The Reflectivist Critique of Positivist IR Theory

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International Relations (IR) has been undergoing a great upheaval in the last three decades as positivism, the foundational epistemology of most schools of thought in IR, has come under attack by a loose confederation of theories tied together through their critique of the basic positivist assumptions. A survey performed by Maliniak *et al.* (2007) shows that this epistemological debate is considered to be one of, if not the major divide in IR today. This debate is not a simple two-sided discussion, however, as reflectivists are not united by anything more than their disagreement of positivism, and each reflectivist disagrees with various positivist assumptions for different reasons. In order to make sense of the overall reflectivist critique, this essay will set down the fundamental assumptions of positivism in IR and then show the range of criticism levelled against each by five of the major strands of reflectivism: normative theory, critical theory, constructivism, feminism, and postmodernism, using each strand in reference to one assumption. This will be followed by the positivist response. By using this format, the essay will demonstrate how reflectivism can be perceived as a common strand running through a grouping of different theories united simply through the critique of positivism, while also showing its flaws. It is also important to note that reflectivists are critical of rational choice theory as well but, as Chris Brown (2001) points out, it is possible to be a positivist without being a rational choice theorist and therefore this essay will remain focused on positivism for the sake of brevity.

Positivist and Reflectivist IR Theory:

Positivism has been the dominant epistemological viewpoint in IR throughout most of the history of the discipline. Peter Sutch and Juanita Elias (2007, p.14) go so far as to suggest that positivists have acted as gatekeepers by setting strong parameters as to what would count as a fact in the discipline and using this to prevent non-positivist forms of knowledge from being examined. There are various definitions as to what positivists stand for and this essay will use the definition put forth by Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (2005). In this work, the authors suggest that positivism creates knowledge supported by four foundational assumptions. The first of these is that methodologies which apply in the scientific world can be assumed to perform much the same in the non-scientific world; they refer to this as the 'unity of science' (2005, p.274). The second assumption is that there is a clear delineation between values and facts as well as, perhaps most importantly, the belief that facts remain neutral between various theories. The next assumption is that both the natural and social worlds have regularities which can be uncovered by theories, and therefore the same process by which a scientist approaches the natural world can also be used to investigate the social world. Lastly, there is an assumption that the way to determine the truth of theories or statements is through the utilization of these neutral facts in conjunction with the falsification principle or the correspondence theory of truth, or in other words, an empirical process for truth determination. It is these four assumptions that the reflectivists in IR choose to debate in various ways.

Reflectivism, also known as post-positivism or anti-positivism, grew in popularity within IR during the 1980s and burst into the mainstream when positivism failed to predict the end of the Cold War (Monteiro and Ruby 2009). It has given birth to a debatable number of adherent sub-disciplines of IR such as post-modernism, normative theory, some forms of critical theory and feminism, as well as constructivism to various degrees. There is no synthesis between these approaches as to what it means to be a reflectivist; rather they are united solely by their post or anti-positivism, or in other words, their critiques of the core positivist assumptions. Reflectivists are therefore trying to open the

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discipline to a wide range of other ways of thinking about the issues central to IR, such as international legal norms, sovereignty, and human rights. Yosef Lapid (1989) writes that reflectivism has allowed many IR theorists to gain confidence in their scientific credentials by allowing for a great deal of manoeuvrability within the range of what work could be considered scientific. This benefitted the discipline by allowing a great deal of new research to be undertaken that would not have previously been considered legitimate. It is also worth pointing out that some scholars, such as Monteiro and Ruby (2009), consider there to be a difference between anti-positivism and post-positivism based on whether the theory rejects all or just some of the assumptions of positivism respectively. For the purposes of this essay, both viewpoints will be considered as reflectivist because they both critique, on some level, the positivist assumptions.

Critique of the First Assumption:

The first assumption of the positivists carries with it a belief that since the same methodologies apply to both the natural and social worlds, there must be something analogous between natural and social facts, and they can both be utilized as independent variables in said methodologies. This is debated amongst IR scholars with a great deal of dissent coming from those scholars who see social facts as constructed, unlike natural facts, and therefore cannot be studied with the same methodologies. Constructivism utilizes an epistemology that is based on the belief that knowledge is made up of facts which are socially constructed. As mentioned by William A. Gordon (2006), Karl Popper suggested that the social environment is created by humans and is therefore alterable by their decisions and actions. John Searle (1996) further stipulates this with regards to constructivism by writing that constructivism contains the central notion that there is a fundamental difference between brute facts and social facts, with the former representing those which are true independent of any human action, and the latter referring to those which exist because of socially established conventions. Michael Barnett (2005, p.259) refines this by reiterating that social facts are dependent on agreement and uses examples such as money and sovereignty to demonstrate this claim. Alexander Wendt (1992) further argues that those same social facts can be transformed by a wide variety of factors and therefore should be considered a dependent variable which means, in other words, they do not exist in a natural state independent of their context. The constructivists' critique of this assumption is the observation that the social world cannot be measured with the same methodologies as the natural world because social knowledge is made up of changing, ever-modifying facts and therefore bears no resemblance to knowledge of the natural world as well as the idea that social facts cannot be used as independent variables in the positivist methodologies since they are dependent on their context.

Critique of the Second Assumption:

The second assumption of positivism clings tightly to the belief that facts are separate from values and therefore will remain neutral between theories. Both critical and normative theory oppose this claim because they perceive that knowledge has value to someone or something and therefore cannot be seen as being neutral. Robert Cox is one of the staunch critics of this assumption and demonstrates it in his famous article 'Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', in which he said that 'Theory is always for someone, and for some purpose' (1981, p.128). This suggests that social knowledge reflects the time or context in which it was created and therefore knowledge, and the facts the form it, cannot be objective and must contain some aspect of the values of its espouser. This is a thought that continues throughout reflectivist critiques of this assumption. Cox further develops this by showing how neo-realism, which was at the time of his writing the dominant theory in IR, continues to support the ruling elites and the status quo. Normative theory also stands in opposition to the second assumption. Smith and Owens (2005, p.278) explain that normative theory has two problems with the idea that facts are not value-laden. The first is that this leads to too much discussion of how things are instead of how they should be, creating a narrow definition of the nature of politics as well as supporting existing political arrangements. The second problem is that all theories reflect the values of someone and this can be seen in the focus of study, the methods employed, and even the suggested policies of scholars. This critique is strengthened by the growth in normative questions raised in policy making circles, as demonstrated in one aspect by Nicholas J. Wheeler's (2002, p.286) assertion that there is a developing norm in the world for humanitarian intervention. The reflectivists' critiques in this section all share the belief that social facts are not neutral because they represent the values and interests of the entity that creates them, an entity that has a self-interested viewpoint, and therefore social facts are not as transferable between theories as

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the positivists suggest.

Critique of the Third Assumption:

The third assumption is the way by which positivists attempt to show their scientific nature. Within it is the claim that the social world, like the natural world, contains an inherent truth that can be discovered by finding and examining the regularities. Feminists, especially ones who utilize post-modernism in their work, disagree with this in reference to the issues of sex and gender. They believe that the positivist stance leads to the conclusion that there is something fundamental or natural about the differences between the sexes and therefore even if one accepts the common suggestion that gender is constructed, it is still possible make predictions based on the regularities inherent in the assumed natural sex differences. They critique this from the viewpoint that perceived biological differences between the sexes are as constructed as gender differences because, as Helen M. Kinsella (2003, p.296) suggests, by stating that sex is natural and a regularity that can be studied, which the positivists must, one hides the power relations the produce and regulate the concepts of sex and gender and therefore there is a subjective benefit gained by those in power by upholding the positivist claim. Another feminist, Judith Butler (2006), critiques this assumption by asking how certain states of being are produced that appear to be natural, such as worker or soldier, yet have no gender or sex aspect necessarily within them. In other words, society can produce states of being that have no basis in nature at all and therefore cannot be seen as a natural regularity that can be studied and deciphered in a positivist manner. This concept looks at the identity of actors in IR as being a performative site, or something that is not fixed but represents a repeatable act only understandable within the framework of agreed-upon social norms. Feminist critique of positivism shows that even something that appears as fundamentally natural and unchanging as sex can be socially constructed and manipulated and therefore the search for underlying regularities that demonstrate a fundamental truth in the social world is doomed to fail.

Critique of the Fourth Assumption:

The fourth assumption builds on the earlier ones to develop a blueprint for the use of empiricism to ascertain the truth of statements. It requires that one accepts the earlier belief that facts are neutral and that there are regularities in the world that will reflect a singular, true world that is waiting to be discovered. Since there is a repetition of previous themes in this assumption, earlier critiques that disagreed with the second and third assumptions apply to this one as well, but this section will focus solely on the post-modernist critique. This critique is on demonstrating that theories which are held to contain or reflect empirically true knowledge, or what Jean-Francois Lyotard called 'metanarratives' (1984, p.xxiv), are actually false. Post-modernists offer various demonstrations of this critique. Jacques Derrida (1997) suggests that in order to understand the way the social world is constructed one must accept that knowledge is presented textually. In other words, the interpretation of the world is based on the structures of language and that while these appear to be stable, they are actually based on arbitrary and artificial oppositional constructs, for example good versus bad, which he calls 'logocentrism' (1997, pp.30-33). Therefore, the most basic of tools used in an attempt to make a statement of truth, i.e. language, is not reliable and can lead to spurious conclusions based on false oppositions. One of the best demonstrations of this is by Richard Ashley (1988) in which he shows how the opposition central in much of positivist IR thought, sovereignty versus an anarchical state, is not truly an opposition and therefore any predictions or theories based on this are foundationally flawed. The concept that language itself is not reliable means that any attempt to produce the statements of truth that positivists are reaching for would fail. Some post-modernists even hold that the quest for the empirical truth is actually dangerous. Richard Rorty (1993) espoused this when he juxtaposed scholars deciding what is true and false with concentration camp guards deciding who is human and not quite human. He used this comparison to suggest that by searching for and claiming to find the empirical truth, one cannot help but put other viewpoints or beliefs in the position of being wrong, a position that can, in extreme circumstances, lead to the perpetration of horrors. Post-modernists also disagree with positivists that knowledge can be seen as immune from the manipulations of those in power and therefore facts cannot be separated from the values of those in power. Michel Foucault (1972) argued in his work on discursive formation that power actually produces knowledge and that knowledge itself is dependent on the existing power structures and therefore cannot be seen as neutral. Post-modernism looks to disprove the idea of empirically true statements by demonstrating that facts are always value-laden because even the language used to express them contains norms and the search for truth is not possible because, since there are no neutral facts to utilize empirically, there is no way

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to determine truthfulness.

Positivism's Response:

There is a great deal of support for the positivist approach in IR despite the critiques presented above. As the survey by Maliniak *et al.* showed, seventy percent of American IR scholars still consider themselves as positivists with a number of the rest not yet reflectivist. This is significant as the United States is still considered to be the major force in IR scholarship. There are many reasons for this continued success of positivism in IR, the majority of which have to do with either the continued reliance on empirical methods or the failure of many reflectivists, especially the post-modernists, to offer any suggestions to fill the epistemological void left by their passing. David Houghton (2008, p.118) addresses both of these by writing that despite their critique, reflectivists continue to use empirical, observational methods and that is not possible to be anything but positivist because, as he writes, 'truth claims about the world have to come from somewhere'. He also suggests that reflectivists are essentially engaging in what can only be perceived as a negative exercise since by continually deconstructing theories one will eventually be left with nothing that is considered a legitimate theory. Another issue raised in response to the reflectivist critique focuses on the pluralism which scholars have called for in the face of epistemological relativism. Lapid (1989, p.249) warns that such pluralism, 'If adopted uncritically or taken to its logical conclusion, [can] deteriorate into a condition of epistemological anarchy under which almost any position can legitimately claim equal hearing', and that in such a state it would become nearly impossible to distinguish theoretical proliferation from theoretical growth. Positivism defends itself by claiming that scholarship is inherently observational, therefore empirical, and that if reflectivism is followed to its logical endpoint there would be no legitimate theories left because they would have been either deconstructed or created without a means of testing their legitimacy.

Conclusion:

The critique of positivism by the reflectivists is fundamentally an epistemological one. Each side can and does make compelling arguments showing the strength of their position. While it is important to acknowledge the positivists' attempts to ground the discipline in a naturalist, scientific area there is still the obvious fact that the assumptions on which their epistemology is based are too easily deconstructed when they attempt to explain phenomena and make predictions in the socially constructed world which IR purports to study. As Milja Kurki (2009, p.442) suggests, positivism fails to acknowledge the possibility that all theories are at some level 'politically and socially contextualized'. This creates the possibility for positivist theories to create predictions that are fundamentally flawed as they have failed to take into account the context within which their facts are constructed. This in turn allows the reflectivist theorists to deconstruct the predictions due to misunderstandings that arise from the lack of context in the positivists' predictions. The question of what positivism has to say in a socially constructed and interpreted world is still an important one, however, since the study of IR is still in many ways observational and therefore empirical. There is also the valid claim that in the face of the possible anarchical pluralism or lack of legitimate theories left by reflectivist critiques there needs to be some sense of scientific and theoretical grounding, and that positivism provides that very thing. In the end, reflectivism performs a valuable service in widening the range of legitimate research that is possible by IR scholars and allowing such research to take into account the understanding that the issues studied are birthed by social conventions. There still must be, however, some framework within this study to prevent the anarchy that could follow in the wake of reflectivism and while positivism is in no ways perfect, or even close to it, it still provides such a framework that if made to be self-reflective and continually evolving, could provide the stability needed.

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