

# Harre's Social Philosophy and Political Philosophy: A Social Scientific Critique

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I feel compelled to critique Harre's social and political philosophies because they represent two ominous wider trends in scholarship that haunts social science. One trend misconstrues the nature of social life and social behavior. It obscures the causes of social problems and the solutions that are necessary to correct and prevent them. The second trend degrades the form of scholarship by making outlandish, unsupported assertions about social life. This opens the door to subjectivism and dogmatism which are fatal to objective, empirical social science, and to understanding and solving social problems.

Insights and oversights in social science rest upon concepts and ideals of social and political philosophy. It is therefore imperative to be clear and accurate about the social and political philosophies we espouse, implicitly or explicitly. The two trends that Harre represents are particularly dangerous at this time of world crisis when objective, comprehensive analyses and solutions are needed to preserve civilization itself.

## HARRE'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

Harre views society as composed of loosely bounded, active individual agents who agree to live by certain social conventions (which are fundamentally discourse conventions) that they make and remake as they choose. He rejects the idea that society consists of massive, obdurate, administered institutions, structures, and systems that transcend individual choices. "Structural concepts in human sciences are heuristic models only—there are no structures" (p. 138). Instead, "The prime source for the root models of scientific explanations in the domain of social phenomena is the *conversation*" (p. 140).

Harre exemplifies his social philosophy in comments concerning the current economic crisis. This shows the practical significance of his point of view.

institutions are not ontologically basic, nor are any other seemingly structured entity-like beings. From the point of view of the conversational source model an institution is an appearance, an illusion presented by the relative stability of the flux of social acts that are constitutive of the then

and there social reality. The need for a clear ontological viewpoint has been illustrated dramatically in the "collapse" of part of the "banking system". Talking that way distracts our attention from the reality, the flux of social acts performed by a loosely bounded group of active agents, following discourse rules that proved in the end to be incoherent. There is and was no "banking system" (p. 135).

Harre replaces social institutions and structures with loosely related active individuals who engage in a flux of social acts. Primary to these is conversation. This is why he denies any reality to the banking system or to its collapse. Since structures and institutions are non-existent, they cannot collapse.

These bald statements are never justified with examples or argument. They are simply proclaimed. Using common knowledge and social scientific data we can demonstrate that Harre's statements are factually false, that these errors undermine his social and political philosophies, and that a more valid and useful social and political philosophy are called for.

Harre's errors are obvious. Banks did collapse. Shares of Lehman Brothers plunged 52% in one day (Sept. 8, 2008) and another 42% on top of that 3 days later, on Sept. 11. Three days after this 94% fall, which eliminated virtually the entire value of the stock, Lehman declared bankruptcy on Sept. 14 and went out of business. If this isn't a collapse, what is it? Additional collapses were registered in 25 banks that failed (in the U.S.) in 2008, and 52 more that have failed in the first half of 2009. Further description of economic collapse is found in the front page headline of the May 21, 2009 *Wall Street Journal*: "World Economies Plummet." The *Journal* went on to explain the demise of Mexico's economy where GDP fell 21.5% in the first quarter of 2009. Mexican auto production in the first quarter fell 41% from the year before.

In further opposition to Harre, everyone knows that institutions such as the CIA, the U.S. Army, and General Electric are not illusions. Prof. Harre should ask the Iraqis if they think the U.S. army is an illusion! Of course, institutions change over time, but they are deathly real, tightly organized, and wield ferocious power throughout American and foreign societies, on social policy, communities, and individual lives.<sup>1</sup>

Everybody also knows there is a banking system composed of massive institutions, codified in law and approved by courts, with interlocking boards of directors and ties to congressional committees and agencies which passed laws that allowed bank managers to engage in risky investments. Beyond this, banks are interconnected with accounting firms, mortgage brokers, pension funds, and corporations.

This system is personified in individuals such as Linda Robertson. She was Assistant Treasury Secretary in the Clinton administration where she worked for Larry Summers to push through the Commodity Futures Modernization Act in Congress. This act freed the derivatives market from supervision and contained the "Enron Loophole," permitting the then 7th largest corporation in the U.S. to go wild and *collapse*. Robertson then became the top Washington lobbyist for Enroll. She was recently appointed senior adviser to Fed Chair Ben Bernanke.

Robertson crystallizes the symbiotic system of government agencies and corporations. She is also an indicator of Obama's commitment to change this system.

It is also perfectly obvious that the government intervention which salvaged the financial system from total collapse was a tightly structured program that involved Congressional laws, court decisions, secret (Sunday night) meetings with bankers, and agreements from unions. It was not a loosely bound flux of independent actions as Harre imagines. Of course, it will fail because it is dominated by the very interests that caused the collapse, but that does not negate the coordinated nature of the bailout.

The world's economies are also interdependent in a system. What happens in one reverberates to others. This would not happen if actors were independent and only loosely bound together.

The tightly bound interdependence of economies forces the U.S. Government to work in concert with other governments to find common, coordinated, systemic ways to stop the meltdown by infusing money, changing tax codes, taking over corporations, regulating investment behavior, regulating trade practices, and enacting many other *material* changes in social institutions and policies/sanctions (far beyond mere discourse) which regulate behavior.

If social practices are a flux of social acts by loosely bounded agents, why do corporations spend billions of dollars in political contributions and lobbying in order to affect the content of laws? Laws would not constrain a flux of agentive acts, so corporate managers must be insane to waste money in these ways. Yet corporate managers go to great lengths to influence the laws that constrain and facilitate their behavior. This is why GM spent \$13 million in 2008 on lobbyists to direct laws on climate change, renewable fuels standards and health care.

Harre attributes the economic crisis to the fact that "discourse rules proved in the end to be incoherent." He never bothers to mention one example of an incoherent discourse rule or to indicate how it could be a reason for world economies plummeting in synchrony. Nor does he offer any reason for the appearance of incoherent discourse rules in this situation. Apparently, they just magically arose and unhinged the world economy.

Attributing the collapse to incoherent discourse misrepresents it as a kind of interpersonal misunderstanding, a failure of communication. This is the failure of discursive social philosophy. The failure consists of errors of commission (stating factual and logical errors) and also omission (neglecting important facts). Harre never mentions the economic stagnation that has seized the U.S. economy since the 1970s and has forced capitalists to seek profitable investments through financial speculation instead of manufacturing production (Foster & Magdoff, 2008, 2009). For instance, manufacturing profits declined from 50% of GDP in 1965 to 11% in 2006, while financial profits increased from 17% to 40% of GDP. Harre never mentions falling wages that necessitated credit borrowing by consumers and credit extension by financiers to overcome the inability of workers to purchase goods from their wages—e.g., housing costs and basic necessities doubled between 1973 and

1989 while real discretionary income fell 18%. During this 16 year period, the real income of the of the poorest 40% of the population suffered a 10% decline (while the richest 1% increased by 20% (Lipsitz, 1998). This is why financiers had to provide easy credit and misleading enticements to risky borrowers. It is also the reason consumers flocked to these inducements. Ignoring these structural facts is typical of the way that advocates of the linguistic turn displace material reality.

It is true that many of the “collateralized debt obligations” were packaged in convoluted, misleading ways, and many sub-prime mortgage contracts were complex and misleading to uneducated consumers. However, this deception was not fundamentally a problem in discourse. It was a financial practice to generate fast and large profit with little scrutiny from borrowers or regulators. It was a coherent, calculated, and rational way to make money—however devious and destructive it was. It’s not like people didn’t know how to communicate properly, as Harre suggests.

The “discourse rules” that allowed speculative investment were quite clear. Financiers informed their spokespeople in Congress and in the Clinton and Bush administrations—in perfectly understandable English—that they needed and wanted to engage in speculative investments without interference from government regulators. The government eagerly complied. It passed the Commodity Futures Modernization Act and repealed the Glass-Steigel Act, two actions that abetted risky investment practices. The government allowed a bank purchasing a triple-A mortgage security valued at \$100 to put up just \$1.60 in cash—the rest could be borrowed (*Wall St. Journal*, June 18, 2009, p. C1). This lax legal requirement fueled speculative investment. There is nothing incoherent about this, nor is it a discourse issue. Then financiers clearly told mortgage brokers that they will “securitize” mortgages, however risky. Mortgage brokers clearly understood the enormous profits they could make by selling risky mortgages to consumers and then bundling them to the investment banks. Moreover, the brokers and bankers clearly understood how risky all this was and they fully expected the system to crash—after each one had profited individually by selling the risky derivatives to someone else. The NAFTA trade agreement that made Mexico vulnerable to American markets and financial collapses, was a perfectly coherent agreement. There was no discursive incoherence anywhere.

Speculation was institutionalized, politicized, and well-known in the U.S. and Britain. Harre converts a calculated, orchestrated, required political-economic strategy into a conversational misunderstanding. This is empirically wrong, and politically irresponsible because it exonerates the economic principles and organized behavior that caused the crash. It blames “incoherent discourse rules” instead.

Disdaining to justify his claims about structures, collapse, and incoherent discourse rules, Harre proclaims yet another: “Contrary to Hume, the world is not just a long sequence of reliable regularities” (p. 141). Harre dislikes long sequences of reliable regularities because they imply structure to behavior, and oppose loosely

bounded groups of active agents who spontaneously express their own desires. Again, no evidence is provided for his preference, probably because it is so wrong.

Long sequences of reliable regularities are widespread and dominant. Unpaid debt to banks leads to reduced bank lending to corporations, which leads to corporate cut-backs in production, and this leads to firing workers, which leads to lower tax revenues flowing to government agencies, which curtails education and health services, and these affect cognitive development of children. An interesting long sequence of a reliable regularity is the disastrous effect of the collapse of the automobile industry on cattle producers, because 12% of the cow hides they produce goes for leather interiors in luxury cars.

Other interesting reliable regularities are the fact that for every 1% rise in unemployment, there are 46,000 additional deaths. From 1840–1967, the correlation between unemployment and admissions to mental hospitals was 0.80. As foreign countries Westernize, the incidence of eating disorders among women increases. Social events have affects on behavior, contrary to Harre's individualistic dream of autonomous agents in a loose flux of easily changeable actions.

It is true that the world is not *only* long, regular patterns of behavior. Unanticipated, irregular behaviors do crop up. However, Harre means to prioritize these and eclipse regular patterns. This is erroneous.

Harre further denies and decomposes organized social life with his phrase "society, another metaphor with dangerous edges" (p. 138). If society is a metaphor, that would mean the third Reich was just a metaphor. Does Harre really believe that, or expect us to?

Harre proceeds to claim "Human development does not come about from the influences of social structure on the nascent human being, but by interpersonal processes" (p. 138). Once again, he disdains to support his assertions with evidence. And once again he is wrong.

His statement implies that structural issues such as as poverty, decrepit housing and neighborhoods, crime, declining budgets for schools and health care, lack of play areas, books, educational instruction and job opportunities, play absolutely no affect on human development. And that slavery, patriarchy, war, and poverty do not color interpersonal relations. This is not credible, hopefully not even to Harre himself.

Harre's assertion implies a bifurcation between psychology and social structure. It implies that social structural conditions such as occupational opportunities, standard of living, presence or absence of war, working conditions, the manner in which people are treated at work, how healthy they are (the access they have to medical care), educational curricula, the entertainment to which they are exposed, the news they hear, have nothing to do with the kind of self-concept people develop, or the way people come to think, perceive, remember, emote, suffer, or develop psychological disturbances. Only interpersonal interactions affect these. And interpersonal relations are presumed to be cocooned in their own world, divorced from the social structure.

Of course, no such bifurcation is possible. The social structure profoundly organizes psychological phenomena both directly, and indirectly by influencing interpersonal relations.

The profound influence of macro cultural factors such as gender equality in society on the development of cognition is documented in “mounting evidence that both the magnitude of mean math gender differences and the frequency of identification of gifted and profoundly gifted females significantly correlate with sociocultural factors, including measures of gender equality across nations” (Hyde & Mertz, 2009, p. 8801).

A wealth of scientific evidence documents massive psychological differences that stem from ethnic and social class positions. Social class permeates the most personal interactions between parents and infants—including the number of words parents speak, the manner in which they speak, how often they smile, how stern they are, the kinds of stimulation they provide.

Research by Hochschild and sociologists of emotion demonstrates that emotions are governed by rules and scripts that are inscribed in macro cultural factors such as work places, movies, television, advice columns in newspapers, and advertisements.

Research on educational psychology reveals the importance of socioeconomic status on educational achievement. Socioeconomic status is so powerful an influence that it overrides cognitive competence: “A high-ability student coming from a family of high SES is approximately 3.5 times more likely to obtain a graduate degree or professional education than a student with similar cognitive ability who comes from a family with low SES” (Schooler, 2007, p. 377; see also Ratner, 2002, p. 19; Ratner 2006a, pp. 125–126).

Substantial research demonstrates negative effects of racial segregation on academic achievement, self-concept, and other psychological expressions. Racial segregation is a structural influence that invalidates Harre's statement.

Social demographics influence the symptoms and prevalence of mental illness. They even affect body weight: Sixty-one percent of black women 60 and older are obese, compared with 32 percent of white women. Finally, interpersonal violence is a function of the social structure. Americans kill each other at roughly the rate of 16,000 a year. Since this murder rate is far higher than almost all other countries in the world, it clearly is fostered by broad social factors. The most personal and interpersonal activities are thus organized by the macro culture.

Additionally, census data shows that interpersonal living arrangements are affected by social structural factors such as income and race. Among women age 45 to 49, 79 percent of Asians are married, compared with 43 percent of blacks. Eighty-five percent of Asian children live with two parents, as do 78 percent of white non-Hispanic children, 70 percent of Hispanic children and only 38 percent of black children. These demographic patterns should not occur if people freely make life choices.

Demographic patterns testify to the social organization of behavior—individuals of similar ethnic circumstances have similar interpersonal social arrangements. Individual-interpersonal actions cannot account for demographic patterns of behavior that run throughout particular groups of people in similar conditions throughout society. Blacks throughout American society do not know each other individually and decide through interpersonal interaction to marry in low numbers, to raise children as single parents, and to become obese. In fact, most black women do not want to be obese or to be single mothers. Yet social conditions override their desires and structure their behavior (Ratner, 2006a, p. 60).

Demographic variations in interpersonal marital status and family integrity carry over into corresponding demographic variations in human development.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of psychology correctly emphasizes the structuring structures that structure psychology. He enumerates a set of social contexts from the micro, interpersonal level, to broader levels, some of which are never directly experienced—such as one's parents' working conditions that affect parents in their interaction with their children. The broadest level, which forms the framework of parameters for all the other narrower levels, is the macro social structure. The interpersonal level is thus organized by the macro level, in direct contradiction to Harre's notion. "The complex of nested, interconnected systems is viewed as a manifestation of overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture. Such generalized patterns are referred to as *macrosystems*. Within a given society or social group, the structure and substance of micro-, meso-, and exosystems tend to be similar, as if they were constructed from the same master model" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 8; Ratner, 1991, pp. 172–178). The macro level is the core of, and key to, all the layers and factors in a society. "Public policy is a part of the macro system determining the specific properties of exo-, meso-, and microsystems that occur at the level of everyday life and steer the course of behavior and development" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 9). We must add that even more central and powerful within the macro system (and reverberating throughout the other layers of society) than public policy, is political economy (profit motive, private property, commodity production, class structure), as I indicated earlier.<sup>2</sup>

This top-down (macro-micro) model is exactly what happened in the financial meltdown. Public policy, and political-economic dynamics, fueled financial speculation that first stimulated purchasing by families on the micro level, and then crashed with devastating effects on families. Bronfenbrenner's systemic model of society also captures the reverberations that occur on the micro level from corporate policies to move into or out of a community, or lower or raise wages.

Harre's "loosely organized" "bottom-up" notion of society is invalid. Interpersonal narratives among community members are not the cause of corporate policy, as decimated communities across the country know well.

Of course, the social system works through people interacting. When your boss fires you, she interacts with you. But this does not mean that the interaction is

origin of the behavior or that the behavior is *interpersonal* in any real sense. The interaction is merely the culmination of higher level strategies that are based on material considerations such as maximizing profit or market share. Similarly, when a soldier shoots an enemy in a war, two individuals are directly involved, but it is absurd to call this an interpersonal interaction and to explain war in interpersonal terms.

Harre continues his assault on organized society with another proclamation: "Rules do not make people do things!" (p. 141). "Rules are used by people to guide their actions, not to produce them" (p. 135). Again, Harre feels free to proclaim whatever he wishes without regard for reality. Everyone knows that parents make their children do homework, wash the dishes, and many other things. Rules obviously make people pay for food and shelter and taxes; they make people go to jail and get executed. Immigration rules make you leave the country when your visa expires, tearing you away from your American-born children who can legally stay. Rules make you leave your job when the boss fires you, and they make you leave your house when you do not pay the mortgage. Rules force you to drive under the speed limit. They compel you to stop your car when a police car flashes its lights at you. Rules make cigarette manufacturers write warning labels on cigarette packages that smoking is dangerous to health. Work rules compel you to arrive on time for work. Rules determine how many days you can spend in a hospital and how many minutes your doctor will talk with you in his office; they determine how much your pension will be after 25 years of work. Rules determine how many miles per gallon of gas a car *must* get, which is why GM spent \$13 million to influence those rules. Laws of supply and demand determine how much you must pay for a house. When the supply is tight, you must pay more. Conversely, when you want to sell your house, the market determines how much you must lower your price to attract buyers. If you charge more, you cannot sell it. The laws of the market economy *force* farmers to mechanize their crop production in order to keep up with others who have mechanized and can charge lower per unit prices on their crops. If a farmer does not mechanize and cannot realize efficiency of mass production, he will not be able to sell his crops and will go out of business. That is why small family farms in America have dwindled, and thousands of Indian farmers have committed suicide. These are inexorable economic pressures, not guides for action. Similarly, neo-liberal trade agreements *require* countries to accept the importing of foreign goods and services. Violators are punished by sanctions and penalties and even military regime change. Local producers in a country are thereby often put out of business by cheap, mass-produced products from abroad. Rules have made this happen.

Rules certainly make you not do things you'd like to do. I told my daughter she could not watch television or talk on the phone when she had school work to do. You cannot build a factory without a building permit. You cannot smoke in a restaurant in California. You cannot go to your chosen university if your grades are low. Not long ago, rules prevented women and blacks from voting. Prior to



1969, rules prevented women from attending Princeton University. (Actually, it was the absence of rules that prevented women from voting or attending Princeton. Rules did not grant women those rights.)

To say that people use rules to achieve their purposes ignores the fact that rules provide the basis for people's purposes, or rules produce the purpose. Rules allowed women to even consider attending Princeton after 1969. Before that, the vast majority of women did not have that purpose and could not consider that action because it was foreclosed by law, or the absence of law. The rule stimulated their consideration/action/purpose, it did not simply fulfill or guide it. Harre's voluntaristic notion of rules fails to consider cultural contexts of pressure that motivate people to use rules.

Harre confuses the fact that rules are implemented by people with the fantasy that people can use and refuse rules with impunity. We act on the basis of rules, as every child knows (Searle, 2006a, b).

Harre's denial of society as a system of structures, social influences, social institutions, social rules, sequences of reliable regularities in social life, is falsified by social facts.

#### HARRE'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Harre's social philosophy (and philosophy of science) is based upon a political philosophy. It is a bourgeois, individualistic political philosophy that idealizes individual freedom as political freedom/liberation. His reductionistic social philosophy—that reduces society to individual acts of speaking—is designed to justify and realize this political ideal. For if society is no more than individuals speaking, then bourgeois individualistic freedom can be realized. In fact it already is realized: society is presently composed of and controlled by individuals exercising their mundane, personal choices through conversations that are easily altered. In contrast, massive, objectified, interconnected institutions are impervious to personal expressions and changes. They contradict Harre's bourgeois politics and are thus unacceptable to him (see Ratner, 2002, chap. 2 for additional examples of this idea from Bruner and others). All social philosophy and social science is based on political philosophy (Ratner, forthcoming).

Harre counsels us that social constraints only *seem* to exist. They are really only grammatical conventions that can easily be different. There are no *social* problems in the form of social institutions, structures, or systems. Indeed, Harre reassures us that there was no banking collapse. There are only new fluxes of action by creative agents. From this it follows that there is no need for political action to reform non-existent social institutions, structures, and systems.

Individualistic social philosophy legitimizes political quiescence because it assures us that there are no structural, systemic phenomena to politically challenge. There is only a flux of social actions, primarily conversational in nature, and these can be changed through personal decisions and negotiations.

Harre explicitly denies political action and replaces it with new narratives: "Human beings can come to realise that they are people and so active agents trying to realise their projects with others. As such they can come to realise that the constraints that society seems to place upon their pursuit of worth are grammatical, in the sense that Ludwig Wittgenstein gave to that term. The story-lines and conventions in accordance with which people live could be different and new grammars can be created and adopted. All we have to do is to show people that they are trapped in the silken but fragile shrouds of a pattern of discourse conventions" (p. 142).

Harre reduces society to discourse. This linguistic reductionism conflates the use of language to impart symbolic meanings to things and to coordinate institutionalized behavior, with dissolving social life into nothing other than language and having a linguistic form. This is scientifically wrong and politically irresponsible.<sup>3</sup>

It is wrong to regard conversation as the root metaphor of all social phenomena. Important social phenomena such as the Spanish conquest of South America, being laid off from your job, the banking crash, or discovering that the airlines have reduced leg room between seats from 34 inches to 31 inches so they can pack more passengers onto the plane and earn more profit, are not conversational forms. They include conversations among some people at some point but they are not conversations, *per se*; they do not have the form of a bilateral give and take that Harre attributes to conversations. To use this notion of conversation as the metaphor of all social activity is to naively democratize all activity in the image of a bilateral exchange of personal expressions.

It is not even true that all conversations have the form of bilateral exchanges of personal expressions. The conversation between an army sergeant and a new recruit is one-sided and autocratic. The same is true for the conversation between the manager of a call center and the new employee. Harre surreptitiously assumes a particular social form to language, namely a bilateral exchange. But it can have many social forms. It therefore makes no sense to use "conversation" as the metaphor of social phenomena because this does not take account of the concrete form that conversation acquires from macro cultural factors.

Harre's reducing society to conversation leads to displacing political action and structural reform by narrative changes. This is politically conservative, because it exempts structures, classes, power relations, and social principles from challenge. They persist while Harre and his disciples tilt at conversation rules. This is the conservative ramification of individualistic politics.

How insulting it is to tell slaves, or victims of the Holocaust, or displaced Iraqis who have had their country blown to smithereens, or destitute victims of the current economic crisis that society only "seems" to place constraints on them; that constraints are reified illusions which should be deconstructed into their real nature which is discourse conventions and grammars. "All people have to do" is change the "patterns of discourse convention" which are fragile and easily altered, and adopt new story lines!

This is elitism. It assumes that everyone lives in elite ivory towers like Harre does, and settles problems in amiable discussions akin to department meetings where professors discuss the scheduling of classes for the next semester. Harre seeks to apply a model that only applies to (some) the elite (sometimes), to all people whose lives have nothing in common with the narrative model. Harre naively believes that his elitist model can open possibilities to all people, but it cannot. Whatever humanistic intention it may have, it remains elitist, ineffective, and inappropriate. Humanistic elitism is elitist humanism.

According to Prof. Harre, there is no need to analyze the economy or challenge the capitalists and politicians who precipitated the economic crisis, or develop any new socioeconomic principles or institutions, or take any political action whatsoever: "Where is the place for political action, activities which are aimed at such social goods as the emancipation of some category of persons, the relief of the tyranny of bureaucracies, and so on? If social life is constituted grammatically then it must be transformed grammatically . . . Should anyone want to make changes in a form of life, the focus of their efforts must be on rendering implicit grammars explicit" (p. 140).

If only the Russians had thought of that on June 22, 1941 when the German army amassed at their border for an invasion—of course, army and invasion are just heuristic, metaphorical terms that create a misleading sense of organizational solidity; the Germans' 3,050,000 men, 7,184 artillery pieces, 3,350 tanks, 2,770 aircraft, 600,000 vehicles, and 625,000 horses that were arrayed in three prongs aimed at the Soviet Union, was really just a loosely organized group of active agents involved in a flux of activity; for "there are no structures." How silly the Russians were to mobilize an army (metaphorically speaking) of 2,300,000 men manning 10,000 tanks and 2,300 aircraft. This loosely bounded (unstructured) group of active agents in social flux was wasted effort. *All* they had to do was render the implicit grammar of fascism explicit and adopt a new grammar! Then at a picnic on the border, they could realize their narrative project with the Nazis and show them that they were trapped in the silken but fragile shrouds of a fascist pattern of discourse conventions which they could readily change to new story lines! The Nazis would gleefully agree to change their patterns of discourse convention because they were known for their openness to dialogue with other groups. The upshot of this dialogue would inevitably be the Nazis feeling empowered from the intellectual insights they had gained from the picnic on the border, and returning home without firing a single shot. They would feel their creative agency erupting in new discourse conventions and story lines they had adopted about Soviet socialism. This would inspire them to expand their repertoire of story lines when they got home, by dialoguing with the Jews who were trapped in concentration camps by the silken but fragile shrouds of discourse conventions, not by fictitious structures such as the SS. If the Jews wanted to make changes in their form of life in the camps, they could render their implicit grammar explicit, adopt new discourse conventions, and

then merrily walk out of the concentration camps empowered by the fact they are no longer trapped by their implicit grammars.

#### THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Harre's individualistic political philosophy drives his individualistic social philosophy. His bourgeois notion of individual freedom leads to reducing social life to individual behavior that can be readily changed by and for individual agents who "own" their behavior. This leads Harre to reduce society to discourse which can be readily changed. It also leads him to deny social structures, systems, rules, and regularities because these are antithetical to individualistic freedom. To achieve individualistic freedom, society must be loosely bounded grammatical conventions rather than tightly organized and administered institutions and structures and conditions.

Individualistic political philosophy also requires denying that social institutions collapse. For collapse presupposes an organized, coordinated entity, which is anathema to individualism. A collapse is the simultaneous, synchronized, breakdown of an entire unit-structure-thing—e.g., the collapse of the twin towers in New York City in Sept. 11, 2001. If only some pieces broke down we would not speak of a collapse. A collapse is the breakdown of the entirety, of the whole thing. There must be a whole thing to collapse at once. This is reflected in the etymology of "collapse" from Latin *collapsus*, "fall together," (literally com- "together" + labi "to fall, slip"). Because collapse is the obverse of an organized social institution, Harre cannot perceive or abide it despite its blatant and painful reality. This is why he denies a banking collapse occurred.

Harre's politically-driven social philosophy prevents him from acknowledging organized social reality. It acts as a distorting prism that denies, destabilizes, decomposes, diminishes, de-realizes, and de-politicizes culture. Individualistic political philosophy is driven by its internal logic to misconstrue culture, and prevents comprehending it as an emergent, organized, objectified, structuring structure that can collapse. In this sense it is an epistemology of ignorance (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) that impedes advancing knowledge.

Harre's individualistic social philosophy—his assertions about social life—is wrong. The fact is that human society and human behavior are not individual constructions and negotiations about discourse rules. Empirical evidence that I have presented (ranging from mundane observations to scientific research) demonstrates that social life is organized into a system of rule-governed, regular behaviors in which macro cultural factors are dominant and structure other social levels as Bronfenbrenner observes. In addition, these coordinated, massive, objectified structures collapse precisely because they are interdependent in a system. This is exactly what is occurring before our eyes in the world economy.

The fact that his social philosophy is wrong invalidates the political ideology that generated it. Because individuals do not act as they choose, or use social rules simply as guides for fulfilling their own purposes, and because structures and behavioral regularities are real, and society is not merely a metaphor for discourse conventions but is massive, administered, interlocking institutions that resist change and ultimately collapse as a synchronic whole, it follows that the political ideal of individual liberty is fictitious. Individuals cannot be free individually, through their mundane, conversational activity, because their behavior is socially organized at the macro cultural level. The facts of social behavior invalidate the political ideal of individual freedom. It is unrealizable.

The facts of social life reveal individualism is not real freedom! For it does not free people to control the real source of their behavior. *To be truly free in the sense of controlling our behavior, we must control the real sources of our behavior.* Political philosophy must thus derive from a social philosophy that is objectively formulated from social facts.

Since behavior is socially organized at the macro level, freedom can only be achieved by humanizing macro culture through concerted political action at that level. Genuine freedom to control one's behavior requires controlling the macro cultural organization of behavior. *The facts of social behavior require a macro-political conception of freedom.* For example, to be free of financial crisis, the causes—including the political economic dynamics of stagnation, laissez-faire freedom from oversight, speculative practices, accounting procedures, incentives to speculate, and corporate control of the banking system—must be transformed. This requires attention to the content of macro cultural factors and to their form or structure organized into an interdependent system (as I have explained in Ratner, 2009). Similarly, Vygotsky (1997, p. 236) said, "Questions of education will be fully solved only when questions of social order have been fully solved. Every attempt at constructing educational ideals in a society with social contradictions is a utopian dream." Finally, to be free of the psychological/behavioral problems I enumerated above (from obesity and eating disorders to gender differences in mathematical competence), the macro cultural factors that generate them must be transformed.

Any other political program and political ideal of freedom that is not based on social facts and social systems but is rather based on ideology of individual freedom over individual acts, overlooks what is really necessary to achieve the freedom to control our lives.<sup>4</sup>

This analysis opens a new line of thinking about political and social philosophy. They are not simply wishful moral preferences. They entail assertions or assumptions about the nature of social life, and these are open to empirical test. The empirical assertions of political and social philosophy render them scientifically testable. If the assertions about social behavior are found empirically (scientifically) wanting, then the political and social philosophy that generated them is repudiated and must be replaced by one that is consistent with the facts of social behavior. This is diagrammed in figure one, below.

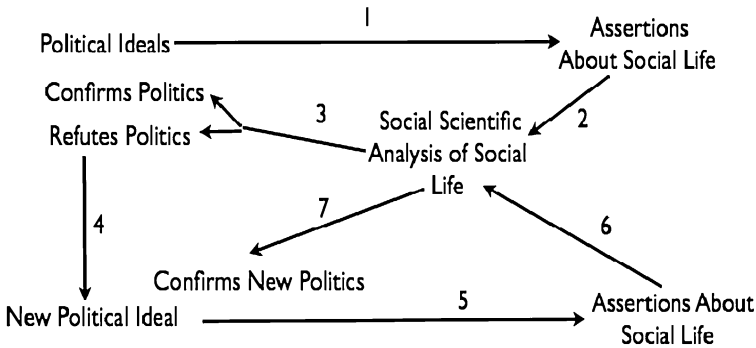


Figure 1. The relation between political ideals, social philosophy, and social science.

The figure shows that political ideals can be evaluated by social science on the basis of assertions they make about social life. These politically-generated assertions can be either confirmed or refuted. If they are confirmed, the political ideals are confirmed. If they are refuted, the proponents of the political ideals must formulate new ones (#4) that generate new assertions about social life which are consistent with social scientific analysis, and are confirmed by it. Of course, if the new assertions about social life were not confirmed, then a new round of political ideals and assertions about social life would have to be formulated and tested.

Harre rests content with proposing political ideals and assertions about social life, without bothering to go through the rest of the process. He stops short of subjecting his ideals and assertions to scientific scrutiny, or philosophical analysis. They thus remain unfalsifiable and dogmatic, as well as baseless.

This dangerous trend is often justified by claiming that all opinions are deserving of respect and there is no way to adjudicate among them anyway. An example of this claim is Gergen & Gergen's (2002, p. 51) statement:

There is no particular configuration of words or phrases that is uniquely matched to what it is we call either the world "out there" or "in here." We may wish to agree that "something exists," but whatever "is" makes no demands on the configuration of phonemes or phrases used by humans in communicating about it. Thus, we remove the privilege of any person or group to claim superior knowledge of what there is. With respect to truth (a match of word and world) or reason (the arrangement of words themselves), no science, religion, philosophy, political party or other group can claim ultimate superiority. More positively, the world does not control what we make of it.

This is the epistemological complement (and compliment) to Harre's social and political ontology. Just as he dissolves social reality into individual discursive choices, the Gergens dissolve reality into fanciful individual perceptions, interpretations, and statements. Both deny reality in order to maximize individual freedom to think, say, and do anything we wish and to have it respected by all without question.

Gergens' statement is fatal to reason and science. For it prohibits any attempt or possibility of evaluating knowledge claims and privileging one over others. All claims are leveled to equal status and none is superior. This protects fallacious ideas such as the ones Harre expresses in his article, and the Gergens express in theirs. The Gergens' epistemological egalitarianism (equivalence or equivocation) also means that their own statement cannot claim more validity than a contrary viewpoint. So agreeing with it is only personal preference that cannot be justified (Yoshida, 2007).

Indeed, the Gergens never try to justify their proclamation. This is unsurprising because it is "one of those views which are so absurd that only very learned men [and women] could possibly adopt them." On its face, the proclamation means that the knowledge of scientists is not superior to the knowledge of "other groups" such as kindergarden children and creationists, and a third of ordinary Americans who believe human beings have existed in their current form since the beginning of time (!), according to a recent survey by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Gergens' statement means that the knowledge claim (and the spoken phrases used to convey it) that the Gergens are alive is not superior to the opposite claim that they are dead. For neither of these claims can be matched against a world out there such as whether their hearts are beating. The Gergens would also deny that the evidence for global warming is epistemologically superior, and no more telling about the "world out there," than the denial of global warming. One can see how the Gergens' epistemological egalitarianism (equivalence or equivocation) is specious, and supportive of dangerous, conservative ideas. It exonerates them as just another interesting outlook that is no more dangerous or specious than any other.<sup>5</sup>

This impedes advancing knowledge, and it makes errors in thinking and action irremediable. Where Harre is remiss in making unsubstantiated assertions, the Gergens provide a programmatic rationale for doing this. They explicitly promote it as an acceptable form of scholarship. Committing a mistake is possibly excusable and correctable. It is far more reprehensible to concoct an epistemological program that promotes mistakes and renders them inevitable and irremediable. It is an epistemology of ignorance, the destruction of reason (Lukacs, 1980), and the seduction of unreason (Wolin, 2004) that devalues reason itself (Ratner, 2006b).

Social and political philosophy guide theories and methodologies of social science. It is fair to say that differences among theories and methodologies are rooted in, reflect, and reinforce different social and political philosophies. Insights and oversights in social science are similarly rooted in, reflect, and reinforce social and political philosophies.

The scientific errors of individualistic social philosophy and political philosophy go hand in hand with their political conservatism and irresponsibility. Likewise, progressive, responsible politics that aim at transforming the system of macro cultural factors go hand in hand with scientifically valid structural-systemic-macro social philosophy and political philosophy (Ratner, 2002, 2006a, b). We must be

careful about our political assumptions because they affect the social science we do as well as the political activities we endorse.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All cultural entities are cohesive in order to combine and focus the input of their members. Even marketing consumer products is rigorously managed to create necessary images. A study of marketing directors revealed comments such as, “the culture of the company is important; you cannot create a successful brand without the right management team, internal commitment to the brand, and the brand vision, and right external partnerships.” “We have to design, sample, manufacture, distribute, create our own stores, and sell.” “We have a very strong design handwriting. Our products and everything else for that matter must be in keeping with that.” (Fionda & Moore, 2009). No loosely bound, independent agents engaged in a social flux here.

<sup>2</sup> Harre tries to recruit Vygotsky to his individualistic social philosophy, and falsifies Vygotsky’s position. Harre claims “the explicit attention I want to pay to the means by which socially competent people are produced [echoes] the manner of Vygotsky’s psychological symbiosis, a mode of production that involves interpersonal interaction without the reification of social structures” (p. 139). The truth is that Vygotsky emphasized (in his cultural-historical theory) social structures structuring psychology and interpersonal interactions (cf. Ratner, 1991).

Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev followed Marx’s theory of historical materialism. Luria (1976, p. 164) stated: “Psychology comes primarily to mean the science of the sociohistorical shaping of mental activity . . . The basic theses of Marxism regarding the historical nature of human mental life are thus revealed in their concrete forms.” Vygotsky said that the “social environment is class-based in its very structure.” “We must be profoundly historical and must always present man’s behavior in relation to the class situation at the given moment.” “Class membership defines man’s psychology and man’s behavior” (1997, pp. 211–212). Vygotsky further stated that “every epoch has its own form of education” because educational activity has always corresponded to “those particular economic and social structures of society that defined the whole history of the epoch” (*ibid.*, pp. 55, 56).

Luria used historical materialism to criticize the French school of sociology (Durkheim, Levy-Strauss, Mauss, and recently Moscovici) for ignoring structural issues: “The French school of sociology had one major shortcoming that invalidated its theories. It refused to interpret the influence of society on the individual mind as the influence of the socioeconomic system and the actual forms of social activity on individual consciousness . . . . The French school thus side-tracked both particular forms of work and the economic conditions forming the basis of all social life” (*ibid.*, pp. 6–7).

Far from endorsing Harre’s social and political philosophy, Luria & Vygotsky would regard them as similarly invalidated by their dismissal of economic and social structures influencing individual consciousness.

<sup>3</sup> See Zagorin (1999) for a history and analysis of this mistake. Zagorin cites Bertrand Russell’s precious observation that “it is the essential function of words to have a connec-



tion of one sort or another with facts, which are in general non-linguistic. Some modern philosophers . . . tell us that the attempt to confront language with fact is ‘metaphysics’ and is on this ground to be condemned, This is one of those views which are so absurd that only very learned men could possibly adopt them.” Unfortunately, the embracing of absurdity includes ordinary people, as recent surveys testify.

<sup>4</sup> Harre insists on repudiating macro culture, structure, system, regularity, and rules because he believes these impede freedom. He is exactly 180 degrees wrong. Structures, systems, and rules are what make us human and are the source of our achievements and our possibilities. We must therefore improve them, not eschew them and deprive ourselves of the only possibility to fulfill ourselves as human beings.

<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting to see if the Gergens practice their claim that the world does not control what we make of it. If Ken were standing atop a tall building and started to walk off the edge, would it be positive if he did not let the world of physical principles control what he made of it, and if he instead imagined that the air would support him, and walked off the edge and plunged to his death? If the Gergens were driving in their car and Ken had a heart attack, which would be positive: for Mary’s perception and behavior to be controlled by the situation at hand and drive Ken to the hospital, or for her perception and behavior to not be controlled by the situation, whereupon she would drive to Saks Fifth Ave. to shop for new shoes leaving Ken slumped in the car to die? Finally, if all of Ken’s students could not understand his lectures, would it be behoove him to adjust his lectures in accordance with their opinion—i.e., let the social world control what he made of it—or would it be positive if he dismissed their opinion, kept on presenting unintelligible lectures as he wished, and did not allow his social world to control what he made of it?

While the Gergens imagine themselves to oppose mainstream thinking, their subjectivistic standpoint is precisely what capitalists espouse. Capitalists refuse to allow the laws of physics and the real negative effects of their pollution to control their perceptions or production operations. They pollute as much as they can, disregarding the real world of reliable regularities that will come back to kill people. Financial speculators similarly refuse to allow sound investment principles to control their behavior, and they speculate as much as they can regardless of disastrous effects. Subjectivism supports capitalist egoism; it is not a critical epistemology. Indeed, the economic theory that has justified capitalism since the 1870s—known as marginal utility theory—is an extreme form of subjective individualism. Marginal utility theory insists that society is only the aggregate of individual subjective desires and decisions. It argues that the value of commodities is entirely a subjective determination that depends upon subjective desire for them. There are no objective determinants of value, such as the amount of labor or resources required to produce a product. How ironic that the Gergen’s (and Harre’s) “radical” subjectivistic individualism is the economic philosophy of capitalism!

Not allowing the world to control what you make of it is a recipe for death and disaster. It is not positive. Even changing a situation requires realistically appraising its objective character and letting what we make of it be controlled by what it really is. To improve our social relations, our news, education, environment, and health care, we must thoroughly understand how they are organized, what their principles are, in whose interests they operate, and by whose power. Only then can we envision viable improvements that are based upon practical possibilities. In this sense, freedom is the recognition of necessity, as Hegel and Marx observed. Harre and the Gergens rupture this dialectic and counterpose freedom to necessity. They postulate freedom as a capricious, blind wishfulness to do whatever we please by simply changing our mind and conversation. No reality or necessity stands in our way because reality is defined as whatever we wish it to be and say it is. Such naive ideas of freedom can never be effective.

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