

Survival ‘Beyond Positivism?’ The Debate on Rationalism and Reflectivism in International Relations Theory

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Abstract

In the late 1980s, Robert Keohane argued that “the greatest weakness of the reflective school of international relations lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective program that could be employed by students of world politics.” This argument has been one of the initiators of the debate between rationalism and reflectivism in International Relations (IR) theory. This paper aims to question the relevancy of such argument for the reflectivist scholarship. To this aim, it first provides an overview on the major focal points of the so-called rationalism-reflectivism debate. Second, it focuses on Keohane’s argument to understand his accounts on what counts as a ‘research program’ and what he means by ‘reflective scholarship.’ Third, the study revisits the foundational claims, as well as promises of reflective scholarship. Accordingly, the paper concludes that the call for a ‘clear research program’ contradicts with the very foundational claims of reflective scholarship, which has its roots in the criticism of positivist understanding of social science.

Keywords

Epistemology, International Relations Theory, Philosophy of Science, Rationalism, Reflectivism, Research Program

Introduction

Since its foundation as a discipline, there have been four so-called ‘major/great debates’ in the International Relations (IR) theory literature. The first was in the interwar period, between realism and idealism about the role of international institutions and the causes as well as prevention of war. The second debate emerged in the 1960s between traditionalists (a more interpretivist/historicist methodology) and behavioralists (arguing for a scientific methodology) on the question of a ‘scientific methodology’ of IR. By the 1970s-80s positivism had become the dominant way of thinking in IR. This also corresponds when the third debate (the inter-paradigm debate) emerged between Realism, Marxism and Pluralism. In mid-1980s the debate between rationalist and reflectivist approaches, which has mainly developed around the issue of science in the history of IR, has started.

In the late 1980s, as one of the major figures of the ‘fourth debate’, Robert Keohane (1988: 392) argued that “the greatest weakness of the reflective school of international relations lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective program that could be employed by students of world politics.” He further suggested that “until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues of world politics they will remain on the margins of the field, largely invisible to the preponderance of empirical researchers” (Keohane 1988: 392). This argument has been one of the initiators of the above-mentioned debate between rationalism and reflectivism.

This paper aims to question the argument that is first put forward by Keohane in 1988. To this aim, it provides a brief overview on the major focal points of the rationalism-reflectivism debate in IR. Second, it focuses on Keohane’s argument to understand his accounts on what counts as a ‘research program’ and what he means by ‘reflective scholarship.’ Third, the study revisits the foundational claims, as well as promises of reflective scholarship. Accordingly, the paper concludes that Keohane’s call for a ‘clear research program’ contradicts with the very foundational claims of reflective scholarship, which has its roots in the criticism of positivist understanding of ‘social science.’

An overview of the literature: the rationalism-reflectivism debate

Following the debate between traditionalist (a more interpretivist/historicist methodology) and behavioralist (arguing for a scientific methodology) of 1960s, positivism has become dominant in the academic discipline of IR. In the 1980s, a new discussion is initiated between two approaches, and

characterized in various ways: “explaining and understanding” (Hollis and Smith 1991) “positivism and post-positivism” or “rationalism and reflectivism” (Keohane 1988). Literature on IR also considers this debate as an ongoing one, since the discipline is currently organized around the divisions that emerged during this debate and the major ‘camps’ still exist and the issues are still discussed. The debate revolves mostly around epistemological questions, namely, claims of knowledge.

According to Smith (1996) rationalism is a foundationalist approach to philosophy of science. Influenced by Comteian positivist emphasis on the ‘unity of scientific methodologies’ rationalism refers to the idea that nature is governed by regular laws. It offers the notion of reason to explain these regularities by developing causal mechanisms (Smith 1996: 21). For positivist epistemology that is adopted by rationalism “events in the empirical realm are held to be instances of observable regularities” (Neufeld 1995: 28). These regularities are seen as independent of time, space, the human observer (as an outsider), and they are approached in terms of Humean understanding of causality. The aim of a positivist approach is to find out initial conditions for outcomes/occurrences. Rationalism treats individuals as rational actors, and ignores some other characteristics of them, not merely because they believe in this assumption but for the purpose of parsimony and generating predictions. This approach, for Keohane, is useful for knowledge production (Kurki and Wight 2013: 24). The roots of this deductive approach lie in observation and measurement. This approach has been quite influential in the IR theory literature. Broadly speaking in IR theory rational approaches include the variations of realism and liberalism.

For Kurki and Wight (2013: 24) and Smith (1996: 12), Keohane’s ‘reflective scholarship’ include Critical Theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and feminism. These approaches are reflective due to their rejection of positivism/rationalism. Apart from this shared interest in questioning positivist/rationalist understanding of IR, these theories are not easy to group together since there are important differences between reflectivist theories on their empirical focus (Smith 1997: 172). Post-positivist epistemology that is adopted by reflective scholarship is uncertain of almost all clearly defined and defended knowledge claims. Reflectivist scholarship oppose the argument that social scientists can be like natural scientists regarding being independent from their subject matter. As Horkheimer argued, the connection between knowledge and power is very close when it comes to ‘social sciences’ (Smith 1997: 175). Horkheimer opposed to the application of positivism to social sciences since he did not believe that ‘facts’ were waiting out there to be discovered by the observer. Rather, facts are the product of political, social and historical

frameworks. This was the reason that he proposed critical theory's adoption to world politics (Smith 1997: 176).

Keohane's argument and the idea of 'research program'

The debate between rationalism and reflectivism is highly influenced by Thomas Kuhn, who criticized Popper's suggestion "to stop asking whether a claim could be proven true and instead ask whether it could be proven false" (Jackson 2011: 12) and possibility of a rational reconstruction of the growth of science (Lakatos 1965). In his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn (1962) defines three processes of scientific development: (1)pre-paradigm, (2)normal science, (3)revolutionary science. He argues that when the paradigm encounters with anomalies that cannot be solved within normal science, paradigm shift occurs by means of a scientific revolution. The period that the new approach remains explanatory is called normal science and knowledge accumulates within this process. Imre Lakatos (1965) in his chapter *Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes* criticizes incommensurability argument of Kuhn and builds the idea of "research programs" which have their core and auxiliary assumptions/clauses. According to this view, when crises occur, auxiliary assumptions can be altered to increase explanatory power of the program. If core assumptions are challenged for the purpose of dealing with the crises, then it becomes a 'degenerative' research shift.

According to Lakatos (1965), 'problemshifts' are theoretically progressive only if they increase their predictable capacity by adding auxiliary assumptions. They are empirically progressive if they contribute to actual discovery of new facts. He argues that problemshifts are progressive only if they are both theoretically and empirically progressive. If they are not, we reject them by labeling them 'pseudoscientific.' Moreover, "Progress in science is measured by the degree which a problemshift is progressive" (Lakatos 1965: 118). According to this understanding of falsification, theories are falsified only if they are superseded by a theory with "higher corroborated content" (Lakatos 1965: 118-9.) For him, theories are scientific if they offer a content-increasing explanation, and they are unscientific if they establish a linguistic reinterpretation. This is Lakatosian definition of science and progress in this specific understanding of science.

Particularly Lakatos's model on "research programs" has been adopted by the 'positivist' wing of the discipline (See Kurki and Wight 2007: 18-20; Hollis and Smith 1990: 28-36). Positivists adopt a rationalist research program that seeks falsification and progress. Their aim is to find causal links between observable variables with objective lenses. According to Smith (1996: 16), there are four main features of positivism, which he names as a methodological position: belief in (1) the unity of

science, (2) the distinction between facts and values (the idea that facts are theory natural), (3) the existence of regularities in social and natural world, and (4) empiricism as the hallmark of enquiry.

Rationalist and positivist assumptions, as well as the idea of ‘research program’ are also adopted by Keohane. He uses the label reflectivism by basing on rational choice approach, which is essentially a methodology constructed from a commitment to a positivist account of science. In his ISA presidential speech Keohane (1988) mentions the emergence of a series of theories that were sharply critical of rationalist approaches to the discipline – by mainly referring to critical theory, constructivism, poststructuralism, and feminism. He labels these approaches as reflectivist due to the fact that they rejected the classical positivist/explanatory approach to IR theory and research, emphasizing instead reflexivity and the non-neutral nature of political and social explanation. Then he suggests that these approaches can only be taken seriously if they adopt a Lakatosian account of science and develop a distinctive ‘research program.’ This idea is further developed in his famous book written with King and Verba (1994: 229) who claim that “research designed to help us understand social reality can only succeed if it follows the logic of scientific inference.”²²

Keohane (1988: 381) believes that “Rationality generates hypotheses about actual human behavior only when it is combined with auxiliary assumptions about the structure of utility functions and the formation of expectations.” Defining rationalist research program, he relies on Lakatos and his arguments of core and auxiliary assumptions. By keeping this specific definition of research in mind, Keohane looks at dissimilarities between rationalist and reflectivist schools’ understanding of institutions. Reflectivist scholarship focuses on human reflection and intersubjective meanings of world politics. It aims to understand how people think about institutional norms and rules, as well as discourse that is embedded in these institutions. For such view, institutions are not only constituted by preferences of actors, but they are also constitutive of them. Preferences of people are not given, but are constructed in specific contextual conditions. Keohane’s (1988, p. 382) conceptualization of reflectivist scholarship equals to what he calls ‘interpretive’ approach, since it emphasizes the importance of textual and historical interpretation, and rejects scientific claims of rationalist school.

Looking at how rationalist and reflectivist scholarship approach international institutions, Keohane argues that the former develops a causal link between transaction costs and institutions, that, when

²² It is important to note that there is also a growing body of work in social sciences that challenges King Keohane and Verba’s fundamental claims on science and methods. For further information on this body of work which mainly argues that “a way out from rigid positivism-postpositivism debate is possible” see: Bhaskar (1998); Goertz and Mahoney (2012); Brady and Collier (2004) among others.

the costs are low, international institutions are likely to occur. It aims to imply hypothesis that “could be submitted to systematic, even quantitative, examination” and to predict the likelihood of institutions to be created (Keohane 1988: 387). Such approach derives from rationalist theory, more specifically game theory, and formal models of cooperation. Rationalist research program is better in posing explanatory questions, but it needs to deal more with empirical and historical inquiry. This is possible by slight a departure from neoclassical economic theory and its deterministic equilibrium logic that assumes rational actors (Keohane 1988: 388-89).

Keohane argues that reflective scholarship does not take the assumption of utility maximization (in contrast with rationalist scholarship), since it is not able to tell us about origins and variations of organizations. Such approach rejects timeless generalizations and argues that values, norms, cultures, and practices change across time and space. One can develop a rationalist argument based on this arguing “institutions that are consistent with culturally accepted practices are likely to entail lower transaction costs” but this still does not give any idea regarding the roots of these practices and preferences (Keohane 1988: 389-90). Rationalist theory takes preferences not only as exogenously given but also fixed. For reflectivism, this ignores the possibility of change in world politics since rules such as sovereignty are also prior to preferences of states and they are taken as given. For Keohane (1988: 392) “Limiting the number of variables that a theory considers can increase both its explanatory content and its capacity to concentrate the scholarly mind.” Strength of rationalist research program lies in its parsimony, due to its capacity to ask and answer new questions in a short time. Clarity of its research program and methodology makes rationalist scholarship to be applicable and reproducible by its students.

To sum Keohane’s argument up, he suggests that reflectivist scholarship may have a point in their empirical focus or subject matter, but they need a clear research program that is similar to what Lakatos argues for. The idea of prediction, explanation, and falsifiability constitute the cores of a Lakatosian research program, which is also advocated by Keohane and rationalist scholarship. One may argue that due to variation within reflective scholarship, it is not possible for it to establish a research program, but, this study rather argues that the idea of a coherent (Lakatosian) research program contradicts with their *raison d’être*, which will be presented in the following sections.

The discussion: reflective scholarship in IR

Neufeld (1993: 54-55) addresses three main elements of reflectivist understanding as follows: (1) it is self-aware of its premises, (2) it emphasizes political and normative dimension of paradigms and their ‘normal science’ approach, (3) a ‘neutral observation language’ needs to be absent for reasoned

judgements of these paradigms. According to him, reflective scholarship does not seek for “a research program designed to provide cumulative knowledge about the world of empirical facts or about the world of theory” (Neufeld 1993: 60). In other words, reflectivism is a meta-theoretical stance, rather than a research program. Thus, with its core assumptions, reflectivist understanding of IR is capable of responding to positivism but it also refers to a more generic term, which includes a variety of theories. These multiple theories need to be able to choose their objects of study respectively, yet, they also need to be “consistent with reflexivity as an underlying principle” (Hamati-Ataya 2013: 20) Their ability to understand the world of facts and values, and doing these from a reflexivist theory of knowledge, is how it becomes possible to take reflective scholarship seriously (Hamati-Ataya 2013: 20). Rather than establishing a distinctly defined research program, reflective scholarship’s ‘task’ is to reflect on political and normative aspects of world politics as well as academic writing.

Cox’s (1981) differentiation between critical theory and problem-solving theory also needs to be revisited as a key to understand how reflectivist and rationalist schools serve at cross-purposes. For him, while problem-solving theories that claim objectivity do not see a great potential for change, their aim is to maintain status quo as functional as it can get. Problem-solving or mainstream theories take the world as it is and legitimize and reify the existing order. For critical theory as for the reflectivist scholarship “Theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox 1981: 128). This means that, for critical approaches, there can be no objective engagement with the nature/facts. Values of the researcher are always reflected in the process of what positivist approaches name ‘observation.’ Thus, social inquiry is always ideologically and politically oriented.

Differentiation in their academic purposes and their understanding of the world further reflect on rationalism and reflectivism’s approaches to how to study social world. Kurki (2008: 124) argues that reflectivist or post-positivist approaches are named and grouped [as reflectivist] due to their reluctance to endorse “the mainstream rationalist conception of how to study world politics.” They reject Humean assumptions regarding the nature of causality that is accepted by rationalist approaches. They also avoid causal descriptions that claim universality even in favor of non-causal or constitutive terminology (Kurki 2008: 130). The mainstream does not take reflectivist scholars’ knowledge claims seriously due to their rejection of the former’s ontological, as well as epistemological and methodological assumptions (Kurki and Wight 2013: 24). Their way of making “unscientific” knowledge claims are seen as unproductive by rationalist scholars. According to the

rationalist camp's argument, without a proper research program, knowledge does not accumulate and science does not progress mainly because of the lack of falsifiability.

Linklater (1992) addresses Keohane's question from a critical theory perspective. He argues that rather than staying in the margins, developments within critical international theory are significant for the development of the discipline as a whole. For reflectivist approaches (more specifically post-moderns) reading of the history of IR discipline as a linear continuity is mistaken. The discipline rather develops through a dialectical way, in which different perspectives contribute to "a larger whole" (Linklater 1992: 90). They challenge the idea that limits of different approaches and disciplines do not have to be drawn too strictly. Thus, post-modernists and post-structuralists do not only question sovereign states, but also the way disciplines are defined and demarcated (Linklater 1992: 88; Ashley and Walker 1990: 375). Ashley and Walker (1990) argue that states and disciplines share many common characteristics. They both have strictly defined/drawn imaginary boundaries that are protected by authorities. Both of them contain systems of surveillance as well as means to practice disciplinary power upon its members. As a result, who is inside and who is outside are determined. Criticizing strictly defined boundaries, Ashley and Walker (1990: 386) put forward two limitations that boundaries around disciplines impose:

(1) On a spatial dimension, they require us to imagine an initial situation of dichotomously opposed positions for any work of thought: with regard to the discipline the images suggest one must be inside or outside, for or against. (2) On a temporal dimension the images require us to understand crisis as a moment of discontinuity that opens up when the discipline's continuous time, homogeneous place and coherent and well-bounded textual inheritance breaks up or gives way.

Campbell (1998: 4) also argues that post-structuralism as a reflectivist approach rejects causal descriptions since they are misleading and dangerous due to embedded generalization attempts. Rather, post-structuralism as a reflective approach deals with political consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another (Campbell 1998: 4). Rather than building causal relations between facts, post-structuralism focuses on representations, discourses and practices, as well as their social and political consequences.

Tickner (2005) addresses Keohane's question from a feminist perspective. In her response to Keohane (1998), she mentions that the methodological understanding that is proposed by rationalist

scholars have been one of the major sources of misunderstandings between feminists (as part of what Keohane called reflectivist scholarship) and IR Theory scholars who claim to do social science (Tickner 2005). The positivist methodological framework based on the claim that there are patterns of regularities that could be explained through causal analysis and observed through hypothesis testing with the tools of natural sciences is put forward by Keohane as the ‘basic method of social science.’ Utilizing such basic of social science, Keohane argues, would be “the best way to convince non-believers of the validity of the message that, feminists are seeking to deliver” (Keohane 1998: 196-197). Tickner (2005: 1-3) mentions that the methodological framework that is used by feminists has generally been described as post-positivist, reflectivist, or interpretivist. However, they do not have a claim over a single standard of ‘correct’ methodology. Since mid-1990s IR Feminist scholarship has continued to grow and very little of that scholarship have followed the path that is suggested by Keohane. Therefore, as Tickner (2005: 3) puts forward, probably IR feminists have not convinced those whom Keohane called the ‘IR non-believers.’ However, this did not stop the growth of feminist scholarship and the different methodological frameworks that they apply (see Tickner 2005: 4-10).

As argued in the previous sections, starting from the early 1950s the dominant view was that “academic work should eschew statements about values and should instead concentrate on the facts” (Smith 2004: 501). A similar position also underlay the claim against the so-called reflectivist frameworks including: post-structuralism, feminism, and critical theory. Keohane (1989: 173) argued that reflectivist theories would remain in the margins of the discipline unless they build ‘testable hypothesis’ and ‘causal explanations’. Smith (2004: 501) claims that “This challenge was not about the ontological commitments of reflectivist work, but was instead framed in terms of what was legitimate social science.” Building on such legitimate way of doing science, Katzenstein et al. (1998) have put forward an analysis of the debate between rationalism and constructivism. Focusing on different variants of constructivism they have claimed that “in contrast to conventional and critical constructivism, post-modernism falls clearly outside of the social science enterprise, and in IR research it risks becoming self-referential and disengaged from the world, protests to the contrary notwithstanding”(Katzenstein et al. 1998: 678; quoted in Smith 2004: 501). Certain constructivist approaches have adopted this commitment to ‘social science’ (Smith 2004: 502). This adoption is observed in Wendt’s (1999: 90) position when he claims that epistemologically he sides with positivists but on ontology he is post-positivist. In his review of Wendt’s social arguments, Keohane

(2000: 128-9) further states that he found Wendt's arguments sensible, "but if one asked about how ideas matter—through what causal mechanisms—answers might well begin to appear."

Another adoption is proposed by Ted Hopf (1998: 172, 186-187). Hopf claims that constructivism should be understood in two variants: critical and conventional. While critical constructivism is closely tied with critical social theory, conventional constructivism mainly desires to present an alternative mainstream IR theory. This is why conventional constructivism needs a Lakatosian research program to present its own explanations to the problems that mainstream IR theories deal with: Balance of threat, security dilemma, neoliberal cooperation theory and democratic peace. Then, he proposes what he prefers to call a "loosely Lakatosian research program" (Hopf 1998: 186). Hopf's approach aims to move constructivism from "the margins" with the help of a Lakatosian-inspired research program. This approach, what Hopf calls "conventional constructivism" bases its analyses on the ontological assumption that the world is social, yet analyzes that social reality through a positivist commitment. Conventional constructivism then adopts a "loosely Lakatosian" research program, "rejecting both the positivist understanding of homogeneity in world politics, and the critical constructivist position that world politics is so heterogeneous that we should presume to look for only the unique and the differentiating" (Hopf 1998: 199). Such approach assumes that we should be looking at shared understandings and intersubjectivity in the world while having a positivist-inspired research program.

According to Keohane (1988: 380) "Most of us are children of the Enlightenment, insofar as we believe that human life can be improved through human action guided by knowledge." Thus, his rationalist commitment has probably led him to believe in the necessity to work for human progress, defined in terms of welfare, security, and liberty. He challenges the reflective scholarship from such standpoint, which has a strict definition of knowledge and progress through 'the knowledge.' He poses a critique of what reflective scholarship does, following his strict definition of science. As Smith (1996: 12) argues, one shared feature of 'critical' approaches to IR theory is "the rejection of the assumptions of what is loosely described as positivism." Thus, Keohane's criteria (or 'the gold standard' as Smith calls it) is set by what reflective scholarship has been attacking at first place, or one may argue, the *raison d'être* of critical approaches to IR theory.

Conclusion

The so-called fourth debate between rationalism and reflectivism in IR theory has blazed in the 1980s and it continues since the arguments by both approaches are still being discussed in the current literature. While analyzing Keohane's claim that the reflectivist scholars should develop a

distinct research program if they desire not to remain in the margins of the field, this paper proposes that such claim contradicts with the very foundations of the reflectivist theories of IR. It is one of the shared characteristics of many reflectivist theories to reject claims and methodology of positivist 'scientific' approaches. However, as discussed in the second section, Keohane asks the reflectivist scholars to build Lakatosian-inspired research programs; hence, to do what they rejected at the first place.

On the one hand, rationalist scholars try to build causal relationships between variables, find patterns of regularities, and create objective law-like generalizations of these relationships. On the other hand, reflectivist scholarship has mainly tried to deconstruct these embedded knowledge claims. Indeed, reflectivist scholars did not aim to build a distinct research program but instead attempted to deconstruct certain assumptions of the existing research programs in the so-called mainstream IR. Although looking from a positivist or rationalist lens reflectivist scholars have not built a distinct research program, the argument of this paper is that most of them neither attempted nor failed to do so. Thus, Keohane's criticisms and suggestions towards the reflectivist scholarship disregard the foundational philosophy of science approach of the latter. He presents an external critique without a sufficient consideration of the philosophical position immanent within the reflectivist theories. This might probably be the underlying reason why rationalist-reflectivist debate has continued for more than three decades.

In conclusion, as explained in the sections above, the reflectivist scholarship rejects certain knowledge claims and strictly drawn boundaries. For the reflectivist approaches, Keohane's argument is an attempt to legitimize certain ways of knowledge production, while delegitimizing the others and pushing them into the margins of the field. However, looking at the reflectivists' responses to Keohane's argument, the paper underlines that, despite their rejection of Keohane's suggestion, the reflectivist literature has continued to grow. Another crucial question to be asked here is 'how and by whom the center and periphery (margin) of the field is defined.' This question, of course, would be a starting point for another research.

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