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A Critique of Positivism: Human Nature and Anarchy

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Abstract

Positivism and postpositivism are two paradigms within the field of international relations (IR) that differ in their approaches to ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how knowledge is acquired) in the study of international politics. Ontologically, positivists are objectivists, meaning that they believe there are objective facts (for example, selfish human nature) and laws (for example, anarchy leads to chaos) in international politics. Positivists apply common rationality and value-neutrality as epistemological tools to discover and analyze such claims regarding external and objective social reality. In this paper, I make two points. First, positivism (realism and liberalism) has a natural propensity to reify social concepts into transhistorical essence to generate causal theories. However, in reality, human nature is complex and the meaning of social realities such as human nature and anarchy is conceptual and constitutive. Second, the adoption of common rationality and value-neutrality as epistemological building blocks lead positivism to a rigid and ahistorical view of human nature and anarchy. In contrast, postpositivism (critical theory and constructivism) can generate a relatively nuanced and complete picture of international politics.

Keywords: Positivism, postpositivism, human nature, anarchy, ontology, epistemology, international relations theory

Introduction

Positivism and postpositivism are two paradigms within the field of international relations (IR) that differ in their approaches to ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how knowledge is acquired) in the study of international politics. Positivists in IR adopt a positivist ontology, which means they believe that there is an external and objective reality. In other words, they assume that there are facts (selfish human nature) and laws (anarchy leads to conflicts) in international politics that can be discovered and analyzed using scientific methods. Positivism can be classified into two broad schools of thought – realism and liberalism – both of which apply the logic of rationalist economic theory to international politics, but their conclusions about the potential for international cooperation diverge significantly (Reus-Smit,

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2005, p. 189). Liberalism is ideologically more left-leaning as it holds a more optimistic view of the possibility of progress through international cooperation (Rathbun, 2012, p. 608).

The vague label of ‘postpositivism’ contains a variety of different approaches – including critical theory, constructivism, and postmodernism – common to all is, the belief that reality is subjective in IR or social science in general (Rathbun, 2012, p. 609). Postpositivists argue that social reality is not fixed and objective but socially constructed (Burchill and Linklater, 2005, p. 20). They emphasize that the norms, identities, and interests of actors in international politics play a crucial role in shaping their actions and interactions. Postpositivist epistemological commitments are associated with the political left (Rathbun, 2012), with postmodernism being the most radically left. Postmodernism can aptly be defined as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ – metanarratives are theories that claim to have discovered the truth about the social world (Sørensen, 1998, p. 85). Thus the issue in the debate between the positivists and postpositivists concerns the ontological nature of the social world. In the words of Sørensen (1998):

The extreme version on the objectivist side is purely materialist or naturalist, i.e. the social world of international relations is a world shaped by the material structure of the international system. The extreme version on the subjectivist side is idealist, contending that the social world is primarily constituted by our language, ideas, and concepts – that is, it is ‘what we make it’. (p. 90)

In this paper, I make two points. First, positivism (realism and liberalism) has a natural propensity to reify social concepts into transhistorical essence to generate causal theories. However, in reality, human nature is complex and the meaning of social realities such as human nature and anarchy is conceptual and constitutive. Second, the adoption of common rationality and value-neutrality as epistemological building blocks leads positivism to a rigid and ahistorical view of human nature and anarchy. In contrast, postpositivism (critical theory and constructivism) can generate a relatively nuanced and complete picture of international politics. The centrality of reflexivity and intersubjectivity in postpositivist epistemology helps us better negotiate the researcher’s role and understand how different actors in a social setting construct their realities, and how these constructions shape international politics.

Human Nature

In 1651, during the British Civil War, English author Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, in which he described human existence in the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 163). His observations are predicated on the notion of ‘selfish’ human nature. Hobbes argued that man’s primary concern is self-preservation, but that competition breeds antagonism and distrust because some men are egotistical, arrogant, and eager for vengeance (Waltz, 2001, p. 85). As a result, everyone naturally fears for their safety and sets out to harm the others before they are harmed themselves. The ‘first image’ of IR that causes war, as described in Kenneth Waltz’s book *Man, the State, and War*, represents this anxiety and stupidity of men.

Realists explicitly base their ideas of global politics on presumptions about human nature. The first principle of political realism, wrote Hans Morgenthau in *Politics Among*

Nations, is that “politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature. . . The operation of these laws being impervious to our preferences, men will challenge them only at the risk of failure” (1992, *Six Principles of . . .*). Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr held that states, like human beings engaged in conflict due to an innate desire to dominate others (Walt, 1998, p. 31). Niebuhr refuted Marx’s claim that exploitation is caused by class divisions, instead, in his view; both class divisions and exploitation are the result of a “tendency in the human heart” (Waltz, 2001, p. 24).

Such Hobbesian analogy of politics which realists use as a model of international politics, is, however, rejected by liberals and postpositivists alike. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, held the view that people born in their natural state are neither good nor bad (Waltz, 2001, pp. 4-5). The main causes of conflict, according to Rousseau, are not found in men or states but rather in the anarchical state system (Waltz, 2001, p. 6). He claimed that without some certainty that others won’t be able to harm him, a man in a state of nature cannot begin to act honorably. Immanuel Kant held that humans are mixed beings – midway between animals and angels (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 179). He argued that humans are influenced not only by physical desires but also by an inherent sense of duty. Kant referred to this innate sense of obligation as the ‘categorical imperative’, the moral and rational capacity that allows individuals to make rational moral choices and act according to universal moral principles (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 176-177). Much of the postpositivist assumptions about human nature stem from Marxist theory, which holds that since economic and social life are produced by collective activity, human nature is influenced by social interactions or the type of society one lives in (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 197).

Has evolution shaped human beings to be altruist animals?

Before we can refute or declare support for either ontological assumption regarding human nature, which is central to understanding the cause of war in international politics, it is imperative to consult the research findings of evolutionary psychology. Has evolution shaped human beings to be altruist animals? In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin argued that humans are subject to the same forces of variation and natural selection as other animals (Darwin, 1981, p. 185); and suggested that altruism in humans may have evolved from an evolutionary advantage (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 253). Darwin (1981) wrote:

It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over other men of the same tribe, yet that an increase in the number of well-endowed men and an advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. (p. 166)

Darwin, however, did not know how such ‘group selection’ might work, as aggressive warriors might not survive wars to pass on their genes, whereas the ‘draft dodger’ probably has more chances to do so (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 253). Wouldn’t selection thus favor the latter? In 1964, William D. Hamilton came up with a potential answer now known as the ‘kin selection theory’ (Miller, 2019, Chapter 4). He argued that if chivalry were directed toward close relatives, such a gene might actually be helping copies of itself to survive. Your children, siblings, nieces, nephews, and other close relatives are very likely to share your genetic makeup. Therefore, in terms of natural selection, a gene that programs altruistic conduct within

the family would essentially be ‘feathering its own nest’ (Miller, 2019, Chapter 4). However, research demonstrates that the evolutionary benefits of altruism extend to groups as well as kin. For example, within a mixed pair, noncooperative strategies frequently outperform cooperative ones, but pairs of cooperators have a larger overall fitness(=payoff) than mixed pairs or pairs of noncooperators (Wilson, 2015, p. 42).

That being said, theories of kin selection and group selection reveal another, philosophically fatalist, aspect of human nature. If these theories hold, it can only lead to a rise in altruism within groups (Johnson & Thayer, 2016, p. 16). Group selection would have the reverse effect between groups, maintaining or even escalating conflict. Since the underlying premise of this theory is that selection occurs at the level of groups, Johnson and Thayer (2016, p. 16) emphasized that altruistic characteristics can only spread if altruism aids in the spread of the genes causing them at the expense of other genes, which must happen through intergroup rivalry or conflict. In other words, if there is competition for survival and reproduction between members of the same species, even more than between different species (Stevenson et al., 2017, pp. 248-249); as Darwin proposed; then group selection theory suggests that humans evolved in an environment of fierce intragroup rivalry, where groups with loyal members typically outperformed those with disloyal members (Clark et al., 2019). This means that human minds have been shaped to be tribal as a result of selective pressures, and group loyalty and associated cognitive biases are presumably present in all cultures (Clark et al., 2019).

Consequently, if the theory of group selection is favored to individual selection, predictions regarding diminishing human violence would not be affected. Johnson and Thayer (2016, p. 16) asserted that group selection would tend to encourage violence since competition between groups (conflict between strangers) might often be more brutal than competition within groups (conflict between family and fellow group members). According to Johnson and Thayer (2016), the three core tenets of offensive realism – self-help, power maximization, and outgroup fear – have their roots in scientific understanding of the development of human behavior. These specific traits, especially in primate and human civilizations, are not only evolutionary adaptable but also empirically prevalent throughout the animal kingdom. Johnson and Thayer (2016) argued that states behave as offensive realists not just as a result of anarchy in the current international system but also as a result of the legacy of our evolutionary history. Offensive realism may better reflect the nature of humanity than that of the international system. By comparing liberals’ and conservatives’ levels of partisanship, Clark et al. (2019) also came to a similar conclusion that no group is exempt from tribalism and that it is a natural and practically unavoidable aspect of human cognition.

However, Crawford (2009, p. 276) contended that simple genetic determinist claims should be regarded with skepticism, because ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ are so intertwined with one another on a biological and environmental level, that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart. She argued that on a basic level, humans (and other animals) are malleable and rewriteable; experiences can and do change the biology of each of our particular brains. Therefore, we ought not to discuss human nature as a single collection of traits that are mostly positive or negative. The reality is that we can be kind, compassionate, and trusting just as much as our biology can encourage hostile and aggressive actions (Crawford, 2009, p. 276). Claims regarding human nature made by Crawford (2009), who is a political scientist, appear rather bold. Of course,

adaptability is the key to natural selection but does evolutionary psychology support the view of socially malleable human nature?

Is human nature socially malleable?

Although human nature is understood to be fundamentally biological and affected by culture, there is reason to believe that culture (i.e. socially transmitted information) not only plays a significant role in shaping human behavior; but also evolves in the manner laid out by Darwin in *The Origin of Species*, i.e. it comprises a system of variation, differential fitness and inheritance (Lopreato, 1988; Mesoudi, 2015; Wilson, 2015). There is much commonality observed between biological and cultural evolution. For example, just like a species, when a language dies, it never reappears (Mesoudi, 2015, A Brief History...). Mesoudi (2015) argued that cultural traits (words, ideas, artefacts etc.) exhibit variation; these variations have diverse rates of survival and reproduction and are transmitted from person to person through social learning processes like imitation or speech.

In a comparative study of the roots of human and non-human primates' cognitive systems, Rosati et al. (2014, p. 461) found that young apes must rely to a greater degree on individual and trial-and-error learning, while children depend heavily on imitation to acquire knowledge about the world. Since humans are biologically driven to imitate, and culture depends on imitation to prosper, this could only mean that humans are greatly influenced by the kinds of behavior they see in others. A person, raised in a free democratic world would be more open to cooperating, whereas a person who grew up in a conflict-ridden authoritarian state could be less so. Liberalism extends the same logic to states and emphasizes the role of liberal democracy in the promotion of peace. Democratic peace theory, a major strand of liberalism, emphasizes that although democracies seem to fight wars as often as other states, they rarely, if ever, fight one another (Walt, 1998, p. 39). Constructivists, on the other hand, focus on the role of identity and norms in providing motivations for actions. While identity may still serve the purpose of group selection – us versus them – norms can become institutionalized into the everyday practices and interactions within the international community (Björkdahl, 2002, p. 16).

According to Joseph Lopreato (1988, p. 210), like other forms of sociocultural behavior, morality is deeply rooted in our biological nature, which is constantly interacting with the environment, including culture. Like evolution itself, morality is caused by 'functional interdependence' between organisms (genes) and their environment. This is apparent in animals too. For example, our domestic dogs, who have descended from wolves and jackals, have permanently improved in terms of certain moral traits like affection, dependability, temper, and presumably general intelligence (Darwin, 1981, p. 50). Hence, morality is itself an evolutionary phenomenon, subject to change under the dual and interacting influence of human nature and culture (Lopreato, 1988, p. 210). In other words, forces of natural selection have given humans brains, impulses, and most importantly ability to develop culture which gives mankind the exceptional ability to evolve itself using cultural adaptation. At the moment, this theory lacks universal support, but if humans are simply the slavish products of evolution, procreation is the main goal of natural selection, and altruism is by definition other-oriented, then we must admit that a huge part of empirical human behavior is simply inexplicable. This includes philosophical urges that other animals seem not to have, and also immoral practices such as slavery which is absent in nonhuman primates and even among nomadic humans (Lopreato, 1988, p. 212).

Perception of Threat in the Absence of Central Authority

Humans can harm others regardless of their innate tendencies. It begs the question of what allows that potential to materialize. In Waltz's (2001, p. 160) 'third image' of international politics, war is a product of the anarchic nature of the international system under which all states are present. Because any state can use force at any time, all states must always be prepared to either use force to counter force or pay the price of weakness (Waltz, 2001, p. 160). In his magnum opus, *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz (1979, pp. 104-105) claimed that the international system is a self-help system because it lacks a legitimate central authority. Consequently, units of self-help systems must worry and act accordingly to ensure their survival (Waltz, 1979, p. 105). Because power is of utmost importance to ensure survival, Waltz's theory – which is now referred to as 'neorealism' or 'structural realism' – places a strong emphasis on how the distribution of power among states influences world politics.

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 21) used neorealism in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* to assert that a state's ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system. He argued that three reasons – (1) absence of central authority in the international system, (2) presence of offensive capability in individual states, and (3) uncertainty of states' intentions – force states that seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 3). Thus, the 'negative consequence of anarchy' is the key ontological assumption in both Waltz's and Mearsheimer's theory. Both thinkers endorsed the view that because of anarchy, rational actors and states must fear one another, and consolidate power to ensure survival.

In regards to the issue of how much power states desire, Mearsheimer's theory (known as offensive realism) diverges from Waltz's theory (known as defensive realism). According to defensive realists, the international system offers governments little motivation to seek out additional power and instead forces them to preserve the current balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21). States' principal objective is to maintain power rather than grow it. The offensive realists contend, in contrast, that status quo powers are rarely found in international politics. The international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21).

Both strands (defensive and offensive) of neorealism enjoy considerable support in the discipline of IR. Even liberals who argue that institutions, norms, and commerce can facilitate peace in the international system generally agree with realists that anarchy provides incentives for conflicts. Rousseau himself, who rejected the positivist assumption of human nature, held that even if a state may want to maintain peace, it may need to think about waging a preventative war; otherwise, the opposing side may strike when the advantage has turned in their favor (Waltz, 2001, pp. 6-7). Realists, on the other hand, do not hold liberal theories in high regard. For realists, power is central to any political system; and institutions, norms, and commerce are products of hegemonic stability rather than causes of stability. In short, the international system is a self-help system because of anarchy, which fosters a sense of threat and encourages preemptive strikes. However, postpositivists reject the neorealists' view of the international system as a singular 'anarchic' domain that can be studied independently of social and economic dynamics within and across societies.

The postpositivist objection to the reification of anarchy

Alexander Wendt (1992, p. 396) claimed that “without assumptions about the structure of identities and interests in the system, Waltz’s definition of structure cannot predict the content or dynamics of anarchy”. In other words, whether self-help is a logical or contingent feature of anarchy, and whether states engage in endless power competition to ensure their survival, depends upon how states view one another. For example, the US would not be as concerned about the armaments of a democratic EU member as it would be about those of North Korea. The nature of the relationship among nations identified cognitively is the cause of alarm, not the destructive capacity. For Wendt (1992, p. 405), “Self-help is an institution, one of the various structures of identity and interest that may exist under anarchy.” According to Wendt (1992, p. 405), social threats are not natural but socially constructed; it is shaped by the identities and interests of states. Anarchy is not a constant system that imposes restrictions on states and forces everyone to engage in a never-ending war for power and security (Burchill and Linklater, 2005, p. 26). Wendt’s theory, which is rigorous and systematic in approach, is a part of the larger constructivist paradigm that encompasses several competing approaches. Some are influenced by postmodernism, others by critical theory.

Robert Cox, who is associated with critical theory, emphasized that the concept of anarchy is not static and there is more to power distribution than economic and military capability. Instead, the international system is influenced by historical context characterized by ideas, material capabilities, and institutions (Cox, 1981, p. 98). For example, despite American dominance during the interwar years, neither stability nor hegemony existed. On the other hand, the Pax Britannica and the Pax Americana are illustrations of hegemony at the level of the world order, which is linked to stability and a ‘fit’ between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions (Leysens, 2008, pp. 52-53). Cox highlighted the dialectical relationship between structure and agency in IR. He held that structures exist in language, in the way we think, and in social, economic, and political practices. Cox (1992, p. 149) wrote: “Structures are socially constructed, i.e., they become a part of the objective world by virtue of their existence in the intersubjectivity of relevant groups of people”.

Nicholas Reus-Smit, whose philosophy is more eclectic, explores how norms and values affect state behavior. He claimed that basic institutional practices are far more influenced by culturally and historically contingent beliefs about what defines a ‘civilized’ state and how such states should solve cooperation problems than by material structural conditions, the strategic imperatives of specific cooperation problems, or the stabilization of territorial property rights (Reus-Smit, 1997, p. 583). He asserted that practical association is not more fundamental than purposive association. From ancient Greece to the modern societies of states, Reus-Smit argued, all historical societies of states are linked by common sentiment. According to this perspective, the culturally homogeneous European system of the nineteenth century gave rise to the current world order, which has remained centered around an expanding community of liberal-constitutionalist governments that have prevailed in all of the century’s major conflicts, most notably the Cold War (Reus-Smit, 1997, p. 584). Thus, anarchy does not preclude the existence of moral purpose that states frequently pursue through normative discourse and actions in the international structure.

However, it is important to note that anarchy does not rule out the perception of threat, just as it does not exclude the existence of a moral purpose. The historically declining levels of

organized violence suggest the crucial role of purposive action in domestic and international politics. Human beings are social animals who are shaped by cultural practices. While survival remains the primary goal of all living beings, social animals (whales and elephants) and solitary animals (bears and tigers) have different survival strategies. The malleability of human nature suggests that humans can act in both a competitive and cooperative manner subject to constraints imposed by man-made institutions and historical context. According to Crawford (2009, p. 278), fear of the other is often institutionalized within the international system, and institutionalized fear has the potential to function as a perceptual filter and analogical trigger. Institutionalized fear can develop into a climate that is nearly self-sustaining and difficult to overcome. In other words, even in the face of evidence that the threat has diminished, realism taken as an instrument of foreign policy can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of security competition.

Epistemological Approach: Positivism versus Postpositivism

Positivists believe in a positivist epistemology, which is grounded in the idea that the investigator and the investigated ‘object’ are independent entities, and the investigator is capable of studying the object without influencing it or being influenced by it (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). They aim for objectivity and seek to uncover generalizable patterns and causal relationships. Postpositivists are critical of the positivist epistemological approach. They argue that in the study of international politics, understanding often involves interpretation and contextualization. They emphasize the importance of intersubjectivity and context in the generation of knowledge (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 193). They are more inclined to question the objectivity and neutrality of research and recognize the role of reflexivity, i.e. subjective biases of researchers, in shaping their findings.

Thus, the primary disagreement between positivists and postpositivists in relation to ontology and epistemology in international politics lies in their perspectives on the nature of reality and how knowledge about international politics can be acquired. Positivists tend to adopt a more objective, empirical, and scientific approach, while postpositivists emphasize the constructive and interpretive nature of reality and are more open to subjective and qualitative methods of inquiry. The next chapter clarifies the concepts that represent the epistemological building blocks in the theories of IR.

Common rationality and value-neutrality: the essence of positivism

Max Weber, one of the most renowned proponents of methodological individualism, held that only one type of action warrants the qualifier ‘social’ – the purposeful action that considers the conduct of others, whether present or absent, known or unknown (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 155). Two conditions must be satisfied to cultivate any meaningful insight from the study of social phenomenon: (1) motives (reason and thought) must guide purposeful individual behavior and (2) the observer must be able to discern the motives of agents. Although social theorists do not directly have access to the agent’s underlying subjective motivation, they are still able to interpret those motives through the use of their capacity for enactment or simulation. This ability, also known as common rationality, develops on the premise that any person, interchangeable as a rational being, would have taken the same action in the same situation. This rational typification permits social scientists to avoid the empirical singularity of actors and reintroduce necessity into a theoretical system and draw general conclusions (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 155).

Neorealism assumes that the international system can be comprehended through a 'common rationality'. Three presumptions underpin this rationality: first, that states' foreign policies are uniform and motivated by the need to maintain political security in the interest of their countries; second, that human nature is immutable and driven by a self-serving desire to maximize power; and third, that the international system restrains states that seek to maximize their power using the balance of power mechanism (Cox, 1981, p. 92). Furthermore, these tenets are universal and unchangeable. However, this very idea of common rationality, Cox (1981, p. 92) argued, reinforces the non-historical mode of thinking. Rationality is not uniform through time and space. In reality, states frame their foreign policy based on ideological and historical context. For example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States adopted an agenda of liberal international order in its foreign policy.

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama, a scholar of the liberal positivist paradigm, suggested that liberal democracy represents the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the ultimate form of government (1992). He saw the spread of the global free market as a favorable development for global stability and peace. Mearsheimer (2019), in contrast, saw the agenda of liberal international order as bound to fail because of the powerful force of 'nationalism'. He believed in the containment of rising great powers. Thus we can see that the idea of common rationality is a hoax; what is rational is a subjective view.

But for positivists, common rationality is the only proper response to a hypothesized anarchic state system (Cox, 1981, p. 92). To make a generalizable 'causal' theory which is the aim of positivism, common rationality plays a crucial role. Devoid of context, nothing can be said about how policymakers feel and how they will act when approached by a great power, if not for the assumption of selfish human nature. Selfish human nature is therefore an intrinsic premise of positivist causal theories. Realists argue that maintaining a balance of power for states is more important than upholding moral principles. They believe that only when morality is backed by physical force does it have any effect. The reduction of moral issues into power dynamics gives neorealism the appearance of a non-normative and value-neutral theory.

However, the underlying presumptions of realist theories, Cox argued (1981, pp. 92-93), give rise to a latent normative element that security within the imagined inter-state system depends on all major actors adopting realist rationality as a guide for behavior. Griffiths (2007, p. 3) claimed that the link between theory and practice in IR is not contingent or instrumental; instead, the relationship between beliefs and actions is conceptual and constitutive. Simply expressed, anarchy and balance of power are true to the extent that policymakers, in particular, hold it to be true (Griffiths 2007, p. 3). In the eyes of the postmodernists, the most radical of the postpositivist camp, neorealism is just another construction of the world, one that needs to be contested because it violates reality and is rife with fatalism (Burchill & Linklater, 2005, p. 20). The meaning and scope of anarchy and state interests, as per the critiques of neorealism, are significantly impacted by the neorealist purpose of inquiry. The critiques claimed that realism constituted a 'hegemonic discourse', in that they scorned alternative perspectives and forms of knowledge and informed Washington's Cold War politics with their ahistorical assumptions (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 195).

Reflexivity and intersubjectivity: the essence of postpositivism

The reflexivity i.e. self-aware and critical role of researcher is a major epistemological tool for postpositivists in the clarification and rejection of hegemonic discourse. According to Cox (1981, p. 87), “Theory is always for someone and for some purpose”. He argued that the purpose that gives rise to problem-solving (neorealist and neoliberal) theories is to make the existing order of relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble. However, this relative strength of problem-solving theory is based on faulty assumptions of static human nature and the structure of the international system (Cox, 1981, 89). In reality, the social and political order is dynamic and subject to change, at least over the long term. The purpose of critical theory, in contrast, is to understand and examine political order in a changing reality and clarify the range of possible alternatives (Cox, 1981, pp. 88-89). Critical theory thus contains an element of utopianism in the sense that it allows for a normative choice in favor of a social and political order different from the prevailing order.

The positivists also believe that the interests of actors are exogenously defined, which means that whether they are people or states, they come into contact with one another with a pre-existing set of preferences (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 197). Reus-Smit (2005, p. 197) maintains that neorealists and neoliberals – the principal users of rational choice analysis – are solely concerned with how actors strategically pursue these preferences; they are not concerned with whence such preferences originate. Institutions (anarchy) and practices (armament) ought to be understood through the changing mental processes of their makers. According to Cox (1985, p. 52), the objective realities of our world - the state, social classes, the conflict groups, and their practices – are constituted by intersubjective ideas. Individuals act as though these other realities exist, and by doing so, they reproduce them, even though none of these realities exist in the manner individuals exit. Intersubjectivity thus reveals how different actors in a social setting interact and construct their realities regarding anarchy and threat, and how these constructions shape international politics.

Collective responses to a collectively perceived problematic produce certain institutions and practices that can provide incentives for war and peace as well. One such institution that shaped the concept of anarchy during the age of colonialism was Christendom. In the late fifteenth century, under the leadership of King Ferdinand, who backed the voyage of Columbus and in return was enriched with the wealth of the New World, Spain emerged as a serious rival for overseas empire and sea routes, threatening the near monopoly of King John of Portugal. The leaders of both countries were anxious about the possibility of conflict, particularly in uncharted territory (Allison, 2017, Spain Vs. Portugal). Fortunately for both, King Ferdinand decided to appeal to a higher authority: the representative of God on earth, Pope Alexander VI. In his capacity as an arbitrator, Alexander VI divided the Western Hemisphere by drawing a line that ran from pole to pole from north to south. Treaty compliance was encouraged by the papal role in delineating these areas of influence. As a result, there were no notable hostilities for nearly a century between the two nations (Allison, 2017, Spain Vs. Portugal).

Likewise, the concept of anarchy is also shaped by ideology. Ideology shapes the states’ interests, relations with others, and attitude towards global challenges. A liberal state, for example, places a higher priority on international cooperation and human rights than a realist state that is more focused on balance-of-power politics and national security. The shared principle of national self-determination in the early 20th century, among leaders of great powers,

Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin, assisted in the peaceful formation of new nation-states in the Baltic region (Neuberger, 2001). By the mid-20th century, the US and Russia began to view one another as their main ideological competitors. Consequently, norms of international order became weaker, and numerous postcolonial countries found themselves in the crossfire.

Cox (1981, pp. 97-98) asserted that state behavior is subject to a historical structure or framework for action that represents a particular configuration of forces. The historical structure is made up of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. Although actions are not mechanically influenced, these forces impose pressure and constraints on state behavior. In no sense, however, Cox should be taken as a structuralist, because he does not believe that structure is the ultimate factor that determines human behavior. In *Production, Power, and World Order*, Cox wrote that while structures precede individuals in the same way social practices precede children who are born in them, these practices whatever forms they may take in languages, legal systems, production organization, or political institutions are the creation of collective human activity (1987, p. 4). Historical structures in this sense are intersubjective –made by collective human activity and transformed through collective human activity.

Conclusion

Positivism and postpositivism are two paradigms within the field of IR that differ in their approaches to ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how knowledge is acquired) in the study of international politics. Positivists in IR adopt a positivist ontology, which means they believe that there is an external and objective reality. The vague label of ‘postpositivism’ contains a variety of different approaches; common to all is the belief that reality is subjective in IR or social science in general.

To make a generalizable ‘causal’ theory which is the aim of positivism, common rationality and value-neutrality play a crucial epistemological role. Devoid of context, nothing can be said about how policymakers feel and how they will act when approached by a great power, if not for the assumption of selfish human nature. Selfish human nature is therefore an intrinsic premise of realist causal theories. However, this very idea of a common rationality reinforces the non-historical mode of thinking. This paper argues that human nature is evolving, subject to not only natural selection but also cultural selection. Since humans are biologically evolved to imitate, have introspective capacity, and can amend the culture they inherit, it is concluded here that humans are not mere slaves to biological forces but socially malleable creatures.

Likewise, the positivist assertion that chaos would inevitably ensue in the absence of a central authority is also rejected. The writings of Alexander Wendt, Robert Cox, and Nicholas Reus-Smit show that the understanding of anarchy and the behavior of states can be influenced by purposive action and historical context. Because our perception of the world is socially created rather than objective and predetermined, postpositivism emphasizes that the lack of a central authority does not always entail chaos or disorder. Yet power disparity may be perceived as a threat by social actors in the institutionalized schema. For radicalized social actors any belief can serve the basis of reality in which action may seem necessary – fighting a preventative war to avoid domination or enforcing the rule of God on Earth. Thus, whether a threat is natural or not is irrelevant, what matters is how actors are conditioned to perceive a threat. Even in the

face of evidence that the threat has diminished, realism taken as an instrument of foreign policy can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of security competition.

I have purposefully refrained from discussing postmodernism in this paper so as not to relativize truth. It is also not my intention to point out the obvious – that “the world out there” is made up of both material and social facts. Instead, I emphasize the dialectical relationship between ideology and material capabilities as suggested by critical theorist Robert Cox. I suggest focusing on the problems of globalization (for example, new class divisions and mass migration) that allow the propagation of hostile ideologies and exacerbate tension in international relations. This requires the examination of political order in a changing reality and an element of utopianism in political philosophy. The difference in research strategy between positivists and postpositivists arises from the purpose of inquiry. While positivists are more concerned with solving a problem at hand, they must formulate static assumptions of social concepts that help them conjecture a causal theory. On the other hand, postpositivists are more interested in clarifying alternative orders, which require scholars to view the totality of social phenomena in a historical context.

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