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Author(s): Yosef Lapid

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The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era

YOSEF LAPID

Carleton University

The demise of the empiricist-positivist promise for a cumulative behavioral science recently has forced scholars from nearly all the social disciplines to reexamine the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of their scientific endeavors. The “third debate” in the field of international relations parallels this intellectual ferment and constitutes a still maturing disciplinary effort to reconsider theoretical options in a “post-positivist” era. This essay explores the etiology of this debate and critically assesses its implications for current and future theoretical practices. Although the debate has triggered many different responses, the analysis focuses on only one of them—the optimistic response—which both affirms and celebrates the unparalleled theoretical potentialities presumably created by the present intellectual transition. While acknowledging the considerable promise of the third debate, the essay notes that post-positivism offers nearly as many dead ends as it opens promising paths for future research. The essay issues some warnings concerning hazards of misplaced or extravagant theoretical hopes, and it singles out *enhanced reflexivity* in the scholarly community of international relations as the notable contribution to date of the current theoretical restructuring.

“The search for a better theory forms the third debate . . . [It] is potentially the richest, most promising and exciting that we have ever had in international relations.”

Michael Banks (1986:17)

“Our enterprise shows important signs of maturation.”

Kal Holsti (1984:361)

Excursions into metatheory are notoriously controversial in the social sciences. One finds, on the one hand, the conviction that such concerns “are too important to be taken for granted and too much a part of our ongoing research enterprises to be left to philosophers to think about” (Fiske and Shweder, 1986:3). Furthermore, as Mario Bunge notes, “Those who try to ignore philosophy only succeed in reinventing

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it" (Bunge, 1983:270). One finds, on the other hand, a prescription for a rigorous philosophy-avoidance strategy for the practicing social scientist. Especially in the early stages of theorizing, so this argument goes, misplaced pursuits of epistemology and philosophy of science are bound to be inconclusive and are likely to come at the expense of actual research (Rosenberg, 1986).

Be that as it may, it is hardly disputable that the demise of the empiricist-positivist promise for a cumulative behavioral science recently has forced scholars from nearly all the social disciplines to reexamine the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of their scientific endeavors. As a result, the human sciences are currently undergoing an acute bout of self-doubt and heightened metatheoretical ferment. Indeed, some of the most highly prized premises of Western academic discourse concerning the nature of our social knowledge, its acquisition, and its utility—including shibboleths such as "truth," "rationality," "objectivity," "reality," and "consensus,"—have come under renewed critical reflection (Fay, 1985).

Anthony Giddens (1979:238) has identified four typical responses to this reawakening of metatheoretical impulses following the collapse of the positivist orthodoxy: the "despairing," the "dogmatic," the "celebratory," and his own, the call for a "systematic reconstruction" of social theory. Alarmed by the conspicuous absence of a single shared conviction about the nature and destination of social theory, the despairing response articulates an instinctive desire not to be disturbed by foundational, or "meta"-scientific, problems. Noting that experts in metascience rarely agree among themselves, this response clings to pre-Kuhnian verities about objectivity, testability, and falsification and encourages social scientists to go on with some "useful" or practical work. Unfortunately, this retreatist pattern neither addresses nor settles the issues raised by the current intellectual transfiguration. Worse still, the creative potential of the crisis is lost in "the haste of wanting to know."

The dogmatic response suffers from similar limitations. In the face of expanding confusion and as a result of a foundationalist craving to restore intellectual security, this response appeals to an "authoritative" figure such as Karl Marx or Max Weber. As Giddens indicates, however, this reversion to dogmatism avoids rather than confronts the core problem. Certainty is perhaps artificially restored, but at an excessive scientific price.

In sharp contrast to the first two responses, the third affirms and celebrates the supposedly "liberating" potential of the Babel of theoretical voices currently sounding over the ruins of the positivist project. It casts a new light on the endemic diversity of theories by questioning the assumption that convergence of belief is necessary for maturity in science. It seriously examines instead the possibility that, within limits, diversity of viewpoints might be fully compatible with scientific rationality and objectivity. This is an optimistic response, and thus Giddens cautiously approves. He insists, however, that simply embracing—or compounding—this condition of theoretical pluralism may inadvertently aggravate the crisis. His fourth response, systematic reconstruction, addresses this problem by trying to order and transcend diversity without substituting a new orthodoxy for the old one (Giddens, 1979:240).

As we shall see shortly, this far-reaching and still evolving intellectual transition in the philosophical and social disciplines has left its mark on international relations scholarship. Following the "idealism versus realism" schism of the 1920s and 1930s, and transcending the more recent "history versus science" exchange of the 1950s and 1960s, in the late 1980s the discipline stands in the midst of a third discipline-defining debate (Maghroori and Ramberg, 1982; Holsti, 1985a; Banks, 1986). It is noteworthy that in terms of methodological and theoretical innovations the field of international relations was and still is "an absorber and importer, not a producer in its own right" (Halliday, 1985:408). Hence, *prima facie*, there are reasons to suspect that just as the "second debate"—the "history versus science" controversy—was

wedded to the ascendance of positivism in Western social science, so is the “third debate” linked, historically and intellectually, to the confluence of diverse anti-positivistic philosophical and sociological trends.

Submitting that the third debate in international relations theory parallels the intellectual ferment that other social sciences are presently undergoing and that this debate constitutes a diffuse and still maturing disciplinary effort to reassess theoretical options in a “post-positivist” era, this essay explores the debate’s etiology and assesses its implications for current and future prospects for theoretical growth. Although all four responses enumerated by Giddens are embryonically present in the context of the third debate, this study singles out one of them—the celebratory pattern—as its main focus.¹ This optimistic reaction has been chosen for three principal reasons. First, it is a salient and provocative response which merits special consideration in view of a lingering suspicion that something is still radically wrong with international theory.² What, one might ask, is the nature and the origin of this apparent surge of optimism? Are we truly on the verge of a new era in theory or are we simply witnessing an international relations version of the “obsessive discoverer’s complex”?³

Second, from a more practical point of view, the celebratory pattern is intriguing because of its explicit focus on some putative moments of special productivity which are presumably implicit in the current intellectual transition. It is interesting, in other words, to see what types of theoretical opportunities and potentialities have been attributed to the current debate and what kind of theoretical projects are expected to best realize such promises. And finally, as hinted by Giddens’s fourth pattern, systematic reconstruction, the celebratory response needs constructive critical delimitation in order to anticipate and preempt the dangers of indiscriminate theoretical elation.

In direct answer to these queries and concerns we posit that the deeper roots and implications of the current season of hope in international relations theory are best explored in the context of a focused effort to understand some seemingly far-reaching ramifications of the “new,” post-positivist philosophy and sociology of science. The following analysis is presented in four consecutive stages. The first acknowledges and explains the difficulty some have in identifying a coherent “debate” in the emerging Babel of discordant theoretical voices in the international relations field. The second seeks to bring the third debate into sharper focus by highlighting its distinctive post-positivist profile. The third delimits the parameters of the celebratory response and explores the grounds for the optimistic equation of the current debate with a promising growth in international relations theory. The fourth section issues a general warning concerning some notable hazards of misplaced or extravagant theoretical hopes. While acknowledging the considerable

¹ Brief reference will be made later to the “despairing” response. The orthodox Marxist attack on the “dependency” and “world system” approaches provides good examples for the “dogmatic” pattern (see Denmark and Thomas, 1988). The “systematic reconstruction” response is certainly very important and deserves separate attention. But I agree with Preston that as formulated by Giddens it comes close to “step number one in the direction of a new orthodoxy” (Preston, 1987:75). And like him I believe that having just escaped from one straitjacket there is no point in pushing so early for a new one (Preston, 1987). As an example, however, Hoffman’s (1987) plea for adopting “Critical Theory” as “the next stage” in international relations theory certainly qualifies for the systematic reconstruction category. For an interesting exchange sparked by Hoffman’s suggestion, see articles by Renger (1988b) and Hoffman (1988).

² See, for instance, Waltz’s (1979:18) lament: “Nothing seems to accumulate, not even criticism.” Or see Rosenau’s (1980:129) despair over the “process of paradigm deterioration” which, in his view, “is underway in the study of world affairs.” Reflecting this spirit, Gilpin (1984:287) has recently suggested that the discipline, no less than its object of study, is in a state of anarchy.

³ This “complex” originates from Sorokin (1956:3–20) and refers to the periodic emergence in the social sciences of would-be “new Columbuses” who “discover” hereto undetected leaps of growth in social theory.

promise of the current intellectual ferment, the concluding section singles out *enhanced reflexivity* as the most important contribution to date of the current theoretical restructuring.

The Third Debate: Disarray or Theoretical Restructuring?

Few observers would seriously contest the suggestion that the field of international studies has experienced in recent years sustained theoretical effervescence. But beyond a vague uneasiness over the fact that no reduction seems to be obtaining in the diversity of conceptualizations and higher-order theories, one looks in vain for a more specific consensus on the current state and future direction of the discipline. Echoing Giddens's despairing response, we find at the pessimistic end of the spectrum scholars who are either reluctant or unable to detect a coherent pattern in the rampant theoretical speculation. Such observers deplore the dazing pace with which new ideas are superficially introduced into international relations theory, only to be discarded subsequently with inexplicable urgency. They seem thoroughly confused by the "amount of debris on the battlefield of international relations theory" (Der Derian, 1987:11) and feel understandably frustrated at facing this vast intellectual disarray "with few guides on making choices" (Lyons, 1986:643). Hence, they conclude that "in both theory and practice international politics can bring on despair. This is an occupational hazard in the field for which there is no remedy" (Morgan, 1987:301).

Others, to be sure, would strongly disagree with such a gloomy reading (Holsti, 1985a:4). They would counter that the lively chorus of contending theoretical voices in the field of international relations constitutes a "dialogue" or a "debate" with the power to transform the international relations discipline. Yet even among this group there is conspicuously little agreement about who is debating whom, along what lines of contention, and with what prospects of success. For in sharp contrast with both previous debates, the residual confusion over the source, nature, direction, and potential consequences of the current intellectual transition remains extensive. It reaches far beyond technical disagreements over nomenclature or head counts of would-be paradigmatic combatants (Holsti, 1985a:5).⁴

At first sight it is therefore difficult to avoid the conclusion that international relations theory has recently up-graded its profile as "a fundamentally contested domain" (Biersteker, forthcoming). This perhaps partially explains the reluctance to bring the current exchange into focus as an intelligible "debate." But, precisely in view of this reluctance, it is imperative to highlight some notable commonalities among those who do acknowledge a coherent and consequential pattern in the current intellectual cacophony in the international relations field. For at a minimum one finds, for example, a shared recognition that the third debate marks a clear end to the positivist epistemological consensus that was hardly shaken in the course of the "history versus science" controversy. Whereas the second debate was preoccupied with quarrels over methodology narrowly defined, the third debate is typically expected to facilitate trailblazing ideas about the nature and progression of knowl-

⁴ The *nature* of the third debate may vary considerably along ontological, epistemological, and axiological lines. Its *scope* may fluctuate widely depending on whether one opts for a restrictive description of the debate—as a focused exchange between realism and neorealism versus all comers and challengers (Keohane, 1986)—or for a far broader characterization which specifies the emergence of a genuinely multiparadigmatic international relations discipline as the outstanding novelty of the current intellectual transition (Alker and Biersteker, 1984; Holsti, 1985a). And finally, moving along the plane of knowledge versus power, the significance of the debate may vary depending on whether one sees it as a battle between "good" and "bad" ideas in an insulated scientific arena or as a series of "intensely political happenings" (Ashley, 1989) occurring between vested cultural, economic, and political interests (Biersteker, forthcoming).

edge in the international relations field. One also finds a shared appreciation that theory in this field is “in the process of being restructured,” a restructuring which is recognized moreover as being “linked directly to a similar set of debates occurring in contemporary social and political theory” (Hoffman, 1988:91).

The following analysis makes no attempt to deny or expunge the possibly irreducible ambiguities of the current intellectual transition in the discipline. Its purpose is simply to refer to certain themes in the new philosophy and sociology of science in order to clarify the etiology of the current debate and its promises and limitations.

The Third Debate: A Post-Positivist Profile

Especially when compared with the simplistic coherence of the positivist philosophical movement, post-positivism is not a unitary philosophical platform. It presents itself as a rather loosely patched-up umbrella for a confusing array of only remotely related philosophical articulations. Hence, if one wishes to refer meaningfully to post-positivism as an alternative philosophical position—perhaps ushering in a new era in international relations theory—one first must identify some areas of convergence in the general ideas presented by this “new philosophy of science.”

A detailed analysis of such convergent post-positivist views is, however, well beyond the scope of this paper.⁵ I will deliberately restrict my attention to three themes which seem to have been particularly influential in determining the tone, agenda, and mood of the current debate in international relations theory. These themes—the preoccupation with meta-scientific units (paradigmatism), the concern with underlying premises and assumptions (perspectivism), and the drift towards methodological pluralism (relativism)—are, of course, interrelated. They will, however, be treated separately here to elucidate more clearly their distinct impact on the current theoretical debate.

The Concern with Meta-Scientific Units (Paradigmatism)

Post-positivism has wrought a notable change in the understanding and choice of proper units of analysis in the study of scientific development.⁶ In sharp contrast to the positivist choice of the empirically corroborated law or generalization as the fundamental unit of scientific achievement, the new philosophy of science insists that only relatively long-lived, large-scale, and multi-tiered constructs—such as “paradigms” (Kuhn, 1962), “research-programmes” (Lakatos, 1970), “research traditions” (Laudan, 1984), “super-theories” (Gutting, 1980), “global theories” (Hooker, 1987), and “weltanschauungen” (Wisdom, 1987)—should qualify as basic knowledge-producing, knowledge-accumulating, and knowledge-conserving units. For theories do not come to us separately; hence they should not be handled as self-contained entities.

Above all, the new philosophical posture portrays scientific knowledge as a triadic complex consisting of 1) a “phenomenic” axis covering the empirical content of scientific theories; 2) an “analytic” axis covering hypotheses, explanations, and theoretical models; and 3) a “thematic” axis covering reality-defining assumptions, epistemological premises, and other types of distinctly “ideological” or “metaphys-

⁵ There is now a voluminous body of literature which seeks to identify the basic themes of the dramatic revolutions in our understanding of science. See Laudan et al. (1986:141–224), in particular, for a readable summary of both convergent and divergent themes in the “new philosophy of science.”

⁶ This change is known in the philosophical literature as the problem of choosing a proper unit of epistemic appraisal (Bernstein, 1983:24; Pandit, 1983:19; Campbell, 1984:28–30; Laudan et al., 1986:154).

ical” ingredients.⁷ The novelty of this underlying post-positivist project—postulating an irreducibly three-dimensional space for scientific knowledge—is the explicit negation of the cardinal positivist premise which affirms the “eliminability of the human” (Margolis, 1987:xxii) and places (or replaces) the scientist “at the center of the social-intellectual-ethical complex known as science” (Hooker, 1987:10).

Paradigmatism thus asserts that meta-scientific constructs come and go in complete packages. It follows that only broader conjunctures of interrelated theories, including their unstated premises and underlying assumptions, can qualify as proper units of development and appraisal in science. It follows, furthermore, that empirical evidence in the usual sense of registering “objectively” what one sees is of only limited utility in scientific evaluative appraisal. For in sharp contrast with the phenomenic axis, the thematic axis—although challengeable perhaps in some other way (Wisdom, 1987:160)—is not refutable by direct empirical observation. This partially explains, as Holton points out, why science is not “one great totalitarian engine taking everyone relentlessly to the same inevitable goal” (quoted in Stent, 1988:37). At the same time it also raises the challenge of formulating alternative, “rational” criteria of evaluative appraisal which acknowledge and confront rather than deny or ignore the non-empirical nature of at least one integral component of all scientific knowledge (Wisdom, 1987:160).

Returning to our principal concern with international relations theory, I submit that “paradigmatism”—in the specific sense of an enhanced post-positivist concern with meta-scientific constructs which incorporate integral thematic components as a precondition of scientific intelligibility—presents itself as one of the most notable characteristics of the third debate. For even a cursory glance at the literature reveals that studies involving bivariate and multivariate relations, which flourished throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, now are held in general disrepute (Viotti and Kauppi, 1987:580). The intellectual exchange is no longer between individual scholars or isolated theories, but between “models” (McKinlay and Little, 1986), “paradigms” (Banks, 1985; Holsti, 1985a), “research programs” (Keohane, 1984; Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986; Hermann and Peacock, 1987), “research traditions” (Biersteker, forthcoming), or “discourses” (Ashley, 1989). The chosen unit differs in accordance with respective preferences for Kuhnian, Lakatosian, Laudanian, or other more fashionably “post-modernist” constructs. But we find in each case a remarkable concurrence with the underlying tenet which postulates that significant theoretical modifications and choices must always take into account the supportive meta-scientific domains in which they are holistically embedded.

It is in this general context, I suggest, that one can best understand the marked popularity of countless efforts to recast the fragmented theoretical turnout of the international relations field in terms of contending meta-theoretical constructs (Banks, 1985; Holsti, 1985a; McKinley and Little, 1986; Viotti and Kauppi, 1987). There is also the related propensity to go beyond simple shopping lists of would-be paradigms or perspectives by launching more ambitious projects of paradigm demolition (Vasquez, 1983), paradigm synthesis (Maghroori and Ramberg, 1982), or paradigm proliferation (Rosenau, 1980). And, arguably, such is the logic that also informs, for instance, Kratochwil and Ruggie’s choice of the historically evolving “research program” (international organization) over the isolated theory (regimes) as their prime unit of evaluative appraisal (1986).

The common denominator of these endeavors is the implicit belief that the substitution of new meta-theoretical constructs for more traditional units of scientific

⁷ In this analysis I follow arguments presented by Holton (1987) and Wisdom (1987). Holton’s triad consists of *phenomenic*, *analytic*, and *thematic* axes (Stent, 1988:36–37). Wisdom’s roughly similar construct consists of *empirical content*, *embedded ontology*, and *weltanschauung* (Wisdom, 1987:140).

appraisal is somehow essential to locating and stimulating genuine theoretical growth. Fortunately—as indicated by the tendency to up-grade theoretical revisions to would-be “paradigm clashes” or putative “progressive” or “degenerative problem-shifts”—the impact of paradigmaticism on current theoretical preoccupations in the international relations field has started penetrating well beyond a technical recasting of its fragmented theoretical corpus into revamped and more fashionably holistic blueprints. New questions are being raised about the dynamics of emergence, persistence, and the decline of meta-theoretical constructs in the field (Biersteker, forthcoming). The extent to which contending paradigms are truly “incommensurable”—incompatible and even incommunicable with one another—is more seriously examined (Krasner, 1985). And the potential for fruitful dialogue between or syntheses of contending paradigmatic approaches is more systematically explored (Keohane and Nye, 1987; S. Smith, 1987:201).

Most important, in this process of expanding paradigmaticism the third debate has progressively taken the format of “a discourse about the choice of analytic frameworks” (Banks, 1985:20). In this more sophisticated sense paradigmaticism focuses on the difficult task of formulating and applying valid—as opposed to invalid—evaluative procedures at the paradigmatic level (McKinley and Little, 1986:269). Needless to say, for the time being these promising developments have expressed themselves mainly in a far greater sensitivity to, rather than the actual resolution of, new and hereto ignored sets of meta-theoretical problems. But given this, it is still possible to summarize by reiterating the remarkable role played by the post-positivist reformulation of the unit of scientific appraisal in determining the specifically “inter-paradigmatic” profile of the current debate in international relations theory. This I submit differentiates in a fundamental rather than a faddish way the current controversy from its two predecessors in the field.

The focus on Premises and Assumptions: Perspectivism

In addition to the reformulation of the unit of scientific achievement, post-positivism also invokes a deliberate shift to the thematic level of underlying ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises and assumptions.⁸ Such a refocusing is considered necessary in view of the remarkable willingness of both natural and social scientists to disregard empirical data that appear to contradict theories that (for them) have reached thematic status. Sometimes, therefore, impasses in the growth of knowledge may be created and reproduced less by observational mistakes (in the phenomenonic axis) or by narrowly defined theoretical flaws (in the analytic axis) than by generalized crises of basic presuppositions (the thematic axis).⁹

Once a set of guiding assumptions is elevated to thematic status, the perspectivist argument suggests, it becomes highly resistant to both evidence and logical criticism (Laudan et al., 1986:154). And occasionally, under the fiat of premises that endure in the face of all negative tests, the entire process of theorizing may be forced to proceed along unacceptably restrictive or misleading lines. For instance, as indicated by the bizarre lack of interest manifested by Marxism towards nationalism, such malfunctions may result in an excessive preoccupation with marginal problems while even critically important phenomena are ignored.

⁸ See, however, Dawson's (1985:373–80) critical distinction between “strong” and “weak” perspectives and their implications for the objectivity of the social sciences. For an interesting attempt to differentiate between paradigms and perspectives, see DeMey (1982:222–26).

⁹ Gadamer's “prejudgments,” Holton's “themata,” Schumpeter's “vision,” Polanyi's “tacit dimension,” or Lakatos's “hard core” are, in a sense, different articulations of the same post-positivist insight which posits that, although it is often left implicit, what is assumed by a given theory can be far more significant than what is explicitly stated.

Highlighting assumptions as an important source of our scientific ignorance is different, however, from submitting that they always serve to distort theoretical inquiry. To the contrary, *similar* sets of assumptions invariably serve as enabling sources of valid scientific knowledge.¹⁰ Perspectivism submits, in short, that we are encapsulated in sets of presuppositions which may hinder *or* facilitate theoretical growth. And if guiding assumptions are the source of both our ignorance and our knowledge, it follows that “the focal point of challenge in science should become our *weltanschauungen*” (Wisdom, 1987:154).

It should not be difficult to establish that the current debate in international relations theory also is characterized by a shift of attention toward the domain of thematic premises and assumptions (Haas, 1986). This refocusing expresses itself in a manifest eagerness of international relations scholars, from even radically opposed theoretical camps, to leave the phenomenic and analytic planes in order to devote more energetic attention to the “hidden” domain of key underlying assumptions. Perspectivism is implicit, for instance, in insights concerning the “inescapability of theory” and in ensuing concerns with becoming “the prisoner of unstated assumptions” (Keohane, 1986:4). It is manifest also in a more explicit sensitivity to the need “to become clearly aware of the perspective which gives rise to theorizing” (Cox, 1981:128). As a result, editors and theorists in the field seem far more willing now to concede that readers are “entitled” to an exposition of underlying presumptions in theoretical analyses (Rosenau, 1986:854). Notably, one even hears the echoes of perspectivism in the embattled bastion of international relations empiricism, the “data movement,” with prospective customers now dutifully advised to check “which dataset is the most suitable in terms of the nature of its underlying theoretical assumptions” (Maoz, 1988:165).

To be sure, the perspectivist accent is most audible among a small but vocal group of “post-positivist,” “post-structuralist,” and “post-modernist” critics of mainstream international relations theory. As indicated by Richard Ashley’s recent work, these “rebels” utilize “deconstructive” and “genealogical” tools deliberately designed to automatically “target” assumptive theoretical headquarters. These intellectual technologies postulate that meaning and understanding are not intrinsic to the world but, on the contrary, are continuously constructed, defended, and challenged. Their main purpose is to “problemize” answers, make “strange” what has become familiar, and reverse the process of construction in order to reveal how problematic are the taken-for-granted structures (“anarchy” for instance) of our social and political world (Ashley, 1988, forthcoming; Alker, forthcoming).

The growing fascination with the thematic component of our current knowledge of world politics is by no means restricted to an elite vanguard of post-modernist rebels. In a perfect example of perspectivism, as that term is used in this essay, Robert Jervis (a leading international relations “modernist”) has recently demonstrated that modernists can be quite effective—and, of course, far more accessible than their post-modernist colleagues—in exposing major assumptive traps in current theory (Jervis, 1988). To be sure, unlike the rebels, Jervis has no intention to “deconstruct” the “anarchy framework.” On the contrary, he is evidently impressed with its supposedly proven capacity to stimulate and sustain valid theoretical growth (Jervis, 1988:319). But he is nonetheless determined to demonstrate how the simplifications of the anarchy framework—especially when amplified by game theory simplifications—lead us to concentrate on questions that are not central, while at the same time, we marginalize many important queries (Jervis, 1988:349).

¹⁰ As Wisdom points out, “What the *Weltanschauung* effects is to promote what comes within the point of view and discourage what falls outside it: what is discovered in its name can be valid if satisfactorily tested; what is not investigated is a loss. *But what is gained is not thereby invalid or distorted*” (Wisdom, 1987:138; my emphasis).

Although it is possible to argue that the preoccupation with underlying assumptions is anything but new to international relations theory, my point is that this preoccupation has acquired new significance in the context of the third debate. Perspectivism, as defined in this study, denotes something more fundamental than a ritualistic insistence that “we must examine our assumptions about the behavior of the actors in international arenas more carefully” (Young, 1986:121). It refers more to “a rejection of empiricism in favor of a theoretical approach that accepts the place of data in a subordinate position” (Halliday, 1985:412). On the basis of these brief illustrations, it seems reasonable to conclude that perspectivism in the sense of a strong post-positivist focus on thematic premises and assumptions has been internalized as a foremost characteristic of the third debate in international relations theory.

The Drift Toward Methodological Pluralism: Relativism

“The current fierce attack on science, objectivity, truth, and even rationality and logic,” says J.O. Wisdom, “may well be the fiercest ever mounted in history (1987:159; also see Bernstein, 1986). The new epistemology associated with Fleck, Polanyi, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others is, indeed, often attacked as having extremely relativistic implications (Bunge, 1983:261). This new relativism, posits Robert D’Amico, is far more radical than previous versions because it is “second order,” that is, “it questions not individual assertions for their lack of evidence but the implied and embedded standards, criteria, norms and principles that *make judgments possible and give them privileged status*” (D’Amico, 1986:139; my emphasis). By undermining objectivity and truth, this relativization of philosophical thinking has greatly complicated the task of providing effective legitimation of knowledge and has rendered problematic the demarcation of science from non-science.

The massive move toward relativism has had at least three noteworthy ramifications. First, all versions of *methodological monism* seeking to institutionalize standardized, explicit, and unchanging criteria for regulating scientific domains—including the positivist conception of the scientific method (Tianji, 1985:415)—have been rendered suspect by this new intellectual climate. Far from consenting that epistemic criteria are destined to remain essentially unchanged over time and place, the new epistemology unapologetically suggests that it is itself socially mutable and historically contingent. And, following methodologically from such epistemological relativism, “a vigorous pluralism is called for. When it comes to theoretical ideas ‘let the hundred flowers bloom’” (Hooker, 1987:56).

Second, the growing recognition of a multitude of potentially fruitful research strategies also has facilitated a better understanding of science as a polymorphic as opposed to monolithic entity (Wisdom, 1987:140). As the end product of scientific activity, social knowledge is now more typically seen as a complex of equally privileged but only loosely integratable forms (Margolis, 1987). And since these distinct types of knowledge are set apart by characteristic modes of theoretical growth, it is essential to differentiate them accordingly (Wagner and Berger, 1985).

Finally, the post-positivist endorsement of epistemological and methodological diversity has undermined the classic fascination with scientific consensus, resulting in “a new-wave preoccupation with scientific dissensus” (Laudan, 1984:13)¹¹ This intriguing eclipse of consensus as a prime desideratum in social science is of primary importance, for it signals a collapse of the highly influential Kuhnian equation of an

¹¹ This trend is fed partially by the post-modernist portrayal of consensus as “a horizon that is never reached” (Lyotard, 1984:61).

inability to achieve paradigmatic consensus with an inability to achieve significant theoretical growth.¹²

Returning to our main focus of interest, we note that the post-positivist bent toward relativism and its ensuing methodological ramifications have clearly influenced the tone and substance of the third debate in international relations theory. It is hardly accidental, for instance, that despite high emotional and intellectual stakes, the current controversy has not been characterized by the focused intransigence that marked the two previous debates. In tune with the post-positivist “plea for tolerance in matters theoretical” (Ball, 1987:34), scholars have resisted the temptation to seize upon the current intellectual transition as an opportunity to impose a new set of exclusive epistemological principles and prescriptions.

Reflecting a deepening suspicion of methodological monism, even scholars who are otherwise sympathetic to positivist orthodoxy now feel obliged to concede the dangers of “monolithic dogmatism” (J. Snyder, 1988:190). The discipline as a whole now seems favorably disposed to consider alternative epistemologies “rather than replacement of one kind of science by another” (R. Snyder, 1985:531). In tune with the new polymorphic image of science, it is now possible to posit that “both old and new will be sciences although the purposes and evaluations will be different for each” (R. Snyder, 1985:531).

The growing acceptance of methodological pluralism also is manifest, in the endorsement of “pluralist rigor” as the most promising methodological posture for the field of international relations (Jervis, 1985), in the insistence on “openness to criticism at every turn” (Ashley, 1989:30), in the vision of thriving “multiple disciplines of international relations” (Alker and Biersteker, 1984:123), or, even more explicitly, in promptings to adopt the dictum of “let a thousand theoretical flowers bloom” (Beal, 1980:55). In summary, the present position is indeed “one of ferment and transition, marked by pluralism in values, methods, techniques and perspectives” (Dunn, 1987:79).

Finally, it was perhaps inevitable that the expanding acceptance of a polymorphic image of science and the growing popularity of methodological pluralism also would lead to a reexamination of scientific dissensus and its relationship to scientific progress. As a result, the search for “un-Kuhnian” versions of progress is already well underway in international relations theory (Beal, 1980; Mansbach and Ferguson, 1986). Irrespective of other disagreements concerning the theoretical prospects of the field, one now finds considerable consensus that “the way forward for [international relations theory] that finds itself in difficulties is not to pursue ‘normalcy’ of the Kuhnian kind but to work towards a diversity of strong paradigms” (Halliday, 1985:412).

The Grounds for Post-Positivist Optimism

Granted that some post-positivist messages have been trickling down from the new philosophy of science, why should these tenets translate into greater optimism about the prospects of international relations theory? On what basis and in what sense can one posit that the third debate “provides stimulus, hope, and even excitement in the demanding business of analyzing international relations”? (Banks, 1985:20). What are the new promises of international relations theory from a post-positivist standpoint, and what is the post-positivist substitute for the embattled and rapidly fading El Dorado of positivist science?

In seeking an answer to this question it will be useful to take a second look at the three post-positivist themes that surfaced in our previous discussion. Closer scrutiny

¹² Ball (1987:15–16) identifies three more or less distinct phases in Kuhn’s reception by political scientists, with the current stage being one of “outright repudiation.”

suggests that, under certain conditions, each of them can provide fertile ground for rejuvenated theoretical optimism. To begin, the preoccupation with meta-scientific constructs provides an attractive substitute for the positivist choice of the empirically corroborated law or generalization as the fundamental unit of scientific achievement.¹³ For despite many valiant efforts, scholars were ultimately forced to concede the manifest absence of cumulative progress defined in the rigorous terms of the empiricist-positivist scientific blueprint (Rosenau, 1980:195–241; Hermann and Peacock, 1987:16).

Provided that one is willing to live with charitable definitions of “paradigms” or “research programs,” it is possible to document a rather impressive record of actual and forthcoming theoretical growth in international relations theory. The relentless efforts to produce current inventories of international relations paradigms have resulted in counts ranging from zero to a maximum of no less than twenty-four candidates (Holsti, 1985a:4–7). And if the popularity of Lakatos’s methodology continues to rise among theorists, one may safely anticipate that we will soon have as many, if not more, correspondingly reconstructed “research programs” (Keohane, 1984; Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986; Hermann and Peacock, 1987: 13–32). Surely this provides grounds for optimism, for now—at least in terms of loosely defined meta-theoretical constructs—the international relations discipline can consider itself on a par with many other social and even natural sciences.

Turning briefly to the post-positivist interest in guiding premises and assumptions, we encounter a similar picture. The portrayal of scientific failures as the direct result of assumptive malfunctions certainly leaves ample room for the possibility of vigorous theoretical growth through available substitutions or revisions of “defective” thematic premises. A look at the literature strongly suggests that a considerable part of the current surge of theoretical optimism is derived from precisely such origins. Noting, for instance, the “anomaly of mutual assured boredom” (MAB)—which unjustifiably separates comparative foreign policy (CFP) and international political economy (IPE)—Rosenau submits that “the anomaly would seem to be conceptual and not empirical so that its resolution can be achieved through reconceptualization rather than research” (Rosenau, 1988:24). An additional illustration is provided by Wendt’s forceful argument that both neorealism and world-system theory are incapacitated by their respective assumptions about the relationship of system structure to human agents, a problem which in his view can be satisfactorily resolved by the adoption of a *scientific realist* perspective on ontological and epistemological matters (Wendt, 1987).¹⁴

And just as in some cases assumptive malfunctioning is blamed for theoretical and empirical failures, so in other cases *assumptive sagacity* is invoked to compensate for admitted theoretical and empirical poverty. As formal theorizing efforts, suggests Donald Puchala, integration theories could hardly qualify for even a footnote to the intellectual development of the international relations field. But at the thematic level, in their capacity as philosophies that in the 1950s and 1960s nearly single-handedly sustained a challenge to the increasingly hegemonic realist *weltanschauung*, integration studies have presumably had a lasting impact on the field (Puchala, 1988). To

¹³ Some scholars suggest, in fact, that it is “primarily the association of paradigms with super-theories that has made Kuhn’s account so attractive to social scientists” (Gutting, 1980:12).

¹⁴ Further examples abound in recent evaluative appraisals of international regimes theories. Identifying a variety of would-be assumptive problems caused by uncritical acceptance of political realist (O’Meara, 1984) and positivist (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986) commitments, some scholars have expressed optimism about the prospects of further theoretical progress in this currently fashionable field of enquiry through revisions (R. K. Smith, 1987:278–81; Haggard and Simmons, 1987:515–17), additions (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986), or substitutions (O’Meara, 1984) of thematic sets of ontological, epistemological or axiological assumptions.

summarize, in both their hindering and their enabling capacity, thematic assumptions can inspire considerable optimism about the growth and prospects of international relations theory.

The belief that social scientists are invariably better equipped to cut through assumptive as opposed to empirical impasses is perhaps overly optimistic.¹⁵ By pointing, nonetheless, to the nonempirical sphere of thematic premises and presuppositions, perspectivism has facilitated a relative “liberation of theory from observation” (Gergen, 1987:2). And this liberation was destined to be interpreted by at least some scholars as a good reason for renewed hopefulness. “Having passed through a phase in which facts have dominated theory,” one of them notes approvingly, “the logic of our scholarship is carrying us into a phase in which theory dominates facts” (Banks, 1986:9).

This takes us directly to perhaps the richest mine of optimism embedded in the post-positivist credos of the third debate. Like other social scientists, international relations theorists can derive renewed confidence in their scientific credentials from the post-positivist move toward relativism and methodological pluralism. For the positivist scientific promise was arrogant and brutal in its simplicity: “This is the model of a scientific enterprise, take it or leave it” (Elias, 1987:xix).

For too long the tragedy of international relations scholars was, of course, that they proved incapable of either fruitfully adopting or decisively rejecting the grail of positivist science. Via positivism the discipline became locked in a sterile and frustrating worshipful relationship to the natural sciences. Presently emerging from this self-imposed positivist trap, many scholars are favorably impressed by the new latitude of maneuver offered by a multitude of post-positivist idioms of enquiry. And although notably lacking the exclusive luster of the positivist “mantle of science,” the post-positivist counterpart—or counterparts—are far more accommodating in their acknowledged posture of tolerance and humility.

The endorsement of methodological pluralism, the emergence of a polymorphic image of science, and the reassuring notion that in the social sciences even permanent dissensus is not a scientific disaster have neutralized the once intimidating bite of the positivist “anti-scientific” label. Small wonder that currently issued verdicts of condemnation to “a life of intellectual pluralism” (Holsti, 1985b:695) no longer carry their traditional message of scientific despair. Following a necessary period of digestion of post-positivist ideas, it is now more fashionable to posit that “much of the strength of the discipline comes from the plurality of its theoretical orientations” (Walker, 1987:8).

Arguably it is this feeling of an exceptional “opening up” of international theory which above all sustains the hope that, by presenting unprecedented theoretical potentialities, the impact of the third debate may exceed by far the significance of the two previous ones. For some the main opportunity is to overcome U.S.–inspired nationalistic parochialism and create a “genuinely international theory applicable to all” (Holsti, 1985a; S. Smith, 1987:204). Others seem more concerned with related problems of paradigmatic sectarianism, identifying opportunities for new and more energetic syntheses of realism and Liberalism (Nye, 1988) or realism and Marxism (Linklater, 1986; Halliday, 1987b).

Still others have identified opportunities for revamping the empiricist-positivist orthodoxy with “holistic” (Snyder, 1988) or “interpretive” (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986) correctives; grounding political realism and international theory in the supposedly superior principles of a “realist philosophy of science” (Wendt,

¹⁵ In fact, as Wisdom points out, problems at the *weltanschauungen* level may prove far more difficult to overcome than problems at theoretical or empirical levels (see Wisdom, 1987:153–54).

1987:369); endorsing the epistemological foundations of critical theory as “the next stage in the development of International Relations theory” (Hoffman, 1987; see also Ashley, 1987); and adopting a “post-structuralist discourse” which, we are told, “expands the agenda of social theory, posing questions that other discourses must *refuse to ask*” (Ashley, 1989:1).

Other interpretations of the precise nature of the post-positivist promise are readily available. What seems common to many of these theoretical projects is their striking ambition. In their combined effect the themes of paradigmism, perspectivism, and relativism—in conjunction with the post-positivist plea for tolerance in matters theoretical—apparently have generated a reservoir of energy which seems to be best released by theorizing on a grandiose scale. Indeed, as Rosenau remarks, “this is not a time for nit-picking, for finding fault with rogue definitions, imprecise formulations and skewed data” (1986:850).

The Limits of Post-positivist Optimism

How durable and consequential will the current season of hope be in the international relations discipline? Are we truly on the verge of a new era in international theory or is it more likely that the adrenaline rush of the third debate, like others, will have only negligible long-term implications? A definitive answer to this question would be risky and premature at this point, for we must keep in mind that the current surge of optimism is admittedly heuristic. It is, in other words, an enthusiasm of newly initiated departures rather than a sober celebration of safe arrivals. Hence prudence and fairness and the post-positivist spirit of tolerance itself demand a patient awaiting of further, more substantive, research findings.

Having acknowledged this it is nonetheless appropriate to add some observations on the hazards of excessive post-positivist optimism. In referring to possible problems and difficulties, my purpose is not to deprecate the revitalizing theoretical energy released by the third debate. It is rather to further delimit its scope in the spirit of constructive criticism. For clarity and consistency we will return, for the last time, to the three post-positivist trademarks of the third debate. Starting with “paradigmism,” one should notice in particular the danger of misappropriating this valuable post-positivist corrective for propaganda and polemical uses. Philosophers of science have long suspected, in fact, that one major reason social scientists turn to philosophy is to fabricate a more “respectable” anchor for the claim of being a “progressive science” (Rosenberg, 1986:340). There are reasons to suspect that such a line of reasoning may stand behind some current attempts to reconstruct the corpus of international theory in terms of “paradigms,” “research programs,” and other meta-scientific units of analysis.

Consider the fact that, as typically applied to the international relations field, Lakatos’s methodology of scientific appraisal has consistently resulted in rather optimistic readings of both its past theoretical growth and its future prospects.¹⁶ This might be a fortunate coincidence, but one is alerted by Hermann and Peacock’s candid confession that the main reason for their decision to move from the two “prevailing logics of inquiry” (the neo-positivist and Kuhnian methods) to a Lakatosian methodology of scientific appraisal is that the first two—but presumably not the third—lead invariably to negative assessments of the comparative study of foreign policy. The excessively cavalier interpretation of Lakatos’s methodology is

¹⁶ Such is, indeed, the warrant for the passports of hope recently issued for neorealism (Keohane, 1984), regimes analysis (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986), and the comparative study of foreign policy (Hermann and Peacock, 1987:16–22).

particularly striking in this case. For one looks in vain for even gestures to the key term of “progressive or degenerative problem-shift.” Yet in the absence of this concept it is virtually impossible to accomplish what these two scholars have explicitly set out to do, to refer meaningfully to Lakatos’s method for purposes of theoretical appraisal (Hermann and Peacock, 1987:16–22).¹⁷

But the problem goes far beyond cavalier invocations of would-be philosophical authorities. With the consolidation of international relations as a “dividing discipline,” contending sets of criteria for judging scientific acceptability proliferate. Ironically, this opens up tempting opportunities for instant scientific redemption of vast bodies of theoretical literature by simple shifts of epistemic standards of appraisal. Would-be scientific contributions such as Allison’s “models” of foreign policy decision-making, which might be considered unacceptable if judged by strict positivist criteria, may appear more promising if “interpretive” or “hermeneutical” standards are invoked (Ball, 1987:104–09). Without questioning the considerable merits of multiple criteria for evaluating claims, scholars in the field should beware lest they come to resemble the proverbial archer who shoots his arrow and then draws a bull’s eye around it. . . . Especially if seen as a miracle drug, enthusiastic paradigmaticism which makes light of the critical distinction between promising and misleading lines of inquiry at the meta-scientific level might lead us straight into new but equally damaging traps at the paradigmatic level.

A more sober look at the true merits of post-positivist perspectivism reveals at least three noteworthy risks. First, the preprogramming capacity of assumptive frameworks is often vastly exaggerated or reified. Perspectivism can play a constructive role only in so far as it acknowledges the historic and dynamic character of cognitive schemes and assumptive frameworks. Otherwise, “we lock the subject into himself unable ever to see more than he knows” (DeMey, 1982:225). This reminder seems particularly pertinent in view of the still popular rehearsals of rigid matrixes of underlying assumptions which mechanistically incapacitate realist thinking about contemporary world affairs (O’Meara, 1984:250; Taylor, 1984:4). Seen in this simplistic manner—but *not* otherwise—perspectivism as revealed in the debate over realism may justifiably be dismissed as “a source of confusion” (Goldmann, 1988).¹⁸

This takes us to a second set of hazards, namely that of embedding the fixation on guiding assumptions in a superficial understanding of the ramifications of what has been popularized by Kuhn and by Feyerabend as the “incommensurability” thesis. This in turn can result in equally damaging denials *or* exaggerations of the problem of comparison and communication between sets of thematic assumptions. Rather than defining the problem away by assuming automatic commensuration (portraying “models” as merely different “facets” of the same complex “reality” [Young, 1986:120] and instead of building up the problem to “suicidal” proportions (by insisting that “genuine” paradigms “are defined by their fundamental incommensurabilities with other interpretations” [Biersteker, forthcoming]), scholars interested

¹⁷ In fairness, these scholars do acknowledge that “It may be stretching too far to call these various contributions . . . a research program in the spirit of Lakatos” (Hermann and Peacock, 1987:30). But the fact remains that they do invoke Lakatos’s authority for what can be uncharitably portrayed as propaganda purposes. For to take Lakatos’s scheme seriously would involve among other things “that we distinguish between core and auxiliary assumptions, directing our defenses and/or criticisms accordingly . . . that our criticisms be retrospective and directed against adjustments in the protective belt of the program in question; and . . . that we judge the success-to-date of a research tradition and of the theories composing it in terms of progressiveness or degeneration of successive adjustments and attempts at problem-solving” (Ball, 1987:34–35, my emphasis).

¹⁸ Fortunately others have acknowledged the fact that assumptions do not stay unmodified over time and have approached realism as “a knot of historically constituted tensions and contradictions” which “might be reconstituted in a more critical and creative manner” (Walker, 1987; see also Ashley, 1984). As Musgrave points out (1981:378), it is necessary not only to distinguish between different types of assumptions but also to remember the possibility of a concealed change in the nature of a single assumption due to ongoing criticism.

in understanding the implications of post-positivist perspectivism for international theory must pay considerably more attention to philosophical efforts to devise new roads to commensurability (Pearce, 1987; Rengger, 1988a).

A third danger which merits brief mention in this context lurks in the often-voiced concern that the shift of focus toward the lofty domain of guiding assumptions will come at the expense of empirical or lower level theoretical studies. Should it drift into such parasitic directions, the post-positivist "liberation of theory from data" could indeed lead us "into the dead end of metatheory" (Skocpol, 1987:12).

Finally, we will briefly examine the notorious pitfalls of post-positivist relativism. To be sure, methodological pluralism richly benefits from all the virtues of relativism. Unfortunately, it also suffers from some of its worse vices (Gellner, 1985). If adopted uncritically or taken to its logical conclusion, methodological pluralism may deteriorate into a condition of epistemological anarchy under which almost any position can legitimately claim equal hearing. And to the extent that such an equality between different types of knowledge prevails, mere theoretical proliferation becomes practically indistinguishable from genuine theoretical growth.

It is hardly a secret, of course, that the international relations field is already seriously afflicted by some of the hazards of unreflective methodological pluralism. Within certain limits, the field seems well advised to distance itself from economics and follow in the footsteps of sociology in reinterpreting its own "lack of definition" and "theoretical cacophony" as "selective advantages" (Hirsch et al., 1987:333). For, like sociology, the field of international relations must typically deal with "multiple realities" (Holsti, 1986). Hence it must resolutely resist the seductive lure of economics with "its self-imposed incapacity to see more than a single dimension of most phenomena" (Hirsch et al., 1987:333). Having said that, one must add that the "Newton syndrome" and the seemingly universal desire to engage in grandiose theorizing have already resulted in an excessive fragmentation of the field. To borrow an apt metaphor, the field of international relations indeed "resembles nothing as much as the Lernean Hydra; each time one conceptual head is lopped off, another two appear in its place" (Rengger, 1988b:81). If the relativistic excesses of methodological pluralism and fickle allegiances lead to hopeless theoretical incoherence, the optimistic message of post-positivist pluralism ironically may result in a backlash of some new dogmatic version of methodological monism.¹⁹

In Lieu of Conclusion: A "Pianissimo" Bravo?

Much more could be said on the promises and hazards of post-positivism in international relations theory. It is certainly useful to note that the third debate offers as many dead ends as it opens promising paths for future research. But acknowledging such hazards is not to deny that theoretical creativity may be greater today than at any time since the emergence of international relations as a distinct discipline. For we must keep in mind Isaiah Berlin's brilliant insight concerning the propensity of all great liberating ideas to turn into "suffocating straitjackets" (1979:159). When all angles are carefully considered, the hazards are not sufficient to seriously challenge the conclusion that the third debate has indeed generated some unparalleled theoretical potentialities. Indeed, "the next decade could be an exciting time for scholarship" (Keohane and Nye, 1987:753).

Whether these theoretical potentialities will bear fruit in the foreseeable future remains to be seen, but one thing seems reasonably clear. For many years the international relations discipline has had the dubious honor of being among the least

¹⁹ To appreciate how compelling the fear of disciplinary paralysis through excessive pluralism and relativism can become, consider Peter Rossi's 1980 presidential address before the American Sociological Association in which he argues for a dominant model even if such a model were to exclude his own work (cited in Crane, 1986:443-44).

self-reflexive of the Western social sciences (Frost, 1986:11). In the words of one critic, the field has allowed itself to deteriorate to the level of “a welcoming repository for philosophical and theoretical caricature” (Walker, 1988:84). The third debate is the beginning of a slow but progressive loss of patience with this posture of intellectual hibernation. The debate has stimulated theoretical and epistemological ferment in international relations theory, forging links with other disciplines undergoing a similar process. It has called attention to new notions of scientific objectivity, forcing a reconsideration of the role of the international relations theorist in the scientific process. It has called into question received criteria for evaluating theoretical constructs (such as empirical validity, prediction, and explanation), allowing theories to be reexamined in terms of their historical context, their ideological underpinnings, the forms of society which they foster or sustain, and the metaphors and literary tropes that inform their construction.

Although the controversy fueled by post-positivist ideas in some ways has aggravated the dangers of epistemological anarchism, it also has alerted scholars to the problem of understanding “the notion of criticism where known methods of refutation are inapplicable” (Wisdom, 1987:136). Although we may be unable to disprove a “themata” or a “weltanschauung” with traditional empirical or logical methods, we may find them to be overly restrictive or impossible to work with, as shown by Jervis’s critique of the “anarchy/game theory” framework or by Kratochwil and Ruggie’s rebuff of positivism in the context of regime analysis (1986:766).²⁰ One would think that analyses such as Jervis’s (1988) would reduce the very real threat of the international relations field being “seduced” by economics. And although positivism is still very much alive in the field (Alker and Biersteker, 1984), it has been retreating to ever thinner and more tolerant versions, as indicated by Jack Snyder’s (1988) advocacy of “hybrid methods.”

In the space cleared by the weakening of deeply rooted urges for firm foundations, invariant truths, and unities of knowledge, an optimistic hope is now being planted—as hinted by the demand to make room for new “problematiques” (Ashley, 1988:189) and “to open up the field to critical approaches which have hitherto been marginalised, neglected, or dismissed by the discipline” (Der Derian, 1988:189)—that, as in other social disciplines, knowledge in the field of international relations may be cumulative “not in possessing ever-more-refined answers about fixed questions but in possessing an ever-rich repertoire of questions” (Cronbach, 1986:4). In this process, the discipline’s level of reflexivity and its means for sustaining critical and self-conscious direction have been vitally enriched. And as Der Derian says in a different context, “Taking into account the complexity and the breadth of the subject, one is inclined to be intellectually over—rather than under—equipped for the task” (Der Derian, 1987:5).

“The task,” as highlighted by the third debate, is neither the discovery of some ahistorical and universal scientific method nor the attainment of some objectively validated truth about world politics. It is rather a matter of promoting a more reflexive intellectual environment in which debate, criticism, and novelty can freely circulate. The international relations scholarly community—like all communities of inquiry—is communicatively constituted, and its success is partially conditioned by its ability to sustain and enhance the quality of argument in the context of deeply entrenched paradigmatic diversity.²¹ The proper attitude for such situations, suggests Terence Ball, “is less one of live and let live than of talking and listening” (1987:4).

²⁰ Wisdom calls this “the enabling criterion.” It asks whether a weltanschauung “can do its job or gets in the way of its own goal” (Wisdom, 1987:161).

²¹ Reflexivity is built, above all, on a “dialogical notion of scientific rationality” (Colapietro, 1987:283). For an attempt to go beyond dialogical reflexivity in the direction of praxis, see Jackson and Willmott (1987).

The international relations discipline must locate and eliminate Rosenau-type "MABS" (related research areas separated by redundant walls of "mutually assured boredom"). Those who labor hard to integrate deconstruction into the normal business of international relations scholarship must be on alert not to give the impression that to show a subject to be a "construction" is to render its deconstruction imperative (Connolly, 1984:164). Should that happen, Rosenau's more familiar "MAB-type" mines could be accidentally replaced by "MAD-type" booby traps (paradigms or discourses locked in a deadly embrace of "mutually assured deconstruction").

As it delights in the light of its newly found "reflexivity," the field must take care not to burn up in the heat of "hyper-reflexivity" (Rose, 1979). To an unprecedented degree, however, international relations scholars now seem ready to concede that they must come to understand what they cannot or will not embrace (Geertz, 1986). Arguably, there is some cause for optimism in the realization that the current intellectual transition "portends a new pluralism as the cutting—rather than the polemical—edge of international theory" (Der Derian, 1988:190). On that account alone we can agree, I hope, that the "exclusive and chloroforming world of the 1950s . . . is one to which few friends of International Relations or social science more generally would want to return" (Halliday, 1987a:216). And on this minimal basis I for one am prepared to add a pianissimo "bravo" to the cheers of those already celebrating the would-be splendors of post-positivism in international relations theory.

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