

Political Science as a Polymorphic Entity – The Anti-Foundationalist Challenge in International Relations Theory

Come on, join the joyride!
Roxette

The American discourse on international relations theory has during the end of the 1980s come under the influence of a set of new approaches that criticise and challenge the dominant and traditional empirical-positivist research programme. These different approaches have, among other names, been called post-modern, post-positivist, post-structural and reflectivist. Although different in practice, these new approaches share the critique of traditional international relations theory and its universalist and rationalist claims of idealist, realist and neo-realist schools of thought (Der Derian – Shapiro 1989: ix, Lapid 1989: 242). To recognise the theoretical and methodological diversity of these challengers as well as their critical unity, I propose "anti-foundationalism" as a common name throughout this article. The concept of foundationalism in this context refers to the idea of the unity of science and the possibility of acquiring cumulative knowledge to the benefit of humankind in the tradition of the Enlightenment. Different anti-foundationalist approaches share the critique of foundationalism rather than constituting a new coherent theoretical programme.

The purpose of this article is to illuminate some aspects of this ongoing debate, mainly based on articles from *International Studies Quarterly*, where the arguments have been debated the most. I will first briefly describe the character of the debate. Second, I will discuss two reasons why the debate came about in the field of international relations and third, recapitulate some traditional themes of international relations theory. Fourth, discuss some common characteristics and methodologies of

the anti-foundational approach and finally, give a recent example of an attempt to create a synthesis between the different positions.

It should be noted that the borders between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism are not clear-cut. Some approaches discussed here as the "reflective" school have been characterised as part of the modern positivistic tradition (Hjorth 1992: 23) that is somewhat different from the categorisation offered by Keohane (1988: 382). Moreover it could be discussed if the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas should take place on one or the other side (Ashley – Walker 1990: 265, Hjorth 1992: 23). Inevitably, the following discussion will take the form of a debate between two ideal positions. The reason for this is to gain clarity and emphasize the common characteristics of the otherwise complex and diverse schools of thought challenging traditional international relations theory.

The nuisance of the post-movement in international relations

The anti-foundationalist challenge puts a clear end to the positivist epistemological consensus that characterised the modern project of Enlightenment. The scholars of the different philosophical articulations under the umbrella of anti-foundationalism celebrate the supposedly liberating potential following the demise of the empiricist-positivist promise for a cumulative behavioural science (Lapid 1989: 236). Yosef Lapid refers, in a much cited article, to the "third debate" in order to describe the turmoil this challenge created in, what he calls, the so far least self-reflective social science, that of international relations. After the major debates about idealism versus realism and history versus sciences, the third debate signifies a turn away from economics towards sociology and philosophy in a call for critical reflection and theoretical pluralism in the post-positivistic era (Lapid 1989: 236-8, 247-51).

The adherents of the new perspective have felt themselves marginal among mainstream scholars of international relations which has

sometimes resulted in heated debate, creating non-productive controversy. Members of the new group, most notably Richard Ashley, R. B. J. Walker, James Der Derian, Michael Shapiro and William Connolly among others, regard themselves as exile scholars performing dissident scholarship (Ashley – Walker 1990: 263, 266). The traditional "hard-liners" of international theory are criticised for being intolerant and attacking before reading (Donna Gregory in the foreword to Der Derian – Shapiro 1989: xiii). In the other camp, Robert Keohane concludes that the greatest weakness of the reflective school is the lack of a clear reflective research programme that could be tested empirically (Keohane 1988: 392). Furthermore Stephen Walt adds that the new pluralistic approach threatens to destroy the intellectual coherence of the discipline, thus making it more difficult to solve important global problems (Walt 1991: 213). This is seen as an admonishment from a parochial and self-centred hegemonic theoretical discipline by the dissidents. Or in the words of James Der Derian: "the big American car of IR theory takes another spin" (Der Derian 1992: 11).

However he also concludes that "it seems that both sides have begun to recognise the legitimacy of the dialogue if not the epistemological claims of the other" (Der Derian 1992: 10). Moreover, Keohane has been given credit for making it more difficult for the so-called rationalists to ignore the problematic posed by the anti-foundationalists (Der Derian 1992: 8 comments on Keohane 1988). Finally, Lapid concludes that the enhanced reflexivity caused by the debate has notably contributed to the current theoretical restructuring of the discipline (Lapid 1989: 249-51).

Exiles in modern global life and continental philosophy

Two reasons can explain why the anti-foundationalist perspectives have emerged in international relations theory. The first one is based on empirical observations of modern global life, the other is the theoretical influence of recent developments in other disciplines such as

sociology and philosophy, particularly in their European continental versions.

A common observation among the anti-foundational scholars of several disciplines is that the empiricist-positivist promise for a cumulative behavioural science has not been fulfilled. In an increasingly complex and ambiguous world, characterised by uncertainty, the search for general social theories will be in vain. Since more questions are raised than the traditional theories, mainly based on assumptions of rationality, can answer, these scholars have been forced to re-examine the ontological, epistemological and axiological foundations of social research (Lapid 1989: 236). These new, or newly discovered, features of late modernity have altered the concept of power in international relations. Der Derian argues that new technological practices and universal dangers, mediated by interests of the national security state, have generated a new "antidiplomacy." The new forms of power are "transparent and pervasive, more 'real' in time than in space and produced and sustained through the exchange of signs rather than goods" (Der Derian 1992: 3). He believes that traditional methods of analysis are not able to grasp these new techniques of power and that a post-structuralist approach better captures the significance of these new forces in international relations. In the book "Antidiplomacy," Der Derian outlines three central forces: spies, terror and speed that he means stand out for their discursive power and together generate a late modern problematic. First, they are chronopolitical by emphasizing chronology over geography and time and speed are more important than place and space. Second, they are technostrategic because they use and are used by technology for the purpose of war. Among other things the Gulf War is a clear case for this line of argument. Together, these observations suggest the rejection of grand theories and deterministic structures and call for a post-structural analysis (Der Derian 1992: 3-4).

Although starting from a different point of departure, Ashley and Walker arrive at the same conclusion. By citing several marginal events in modern global life today, where he-

gemonic "narratives" exercise power over minorities and marginal groups relative to the centre of power. These narratives could be constituted in different ways as nationalistic, juridical, economical, religious, patriarchal, scientific and so on. The authors argue that these phenomena in the margin of the grand narratives have four things in common. First, they are intrinsically ambiguous and heterogeneous without clear values and categories. Second, they are sites of struggle where power is at work. Third, they resist knowledge in the modern sense as a construct of coherent representation. Fourth, they defy representation based on a unique and sovereign identity. Multiple constitutions of identity and interests are to be found at these marginal sites. These observations of ambiguity, uncertainty and questioning of identity call for a reflection on the unspoken presuppositions of the discipline of international relations (Ashley – Walker 1990: 260-3).

The second reason for the origin of the third debate in international relations studies is the influence from other areas of the humanities and social science, where encounters between post-modern and traditional modes of writing have been going on for quite some time. That is to say that the field of international relations has been affected by these developments and borrowed the new theoretical perspectives invented elsewhere, mainly in continental sociology and philosophy. Among the best known thinkers of this anti-foundationalist movement one could mention Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard (Donna Gregory in the foreword to Der Derian – Shapiro 1989: xiii). The liberating acceptance of dissension, escaping the positivist trap, that this movement promised during the late 1970s and the early 1980s, also attracted after a while, scholars in the discipline of international relations (Lapid 1989: 246).

One of the important works of French post-modernism is "The Postmodern Condition – A Report on Knowledge" by Jean-Francois Lyotard written in 1979. Lyotard discusses the problem of knowledge in post-industrial or

post-modern societies. He claims that science is the search, not for consensus, but for dissension. By analysing the narratives of knowledge legitimation, their hegemonic and repressive practices can be revealed and opposed (Lyotard 1984: xvi, 3, 7-8). Lyotard argues that post-modern knowledge is discontinuous, paradoxical and local and consists of an infinite number of independent discourses. No discourse can claim supreme legitimating power over the others and every discourse is theoretically inconsistent, an open system that inevitably includes contradictions. The search for dissension in this field of pluralistic, relativistic and heterogeneous knowledge is the only legitimate research activity (Lyotard 1984: 59-67). Lyotard often develops his argument by opposing Jürgen Habermas' call for a revitalised modern project, emphasizing the polemic character of the epistemological debate between modernists and post-modernists (Karls-son – Achen 1993). Lyotard refers to Nietzsche when discussing the internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge. The reflection on the foundations of the "positive" sciences turned the truth requirement of science back against itself, resulting in the crisis of scientific knowledge and opening up the grounds for relativism (Lyotard 1984: 39). To this pessimistic threat, Lyotard answers: "This is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction" (Lyotard 1984: 41).

Traditional theories and their limits

Martin Wight discusses three themes of international theory: the realist, the rationalist and the revolutionist tradition of political thought. Realists concentrate on the condition of international anarchy. This condition consists of a multiplicity of independent sovereign states acknowledging no political superior and their relations are ultimately regulated by power

and warfare. Rationalists emphasize the element of international intercourse. Organised interaction and institutions related to diplomacy, commerce and world order are at the centre of study. Revolutionists concentrate on the concept of a society of states or family of nations. This society forms a cultural whole that imposes certain moral obligations. It could be said that the adherents of the evolutionist tradition claim to speak in the name of this unity and give effect to it as the first aim of their international policies. The traditions have been given the names Machiavellian, Grotian and Kantian respectively (Wight 1991: 7-24). The realist and rationalist approach are usually recognised as "traditional" theories of international relations whereas the revolutionist emancipatory discourse has developed within the concept of Critical Theory in opposition to traditional theory (Linklater 1990: 8-27). It is not possible to make an easy classification of different theories of international relations. How do the power politics of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism relate to the concept of rationality and reflexivity? The borders are often obscured in articles and in the literature. However, I will attempt to proceed from the categories above and position them on the map of the foundationalist – anti-foundationalist cleavage.

Neo-realists and neo-liberals could be related to, the so-called, traditional theories of international relations. Both schools share a commitment to rationalism. Rational choice theory seeks to explain the dynamics of behavioural interaction among actors with exogenously defined identities and interests (Wendt 1992: 391-2). The basic assumptions of the rationalistic study of international institutions, according to Keohane, are scarcity, competition and rational actors. Co-operation and discord in world politics thus can be studied in terms of zero- or positive-sum games (Keohane 1988: 386-9).

The limits of rationalistic theory are recognised within the traditionalist camp and of course the subject of attacks from the anti-foundationalists. Keohane admits the context dependency of the rationalistic approach: it is

necessary to incorporate auxiliary assumptions as well as the cognitive capacity of the decision makers to explain variations in outcomes. Rationalistic theories are "one-dimensional" in that they ignore changes of consciousness and belief system (Keohane 1988: 381, 391). Furthermore, the constitution of identities and interests of the actors involved in the rationalistic game are taken as given. It is important to explain identity and interest and treat them as endogenous variables in order to better understand the outcomes of state or individual interaction. This call for "reflexivity" suggests that rational choice theory tends to ask certain questions and not others. This opens up the possibility of building a bridge between the two traditions according to Wendt (Wendt 1992: 391-5). As described above, the anti-foundationalists further sharpen the arguments regarding the limits of traditional rationalistic theory. The traditional view is said to be theoretically monistic and is associated with the problematic of empiricist-positivist cumulative science. The new philosophy of science that shares a concern with the "sociological" issue left out by the rationalists, stresses the role of impersonal social forces, the impact of cultural practices, norms and values as well as the issue of identity- and interest-formation. Under many different names, these new theories have developed in the spectrum between the foundational and anti-foundational ideal-types of the philosophy of science. Many of them incorporate, to various degrees, the idea of science as a polymorphic entity. This post-positivistic or post-modern tradition, at the centre of the anti-foundationalist movement, is proposed to constitute a fourth, Nietzschean, theme in international relations.

The Nietzschean theme in international relations theory

When suggesting that Nietzsche gives a name to the new theme, one refers to his thoughts on "perspectivism." In short, he questions the possibility of truth, arguing that morality, religion, art, philosophy and science are only different perspectives or interpretations of reali-

ty. As reality offers an infinite number of interpretations, there is plenty of reason to be wary of every attempt to elevate one single perspective as supreme and eternal. (See Strong 1992: 161-80 for an elaboration of perspectivism in Nietzsche.)

Both the Kantian approach of Critical Theory and the Nietzschean theme of anti-foundationalism could be regarded as dissident thought in international relations theory: they both raise questions bearing upon "the Enlightenment constructs of history, rationality, objectivity, truth, human agency and social structure; the relation between knowledge and power; the relation between language and social meaning; the role and function of the social sciences in modern social and political life; and the prospects for emancipatory politics in the late twentieth century" (Ashley – Walker 1990: 265, see also Linklater 1990).

When offering a summary of the "positive" definition of the Nietzschean theme by characterising it in terms of "what it is" rather than in terms of "what it is not," one automatically positions oneself outside the theme itself. One is committing the crime of establishing a new orthodoxy, forcing a variety of theories and perspectives into a coherent and consensual position. Being aware of the violation of the "dogma" of theoretical pluralism, I still regard the attempt to summarise the common elements of these theories as fruitful.

The Nietzschean tradition emphasizes the complex, non-transparent, fragmented and heterogeneous character of world politics. This political condition calls for theoretical and methodological pluralism and the application of discourse analysis. The tradition tolerates in principle other scientific approaches, including realism, rationalism and revolutionism. However, realism and rationalism in particular are thought to have grown too big as research programmes. As they have acquired a hegemonic and unjust power position, believing themselves to hold the only legitimate knowledge of international relations, they become the prime target for anti-foundationalists to reveal the intrinsic contradictions of these theories. This critical project undoubtedly

contains the Enlightenment principle of justice. Although the importance of theoretical pluralism and tolerance is emphasized, a single perspective cannot be allowed to develop a hegemonic position. The problematic of theoretical self-reflection and the fact that the Nietzschean tradition does not exclude any other perspectives, puts it in a class of its own relative to the Machiavellian, Grotian and Kantian traditions.

Lapid has developed a theoretical umbrella of three convergent views, suitable for describing the features of the Nietzschean tradition: paradigmaticism, perspectivism and relativism (Lapid 1989: 239-44). Paradigmaticism could be understood as the discourse about the choice of analytical framework. As theoretical generalisation is not possible, knowledge is assumed to be produced, accumulated and conserved within paradigms, research programmes or discourses. The term paradigm is used here in a somewhat different way than Thomas Kuhn did. It does not include the search for normalcy, but rather the search for a simultaneous diversity of strong paradigms. (See also Kuhn 1970.) Perspectivism focus on the thematic premises and assumptions of these analytical frameworks. A set of assumptions is assumed to be highly resistant to evidence and logical criticism and may therefore hinder or facilitate theoretical growth. The anti-foundationalists argue that it is important to reveal these assumptions to create awareness of perspective. Methods of genealogy and deconstruction are tools to target the premises and assumptions of a discourse. The principle of perspectivism emphasizes the process of "strange-making." In order to show how a process, a perspective, a concept or a fact is socially constructed, it must be distanced and made seem strange. (See also Donna Gregory in the foreword to *Der Derian – Shapiro* 1989: xiv-xxi.) Relativism stands for methodological pluralism. A multitude of research strategies must be recognised as science is polymorphic. The relativist feature of the Nietzschean tradition has been criticised for its "anything goes" implications. This is indeed a problem: "By undermining objectivity and truth, this re-

lativization of philosophical thinking has greatly complicated the task of providing effective legitimation of knowledge and has rendered problematic the demarcation of science from non-science" (Lapid 1989: 243).

Partly emerging from the Nietzschean tradition, Keohane coins the word "reflectivists" for the approaches that emphasize the importance of "intersubjective meanings" of international institutional activity. This means that institutions, defined in a broad sense, not only reflect the preferences and power distribution of the units or actors constituting them, but institutions also shape those preferences and that power (Keohane 1988: 381-2). The impact of the Nietzschean tradition on the study of international relations seems to have directed the research toward the issue of the intersubjective construction of identities and interests of actors. Alexander Wendt argues that the principle of self-help is not derived from the structure of anarchy of the international system, but from the structure of identity and interests. It is the collective meanings that constitute the structure because identity is always relational. Wendt develops a model based on social theories of identity and interest formation in order to bridge the gap between structure and actor. The formation of interest and identity is influenced by two factors. First, the domestic factors of the actor, in this case the state. This influence could best be described by behavioural-individualistic theories that treat interest and identity as extraneous. Second, the "systemic" factors, meaning the interaction with the interests and identities of the other states in the international system. This influence is the innovation of the model and it is described by cognitive-constructivistic theories. Wendt concludes that the world of power politics is socially constructed in a call for a process oriented international theory (Wendt 1992: 403-18, 422-5, the concept of social construction is further elaborated in Berger – Luckmann 1991).

Towards a synthesis? The possibility of a reflective research programme

The anti-foundationalist challenge in international relations theory has been counterattak-

ked by the traditionalists mentioned above. The demand for a coherent reflective research programme has been rejected by some scholars arguing that the very idea of such a programme will do violence to the spirit of the Nietzschean tradition of theoretical pluralism (Ashley – Walker 1990: 266). Nevertheless, there has been room for middle ground beyond the polemic debate.

Still with a foot in traditional theory, a reflective approach studying epistemic communities, has emerged. A special issue of *International Organization* treated the topic in grand scale under the name of "Knowledge, power and international policy co-ordination" edited by Peter Haas (Haas 1992). The approach claims to be methodologically pluralistic in the sense that it integrates neo-realism, liberal institutionalism, neo-functionalism and cognitive analysis. The task is to study the ideas of "epistemic communities" to illuminate the dynamic between structure and choice, the "inner world" of international relations (Adler – Haas 1992: 367-71). An epistemic community is conceptualised as "a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas 1992: 3). Epistemic communities are treated as vehicles to understand the creation of collective interpretation and choice. A process model of policy evolution is developed in the form of a "two-level game" consisting of four phases: policy innovation, policy diffusion, policy selection and policy persistence. Epistemic communities play an important role in the innovation and diffusion of ideas as well as in defining the interests of decision makers and influencing the processes of institutionalisation and socialisation of ideas (Adler – Haas 1992: 371-87). The two-level game metaphor seeks to link national and international policy co-ordination in order to understand the construction of identity and interest (see Putnam 1988).

With the attempt to take the anti-foundationalist challenge seriously in the study of international relations, it seems like the third debate

has generated some creative research activities. Although not abandoning the traditional theory, as the more extreme dissidents call for, the increased self-reflexivity of the discipline will most certainly result in interesting theoretical growth in the future. However, there is still only a small space for continental philosophy in the American car of international relations.

Magnus Karlsson

References

- Adler, E – Haas, P M, 1992. Conclusion: epistemic communities, world order and the creation of a reflective research program, *International Organization* 46, 367-90.
- Ashley, R K – Walker, R B J, 1990. Introduction – Speaking the language of exile: Dissident thought in international studies, *International Studies Quarterly*, 34, 259-68.
- Berger, P L – Luckmann, T, 1991 (original 1966). *The social construction of reality – A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, London: Penguin Books.
- Der Derian, J, 1992. *Antidiplomacy: spies, terror, speed and war*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Der Derian, J – Shapiro, M J, 1989. *International / Intertextual Relation – Postmodern readings of world politics*, Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Haas, P M, 1992. Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination, *International Organization* 46, 1-35.
- Hjorth, R, 1992. *Building international institutions for environmental protection: the case of Baltic*

- Sea environmental cooperation*, (diss.), Linköping: Institute of Tema Research.
- Karlsson, M – Achen, T, 1993. Teorier om kunskapen i det nya samhället, in Ingelstam, L & Stureson, L (ed) 1993, *Brus över landet – om informationsöverflödet, kunskapen och människan*. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag.
- Keohane, R O, 1988. International institutions: Two approaches, *International Studies Quarterly*, 32, 379-96.
- Kuhn, T, 1970 (original 1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lapid, Y, 1989. The third debate: On the prospects of international theory in a post-positivistic era, *International Studies Quarterly*, 33, 235-54.
- Linklater, A, 1990. *Beyond realism and Marxism – Critical theory and international relations*, Houndmills: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Lyotard, J-F, 1984 (original 1979). *The postmodern condition – a report on knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Putnam, R D, 1988. Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games, *International Organization* 42, 427-60.
- Strong, T B, 1992. Text and pretexts: Reflections on perspectivism in Nietzsche, in Strong, T B (ed) 1992, *The self and the political order*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Walt, S, 1991. The renaissance of security studies, *International Studies Quarterly*, 35, 211-39.
- Wendt, A, 1992. Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics, *International Organization* 46, 391-425.
- Wight, M, 1991. *International theory – The three traditions*, (edited by Wight, G & Porter, B), Leicester: Leicester University Press.

A Rather Astute Understanding

– An American View on a European View on American Political History

Göran Rosenberg has written a fascinating and eminently readable account of the American political tradition, its myths and realities, and

how the ideas of the past have shaped the context of the present¹. The book spans a wide range of topics – from New England puritanism to the Americanization of Asian immigrants in Orange County, California.

It is one of the best books on American political history written by a European author in recent times. Göran Rosenberg, who is editor-in-chief of *Moderna Tider*, has spent several years in the