that HH's macro-orientation is consequently not 'old-fashioned' in the sense of being 'outdated': on the contrary, it represents an important correction to current trends in anthropology.

Critical realism

Debates such as this often boil down to questions of the most relevant *contextualisation* of micro events: What broader connections encompass mealtime in a nursing home? What is the analytical framework required to understand the situation? Or, to formulate this point using Reidar Grønhaug's field/scale theory (1975, 1878): Which macro factors influence the formation of events at the micro level? Inspired by Roy Bhaskar's critical realism, I believe that we must make four analytical moves in order to proceed from 'the small places to the large issues' (see Bråten 2015 for a more comprehensive account), and below, I present these points as a part of the discussion of the doctoral thesis between HH and FFJ.

It is first necessary to emphasise that Bhaskar's thinking represents an 'ontological turn', but completely different to the ontological turn that is currently so popular in anthropology. Bhasker's viewpoint is that 'ontology' refers to a transcendent reality, that is to say, a reality that exists beyond human conceptualisation. He thus operates with a clear division between ontology and epistemology, and with a tendency towards being a realist at the one pole (ontology) and more relativistic at the other (epistemology): reality is real beyond people's comprehension of it, and the human comprehension varies over time and space, and perhaps never becomes complete. The concept of 'ontology' in recent anthropology on the other hand entails the opposite view, particularly in the sub-stream that is designated 'perspectivism' (Viveiros de Castro 2012; see also Holbraad 2012). Here, human conception of reality is regarded *as reality*, and the perspective is thereby positing a multitude of worlds (multinaturalism) in a strong ontological sense. This implies a transposition of the modern rendering of the nature/culture divide (one natural world and several cultural intakes to it), and more narrowly the criticism is directed towards representational thinking in modernity: the 'Western' inclination to understand people's assertions of reality as beliefs or delusions. Within radical perspectivism, beliefs *are* reality; hence the dividing line between epistemology and ontology collapses (Bråten 2016; Graeber 2015).

Bhaskar's concern is not with the discipline of anthropology, but Western philosophy. He criticises dominant philosophers who, he holds, are misguided by 'the epistemic fallacy' (1997:26–35), that is they consider ontological questions as epistemological. In much of modern philosophy, Bhaskar argues, questions about being are reframed as – and thus reduced to – questions about what we can *know* about being. He then goes on to develop an alternative approach based on a much clearer distinction between the world and our knowledge about it, and in the same manner, I argue for a revitalised anthropology based on the premise that reality always surpasses human comprehension. An important implication of this position is that we can never deduce reality from cultural constructions alone, irrespective of whether we regard culture as systems of public symbols , cognitive models, multiple, fluid perspectives or other epistemological aspects. Further, it is important to emphasise that this point is not only an 'academic' concern for Bhaskar; his motivation is moral: he is concerned with understanding people's objective life circumstances in order to improve them (therefore *critical* realism) (Bhaskar 1987). Even though I am primarily concerned in the present text with theoretical problems, there is nevertheless a political question just under the surface of my discussion, too: How can we develop a more socially relevant anthropology?

In the following I discuss four aspects of this perspective. In order to achieve a more realistic and politically potent anthropology, we need to develop theory that advances: i) ethnographic retroduction, ii) temporalizations of social dynamics, iii) ontological stratification, and iv) evaluation of epistemologies. Some of these concepts break with the orientation in classical Norwegian social anthropology, some further develop theoretical rudiments in the tradition, and all challenge basic premises within the so-called 'ontological turn' in the discipline, particularly presuppositions underlying 'perspectivism'.

Ethnographic retroduction

First of all, the analysis should incorporate a logical inference structure which Bhaskar refers to as 'retroduction'. In his view, the classic reasoning modes, induction and deduction, are insufficient to achieve ontological insight since these are directed towards the empirical level – that which is capable of being observed. Bhaskar introduces a fundamental division between 'the empirical' and the underlying mechanisms which bring about the empirical elements, that which he calls 'the real'.[3] He invites us consequently to

go behind the level of empirical manifestations so as to expose deeper dynamics in society, and retroduction is the logical inference form that takes us from observation to mechanism. Methodologically, retroduction implies searching in the empirical details for more general generative principles that can be assumed to create the empirical patterns we observe.

The theoretical justification for this analytical move is that connections on the empirical level can be incidental and therefore not 'real' connections since the empirical is only a form of expression for underlying mechanisms. A specific mechanism will rarely emerge in a pure form at the empirical level, if at all, since it occurs in a complex interplay with other mechanisms. This complexity challenges the fundamental analytical position in much anthropology, the assumption that the empirical, so to say, can be explained empirically. Here, it is not sufficient with ethnographic descriptions, no matter how 'thick', 'experience-near' (Geertz 1973), or phenomenologically precise these are. Moreover, we are spurred to take a more offensive approach than the one that typically characterises ethnographic contextualisation in the discipline – a somewhat loose reference to connections that can be relevant for the phenomena we are studying. Instead of a 'layer on layer' of meaning or context where all 'layers' emerge as equally important, Bhaskar challenges us to explore the various factors relative significance in the formation of the empirical.[4]

HH's Marx-inspired analysis of the gender roles in the nursing home is an example of a leap from empirical phenomena to underlying generative mechanisms, and the same applies to her discussion of trust in the classic welfare state and dynamics in New Public Management. She identifies a number of basic structures, a set of mechanisms which, as a result of their ontological character, have effects in social life. Focus is on the underlying dynamic that constantly comes to expression at the empirical level, and thereby – in the interplay among various mechanisms – establishes regularities that we are able to observe.

FFJ also points to underlying, generative dynamics. That which makes possible sound qualitative services, in spite of tight frameworks, is a 'drive' which is inherent in the practice of care itself. It is more difficult to characterise this 'drive' precisely, but at one level we speak of psychological motivation. We can perhaps explain the durable care practice as a result of humanitarianism (cf. the popular desire to get a job where one 'works with people'), the need for a worthy self-identity associated with a recognition of competence and skills, and qualities in the work community established in the workplace. We can also trace the field's distinctiveness and durability to other, more external mechanisms, as does FFJ in his analysis. The quality of care is affected by the spatial organisation of care institutions, by the fact that embodied domestic practices are brought into the institutional setting (2010:211–212), and by the system of professional training that produces ideals of care and provides 'tools' for treating humans with respect (something which HH also discusses). FFJ sums this up in an article:

> One can … say that different embodied, architectonic and physical dimensions of care work can be more decisive for the task and the rhythm of work than organisational and other changes that are purposefully attempted to be carried out. (Translation from Norwegian; 2010:214)

It is important to note in this connection that Bhaskar recognises motivations as socially formative: they have an ontological status similar to that of mechanisms in social structure (1998:88–131). Analytically, we must therefore take people's reasons for acting in particular ways seriously. They drive their actions; people are, in fact, motivated. This naturally opens up a cultural dimension where people can have broadly different reasons

for their social engagements, and theoretically we are approaching Barth's conceptualisation of values as the driving force in human action (1981, 1993).

Both HH and FFJ's analyses are therefore retroductive. Both attempt to move beyond manifestly ethnographic phenomena, but they point to very different generative mechanisms. More generally, I would maintain that they point to different ontological levels in social life, to different levels of reality. As will be seen in the point on ontological stratification below, this is not necessarily a contradictory proposition. On the contrary, it can be maintained that these diverging positions are *required* in order to achieve a more satisfactory and realistic insight.

Temporalisation of social dynamics

Secondly, we should temporalize social dynamics; that is, introduce a time dimension in analyses of social life. To operate with time as an ontological verity beyond ethnographically varying conceptualisations of time (culturally construed temporalities) provides us with the possibility to analyse social development in a chronological sense, i.e. to understand social life as history. However, the objective of this shift is not primarily to carry out empirical historical writing, but to investigate the dynamics of social change – what occurs in the interchange among different social forces over time (Bråten 2013a). This is an essential question when we attempt to establish the relevant macro context of what takes place in the nursing home – and speculate over the changes that are occurring.

A central point is that generative mechanisms can have different time horizons and consequently disparate effects in the formation of social life. In other words, if we are to understand continuity and change, we must understand the interplay among dynamics with different temporality. This analysis can be undertaken at several levels of social life (see the next point on ontological stratification), but we acquire a special means to understand the relations between structure and agency as the debate between HH and FFJ is much concerned with. In Bhaskar's view, social structure has a long time horizon relative to the action level. There is not a one-to-one relationship between structure and agency in a temporal sense, and consequently these ontological levels have different constitutive powers in social life. The time dimension enables us to recognise that actors are born and socialised in a world that is established prior to any individual, and even though in principle society cannot exist without actors' acting, this is nevertheless the case *relative to each individual action*. Consequently it is a theoretical error to maintain that society is 'constructed' at the action level – as though it is created anew from the ground upwards at each separate moment. Concepts such as 'reproduction' and 'transformation' are more suitable terms since the actors always act in relation to an objectively existing reality that transcends them – human activity is always directed at something which 'is'.[5]

This is an essential theoretical point that has major implications for the analysis of social life, and in this particular respect there was a certain theoretical development within classic Norwegian social anthropology. In contrast to Barth (1991), who insisted on synchronous analyses and argued that reality is created anew in every moment of action (Bråten 2013a), Grønhaug (1974, 1978) does recognise the existence of historic continuities.

Let us see how HH and FFJ discuss temporalisation. First, we note that both consider the incident at the nursing home from a historical standpoint, but in different ways and with quite different implications. FFJ's time horizon appears to be the history of public care, and he makes the point that there have always been stringent economic frameworks, but that care workers have nevertheless managed to get the system to function. In other words, the distinctive character of care is a durability that is impervious to external pressure, thereby generating historic continuity at the micro level. FFJ characterises the

quality of care as 'old-fashioned' (2010:212). This also implies a more optimistic view of the future than that claimed by HH, even though FFJ is also concerned about certain development trends, not least an increasing isolation of nursing home residents from their relatives and the local community (2015).

HH's broad approach implies that she discusses contexts with strongly contrasting temporality: gender roles are rooted in the occurrence of capitalism as a new form of production in the 1700s, but there is also a more specific analysis of nurse training in recent decades that HH maintains reproduces the gender structure. Her analysis of trust as a bi-effect of the welfare state again takes us far back in time. At the same time HH notes a watershed in recent times with the introduction of New Public Management that entails something qualitatively new. As stated, HH's take on developments results in a relatively pessimistic view of the future at the micro level. Ongoing reforms undermine relations of trust in the welfare state, and threaten the quality of work in the field of care and nursing.

I had another time horizon in my mind when I attended the defence of the thesis – the transition from private to public care. I was reminded of narratives I had heard during fieldwork in Norway, of individuals who had spent their lives locked in their own homes on account of various abnormalities. The historic poor houses with 'reversed auctions' over poor relief also arose in my thoughts. The sick and the old were placed with those farmers who demanded the lowest compensation from the community purse, and among these they often had to live in outhouses. We need not go so far back in time before we find family-based and municipal forms of care which clearly were inferior to today's arrangements, and such knowledge is important for assessing the current situation. The situation has improved quite considerably during the centralised welfare state. In other words, examining history can place our arguments in perspective, both analytically and politically. This was, moreover, also a central methodological point in FFJs opposition: how time-depth can provide a more nuanced understanding of institutions' contemporary challenges and performance.

The main point when employing a historical approach is nevertheless that it can help us to understand the dynamics of social change, that is to say the relative significance of different impacts over time – what has more or less formative powers. And immediately, when we formulate the problem in this manner – as a question of the various mechanisms relative significance – we arrive at the next point, namely that ontologically we are concerned with a stratified reality.

Ontological stratification

The concept of stratification is central to Bhaskar's thinking and points to the need to construct an in-depth perspective of social life. As mentioned, Bhaskar maintains that the classic controversy within social science on the significance of structure versus agency reflects an ontological division; that is, structure and agency represent qualitatively different levels of reality. This in turn indicates that they have different types of effect in social life and must therefore be analysed with regard to their distinctive characteristics. In other words, structure and agency are irreducible social dimensions and we therefore need a dualistic analytical approach (Archer 1995)[6] that avoids conflating ontological levels – a non-conflationary perspective. At the same time, we are not dealing with separate worlds; structure and agency are interdependent levels in the formation of social, life – one cannot exist without the other, and a complete analysis of society demands that we understand the interplay between levels.

This dynamic cannot be analysed with an action- or practice-oriented perspective alone, something that represents an enormous challenge for anthropological work. Through empirical research we acquire a rich entry into social dynamics at the action level, how

agency is involved in the formation of persons, relations and lifeworld, while it is more difficult to become aware of the structural circumstances that comprise generative premises for the micro situations which we are studying. I would maintain that anthropology largely lacks the necessary tools to chart and analyse social constitution at this level, and that those scholars attempting to do so – such as Marxists and globalisation theoreticians – frequently end up with quite abstract and/or deterministic analyses (see Knutsen 2014). Using Bhaskar's vocabulary we can argue that anthropology fails to capture the structural level's ontological distinctiveness, and that this failure also easily creates an epistemological blindness. This is especially the case for what could be called the 'post-realist' perspectives in the discipline from the 1960s onwards. Occasionally, public debate, especially on the political left, seems to provide a better insight into structural conditions than anthropological discourse.

On account of its unbalanced focus on the action level, classic Norwegian social anthropology has little to contribute in the investigation of relations among structural and actor-created impacts. On the other hand, it is important to note that Grønhaug did recognize ontological stratification at the action level itself (1975, 1978). He attempted to expose the relative significance of different impacts in the formation of observable social life and operated with a concept of *dominant* social fields. In a somewhat brief article (1991), he also discusses some of the meta-theoretical ideals behind his field/scale perspective. Grønhaug argues that anthropology should strive to be a 'non-conflationary unitary science', meaning that in order to understand human life to the full we are dependent upon several, non-reducible theoretical approaches. This is an excellent summary of the stratification premise in critical realism even though Grønhaug did not operate with the same ontological divides as Bhaskar and other theoreticians that have pursued this line of thought (notably Margaret Archer, e.g. 1995). Instead, Grønhaug remained faithful to the methodological individualism at the base of the process analysis – which overlooks, or denies the structural level (Bråten 2015; see Vike 2010).

Let me give an example of structural dynamics in order to illustrate the point concerning ontological stratification. I formulate this as a blunt proposition in order to clarify the viewpoint: 'It is easier to wind up a collective arrangement than to establish it.' For example, worker's rights are more easily undermined than established. The front-line working conditions in the health service are laboriously fought for over several decades through professional organisation, labour unions and welfare development, but may be rapidly undermined by neo-liberal transnational dynamics, such as that which we now observe in certain branches of Norwegian business, characterised by lower wages, temporary employment and more stringent working conditions. My understanding is that the privatisation of public services would facilitate such trends, also in the care services, since the collective safeguard of working conditions is undermined. In HH's viewpoint, we can consequently expect changes in the substance of care – that deteriorating working conditions for the staff will result in lower standards of care. FFJ and colleagues point to similar developments in a comparative analysis of scandals within profit-driven private care in several Western countries. With reference to Mol (2008), they emphasise the tension between 'the logic of care and that of the market' and advise against the 'seductive power of privatisation' (Lloyd et al. 2014:13). On this point FFJ's optimism is also conditional.

Further, it is probably easier to establish a differentiated form of care based upon means testing and/or payment than to expand the welfare state's universal principles. A narrow economic argument can easily gain ground: in a short-term perspective the universal principal – that all citizens have equal access to welfare services – appears to be more expensive than a means test arrangement. And when almost the entire political spectrum

seems to doubt the long-term viability of the present welfare state, means testing emerges as a rational solution to the problem. In addition, we have the high private affluence in Norway that legitimises the viewpoint that 'people have the ability to pay part of the costs themselves'. Given these discourses, the attempt to expand universal solutions appears to be an uphill task: the discussion will probably become focussed on which universal arrangements should be retained, and the consequences for the care sector can be large. The question becomes who shall have the 'right' to what type of care.

Behind these mechanisms, in my opinion, there are even deeper dynamics that make the changes we observe both logical and powerful. These are partly concerned with structural displacements in relations among different social interests, not least concerning market principles and market actors' incursion into a steadily increasing number of life spheres. The ongoing negotiations on binding agreements for trans-Atlantic trade (TTIP) and regulation of transnational service production (TiSA) threatens even to enshrine market sovereignty for an unforeseeable period. Strong interests strive to ensure private corporations the right to sue states for 'obstructing competition'; something that could make it illegal to reverse the privatisation of public services, including health services (Bennet 2014). In other words, we are definitely not talking about symmetrical and reversible processes at this level, and if we do not understand this structural unevenness, there is a danger that we will also misinterpret the micro situations that we study as anthropologists.

It is important to be clear about the fact that if we endorse the analytical flatness that characterises today's 'ontological' anthropology, we will not be able to identify such problems at all.[7] It will not be possible to formulate the claim itself – that 'it is easier to wind up a collective arrangement than to establish it' – since the assertion is based on two theoretical premises that the ontological turn disallows: i) that a chronological time-line is necessary in order to understand social dynamics (continuities and discontinuities), and ii) that different mechanisms carry different weights in the formation of social life. If we open up either for temporality or stratification, the claim is no longer meaningless but emerges as unprovable. If we recognise ontological stratification but not temporality, we will not be able to trace changes over time; we end up with a synchronous still photograph of the situation – and consequently will not be able to assess the quality of care relative to previous situations and future possibilities. Conversely, should we recognise temporality, but not ontological stratification, the diachronic analysis will be 'flat' and unable to tell us anything about the relative significance of various social forces in the formation of the quality of care. It is first when we recognise both analytical dimensions that we observe the skewness in the dynamics, and this naturally has a number of implications for our insight into conditions for collective arrangements – such as public care – and for our knowledge-based public participation as anthropologists.

How do HH and FFJ handle these challenges? Drawing on Bhaskar, I maintain that relative to each specific situation of action, structure is analytically more prominent than agency, and this point is accommodated in HH's perspective. When we include temporality and stratification into the analysis, the flat (atemporal and/or one-dimensional) conception that it is actors who 'construct' society, fails. It is undoubtedly correct that acting as such (every form of human activity) generates society, but this is only a tautological principle ('without action, society would not have existed'). As anthropologists, what we need is a perspective that can give proportionality to *specific* actions, for example what sort of influence a team of nurses in a nursing home may have on the underlying parameters of their working day, and in that respect it is clearly very limited what the actors can 'construct'. The specific persons in the nursing home which were studied by HH are not able to change the structural conditions for what they do, irrespective of how they act in

everyday life situations. Working arrangements, stop-watch regimes, excessive reporting requirements and gendered working roles fundamentally transcend their action limits. It is correct to say that relative to structural circumstances, these and other care workers are in a powerless situation.

On the other hand, FFJ is right when he insists that the social structure never determines specific situations: structure 'only' creates framework conditions for actions and involves a degree of openness. Situations must always be realised in one or another manner, and this realisation is creative and can be understood performatively – it arises *through practice* in a fundamental, ontological sense (Bråten 2013b:25–28). Mealtimes and other activities can be carried out in very different ways, and dedicated nurses work constantly to improve the care they exercise within the framework of the job. On this level of social life, Barth's generative process analysis is also a fruitful perspective (1981a). As I understand it, this perspective does espouse a conceptual link between structure and agency. Structural aspects emerge as so-called 'opportunity situations' in Barth's view, as those possibilities and constraints (framework conditions) within which actors operate. In addition, there is room for both complexity and unintended consequences in modelling actors' choices at the level of action. The question I am concerned with here, on the other hand, is what type of situational actions can be transformative at the *structural* level, and in this respect the generative process analysis has limited explanatory power.

Here, we are approaching the more substantial questions of power, resistance, and political mobilisation, and we can envisage different analytical approaches. FFJ discussed these issues during his opposition to the thesis. One might envisage that the motivations he thinks re-create quality in care at the action level are so strong that they will be defended if they really are threatened – and that this situation can become so intolerable that it is felt morally acceptable to undermine the entire management regime: This scenario is not inconceivable, cf. the insight presented to us by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), although it should be noted that we are precisely discussing weapons of the *weak*, not the powerful. Such an action form will first have a transformative effect at the structural level if it becomes widespread and aggregated to a general resistance. But neither is it unthinkable that this could occur: so many care workers can share experience of powerlessness, mistrust and ill-conceived management models, that collective action can virtually arise spontaneously without significant communication and organisation. However, in order to understand this dynamic, we must again move beyond the action level itself. There are, as such, *structural* reasons that an 'effective spontaneity' can arise – the fact that actors share a social position and thereby similar experiences.

It is also relevant here to ask whether we recognise the contours of *cultural* structures. For reasons of space, and also because I do not have ethnographic material that allows detailed analysis of the symbol systems that suffuse everyday life in Norwegian nursing homes, I have largely overlooked the cultural dimension in the discussion. This dimension is also under-developed in critical realism, but it is important to note that central theoreticians, not least Archer (1988), regard 'culture' in the sense of public systems of meaning as a separate ontological level in addition to social structure and agency. A complete analysis must therefore be able to establish how three levels with ontological distinctiveness interact in the formation of social life: social structure, culture, and agency.

It is not possible to go into this problem here, but the relevant ethnographic question is whether we do perhaps have a special 'cultural state of readiness' in Norway which can become very potent when challenged by changes in the social structure. This cultural level is not necessarily visible in everyday contexts and can be conceptualised as an historic undercurrent (Bråten 2013a) that first comes into action when the going gets really tough. We can perhaps sense some of these undercurrents 'at the moment of writing'. The

pressure on established collective arrangements in Norway – which are partly due to transnational dynamics that refigures established social institutions, and partly the eagerness of a 'blue-blue' government[8] to privatize the public sector – encounters resistance. We experienced a teacher 'uprising' in 2014 against distrust-based control regimes (and own compliant trade unions), a comprehensive strike against the government's changes to the Working Environment Act, a popular reaction to the 'sale of Norway' – the commodification of national resources, and we experience resistance to privatisation, centralisation policies and the bureaucratisation of profession-based activities. It remains to be seen what type of real political effect these reactions will achieve, but we should not be surprised when cultural structures have formative power (Sahlins 2004). People see the contours of new life conditions that challenge customary values and orientations, and this assault on cultural traditions can lead to political engagement. HH discusses such cultural aspects in her thesis pointing particularly to the powerful history of popular movements in Norway (Sørensen and Stråth 1997), and the formative powers of cultural values that underpin democratic involvement, particularly the emphasis on personal autonomy (Vike 2013).

To summarise, we can point to both structural and cultural sources of resistance to new working conditions in the health sector. Structural positions can provide common experiences, and cultural meanings may afford a framework for conceptualising these experiences in ways that can provide direction to political engagement. Analytically, what is lacking in order to gain an overall picture of front-line opportunities is the level of action: how daily concerns can be converted into political influence through organisation, mobilisation and concerted political moves. However, I will not go further into this discussion here.

The main point is that in a survey of various analytical approaches to relations among agency, culture and social structure it is easy to fall into what could be called 'the contradictory trap' – to assume that we are dealing with mutually exclusive perspectives. Critical realism takes the opposite view: we are in fact concerned with different *ontological levels* and therefore have a need for theory that is able to capture the distinctiveness of each level. First of all we must avoid ontological reduction – the assumption that in an extreme sense only one of the levels *exists*. Secondly, we must avoid epistemological reduction (something that willingly follows on from ontological reductionism), to explain 'everything' by focusing on just one level. Relations among the various levels require analysis in terms of the special ontological characteristics particular to each level. Since several types of dynamics – cultural, structural and actor-driven mechanisms – will be operative at the empirical level, a realist-oriented anthropology will have to relate to the *interplay* among these dynamics – or, to state this more precisely: It is necessary to understand social formations as the interplay between different ontological levels. In the above, I have sketched how the power dimension might be analysed as a complex outcome of interplay between the levels of agency, culture and social structure. In contrast, it is typical within anthropology to deduce the entire world from a *single* ontological level. For example, the action level was the premise in classical Norwegian social anthropology; Marxism attached importance to structural dynamics while 'culture' in its broadest sense (epistemological aspects) is the predominant orientation in contemporary anthropology.

Evaluation of epistemologies

The fourth analytical principle – evaluation of epistemologies – is more difficult to exemplify through the mealtime event, but I will outline the theoretical argument. For anthropologists this is assumedly the most controversial point in the critical-realist

approach. Bhaskar's emphasis that there is a reality with objective characteristics external to the human comprehension of this reality, establishes a truth-criteria that enables us to *evaluate* human knowledge. This applies both substantially – whether specific people have a 'correct' understanding of reality or not, and epistemologically – whether some knowledge traditions are stronger than others regarding the development of objective knowledge of reality. We recognise this problem in the anthropological debate on the relationship between emics and etics, whether anthropology is a science, or just a 'field of study', and whether our discipline is at base an ethnocentric, (post) colonial project.

Bhaskar adopts a clear position here: knowledge is fundamentally fallible. It is demanding to extract secrets from reality, and we can never be certain that we have succeeded. This goes for science as well as for the large variety of reality conceptions we encounter in the ethnographic record. Nevertheless, it is essential that we attempt to understand reality as best we can; as mentioned Bhaskar's overall project is political: to utilise our insights about reality to improve the human condition. If this ambition is acknowledged – as I assume many other Norwegian anthropologists also do, cf. the directions of the ISP projects – it is essential to 'get our epistemologies right' (Bateson 1979). In other words we cannot avoid an evaluation – in practice, ranking – of different epistemologies with respect to how they manage to grasp aspects of reality. This is an extremely problematic assertion given the democratic will that characterises today's anthropology, most clearly formulated by Viveiros de Castro who maintains that the ultimate objective of the discipline is 'the permanent decolonization of thought' (2011:128).

In contrast, within the framework of critical realism it would be quite legitimate to pose the question whether it is the residents, nurses, leaders or politicians who understand the situation in the health sector 'best'. I will leapfrog over this delicate question and prefer to focus on the *researchers'* contribution: Who, of HH and FFJ is the 'most right'? Actually, this choice also reflects a hierarchical ranking of epistemologies. I consider that as a serious discipline anthropology can acquire a 'better' in the sense of 'more complete' analysis of the situation than that held by the various actors involved in the social setting we study. It is essential to include their interpretations in the analysis since in a realist perspective, they represent ontological formative mechanisms. We simply cannot understand social dynamics without following the trajectories of motivated action. On the other hand, I hope that my discussion has shown that, in the next round, it is absolutely necessary to move beyond meaning formation at the micro level. First, the different actor perspectives must be viewed against each other since there will frequently be disagreement on interpretation. In other words, there is complex interplay at the level of agency itself. Secondly, we need to transcend these perspectives in order to be able to analyse them in relation to other levels of reality, notably structural dynamics.

What now?

What will happen in Norwegian nursing homes in the future? If we contrast the two polemic positions 'care will depreciate as a result of reorganisation' versus 'health staff will always find a way to carry out good care'. Who is right? The non-conflationary realist approach enables the following reasoning: It is at the structural level we must search for the most formative processes – in the ongoing restructuring of frameworks for action. Relative to *specific* micro situations, the structural level is transcendent – ontologically given; there is no *direct* feedback from a specific work situation to the premises that encompass and to some extent create it. We must therefore 'focus outwards' in order to obtain a proportional understanding of the formation, for example, of a nursing home mealtime for residents with dementia. On the other hand, such an analysis cannot give an

adequate insight into the specifics of situated practices since it takes actors with motivation and creativity in order, as it were, to 'fill' the spaces that the underlying mechanisms generate. I have attached lesser importance to this ontological level in this article since there is scarcely a need to point out that anthropologists already have a solid grasp of this 'side of the coin': the complex phenomenological realisation of social life at the level of actions and interactions.

Instead I have discussed the question of structural premises, but without going into detail: New Public Management, privatisation of public, collective institutions, transnational trade agreements, etc. There is no space for a more comprehensive discussion of these topics here, but my understanding is that these trends reflect displacement at an even deeper structural level; in the relation between state and market, work and capital, politics and law. These transformations can have formidable social consequences, and it is doubtful whether Norwegian society, despite its strong democratic and egalitarian ethos, will be able to withstand the changes. Consequently, the structural level must be the main framework for speculation on what may occur in the care sector in the future. My hypothesis is that we will continue to find excellent services for the sick and the elderly – but to an increasing degree for those who have the means to pay for it. I envisage an increasing privatisation of the public sector that will result in a differentiation of care that both reflects and strengthens the economic class divide. The pressure from neo-liberal, transnational processes is so strong that we will hardly manage to maintain the welfare state's universal solutions at the current level, and there will be ever more opportunities for people with means to 'buy' better care. As such, I share Haukelien's scepticism. At the same time I do not doubt Jacobsen's point that workers in the front-line services will keep up their humanitarian 'drive' also within new frameworks – struggling to 'maintain and preserve life itself' (Jacobsen 2010:214). It is, on the other hand, doubtful whether staff will have the same favourable conditions for realising today's good care facilities for everybody.

This pessimistic conclusion must stand the test as will other viewpoints on what may happen. My main point is that anthropology appears as a very defensive discipline if we are not able to envisage, analyse and react critically to the restructuring of premises for action! I have suggested that the basic realist position in classic Norwegian social anthropology provides us with the ground for a more offensive discipline in this sense, but that this position need to be reinforced and further developed with the aid of Bhaskar's critical realism (see also Bråten 2015). I have also proposed a more general criticism, namely that the programmatic anti-dualism in recent anthropology, especially in the 'ontological turn', has established a form of theoretical unidimensionality that is counter-productive. With the point of commencement in critical realism, analytical plurality does not appear as problematic at all: on the contrary stratified, non-conflationary analyses are necessary in order to gain insight into the various levels of reality. This point can be formulated even more strongly. We frequently experience – possibly out of logical necessity – a dogmatism in the shadow of the 'virtuous' anti-dualism of recent perspectives: Ontological divides are erased by making a single category (social structure, agency, or in the anthropology commencing in the 1970s culture/epistemology), all-consuming – analytical challenges are solved through a denial of other levels of reality. In an ontological perspective inspired by critical realism, this is a theoretically unacceptable position – and scarcely suited to making anthropology socially relevant.

Notes

1. A number of theoretical problems arise in relation to contemporary anthropology, and particularly the 'ontological turn', when one prefers such a 'modernistic' perspective as critical realism. A study of these contrasts requires a separate text. However, an important question would be whether the contrasting perspectives emerge as paradigmatic in Kuhn's sense (1962), that is to say that reasoning follows on from 'first principles' and that it is therefore difficult/impossible to mediate between the paradigms (see Bråten 2016).

2. I extend my gratitude to Haukelien and Jacobsen for reading a draft of this article; to the best of my ability I have attempted to include their comments. Thanks also to NAT's consultants for useful contributions.

3. Bhaskar's ontology essentially comprises three parts: between that which is real and the empirical is 'the actual'. This refers to all phenomena which exist, including those that we do not have access to through experience (Bråten 2015).

4. This perspective thereby enables us to search for *explanations* of that which we observe, while the anthropological focus on epistemology frequently does not extend beyond more or less 'thick' descriptions of ethnographic circumstances.

5. Commencing with a linear interpretation of time (that 'the arrow of time' inevitably creates the past, present and future), Bhaskar's perspective seems intuitively correct. Much of today's anthropology does not, however, share this assumption and we encounter a number of intricate philosophical questions here. Inspired by philosophers such as Nietzsche and Deleuze, and their interpretation of Heraklit, there is a tendency to regard social life as an eternal 'becoming'. The position is reflected in performative and post-structuralist perspectives, for example Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005) and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2012, Holbraad 2012). In its most extreme form this notion denies a 'being', that is the world is seen as so fundamentally in a state of creation that it becomes problematic to maintain that something 'is'; in any case 'being' in an essential sense. Bhaskar's ontological viewpoint leads logically to a completely different solution, not the opposite position – that the world is static and/or without genuine novelty, the concept of '*difference'* in Deleuze's terminology (1994) – but an intermediate position that is concerned with the *relationship* between existence and creation. There is such a degree of temporal continuity in the ontological levels Bhaskar identifies that much in the world must be understood in terms of 'being'; entities are preserved through time with distinctive identities and internal characteristics such that we must operate with existence as an analytical dimension. Further, Bhaskar insists that even innovations must arise on the basis of *something*, also in the case where they are new in a fundamental sense, that is have 'emergent properties'. What is new cannot always be *deduced* from what is existing, but nevertheless has the existing as a basis; even novelties with emergent qualities are localized in time and space and consequently will – at the moment they come into existence – enter into a relationship with something that has existed previously. I consider this to be an analytically productive position that can also throw light on Deleuze-inspired ontological perspectives.

6. The anti-essentialist anthropological reflex would twitch immediately: 'But this is indeed a reification of analytical categories'. It is worth noting that Bhaskar's ontological position does imply such reification since the claims relate to qualities of *reality*, not of perspective (that of anthropology and/or our informants).

7. Flatness has become virtually a respectful term within the ontological turn, not least in Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005). My standpoint is the diametrically opposite: Analytical flatness precludes certain types of insight.

8. At the time of writing Norway had a coalition government consisting of the two right-wing parties Høyre (The Conservative Party) and Fremskrittspartiet (The Progress Party). With support from the center-right parties of Venstre (The Liberal Party) and Kristelig Folkeparti (The Christian Democratic Party), the blue-blue coalition secured a majority in Stortinget, the Norwegian Parliament.

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