The Benefits and Disadvantages of Post-positivism in International Theory

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Milja Kurki has commented that International Relations (IR) is a 'divided discipline', split between a 'positivist mainstream…camp' and a post-positivist 'camp', and she is not alone in this assessment.[1] This essay will critically examine the benefits and disadvantages of post-positivism in light of this split, as part of what Yosef Lapid has called 'the third debate'.[2] In order to do this I will look at its genesis as a reaction against the positivist majority within IR, which I will locate more broadly within a reaction against positivism in the social sciences as a whole, thus agreeing with Jim George that IR is not independent of wider theoretical debate in the social sciences.[3] Within the scope of this essay it is not possible to give a full overview of the breadth of post-positivist approaches, which include post-modernism, constitutive analysis and more, but I will outline the benefits of some of their corresponding characteristics, and particularly focus on 'critical theory'.[4] Firstly however, it will be necessary to briefly outline what we mean by positivism more generally. I will then move on to question the relationship between positivism and post-positivism in IR by identifying positivism with the realist and neorealist paradigm most common in the discipline, demonstrating the comparative benefits of post-positivism for showing the myths that realism is built on. I will then turn to some of the problems that arise from post-positivism itself. This essay contends that IR can benefit from both positivism and post-positivism; rather than discussing the strengths and weaknesses of post-positivism in IR, it is best to consider the complementary strengths of post-positivism and positivism together.

Positivism has dominated the social sciences as part of the Enlightenment project to study social activity in a 'scientific' way.[5] Positivism follows Hume's radical empiricist conception of cause: knowledge does not exist outside of what we can observe, and thus what we claim to know is simply the associations or 'conjunctions' made on these observations.[6] Kurki notes that 'social scientists are still adamant that only careful observation of regularities (even if of 'localised' regularities) can give us an adequate understanding of human action and society.[7] Thus in the context of this essay positivism is defined as following the Humean principles outlined above, with 'the adoption of methodologies of the natural sciences to explain the social world'.[8] It is noted that this is a loose definition of positivism, but for the purposes of a relative discussion of post-positivism, it conveys the key assumptions that post-positivism has reacted against.

Viewed uncritically, positivism has much force. By presenting knowledge of the social world as similarly formulated as that of science, one can apply the same methodologies as used in the natural sciences to the social sciences and as a result find 'scientific' proof of one's theories.

However, it is the critical analysis of positivist thought that is the main strength of post-positivism. It encourages social science to think more critically towards the status quo, and the reaction against positivist epistemology, questioning its methodology and the claim to formulating 'scientific' theories, is what this essay views as 'post-positivism'. It is important to emphasise that there is no such thing as '*a* post-positivist approach, only post-positivist approaches'.[9] Indeed, this too is one of its strengths: it has opened up the debate within social sciences and created 'thinking space'.[10] Whereas positivism is methodologically dogmatic, post-positivism encourages a 'Socratic method'.[11] Lapid points out 'post-positivism is not a unitary philosophical platform', but one can find some common and often' inter-related' themes amongst its adherents.[12] These he identifies as 'the preoccupation with meta-scientific units (paradigmatism), the concern with underlying premises and assumptions (perspectivism),

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and the drift towards methodological pluralism (relativism)'.[13]   The common ground above is the raising of questions regarding accepted practice: questioning paradigms, questioning perspectives, and questioning methodology, which invigorates the academic project, and as such I agree that there should be optimism as to what post-positivism can achieve in IR.[14]

One can easily trace positivist epistemology in IR, where 'rationalist epistemology that relies on scientific inference… has been clearly articulated by the neo-realist and neo-liberal programmes of research.'[15]   Thus we can see that positivism has set the standard of how we 'do' IR. However, this essay concentrates on the broadly realist school, because it 'is the most venerable and persisting model of international relations, it provides a good starting point and baseline for comparison with competing models'.[16] In response to the positivist realist programme, I will now argue that post-positivism is very important in showing relations of power in the disciple of IR, highlighting the relative strengths of the post-positivist position.

Critical theory rejects the 'three basic postulates of positivism: an objective external reality, the subject object distinction, and value free social science.' [17] By denying the subject-object distinction, critical theory strikes at the epistemological heart of positivism. Cox has stated that 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose', and therefore where Hume argued that we find knowledge on what we observe, critical theory argues that human 'needs' and 'purposes' are the glue that binds these observations.[18] The theories we postulate are therefore not 'value-neutral' as they purport to be.[19]   It is revealing to look at Waltz's epistemologically positivist approach that 'only through some sort of systems structure can international politics be understood'.[20]   The observables in IR (states) are 'units' in a structurally anarchical society. All states perform same functions and are equivalent units in this system, but there is an uneven distribution of resources and capacities among states. Fear of domination by other states is the main motivation for inter-state competition.[21] However, as Agnew argues, this is in fact a normative approach: 'It is a dangerous world out there and if a state (read: our state) is not ready for a competitive environment then it is headed for disaster. This was a reassuring hard-headed message for Americans during the Cold War!'[22] Thus, a benefit of the critical theory approach, and indeed the post-positivist approach in general, is considering who theory is working for.

The post-positivist position has responded to the changing nature of international relations in the post-cold-war period, demonstrating the political nature of positivist assertions as to how the world is. Buzan and Little go so far as to say that one of the reason IR has 'failed as an intellectual project' is its failure to move beyond the traditional conception of relationships between states.[23] The realist conception of world order constructed an 'image of reality constituted in particular historical and political circumstances (the struggle with Fascism and the Cold War)… an ahistorical, universalized dogma'.[24]   In what sense, therefore, is realism, with it 'ahistorical' universal claims actually reflecting international security issues now? Smith argues that failing to move past positivist dogmatism, cold war political assumptions etc…, and reconsider the implications of violence and development issues has had important consequences in international politics. He goes so far as to say that affectations to impartiality and universality are implicated in post-war developments in international security where the 'West' (specifically Anglo-Saxon IR) sung 'into existence the world of September 11, 2001'.[25]

The post-positivist approach is in better shape to understand this new reality by the very fact that is it not so ontologically dogmatic. Importantly, the debate is widened and marginalized groups which have previously been denied agency in traditional IR are empowered, putting the 'international' back into international theory. The Eurocentric model has been guilty of ignoring the constitutive voices that make up a conversation in IR, for example the failure to acknowledge the role of Cuba in the Cuban Missile Crisis.[26] As Laffey and Barkawi say, 'That the weak play an integral role in shaping world politics is harder to deny when a Southern resistance movement strikes at the heart of Northern power'.[27]

More importantly still, this type of analysis allows IR practitioners to see the power inherent in denying agency when universalizing Western values. As Laffey and Barkawi say, 'a Eurocentric security studies regards the weak and the powerless as marginal or derivative elements of world politics, as at best the site of liberal good intentions or at worst a potential source of threats.'[28]   This echoes Said's post-modern approach to Western images of the East, where 'Orientalism depends for its strategy on… *positional* superiority, which puts the westerner in a whole series of

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possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'.[29] Barnett and Duvall conceive of a type of 'productive power' which refers partly to 'the discursive production of the subjects, the fixing of meanings, and the terms of action, of world politics' and this productive power is inherent in the positivist universality of assumptions based on conjunctions of Western experience.[30] By casting non-state actors on the periphery, or by ignoring them as part of IR, the dominant remain dominant as they can produce what is to be a 'them', a 'terrorist', an 'insurgent', a 'rogue state'; there are inherently normative judgements in what is legitimate and what is not legitimate: 'the politics of Eurocentric security studies, those of the powerful, prevent adequate understanding of the nature or legitimacy of the armed resistance of the weak'.[31] Therefore, it is possible again to see positivist value-free credentials deconstructed by post-positivists rejection of positivist assumptions.

However, whilst this essay argues strongly for the benefits of post-positivism in critiquing the positivist mainstream in IR, it must be noted that post-positivism has its disadvantages. Firstly, Biestecker notes that 'however desirable it may be to open international relations to methodological pluralism and relativism, post- positivist scholarship does not offer us any clear criteria for choosing among the multiple and competing explanations it produces'.[32] Post-positivism may in fact lead to intellectual incoherence in IR. Therefore, perhaps rather than invigorating the academic project it just confuses it.

Indeed, it is not just a case of numerous confusing explanations produced. Within the broad post-positivist camp there is no consensus. Whilst post-modernism and critical theory are both post-positivist in nature, postmodernism 'eschews the very goal of critical theory' and would argue critical theory itself is hegemonic, where 'all conversation is power, and it is not possible to move beyond a place tainted by power'.[33] We therefore have an example of post-positivism criticising post-positivism, which in the scope of this essay makes it difficult to discuss the relative merits of post-modernism and critical theory. Perhaps, then, as George says, we should be careful to avoid 'intellectual anarchy.'[34]

Secondly, this essay has devoted considerable time to the relative advantages of post-positivism to positivism, but that is not to say that positivism is no longer important. Conversely, I agree with Holsti that the theories that positivism have given us are valuable, that 'No amount of meta-theoretical debate, or perspectivism, or post-modern relativism renders their work less theoretically useful. '[35] Even critics of traditional positivist methodology in IR can be amongst its adherents, such as Buzan who insists on the benefits of realism, that it 'possesses a *relative* (not absolute) intellectual coherence. It provides a solid starting point for the construction of grand theory'.[36] We should thus view positivism and post-positivism as complementary in strengthening the discipline of IR as a whole. This essay does not seek to advance the benefits of post-positivism to do away with theory, nor all positivist methodology. I agree, for example that we should be careful not to, as George says 'attempt to overcome universalized humanist premises (progress, dialectics, consciousness) [which may] deprive us of both baby (creative social agent) and bathwater'[37]

Finally, one can question how far post-positivism actually departs from the positivist perspective that it critiques. Kurki argues that the Humean concept of cause is present in the work of critical theorists such as Cox.[38] Thus, for Kurki what the post-positivists purport to reject is evident in their work. Instead, she advocates 'multi-causal' and 'complexity-sensitive' IR theory. Lapid's statement that 'the tragedy of international relations scholars was, of course, that they proved incapable of either fruitfully adopting or decisively rejecting the grail of positivist science'[39] is perhaps still true despite the Third Debate.

However, this essay argues that this is not a tragedy, but instead benefits the discipline. 'Our discipline, like other social sciences, should demonstrate a healthy and tolerant diversity: of theoretical approaches, of relations with policy-makers versus concentration on fundamental questions, of detailed studies alongside broad historical surveys.'[40] This essay considered the strengths and weaknesses of Post-positivism in IR as relative to those of positivism. As such, it has necessitated a discussion of the two in opposition. However, one must not create a false dichotomy and this essay argues that the main strength of post-positivism is as a critic of the positivist mainstream in order to create a questioning, Socratic approach to IR. Even in light of the criticisms of Bierstecker, Kurki and others, post-positivism has invigorated IR, added to its theoretical arsenal, and emphasised the need to remain relevant within the changing nature of the world it seeks to explain, much in the way other social sciences must.

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