Critical realism is described by some of its proponents as a ‘movement’; it develops themes such as critique and emancipation, and has traditionally tended to attract people on the Left, including Marxists. So what is the relationship between critical realism and Marxism? Critical realism was rooted initially in Roy Bhaskar’s defence of realism in the philosophy of science and social science, articulated in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, critical realism has grown in different directions. Roy Bhaskar’s own philosophy has moved far beyond his initial scientific realism and critical naturalism, through dialectical and transcendental dialectical stages, to his latest elaboration of ‘meta-reality’. Bhaskar’s early work makes fairly frequent references to Marx, and occasionally deals explicitly with Marx as a (indeed perhaps the first) realist social scientist. Bhaskar’s social ontology elaborated in *The Possibility of Naturalism*,1 the Transformative Model of Social Action (TMSA), is clearly influenced by and consistent with Marx’s social ontology, though it is derived independently of Marx through transcendental enquiry into the presuppositions and conditions of possibility of intentional human agency. Thus there is a discernible Marxist hue to Bhaskar’s own earlier work, which, however, has tended to fade in the later developments of Bhaskar’s thought.

The critical-realist ‘movement’, at times, displays somewhat cultish characteristics, with its central focus on the figure and work of Roy Bhaskar. Critical realism is, of course, not reducible to his work, however. Many others in philosophy and the substantive social sciences have engaged with and developed different aspects of critical realism, and there are now a variety of positions and approaches falling under the general term. While a number of critical-realist works make reference to Marx’s work in more-or-less explicit ways, some more centrally than others, other critical realists make little or no reference to Marx and clearly do not espouse a Marxist tradition. This, in itself, is not inconsistent with the claims of critical realism, as a set of arguments in philosophy. Bhaskar is explicit in his claim that critical-realist

1 Bhaskar 1998.
philosophical ‘under-labouring’ – the meta-analysis of the practice and conditions of possibility of science and other practices – does not, in itself, entail any particular social theory in terms of content; he insists that critical-realism philosophy does not and cannot ‘legislate in advance’ for the social sciences. But, among those who would describe themselves as critical realists, there is some debate over the extent to which critical realism entails or enhances Marxist social theory. On the other hand, among those who call themselves Marxists, many see no need for, or are critical of, critical realism. Again, this is hardly surprising, given the variety of positions and approaches which fall under the term ‘Marxist’.

Sean Creaven’s book-length treatment of the overlapping fields of Marxism and critical realism is, thus, an intervention into a much debated set of questions over which there is little agreement. This, in itself, makes his work an important contribution, to be welcomed and engaged with by non-Marxist critical realists, Marxist critical realists, and non-critical-realist Marxists alike. Creaven does not aim to engage directly in existing debates among critical realists and Marxists, but, rather, to propose a particular, original synthesis of Marxism and realism as superior to other positions in the social sciences, which are his primary target of criticism.

In *Marxism and Realism*, Creaven’s aim is to set out and defend a view of Marxist social science as being a non-reductive emergent-materialist approach. He uses the philosophical arguments of critical realism to defend and elaborate Marxist social science; and he argues that critical realists can enrich and radicalise their approach by drawing more systematically on the heritage of classical Marxism. He advocates a position of ‘critical materialism’, which consists of a synthesis of philosophical realism (as set out principally in Bhaskar’s early work) and dialectical materialism (primarily that of Engels). Creaven’s work is located above all within sociology. He aims to elaborate and defend a Marxist understanding of the relationship between human agency, social interaction and social structure in social systems, by reconstructing Marxist social theory on the basis of critical realism as a form of ‘emergentist’ social theory which he terms ‘emergentist Marxism’. In doing so, he aims at several targets:

i) to show how realist social theory provides a solution to several long-standing debates in social theory regarding structure and agency, and voluntarism vs. determinism; and how it transcends the weaknesses in the contending positions of holism, individualism and elisionism;

ii) to produce a radicalised version of realist social science by systematically incorporating the insights of dialectical materialism, as developed by Engels and Lenin among others;

iii) to defend the central claims of classical Marxism regarding the explanatory primacy

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2 See, for example, Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (eds.) 2002.