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Qualitative Pluralism

In themselves, facts are mute; natural forces are brute mechanisms. Yet scientists declare that they themselves are not speaking; rather, facts speak for themselves.

Bruno Latour (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*

International Relations as an academic discipline and field of knowledge inquiry lends itself to a heterogeneity of methodological approaches. While the dominant theories of neorealism and neoliberalism (the “neo-neo” synthesis) presuppose a particularistic rationalist-positivist epistemology, there perhaps exists more than one key to unlocking the various mysteries of the universe, and this paper therefore advocates for a greater acceptance of approaches that deviate from the conventional methodologies as advanced by modernity’s (yet unfinished) project of Enlightenment. While an exposition into quantitative methods is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that a deductive approach to reasoning and the focused testing of empirical data through hypotheses provides a useful “first-cut” – statistical analysis and the associated “large-N” studies seek to discover and explain causal mechanisms in order to formulate generalized theories or explanations across cases. Such an approach, however, is an indelibly partial one. Both rational and nonrational qualitative methodologies can populate these lacunae with greater nuance, where reflective interpretation and a situated historicism furnish a more holistic appreciation of how culture/history/society/economy predetermines, coproduces, or otherwise affects the manner in which international affairs play out and manifests itself. Post-positivist and otherwise critical approaches will also be briefly introduced and discussed, despite (or in spite) of their radical rejection of particularistic modes of Knowledge or Being, for they expose the fallacy of a strict adherence to, or operationalization of, boundaries and categorical dualisms. Indeed, if existence precedes essence, and if there is an increasing incredulity of totalizing grand metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979), then the possibilities of grounding meaningful thought/action according to some exogenously-given (or, transcendental) principle becomes an impossible endeavour, for such is the indeterminacy of the postmodern condition. The genesis of this strand of radical critique is often located in the “linguistic turn” of the 1980’s and 90’s, and while it has gained increasing traction since, critical postpositivist approaches continue to remain on the margins of various social science disciplines. We argue that, as with plurality, the possible coexistence of seemingly antithetical approaches must not be precluded by a narrow positivism and its pretensions towards the monopoly over valid “scientific” interpretations.
A brief foreword may also be useful in explaining the (problematic) concept of “historicism” as alluded to above – which broadly refers to the attribution of meaning to particular periods in history, cultures, and/or geographies. Indeed, in the *Poverty of Historicism* (1957), Karl Popper furnishes a scathing critique on the conviction that the aim of social science was to uncover “the law of evolution of society in order to foretell its future”. We concede two points to Popper: firstly, that “historicism” has too often been used and abused to forward political projects that aimed at the creation of a “New Man”, as resulting from the praxis of historical Socialism and Fascism (§21), and secondly, about the pluralistic nature of valid historical interpretation, since any investigation of the past will necessarily produce only a partial snapshot of history (§31). For Popper, history must be subjected to experimentation – made possible through incremental “social engineering” – in order to produce testable and falsifiable hypotheses. As a logical corollary of this, Popper rejects the idea that certain “inexorable laws of history” may be contingent upon its application to certain specific historical periods. This is where we depart from Popper. A reductionist epistemology oculdes from view a heterogeneous array of (potentially) meaningful phenomena that are often not amenable to rigorous “scientific” testing, and to thereby disregard reflectivist or interpretivist modes of inquiry is to confine the scientist within a self-reinforcing enclosure of instrumental rationality and methodological individualism, which are neither definitive nor the sole arbiter of “reality as such”. More than a century ago, the great sociologist Max Weber (1922) had already presaged how Western modernity’s pathologies of rational calculation, teleological efficiencies (means to end) and the focus on scientific-bureaucratic control would eventually iron-cage the individual. Scientism has become a totalizing ideology that produces and reproduces itself. This distinctively “modern” ethos – having successfully captured the naturalistic sciences – has now infiltrated the discourse of the social “sciences”, (pro)claiming in the process an unchallengeable right to determine what constitutes “validity” and “reliability”. Kuhn’s (1962) seminal work on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* introduced into the scholarly lexicon the notion of a “paradigm shift”, which takes place once the underlying premises, assumptions, and presuppositions are re-examined and reformulated. Indeed, the anomalies of “normal science”, which may include adherence to the oftentimes unrealistic Popperian criteria of falsifiability and the inability of “normal science” to verify contradictory claims emerging from *outside* the dominant paradigm, are part of the process which might indeed inaugurate such a revolutionary shift. Gramsci (1971) was right: *the old is dying and the new cannot be born*. This paper proposes that privileging one methodology over another is in itself an act of domination – more appropriately, *hegemony* – which demands interrogation, lest we condone the occurrence of *a great variety of morbid symptoms*. 
Two broad (and typically mutually exclusive) approaches of “historicism” may usefully be distinguished. One sphere concerns itself with rigorous hermeneutics\(^1\) (the method through which texts are interpreted, along with its associated *problematiques*), while the other adopts a relativist epistemology that denies the possibility of universal or immutable “truths” (or, truth-claims) that can be rendered “knowable”. Hermeneutics as a field of inquiry was historically associated with theological (Biblical) exegesis – interpretatively deriving meaning from Scripture. Notably, “Christian apologetics” was one of the outgrowths of this tradition. With the “rediscovery” of the classics in the European *Renaissance*, exegesis progressively began to be applied to a variety of philosophical works and domains. Although this paper only tangentially refers to “postmodern” schools of thought, it might nonetheless be useful to afford some consideration of the ‘hermeneutic circle’. Popularized in the 19th century by Schleiermacher and later reformulated by the metaphysical mysticism of Heidegger (whose esoteric terminologies we avoid discussing), it problematizes the manner in which a reader apprehends a particular text (or sentence), which depends upon a constant circular interplay between the individual parts and the whole, along with the individual reader’s subjective interpretation of this circular relationship; neither the part nor the whole of a text can be understood when taken in isolation or without reference to the other (Schleiermacher, 1959). This apparent circularity evidently does not preclude one from meaningfully interpreting a given text; however, it does point to the importance of situating “meaning” within the historical, cultural and social context of both the text and the reader. The relationship and interrelationship between the text, the context, and the reader is crucial. In literary criticism, Roland Barthes (1967) famously calls for the “*Death of the Author*” in order to herald the “*birth of the reader*”, and Derrida (1976) goes further with: “*there is nothing outside the text*”. This is indicates a circular (inter)mediation between text – which is always-already context – and the reader’s understanding of context (not only his own, but of his familiarity with the vocabulary and cultural-historical milieu in which the work was produced). The intention(s) of the Author alone does not provide an absolute or transcendental basis upon which to derive or ground “meaning”. In *The Logic of the Social Sciences*, Jürgen Habermas (1967) reveals the link between hermeneutics, history, and “objectivity”: “*the positivist thesis of unified science, which assimilates all the sciences to a natural-scientific model, fails because of the intimate relationship between the social sciences and history, and the fact that they are based on a situation-specific understanding of meaning that can be explicated only hermeneutically. [A]ccess to a symbolically pre-structured reality cannot be gained by observation alone.*”

\(^1\) Discussing hermeneutics would ordinarily include elements from Ricoeur, Dilthey and Gadamer, but their works – while important – are perhaps less salient for International Relations.
Geoffrey Elton’s (1967) *The Practice of History* offers an exposition on how scholars ought to undertake historical research. He exalts, quite correctly, that the “inability to know all the truth is not the same thing as total inability to know the truth”, and instead proposes by means of two questions the basic principles that underlie the historical method-practice: what evidence is there, and what do they mean? His work was in large part written as a response to Edward Carr’s (1961) seminal piece “What is History?”, the latter whom provocatively surmised that “the historian and his facts” merely represent an irreducibly and irrevocably subjective rendition (or version) of history. Elton seems to reinvigorate the Rankean “fetishism of facts” in the 19th century, which prioritized an empirical description of history “as it actually was” through the method of scrupulous archival research and strenuous reliance upon primary sources. By contrast, and with uncanny analogues to the leitmotif presented at the outset of this essay, Carr charges: “It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.” Indeed, it is through the Authorship of the historian who, in clothing himself with the anonymous veil of objectivity, that actually animates History. It is not a mere assemblage of (usually political) events, dates, and ‘facts’. Indeed, Spivak (1993) notes how the Latin *facta* (fact) is the past participle of *facio*; to make something, which the postpositivist is likely to see as a potential hegemonic truth-claim. Her interview with Arteaga (ibid) also raised the interesting coincidence (?) of how the French word for ‘history’ (*histoire*) is a homonym; it also means ‘story’. In contradistinction to Elton, historical “truth” is partially obscured by virtue of an inaccessible contextual meaning lost on the contemporary historian, and the meaning that he ascribes to it is also oftentimes subjectivized through his own ideological or interpretative biases. To delude ourselves further with the modernist pretension that an Archimedean vantage point exists for the ascension of the objective scholar would be to condone the works of Eurocentric Orientalizers, who most assiduously described and defined according to their own “objective standards” what the Orient was, had been, and would come to be. Was not Balfour’s ambition “to know India better than any other European ever knew it” (Said, 1978)? Armed with their arsenal of “facts” and claiming for itself the right to know another’s history, Western intellectuals (historians being merely one) – for Spivak (1988) “our best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other” – have indeed been relentless in “rendering Asia transparent”. Obviously, this is not to say history cannot be academically studied and appreciated; what it does mean is that historians must no longer pretend that their practice achieves absolute “truth” or “understanding” through their interpretative renditions. All writings of history must be subjected to critical historiography, lest we eulogize the *fait accompli*. 
What are some alternatives? How can we wield the practice of history ethically? While historical realism – as was Thucydides’ (1972) rendition of the History of the Peloponnesian War – has often been offered as a classic exemplar, his differences with Herodotus are illustrative. Thucydides’ “objective” account purports to rely on first-hand eyewitnesses (without mentioning his sources), and sees “history” as primarily a “political” history. Herodotus, on the other hand, incorporates both geographic and ethnographical conditions within his historical rendition. Much unlike realism’s focus on human nature’s will to power, Herodotus presents the study of history as being a source of lessons in morality. Thucydides’ amoral treatment of history has unsurprisingly found a following with the positivism of the 19th century, with “great” historians in the vein of Ranke and Macaulay venerating his approach as the model for emulation par excellence. Was it not Father Hobbes who translated the History of the Peloponnesian War? Was it not Nietzsche (1881) who proclaimed Thucydides: “the portrayer of man, that culture of the most impartial knowledge of the world finds its last glorious flower”? If we reject the possibilities of “impartial knowledge, how might study historical practice(s)? Lipstadt (1993) reminds us that historical revisionism is not synonymous with negationism. Holocaust denialisms (and the like) take the form of the latter; the former represents a refinement of historical events from different perspectives. One example would be the Annales School of historiography, which is explicit in its rejection of the “Great Man” theory of history. Popularized by the “second generation” of Braudel and his contemporaries, this tradition sought (as did Herodotus) to re-centre the focus upon social history, geography and psychology to understand the enduring nature of these institutions in the context of their historical-structure over the longue durée. Unlike the insular diplomatic histories, this attempt at resurrecting a “history from below” provides a far more holistic and textured approach to understanding the complexities (and multitudes of perspectives) of a histoire totale. Another historiographical approach that remains on the academic periphery is that of the Subaltern Studies Collective, comprising of a motley crew of intellectuals united in their anti-essentialist approach towards “history” – especially history as defined by the colonial victors and elite nationalists. Foucault’s The Order of Things (1966) specifically defines épistème as the “a priori grounding of knowledge and discourses which define the conditions of its possibilities in particular epochs”. At the risk of misrepresenting their eclectic (and conflictual) postcolonial project, suffice to say that their critique exposes how history cannot be appreciated as a universal, linear, or knowable, especially since most of such narrativizations neglect a consideration of the irretrievability of the subaltern’s fractured epistème. Speaking for the subaltern simply reproduces and reinforces the dominance of a partial and interested elite-national historiography.
Anthropological studies represent another approach that blends the domains of history, society, and politics in apprehending international affairs. While Straussian (1962) anthropology presumes the existence of a common, “deep structure” undergirding the mental faculties both savages (bricoleurs) and scientists (engineers), Geertz (1968) argues that in the process Strauss inadvertently becomes beholden to the “universal rationalism” as posited by the Aufklärung. Geertz’s (1973) seminal work “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” provides instead a textured ethnographical account of such a socio-cultural activity, where the focus is less on generalized and decontextualized customs or myths, but rather on the symbolic action and interaction between humans. While Bentham’s (1802) utilitarianism posits that with such high stakes, “deep play” is an inextricably irrational activity, Geertz manages to locate within the economy of exchange in Balinese culture performative acts that symbolically affirm and reaffirm the extant normative social structure. “Thick” description therefore embeds the researcher within the context or setting that is being observed, who imputes meaning through terms accessible to those standing outside the culture. Such an approach, when coupled with an immersive experience within a particular culture-system, may bridge the emic-etic divide, and therefore need not paralyze scientific understanding. Anthropological methodologies conventionally emphasize fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth structured or unstructured interviews, and even active partaking in certain activities (though at the risk of “going native”). While such methods may be amenable to certain research areas in political science and sociology, International Relations typically does not lend itself well to such approaches, simply because there is no “subject” to be interviewed, there is no culture/society to become acquainted with, there is no “activity” which may be observed or participated in. What may be gleaned from “deep play”, however, is the necessity of Verstehen, or “interpretive understanding”, as with Max Weber (1949). What is to be explained is “the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise”. Likewise, Geertz (1972) charged: “it is not in our interest to bleach human behaviour of the very properties that interest us before we begin to examine it” – indeed, to paraphrase him, the meaning of a “conspiratorial wink” would be utterly lost on a strictly phenomenalistic approach. Navigating between the “Scylla of cultural relativism and the Charybdis of a nativist culturalism” (Spivak, 1999) is indeed no simplistic endeavour, with both extremes being untenable positions. Given how the “English School” of Bull’s International Society and the related but distinct approach of social constructivism have arisen to challenge the predominance of positivist reductionism, the study of societies and their cultures – and the way in which these affect the structures of their political and economic institutions – anthropological studies have a strong claim towards providing a more nuanced appreciation of international affairs.
How may anthropological approaches contribute to the study of international relations?

Two works of Pierre Clastres – *Society Against the State* (1974) and *Archaeology of Violence* (1980) – exemplify such a possible interrelation. While not from the Annales tradition per se, Clastres does hail from the Sorbonne. Reminiscent of Marshall Sahlin’s (1966) theses on the *Original Affluent Society*, their approach calls for a radical revision of the ethnocentric “Western” conceptions of what it means to be “primitive”. Sahlin’s analysis sought to turn the conventional understanding on its head; his investigations find that, far from scraping a meagre existence, many of the hunter-gatherers in his study were free of deprivation, and in fact enjoyed much leisure time (15-20 hours per adult per week spent on food production).

Similarly, Clastres attacks this notion that a “subsistence” economy is defined by its inability to produce a *surplus*, which in the Western discourse is popularly attributed not only to a technological deficiency, but also a cultural one. This denigration hides the Western self-conviction; firstly, that history is linear in its trajectory (a one-way street); secondly, that societies without “power” are a reflection of what Western society used to be (which has now been transcended, since “true” societies emerge under the protection of the State); and lastly that such primitive cultures necessarily evolve into one that resembles the West. Quite profoundly, Clastres (1974) juxtaposes the primitive ethnocentrism of the tribal man – who, despite an assurance of his own cultural superiority, does not seek to impose a scientific rendition about it – with Western ethnology’s ethnocentrism, which (attempts to) locate itself in the “universal” while at the same time remaining stubbornly entrenched in its particularity.

His fieldwork with numerous South American tribes² leads him to the conclusion that, with the exception of the “totalitarian” empire of the Inca, most were characterized by the “democratic” nature of their society and their tendency towards reaffirming equality. Through the traditional institutions of these tribes, which include the hunter’s prohibition of consuming his catch (his is given to another, and another’s to him) and the largely symbolic role of the chieftain (whose prestige is counterbalanced by an obligation to satisfy the various incessant demands of his tribe, and whose words need not be obeyed for he commands no real power), these hunter-gatherer societies actively refute both the concentration and separation of power-authority. This refusal ensures that these are not simply societies *without* a State, they are societies *against* the State. Clastres’ anthropological findings have implications for international relations, as they provide a glimpse not simply into a Romantic past that has been (supposedly) transcended, but to a historical alternative for socio-political formations. Perhaps Tilly’s (1990) was indeed correct when he charged: “*war made the State, and the State made war*”?

² In particular the Guayaki tribe of Paraguay, but also the Guarani and the Yanomami.
Bruno Latour’s (1993) “We Have Never Been Modern” might furnish a useful, if philosophically abstract, point of departure. In critiquing Shapin & Shaffer’s (1985) *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, Latour finds that the “modern” procession of the history of science – particularly the “Nature-Society” dichotomy – has been premised on the (artificial) separation and purification of these very categories, leading us to view them as a double ontological distinction (despite their holism). Unlike Shapin & Shaffer, who are critical of Boyle’s experimental method, Latour advances a more nuanced argument: Boyle’s scientific privilege (proof through “demonstration”) has indeed been masked – but so too, Hobbes’ monist formulations of the necessity of one Power and one Knowledge to be centralized in the Leviathan’s Body-Politic assumes that the macro-social-political represents a sturdier foundation independent of material foundations. Again, neither position is tenable. The Modern constitution obscures the fact that both Nature and Society coexist, co-act, and indeed, coproduce. A natural science that purports to unveil material reality independently of the human-social is as erroneous as the social science that speaks of a *pure* social realm (Pickering, 1994). The rise of experimental science, and its infiltration into the discourse of – particularly economics and psychology (purportedly the “hardest” social sciences) – perhaps militates against alternative methodologies of knowledge inquiry. Boyle’s “vacuum chamber” enables the “Death of the Scientist” – where “objective” outcomes are demonstrated and derived from their fabrications under antiseptic laboratory conditions. In fairness, scientific inquiry has itself discovered certain principles that seem to proceed against its theoretical and empirical practice – chaos theory, the “Heisenberg principle” and other related phenomenon in quantum mechanics that seem to defy long held beliefs. While these peculiar exceptions are insufficient conditions to call for a revolutionary overthrow of the existing scientific paradigm(s), they serve the useful function of reminding those who operate within such paradigms against a conceited monopoly over the approaches towards knowledge inquiry and experiential learning. In reality, we have always been working with and creating hybrids that cannot be understood purely through Boyleian or Hobbesian “methods”. While the “radical liminality” advocated by postpositivists may provide refuge for those who are incredulous towards the various metanarratives of scientific rationality and empiricism, Latour suggests that throwing the baby out with the bathwater does us no favours. If the Enlightenment’s project of ablution was never in fact achieved – if we have never really been modern – then we need to fundamentally rethink the categorical distinctions that have been inherited from it; but the Enlightenment can nonetheless proceed without modernity through a reconceptualised “Constitution” which cherishes the plurality and hybridity of Nature/Society and the various other dualisms that have emerged as a result of our works of translation and purification.
How do we tie the various disparate critiques introduced above to the domain of International Relations? Within international relations, some of the more conventional techniques of qualitative analysis include using case studies, which may be inductively investigated through congruence procedures (such as Mill’s (1843) “method of difference/agreement”) and a rigorous process-tracing. Case studies provide in-depth knowledge of a particular event, but typically resist generalization across cases given the specificity of its locus. While the study of “International Relations” has its specificities and peculiarities, Particularly when engaging in historical research, the researcher must be cognizant of not only potential bias within the sources or materials that he uses/analyses, he must also be aware of the shortcomings and prejudices that his results might contain, produce, or reproduce. This is reflects a “middle-ground” approach which is neither strictly positivistic nor post-positivistic. Beck, Bonns & Lau (2003) explain the concept of “reflexive modernization” beautifully: “postmodernists are interested in deconstruction without reconstruction, second modernity is about deconstruction and reconstruction.” While their thesis posits that we have already ‘completed’ “first-modernity” and seemingly in stark contrast with Latour’s leitmotif, we suggest that both may be appreciated in tandem as exhorting for new institutions and new approaches that avoid a dogmatic reliance upon the constitution-framework of “Old Modernity”. Traditional approaches to international relations are distinctly uncomfortable – and in many instances openly hostile – towards the notion that the nation-state as the prime unit is increasingly being subverted by the emergence of other actors such as non-governmental organizations and transnational corporations. Given the spectacular improvements in information technology and communications that have proceeded under the march of economic and cultural globalization, theories of international relations cannot afford to remain beholden to the belief that the State should be bestowed with analytical privilege. Indeed, International Relations as a subject will increasingly need to incorporate a variety of disciplines under its umbrella in order to account for the multitude of interrelated dynamics within and between States lest it become an insular, dismal science, as had Carlyle characterized Economics. Globalization (or, second modernity) will increasingly render dogmatic attempts to sanitize the boundaries between the Third/Second/First images superfluous – returning to Latour, this rabid drive for ablution masks the always-already condition of hybridity – International Relations cannot be fruitfully apprehended without adopting and acknowledging the various intervening “variables” (to use the terminology of positivists) such as culture, society, nature, geography, and psychology that indelibly impinge on any analysis.
This essay has sought to inject some doubt into the self-confident “rationalist” techniques that purport to demystify the various *problematiques* of the social sciences. Unlike the natural sciences, the complexities of the “social” (or, in keeping with modernity’s ontological fetish for categories, the “political”/“international”) may not be reduced to a set of “basic principles” that allow us to fully appropriate knowledge about them. We can “know” a certain slice of historical/political/societal phenomena through such parsimonious explanations, but this “knowing” will only be partial and therefore unsatisfactory. Instead of reinforcing and reproducing our modernist biases and assumptions-presuppositions, the social sciences should advocate for a greater methodological pluralism that does not impose strict epistemological and ontological enclosures in our relentless quest to appropriate the knowledge of the world. If daring to know – *Sapere aude!* – was the challenge, let us not then sit content with our simplified understandings while pretending that facts speak for themselves. Let us instead cherish this complex indeterminacy and interdependency; let us be critically reflective about the limits of our bounded capacities for knowledge and rationality.

(4200 words, incl. footnotes)

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