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Postpositivist Political Theory
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Introduction

There is no such thing as a coherent, unified postpositivist political theory. Postpositivist political theory is rather an umbrella description, which is loosely used to group together a variety of different theories and approaches that critically engage with different forms of essentialism in the political and social sciences – assumptions reflected in conventional, traditional, and especially positivist thoughts. Among other paradigms, the term postpositivism encompasses poststructuralism, most feminist theories, critical theory (in the sense imposed by the Frankfurt School), critical realism, the interpretative tradition, and neo-Gramscian approaches, notwithstanding the tendency, on the part of many scholars representing these currents of thought, to reject the label of postpositivism.

The term postpositivism is often used interchangeably with terms such as poststructuralism or postfoundationalism. Although no clear-cut theoretical framework exists, it is possible to find a common ground among the differing approaches and to highlight a number of salient points that link them together. In one way or another, all these theories challenge the explicit – and very often the implicit – assumptions inherent in such theories as rational choice, game theory, (post)behaviorism, (neo)realism, or (neo)liberalism (see, for example, Friedman 1953; Krasner 1996; Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner 1998; Gilpin 2001; Mueller 2003; Shapiro 2005; Sobel 2006; Frieden, Lake, & Schultz 2009). They reject uncritical objectivism and the possibility of prediction in social and political sciences. They contest the conception of social sciences as natural sciences. And they dispute the Weberian claim that science should be neutral and value-free (Weber 1949). In fact, they strongly question the notion that science can be viewed at all as a neutral venture. According to postpositivist approaches, science simultaneously shapes and is shaped by society, and every theory is biased and partisan (Shapiro 1981). Following this line of reasoning, there is no logical distinction between the political and the social (or the economic, or the cultural). As a result, all spheres of society, including science, are inherently political (but not necessarily always politicized). Traditional political science approaches are accused of being complicit with existing unequal power relations, and even of supporting prevailing states of power. The notion of power and the analysis of power relations are, accordingly, pivotal to postpositivist theory.

Engaging with postpositivism requires critical engagement with positivism, which is not a clear-cut concept either (for an introduction to the debate, see Smith, Booth, & Zalewski 1996; Steinmetz 2005). Halfpenny (1982) distinguishes 12 different forms of positivism, and Giedymin (1975) indicates that there are about 64 possible positivist mutations. Following Blaikie (2007: 110–11), it is possible to identify some rules that are largely accepted as constituting positivism in the English-speaking world after World War II: phenomenalism (the uniqueness of pure experience as the only reliable basis for scientific knowledge, not contaminated by any theoretical notions; a theoretically unmediated access to empirical facts); nominalism (metaphysical claims are not scientifically legitimate; abstract concepts must also be derived from experience); atomism (reality consists of discrete and independent events, which constitute the ultimate, fundamental elements of the world); universalism (order and regularities in reality are considered to be valid across time and space); and a strict separation between fact and values. This is often combined
with a theoretical monism: “all theoretical or generalizing sciences [should] make use of the same method, whether they are natural sciences or social sciences” (Popper 1957: 130). Despite the fact that postpositivism constitutes a clear break with these rules of positivism, the approach is nevertheless not antipositivist or antifoundationalist (Giedymin 1975; Bevir 2009). In fact, because a political analysis consists of developing plausible explanations, there is no such thing as an antipositivist political analysis, as will be demonstrated below. The “post” in postpositivism rather indicates a degree of continuity with positivism.

Positivism is traditionally located within the realm of epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Accordingly, it addresses questions such as “What can we know of the world ‘out there’?” and “How is knowledge acquired about this world?” Ontology, on the other hand, which is the theory of being, deals with such questions as “What is the world ultimately made of?”; “What is the driving force of history?”; and “What is out there to know about?” In positivism, however, the traditional distinction between ontology and epistemology is blurred. The question “How can we know?” simultaneously touches upon the question “What is out there to know about?” and, last but not least, “Whom does this ‘we’ refer to?” As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 3) note: “The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.” Framed in this manner, ontology and epistemology are inextricably intertwined. In postpositivist political theory there is no clear-cut difference between the two domains. For this reason, and because positivist theories and other conventional political theories have been very fiercely attacked and challenged from within the realm of ontology, questions of ontology will be the primary focus of the present entry.

In what follows, postpositivist theories are approached from a variety of different angles. The discussion proceeds from a problematization of the notion of objectivity as well as from the idea of an unmediated access to empirical facts. An explanation of the difference between form and existence is followed by a description of an inclusive way to analyze reality. Methods of induction and deduction are critically examined and related to the question of social foundations of society. The entry then considers a postfoundational approach to social structures and to the concept of dislocation and outlines a critique of the rational notion of the subject. An alternative approach is presented, in which the subject is located within dislocated social structures, the notion of power is brought to the fore, and prevailing accounts of reality are discussed in connection with hegemonic truth politics. The terms sedimentation and reactivation are introduced to explore the construction of objectivity and truth, after which various paradoxes within postpositivist theories are described. Finally, by way of conclusion, detailed consideration is given to the political underpinnings of postpositivist approaches.

**Universal Objectivity**

The striving for universal explanations is a paradigmatic feature of positivist political theories. It is based on the assumption that political science is driven by the need to find the appropriate framework to “squeeze” the real and true facts out of empirical data in order to come as close as possible to social objectivity. This is an attempt to deliver schematic descriptions and classifications of political events and developments that should be based on criteria similar to those used in the natural sciences.

From a postpositivist point of view, it is not possible to offer an ultimate explanation or a transcendental theory, that is, one that is historically independent. According to this line of reasoning, there is no ahistorical explanans such as a universal law or theory, and a variable independent of society is impossible. Postpositivists argue instead that every theory is embedded in a social context. They see the production of theory, the collection of “brute facts,” and intellectual reflection as always embedded within a specific horizon of truth. From this perspective theory is a historical product: “Objective always means ‘humanly
objective,' which can be held to correspond exactly to 'historically subjective': in other words, objective would mean 'universal subjective' (Gramsci 1971: 445). It follows that theoretical frameworks are constantly changing and that, consequently, objectivity also changes. The claim that objectivity can exist independently from humanity has been dismissed as a form of mysticism:

It might seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity. But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of "standpoint of the cosmos in itself" and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God. (Gramsci 1971: 445)

However, claiming – as postpositivist theory does – that objectivity is historical and embedded in a social context is very different from denying the possibility of objectivity per se, as would be the case in antipositivism.

If there is no universal objectivity, neither can there be any pure empirical facts. Lefort asserts that positivist political science emerges from a desire to objectify, and it forgets that no elements, no elementary structures, no entities (classes or segments of classes), no economic or technical determination, and no dimension of social space exist until they have been given a form. (Lefort 1988: 11)

In postpositivism, a difference is introduced between the social form of an object and its pure existence. The social form of an object, in other words its meaning, is dependent on a social, and hence discursive context. Its existence, that is to say its pure substance, is outside of the discursive realm. Outside of discourses "objects do not have being; they have only existence" (Laclau & Mouffe 1990: 104). Most postpositivist theories side with realism against idealism in claiming that objects have an existence outside the human mind. However, nothing meaningful follows from this existence. We never engage with this pure existence of objects, but only with its social form. There is no unmediated access to the "real-concrete." It follows that the thing to be explained, the explanandum, is always already a contextualized explanandum. Rather than being able to analyze the existence of objects, we can only examine their social form. Nevertheless, the result of such an approach is not relativism. In contrast to relativism, which is just another name for antipositivism, a postpositivist approach stresses that some explanations are indeed more plausible than others (see below).

In epistemological terms, a positivist approach assumes that knowledge is acquired by way of investigation and testing. This is chiefly a question of method and empirical facts. As an empiricist-agnostic approach, positivism maintains that no claims can be made about the world except in the form of observables and that hypotheses must be formulated so as to be open to falsification – that is, to the possibility to show that the hypothesis is false. It considers any claims or theories that are not falsifiable to be unscientific (Popper 1968; King, Keohane, & Verba 1994: 99–105). In positivism the methodology of reasoning is inductive. Induction involves making careful observations, conducting experiments, rigorously analyzing the data obtained, and thus producing new discoveries or theories (Blakie 2007: 59–79). Theory follows observation.

Other theories, including (new) institutionalism (March & Olsen 1989; Goodin 1996) and constructivism (Onuf 1989; Searle 1995; Wendt 1999), reject the assumption of parsimony in positivism – a guiding principle of political analysis that refers to the reliance on models with as few variables as possible, which nevertheless explain as much as possible (Hay 2002: 31–7). Unlike models emphasizing parsimony, these theories offer complex explanations based on rich and empirically saturated analyses. This, however, is not the point of a postpositivist approach. For, if both the explanans and the explanandum are dependent on their social context, as claimed by postpositivists, it is not merely the principle of parsimony, but the method itself that must be problematized. Accordingly, it is possible neither to derive concrete cases from universal laws (deduction)
nor to conclude a universal explanation from many individual cases (induction). Both of these claims have been highly problematized: on the one hand, the claim that it is possible at all to have a socially independent variable; and, on the other hand, the claim that the application of a theory does not impinge upon the theoretical framework. It has been proposed instead that theory and empirical facts are prone to variation and mutation (Wullweber & Scherrer 2010). What is more, according to postpositivist theories, the line of reasoning does not start with an objective empirical or theoretical problem, because no problem can be objectively stated in the first place. Instead, something must be problematized in order for a problem to be constructed. We are not pristine observers of objective problems that are “out there,” waiting to be discovered. Rather we actively – although perhaps not consciously – construct scientific problems. Moreover, deciding to focus on one specific problem implies leaving other issues unscru tinized. At the same time, the decision to problematize one issue and not another is not a pregiven. The terrain for making a decision is undecidable (see below).

**Postfoundational Ontology**

Postpositivist scholars sharply criticize the notion of social foundation as a closed and fixed structure of society. The basic assumption – and in fact the very ontological core – of postpositivist political theory maintains that there is no ultimate ground for society. A common assumption about postpositivist approaches is that they categorically deny the existence of social structures. This is not the case. In postpositivist theories a different concept is used for social structure, namely discourse. The phrase social structure has not simply been renamed, however. Unlike subjectivist or voluntaristic theories such as behaviorism, postpositivism goes along with more structuralist approaches, for instance institutionalism or Marxism, in their explanation that subjects are embedded in social structures. Postpositivist approaches are consequently not antifoundational. The postpositivist concept of discourse refers to a more or less stabilized horizon of action and truth. Every society requires foundations. Without stabile social structures, society would not be possible. However, foundations are not permanent. Instead, societies are based on unstable and contingent foundations (Butler 1992). Such postfoundational approaches argue that society’s foundations are subject to variation and transformation. They deny the existence of ultimate foundations but not of social foundations per se (Marchart 2007).

In their criticism of structuralist theories, postpositivist approaches argue that every social foundation is subject to change. In other words, to a certain degree they are always dislocated. The concept of dislocation refers to a destabilization of structures, and hence to discourses. It is a permanent phenomenon, and a continuous disruption of existing social structures (Lacan 2005). The result of this postulated dislocation is that a social structure is not able to offer the means for its own transformation. In other words, “with dislocation there is no telos which governs change” (Laclau 1990: 42). There is no Hegelian rationality of the world that ultimately leads to the sublation (Aufhebung) of all social contradictions.

In postpositivist theory the concept of dislocation is constitutive and, as an ontological concept, it frames the impossibility of a full and complete structuration of the social. It introduces temporality, possibility, and freedom, all at the same time. In other words, it refers to the historicity and contingency of events and social processes. However, in order to engage in a dispute over the notion of foundations, foundations must exist in the first place. A structure – that is, a set of discourses – has to be there in order to become dislocated:

> the dislocation of a structure does not mean that everything becomes possible or that all symbolic frameworks disappear, since no dislocation could take place in that psychotic universe. … The situation of dislocation is that of a lack which involves a structural reference. (Laclau 1990: 43)
The concept of dislocation implies a relative structuration.

It is evident now that the term discourse is not just about language. It comprises all forms of (relatively) stabilized social actions. These stabilized and sedimented actions constitute the framework within which other actions become possible and meaningful. Hence discourse is another word for a spatially and temporally sedimented horizon of truth. In this sense, it refers to the whole social constitution of a specific society. Within this framework some discourses or organizations of discourses are more stable – more sedimented – than others (see below).

De-Centered Subject

Rational choice theory formulates the strongest claim about a rational subject. Actions of subjects are conceptualized as instrumental, utility-maximizing, and, of course, rational – conceptualized on the basis of a set of given interests and preferences. Such a concept of the subject relies on a stylized model of political behavior. Even though rational choice theory is often perceived as giving the subject free reign, it is in fact superstructuralist. For it is based on the assumption that, in each and every moment, there is always one best choice. Furthermore, because subjects are conceived of as acting rationally, they are always acting out precisely this best choice. In consequence, subjects have no choice at all.

To be more precise: “They have … a nominal choice between rationality and irrationality but, as rational choice actors, always opt for the former” (Hay 2002: 53). However, rational choice theory is not a clear-cut positivist approach. Given the criteria defined above, rational choice theory shares with positivism the requirements of generating universal laws, of value-free statements, of theoretical monism, of parsimony, and of atomism. Still, the research process goes the other way round. Rational choice theory follows the logic of deduction: a theory or a postulated general law is the starting point for political analysis. Hypotheses are deduced from theoretical assumptions. These are then tested through empirical observation. The data set either confirms or falsifies a hypothesis. Explanations of concrete phenomena are derived from theory. Furthermore, the strong claim of rationality and the maximization of utility cannot be shown empirically. Both assumptions are axiomatic metaphysical claims that are completely incompatible with the claim of phenomenalism and nominalism (Hay 2002: 31; Harré 1970). Hence rational choice theory shares with positivism only some assumptions and strongly departs from others. Interestingly, rational choice theory is often perceived as being a positivist theory, perhaps because “contemporary disciplinary practice equates science with positivism” (Wight 2006: 17).

It is not surprising that postpositivist theory questions all these assumptions. To start with, postpositivism denies a voluntaristic account of the subject and the whole idea of an autonomously and rationally acting subject. It rejects the idea that there is any freedom of action. On the contrary, it views the subject as being caged in social discourses. In consequence, “freedom” does not arise from or in the subject. However, postpositivism departs from a structuralist account of the subject as well, for it does not assume that subjects merely act out the reason or the necessities of the structure; they do not merely follow the corridor of action that is given by the structure. Instead – as described above – as the structure is dislocated, it fails to completely determine the subject. As Derrida (1992) argues, the structure is undecidable. It does not contain its own means of reconstruction. There is no freedom to act, only a necessity to do so: “I am condemned to be free, not because I have no structural identity … but because I have a failed structural identity. This means that the subject is partially self-determined” (Laclau 1990: 44).

The subject is embedded within the social structure, but the structure itself is dislocated. As a result, the fullness of the subject is disrupted as well. The dislocated structure needs to be supplemented by decisions. The subject has to fill the rift in the structure with decisions
within an undecidable terrain. However, even though the decisions are not determined by the structure, they take place within a social field that is strategic and selective (Jessop 2007). It is selective because the social terrain facilitates some decisions while making others more difficult. It is strategic because the structure is constituted by decisions that have formerly been made by others. Paraphrasing Marx, one could say that people make their own decisions, but they do not make them as they please; they do not make them within structures chosen by themselves, but within structures directly encountered, given, and transmitted from past decisions. The more dislocated the structure, the less constrained the decisions are by it, and hence the more of a leeway for the actions of the subjects there is. In this way subjects change their identity by re-creating some structural possibilities and by refusing to act on others (Laclau 1990: 28–31).

The Construction of Reality

If, as postpositivists claim, there is no universal truth, how is it possible to explain that there are indeed truth claims that are socially accepted? Is this because these truth claims come closer to objectivity than others? According to postpositivist theory, the answer to this question is an unequivocal “no.” If there is no such thing as transcendental objectivity, truth cannot arise by way of closeness to something that does not exist. Instead truth and objectivity must be related with the notion of power. This is a question of truth politics:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1984: 73)

To say that there is no general objectivity is the same as saying that there is no transcendental universality. However, there are truth claims that are perceived as universal. According to postpositivist theory, universality is not inherent in the claim per se. Every universality is rather a particularity that became hegemonic at a certain point in time. In other words, the concrete constitutes the abstract, the implication being that each universality is a specific historical construct. This is only possible by denying its particular content. Such a process of construction does not happen accidentally. Rather it has to be connected to the question of power struggle. To put it the other way around: the universal has no content of its own, it is an empty universality: “The universal is the symbol of the missing fullness” (Laclau 1996: 26). Which particular content will represent a universality cannot be derived from the particularity itself. Filling the universality is a hegemonic process between different particularities, which compete in filling the empty universality. The relation between particularity and universality can be conceptualized as a hegemonic relation. It is a relation in which a particular content is partially fixed as a universality, by way of power struggles. It follows that the construction of universality is precarious, incomplete, and contestable.

Husserl (1978) used the term sedimentation to describe a social process in which the knowledge of the creative moment of a particular scientific insight becomes gradually lost, step by step. As the insight is integrated into daily use, it is reproduced without being questioned. The original creative moment becomes obscured and the knowledge of alternative explanations gets lost. A scientific postulate initially in competition with other approaches is thereby naturalized without any obvious alternatives. This is how universalities and “disciplinary knowledge systems” (Ashley 1983: 493) are created. However, as Husserl emphasizes, some traces of particularity always remain. Accordingly, the opposite route – the reactivation of the knowledge of alternatives – is still possible. In political terms, sedimentation and reactivation can be linked to the domain of the social and the political. The social realm of a society consists of sedimented – and hence,
for the most part, unquestioned – social relations. In the process of reactivation, some social relations become denaturalized and thereby (re)politicized (Wullweber & Scherrer 2010). During and between these processes, reality is produced, reproduced, and revised.

The Postpositivist Paradox

A postpositivist approach has far-reaching implications for both the process of knowledge production and the significance of analysis, considering that there are no hard facts or timeless explanations. Explanations become elastic, context-sensitive, and considerably dependent on the person who conducts research. However, although there is no possibility of objectivity, postpositivists insist that it is still possible to make plausible statements. Therefore, as stated above, they are not antipositivistic.

In a postpositivist approach there is no truth that is contextually independent: “There are no formal rules that could guarantee a correct choice as to which explanation should be retained and which rejected. … any substantive rules will depend on the specific theoretical framework(s) within which investigators work” (Jessop & Sum 2006: 308). Something is perceived as being true because it refers to the prevailing horizon of truth. Accordingly, an explanation is seen as being plausible once it becomes inscribed within this hegemonic horizon. Although horizons of truth are spatial and temporal, it follows that every scientific explanation must be oriented toward this prevailing horizon. Otherwise it is no longer deemed scientific. Even a postpositivist analysis cannot articulate its explanations and lines of reasoning completely outside this (potentially positivist!) horizon. A relation to the hegemonic horizon of truth is both a necessary and paradoxical condition. The struggle for truth is waged on a hegemonized terrain, which is therefore strategically and selectively dominated by conventional and potentially positivist theories. Although it may be possible to reasonably break with some prevailing assumptions – a very common practice among postpositivist scholars – it is not possible to call the whole system of evidence into question at once. Still, a partial breakdown of truth claims can lead to a displacement of such a system. In the long run it may shift the horizon of truth.

A further paradox exists in the realm of postpositivist theorizing. In a general sense, a theory is a formal abstraction of reality. The abstraction is possible because we assume social regularities within societies. In positivism, the process of abstraction entails extracting the essence from the concrete object. However, postpositivist theory problematizes the whole idea of social regularities and transcendental laws. The theory is based on an ontological system “in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” (Derrida 1978: 280). It argues that there are no regularities independent of their social and historical contexts.

This assertion is already the first step out of this paradox. For, although postpositivist approaches agree that there are no transcendental laws or objectivities per se, they argue that every society has its own specific spatial and temporal transcendental framework. This framework is shaped by stabilized and sedimented social relations. It is accordingly possible to derive abstractions from these sedimented relations as social forms. In this way postpositivist theory becomes a quasi-transcendental ontology. However, it is a negative ontology, or an “ontology of lack” (Laclau 1990), which is based on the assumption of a profound social contingency and incompleteness of social structures. Therefore the scientific process of abstraction does not lead to a universal abstraction, but to an abstraction that is determined, limited, specific, and always contextually dependent. Furthermore, scientists themselves are embedded in a social context. Hence, instead of there being universal abstractions, there are at best plausible abstractions, which are related to a certain horizon of truth. In this sense, a determinate abstraction is an empty universality, for
it remains tendential and the knowledge of its particularity is maintained.

**The Primacy of Politics**

The aim of positivist science is to collect and classify pure facts. From a positivist standpoint, science is expected to derive general laws and to develop theoretical models – or vice versa – on the basis of such hard facts. Mathematics and statistics are considered basic tools in the study of society. It is therefore deemed necessary, according to positivist reasoning, that science banish “all ‘metaphysics,’ [and] all ‘personal feeling or class bias’” (Ross 1990: 157, quoting Pearson). Politics is expected to be kept out of science.

In this entry diverse points of critique were delineated. The notion of objectivity was deconstructed. It was demonstrated that, instead of one single version of objectivity, there are many spatiotemporal specific objectivities, and that a trace of particularity remains in every universal (scientific) claim. The claim that stable social foundations exist was scrutinized by showing the spatial and historical traces – and hence the contingency – of social foundations. The notion of a subject with fixed interests and preferences was replaced by a concept of the subject embedded in dislocated social relations. It was further claimed that there are no “hard facts,” but rather accounts of reality that are theoretically informed and culturally shaped, and therefore discursively constructed (Torfing 2005). The subject is always already situated within this world of meaningful objects and practices.

Postpositivist scholars assert that a fundamental critique of positivist science is not just appropriate, but also essential – and indeed of key importance. It is not the object of postpositivist theory to refine positivist or conventional theories. All of the above-mentioned critique of ontology and epistemology targets the very essence of positivist science: it aims at bursting the “neutrality bubble” (Connolly 2006: 829). It profoundly shatters the idea that science could be value-free in any way. It problematizes the “spectre of scientism, especially its current positivist incarnation, which is evident in the paradigmatic status accorded to causal laws” (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 3). It holds that no methodology exists that is not grounded on epistemological assumptions; and that no epistemology exists that is not based on an explicit or implicit ontology. Each and every stage of application and abstraction is located within a social context that is strategic and selective. Inevitably, people are constrained by certain ideologies in the form of hegemonic discourses. Therefore the object of methodology is not to apply a neutral set of rules and techniques. Science and research are practices that are themselves embedded within spatial, historical, and ultimately also political contexts.

The practice of science involves the rearrangement of data, explanations, and theoretical assumptions. It strives to establish relationships between and among various factors. This process changes the form, in other words the meaning of the factors. If the process is successful, a certain meaning is fixed and established by way of articulation (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). If, as argued in postpositivist theory, there is no one best option or choice for interrelating elements, other possibilities can always be found to establish relationships. The researcher is required to choose among different alternatives: “It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage” (Wittgenstein 1953: §186).

To decide on a specific explanation implies excluding alternative explanations. This exclusion is not based on objective facts, but on individual choice. This choice, again, depends on a specific methodology, on a certain epistemology, on a particular ontology, and, last but not least, on the social, political, and cultural context in which the research is couched. Every analysis can be conducted in a different manner, which is not the same as saying that every analysis is plausible. To phrase it differently: because there is no objectivity, which is the same as saying that there is no universal
law, the moment of undecidability cannot be overcome or skipped (Derrida 1992). The subject has to fill this structural void. It follows that both the context within which the decision has to be made and the subject who has to come to a decision have a highly significant role in the research process. Moreover, there is no fundamental and unambiguous difference between fact and value. Similarly, it is not possible to completely differentiate between science and daily practice, or between science and nonscience. Science is only one among many forms of knowledge (Habermas 1972; Latour & Woolgar 1979; Haraway 1989).

Each decision, each rearrangement of established relations has an impact on the overall horizon of truth – an impact that is sometimes stronger and sometimes weaker. Every horizon of truth is social and political. Shifting and displacing this horizon becomes a political act. In accordance with the postpositivist perspective, science is essentially politics: the politics of ontology, the politics of epistemology, and the politics of methodology. Postpositivism interrogates the historical limitations of our knowledge; it asks about that which is knowable at a certain point in time, and how power relations construct certain objects as knowable while simultaneously presenting others as non-knowable and unthinkable (Butler 1993).

Postpositivism insists on being explicit about the underlying theoretical assumptions and the analytical choices and strategies that are made. This implies being conscious about one’s own role as a researcher.

In contrast to problem-solving approaches, postpositivist approaches are problem-driven (Cox 1981; Howarth 2005). While problem-solving theories aim at solving problems within social structures that are taken for granted, a problem-driven approach includes in its analysis the structural conditions that gave rise to a certain problématique. And things do not stop here: a problem-driven approach involves criticizing prevailing social conditions, revealing underlying power relations, and developing the means to challenge these conditions and relations. A normative element is inscribed in such approaches. The role of political theory and of political analysis is a politicized process itself.

A postpositivist approach is concerned first and foremost with questioning existing power relations. What is more, such an approach opens the ontological possibility of democratic politics. If there is no telos, if there is no neutral Archimedean vantage point from which right and wrong can be judged, this void, this constitutive lack within the social structure has to be filled by political practice. However, every universal claim is unstable in the long run, because it is itself permeated by its own particularity: “Incompletion and provisionality belong to the essence of democracy” (Laclau 1996: 16). In that sense, one of the main tasks of postpositivist theories is to democratize the political and social sciences.

SEE ALSO: Biopower/Biopolitics; Constructivism; Contingency; Critical Theory; Derrida, Jacques (1930–2004); Epistemology; Essentialism; Foundationalism; Hegemony; Positivism; Postmodernism

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References


Further Reading


