



## Economics and Social Ontology in Cambridge<sup>1</sup>

di

YANNICK SLADE-CAFFAREL

**ABSTRACT:** Cambridge Social Ontology is among the longest running continuous research projects in economics and philosophy. Building on a critique of the modern mainstream of economics and its insistence on the use of mathematical modelling, the project emphasises the importance of social ontology – the study of the nature and basic structure of social reality – for both economics and the social sciences more generally. In this paper, I explore the context in which this project has developed. I begin with a discussion of the history of the project and its development through meetings of the Cambridge Realist Workshop and, more recently, the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. I then explore the relationship between Cambridge Social Ontology and two different philosophical approaches, critical realism – most notably the work of Roy Bhaskar – as well as with analytic approaches to social ontology and, most importantly, the work of John Searle.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Ontology, Heterodox Economics, Critical Realism, Social Positioning

**ABSTRACT:** La Cambridge Social Ontology è uno dei progetti di ricerca continuativi più longevi nel campo dell'economia e della filosofia. A partire da una critica alla corrente moderna dominante in economia e alla sua insistenza sull'uso della modellazione matematica, il progetto sottolinea l'importanza dell'ontologia sociale – lo studio della natura e della struttura di base della realtà sociale – sia per l'economia che per le scienze sociali più in generale. In questo articolo esploro il contesto in cui si è sviluppato il progetto. Inizio con una discussione della storia del progetto e del suo sviluppo attraverso gli incontri del Cambridge Realist Workshop e, più recentemente, del Cambridge Social Ontology Group. Esploro poi la relazione tra la Cambridge Social Ontology e due diversi approcci filosofici, il

---

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Stephen Pratten and to two anonymous referees of this journal for their helpful comments during the development of this paper.

realismo critico – in particolare il lavoro di Roy Bhaskar – e gli approcci analitici all'ontologia sociale, tra cui, soprattutto, il lavoro di John Searle.

KEYWORDS: ontologia sociale, economia eterodossa, realismo critico, posizionamento sociale

## 1. Introduction

For almost forty years, a sustained programme of broadly philosophical research led predominantly by economists has been pursued in Cambridge. This ongoing project, now regularly referred to as Cambridge Social Ontology, develops today through the research of members and associates of, visitors to, and other contributors critically engaging with, the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. Its aim is: «studying in a systematic fashion the *basic nature and structure of social reality*»<sup>2</sup>. It does so through discussion pursued in a largely unstructured manner.

The project's origins lie in an assessment of the widespread explanatory failure of the modern mainstream of economics. The problem identified is that the ontological presuppositions of the dominant methodological approach employed by the mainstream of economics – mathematical modelling – are inconsistent with the nature of social material. As these methods presuppose a conception of social reality that is demonstrably unrealistic – a world of isolated atoms – it is argued that the contributions provided through their use will likely be irrelevant to understanding the social phenomena mainstream economists purport to explain. To have a chance at producing powerful explanations – whether in economics or any other social science – one must employ methods that are consistent with the nature of the phenomena studied. And to inform such methodological choices, one must have some idea of the nature of the phenomena one seeks to explain. Social ontology – the study of the nature and basic structure of social phenomena – is therefore central to successful social science and the development of an explanatorily powerful economics<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> T. Lawson, *The Nature of Social Reality: Issues in Social Ontology*, Routledge, New York 2019, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Lawson's critique of the modern mainstream of economics cf. for example E. Fullbrook (ed.), *Ontology and Economics: Tony Lawson and His Critics*, Routledge, New York 2009; T. Lawson, *Economics and Reality*, Routledge, New

The aim, in this paper, is not to detail the various contributions made by researchers associated with the Cambridge Social Ontology project<sup>4</sup>. Rather, the focus is exploring the context in which such a project has been able to grow. I begin with a discussion of the history of the project and the two meetings through which it has developed: the Cambridge Realist Workshop and the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. I then analyse the project's association with critical realism and the work of Roy Bhaskar before considering links with the dominant analytic school of social ontology and, most particularly, the work of John Searle<sup>5</sup>.

Cambridge Social Ontology is an unusual project both in its longevity and its focus on the importance of studying the nature of social reality. It has survived, thrived and had some significant impact despite its resolute opposition to the hugely dominant mainstream of modern economics. Moreover, it has consistently highlighted the pressing current need to prioritise ontological analysis in a disciplinary context where the legitimacy of such an agenda of research is rarely recognised. Given the state of mainstream academic economics, and without mentioning the state of mainstream academic philosophy, it is almost difficult to believe that a project like Cambridge Social Ontology has persisted. But it has. In this paper, I seek to explore the institutional conditions and intellectual engagement

---

York 1997; Id., *Reorienting Economics*, Routledge, New York 2003; Id., *Essays on The Nature and State of Modern Economics*, Routledge, New York 2015; N. O. Martins, *The Cambridge Revival of Political Economy*, Routledge, New York 2014; J. Morgan (ed.), *What is Neoclassical Economics? Debating the Origins, Meaning and Significance*, Routledge, New York 2015; S. Pratten, *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, Routledge, New York 2015; Y. Slade-Caffarel, *The Nature of Heterodox Economics Revisited*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 43/4 (2019), pp. 527-539.

<sup>4</sup>For an overview of the different contributions made by members of the group dating back to the beginnings of the Cambridge Social Ontology project, cf. S. Pratten, *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, cit.

<sup>5</sup>This is not to suggest that these are the only two intellectual traditions with links to the Cambridge Social Ontology project. For example, recent contributions have explored the link between Cambridge Social Ontology and pragmatism such as G. Baggio, *Emergence, Time and Sociality: Comparing Conceptions of Process Ontology*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 44/6 (2020), pp. 1365-1394; B. R. McFarling, *Finding a Critical Pragmatism in Reorienting Economics*, in E. Fullbrook (ed.), *Ontology and Economics*, cit., pp. 232-240; S. Pratten, *Dewey on Organisation*, «European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy» 11/2 (2019); Id., *Social Positioning Theory and Dewey's Ontology of Persons, Objects and Offices* «Journal of Critical Realism», Advance Online Publication (2022).

with associated projects that have served to foster the development of Cambridge Social Ontology<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. *From the Cambridge Realist Workshop to the Cambridge Social Ontology Group*

The beginnings of the project can be traced back to research and initiatives instigated by Tony Lawson, the «central figure in this project [...] whose work has provided much of the impetus for Cambridge Social Ontology»<sup>7</sup>. Some of Lawson's research in the early 1980s concerned a critique of the methods that dominated in economics and this provided the impetus for broader philosophical reflection regarding the nature of economics' object of study, social phenomena. Cambridge Social Ontology began with Lawson and his students meeting to discuss these issues, which it would soon become clear were all related to social ontology.

From an informal meeting between Lawson and his research students, the project first formalised its meetings in October of 1990 as the Cambridge Realist Workshop, which continues today<sup>8</sup>. If, at the beginning, the Cambridge Realist Workshop fostered open, regular, continuing discussion, its structure developed over time to involve speakers presenting papers and, consequently, it became not only a far more formal occasion, but each week had its own distinct topic. Both the openness of discussion and the continuity in inquiry progressively decreased. Indeed, as Lawson describes, «[i]t had become more another type of performance. People come from around the world, famous people are coming in and give their talks, Nobel

---

<sup>6</sup> The constructive dialogue between philosophy and economics in Cambridge of course has a long history. Famously, Sraffa is understood to have had some influence on Wittgenstein, Keynes made substantial contributions to the philosophy of probability and Marshall was influenced by his reading of Hegel. The focus in this paper is on contemporary developments and specifically on how the Cambridge Social Ontology Group has managed to sustain a philosophically oriented project in a less than hospitable disciplinary context.

<sup>7</sup> P. Faulkner-S. Pratten-J. Runde, *Cambridge Social Ontology: Clarification, Development and Deployment*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp.1265-1277, p. 1265.

<sup>8</sup> Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Cambridge Realist Workshop is currently on hiatus.

Memorial Prize winners like Amartya Sen or whoever»<sup>9</sup>.

So, in October 2002 the Cambridge Social Ontology Group was founded with the aim of providing a forum to continue the sort of informal, ongoing discussion that fostered the early ontological inquiry pursued in Cambridge<sup>10</sup>. The group, or CSOG as it is more commonly known, has been meeting on Tuesday mornings in the coffee room on the top floor of the Economics Faculty at the University of Cambridge ever since<sup>11</sup>. The Cambridge Social Ontology Group is consequently a very different kind of meeting to the current Cambridge Realist Workshop. It is a smaller group. No papers are given. There are no pre-requisite readings. There is often a considerable degree of continuity to the discussions week on week. The only requirement is that members commit to attending regularly and are interested in taking part in the exploration of ontological issues. In Lawson's own words:

What we do there is basically discuss topics in ontology. The structure is variable. A topic can last for an hour, or for a term and more. We spent about a term discussing the nature of gender, even longer discussing the nature of rules. We have even discussed the nature of econometrics. [...] Sometimes it almost feels like a confessional. We question and re-question everything, not least the things we defend quite strongly in public. And we do laugh a lot. We continually criticise ourselves. We also go round and round in dialectical circles, trying to make sure that everything is coherent with everything else, following every criticism and change in understanding – though we rarely succeed<sup>12</sup>.

Recently, discussions have focussed on topics as varied as the nature of information, absences and meaning. There is an openness to discussing any and all topics but that is not to suggest that the group simply goes off untethered in all directions. I would also not wish to suggest that members of the group agree on everything. Far from it, debate is what makes Tuesday mornings interesting. But two broad

---

<sup>9</sup> T. Lawson, *Cambridge Social Ontology: An Interview With Tony Lawson*, «Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics» 2/1 (2009), pp. 100-122, p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> S. Pratten, *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> In 2020, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the group shifted its meetings to Zoom.

<sup>12</sup> T. Lawson, *Cambridge Social Ontology*, cit., p. 121.

areas of agreement underpin the ongoing discussion. The first is that «participants hold to the view that the by-now-widely-recognised generalised explanatory failures and lack of realisticness of modern economics is directly related to pervasive ontological neglect» and «that method and substantive theory can benefit if informed by explicit, systematic and sustained social ontology»<sup>13</sup>. The second is that there is a shared, if evolving and debated, set of ontological concepts that aim to describe how social phenomena are everywhere constituted that can now be appropriately referred to under the banner of social positioning theory<sup>14</sup>.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail about social positioning theory but it is important to note that, although the Cambridge Social Ontology project is a group endeavour, in terms of social positioning theory the project's central figure, Tony Lawson, is the person who has done by far the most to develop this conception. Therefore, contributions developing social positioning theory have been overwhelmingly published by Lawson<sup>15</sup>. But different members often take

---

<sup>13</sup> S. Pratten, *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> I acknowledge that Rom Harré has developed a positioning theory that has ostensible similarities to Lawson's and the Cambridge group's such as the emphasis on positions, rights and, in Harré's terminology, duties. However, Harré's positioning theory is not attempting to provide a conception of philosophical social ontology and, with closer examination, one can identify important differences particularly in relation to how positions are conceived such as the role of features such as storylines in Harré's theory. Moreover, as far as I am aware, Harré's notion of positioning has had no influence on Lawson. For more on Harré's positioning theory, cf. B. Davies-R. Harré, *Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour» 20/1 (1990), pp. 43-64; R. Harré, *Positioning Theory: Moral Dimensions of Social-Cultural Psychology*, in J. Valsiner (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 191-207; Id., *Positioning Theory*, in J. Martin-J. Sugarman-K. L. Slaney (eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology: Methods, Approaches, and New Directions for Social Sciences*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester-West Sussex 2015, pp. 263-277; R. Harré-L. v. Lagenhove, *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*, Blackwell, Oxford 1999; R. Harré-F. M. Moghaddam, *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts*, Praeger, Westport 2003.

<sup>15</sup> The latest outline of the theory can be found in T. Lawson, *Social Positioning Theory*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 46/1 (2022). Recent contributions made by members other than Lawson to aspects of social positioning theory include, for example, N. O. Martins, *Social Positioning and the Pursuit of Power*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 46/2 (2022), pp. 275-292; S. Pratten, *Trust and the Social Positioning érocess*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp. 1419-1436; Id., *Social Positioning and Commons's Monetary Theorising*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 44/5 (2020), pp.

the lead in other avenues of ontological inquiry. For example, most recently, members of the group have pursued projects focused on the natures of technology<sup>16</sup>, the corporation<sup>17</sup> and money<sup>18</sup>. A substantial amount of research conducted by members of the Cambridge group has also been focused on the history of thought, particularly in economics<sup>19</sup>. One key contribution has been to draw out the often implicit

---

1137-1157; Y. Slade-Caffarel, *Organisation, Emergence and Cambridge Social Ontology*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour» 50/3 (2020), pp. 391-408.

<sup>16</sup> On technology, recent advances have been made by C. Lawson, *Technology and Isolation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017; P. Faulkner-J. Runde, *Technological Objects, Social positions, and the Transformational Model of Social Activity*, «MIS Quarterly» 37/3 (2013), pp. 803-818; Id., *Theorizing the Digital Object*, «MIS Quarterly» 43/4 (2019), pp. 1279-1302.

<sup>17</sup> On the corporation, there have been contributions by S. Deakin, *Tony Lawson's Theory of the Corporation: Towards a Social Ontology of Law*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp. 1505-1523; T. Lawson, *The Nature of the Firm and Peculiarities of the Corporation*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 39/1 (2014), pp. 1-32; Id., *The Modern Corporation: The Site of a Mechanism (of Global Social Change) that Is Out-of-Control?*, in M. S. Archer (ed.), *Generative Mechanisms Transforming the Social Order*, Springer, Dordrecht 2015, pp. 205-231; N. O. Martins, *An Ontology of Power and Leadership*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour» 48/1 (2018), pp. 83-97; J. Veldman-H. Willmott, *Social Ontology and the Modern Corporation*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp. 1489-1504.

<sup>18</sup> On money, a conception is developing with the work of T. Lawson, *Social Positioning and the Nature of Money*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 40/4 (2016), pp. 961-996; Id., *The Constitution and Nature of Money*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 42/3 (2018), pp. 851-873; Id., *Debt as Money*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 42/4 (2018), pp. 1165-1181; Id., *Social Positioning Theory*, cit.; M. S. Peacock, *The Ontology of Money*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp. 1471-1487 and through debate with G. Ingham, *A Critique of Lawson's "Social Positioning and the Nature of Money"*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 42/3 (2018), pp. 837-850; J. Searle, *Money: Ontology and Deception*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp. 1453-1470.

<sup>19</sup> Some recent examples in the history of thought include T. Lawson, *What is This "School" Called Neoclassical Economics*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 37/5 (2013), pp. 947-983; P. Lewis, *Ontology and the History of Economic Thought: the Case of Anti-Reductionism in the Work of Friedrich Hayek*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 41/5 (2017), pp. 1343-1365; D. Lourenço-M. Graça Moura, *Tony Lawson and the History of Economic Thought*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 44/5 (2020), pp. 991-1011; N. O. Martins, *The Sraffian Methodenstreit and the Revolution in Economic Theory*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 43/2 (2019), pp. 507-525; Id., *Reconsidering the Notions of Process, Order and Stability in Veblen*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 44/5 (2020), pp. 1115-1135; Id., *The Cambridge Economic Tradition and the Distribution of the Social Surplus*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 45/2 (2021), pp. 225-241; S. Pratten, *Veblen, Marshall and Neoclassical Economics*, «Journal of Classical Sociology», Advance Online Publication (2021).

ontological presuppositions that are common to different schools of thought broadly categorised as belonging to heterodox economics<sup>20</sup>.

But even where some members have published more extensively than others, the ideas are developed through continuing group interaction. Above all, it is the conditions provided by the Cambridge Reality Workshop and, most importantly, the Cambridge Social Ontology Group that have fostered the continuing development of the Cambridge Social Ontology Project. The group, however, does not operate in isolation and, over time, there has been important intellectual engagement with associated projects. Two such projects warrant particular consideration. I begin with Cambridge Social Ontology's engagement with critical realism and particularly the work of Roy Bhaskar. I then turn to the growing field of social ontology and, in particular, the conception developed by John Searle.

### 3. *Critical Realism*

The research produced by members of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group has been closely associated with the project known as critical realism. Indeed, «[t]he contributions of the Cambridge group have often been referred to by its members and others under the title of critical realism in economics»<sup>21</sup>. However, this association has led to the Cambridge Social Ontology project sometimes being mistakenly interpreted as building upon the results of particular projects within critical realism and, in particular, the work of Roy Bhaskar. This is simply not the case.

The relationship between the Cambridge group and critical realism is far more nuanced. Rather, the development of a particular critique of economics by researchers associated with the Cambridge Social Ontology project grounded in a philosophical perspective appropriately characterised as realist had begun before an engagement with other similar projects in other disciplines, let alone with Bhaskar's work. The adoption of the label critical realism, at least for the Cambridge group, did not come about through building on

---

<sup>20</sup> For more on the ontology of heterodox economics cf. T. Lawson, *The Nature of Heterodox Economics*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 30/4 (2006), pp. 483-505; Y. Slade-Caffarel, *The Nature of Heterodox*, cit.

<sup>21</sup> S. Pratten, *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, cit., p. 10.

the results of any particular critique – not even Bhaskar’s. Rather, as a consequence of the fact that the Cambridge group’s already developed concerns coincided with those of other projects, the adoption of a collective label seemed appropriate:

At around the same time a series of similar related critiques of current social scientific practice in various different disciplines were being developed. Meanwhile Roy Bhaskar [...] had recently developed a critique of the then dominant positions in the philosophy of science. These differently situated projects came together picking up especially on Bhaskar’s philosophical language and formed a loose federation that placed a high priority on ontological analysis and elaboration and involved regular conferences and considerable interdisciplinary interaction. The label of critical realism was adopted by a number of these related but differently situated projects<sup>22</sup>.

Developments made by Lawson and early participants in the Cambridge Social Ontology project coincided with those of other projects that found it useful to draw on the philosophical language developed by Bhaskar. Therefore, it made sense at that point in time to unite under a label, critical realism. But this was always a “loose federation”. Over time, as these different projects developed, including Bhaskar’s own, divergences emerged such that simply categorising contributions to the Cambridge Social Ontology project under the banner of critical realism could be misleading, especially if this was taken to mean that the results of analysis were entirely consistent with Bhaskar’s work. Therefore, more recently, there has been a move towards identifying research associated with members of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group as being part of a distinct Cambridge Social Ontology project:

[A]s the Cambridge project itself evolves, clarity is most likely to be served by elaborating precisely what it is that this project involves rather than establishing that the results achieved are entirely consistent with, still less emerge immediately from, a broader critical realist framework. Thus, although earlier papers make explicit reference to critical realism, sometimes even in the titles to contributions, and while there is no particular desire to distance the project from critical realist contributions,

---

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 10.

for reasons of clarity it is currently more common for papers by Cambridge group participants to be presented simply as contributions to social ontology<sup>23</sup>.

For Lawson, in particular, it is important to underline that whilst Bhaskar and other authors associated with the critical realist project have undoubtedly influenced his thinking, his development of a realist philosophical position predates engagement with those authors. Rather, Lawson's philosophical views developed early on through criticising the mainstream of economics as well as drawing on the work of economists, such as Keynes, to elaborate his philosophical arguments<sup>24</sup>. Throughout that time, Lawson engaged with philosophy. Indeed, he «started researching philosophical issues around 1979 to 1980»<sup>25</sup>. At first, Lawson «read anyone and everyone. I read quite a bit of Aristotle, Marx, Hegel, Kant, Hume, Whitehead – and many others. I also read people like Bas van Fraassen»<sup>26</sup>. But:

[I]t wasn't until very late in the 1980s that I discovered the project called critical realism and Roy Bhaskar. [...] When I did come across Bhaskar's [...] book [*A Realist Theory of Science*] it mainly resonated. My copy of it contains a list of ticks. It was just so similar to some of the things I'd been saying myself, albeit in a different language. I think it was probably when I further realised that other social theorists in sociology and geography and elsewhere were beginning to adopt a lot of the philosophical terminology employed in critical realism, that I decided to do so too. Given that the philosophical stance I was taking was basically the same position, it wasn't too difficult to adopt the language of others<sup>27</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, pp. 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. for example A. Kilpatrick-T. Lawson, *On the Nature of Industrial Decline in the UK*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 4/1 (1980), pp. 85-102; T. Lawson, *Keynesian Model Building and the Rational Expectations Critique*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 5/4 (1981), pp. 311-326; Id., *Different Approaches to Economic Modelling*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 7/1 (1983), pp. 77-84; Id., *Uncertainty and Economic Analysis*, «The Economic Journal» 95/380 (1985), pp. 909-927; Id., *The Relative/Absolute Nature of Knowledge and Economic Analysis*, «The Economic Journal» 97 (1987), pp. 951-970.

<sup>25</sup> S. P. Dunn-T. Lawson, *Cambridge Economics, Heterodoxy and Ontology: An Interview with Tony Lawson*, «Review of Political Economy» 21/3 (2009), pp. 481-496, p. 485.

<sup>26</sup> T. Lawson, *Cambridge Social Ontology*, cit., p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> S. P. Dunn-T. Lawson, *Cambridge Economics*, cit., pp. 485-486.

To be accurate, then, Lawson's philosophical position began to develop before there was any engagement with critical realism. It coincided, at a time – and perhaps still, in parts, today – with much of the approach taken by Bhaskar as well as others such as Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier, Alan Norrie, Doug Porpora and Andrew Sayer<sup>28</sup>. This then led to coordination and the adoption of a common philosophical vocabulary. Even recently, Lawson: «for a period of about six years [...] participated annually in a project on *social morphogenesis* directed by Margaret Archer»<sup>29</sup>.

I do not wish to downplay the importance that engagement with critical realism has played in the development of the Cambridge Social Ontology project. However, although Lawson and the Cambridge group have at times presented their work as part of the critical realist project and have adopted a similar philosophical language, they have always pursued what was, and continues to be, a distinct project. For the reasons cited above, there has, therefore, in recent years, been a sustained movement in published contributions away from framing contributions made by members of the Cambridge group in terms of critical realism. Indeed, Lawson has explained that «since the term ontology has, in recent years, become more commonplace [...] in social theory quite widely, I have been content to describe my basic project simply as one in social ontology»<sup>30</sup>. This has led some to question whether or not Lawson himself, or the Cambridge group more generally, still consider themselves to be critical realists. Lawson has responded to this question by stating:

My project is characterised by a turn to ontology in social theory as an explicit undertaking. This is what I have been doing since the late 1970s. So I am actually very happy to be perceived as a critical realist. It is not at all a misinterpretation. But it is important to see this project as multifaceted and continuously evolving. And it is also variously interpreted<sup>31</sup>.

Moreover, most recently, Lawson has stated:

---

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of these varied contributions cf. M.S. Archer-R. Bhaskar-A. Collier-T. Lawson-A. Norrie (eds.), *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, Routledge, New York 1998.

<sup>29</sup> T. Lawson, *The Nature of Social Reality*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> T. Lawson, *Anti-Realism or Pro-Something Else? Response to Deischel*, «Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics» 4/1 (2011), pp. 53-66, p.59.

<sup>31</sup> T. Lawson, *Cambridge Social Ontology*, cit., p. 103.

I haven't changed in my commitment to Critical Realism as I all along understood it. However, I think the way that many now interpret or use the term Critical Realism is often at odds with my own understanding. [...] So, I find it is simply less likely to mislead if on each occasion I spell out the assessments to which I commit, rather than relying on a label to speak for itself<sup>32</sup>.

If there has been a shift insofar as contributions are less readily presented as being about critical realism or critical realism in economics, the relationship between the Cambridge group and critical realism has not substantially shifted. Cambridge Social Ontology has always been a distinct project that has shared concerns and philosophical language with other projects that have come under the banner of critical realism. That remains the case today. However, as the different projects that come under that banner evolve and so as not to suggest mistakenly that the results of the ontological inquiry pursued by the Cambridge group are always consistent with the results of other such projects, the choice has been made to, more precisely, refer to the work produced by the group in terms of social ontology and, even more recently, as Cambridge Social Ontology specifically.

#### 4. Searle and Analytic Social Ontology

Indeed, in recent years, there has been enormous growth in the amount of research presented under the banner of social ontology. This is in large part due to the substantial amount of work in social ontology that has emerged through building upon research conducted predominantly by analytic philosophers previously presented under the banner of collective intentionality<sup>33</sup>. Over time, the emphasis has moved from collective intentionality to social ontology<sup>34</sup> and

---

<sup>32</sup> T. Lawson-J. Morgan, *Cambridge Social Ontology, the Philosophical Critique of Modern Economics and Social Positioning Theory: An Interview With Tony Lawson, Part I*, «Journal of Critical Realism» 20/1 (2021), pp. 72-97, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> J. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 10, states «[c]ollective intentionality has recently become something of a cottage industry in analytic philosophy. There is even a biennial conference with the title "Collective Intentionality"».

<sup>34</sup> Individuals associated with research relating to collective intentionality have founded both the International Social Ontology Society, in 2012, and the Journal of Social Ontology, in 2015. Moreover, since 2018, the biennial Collective Intentionality

the field is growing in prominence within analytic philosophy, which has historically been sceptical of ontology<sup>35</sup>.

Key contributions to this project have been made by authors such as Michael Bratman<sup>36</sup>, Brian Epstein<sup>37</sup>, Margaret Gilbert<sup>38</sup>, Francesco Guala, Frank Hindriks<sup>39</sup>, Kirk Ludwig<sup>40</sup>, Seumas Miller<sup>41</sup>, Hans Bernhard Schmid<sup>42</sup>, John Searle<sup>43</sup> and Raimo Tuomela<sup>44</sup>. And efforts

---

conference has been retitled Social Ontology and is held annually, organised by the International Social Ontology Society. For more on the International Social Ontology Society, cf. <https://isosonline.org> [13.04.2022]. For more on the Journal of Social Ontology, cf. <https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/jso> [13.04.2022].

<sup>35</sup> As J. Latsis, *Quine and the Ontological Turn in Economics*, in C. Lawson-J. Latsis-N. O. Martins (eds.), *Contributions to Social Ontology*, Routledge, New York 2007, pp. 127-141, p. 128, explains, «[o]ntology, normally understood, is the science of being, the systematic study of the fundamental structure of reality. [Analytic] [p]hilosophers of the early twentieth century had distanced themselves from any ability to partake in such an activity. So discussions of ontology were both uncommon and unfashionable [...]. The logical positivists and empiricists who dominated analytic philosophy tended to regard it as obscure and outdated and references to ontology or metaphysics were usually pejorative». Interestingly, J. Searle, *Making the Social World*, cit., p. 6, writes that «[i]t is an odd fact of intellectual history that the great philosophers of the past century had little or nothing to say about social ontology. I am thinking of such figures as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, as well as Quine, Carnap, Strawson, and Austin. But if they did not address the problems that interest me in this book, they did develop techniques of analysis and approaches to language that I intend to use». Searle makes clear that whilst the major figures in analytic philosophy paid little to no interest in social ontology, which one could argue was in part due to their focus on a particular set of methods, he employs the same methods in his pursuit of social ontology.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. for example M. Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. for example B. Epstein, *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. for example M. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. for example F. Guala-F. Hindriks, *A Unified Social Ontology*, «The Philosophical Quarterly» 65/259 (2015), pp. 177-201.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. for example K. Ludwig, *From Individual to Plural Agency*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. for example S. Miller, *Social Action: A Teleological Account*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. for example H. B. Schmid, *Plural Action: Essays in Philosophy and Social Science*, Springer, Dordrecht 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. J. Searle, *Making the Social*, cit.; Id., *The Construction of Social Reality*, Penguin, London 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. for example R. Tuomela, *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group*

have been made to define social ontology in terms of the concerns associated with such research<sup>45</sup>. However, it is important to note that whilst this output, within this emerging field, currently constitutes the dominant body of research in social ontology, there are a variety of approaches in social ontology<sup>46</sup>. This school – perhaps appropriately referred to as analytic social ontology – is one amongst many<sup>47</sup>. Within analytic social ontology, the most influential contribution has been made by John Searle.

Generally speaking, the work produced by the Cambridge group has not been engaged with in any sustained way by academic philosophers or, more specifically, those who find themselves employed in mainstream philosophy departments. This is, I suspect, for a variety of reasons. I would suggest that perhaps the situation broadly mirrors the response the group's contributions have received on behalf of the majority of academic economists or, more specifically, those who find

---

*Agents*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

<sup>45</sup> B. Epstein, *Social Ontology*, in E. N. Zalta (ed.), «The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy», Summer 2018 Edition, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/social-ontology/> [20.12.2022]

<sup>46</sup> I do not want to suggest, at all, that the only current prominent project in social ontology other than the Cambridge account is that which has emerged out of this project in collective intentionality. Work in social ontology being done from other perspectives includes, for example, K. S. Ásta, *Categories We Live By: the Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; D. Elder-Vass, *The Reality of Social Construction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012; R. Groff, *Ontology Revisited: Metaphysics in Social and Political Philosophy*, Routledge, New York 2013; S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012; H. Ikaheimo-A. Laitinen (eds.), *Recognition and Social Ontology*, Brill, Leiden 2011; D. Porpora, *The Concept of Social Structure*, Greenwood Press, New York 1987; C. Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Moreover, one could argue that analytic social ontology is quite late to the game. Although rarely presented as work in social ontology, the general disinterest in the study of being and, in particular, social being did not seemingly extend to authors associated, for lack of a better term, with continental philosophy. Indeed, major 20<sup>th</sup> century contributions by authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, as well as authors associated with the Frankfurt School such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have been interpreted as contributions to social ontology. Cf. for example I. Al-Amoudi, *Redrawing Foucault's Social Ontology*, «Organization» 14/4 (2007), pp. 543-563; N. de Warren, *We Are, Therefore I Am-I Am, Therefore We Are: The Third in Sartre's Social Ontology*, in C. Durt-T. Fuchs-C. Tewes (eds.), *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture: Investigating the Constitution of the Shared World*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 47-65; I. Testa, *Ontology of the False State*, «Journal of Social Ontology» 1/2 (2015), pp. 271-300.

themselves employed in mainstream economics departments. Both fields, interestingly, have an overwhelmingly dominant mainstream that is largely uninterested in contributions that do not follow the methodological principles they hold dear. Moreover, Lawson has explained that he finds «academic philosophers [...] to be overly analytical, more concerned with being thought to be clever than with addressing matters about the way the world is» and that «the best philosophy [...] is done outside philosophy departments»<sup>48</sup>.

But if Lawson and the Cambridge group's engagement with this larger project of analytic social ontology has been limited, that is not the case when it comes to Searle and the Berkeley Social Ontology Group. For Lawson:

John Searle is fundamentally interested in the way the world is [...]. Indeed, Searle's work on the constitution of society is ignored by many philosophers precisely because it is insufficiently like their conception of proper analytic philosophy. Searle's contributions, I think, like those of critical realism, are much more influential amongst natural and social scientists than amongst philosophers. Actually, I did take up an invitation to visit Searle and his ontology group in Berkeley last summer, for about five weeks. In fact I went twice, because I was also earlier invited by Searle to give a talk at his bi-annual Collective Intentionality Conference, which [...] also featured Tuomela and Gilbert. It was a very fruitful experience for me. [...] I do not see a big conflict in our projects, certainly not between mine and Searle's. Searle actually thinks that we agree on just about everything. I am not so sure, but he well may be right. Certainly we agree on rather a lot<sup>49</sup>.

Lawson's trips to Berkeley were followed by two workshops held in Cambridge, in 2014 and 2017, discussing critical issues in social ontology with members of the Berkeley Social Ontology Group:

[O]n two occasions over the last few years, participants of the Berkeley Social Ontology Group organised by Jennifer Hudin and John Searle visited Cambridge for joint workshops with the Cambridge group. Some of the interactions and related interventions have formed the content of papers that also have been published along the way<sup>50</sup>.

---

<sup>48</sup> T. Lawson, *Cambridge Social Ontology*, cit., p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>50</sup> T. Lawson, *The Nature of Social Reality*, cit., p. 10.

Most notably, these interactions have produced contributions from Lawson<sup>51</sup> and Searle<sup>52</sup> in which they have debated and directly addressed each other's contributions. Consequently, much of Lawson's recent work has drawn very usefully on Searle's conception as a point of comparison and has benefitted from responding to critique from Searle himself. But it is difficult to say the extent to which Searle's conception of social ontology has influenced Lawson's own.

One area in which there does seem to have been some influence is in how Lawson has presented his conception of social ontology. Indeed, Lawson has previously drawn a contrast between the process through which he has inquired as to the nature of the basic structure of social phenomena and Searle's process. For Lawson, his approach «might be appropriately described as *working backwards* (from actual social interactions to their conditions of possibility)» whereas «Searle's alternative is perhaps best described as *working forwards* – by way of building on the results of natural sciences regarded as the most sound»<sup>53</sup>. Whilst I do not know if there has been a shift in Lawson's mode of inquiry<sup>54</sup>, the working backwards/working forwards distinction can be usefully employed to distinguish between the different ways in which Lawson and Searle's respective conceptions have been set out.

Indeed, more recently, there has been a shift towards Lawson presenting the account of social ontology he defends in a manner similar to Searle. Searle's accounts begin by setting out ontological features that apply generally to social and non-social phenomena, such as the laws of physics and evolutionary biology, and then showing how

---

<sup>51</sup> Cf. T. Lawson, *Comparing Conceptions of Social Ontology: Emergent Social Entities and/or Institutional Facts?*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour» 46/4 (2016), pp. 359-399; Id., *Some Critical Issues in Social Ontology: Reply to John Searle*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour» 46/4 (2016), pp. 426-437.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. J. Searle, *The Limits of Emergence: Reply to Tony Lawson*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour» 46/4 (2016), pp. 400-412.

<sup>53</sup> T. Lawson, *Ontology and the Study of Social Reality: Emergence, Organisation, Community, Power, Social Relations, Corporations, Artefacts and Money*, «Cambridge Journal of Economics» 36/2 (2012), pp. 345-385, p. 347.

<sup>54</sup> The process Lawson refers to above as working backwards is that which he has alternatively referred to elsewhere as transcendental argument, transcendental analysis and transcendental reasoning. For more on his conception of transcendental argument cf. Id., *Reorienting Economics*, cit., pp. 28-63; Id., *A Conception of Social Ontology*, in S. Pratten (ed.), *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 19-52.

features specific to social phenomena are built upon such general ontological features and are able to account for the existence of social phenomena. In more recent contributions, Lawson has begun accounts of social ontology in much the same way, starting with the common features of the constitution of both non-social and social phenomena before turning to those elements that render social phenomena distinct from other phenomena<sup>55</sup>.

I would not, however, want to exaggerate the extent to which the conception of social ontology defended in Cambridge has been influenced by Searle's own conception. Indeed, in recent contributions, I have sought to underline that one would be mistaken to think that Lawson and Searle are always drawing on the same notions, even when a common vocabulary is involved<sup>56</sup>. If the engagement between Lawson and the Cambridge Social Ontology Group and Searle and the Berkeley Social Ontology Group has undoubtedly positively contributed to the continuing development of Cambridge Social Ontology, much as with critical realism, although there may be some conceptual overlap, a clear set of common interests and very useful engagement, Cambridge Social Ontology remains its own distinct project.

## 5. Conclusion

The Cambridge Social Ontology project has been developing for the last four decades and the Cambridge Social Ontology Group will, in October of 2022, have been meeting regularly for the last two. The project's survival is surprising given a hostile institutional environment in which the modern mainstream of economics is overwhelmingly dominant. In this paper, I have sought to examine the conditions that have fostered the project's ongoing development.

Cambridge Social Ontology has fruitfully engaged with associated projects over its history, most notably critical realism and the growing field of social ontology – in particular, the work of John Searle. In examining these influences, it is clear that, although there has

---

<sup>55</sup> In this way, Lawson's account makes abundantly clear that the conception presented is consistent with our best understanding of the nature of non-social phenomena. For more, cf. Id., *The Nature of Social Reality*, cit.; Id., *Social Positioning Theory*, cit.

<sup>56</sup> For more, cf. Y. Slade-Caffarel, *Rights and Obligations in Cambridge Social Ontology*, «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour», Advance Online Publication (2022).

been overlap and helpful engagement, Cambridge Social Ontology remains a distinct project with, at its core, weekly meetings – originally with the Cambridge Realist Workshop and now, most importantly, with the Cambridge Social Ontology Group.

These local institutional arrangements are the key to its longevity. Unlike other academic projects, there are no pre-requisite readings, there is little formality, all that is required is an interest in discussing the nature of (mostly social) stuff. Over time projects have developed and explanatorily powerful contributions such as social positioning theory have been produced. These are then constantly questioned and, at least for now, there is no sign of running out of things to talk about.

Whilst the impact of the project on the modern mainstream of economics has been limited, its contribution to economics should not be ignored. In particular, research advancing our understanding of the nature of money as well as the wealth of interventions in debates in the history of thought and among heterodox economists are undoubtedly significant contributions to the discipline. But, if anything, economics is no longer the focus of the group. Social ontology, it has been found, is the key to developing successful social science, including economics. And so social ontology is the focus. No (ontological) topic is off limits.

*King's College London*  
[yannick.sladecaffarel@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:yannick.sladecaffarel@kcl.ac.uk)