

What is at Stake in the Third Debate and Why does it Matter for International Theory?

Written by Dell Marie Butler

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Pitting 'postpositivists' against the 'empiricist-positivist' orthodoxy, international theory's 'third discipline-defining debate' (Lapid, 1989: 236), so defined, has thrown up discomfiting questions for its practitioners. Amidst the 'philosophical hand grenades [and] largely untargeted artillery barrage' (Wight, cited in Monteiro and Ruby, 2009: 23), two concerns have persistently resurfaced: the self-image of international theory as a 'scientific discipline'; and the link between 'theory' and the 'real world'. This paper implicates both in the recognition that 'our rationalisation of the international is itself constitutive of that practice' (Smith, 1995: 3) to invite critical reflection on the way we define 'international theory' – so venturing beyond the parameters of the 'third debate' itself to ask what might matter most in theorising.

I begin by outlining this approach, cautioning critical reading of the discipline's self-portrayal. To address what has typically been deemed most 'at stake' in the 'third debate', I then counterpoise positivist anxieties over unrealistic, unscientific 'postpositivist' inquiry with the arguably more treacherous implications of an unreflexive empiricism and objectivism. It is on this point that this paper presses further to ask what might be omitted in straightforwardly contrasting 'two approaches',[1] exposing the disciplining underlying the 'debate', and probing the objectivist epistemology which must disrupt any sharp 'positivist/postpositivist' divide. In complicating the frames of the 'third debate', I suggest that it is not simply the case that a new consensus will provide an unproblematic 'resolution'. If 'international theory' frames our understanding of what is 'really' happening in the world, continual attempts to adjudicate what international theory 'is', on the basis of our 'knowing', may persist in (re)creating international practices which do violence to those silenced. I conclude by considering the acceptance of undecidability for a more ethically informed international theory. The stakes here may be highest – but perhaps only then do we do justice to the bodies which haunt the field as it stands.

Producing 'International Theory'

It is pertinent, I think, that this analysis should begin by considering that the very notion of the 'third debate' itself has been called into question. At issue here is not simply the distinction of the 'inter-paradigm debate' from the 'positivist/postpositivist' one (see Waever, 1996), but the need to render problematic the assumption that international theory has evolved out of 'great debates' at all.[2] An alternative genealogical approach, read through Foucault (2003: 242), opposes a search for international theory's 'origins' and 'indefinite teleologies', seeking instead the dominations and discontinuities which effect its disciplinary boundaries. As revisionist historiographies contend, the 'great debates' analogy not only misrepresents the scope, coherence, and interests of the field, but imbues international theory with a teleological logic of progressive theoretical inquiry, even as the 'triumphs' of one position over another have been politically determined (Smith, 1995: 13-17; Bell, 2003: 154-155). We are, Smith (1995: 30) counsels, obliged to maintain scepticism towards the discursive boundaries of the disciplinary collective identity; questions must be continually be asked of what the self-images of 'international theory' tell us, and what they do not.

These silences matter because '[i]nternational theory underpins and informs international practice', establishing the regimes of truth which 'delineate not simply what can be known but also what it is sensible to talk about or suggest' (Smith, 1996: 13). Because events in the world are not ontologically prior to our thinking about them, the ways we

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picture this 'reality' will guide and regulate the ways in which we act (Zalewski, 1996). Thus 'we', too, are complicit in theorising the world; '[i]nternational politics is *what we* make it to be' (Zalewski, 1996: 352; original emphasis). In what follows, I suggest that the legislation of 'what' counts as a legitimate epistemology must be continually agitated, and that the 'we' who count as theorists remain unfixed – so giving play to the 'what' and 'we' as sites 'where unanticipated meanings might come to bear' (Butler, 1992: 16). To do so will require that we go beyond a 'positivist/postpositivist' dichotomy to rethink the ambit of international theory.

The 'Third Debate': Positivism versus Postpositivism'

Supposedly evolved from the successive triumphs of practical realism and rigorous behaviouralism in two earlier 'debates' (Bell, 2003: 154), international theory has been markedly attuned to its status as a hard-headed social 'science' (Monteiro and Ruby, 2009). Self-defined from the outset by a commitment to investigating war and its related phenomena as a unique domain of inquiry, it has understood itself as *sui generis*, its subject-specific vocabulary lending to claims of disciplinary integrity and practical orientation (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2001; Brown, 2006: 680). Yet, disciplinary autonomy has demanded not simply a consensus on subject-matter ('relations among states'), but the development of a 'theory' in line with the 'alleged requirements of epistemological rigour' (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2001: 193).[3] A brief outline of the 'positivistic logic of investigation' (Neufeld, 1995: 24) which has (often implicitly) structured the epistemological backdrop of the field should punctuate the extent to which it has defined both 'explanatory possibilities' and 'ethical and practical horizons' (Smith, 1996: 13).

Positivism, in Smith's (1996: 17) summation, 'is a methodological position reliant on an empiricist epistemology of the world in justification by (ultimately brute) experience and thereby licensing methodology and ontology insofar as they are empirically warranted'.[4] An objectivist belief in the existence of observable regularities in a 'real world' separate and distinct from the observer manifests in a faith in value-neutral empiricism to explain behaviour and outcomes in international politics – a celebration of parsimonious problem-solving nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the rational choice approach predominant in the U.S. academic community (see Smith, 2004: 502-503).

Delimiting its ontological and epistemological dimensions thus, 'mainstream' international theory has remained preoccupied with explaining the structural interactions of states-as-rational-actors in a realm exclusive of domestic politics or economics, let alone questions of subjectivity and identity (Smith, 2004).[5] That this enterprise has presented but one particular picture of the world, produced by a powerful academic community itself situated in the dominant world power, is masked by the depoliticising technical assumptions which 'naturally' preoccupy international theory as a legitimate scientific enterprise. Consequently, the multiple, profound violences effected beyond this narrow purview – from disease or poverty, or race or gender – have been 'simply marginal if not irrelevant' to 'international theory' so defined (Smith, 2004: 509).

While it is impossible to determine 'a postpositivist approach' (Smith, 1996: 35; original emphasis) – a critical point to which I will later return – the broad task facing its motley crew of advocates has been to underscore the singularity of the positivist vision, exposing the limits of empiricist epistemology or, at the least, the narrow range of ontological claims it permits. The latter is embodied by the historical sociological approach, which has challenged assumptions of states' functional equivalence by bringing into focus the particular internal forces which produce the state. 'Stronger' variants of postpositivism, here crudely summarised, have bore down more critically on empiricist-positivism. Emphasising the non-neutrality of knowledge, Critical Theorists have sought to expose positivism's underpinning political interests to present alternative, emancipatory possibilities. Feminists of various stripes have concurred on the need to expose its gendered, often masculinist, assumptions. Indeed, the very assumptions central to the modernist conception of science itself – reality, truth, and structure – have been questioned by postmodern and poststructuralist theorists. At base, these interdisciplinary undertakings have themselves posed direct challenge to assumptions of disciplinary autonomy, of the 'coherence and uniqueness' (Hoffman, cited in Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2001: 192) of international theory. It is in the rejection of empiricism, however, where the stakes have been highest for the 'defenders of the "discipline"' (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2001: 189).

While again risking vast oversimplification, a turn to Lapid's (1989) identification of the challenges to positivist international theory in the 'third debate' provides a declarative 'state of the field'.[6] Discerning a refocusing of the

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'hidden' ontological, epistemological, and axiological presuppositions in theorising, as well as a shift towards methodological pluralism, Lapid (1989: 249-250) heralds the prospect of a new self-reflexivity in international theory, but warns of disciplinary 'dead ends' of incommensurability, incoherence, and 'mere theoretical proliferation' at the expense of 'genuine theoretical growth'. While few self-professed positivists have taken up the challenge of self-reflexivity (Smith, 1996: 34), attempts to adjudicate against these 'dead ends' have continually resurfaced.

In what has ensued as a division over the place of science in international politics,[7] 'those wedded to the orthodoxies of the discipline' (George, 1989: 275) have typically charged that 'postpositivism' is faddish, unscientific, and/or illusory, and therefore ineffectual in guiding policy (Rengger and Thirkell-White, 2007: 11). 'Theoretical proliferation that is not rooted in realities', Holsti (1989: 259, 261) warns, 'may lead to fashion rather than to knowledge'; the 'facts of international relations, past and present', remain prerequisites for intellectual standards. On Nicholson's (1996) defence of 'moderate positivism' – crucial if we are to 'have any control of the [world]' (142) – empirical propositions on international behaviour are ultimately enabled by 'common understanding' (131). As for other positivists, the 'facts' are seemingly self-evident, but are ignored or wilfully denied by 'postpositivists'. Schweller's (1999) defence of neorealism against 'fantasy theory', for example, is upfront about the anarchy and ensuing struggle for power this 'reality' involves. While sceptical of neorealist oversimplification, Holsti (1989: 258; original emphasis) nevertheless falls back on there being more '*important ... realities*'. The impulse, it seems, has been to re-assert disciplinary coherence lest the 'third debate' produce 'confusion and intellectual cacophony' (Holsti, 1989: 256). Indeed, Keohane (1988) is quite explicit in threatening to confine 'reflectivists' to the 'margins of the field' until they have delineated 'a clear reflective research programme' and proven 'that [they] can illuminate important issues in world politics'.[8]

Contesting these claims from a poststructuralist ('postpositivist') position may tend towards tautology, but it remains, following Zalewski (1996), that they are predicated on grounds which are problematic for both our understanding of, and behaviour in international politics. This defence of 'theory-as-tool', distinct from the 'theorist' and the 'real world', allows (positivist) 'theorists' to denigrate those who ignore the 'realities' of world politics as indulging in an 'intellectual pastime' (Zalewski, 1996: 343). Legitimate 'social scientists' are (themselves) marked out from the *hoi polloi* – including those 'unconventional "theorists" ... at the margins of life' for whom the international power hierarchy is acutely felt (Zalewski, 1996: 346-347). It follows that the substantive issues in world politics are already identified by those who '[seek] to understand and explain constant features' through 'good (useful) theory' (Schweller, 1999: 148-149). This insistence on what the 'real issues' are in international politics, Zalewski (1996: 350) argues, is akin to 'theoretical imperialism', denying that any other interests might be held as important as those of the powerful. If alternative voices to the empiricist-positivist orthodoxy are so forcefully and pre-emptively silenced, the demonstration of alternative conceptualisations to the mainstream (Biersteker, 1989) is, in this sense, already foreclosed.

It remains, however, to note that the temptation to theoretical imperialism as articulated by Zalewski is extended to *modernist*, and not simply *positivist* international theory. That 'postpositivists', too, may conceal 'Other' voices must raise care towards 'the strategies ... by which multiple themes ... are excluded, silenced, dispersed' (Ashley, cited in Smith, 1995: 6) across the spectrum of theoretical approaches.

Complicating the 'Debate': the Claim to 'Know'

As noted above, positivist engagements with the 'third debate' have tended to pursue disciplinary coherence, if not consensus, under stipulations of their own empiricist criteria. This impulse to discipline threatens to marginalise certain dissident voices, belying the play of dominations in the unfolding of the 'debate'. Yet, merely rooting for a 'postpositivist' victory will not automatically render international theory more amenable to ethical practice. While the 'third debate' has typically been framed as a sharp 'positivist/postpositivist' divide, with an assumed compatibility within the 'postpositivist' camp, this uncritical reading of the 'debate', as with previous episodes, risks not only a crucial elision of the nuances in each 'position', but an unreflective optimism in its progressive evolution to a new disciplinary consensus.

'Postpositivism', as Smith (1995: 28-29) elaborates, may be foundationalist or anti-foundationalist: the former

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permitting judgements between rival truth claims on the basis of their emancipatory potential; the latter rejecting this as another meta-narrative.[9] In short, the rejection of empiricism in positivist international theory by 'postpositivists' *en masse* leaves open the possibility of objective knowledge of the world (Smith, 1996). Most obviously, perhaps, Critical Theory as articulated by Cox and Linklater asserts a set of rules for producing 'truth' – here, a Habermasian concept of communicative competence in an ideal speech situation – when this 'primary ideal' continues to be predicated on a culturally-specific rationalist claim to knowledge (Rengger, 1988; Zalewski, 1996). The *telos* prescribed is always already the product of (an 'Anglo-American-European') agreement on the issue in question and the rules for 'progress' (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004: 28; Zalewski, 1996: 350).

A wariness of claims to 'know' suggests the critical realist promise to resolve the 'theoretical, methodological, and praxiological cul-de-sacs international relations theory currently finds itself in' (Patomaki and Wight, 2000: 215) may, too, prescribe and proscribe. Seeking to recover a 'depth realism' neither observable by experience nor reducible to intersubjective elements, critical realism challenges the extremities of empiricist-positivism and 'postpositivism' respectively (Patomaki and Wight, 2000: 225). Their purported recovery of 'reality', however, threatens to obscure the complex multiplicity of experience (see Doty, 1997: 371). While acknowledging the social nature of knowledge, critical realism's commitment to science as a means to access 'really existing ontological objects, relations and processes' (Kurki, 2006: 203) appears to run into a 'religious attitude': 'the ideal of inhabiting a securely bounded territory of truth and literal meaning beyond doubt ... where the unruly can reliably be named and tamed and the man of unquestioning faith can be secure' (Ashley and Walker, cited in Doty, 1997: 380).[10]

This religious attitude would seem to foreground all 'ritualistic appeals for "disciplinary integrity" that generate legislative demands for "consensus"' (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2001: 195) in endeavouring to re-establish 'international theory' on a firm footing, 'post-third debate'. Against this 'temptation', however, Doty (1997: 387) argues that the ethical imperative must be to develop 'a critical appreciation of the diverse and widely disseminated practices that construct meanings which normalise and naturalise some modes of being and marginalise and make deviant others'. The stakes for international theory as an academic discipline are surely raised in calling for its reconceptualisation not merely as the secure product of a 'third debate' consensus, but of fundamental 'undecidability' (Doty, 1997: 387). Yet, if to 'know' is to construct a coherent representation that excludes contesting interpretations and controls meaning from the standpoint of a sovereign subject' (Ashley and Walker, 1990: 261), we must surely reflect on the exclusions, concealments, and subordinations the claim to 'know' inevitably entails.

To be sure, a position of undecidability is not an uncritical vote for poststructuralist international theory to extend its own sovereignty, a point lucidly demonstrated in the work of such theorists as Agathangelou and Ling (1997, 2004). They warn of the need to remain reflexive to the internal ironies within 'dissident IR' which threaten, consciously or not, to marginalise non-Western narratives and disable resistance. Their critique, driven by 'open-ended queries rather than declarative statements' (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004: 45), underlines the importance of an international theory which 'seeks to manifest the polyvocality of experience' (O'Gorman, 1999: 103). Just as George and Campbell (1990: 288) refuse to 'denigrate the efforts of those engaged in "concrete" empirical research', the imperative here is to accept that each view of the world is always partial, but potentially valuable. In a Foucaultian 'search for thinking space', George (1989: 273) suggests, there are multiple paths and directions, but a 'shared enthusiasm' for scholars at the intersections 'for alternative explanations of how we got to the present and why we think the way we do about the contemporary world'.

By Way of Conclusion

While it has been this 'search for thinking space' in international theory which has laid the ground for the broadly poststructuralist approach underpinning this paper, my aim has not simply been to pitch for the 'postpositivist' camp in the 'third debate'. Rather, by underscoring the partiality of theory and urging consideration of the ways these constitute practice, I have sought to problematise the terms of the 'debate' itself. While a simplistic 'positivist/postpositivist' duel fails to capture the scope of approaches at hand, any attempt at pressing a new 'consensus' – on positivist or 'postpositivist' grounds – similarly risks delimiting the voices to be heard, even under the auspices of 'emancipation' or 'progress'. The greatest danger, it seems, would be to accept either of these self-images of international theory at the expense of its critical re-evaluation.

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We have, Zalewski (1996) points out, 'All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up'. With so many theories and too many bodies, she fears a retreat to an understanding of theory 'which offers relatively immediate gratification, simplistic solutions to complex problems and reifies and reflects the interests of the already powerful' (352). Yet, against this 'comfort', these bodies also haunt international theory, figuring the impossibility of a sovereign knowing and mastering the infinitesimal complexities of the world (Brown, 2001: 146). It is this haunting, I think, which calls for a rethinking of international theory so the 'what' and 'we' who count in thinking and being in the world are never excluded from conversation.

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What is at Stake in the Third Debate and Why does it Matter for International Theory?

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What is at Stake in the Third Debate and Why does it Matter for International Theory?

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[1] I draw here from the title of Keohane's (1988) article, in which he claims to perform just this sort of 'balanced' appraisal of 'rationalist' and 'reflectivist' international theory.

[2] According to this characterisation, international theory underwent a 'first debate' between idealism and realism in the late 1930s and early 1940s, then a second 'behavioural revolt' in the 1950s and 1960s (Smith, 1995: 14; Monteiro and Ruby, 2009: 20).

[3] It is not without irony that positivist international theory has typically been poorly defined (Smith, 1996: 31-32). This in itself ought to raise important questions about the lack of self-reflexivity associated with the empiricist-positivist orthodoxy in international theory.

[4] The debates over the meaning of positivism and its relationship to empiricism are, George (1989: 272, f.4) warns, complex, and are not addressed in this paper. As Hollis (1996) identifies, there are at least four doctrines associated with positivism, including naturalism, behaviourism, objectivism, and empiricism, but my focus here follows Smith's (1996: 17) in spotlighting 'an empiricist epistemology committed to an objectivism about the relationship between theory and evidence'. George (1989: 272, f.4), too, takes positivism to refer to 'the major contemporary philosophical expression of an empiricist epistemology'.

[5] Steans' (2003: 429) distinction of the positivist 'mainstream' from the neorealist 'orthodoxy' may appear merely semantic, but it usefully points, firstly, to the need to avoid equating 'positivism' with the (neo)realist position, and secondly, to the broad acceptance of empiricist-positivist assumptions across neorealist and neoliberal approaches until the 1980s.

[6] Using Lapid's (1989) oft-cited article as a sort of historical document for the 'third debate' might, of course, be defended on the alleged grounds that dissident scholarship is 'more often attacked than read' (Gregory, cited in Ashley and Walker, 1990: 266).

[7] Such, it seems, has been the tendency to 'read' the 'third debate' as pitched on questions of the philosophy of science (George, 1989: 271; see, for e.g., Lapid, 1989; and Monteiro and Ruby, 2009), that the broader import of social theory, with its emphasis on questions of power in human interaction, is often eclipsed (see George and Campbell, 1990).

[8] Keohane's (1989) assessment of feminist international theory provides powerful evidence of the way this criteria for 'legitimate social science' (Smith, 2004: 501) has been operationalised. While standpoint feminism, with its coherent, essentialised notions of gender, and liberal feminism, with its commitment to the possibility of objective analysis based on empirical research, have been embraced by positivist mainstream, continual attempts to 'discipline' the 'bad girls' of poststructuralist feminism demonstrate the rigid, persistent policing of the discipline's boundaries (see Steans, 2003; and Zalewski, 2003).

[9] The claim that poststructuralism is 'anti-foundationalist' is not uncontested. As Butler (1992: 7) points out, this position simply presents another version of foundationalism. Instead, she presents the latter task as one of '[interrogating] what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorises, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses'.

[10] It has not passed without notice that this decisive turn to the philosophy of science for stability and control may inhere in the demand that 'international theory' remains 'scientifically legitimate' (Doty, 1997: 370).

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