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The 'third debate' revisited

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Abstract. This article challenges the idea that IR theory is in the midst of a 'third debate' between 'positivistic' and 'post-positivistic' approaches, by showing that neither the 'first' nor the 'second' debates have lost any of their relevance, and by arguing that the 'third debate' and the allegedly new paradigms it generated do not constitute a challenging innovation. While the 'first debate' is a debate between two visions of human nature, the 'second debate' is a debate between two visions of knowledge. A critical stance *vis-à-vis* rationalism does not imply a rejection of political realism, nor an endorsement of postmodernism or constructivism.

What is absurdly called theory today is just a mask for fashion and greed.

Camille Paglia[1]

The idea that IR theory is in the midst of a 'third debate' between positivistic and post-positivistic scholars has become a nearly unchallenged commonplace.[2] According to the 'third debate' thesis, IR theory went through three successive stages: a debate between 'idealism' and 'realism' in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by a debate between 'history' and 'science' in the 1950s and 1960s, and finally replaced by a debate between 'positivism' and 'post-positivism' in the 1980s and 1990s.[3] The 'third debate' generated an allegedly new paradigm (namely, constructivism) and students of International Relations are supposedly compelled to make their choice between 'positivism', 'postmodernism', and 'constructivism'.

The present article challenges the very relevance of the 'third debate' and questions the novelty and validity of constructivism. Both the 'first' and 'second' debates belong to wider philosophical and ideological arguments, none of which have lost their relevance. By contrast, the 'third debate' opposes an outdated nineteenth century paradigm (that is, positivism) to an intellectual fad (that is, postmodernism) that emerged from post-World War II French culture and whose contribution to the critique of rationalism is insignificant.

The very relevance of the 'third debate' is questionable for three main reasons: (1) The 'first debate', which is an extension to the study of world politics of an

[1] Camille Paglia, 'Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders', in Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 222.

[2] On the 'third debate', see: Yosef Lapid, 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989), pp. 235–54. On the allegedly relevance and promising outcomes of the 'third debate', see: Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle-Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 319–63.

[3] Lapid, 'Third Debate', pp. 236–7.

ideological argument between a 'conservative' and a 'revolutionary' approach to human nature, is far from being over; (2) The 'second debate', which is part of a broader and older philosophical argument between rationalist and non-rationalist approaches to human knowledge, never ceased to be relevant; (3) The 'third debate' was generated by the influence of the French 'deconstructionists' on American Academia, and the audience gained by 'postmoderns' and 'constructivists' can be explained by the inability of IR theory to fulfil its assigned goals (namely, to provide general explanations for specific phenomena and to be able to predict international events) rather than by the quality and novelty of the arguments developed by the proponents of these allegedly new paradigms.

The 'first debate': two visions of human nature

When the British historian Edward Hallett Carr published *The Twenty Years Crisis* at the eve of the Second World War, he wished to demonstrate the ideological shortcomings of European liberalism in general and of the ideological foundations of the Versailles Treaty in particular. Carr contended (as further argued in his book *Conditions of Peace*, published in 1943) that liberalism was an outdated ideology. For Carr, indeed, the philosophical premise underlying the economic theory of Adam Smith (namely that individual freedom is the best guarantee to economic wealth and that the equilibrium of the market in a free economy is maintained by the 'invisible hand') was an *idealistic* aspiration with no factual basis. Carr rejected the very concepts of natural equilibrium, of positive historical evolution, and of man's inclination toward the good. He contended that the Enlightenment had been naively optimistic, and that both Smith's liberalism and Kant's idealism corresponded to Europe's childhood. Thus, Carr suggested a return to the more 'realistic' premises of early modern European political thought, namely to the political theory of Machiavelli and Hobbes. As we shall see in the next section, Carr did not limit himself to a critique of economic liberalism and of Kantian idealism, as his ultimate goal was to produce a rationalist, German-inspired historicist theory of international relations. However, Carr's rebellion against the philosophical premises of the Enlightenment, and his aspiration to revive the world-view of the early modern political theorists, was revealing of the oscillation of European thinkers between two conceptions of human nature. This oscillation can be understood as a fundamental disagreement over the question of whether man naturally tends towards good or evil, and to what extent the human condition can be improved. The eighteenth century Italian philosopher and historian Giambattista Vico characterized the debate over human nature as a debate between those who consider man 'as he should be' and those who consider man 'as he is'.[4] Thus was the line drawn, in Vico's view, between idealists and realists, or between revolutionaries and conservatives. For the 'realist' (or conservative), man naturally tends toward evil, and it is difficult if not impossible to change his nature. For the 'idealist' (or revolutionary), man's inclinations are naturally positive, and his unhappiness stems from the perversity of the social and political structures he inherited from an obscure past. Thus, in the

[4] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1984), p. 62.

conservative view, man should accept his political, economic and social environment and adapt to it. The revolutionary view understands reality the other way round: the economic, political and social environment should adapt to man's will and aspirations, and ought to be transformed accordingly.

The disagreement between idealists and realists can be drawn back to pre-Socratic thinkers. Bias of Priene contended that most men are bad, and Parmenides argued that human nature is not subject to change. Heraclitus, on the other hand, believed in permanent change and in the malleability of human nature. In Antiquity, Xenophon and Aristotle adopted a 'realist' vision of human nature. Plato, Epicurus and Diogenes, for their part, adopted an 'idealist' vision of man: the natural good in man will re-emerge when humankind gets rid of its obscure rules and traditions. The debate over human nature among the pre-Socratics and among the Ancients was carried on throughout European history. In the Middle Ages, Aquinas and Augustine translated into political terms the teachings of the Church on man's inclination toward evil, while 'heretical' thinkers such as Bogomil, Thomas Müntzer and Jan Beuckelson founded Christian sects challenging the pessimistic premises taught by the Church. Early modern thinkers such as Machivelli, Hobbes and Vico adopted a 'realist' vision of human nature, followed after the French Revolution by Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maîstre. By contrast, eighteenth century 'enlighteners' and nineteenth century socialists (Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Marx, among the most famous) based their philosophy on an 'idealist' perception of man, believing that man's positive nature in combination with improvements in social and international rules would produce the conditions for greater wealth, greater peace, and greater happiness. As the above examples show, the division between idealism and realism is consonant with Vico's differentiation between those who look at man 'as he is' and those who picture him 'as he should be'.

Carr attempted to contribute to the critique of the 'idealist' perception of human nature by undermining the ideological premises of the Enlightenment and of economic liberalism, and by founding his 'science of international politics' on a 'realist' conception of relations between men and between nations. Carr's critique of economic liberalism and of the ideological foundations of the Enlightenment was attacked, in turn, by European thinkers associated with the liberal tradition. Friedrich von Hayek, for instance, denounced Carr as one of 'The totalitarians in our midst',[5] and Stanley Hoffmann contended that 'behind the claim for realism, we find a reactionary utopia'.[6]

The so-called 'first debate' between idealists and realists in international relations is part of a broader and fundamental philosophical debate which has been dividing Western thinkers since the pre-Socratics until today. International relations theorists did not initiate this debate, neither did they end it or make any significant contribution to its enrichment. The 'first debate' is not over. It is a philosophical debate, which is the source of the division between 'right' and 'left' in modern democracies.

[5] Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 204–8.

[6] Stanley H. Hoffmann, 'International Relations: The Long Road to Theory', *World Politics*, 11 (1958/59), p. 352.

The 'second debate': two visions of knowledge

The so-called 'second debate' in IR theory was supposedly between a 'scientific' approach to theory and a 'historical' one. The 'scientific' approach believed in the discovery of the universal laws allegedly governing the behaviour of states, while the 'historical' approach only looked for approximate patterns whose validity was dependent upon given historical contexts. Moreover, while the 'scientific' approach was generally deductive and based upon data accumulation, the 'historical' approach was mostly inductive and based upon historical research.

The debate between the 'scientific' and 'historical' approaches in IR theory was typically illustrated by the contrasting views held by Stanley Hoffmann and Morton Kaplan on the matter. While Kaplan was confident that by applying the methods of rational deduction to the study of international relations, IR theory would be able to determine 'the conditions under which the characteristic behaviour of the international system will remain stable, the conditions under which it will be transformed, and the kind of transformation that will take place',[7] Hoffmann called for a more sceptical and modest approach based on historical research and inductive generalization. Denouncing 'The construction of purely abstract hypotheses based on a small number of axioms', Hoffmann argued that IR theorists should 'proceed *inductively* and, before we reach any conclusions about trends manifest throughout history, we should resort to systematic historical research', for 'it is from history, and not from deduction from abstract hypotheses, that theory might try to obtain "laws" of the field'.[8] As opposed to American neorealists and behaviourists, Hoffmann and the followers of the 'historical' school never believed that IR theory would become a 'science'. Commenting on the dead-ends of the ambitious 'scientific' approach, Hoffmann concluded that 'There was a hope of turning a field of inquiry into a science, and the hope that this science would be useful. Both quests have turned out to be frustrating'.[9]

The debate between 'scientists' and 'historians' is part of a broader and older argument. It is one expression of what Thomas Sowell termed a 'Conflict of Visions' between a 'constrained' and an 'unconstrained' conception of knowledge.[10] In Sowell's terminology, the 'unconstrained' vision corresponds to the belief that reason constitutes the only path to truth and that it is able to reach absolute knowledge. By contrast, the 'constrained' vision corresponds to the belief that reason does not constitute the only path to truth and that human knowledge can never be absolute. Rationalism is an 'unconstrained' vision of knowledge, and its application to the political and social spheres is what Michael Oakshott called 'Rationalism in Politics'.[11] The rationalist, in Oakshott's view, 'never doubts the power of his "reason" (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the property of an action',[12] and cannot imagine a

[7] Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), pp. xvii–xviii.
[8] Hoffmann, 'International Relations', pp. 358–67.
[9] Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, 106 (1977), p. 51.
[10] Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions* (New York: Quill, 1987).
[11] See Michael Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Boulder, CO: Liberty Press, 1991).
[12] Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 6.

political system 'which does not consist in solving problems, or a political problem of which there is no "rational" solution at all'.[13]

The division between political rationalism and what could be termed constrained rationality goes back to Antiquity. In *The Republic*, Plato describes knowledge as a perfect and ultimate stage: reason leads the philosopher from the darkness of the cave to the light of pure and *a priori* knowledge.[14] The eyes of the philosopher 'are turned to contemplate fixed and immutable realities, a realm where there is no injustice done or suffered, but all is reason and order'.[15] Because reason can reach perfect knowledge, the philosopher can design and organize a perfect society based on rational grounds.[16] As opposed to his master, Aristotle did not believe that rational thought could lead to perfect knowledge, and rejected the idea that society could be organized according to abstract concepts to be found in the pure minds of the philosophers. Society, in Aristotle's view, must follow its self-produced rules and practices, and laws must vary with given social and historical contexts: 'In matters of political organization … it is impossible for everything to be written down precisely: What is written down must be in general terms, but actions are concerned with particulars'.[17]

The disagreement between Plato and Aristotle over the relationship between reason and truth and over the ability of the philosopher to organize society on purely rational grounds continued to divide Western thinkers throughout the ages. This division gained a new momentum with the introduction to Western thought of the Bible's concept of revelation through the spread of Christianity. As Leo Strauss explains, 'The whole history of the West can be viewed as an ever repeated attempt to achieve a compromise or a synthesis' between the Bible and Greek philosophy.[18] This 'ever repeated attempt' was eloquently illustrated by the philosophical inquiries of Aquinas, Augustine, and Maimonides.

The debate over the nature and power of reason gained a new momentum in the seventeenth century with the writings of Descartes, Pascal, and Hume. Descartes thought that truth lay 'within himself',[19] and he was searching for 'the true method to reach the knowledge of all things'.[20] Descartes' philosophical speculations led him to the conclusion that rational thought is the source of morals ('it is enough to think well in order to do what is right'[21]) and that truth is to be found within the human mind, not through experience. Tellingly, Descartes chose to write his *Discours de la Méthode* in French instead of Latin, because he wanted to address those 'who only use their pure and natural reason' as opposed to those 'who only believe in ancient books'.[22] Descartes, in other words, claimed that truth was to be found within man's 'pure reason' and that deductive thought should constitute the

[13] Ibid., p. 10.
[14] Plato, *The Republic*, Book 6.
[15] Ibid., 500 b-c.
[16] Ibid., 501e.
[17] Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 8, 1268b.
[18] Leo Strauss, 'Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History', in Thomas L. Pangle, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism. An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 72.
[19] René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1964), p. 55.
[20] Descartes, *Discours*, p. 66.
[21] Ibid., p. 83.
[22] Ibid., p. 145.

basis for scientific inquiry. Ancient teachings, experience and induction are not the source of true knowledge, and reason alone is able to open the gates of knowledge. Thus, as clearly summarized by Max Horkheimer, Cartesian rationalism claims that 'the mind … is capable of producing valid knowledge out of itself'.[23]

Descartes' position was challenged by Pascal and Hume, although for different reasons. Pascal sensed that Descartes' rejection of 'ancient books' and his exclusive reliance upon rational thought laid the ground for atheism (although Descartes claimed that his philosophical system was based upon the existence of God). Pascal felt that the progress of science (especially astronomy) in his century had left man alone and scarred in face of 'the eternal silence of those infinite spaces'[24] and that faith was man's sole possible 'bet' when reason alone is unable to answer the fundamental questions of the human condition. Thus, Pascal rejected Descartes' rationalist outlook and even wrote that he could not forgive him: 'I can not forgive Descartes. He would have liked, in all his philosophy, to get rid of God. But he needed Him to put his world in motion, though afterwards he didn't need God anymore. Descartes, pointless and doubtful'.[25] Pascal further argued than the human intellect could be divided between what he called the 'esprit géométrique' (logics/rationality) and the 'esprit de finesse' (intuition/faith), and that the search for truth could not rely on the 'esprit géométrique' alone.

David Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, refuted Descartes' basic premise that truth can be deducted from 'pure reason'. For Hume, indeed, Descartes was wrong to assert that truth could be derived from 'pure reason', as ideas are derived from experience. In other words, the human mind is not the *a priori* container of truth, and only learns though impressions and experience ('all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions'[26]). Hume argued that philosophers that claim the existence of pre-existing ideas or of 'pure reason' (such as Plato and Descartes) 'prove nothing but that ideas are preceded by other perceptions, from which they are derived, and which they represent'.[27] Hume, moreover, was careful to differentiate reason from morals. While Descartes argued that 'It is enough to think well in order to do what is right',[28] Hume argued that 'The rules of morality … are not conclusions of our reason'.[29] Kant, who understood that Hume's *Treatise* was a serious challenge to rationalist philosophy, attempted to rebuild the principles of 'pure reason' on a solid basis in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. While defining the areas in which 'pure reason' is competent to inquire about the truth, Kant maintained that, as far as 'pure reason' is competent, man can discover truth through rational deduction and then '*oblige* nature to answer its questions'.[30]

[23] Max Horkheimer, 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy', in Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 217.
[24] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Classiques Hachette, 1968), p. 428.
[25] Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 360–1.
[26] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Penguin Books, 1969), p. 52.
[27] Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 54–5.
[28] Descartes, *Discours*, p. 83.
[29] Hume, *Treatise*, p. 509.
[30] Emanuel Kant, *Critique de la Raison Pure* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), p. 17.

Thus, the seventeenth and eighteenth century European philosophers renewed a debate over the nature and power of reason: while for the rationalists truth could be found within the original purity of the human mind, empiricists contended that ideas are the fruit of experience. The issue, in other words, is whether man derives his knowledge from his own mind or from his experience.

The argument over the source of knowledge inevitably extended to the question of whether reason alone is capable of interpreting history and improving society. While Continental followers of Cartesian rationalism contended that history could be rationally explained and that society could be reorganized on just foundations thanks to rational thought, most of the intellectual inheritors of English empiricism stressed the importance of tradition for the well-being of society, and challenged the very prospect of 'discovering' an alleged law of history. This philosophical argument was well exemplified in the eighteenth century by the contrasting views developed by Rousseau and Burke. Rousseau believed that 'Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains',[31] and that he will recover his original freedom when society is reorganized by reason and delivered from its constraining traditions and beliefs accumulated over the years because of ignorance and bigotry. Burke challenged Rousseau's idea that human freedom corresponds to the 'natural' state of nature and can be recovered through human reason. For Burke, freedom is the product of 'civil society', the traditional framework that men established in a particular cultural and historical context in order to overcome the dangers of nature. Civil society endures thanks to the experience of generations and is constantly endangered by the revolutionaries who 'despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men'.[32] The revolutionaries, by trying to redefine human nature through 'pure reason' and to reorganize society through abstract concepts, 'are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man, that they have totally forgot his nature'.[33] The radically opposed views held by Rousseau and Burke over the question of freedom and social well-being can thus be understood as an extension of the rationalist/empiricist debate to the realm of political thought: can man 'rediscover' personal freedom and social justice through the application of *a priori* and eternal rational principles, or are personal freedom and social justice the product of a historical evolution that men have acquired through experience and as a result of their fight against nature?

In the nineteenth century, political rationalists intertwined their claim toward a rational explanation of history with their belief that they could reorganize society on rational grounds. Condorcet, Fourier, Saint-Simon and Comte all asserted that they had discovered (through rational deduction) a 'scientific law of historical evolution' and that they could reorganize society on rational principles toward utopian levels of wealth and happiness. While Fichte and Hegel limited themselves to theorizing about history, Marx based his 'scientific socialism' on a 'scientific' reading of history. Thus, historicism (that is, the belief in a 'law of history', as defined by Popper) generally constitutes the ideological premise for socialism (that is, the belief that society can reach an optimal level of wealth and justice through rational planning and organization).

[31] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (Paris: Bordas/Univers des lettres, 1985), p. 60.
[32] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 58.
[33] Ibid., p. 64.

It is thus no coincidence if Edward Hallett Carr, the self-proclaimed founder of 'the science of international relations', was both an historicist and a socialist. Carr was a follower of the German historicist school ('The 'historical school' of realists had its home in Germany, and its development is traced through the great names of Hegel and Marx'[34]) and claimed that it was possible to scientifically identify the direction of history, and necessary to submit oneself to the law of historical evolution ('We know the direction in which the world is moving, and we must bow to it or perish'[35]). Carr was also a socialist who believed in central control and planning, and in the imminent end of capitalism. In an interview to *The New Left Review*, Carr praised the 'immense achievements' of the Soviet régime which 'have been brought about by rejecting the main criteria of capitalist production—profits and the laws of market—and substituting a comprehensive economic plan aimed at promoting the common welfare'.[36] Moreover, Carr maintained, the Bolchevik Revolution 'together with the war of 1914–1918, marked the beginning of the end of the capitalist system'.[37] Carr believed, like his mentors Hegel and Marx, that history was following a pre-determined path and that liberalism and nationalism were 'idealistic' concepts, typical of the nineteenth century, which had come to an end in the twentieth century. The ultimate stage of European history is that of socialism and central planning, a truth that only Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia understood:

> The victors lost the peace, and Soviet Russia and Germany won it, because the former continued to preach, and in part to apply, the once valid, but now disruptive ideals of the rights of nations and laissez faire capitalism, whereas the latter, consciously or unconsciously borne forward on the tide of the twentieth century, were striving to build up the world in larger units under centralized planning and control.[38]

Carr's admiration for Germany's national-socialism, equalled only by his contempt for England's liberal tradition, found its most extreme and direct formulation in the following sentence: 'The result which we desire can be won only by a deliberate reorganization of European life such as Hitler has undertaken'.[39]

Thus, when Carr asserted that 'realism tends to emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies' and that 'the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to, these forces and tendencies',[40] he departed from the traditional meaning of the concept of political realism. While it is true that realism tends to look at the world 'as it is' rather than 'as it should be', Carr reinterpreted the concept of political realism in rationalistic terms. Indeed, 'the irresistible strength of existing forces' described by Carr are not those constant and unchangeable traits of human nature which political realists tend to accept as a given fact, but a set of allegedly scientific laws of historical evolution that can be identified by man's 'pure reason'. It is on the basis of this premise

[34] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939), p. 65.
[35] Carr, *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan (1943). Quoted from: Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994), p. 207.
[36] Carr, interview to *The New Left Review* (1978), in Carr, *From Napoléon to Stalin and Other Essays* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 261–2.
[37] Carr, *From Napoléon to Stalin*, p. 274.
[38] Carr, *Conditions of Peace.* Quoted from Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, p. 206.
[39] Ibid., p. 208.
[40] Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis* (op. cit.), p. 10.

(namely that history is governed by 'existing forces' which can be identified by the 'pure reason' liberated from all ideological bias) that Carr claimed to be the founder of a 'science of international politics'. Thus, following Carr's influential writings on international affairs, the concept of political realism can be understood in two different ways. What could be termed 'traditional realism' is a conservative world-view based on the premise that man's life is fundamentally, in Hobbes' words, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' and that every political system (including the international system) should restrain the natural tendencies of its members to harm themselves and each other. By contrast, Carr's 'scientific realism' claims that not only should one accept reality 'as it is', but that one should realize that this reality is governed by inexorable historical and social laws which can be identified by man's 'pure reason'. While 'traditional realism' is a conservative political outlook, 'scientific realism' is a rationalist epistemological conceit.[41]

The fact that Carr was not only promoting a certain world-view, but also—and essentially—a rationalistic interpretation of history and international relations, was further exemplified by his personal attacks against Karl Popper. In *What is History?* Carr denounced Popper for daring to criticize 'the allegedly determinist philosophies of history of Hegel and Marx'.[42] Carr also lamented what he called 'the waning of faith in reason among the intellectuals and political thinkers of the English-speaking world'.[43] The 'intellectuals and political thinkers' Carr was referring to were thinkers such as Popper and Hayek who denounced the deleterious application of German rationalism to European politics. It is ironical that, in the midst of the Second World War and the military and ideological conflict between Nazi Germany and the free world, national-socialism was praised by a British scholar (Carr) while the principles of liberalism and freedom developed in England were defended by two Austrian thinkers (Popper and Hayek). No less ironical is the fact that Carr was trying to promote German rationalism in Britain at the same time that German philosophy was taking an anti-rationalist turn under the influence of Martin Heidegger. In any case, the argument between Popper and Hayek on the one hand, and Carr on the other, was a typical debate between political rationalism and constrained rationality.

Popper argued in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and in *The Poverty of Historicism* that the attempts to 'discover' a law of history stem from a rationalistic aspiration to control history and society, and that these attempts are bound to fail. For Popper, the historicists tried to turn the religious belief in a meaningful history into a scientific knowledge by replacing God by Progress, Reason, or Nature. The question of the possible meaning and alleged direction of history, however, is purely speculative and cannot be answered by rational deduction or empirical research. Moreover, Popper argued, whenever rationalist philosophers (among which Popper lists Plato, Hegel and Marx) claim to have 'discovered' the law of historical evolution and the perfect social order, their followers try to impose this alleged perfect order by force, as illustrated by the political tyrannies of the twentieth century. Popper's rejection of historicism was implicitly a rebuke for Carr's 'science of international politics' and it is no surprise if Carr could not stomach the way

[41] Charles Jones reaches similar conclusions in *E.H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[42] Carr, *What is History?* (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 91.
[43] Ibid., p. 155.

Popper was treating 'the allegedly determinist philosophies of history of Hegel and Marx'.[44] From Popper's theory of scientific validity (as developed in his book *Logik der Forschung*), it follows that, like historicism, 'the science of international politics' has no scientific value, because it is not refutable on rational grounds.

Hayek also denounced the premises and effects of political rationalism, but in the field of the social sciences in general and of economics in particular. Hayek argued that, because of the strong influence of Comte and Hegel on the social sciences, social scientists committed the fatal mistake of trying to imitate the methods of the exact sciences, a mistake which 'has contributed scarcely anything to our understanding of social phenomena'.[45] In Hayek's view, our social and economic order was not designed *ex nihilo*, but is the product of a spontaneous evolution during which rules and institutions were established though a process of elimination. Individuals accepted the 'rules of the game' in order to survive, but they did not design these rules, neither did they necessarily understand them. Socialism, which is a rationalist approach to economics, committed the fatal mistake of believing that reason could reorganize the social and economic order in a perfect manner and establish a 'just' system. Hayek followed Hume's idea that knowledge and wisdom stem from experience and not from inquiring into man's alleged 'pure reason', and was in full agreement with Hume that 'the rules of morality … are not conclusions of our reason'. Thus, Hayek asked to admit the limits of reason, especially in the field of the social sciences and economics:

> My argument is no way directed against reason properly used. By 'reason properly used' I mean reason that recognizes its own limitations and, itself taught by reason, faces the implications of the astonishing fact, revealed by economics and biology, that order generated without design can by far outstrip plans men consciously contrive.[46]

The argument between political rationalism and constrained rationality is thus twofold, as it relates both to the power of reason and the origin of knowledge. For a rationalist, the power of reason is unlimited and knowledge is a product of the mind. The empirical approach, on the other hand, recognizes the limits of reason and purports that knowledge stems from experience. In the first view, the mind—which *produces* knowledge and order—can attain perfect truth. In the second view, the mind *adapts itself* to and *learns* from an existing order, and can only approach truth without ever attaining it.

One can now understand why the 'second debate' between the 'scientific' and the 'historical' approach to IR theory is part of a broader and fundamental philosophical argument. Although political rationalism was the fruit of Continental philosophy and only had a limited influence in the English-speaking world (despite Carr's intensive efforts), the 'scientific' approach to IR theory had a wide success in the United States. This phenomenon can be explained by what Allan Bloom called 'The German Connection', that is, the influence of German scholars on American Academia following their immigration to the United States in the 1930s. In the field of IR theory, 'The German Connection' had an obvious example: Hans Morgenthau, a German Jew who immigrated to America in 1937, proclaimed

[44] Ibid., p. 91.
[45] Hayek, *The Counter Revolution of Science. Essays on the Abuses of Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 14.
[46] Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit. The Errors of Socialism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 8.

himself to be the founder of a new 'theory of international politics' based on the assumption that 'politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws'.[47] If one follows Allan Bloom's convincing thesis, it can be argued that the success of the 'science of international politics' in America, like the success of Marxism, Freudianism, and behaviouralism, is due to the fact that America is a young society in which 'men need guidance' and in which 'general theories that are produced in a day and not properly grounded in experience, but seem to explain things and are useful crutches for finding one's way in a complicated world, have currency'.[48] Thus, the success of political rationalism in the field of IR theory raised a debate between a 'scientific' and a 'historical' approach to international relations. To assert that this debate is over is to claim that the argument between rationalism and empiricism has come to an end—a surprising claim indeed.

The 'third debate' revisited

According to the 'three debates' thesis, IR theory has now reached the 'third debate', namely a debate between 'positivistic' and 'post-positivistic' approaches.[49] Some scholars have attempted to contribute to the 'third debate' by claiming the discovery of a new paradigm (namely, 'constructivism') supposedly capable of 'bridging the gap' between 'positivism' and 'post-positivism'.[50]

The concept of 'positivism' derives from the title of Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*, a series of lectures he gave at the Collège de France after recovering from a mental illness. Comte maintained that human thought went through three historical stages (the religious, the philosophical, and the scientific). The religious stage was characterized by myths and beliefs, the philosophical stage by metaphysical speculations, and the third stage by perfect knowledge. Positivism claims that the time of beliefs and speculations is over, and that every observable phenomenon is governed by laws that can be detected by reason. Even history and society, according to Comte, are governed by objective laws which rational thought can identify. Positivism, then, is another word for rationalism, as it purports that reason can reach perfect knowledge and truth including within the realm of the social sciences. As amply demonstrated in the previous section, this claim has been challenged since Antiquity and has created deep philosophical arguments since the seventeenth century. The application of positivism (or rationalism) to the social sciences was denounced in the nineteenth century by Max Weber and in the early and mid-twentieth century by Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper, and other thinkers who identified with this critique. Max Weber rightly claimed that there are no historical or material necessities and that men's beliefs and values determine their action, rather than the other way round ('We are *cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude toward the world and to lend it

[47] Hans Johachim Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), p. 4.
[48] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 254.
[49] See: Lapid, 'Third Debate', pp. 235–54.
[50] See, for instance, Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of World Politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425, and Adler, 'Seizing the Middle-Ground', pp. 319–63.

significance'[51]). The 'critical approach' to social theory developed by the Frankfurt School was itself an attempt to emancipate the social sciences from the heavy influence of Comtian positivism and Hegelian historicism, that is, in Horkheimer's own words, to take 'the discovery of certain unprovable metaphysical preconditions in positivism as grounds for outdoing positivism.'[52] Beyond the scope of the social sciences, the basic assumptions of rationalism were seriously challenged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt, Bergson, and other Western thinkers. Nietzsche and Heidegger convincingly argued that Western rationalism, by replacing one myth with another, had become the very enemy of philosophy itself.

In light of the critiques directed against rationalism since the seventeenth century, and in light of the rejection of rationalism by major social scientists and philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is astonishing that IR theorists engaged in a debate over the shortcomings of rationalism in the late 1980s. One may legitimately wonder where the self-proclaimed 'post-positivistic' theorists have been for the past century.

No less presumptuous is the assertion by 'post-positivistic' IR theorists that it is the 'Poststructural critiques of rationalism by French philosophers' such as Foucault and Derrida which, for the first time in the history of human thought, challenged 'the intellectual suppositions upon which Western rationalism and positivism are based'.[53] Not only is this assertion outrageously wrong, but it also reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of the true nature of the so-called 'Poststructural critiques of rationalism by French philosophers'.

The concept of 'postmodernism' became popularized on American College campuses following the publication (and translation into English) of François Lyotard's *La condition post-moderne*. Lyotard, like Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Kristeva and other Parisian *intellectuels*, belonged to this generation of post-Sartrian Heideggerians who attempted to suppress reason and deny the possibility of truth in the name of philosophy. They attempted to claim that there is no reality to which 'texts' refer, and that what counts is the 'creative self' of the text's interpreter. While empiricism claims that truth can be learned from reality, and while rationalism claims that truth can be learned from the mind, 'Postmodernism' claims that reality is an imaginary concept and that the mind only produces subjective representations of this imaginary reality. There is, however, a direct lineage between rationalism and postmodernism, inasmuch as both approaches deny the importance of reality and attribute to the mind a primordial and essential role: the only source of truth for rationalists, and the only source of 'interpretation' for postmoderns. The denial of the very existence of truth in postmodern theory was central to Foucault's writings: truth becomes a function of power, a means in the hands of the strongest.

The denial of truth by the French philosophers emerged from the strong influence of Sartre over post-war intellectual life in France. Sartre's bad copy of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*L'Être et le Néant*, in the French remake) misinterpreted Heidegger's philosophy by attempting to suppress reason and deny the very possibility of truth.

[51] Max Weber, 'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy', in Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1949), p. 81.
[52] Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p. 7.
[53] James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro (eds.), *International/Intertextual Relations* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), p. xiv.

Tellingly, the French 're-reading' of Heidegger never sold in Germany (it had also ceased to be in fashion in Paris when it was first marketed on American campuses). The French 'deconstruction of language' has no relevance outside post-war France, as it expressed the revolt of a defeated and disoriented generation against a rhetorical, elitist, and self-centred culture.

The popularity of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault in American academia reveals an ignorance of nineteenth century intellectual history, which originated their arguments. Anybody familiar with the writings of Durkheim on crime and punishment, and with Weber's work on organizations and power groups, may legitimately wonder to what extent Foucault contributed to the understanding of these topics. The same goes for the critique of rationalism, and as Camille Paglia rightly commented, 'Those who … claim Foucault's descent from Nietzsche are simply Foucault's dupes'.[54]

Paglia convincingly argued that 'The French bigwigs offered to their disciples a soothing esoteric code and a sense of belonging to an elite, an intellectual superior unit, at a time when the market told academics they were useless and dispensable',[55] and that 'Lacan, Derrida and Foucault are the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality, trapped in verbal formulas and perennially defeated by circumstances'.[56] Although the success of the 'French fad' in IR theory is part of the broader phenomenon described by Paglia, it is beyond doubt that the frustrating gap between the ambitious objectives of IR theory and its disappointing results contributed to the success, among some IR theorists, of the self-exculpating rhetoric of the 'French bigwigs'.[57]

True, 'revisionist' IR historiography rejects the very relevance and legitimacy of the 'three debates' to begin with.[58] However, by denying that such 'debates' actually exist, 'revisionists' are *de facto* creating a debate (a 'fourth debate'?) with anyone who believes that the history of ideas is not a chimera. One could also object that 'postmodernism' is not a homogenous family of thought and that many critical theorists may not identify with the French 'deconstructionists'. But it is hard not to detect the trace of Michel Foucault behind the arguments of today's 'critical theorists'.

Thus, the allegedly 'third debate' does oppose an outdated and discredited approach to the social sciences (positivism) to an academic fad (postmodernism) which combines aberrant assertions ('there are no facts') with valid claims that have already been convincingly made in the last century. As Fred Halliday rightly commented, IR theory is now dominated by positivists who still live 'with the ideas of long-dead philosophers of social sciences, early nineteenth century writers for whom the scientific is to be equated with the quantifiable, the predictable, the regular', and the postmoderns who offer nothing more than 'a blind alley, most of whose valid claims have been made elsewhere and before'.[59]

[54] Paglia, 'Junk Bonds', p. 224.
[55] Ibid., p. 220.
[56] Ibid., p. 211.
[57] On the gap between the aims and results of IR theory, see: John Lewis Gaddis, 'International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War', *International Security* 17:3 (1993), pp. 5–58.
[58] See, for instance: Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).
[59] Fred Halliday, 'International Relations and Its Discontents', *International Affairs*, 71:4 (1995), pp. 377–9.

In the light of the outdated and untenable claims of positivism, and of the inconsistencies and shortcomings of postmodernism, one wonders why some IR theorists are trying to find 'the middle-ground between rationalist approaches (whether realist or liberal) and interpretative approaches (mainly postmodernist, poststructuralist and critical'.[60] Constructivism claims that '*individual agents* socially construct'[61] their institutions and political environment and that 'the objective facts of world politics … are facts only by virtue of human agreement'.[62] Basing themselves on Popper's distinction between World 1, World 2 and World 3 (World 1 being the physical world, World 2 human thought and conscience, and World 3 the interaction between World 1 and World 2, that is human creations such as technology and art), constructivists reduce the social universe to 'World 3', and believe that 'our most enduring institutions … were once upon a time conceived *ex nihilo* by human consciousness'.[63] For a rationalist, the mind *unveils* reality; for a postmodernist, the mind *invents* reality. According to constructivism, the mind *creates* reality. Constructivists thus seem to deduct their basic assumptions from Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism and national identity: in Anderson's view, indeed, nationalism and national identity are the product of the mind, and not the expression of existing, factual ethnic background and common history.[64] Thus, constructivists argue, by understanding how men *create* reality, it will be possible 'to generate a synthetic theory of International Relations'.[65] That men's culture and conscience shape their social environment is not a new idea, having been amply illustrated by Max Weber's study on the links between capitalism and Protestantism. On the other hand, to claim that men 'created' their social environment and that facts are only facts by virtue of human agreement is a strange suggestion. It is not human consciousness that conceived our institutions or developed our civilization, but rather human consciousness and civilization which developed and evolved concurrently. Shaped by the environment in which men grow up, human consciousness conditions the preservation and development of the traditions on which individuals draw. 'Our most enduring institutions', and indeed our civilization, do not result from human design or intention. They arose from the involuntary conforming to rules and practices which consolidated because of their efficiency, not because of their popularity or rationality.[66]

By arguing against political rationalism and by suggesting that institutions and behaviour are shaped by culture and ideology, constructivism adds little to the work of Max Weber and other nineteenth century social scientists. Constructivists, however, go a step further and claim that facts are *produced* by human consciousness. This claim is unacceptable to anyone who believes that facts are facts with or without human consent. If the 'third debate' is a debate between rationalism and postmodernism, it is quite a surprising debate: the critique of rationalism was not initiated by post-World War II French writers, and postmodern theory only takes us

[60] Adler, 'Seizing the Middle-Ground', p. 319. As explained in the previous section, it is erroneous to assimilate liberalism to rationalism.
[61] Ibid., p. 330.
[62] Ibid., p. 348.
[63] Ibid., p. 322.
[64] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
[65] Adler, 'Seizing the Middle-Ground', p. 323.
[66] See Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit.*

to a blind alley anyway. If the 'third debate' consists in wondering 'how real' is reality, it looks very much like an old philosophical question. Thus, the very relevance of the 'third debate' is at best questionable, and cannot claim to have replaced the 'first' and 'second' debates.

Conclusion

Students of International Relations should feel free to emancipate themselves from the allegedly mandatory choice between positivism, postmodernism, and constructivism: the study of world politics does not need to follow the outdated animism of Auguste Comte, the empty verbiage of Michel Foucault, or the sophisticated charlatanism in between. The 'first' and 'second' debates belong to broader philosophical arguments that did not lose any of their relevance. Moreover, the critique of political rationalism should not be understood as a critique of traditional realism, nor should it be interpreted as an endorsement of postmodernism.

The attempt to identify general trends in international relations can only be based on historical research and inductive generalizations, and the results of such generalizations should always be received with scepticism. This scepticism is justified by the idea, correctly expressed by Popper, that 'Even if we observe today what appears to be a historical tendency or trend, we cannot know whether it will have the same appearance tomorrow'.[67] What is true of history, in that regard, is also true of international relations, and as Abba Eban correctly commented: 'International events, like fingerprints, are marked by particularity, not similarity.'[68]

Raymond Aron noticed that the desire of political scientists to produce a general theory of international relations and to imitate the goals and methods of economics and of the natural sciences 'has the unfortunate effect of making it seem more important to do than to know what one is doing'.[69] Similarly, the failures of political rationalists to reach a 'scientific' theory of international relations has the unfortunate effect of opening the gates of academic research to intellectual fads whose (sometimes) valid claims have been made before and elsewhere. Contrary to what postmoderns and constructivists wish to claim, facts are facts with or without human consent, and it is only based on the study of historical facts that IR theory can contribute to the understanding of world politics. Whether one prefers to study those facts from a conservative/realist or from a liberal/idealist point of view, and whether one analyses those facts with an unconstrained rationalist mind or a constrained rational approach, is a question of choice between two visions of human nature and two visions of knowledge. The 'first' and 'second' debates are thus not over, and the 'third debate' can already cease.

[67] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 193.
[68] Abba Eban, *The New Diplomacy. International Affairs in the Modern Age* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 379.
[69] Raymond Aron, 'What is a Theory of International Relations?', *Journal of International Affairs*, 21 (1967), p. 186.