

A Critical Realism Approach: Seeking Mechanisms of the Global World and the Educational Aid

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Abstract

The philosophical foundation of critical realism helps us seek the inner structure of the reality and find out our misleading knowledge, especially meaningful under the complex global context. Educational aid in the globalisation process is related with multi-causal explanations. Education is explained by the different ways within the different mechanisms, as a development of knowledgeable individual and modern society, or as a section of western-oriented global market, or as an important part of the South-South cooperation in political economic process. The Chinese model to Africa gives contemporary world a new perspective to think about the meaning of aid.

Key words: Critical realism, mechanism, global era, educational aid.

I. Introduction

The manifestation of globalisation is becoming more and more obvious and diverse in our life. What are the dynamics of this cross-border process? How can we explain this changing world and the cooperation or competition within it? With the increasing importance of a ‘knowledge based economy’, education is becoming one of the most crucial contributors in this era of globalisation. A trend of educational practice on the global scale is international aid of education.

With the very complex political economic context in the contemporary world, educational aid is not just about helping teaching and learning but related a lot with the whole international relationship and national development goals. Thus how can we understand the educational aid in this era? What are its drivers and mechanisms? Potentially, it could be that different people give different opinions within their own standpoints. Here the basic statement is, a critical realism approach can be one of the philosophical perspectives to seek the ontology of the educational aid practice. It will be started by describing the position of critical realism, and then the explanation of educational aid from the critical realism ontology. That will be followed with further exploration of the different theories’ perspective under the meta-theory of critical realism and the mechanisms of the educational aid under globalisation.

II. Understanding the global world: a critical realism ontology

2.1 Critical realism and three domains: seeking mechanisms of the reality

Opposed to idealism, realism originally believes that the “the material objects exist externally to us and independently of our sense experience” (Hirst, 1969, p.77). According to Hirst (1969), realism is a claim about both “what entities exist” and about “their independent nature”, and the key words of realism are “independent”, “external” and “objective”.

However, it does not mean that we cannot have true beliefs about objective existence, and that the objective (external) world is in principle knowable can be reflected by mind of us, “and to some extent open to being changed on the basis of such knowledge as we are able to achieve” (Benton and Craib, 2001, p.120). So it can be argued that one of the key points of realism is the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. It is about how can we best utilise our subjectivities to get the knowledge of and even work on the objective world. The existence is not constituted by our knowledge, but we are trying to have more knowledge about its real aspects.

Critical realism is better defined as “depth realism” (Benton and Craib, 2001, p.121), which tries to gain a

deeper understanding of the social world, with an aim of emancipation. The critical realism ontology assumes the reality “to exist but to be only imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanism and the fundamentally interactable nature of phenomena”. So the epistemic rule is “never fully know”, by comparing the findings with the pre-existing knowledge. (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.110, 111) Moreover, we can get a deeper understanding from Bhaskar. Basically we should know the distinction made by Bhaskar (1975) between the “intransitive” and “transitive” dimension of knowledge.¹ “When theories change (transitive dimension) it dose not mean that what they are about (intransitive dimension) necessarily changes too”. (Sayer, 2000, p.11) That leads to the role of critical realism, and helps us seek the “real world”, which is not equal to empirical world, broader, and deeper. This “real world” related the structure of the reality is the key point of Bhaskar’s theory. According to Bhaskar (1989):

“Critical realists do not deny the reality of events and discourses; on the contrary, they insist upon them. But they hold that we will only be able to understand- and so change- the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events or discourse.” (1989, p.2)

The three levels of the world mentioned by Bhaskar (1975) help us understand with greater clarity theses of critical realists. He argues the reality as stratified²: The most important level -“the ‘real’ world, achieves at the mechanisms, powers, tendencies, and so on, which science seeks to discover”. (Benton and Craib, 2001, p.125) This reality includes both natural and social objects. All of these objects have their certain structures and causal powers, and through definition -“capacities to behave in particular ways, and causal liabilities or passive powers, that is, specific susceptibilities to certain kinds of change. (Sayer, 2000, p.12)” The main job of critical realism is to focus more on the understanding of the “real” level of the world which is always there, independent from our experience. This “job” is also can be seen as the epistemological explanation of critical realism.

The second is the “actual” level which refers to “what happens if and when those powers are activated, to what they do and what eventuates when they do”

¹ Bhaskar in his famous work “a realist theory of science” (1975) stated “two sides of ‘knowledge’” which are the intransitive objects of knowledge and transitive objects of knowledge, and “three traditions in the philosophy of science” which are the classical empiricism, the transcendental idealism, and transcendental realism. The last one of the three is the contribution of Bhaskar, compared with Hume’s empiricism and Kant’s transcendental theory. Different from the other two, it argues the objects of knowledge are structures and mechanisms, not events, and they are intransitive, not depend on human’s mind. As Sayer (2000, p.27) explained, actually the term of “transcendental realism” was primarily a philosophy for natural science, but “critical realism” concerned more about social science.

² The order of the three level is determined as Bhaskar’s three domains table (1975, p.56) and the Benton and Craib’s introduction (2001, p.125), from real, to actual and empirical.

(Sayer, 2000, p.12). It is about the facts presented by the structure and the powers. Compared with the first one, if we say this level contains the “events” of the reality, then the mechanisms of the reality, can be defined as the “events that generate the events”.

The third level is “empirical”, defined as the domain of experience. As Sayer concluded, it is related both with the former two levels, which is covering the part that we can observe. “Observability may make us more confident about what we think exists, but existence itself is not dependent on it” (2000, p.12).

These three levels interlink, and contain successively fewer of the three parts of the reality which are mechanisms, events and experiences (Bhaskar, 1975, p.56). It means the domain of real includes all of them, and the domain of actual refers to events and experience, and the domain of empirical is just mainly related with experience.

Based on this ontology with which people believe the reality is not only independent of our scientific investigation of it, but also is stratified, or layered (Benton and Craib, 2001, p.125), the view of causation from critical realists is distinctive. According to Sayer (2000), it is different from the “conventional impulse to prove causation by gathering data on regularities...”, but is looking for “causal mechanisms”, which is talking about the internal related elements and their dynamics, questioning the causes, the condition, and giving explanations. Moreover, the same causal mechanisms can produce different outcomes, or even different ones can produce same things. That means “the future is open”. “Events arise from the workings of mechanisms which derive from the structures of objects, and they take place within geo-historical contexts”. Therefore, the way to know and make reform in the world is always to find out its causal mechanisms.

2.2 The importance to find the mechanisms of the global phenomena

It is increasingly necessary for social scientists to seek mechanisms in this global world, and of more importance than ever before is that we should explore those causal powers. When examining the world from a critical realism perspective, assuming the world as “structured, differentiated and changing” (Bhaskar, 1991, p.146), it is not only interesting but also meaningful for us to try to “identify both necessity and possibility or potential in the world—what things must go together, and what could happen, given the nature of the objects” (Benton and Craib, 2001, p.127).

Firstly, we should answer what makes “critical realism” critical? Bhaskar (1986) has argued about the “emancipatory potential” of social science. Said by him, “some social transformation is to be rationally emancipatory it depends not only or especially on a science of behaviour, but on a

science—a depth science-of the structures generating, determining or providing the sources of behaviour”. (1991, p.146) And according to Benton and Craib’s “depth realism”, the critical realism “differs from some other forms of realism in regarding the surface appearance of things as potentially misleading as to their true character”, then “work has to be done to get beyond and behind misleading appearance” (2001, p.120).

It is not only prudent that we know more about the objective world, which based on the realism or empirical attitudes, but also to understand more about the structure and the mechanisms of the world itself, and how are they different from what people perceived before, and how can they be independent from our knowledge and the production on the “surface”. The diverse global realities especially need this emancipatory potential related with some critical thinking as a basis of our understanding. This is because it is a time in human history that everything is changing quickly and having complex relationships in a broader spatio-temporal dimension.

Secondly, the plurality of social phenomena and the lack of clarity about how they relate to development in this global era need clearer explanation. The world is a global village today, with a complex network involving the north and south, with international and domestic issues. Cross-border cooperation, cultural integration, and the trans-national even over-national organisations are all the aspects of this world. Globalisation itself is a very complex mechanism relating to many factors. It is “a central driving force behind the rapid social, political and economic changes that are reshaping modern societies and the world order” (Giddens, 1990).

Facing to the diversities and changes, it is difficult for us to find a clear explanation, to give a critical thinking as a realist. As Held (1999) suggested, the key point of the globalisation process is not about the direction of the development, but is the transformation. Therefore, the key point for the social researchers probably should be generating the inner mechanisms of these transformations, not just stay on the empirical trends of the development. To find out the deep reasons or motivations of the different possible ways, can help us know more about this post-territorial process. Critical realism is always “essentially transformable and open to development” (Bhaskar, 1991, p.141).

Thirdly, the switch from the events to the mechanisms is very important under a global context, because of its multi-causation. It is an era that the causality is turning from moncausal to multicausal. There are lots of objects with complex relationships nowadays. Just focus on the surface of the events, our knowledge may only cover a small piece of the whole reality. Sometimes the realities today are so immense that they confuse us. There are always so many political,

historical, cultural and ethical, or economic reasons behind an event, and these reasons are always involved in an over-territorial context. So what are the general invariants? What are the causal laws? What are the deeper dynamics in the cultural, political and economic field? These are the core questions in this globalisation period. Globalisation has happened because of the human needs of development and production, but all of the behaviours are based on the inner structure behind and below the diverse events, or our increasing experience.

Generally speaking, one of the proper ways to consider the reality today, can be based on the critical realism philosophy, with an epistemological aim which is seeking the mechanism of the global world.

Convergence not only provides a ubiquitous, persistent and flexible way for always-on communication and entertainment, but also breaks the previously logical, physical, geographical and temporal security perimeters that have existed for decades. The unprecedented transparency and openness brought by convergence is a double-edged knife that could hugely increase the vulnerabilities of the whole society and could lead to loss of confidence and trust both in the cyberspace and also in the real world.

III. Educational aid in a global era and related theories

After we get an idea of the critical realism ontology and the necessity of this ontology in a global era, there will be further discussion regarding the explanations of the practices under globalisation, focusing on the international aid of education. There will be limited discussion regarding the details of different approaches, but it will still retain a focus on critical realism philosophy.

3.1 Educational aid: “surface” and “inside”

Education nowadays has more flexible definitions, which are more than teaching and learning, but a vehicle in where there is realisation of the universal civic rights and a bridge towards mutual understanding, sometimes involved in the complex political and cultural contexts. Within the global context, the two main phenomena of education “globalisation” are international education and international educational aid. The former refers to the students’ flow in a global trend, but the focus are always on the top provider countries such as the USA, the UK and Australia. (Matthew and Sidu, 2005, p.55) There has been lots of discussion about those countries and the diverse students there, always related with the economic and multi-cultural topic.

On the other hand, international educational aid was becoming more and more attractive recently, especially with the facts that aid projects are always related with multi-causal background these days.

Compared with the former one, international educational aid is more complex, both of the lenders and the receivers, both from a economic and political perspective, such as its “conditional” characteristics. With the rise of the poverty agenda, and the calling for “Education for All” (EFA), and also with the economic globalisation in the next 10 or more years, it is not difficult to see the biggest educational lender-World Bank’s action all over the world, investing a large amount of fund to the education development in developing countries, especially in African countries. The UNESCO also has put a lot of effort into education projects to achieve the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The British government will spend £8.5 billion on education over the next ten years, through its Department for International Development (DfID), supporting the development of 10-year education plans in developing countries, such as Ghana and Mozambique (DfID, 24/04/2007). Not only the developed countries and trans-national organisations, even the receivers such as China are trying to be lenders today. The China-Africa Beijing Summit in 2006, the largest international summit ever to have been held within China, claimed aid including education within a wider partnership would exist between these developing countries (King, 2006). There have been many empirical works presenting the observation of the events, the data and the reports from both governments and scholars, giving us very direct perception to those progresses in the world. Because of those data and analysis, we can go further to give causal explanations of the “inside” of them.

Based on the acquired knowledge about current events, critical realists want to seek the deep reasons and regulations of the “surface”. That means we should not only just stop on an empirical level of the reality, but ask more questions starting from the actual and empirical level: what are the differences in aid functions and methods? What are the deeper dynamics of their supports, policy-based, political-based, performance-based or exchange-based? And since we regard education as a way of political socialisation, is there any conflicts among those different aid projects, or is there any conflicts between lenders’ policy and the receivers’ domestic value and culture? How to understand the concept of education and educational aid, such as “global public goods” in the economic field, and “global politicization” from the political perspective? Such questions as these may be answered in further researches, but here the focus is that, the critical realism approach of a social researcher will like to explore the reality today and to seek the truth from its inner structures.

3.2 Diverse explanations of the mechanisms: modernisation, neo-liberalism and the win-win theory

Above all, when we wonder that what are the “real”

aspects of the reality, and what is the “intransitive” side, one of the way we can conduct here is to find out how others interpret the mechanisms of this reality, how do these mechanisms structure the reality, and the “causal explanation of the production of certain objects or events” (Sayer, 1992, p.243).

Critical realism is a meta-theory, or we can say, from a realism ontology, there are several explanation about the inner causal explanations of the reality, and finally lead us to a proper way to the reforms and improvements on the reality. In this educational context, the question for a critical realist would be how can we change the reality in order to improve the education development in the global dimension? What is the relationship between the aid and educational development? Behind the different aid programs, what are the mechanisms there? There are different theories which talking about the core causality about development and the educational aid, and how these theories see this relationship working.

The three theories about the educational development and the international aid will be mentioned are the modernisation theory, the neo-liberalism theory and the Chinese Win-Win theory. According to these different explanations, the inner reasons are differed. The education development can be interpreted in the different ways as for the individual modernization, or for the economic development in the global market, or for the benefit and cooperation of the two countries. All of them explain to us the core factors of the development of the human being, of the recognition to real world, of our emancipation of ourselves and the objective world. No matter how we experience the facts, and what have we seen and known about the events, the causal factors are always there.

Modernisation theory: building modern nation states and individuals

Originating from Western countries, the modernisation theory explains that “low-income countries could improve the living condition of their populations by a set of prescriptive policies to encourage economic ‘take off’” (Robertson, 2006: 11). American economist Rostow introduced the five stages of economic growth experienced by countries with investment, consumption and social trends at each stage, during the process of modernization and demonstrated that the most important stages are around the stage of ‘taking off’. This has been called “Rostovian take-off model” and some of his concepts have been become to be the concepts of the modernization theory. (Rostow, 1960) In order to make a change with the reality, education is considered as the key “that unlocks the door to modernisation” (Harbison and Myers, 1964).

In terms of the important role of education, Schultz (1961)’s human capital theory gives us a direction of the relationship between education and development. According to Schultz, human resource performs the

most important role, and its contribution is more than the benefit from the materials capital. The investment to the human resource is a main point of a country’s economic development. And the core factor of human resource is the improvement of population’s quality, which can be approached by education, in order to improve individual’s knowledge and skill. So the investment to the human resource actually can be mainly seen via the investment into education. “The low levels of educational investment in low-income countries were seen to be a causal factor in the relative inequality between north and south.” (Robertson, 2006, p.12)

Therefore, according to Robertson (2006)’s explanation related with Schultz’s theory, “the West’s role in this process was to ‘help’ low-income countries through aid and technical expertise”. That means, educational aid in the global era mainly refers to the aid from the high-income countries to low-income countries, mainly from north to south, and from developed to developing countries, because of the human resource development inequality. Educational aid to poor countries, can help them develop the quality of whole population, by improving the individual’s skill and their modernity.

Moreover, the modernisation of education in the global world, not only refers to education’s role in economic productivity, but also refers to the role of education in the process of improving human’s multilayered subjectivities, which include individual subjectivity, community subjectivity, nation subjectivity and so on. It is not only in the economic level, but also on the cultural and political dimensions. So we can see, international educational aid in this process is performing a crucial role, based on the essentiality of human resource and education’s contribution to the modern individuals and the modern society.

Neo-liberalism theory: aid for joining into the global market

Since the 1990’s activists use the word “neo-liberalism” for global market-liberalism and for free-trade policies. Although the economic philosophy of neo-liberalism has become widespread during the last 25 years or so, then with the rapid globalisation of the capitalist economy, we are seeing neo-liberalism on a global scale (Martinez, 2000). Started from the 1982 Mexico Crisis, World Bank and the IMF developed a set of policies (now referred to as neo-liberalism) that severed to ensure that debtor countries were able to service their debts. These policies later became known as the Washington Consensus (Robertson, Novelli, Dale, etc., 2007: 37). John Williamson, an economist from the Institute for International Economics, first presented the concept of “Washington Consensus” in 1989, listing ten broad sets of recommendations such as financial

liberalization, trade liberalization, and privatisation³ to promote a market-based economy globally. The key points are liberalization, privatization and marketisation, which are come from the Western liberalism tradition. (Williamson, 2004: 3)

Compared with the modernisation theory, which based on the economic development of the nation states and state's intervention, neo-liberalism was arising with a market metaphor within contemporary economic globalisation, based on the philosophy of free capital market, having "a strong preference for markets as the mechanism through which production, distribution and consumption within an international economy should be efficiency managed" (Bhagwati, 1982; Little, 1982; Lal, 1983). And with the economic globalisation process as its "central characteristics" (Robertson, 2006, p.13), neo-liberalism theory believes that the educational aid system can be one of the important aspects of the whole globalisation process.

The neo-liberalism theory is always represented by certain institutions and organizations around the world. As Martinez and Garcia (2000) mentioned, "the powerful financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank..." are always can be seen as the "neo-liberalists". The World Bank report in 2006 stated about its aid functions as follows:

"Because inequalities in opportunity are often accompanied by profound differences in influence, power, and social status—whether at the level of individuals or groups—they have a tendency to persist. And because it leads to an inefficient use of resources and to less effective institutions, inequity is inimical to long-term development. It follows that there is a legitimate role for public action in the promotion of fairness and in the pursuit of equity, provided such action is cognizant of the primacy of individual freedoms, and of the role of markets in allocating resources." (World Bank, 2006)

However, the World Bank is always considered to be using some international policy conditions to give multi-layered political pressure to the receivers, in order to get a broader global capitalism market with more benefit to the rich countries. So with those

³ Ten recommendations: fiscal policy discipline; Redirection of public spending from indiscriminate (and often regressive) subsidies toward broad-based provision of key pro-growth, pro-poor services like primary education, primary health care and infrastructure investment; Tax reform; Interest rates that are market determined and positive (but moderate) in real terms; Competitive exchange rates; Trade liberalization – liberalization of imports, with particular emphasis on elimination of quantitative restrictions; Liberalization of inward foreign direct investment; Privatization of state enterprises; Deregulation; Legal security for property rights. (Williamson,)

neo-liberalism economic policies, "you can clearly see the effects of neo-liberalism here as the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer (Martinez and Garcia 2000)". The educational aid, accompanied with the expanding of the World Bank's mechanism, has more relationship with the political and economic reasons, not only for the educational reality and improvement of individuals. It's more serving for a global capitalism market system. Join the global capitalism, you have to obey the rules of the big market, and also be helped to be like them:

Neo-liberalism provides the rationale for measures that propel globalisation, such as structural adjustment policies. From this perspective, a commitment to reducing poverty can only be displayed by integration into the international capitalist economy. (Mittelman, 2000: 78)

Win-win theory: aid within a mutual beneficial process

The components involved within globalisation are not only developed countries. One of the obvious aspects of globalisation tells us that the developing countries such as China and India are "growing" fast today. Within this picture, the reality should be known by more factors, and the "aid" also should be understood by more meanings, which not only refers to the "help" from West to poor areas. China's "win-win" policy has been attracting a lot of attention, especially with the government's close action to African countries. Since the China-Africa Summit in Beijing in 2006, there are more and more critiques arguing that China is just joining the scrambling for Africa (Africa Research Bulletin, 2006) with others, and is trying to expand their political influence on African countries, using its "neo-liberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Sautman, 2005) approach. The China-Africa (or called Sino-Africa) cooperation is going to be a "hot" discourse and a representation of the cooperation between other developing countries. It gives us a new perspective to see what is going on in the contemporary world. The mechanisms of the win-win theory although based on the same goal which is always the economic development, on the other hand are different from the western way.

The word "aid" to China, is more like an exchange, a "deepen and broaden mutually beneficial cooperation", and building more friendship with developing countries politically. It reflects the new strategic relationship between China and African countries. Politically, the theory is a sign that the Sino-African relationship is moving to be more diverse and flexible state, from a traditional domestic political-based relationship which focused more on the similarities of the political culture and dialogues, moving to a multi-fields' performance based cooperation which includes the interaction in the fields of economics, political parties, culture, education, medical treatment, and a multi-layered

cooperation which includes both the leaders and the public, both the national and private companies, both on practical and research level, and with both the political and commercial aims. Within the win-win theory, the basis is the equal pursuit of developing countries' common interests, so the role of economics is not only focusing on the transform of the aid approaches, but also about the exchange of the benefits and experience and sharing the opportunities.

The win-win theory is opening a window for more future cooperation within the culture and educational fields. Rather than the short period economic benefits, educational aid and cooperation is the method through which development for both sides will be achieved in the long run. We can see that China has noticed this point, as they increased the expected number of aid students in Africa over the coming years, which is issued in the policy. The policy is based on an old idiom in ancient China- "give me a fish and I will eat today, while teach me to fish and I will eat for a lifetime" (The Beijing News, 05/11/2006) which fits for the situation of the contemporary China.

The critical realistic point is not just about what is the win-win like, but also about if the win-win mechanism different from the western way. Though as the lender of this process, China is not able to give a lot of financial aid as other western donors. Therefore based on the win-win theory, with the similar problems and aims in the educational development, the educational aid approach from China is helping people to learn rather than giving people money to go to school, such as some professional training and the dispatch of volunteers, researchers or teachers. Compared with financial aid from the big lenders from the developed countries, China has never been a "rich" donator, but is trying a different way, using its rich human resource to develop the human abilities in Africa. As Kenneth King (2006) stated, focusing on the cooperation, "China's approach seems to differ substantially from many Western donors' preoccupation with poverty reduction, and with meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)" (2006, p.11). The educational aid to developing countries, mainly to African countries, can be seen as a step of their partnership development. Maybe this win-win approach gives us a new perspective to see a non-western-oriented way for developing.

Education development is more than a process to produce skilled person, and also a process of learning each other's strength, and a process to produce the international understanding and cultural integration. Based on more understanding and similarities, the developing countries can produce more cooperation, both on the economic and political field.

IV. Conclusion and further thinking

Above all, we talked about the different theories involving the development and educational aid system, based on a critical realism ontology, focusing on the discovery of the "real" world with its structures and mechanisms, which are the most important aspects of the reality, behind the events and our experiences. According to the different representations, the core of education development reality can be explained as a development of knowledgeable individual and modern society, or as a section of western-oriented economic globalisation process, or as an important part of the South-South cooperation in political and economic future, and so on. The different approaches within those "structures" just are presentations of the inner causal contexts.

However, are there more intransitive regulations inside? Can we get even simpler explanations of the theories? One of the philosophical ways to give explanation is from the view of the "subjectivity". As we talked, the realism ontology original regards the world exists independently from our mental world, but can be known. The aims of different effort with the objects are almost the same, that is, to help the development of human being. We also should know that the subjectivities of human being in the global context not only refer to the subjectivities of individuals, but also of the states, the region, the community and so on. In case of educational aid today, we can say, no matter the modernisation theory, the neo-liberalism theory or the win-win theory, they are all trying to say: education is a tool to help people or nation states achieve a higher level of their subjectivities, and by the improvement of education in a large scale, the whole subjectivities of this world can also be benefited, maybe for a faster economic development, or a political-based cooperation.

It is difficult to say if these theories explain the reality very well from a critical realism standpoint, but we can explore the events and our observations from these theories, by a critical realism perspective, and then generalise more about the diverse facts and even change the misleading ideas and unsatisfied realities such as poverty. Globalisation gives people many view to see, many hot issues to discuss, and many lessons to learn, but the hardest question left to us is the structure of the entire global transformation itself.

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