Let's get real:
New continental philosophy's methodological imperative

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Abstract

This paper elucidates the implications of the ontological turn within continental philosophy for social researchers. In my literature review I focus on the work of Žižek, Badiou, and Ferraris, and I identify three challenges which we must address. First, their work demands increasingly realist approaches to social research. Building on this, the second challenge is to find a methodology which can serve this realist approach; here, I argue that critique of the critical theory tradition is most appropriate. The third and final challenge is to identify appropriate concrete methods. I do so and then provide an example of how these methods could be applied in the study of sustainable food production. Ultimately I argue that the most important intervention is an ethical one, as this tradition compels us to produce knowledge which benefits the comparatively disadvantaged in society. I conclude with specific implications for my own field of consumer research.

Keywords: ontology, methodology, philosophy of science, realism, critical theory, interpretivism, Badiou, Ferraris, Žižek

Introduction

A sea change has taken place within continental philosophy. In the last 20 years, we have witnessed a turn towards ontology—the study of *what is*. Philosophers of the contemporary ontological turn argue that this is necessary, because postmodern idealists went too far in their focus on epistemology—the study of *what we can know*. These contemporary philosophers have progressively become realist, arguing that the abandonment of reality as a reference point had left little ground for producing knowledge, ethical perspectives, and political claims (Ferraris 2015, 2012; Riera 2005; Hallward 2001; Manent 2000; Rancière 1995). This perspective is best explicated by Ferraris, who provides new analyses of both classic sociological arguments and current events, ultimately finding that the normative injunction to ‘study interpretations’ and analyse ‘narratives’ has dangerously anti-intellectual consequences. Indeed, he finds it creates scepticism toward observable social facts like

gender inequality, classism, and racism; in turn, the myths of the most powerful function in the place of knowledge within this void of analysis and criticism (Ferraris 2015, 2012).

I begin the essay by introducing this crisis; the ontological corrective; and the limitations of these new approaches. In particular, I focus on the work of Žižek, Badiou, and Ferraris, as their work has the clearest methodological prescriptions for social researchers. Based on this review of the literature, I argue that there are three major methodological implications which must be considered.

Given that this manuscript was prepared for a special issue on interpretivist research, I begin by considering the implications for this sort of research. Here, I contest the notion that these philosophers reject interpretivism, finding instead that they seek to amend it. Building on this, the second challenge is to identify a methodology which incorporates these amendments. To do this, I explore continuities between the ontological turn and traditional critical theory, finding that many of the methodological principles of the latter serve the former. The third challenge concerns translating these new traditions into practice. I identify a variety of concrete methods in this section which can produce scholarly, political, and ethical claims once again, and then illustrate their potential use in a classic context within my own field of consumer research—the study of sustainable food production.

Ultimately, I find that the biggest intervention of this tradition is an ethical one, rather than a methodological one. This is because these philosophers make a strong case for distinguishing between knowledge as that which contests power, and is thus inherently socially valuable; and ideology, a form of non-knowledge which is inherently reactionary. As such, they contend that the only legitimate ethic of scholarship is that which produces increasingly true, progressive knowledge, and which eschews ideology. For consumer researchers, this means that we should have a commitment to creating scholarship which benefits comparatively powerless groups—such as consumers and workers rather than

corporations, and lower class groups rather than higher class groups—rather than supporting already-powerful marketers. Within this theoretical tradition, doing anything else is simply ideology—a form of non-knowledge which is again inherently regressive.

Preconditions: crisis in philosophy

The ascendance of epistemology over ontology

[Modern p]hilosophy... owes its existence to attempts by the German idealists to put the sciences in their place and to give a clear sense to the vague idea that human beings make truth rather than find it... German idealism, however, was a short-lived and unsatisfactory compromise... What was needed, and what the [German] idealists were unable to envisage, was a repudiation of the very idea of anything—mind or matter, self or world—having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented... Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there... Only descriptions of the world can be true or false.'

Richard Rorty (1989), pp. 4-5

As noted by proponents (Rorty 1989; Foucault 1966) and critics (Ferraris 2015, 2012; Sparrow 2014), the ascendance of epistemology originates in Kantian 'critical philosophy'. Kant (1781) argued that at best humans only have knowledge of the phenomenal world—the world of subjective experience—and never of the noumenal world, or 'things in themselves'. Based on this premise, he contended that the primary object of philosophy was epistemology—scrutiny of *what we can know* (Ferraris 2015, 2012; Sparrow 2014). The study of 'real objects', meanwhile, was relegated and limited to the natural sciences.

This idea permeated later works of German Idealism, phenomenology, and existentialism, reaching its apex in idealist forms of postmodernism—what Firat and Venkatesh in our own field would describe as the extreme deconstructionist postmodernism (1995). This tradition questioned the idea that anything can be scientifically known, furthering the idea that knowledge should be produced with reference to interpretations,

rather than reality. Notable is Lyotard's work (1979) which reduced science to a 'language game', and argued that the pursuit of knowledge yields only competing narratives and a plurality of understandings. Baudrillard popularised the notion that individuals increasingly have access to references without referents, and hyperreality rather than reality (1981). Along with Lyotard (1979), Baudrillard (1992) decried the notion of human progress as a hegemonic metanarrative, thus equating knowledge production with domination. Also notable here is postmodern anti-foundationalism, exemplified by the work of Rorty (1989, 1979), which proposed that there are no universal, relevant principles governing knowledge production. In Rorty's formulation, knowledge is simply discourse; its value judged pragmatically. Foucault's scepticism of truth, evidenced by his preference for 'epistemes' (1966), 'discursive formations' (1969, 1976) and 'régimes of truth' (1975), is another example of the extremes of 20th century idealism. At the end of the day, Ferraris locates the peak of anti-realist postmodernism in his collaborator Derrida's comment that 'there is no outside-text' (1967). He argues that as Derrida reduces reality to discourse, ontology and epistemology become conflated (Ferraris 2015, 2012).

Deconstruction without reconstruction

Contemporary critics acknowledge the constructive intentions of postmodern idealism (Ferraris 2015, 2015; Fuat and Venkatesh 1995), finding canonical postmodernists like Baudrillard, Derrida, and Foucault undeniably scholarly and keenly interested in politics (as seen in Baudrillard 2010, 1970; Derrida 1993; Foucault 1980, 1975). Postmodern idealism also helped identify abuses resulting from uncritical social inquiry.

Nevertheless, what Rorty identifies as the 'promise' of modern philosophy—its abandonment of truth based in reality—would be considered its greatest pitfall by some contemporary philosophers. They find that despite good intentions, the severing of

knowledge production from reality ultimately had negative scholarly and political implications (Susen 1998). For every progressive deconstruction, it appears the powerful have their own reconstruction—and theirs have more weight.

Popular anti-realism has even served the interests of power—examples include Harvey’s findings that people are generally oblivious to the persistence of imperialism (2007, 2005), or Schor’s finding that most are unaware that real income and leisure have declined appreciably, in ways that directly benefit the powerful (Schor 1993). Scholars of the global financial crisis (Mirowski 2013; Mason 2012; Dumenil and Levy 2010; Foster and Magdoff 2009) argue that mass deception regarding the nature of the economy had disastrous effects, and that the need for new political inquiry is greater than ever. In his analysis of the liquidity of postmodern culture, Bauman finds that the main beneficiaries of postmodern fluidity tend to be the powerful within society (2005).

Building on historical examples such as these, Ferraris (2012) ably demonstrates how rejection of reality does not yield emancipation but ‘can be used (as in fact happened) for the worst harassments and falsifications’ (p. 70). This vacuum of critique has inspired some contemporary continental philosophers to revisit the philosophy of social inquiry. I turn to their work in the next section.

Philosophy of science from the ontological turn

Origins of the new philosophical movement

New realist philosophies present ‘an ambitious point of view, a new possibility for philosophy... Philosophy can continue.’
Alain Badiou (2005), p. 20

Contemporary philosophers striving to discover how ‘philosophy can continue’ draw inspiration from a wide variety of longstanding traditions. The first is the critical tradition

starting from Marx (1859, 1845 with Engels), to Gramsci (1935, 1919 with Togliatti), to Horkheimer (1937; with Adorno 1947), and finally with Barthes (1957)—and especially their definitions of knowledge (increasingly true accounts of reality) as opposed to ideology (intentionally untrue accounts of reality). Second would be Heidegger's adamant convictions that philosophy must address questions of ontology; that the importance of (even imperfect) knowledge of 'things in themselves' is analytically important; and that interpretation should have a progressive goal (1927). Third would be existentialism, particularly the work of Sartre (1943) and de Beauvoir (1947), who theorised that there is a facticity (collection of unamendable facts) of our social lives. Fourth, though rarely credited and at times repudiated, Deleuze certainly deserves acknowledgment, as he interrogated the assumptions of Kantian idealism; reconsidered the possibility of direct 'knowing'; and questioned the centrality of an individual subject's phenomenological experience in social inquiry (1968, 1956). Here, and in his work with Guattari, subjectivity (to the degree to which it is sociologically meaningful) is theorised as largely structured by society, in its own interests; consequently, phenomenological accounts of experience may be little more than reflections of objective social structures (1980, 1972).

A final, tremendous corpus upon which these new philosophers draw is their post-structuralist forefathers. Particularly foundational are post-structuralist critiques of the role of power in shaping the social (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 1972; Derrida 1972, 1967; Foucault 1972, 1969, 1966; Barthes 1967, 1957). Indeed, it has been argued (Agamben 1998) that the charge of his generation of philosophers is to complete Foucault's final project, which was arguably stymied by his idealism: the development of an epistemology and ontology which can elucidate the conditions and ethics of progressive social change. In Foucault's late work, he conceives of 'care of the self' (self-reflection and seeking truth about the self, as opposed

to how one has been subjectivated) as the cornerstone of ethical and political practice (1984, 1983, 1981).

Contemporary thinkers who have participated in the ontological turn, and thereby have attempted to realise this potential of post-structuralism, include Agamben, Badiou, Balibar, Brown, Butler, Chomsky, Ferraris, Rancière, Spivak, and Žižek. That said, not all of these philosophers have developed a fully-fledged philosophy of inquiry based on their ontological considerations. On this subject, Žižek, Badiou, and Ferraris are the most prolific writers. Consequently, I focus on their thought here.

Žižek and Badiou: Lacanian interventions

As noted even within our own field (Earley 2014; Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw 2011), Žižek and Badiou have done much to address the post-Foucauldian situation. To start, Žižek uses Lacan's tripartite thesis of the real-symbolic-imaginary to explain the constitution of knowledge, the subject, and ethics. For Lacan, the 'Real' is that which evades interpretation and symbolisation. It is defined dialectically alongside the symbolic (unconscious representation, offered to us by the powerful within culture), and the imaginary (subjective, conscious representation) (Lacan 1966). Reconfiguring Marxian and Gramscian notions of ideology through this Lacanian lens, Žižek argues that hegemony functions through the symbolic order. In the current historical moment, he argues that neoliberalism is the dominant structuring ideology within the symbolic order—as it is an economic programme presented as a 'reality' to which there is no alternative by those who benefit from such a vision of society (Brown 2015; Žižek 2014; Haiven 2014). While escaping ideology is almost impossible in Žižek's philosophy, it remains a crucial point of reference and a linchpin of his arguments about liberatory politics.

Badiou also returns to Marxist notions of ideology versus knowledge. That said, Badiou presents a different perspective on Lacan's original conceptualisation of the real. While Lacan positioned the real as 'always inaccessible', Badiou reads it as that which is inaccessible to most people, most of the time. Also drawing on Lacan, he argues that 'the real' is the counterpoint to 'interpretation' and 'appearance' (i.e. ideology) (Badiou 2011, 1998, 1988; Hallward 2003). Drawing on Hegel (1837), both Badiou and Žižek view 'facts' pertaining to individuals (e.g. skin colour, sex characteristics, ability) in largely negative terms—they are inherently devoid of meaning. Ideology is that which attempts to cover up this negativity and 'force' meaning onto reality (e.g. negative notions of femininity are created and promoted by those who will benefit from them).

Badiou and Žižek thus reframe discussions of individuals in terms of subjectivity rather than identity. They contend that subjectivity—to the degree to which it matters—is defined by an individual's relationship to power (via the symbolic order), and to the real. In Žižek's philosophy, those who do not have access to 'the Real' are 'void' of subjectivity. Badiou initially theorised the same—contending that those who do not have knowledge of the real are not subjects at all (1982)—but came to describe them as 'subjects of ideology' (Badiou 1998).

Building on these epistemological principles, the philosophy of Žižek and Badiou has tremendous ontological implications. In short, they argue that meaning, to the degree to which it matters, is politically constituted, as the social is always structured by politics. In turn, they reveal how not only knowledge structures, but also subjectivity (and what it means to 'be'), ethics, and action, are politically constituted. They contend that much of what we think of as 'ours' and consequently value—our identities, thoughts, terms, agency, and ethics—are largely determined by other social actors. As such, the distinction between the subjective and objective collapses, as subjectivity is seen as largely inscribed. This thinking

reflects a major intervention into the structure/agency debate. Ultimately, they find that we must acknowledge the bleak poststructuralist conclusion that power tends to win, if we are to identify strategies for contesting hegemony.

Here, Badiou presents a powerful account of how social change is *possible*—even if not *probable*. He argues that since the symbolic order works most of the time, important moments of learning must occur in flashes where truth becomes momentarily accessible (Hallward 2003, 2001; Badiou 1998). He describes such opportunities as ‘events’—rare but regular moments when the symbolic order ‘fails’, presenting opportunities for individuals to ‘encounter’ the real. He sees truth like a lightning bolt that strikes an individual quickly, and transforms them completely.

From this, Badiou develops an actionable ethical system. He argues that those who have knowledge of the real, and then act in contradiction to that knowledge (by producing ideology), are ‘evil’; those who have encountered the real, and spread truth, are ‘good’; and most individuals are neither, as they do not have access to the real (Hallward 2003, 2001; Badiou 1998). To conclude, Badiou’s contribution is to remind us that while much is structurally determined, social structures regularly fail—and that such failures are the only opportunities for the relatively powerless to effectuate significant change within society. It is important to note here that Badiou views the least powerless as crucial for meaningful social transformation, as they have the greatest true knowledge of how society works (by being constantly oppressed by its machinations); because transformation which does not address their interests is not truly liberatory; and because power is inherently corrupting, meaning that while the powerful make concessions to maintain the status quo, they never really yield their vested interest in profiting from the disenfranchisement of others.

Ferraris and the return of reality

Based on their shared commitment to radical politics, the work of Žižek and Badiou is largely focused on the social world, constitution of subjects, and ethics. Ferraris's project is to re-embed these considerations into a general philosophy—one that is not limited to the study of social objects. In his very traditional approach, he accounts for all possible objects that could be (a general ontology); then meditates upon what we can know about these objects (a general epistemology); and finally reconsiders the purpose of all knowledge production.

Ontologically speaking, Ferraris argues that there are three sorts of 'real' objects. In turn, each type demands its own distinct epistemology and methodology (Ferraris 2012). They are *ideal objects* (like numbers), which do not have a physical presence, but are universal principles that exist and have validity regardless of human existence; *natural objects*, which exist in the world regardless of human thought and existence (such as squirrels and mountains); and *social objects* (like laws, mortgages, banknotes, weddings, and funerals), which are produced by humans, and require our continued existence for their persistence.

All of these objects are treated as 'real', and their existence is treated as 'true'. Ferraris defends this by arguing that even those without recourse to Kantian schematic thought, or phenomenological understanding of 'experience'—such as newborns and animals—can be 'aware' of their existence, via perception. For example, while babies cannot understand social constructs like 'motherhood' or 'gender', these constructs are nevertheless real; existing independently of the baby's thought; and having impacts upon the child regardless of comprehension. Similarly, a dog and its owner can enjoy a game of 'catch' without sharing representational language. In a way, this is a return to 'common-sense realism' of Hume (Ferraris 2015).

Ultimately, the 'reality' of an object is defined by its 'unamendability' by an individual subject (Ferraris 2015, 2012). We cannot amend the existence of squirrels, or the universal applicability of numbers, or the fact that mortgages exist (as much as we might like

to). The characteristics of objects are ‘facts’ that exist objectively—even though we do not always have perfect access to them. In the case of social objects, ‘facts’ are established by acts called ‘documentality’ (documentation, or enshrinement in discourse), by which meaning becomes not only social, but real, unamendable, agentic, and causal regardless of the desires of other subjects (2015, 2012). Within any hierarchical society, acts of documentality are always political. In this way, Ferraris agrees with Žižek and Badiou that social life is politically constituted, but he does so through an alternative ontology grounded in reality and not just ‘the real’. The positive implications are that there are real facts of social construction; that the nature and effects of real social objects can at times be documented; and that political and scholarly inquiry can continue so long as it is founded in the pursuit of such increasingly real knowledge.

Limitations

While these philosophers have tremendous implications for social research, there are nevertheless unresolved questions. Within the work of Badiou and Žižek, the largest limitations are arguably their focus on social objects, and the still-idealist epistemology they inherit through their Lacanian heritage (Johnston 2008). While Badiou (2005) and Žižek (2005) acknowledge the existence of an external reality, their criterion for truth is not reality but discourse, formed in the interaction between the symbolic, imaginary, and real. While this is at times sufficient for the study of social objects, it is not a sufficient epistemological foundation for scholarship that involves natural objects, or a combination of natural and social objects (such as sustainability). As such, it does not function well as a general philosophy of inquiry.

Politically speaking, Žižek advances a particularly difficult position. As the site of political action is conceptualised as ‘the real’, but the real is in turn contingent, unknowable

and inarticulable, it is difficult to develop concrete political strategies from his work. Badiou attempts to avoid this quandary by arguing that the real is not completely unknowable—just not widely known. Still, he says that knowledge of the event is generally tacit and best seen through embodied actions (1998, 1982). Many note the challenges this creates for those who want use their philosophy to enact social change (Hallward 2013; McMillan 2012; Dean 2012; Hewlett 2010; Power and Toscano 2010; Robinson 2010).

A criticism from stricter realist philosophers concerns their conviction that we can truthfully ‘know’ that knowledge is imperfect; by contending that there is at least one thing that we can ‘really’ know, they undermine idealism (Carew 2014). Moreover, it logically follows that ‘knowingly producing ideology’ would entail reference to the reality of social life. A final critique concerns the idea that idealism (via subjectivity) ‘emerged’ and is distinct from nature (reality). Some dispute this logic, arguing that there is no clear period ‘before’ conscious representation, in the lives of individuals and the human species in general (Carew 2014; Grant 2008). Even if there was, representations themselves are ‘real’ and have impacts. As such, they argue that idealism, rather than realism, is not philosophically tenable. Put differently, their argument that they evaluate truth in reference to the logic of discourse rather than reality is not supportable, as discourse itself is real.

Elucidating limitations of Ferraris’s work is a bit more difficult as it was so recently published. Still, four main concerns can be derived from direct reading and preliminary critiques. First, Badiou has noted that continental realists like Ferraris have not adequately absorbed the interventions of earlier philosophy. For example, the tradition lacks a concept equivalent to the ‘event’, and thus provides little explanation for why humans might act ethically (2011). Indeed, Ferraris provides little justification for why one would produce knowledge which benefits society, and not just him or herself. As such, much work remains in combining the strengths of realist philosophy, which helpfully critiques human uniqueness,

and Lacanian-derived ethics, which provides a realistic and practical perspective on humans' unique potential for good and evil.

Second, many may ask what Ferraris offers beyond traditional post-structuralism. Here, it is fair to say that one of Ferraris' main contributions is simply synthesis—he brings together a wide range of post-structuralist interventions. That said, the seemingly small move from an idealist to strictly realist epistemology in his thought is radical, and has tremendous implications. By reinstating reality as a criterion for knowledge production, the nihilistic extremes of postmodern idealism are avoided, and we have insight on how competing knowledge claims and political demands can be evaluated once again.

Other critiques will likely come from competing continental realists, as there is an entire generation of realist philosophers hot on Ferraris' heels. This can be seen in a recent issue (2015) of renowned philosophy journal *The Monist*, where competing contemporary realists such as de Caro, Gabriel, Grant, and Harman presented alternative visions alongside Ferraris. Thus far, an early comparison has shown these alternatives to be less rigorous, epistemologically and ontologically speaking; for example, some necessitate a return to the existence of divine intervention (deSanctis and Santarcangelo 2015). Still, this debate may yield refinements from Ferraris or an even more sophisticated philosophy of social inquiry from another author.

A final question which will likely arise concerns how scholars can actually produce increasingly 'real' and 'true' forms of knowledge about the social. This paper is developed in part with this critique in mind—and I turn my attention to this challenge in the next section.

Methodological implications of new realist ontologies

Whither interpretivism?

Again, as this is a special issue on interpretivism, I begin by considering the challenges this tradition presents for interpretivism first. Moreover, while the implications of these philosophical developments for radically idealist postmodernism are clear—it is the last nail in the coffin—the implications for milder forms of interpretivism such as social construction are more nebulous. Put simply, does the return of realism call for positivism, objectivism, and an ascendancy of science over social inquiry?

The answer to these questions is a firm ‘no’. Here, Ferraris presents the most complete philosophy of inquiry. While he argues that science (what he refers to as ‘realist intuition’) is the proper epistemology for discerning truth related to natural and ideal objects, he contends that social objects necessarily demand varying degrees of ‘constructivist intuition’. For example, while he argues that we can sometimes truly know facts that relate to social objects using realist intuition (e.g. ‘mortgages exist—there is plenty of evidence’ or ‘VAT was constituted by these acts of government’—this is a fact that is unamendable), most characteristics of social objects require some amount of constructivist intuition (e.g. debate of definitions of the social object).

Nevertheless, external reality remains analytically important. First, it reminds us that we can sometimes establish demonstrable social facts. Second, in cases where that is logistically impossible (acts of documentality are too numerous or not accessible), it reminds us that we should nevertheless strive to produce increasingly real (and hence useful) interpretations. The implication is that empirical, hermeneutic, and increasingly intersubjective social inquiry can yield progressively accurate knowledge of social objects. Third, and finally, while an objective, universal study of a social phenomenon like ‘marriage’ may be impossible, we can produce knowledge which is real and true for a more limited community.

In short, the philosophers of this tradition argue that the purpose of social research is critique—the production of increasingly true knowledge (Ferraris 2015, 2012; Badiou and Žižek 2009). For Ferraris specifically, given his realist orientation, truth is defined not only discursively—it is the reality of objects. Increasingly true knowledge progressively improves human understanding and experience in places where there is either no knowledge; less rigorous knowledge; or hegemony. Indeed, social research is theorised as diametrically opposed to ideology, which is non-knowledge and regressive. Finally, as the social is almost always politically constituted, study of the social is generally a study of politics. In the next section, I expand upon this idea that critique is the key methodological foundation of social research.

Critique: a basis for amending current interpretive practice

‘[C]ritique assesses what exists, what might exist and what should exist...’
Norman Fairclough, 2010, p. 7

To elucidate a new vision of critique, I will begin by revisiting past debates on the philosophy of social inquiry within my own field, that of consumer research. Here, Murray and Ozanne argued that there were two broad methodological camps—the traditional interpretivists, and a critical theory alternative (1991). As noted in the key treatises of the traditional interpretivist camp (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Hirschman 1986; and Spiggle 1994), this tradition generally assumes that there is no mind-independent reality, which necessitates a full (arguably radically) interpretivist ontology.

The critical theory camp, on the other hand, generally employs a critical realist approach to ontology, which assumes that there is an objectively-existing outside world, but that our access to it is subjective, socially constructed, and discursively-mediated (Fairclough 2010; Murray and Ozanne 1991). As argued by notable critical methodologist Norman

Fairclough (2010), the intervention of critical research is an ontological one: it seeks to theorise the nature of being within society, as it is; and it then considers the range of possible social phenomena, within and beyond these limits. Following Murray and Ozanne (1991), it is also an axiological project, or a matter of values, as knowledge produced from these premises makes concrete statements about stakes and benefits. This draws on Horkheimer's (1937) distinction between descriptive and critical theory, which argues that the former seeks to catalogue the social, while the latter seeks to transform it. As with Denzin (2001), Fairclough (2010) argues that researchers are always obligated to make an ethical decision about what 'side' to take, as no research project is 'politically neutral'.

Ultimately, the philosophers discussed here would argue that the position of the traditional interpretivism is philosophically untenable, resulting from its conflation of ontology and epistemology. Moreover, the traditional interpretivist position ignores the possibility that there are social objects whose existence and characteristics can be fairly objectively documented (to borrow an example from Ferraris, there is overwhelming evidence that the Holocaust occurred; it is a real, truly existing historical event, and not simply a subject of narrative, interpretation, or representation). As all social objects are politically constituted, there is no such thing as an 'uncritical' approach to social research; indeed, believing that there is may contribute to significant violence (e.g. to build on the previous example, the case of Holocaust denial). At the end of the day, they would contend that the critical theory approach is not simply an 'alternative'; instead, it is the only methodology capable of consistently producing knowledge.

What's more, these newer philosophers would also have some disagreements with traditional critical theorists. Many within this tradition proceed a step further than Fairclough, contending that the distinction between ontology and axiology is false (Dean 2009; Hallward 2003), as being itself is politically constituted and hence values are inseparable from ontology

(Ferraris 2015, 2012; Rancière 2010, 1992; Badiou 1998; Agamben 1998). This also contradicts Horkheimer's (1937) distinction between descriptive and critical theory, implying instead that there is no way to describe anything social without addressing the politicised nature of social objects themselves. Put differently, all attempts at knowledge production take a 'stand' on this politics; true knowledge is produced when the politics are adequately described and interrogated. Ideology (a failure of knowledge production) occurs when an author consciously or unconsciously worsens the underlying power dynamics. Consequently, any legitimate social inquiry is critical, rather than descriptive.

Based on this formulation, Badiou provides the clearest insight on the nature of research ethics. He argues that we should devote our lives to critique, as it is of universal value. For the relatively powerless, the benefits are obvious (2005, 1988). More interestingly, following Hegel (1807), he finds that even the powerful would benefit from emancipatory knowledge (1998). This is because those who dominate are not free, as they are dependent on the submission of those that they dominate, an inherently unstable condition which they must constantly manufacture and maintain. For example, this sort of analysis would question whether patriarchy is truly valuable, arguing that even men would likely benefit from more egalitarian and honest gender relations.

Taken together, these authors make a powerful logical and ethical case for why critique is the appropriate methodology for social research. What is more difficult to articulate, at this juncture, is how this translates into active research practice. I address this challenge in the next section, identifying some methods appropriate for analysing power relations.

Methods for critique

I will begin with critical discourse analysis, as it has largely influenced many of the other

methods listed. Critical discourse analysis (or CDA) is a longstanding, diverse, fertile field of social inquiry. The goal of CDA is to identify (and ideally critique) power relations at work within any size text—from a cereal box cover, to thousands of pages of archived news coverage on a subject (Fairclough 2010, 1999). At times, texts are purposively sampled as representations of some social object, in which case normal limitations of generalisability apply; at other times, the text itself is the object, meaning that the sampling is ‘complete’ just looking at the text. While it can proceed much like grounded theory (as explained by Corbin and Strauss 2008) it differs by drawing on theory from the outset. It argues that particular characteristics of the communication (related to the source; rhetorical strategies; reach of the communication; political use of metaphor and analogy) tell us much about power, and consequently argues that it would be pointless (or even impossible) to do a more ‘neutral’ grounded round ignoring this. Ultimately, CDA is interested in the motivations behind any text, and how texts fit into larger social and political structures. Consequently, sociohistoric research is frequently required to complete critical discourse analysis of a set text.

Critical ethnography is a method which overlaps with CDA at times. It focuses on how power structures not only discourse, but also social relations within a particular cultural group. In doing so, it addresses the methodological imperative to engage in critical rather than descriptive research detailed above. Sometimes it explicitly uses CDA; elsewhere, it is more influenced by reflexive ethnography more broadly. Inspired, among other things, by Clifford and Marcus’s edited volume *Writing Culture* (1992), this academic movement encouraged ethnographers to think more seriously and critically about their role within the communities they study (Madison 2011). Reflexive ethnography is particularly well-suited to understanding the ontology (and hence political constitution) of subjectivity, and thus is perfect for this ontological turn in the study of social construction (Davies 1998).

Another related method, and one which is eminently applicable in my own field of consumer research, would be critical media studies. As it is conceptualised by Fuchs (2014), this field examines the intersection of power structures and communications structures. To do this properly, Fuchs argues that scholars must start from a solid grounding in social theory, and particularly political philosophy (2014). In other words, one must have a coherent ontological and epistemological position—a sense of what it means to be a subject, to be a society, and to produce knowledge—before starting. While this may sound obvious, it was a major intervention within the field of media studies, which like consumer research tends to produce ‘mid-level theory’, often at the expense of ‘high level’ considerations. Fuchs finds that the results of mid-range inquiry may seem to make sense ‘emically’, but risk becoming inconsistent or incoherent at higher levels of theorisation. A case in point would be social media studies on activism which do not have a solid understanding of relevant concepts from philosophy (subjectivity, politics, ethics) and political philosophy (democracy, the state, citizenship, consumer-citizenship) (Fuchs 2014).

A related, but much broader field, would be political economy. This is the field of economics, as it was initially conceived, with its political and ethical dimensions intact (Redman 1997). In the abstract, political economy does not demand any particular political position. That said, neoclassical and neoliberal economists rarely identify as political economists, as these traditions are largely defined by the fact that they start from a (relatively) consistent political position (one in which market capitalism is seen as the most legitimate, plausible, and/or just politico-economic system) and are not greatly interested in critiquing or debating it (Mosco 2009; Redman 1997). This means that *political* economy is, in practice, inhabited by those who hold any other political position, or who devote their careers to the debate between political positions. Marxism arguably predominates, and Marxist political economists tend to focus on how powerful actors within capitalist market

systems use their power to further their capital accumulation (Mosco 2009). Political economists from any political stance can use any economic methodology—from pure theory to highly data-driven modelling (Mosco 2009). Within Marxist political economy, however, a popular methodology is class analysis, which analyses systems in terms of differential outcomes for social actors of various social classes.

Some traditions that emerged from the identity politics movement are also appropriate for analysing power. An example from feminist theory would be standpoint analysis, which examines the ‘unique standpoint’ of a woman in a given situation (see Harding 2003, for a review). It draws on feminist political philosophy more broadly, which is invested in identifying and critiquing the many ways in which women are subjugated to men globally. As with critical discourse analysis, standpoint analysis frequently necessitates sociohistoric work on the broader context surrounding a phenomenon of feminist interest. Analogous methods from other struggles include critical race theory, postcolonial theory, disability studies, indigenous studies, working class studies, and people’s history. An attempt to bridge these movements can be found in anti-oppressive research methodologies (see Brown and Strega, eds., 2005 for an overview), which seek to advance the interests of a wide range of disenfranchised groups, and enhances our understanding of hegemony by seeking evidence across groups and movements. Badiou (1998) argues that the most marginalised have the best knowledge of power and domination—as they experience the negative effects everyday; consequently, various standpoint theories are perfectly suited for critique as a methodology.

Finally, it should be noted that conceptual research is necessary to advance our understanding of these subjects, as the ontological turn has only recently emerged. It is a field to which one can still contribute, and much work remains in elucidating further implications of the tradition for social research.

Given the unscripted nature of this tradition, it is valuable to illustrate how this methodology can be applied in social research. In the next section, I provide a brief illustration of how these methods can be applied to the sustainable food production, as this is a subject of longstanding interest within my own field of interpretive consumer research.

Application

The first step for any of these methods would be to ensure that one has a solid understanding of the critical epistemology and ontology to be applied. Then, these philosophers and methodologists would argue that some coherent, sociological understanding of the context is a pre-requisite to study of social activity within it. For a sustainable food scene, one would want to study relevant political and institutional contexts—from local constraints to the impact of international trade programmes. Then, from this foundation, a wide range of critical methodologies can be used.

Critical discourse analysis could be applied to reports from industry, government, and non-profit actors to study how different organisations have different missions and strategies. Alternatively, it could study the ‘culture’ of sustainable food production, looking at documentaries and lifestyle publications to understand not only the values entailed, but who is promoting them, and how they benefit from promoting them. CDA could also be used to analyse interviews. Here, it is important to know that these new philosophies—especially Ferraris’ realism—would encourage us to think differently about the interview context. In my own interview work on sustainable food production within a particular city, I asked firms, government agencies, and non-profits what they *feel* that they can do, and cannot do, to foster sustainability. This is the critical, yet still interpretivist, moment. While we can never ‘really’ know what is possible within an institutional field, the critical realist perspective says that what matters—what is nevertheless ‘real’—is actors’ sense of what can be done. This, in turn

has material consequences, affecting the actual policies and practices of these actors.

Critical media studies scholars might be interested in how certain actors have disproportionate access to media within the institutional field—and hence have greater control of ‘messages’ related to sustainability. A reflexive or critical ethnography from any particular position within the institutional field could provide insight on that aspect of the field. Interactions with other actors in the institutional field could be planned, so as to gain information beyond one corner of the institutional field. Another method would be political economy, which would analyse relevant economics using either conceptual methods, or data-driven methods drawing on available data. Finally, standpoint methods could have some applicability; here, an intersectional approach like anti-oppressive methodologies might be best, to ensure engagement with a wide variety of marginalised actors. An alternative could be to use a more focused standpoint, if there is a known group disenfranchised from the sustainable food economy in the area of interest. World systems or postcolonial analysis could be used to highlight international disparities in access to sustainable food.

Discussion: Implications for interpretive consumer research

‘Interpretive consumer researchers ... have not historically emphasized the political dimensions of symbolic consumption. By arguing against a positivist, utilitarian form of consumer research that, at the time, was the dominant intellectual paradigm, the early interpretivists were emphasizing an extreme form of agency... This assumption of agency directed attention to a form of interpretive research that emphasized the creative role of the consumer. At the same time, this view of agency turned attention away from the political and oppressive potential of the symbolic.’ Murray 2002, p. 439.

Consumer research is greatly shaped by the zeitgeist of the academy more broadly. As noted in the quote above, we quite heartily embraced postmodern idealist forms of interpretivism. This point has been well-established in editorial and historical studies of the discipline (Earley 2014; Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Tadajewski 2006), and the details do not merit

repeating. More useful, at this juncture, is a discussion of how these new philosophical movements have already influenced our field, and can do so in the future. Here, I provide a brief history of our participation in the ontological turn, and then a consideration of what we must do in order to fully address the imperative that social researchers must ‘get real’.

The ontological turn in consumer research

The epigraph from Murray (2002) serves not only as an allegation against the field, but also as documentation of our field’s early attempts to avoid these pitfalls, beginning with ‘critical theory’ debate of the 1990s (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Hetrick and Lozada 1994; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro 1994). Recent interest in critique can be seen in the *ephemera* special issue on the ‘Politics of Consumption’, the *Journal of Consumer Culture* special issue on ‘Consumption as Political and Moral Practice’, and the conferences that inspired these publications. Another site of such discussions can be seen in the epistemological conversation between Askegaard and Linnet (2011) and Earley (2014), which argues for the de-centring of phenomenological experience in the field, as well as greater attention to sociohistorical and political forces. Moreover, discussions of the nature of consumer subjectivity (Bradshaw 2013; Schwarzkopf 2011; Trentmann 2007; Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006; Murray 2002; Firat and Dholakia 1998) have long drawn on political theories of the constitution of the social. Last, but certainly not least, the de-centring of the individual subject can be seen in consumer research projects that adopt ‘object-oriented ontologies’ (in the words of realist philosopher Harman [2002]). While ANT researchers have done much to advance such perspectives, the best example of a truly de-centred approach would be Epp and Price’s (2010) ‘biography’ of a kitchen table.

Another relevant conversation would be the the burgeoning discussion of marketing system dynamics (MSD). Scholars within this tradition contend that advancing our

knowledge of market processes will require moving beyond a focus on either consumers or firms. In the words of Zwick, Cayla, and Koops-Elson (2002), '[m]arkets are not friction-free and culture-free spaces of exchange but are formed by complex constellations of actors', whose identities and potential for activity is defined with recourse to structures of power. As such, our understanding of complex social phenomena like value, cultural meaning, and subjectivity cannot progress without considering the agency of many types of political actors and objects as they constitute and are constituted through networks of power and information (Earley 2014; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Giesler 2008, 2006, 2003; Arnould and Thompson 2005; Zwick, Cayla, and Koops-Elson 2002). Scholars in this conversation demonstrate how political analysis is not only relevant to explicitly political contexts like activism, but also the dynamics of market systems more broadly, which are necessarily matters of power, sociohistoric conditions, knowledge structures, subjectivities, ethics, and actions. Taken together, these traditions reflect our field's early attempts to address the challenges of contemporary continental philosophy. While there is much hard work left to be done, it is absolutely necessary, lest the rigor and relevance of the field be brought into question.

Moving forward: research ethics for scholars of consumption

'A philosophy worthy of its name... is in any case antinomical to the service of goods... there is no commercial philosophy.' Badiou 1988, p. 341

Ultimately, it must be argued that the most important intervention of the tradition is an ethical one, rather than a methodological one. This is because, as we have seen, the social is always political in hierarchical societies, and as such there is consequently no 'apolitical' research topics, and no 'unbiased' social research. At a bare minimum, this means that researchers

account for the political dimension of their subjects, and then take a position with regard to the findings—anything less is completely meaningless. To actually produce knowledge rather than ideology, however, requires choosing the side of the comparatively powerless, as siding with the powerful is synonymous with producing ideology.

In the case of consumer research specifically, I find it helpful to consider the ideas of the field's founders, as well as this philosophical tradition and critical political economies of consumer culture such as that produced by Slater (1998). As MacInnis and Folkes note (2010), the founders of the field of consumer research were well aware that the main political axis of consumer research runs from comparatively powerless and disorganised 'consumers' to comparatively powerful actors such as marketers and governments. Indeed, the initial impetus for starting the discipline was to create a home for research which addresses the injustices inherent in this dynamic, and which provides a counterpoint to the marketer's perspective. As such, while the disciplines of political philosophy and analysis have never been formally represented in the Association for Consumer Research, early work in the *Journal of Consumer Research*—even quantitative work—frequently addressed political issues affecting consumers. Unfortunately, the rise of managerial studies of consumption and methods like 'corporate ethnography' have sullied this vision. To contribute to knowledge production once again, we must recommit ourselves to the premise outlined by Badiou in the epigraph to this section—that commercial interests are not academic or philosophical interests. More explicitly, we must resist the power dynamics of the market as they are, and instead produce knowledge benefiting the less powerful (generally individuals within market societies). Doing otherwise would be to create ideology, which is 'not knowledge' and regressive.

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