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In Defence of the Freakshow: Critical Approaches to International Relations and the Social Sciences

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Do Genealogy, Dialectics and Critical Theory Make a Positive Contribution to Social-scientific Methods, or are They Just a Distraction From What we Should be Doing as Social Scientists?

As thinkers such as Steve Smith have noted, whilst positivist mainstream approaches continue to dominate the social sciences—and in particular Americanised disciplines such as International Relations—there have been gradual moves in Europe towards more reflectivist alternatives (2000). In light of this, it's pertinent to ask whether approaches such as genealogy, dialectics and critical theory represent a useful diversion, or whether they are merely a distraction from what we should be doing. This essay will address the question with specific reference to the discipline of International Relations.

The essay will assert that in a 'scientific' study of the social world there is often little room for an analysis of those factors which are difficult to observe and quantify, for example, discourses, ideas and norms. As such, positivist approaches are frequently blind to the social processes through which the world and its actors have been historically constructed. Mainstream 'rationalist' theories within the social sciences, and specifically within the discipline of International Relations, have thus tended to see a world of preconstituted social actors and agents. This essay will suggest that the failure to recognise, draw out and explicate processes of social self-production leads to a number of negative consequences. It will be argued that positivist approaches often assume what needs to be explained. Furthermore, these assumptions embody conservative political commitments: not only do they result in a lack of critical analysis concerning status-quo power relations; they also disable the potential to conceive of alternatives.

Genealogy, dialectics and critical theory represent three methodologies which have challenged the conservative bias of the mainstream approaches. Together, they seek to undermine assumptions that contemporary systems of thought are a consequence of rational progressions of history. This provides a foundation to challenge self-evident Truths, reveal hidden or 'inevitable' power relations and open the possibility of alternative future worlds. As such, they make a valuable contribution to the social sciences.

Positivism in the Social Sciences: The Narrow-minded Old Man of IR

Following a line of thought which was popularised by David Hume's radical critique of metaphysics in the eighteenth century, influential contemporary social 'scientists' continue to argue that '*all* good research... is best understood to derive from the same underlying logic of inference... [It should] be systematic and scientific' (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 4-5, emphasis mine). As Karl Popper has written, '*we know* what a good scientific theory should be like, and -even before it has been tested- what kind of theory would be better still'. For Popper, 'it is this (meta-scientific) knowledge which makes it possible to speak of progress in science, and of rational choice between theories' (1989: 217). In order for examination of the social world to be 'good science', it is therefore crucial 'that we can examine it critically; that is to say, subject it to attempted refutations, including observational tests' (ibid: 221). When a theory is 'able to withstand those criticisms and those tests – among them tests under which its predecessors broke down, and sometimes even further and more severe tests', then it represents scientific progress. Thus, 'it is in the rational choice of the new theory that the rationality of science lies' (ibid). From another perspective, Steve Smith has summarised the epistemological assumptions of positivism as follows:

'...a belief in naturalism in the social world (that is to say, that the social world is amenable to the same kinds of analysis as those applicable to the natural world); a separation between facts and values, by which is meant both 'facts' are theory-neutral and that normative commitments should not influence what counts as facts or as knowledge; a commitment to uncovering patterns and regularities in the social world, patterns and regularities that exist apart from the methods used to uncover them; and finally there is a commitment to empiricism as the arbiter of what counts as knowledge' (2002: 71)

Without necessarily contesting the usefulness of the scientific method as a whole, post-positivists have charged that it is ill-equipped in itself to deal with the social world. A particularly prominent criticism is made of positivism's insistence on the observable, testable and generalisable, which leaves little room for less tangible factors such as ideas, values, multiple truths, or discourses. As a consequence, 'rationalist' theories couched in positivist thinking frequently struggle to identify the social processes through which we construct the world and instead merely see 'preconstituted social actors' (Rupert, 2007: 149). Thus, that which needs to be explained and understood is often simply assumed or described; this has serious repercussions.

Heine and Teschke argue that 'the marginalisation of epistemological expositions' has contributed to the notion of the 'state' being left unquestioned for decades despite that fact that 'such a conceptualisation rests on certain *a priori* assumptions and yields specific implications for research results' (1996: 405). Similarly, rationalist approaches such as neo-realism have been criticised for 'implicitly [taking] the production process and the power relations

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inherent in [world politics] as a given element of national interest' (Cox in Rupert, 2007: 158). The consequence, Rupert asserts, is that the 'patterns in the operations of power among states' are described, but little effort is made to inquire 'as to the social relations through which that power is produced' (2007: 158). In other words, because positivist approaches fail to analyse the social processes through which the world has been constructed, they have difficulty in recognising the power dynamics which have been simultaneously created. Heine and Teschke conclude that 'the flimsy scientific foundations of mainstream IR theory [has] debouched directly into an implicit bias towards the status quo, which [has] often posed unashamedly as advice for the Prince: a sociology of domination and instrument rationality' (1996: 402). Smith provides examples to support the argument:

'...the field of knowledge constituted by the U.S. mainstream [of IR] has a very specific impact on the kinds of inequalities 'seen' by the dominant theories and methodologies. Put simply... the mainstream of the U.S. discipline sees political and military inequalities, but it does not deem other forms of inequality as relevant to the discipline. Thus, gender inequalities are either domestic politics or private politics or both, and questions of migration, the environment, human rights, and cultural clashes are seen as falling outside the core of the discipline' (2002: 82).

He concludes that those theories couched in the positivist approach 'create a field of knowledge and the actors within it in such a way as to mask [their] own involvement in the reinforcement and reconstitution of these practices' (ibid: 83).

However, not only does positivism's neglect of social processes blindly reinforce status-quo power relations, it also implicitly disables the potential to conceive of alternative future worlds. In this way, rationalist theories 'are profoundly limited, and limiting'. Because they take as their 'premise a world of preconstituted social actors (whether self-interested individuals or security-seeking states)' they are 'unable to understand the social processes through which these kinds of actors have been historically constructed' (Rupert, 2007: 149). As such they deny 'the possibilities for alternative possible worlds which may be latent within those processes of social-self production' (ibid).

Thus, the question which this essay addresses might reasonably be inverted: one could equally ask whether rationalist approaches based on positivist assumptions (namely, 'objective [causal] 'laws' of social life') are a distraction from what we should be doing as analysts of the social world. After all, they 'may be misleading insofar as they distract us from the ways in which our world has been produced by historically situated human social agents' and they may divert us from the possibilities that come with recognising these social processes (ibid: 151). A number of 'critical' approaches have sought to address positivism's weaknesses.

Genealogy, Dialectics and Critical Theory: Considering Alternatives

Steve Smith writes that 'ontologically, the [IR] literature tends to operate in a space defined by rationalism, and epistemologically it is empiricist and methodologically it is positivist. Together these define 'proper' social science and thereby serve as gatekeepers for what counts as legitimate scholarship' (2002: 72). Approaches, such as genealogy, dialectics and critical theory, are thus seen as intellectually illegitimate; they are marginalised – a freak show on the edge of the debate. However, it will be argued here that, in undermining the assumptions which lie behind positivist methodologies, and thereby helping to reveal aspects which positivism is blind to, these interrelated approaches perform a valuable task.

Gutting writes that 'the point of a genealogical analysis is to show that a given system of thought... was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of a rationally inevitable trend' (2003). The approach was developed by Nietzsche, who stopped trying to find 'the origin of evil behind the world' and instead began to ask 'under what conditions did man construct the value judgements *good* and *evil*? And what is their intrinsic worth?' (1956 [1887]: 151). In his work 'The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals', Nietzsche notes that thinkers have tended to confuse origins and purposes. He asserts that 'the actual causes of a thing's origin and its eventual uses, the manner of its incorporation into a system of purposes, are worlds apart' (ibid: 209). Everything that exists 'is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions' until 'the earlier meaning and purpose are necessarily either obscured or lost' (ibid).

'Thus, the whole history of a thing... becomes a continuous chain of reinterpretations and rearrangements, which need not be causally connected among themselves, which may simply follow one another. The 'evolution' of a thing, a custom, an organ is not its progressus towards a goal, let alone the most logical and shortest progressus, requiring the least energy and expenditure. Rather it is a sequence of more or less profound, more or less independent processes of appropriation, including the resistances used in each instance, the attempted transformations for purposes of defence or reaction, as well as the results of successful counterattacks. While forms are fluid, there meaning is even more so' (ibid: 210)

The approach has been adopted by Foucault who 'exposes history conceived as the origin and development of an identical subject, [for example], "modernity," as a fiction modern discourses invent after the fact' (Aylesworth, 2005). Perhaps most famously, he analysed the tactics of power and discipline, arguing against the liberal progressive view that punishment now involves 'less cruelty, less pain, more kindness, more respect, more humanity' (Foucault in Scheurich and McKenzie, 2005: 853). In short, genealogists seek to demonstrate how 'linear, progressive history covers up the discontinuities and interruptions that mark points of succession in historical time' (Aylesworth, 2005).

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In their attempt to build 'a metatheoretical framework of dialectic' Heine and Teschke have argued that 'if the aim of thinking is to comprehend reality, and if it is accepted that reality is itself contradictory [as genealogy suggests], then the mode of thinking must reflect these social contradictions' (1996: 411-412). We desire neat 'scientific' explanations of the world because 'humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization' (Horkheim and Adorno, 2002 [1947]: 11). Yet 'contradictions are not logical blunders, but capture the real historically—and socially—constituted antagonisms in the world' (Heine and Teschke, 1996: 412).

Adorno writes that the dialectical understanding of history seeks to express these 'real antagonisms which do not become visible within the logical-scientific system of thought' (in *ibid*). The dialectical approach embraces contradictions by accepting that 'humans are historical beings, simultaneously the producers and the products of historical processes' (Rupert, 2007: 151). In Marx's words:

'Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living (1969 [1852]: 398)

This process of interaction between humans and their (historical, ideological and physical) environment is sometimes described as 'a dialectic of agents and structures' (Rupert, 2007: 151). Structures, Rupert informs us, 'generate the possibility of certain kinds of social identity and corresponding forms of action' but 'are not themselves determinative or automatic' (*ibid*). They thus require 'human agents' to perform their 'structural roles', reinforcing, altering or even transforming 'the social structures in which they are embedded' (*ibid*). When 'this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists' (Marx in Rupert, 2007: 151). Instead,

'we are living amidst the constant motion of the growth of the forces of production, of the destruction of social conditions and of the formation of ideas; motionless is only the abstraction from this motion – *mors immortalis*' (Marx in Heine and Teschke, 1996: 414).

Critical theory draws upon Marx's dialectical social philosophy in pursuit of human emancipation; it seeks 'to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them' (Horkheimer 1982 [1937], 244). Upon recognising that 'scientific propositions on [social] reality aspiring to the status of truth-claims can only grasp relative, not absolute knowledge of reality', a series of new questions and possibilities surface (Heine and Teschke, 1996: 414). Rupert writes that

'we are led to inquire about the context of social relations in which social action take place, to ask about the historical

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processes which generated that kind of social context, and to look for structured tensions in those historically specific forms of life, tensions which could open possibilities for historically situated actors to produce social change' (2007: 151).

Questions arise regarding the legitimacy and inevitability of status-quo power relations, which are challenged as self-evident truths. Instead, 'politics appears as a struggle over processes of social self-production, the ability to steer those processes in one direction or another and thus to shape the kind of world in which we will live and the kinds of persons we will become' (ibid). Correspondingly, freedom may 'be understood in terms of social self-determination – our collective ability to shape ourselves and our world'. Rupert continues, 'this is an expansive understanding of freedom, much broader and potentially more empowering than the traditional understanding of freedom as individual choice (ibid: 152). Thus, far from being a distraction, critical approaches point us towards some of the most important questions in world politics, questions which positivism has great difficulty seeing, let alone answering.

Conclusion:

Critical methodologies remain on the margins of IR and, more broadly, are often considered a freak show on the edge of social sciences debates. However, this essay has argued that they usefully challenge a number of the dominant positivist assumptions. Mainstream 'rationalist' theories within the social sciences, and specifically within the discipline of International Relations, have tended to see a world of preconstituted social actors and agents. The failure to recognise, draw out and explicate processes of social self-production has led positivists to assume what needs to be explained. Furthermore, these assumptions embody conservative political commitments: they result in a lack of critical analysis concerning status-quo power relations and disable the potential to conceive of alternatives.

Conversely, genealogy, dialectics and critical theory have challenged the conservative bias of the mainstream approaches. Together, they seek to undermine assumptions that contemporary systems of thought are a consequence of rational progressions of history. This provides a foundation to challenge self-evident Truths, reveal hidden or 'inevitable' power relations and open the possibility of alternative future worlds.

Thus, this essay has argued that whilst critical methodologies make a positive contribution to social scientific methods, positivist approaches might be considered a distraction from what we should be doing – they draw our attention away from the ways in which our world has been produced by historically situated human social agents and divert us from the possibilities that come with recognising these social processes.

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