

The Paradox of Positivism

Securing Inherently Insecure Boundaries

Jennifer Vermilyea

For at least two decades, there has been a growing debate in International Relations over the extent to which positivism has the ability to 'explain' the world and political phenomena. We could broadly call this the 'positivist/post-positivist debate'. Many people have focused specifically on this debate, and the relative merits of each approach. This is not what I want to do in this paper. This is because I do not see this debate as something 'new' that suddenly emerged when people became more 'aware' about the dangers of a scientific approach. Dissidence writing, or writing at the margins has always been there. The distinction is not in whether it is 'there' or 'not', but in *how* it is presented, in what questions it asks, and perhaps most importantly, whether or not marginal writing is ignored or brought to attention. While the particular questions that dissident thought is now asking may be new, there is nothing new about dissident thought in general. Moreover, I am not interested here in assessing the relative merits of positivism and post-positivism; to do so only reproduces a sovereign center that post-positivism is trying to avoid. To do so, moreover, only reasserts a 'place' for dissident thought within the already bounded

Jenny Vermilyea is a fourth year Political Science Honors student at the University of Victoria. Jenny's primary areas of study relate to Political Theory and specifically to issues such as biopolitics, governmentality, and risk politics. Through work on her honors paper – which focuses on biopolitics as it is manifested through the regulation of pharmaceutical companies – Jenny hopes to gain a greater appreciation of how health constitutes political subjectivity. Jenny would like to thank Dr. Geoff Whitehall for his support and guidance with writing this paper. Jenny would also like to thank Cameron MacCarthy and Jeromy Pollard for their inspiration and helpful critiques in developing many of the ideas reflected in this paper.

discipline of IR, and a “set of standards by which their merits and claims of seriousness must be proven or shown lacking.”¹

In this paper, I will focus on the conditions that make possible positivism’s way of knowing the world and the fundamental paradoxes of space, time and identity that this way of knowing the world produces. I will look at how these paradoxes are ignored and subsequently reproduced by a certain way of (not) dealing with the types of questions post-positivism wants to ask of positivism. The question, as R.B.J Walker and Richard Ashley suggest, is precisely a question of Sovereignty, to which positivism must always already secure an answer before the question is even asked.

By approaching the question of the debate in this way, I hope to dispel the possibility for critics of dissident writers to simply put this dissidence in a box within the ‘already bounded territory of IR’. Moreover, I hope to show that post-positivism is much more complicated than a simple claim that ‘everything is socially constructed’, or that ‘there is no truth’. These simple explanations of post-positivism are precisely what allow positivism to brush off its claims as ‘abstract, useless critique’, and move on with the more ‘serious’ business of IR.

Positivism: the Construction and Reproduction of Boundaries

There are three main aspects of positivism that need to be considered in terms of how they are able to function within modernity as a way of knowing and ordering the world. First, I will explore the way language is conceptualized by positivism as something that needs to be *operationalized* and *measured*, in relation to modernity’s attempt to create language as an object to be studied and known. I will then look at how man is known as both a subject who knows and an object to be known. Thirdly, I will look at the response positivism has generally taken to its critics: the endless desire to make itself *more* scientific, *more* precise, and *more* able to *explain* different political phenomena.

One of the most pertinent problems for positivism is language itself. In order to understand why language is so central to this debate, I think it is necessary to develop a richer understanding of the role of language in modernity. Michel Foucault suggests that language plays a central role to the construction of knowledge in any given episteme. Foucault suggests that in the Renaissance, language had a one to one relationship with the world: language was true in itself; it did not need to be interpreted or deciphered. It *revealed* the truth of the world in its very being. In the Classical episteme, language was always one degree off from the world. It lost its one to one relationship with the world;

however, Foucault maintains that in the 17th and 18th centuries, language still had the ability to hold everything together through representation. Classical knowledge was profoundly nominalist in that a word derived its meaning by virtue of its definition. Thus, language occupied a fundamental position in relation to all knowledge: "it was only by the medium of language that the things of the world could be known."² This occurred not because language was ontologically interwoven with the world – as in the Renaissance – but because it was a particular way to represent the world, "it was the initial, inevitable way of representing representations."³

In modernity, however, language has not only lost its one-to-one relationship with the world, it has lost its ability to hold everything together through representation. Now, "language [begins] to fold in upon itself, to acquire its own particular density, to deploy a history, and objectivity and laws of its own."⁴ Language now becomes an object of knowledge among others, and the question then arises as to how you can develop a language that analyzes language. Crucially, to know language is no longer to come as close to knowledge as possible. Rather, to know language "is merely to apply the methods of understanding in general to a particular domain of objectivity."⁵ Hence, there is a problem: language can no longer be unproblematically deployed, analyzed, and arranged beneath the gaze of science "because it always reemerges on the side of the knowing subject – as soon as that subject expresses what he knows."⁶ The question of epistemology – the question of the condition of possibility of knowledge – emerges as a constitutive aspect of any form of knowledge claim in modernity.

Foucault suggests that one way of dealing with this crisis of representation is to "neutralize, as it were, polish, scientific language to the point at which, stripped of all its singularity, purified of all its accidents and alien elements – as though they did not belong to its essence – it could become the exact reflection, the perfect double, the unmisted mirror of a non-verbal knowledge."⁷ In a very significant sense, the desire to neutralize, polish, and objectify language becomes constitutive of modernity. Language now becomes the "necessary medium for any scientific knowledge that wishes to be expressed in discourse."⁸ Hence, language – with its demotion to a mere status as object – is now always lacking.

Walker and Ashley suggest that this crisis of representation goes beyond the crisis of language to represent the thing it 'describes', but also includes the possibility of any "well-delimited, identical presence of a subject whose interior meanings might be re-presented in words, for it is impossible to exclude the contesting interpretations of subjec-

tive being that must be absent if this presence is simply to be.”⁹ Moreover, “words can no longer *do justice* because they can no longer bear a promise of certain, literal judgments on behalf of a social order, a community, a discipline, a culture.”¹⁰ This crisis, as Foucault suggests, is only a crisis of modernity because words lose their ability to represent clearly that which they purport to describe.

Thus, the positivist dream is to make language a scientific, neutral means by which it can then mirror the world it seeks to know. Language now becomes an object in itself to be studied. It now becomes the object *through* which the world can then be explained and known. For this reason, it is absolutely crucial for positivism that concepts are defined in a precise and finite way so as to be able to talk about causality. One must have a clear understanding of what X is if X is to be able to explain Y. Thus, *operationalization* and *measurement* become constitutive features of positivism and its quest to explain and understand political phenomena.

This idea of defining clearly demarcated areas to be studied and known is the crux of what Foucault terms the analytic of finitude. Modernity, Foucault suggests, assumes as its basis a will to know that which knows itself as a limited being. In this way, “man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and a subject that knows.”¹¹ What is underpinning this analytic of finitude is the figure of the sovereign, reasoning man who knows he is limited because he is trapped within certain conceptions of what it means to be human. Yet it is these very understandings of his human condition that create his finitude in the first place. That is to say, “each of these positive forms in which man can learn he is finite is given to him only against the background of his own finitude...the limitation is expressed not as a determination imposed on man from the outside but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but his own existence as fact.”¹² Man is finite precisely because he knows himself as a finite being which must be studied and understood in relation to other conditions of finitude.

One of the most telling aspects of positivism’s ability to operate in modernity, however, is its ceaseless desire to make itself *more* scientific and *more* able to *explain* political phenomena. John Vasquez suggests that “post-positivism has placed the scientific study of world politics in serious crises.”¹³ However, he warns that many people underestimate the consequences of threatening serious scientific enquiry into politics. He calls for a “modicum of rigor...and a much more systematic application of the criteria [for scientific procedures]”.¹⁴ Moreover, he suggests that what is really needed is to make positivism more scientific and more accountable and careful with its explanations. This points

to what Foucault suggests is the ceaseless attempt of the human sciences to make itself more scientific, "to seek their own foundation, the justification of their method, and the purification of their history."¹⁵

Walker and Ashley outline eight typical responses positivist scholars have given to post-positivism.¹⁶ I will not take the time to outline them all here; however, I think it is enough to say that the most popular response has been that post-positivism cannot offer an alternative paradigm to "choose among multiple and competing explanations" of political phenomena.¹⁷ The question posed is, how are we to know what response is most appropriate, how are we to know how to account for X if we cannot even know what X is? As Walker and Ashley note, this kind of response often amounts to seeing post-positivism as an 'anything goes' alternative to positivism.¹⁸ Thus, positivism remains caught up with avoiding the questions raised and opened up by post-positivism – or perhaps asking them in a way that always already secures a particular answer – and instead becomes preoccupied with making itself *more* scientific and *more* able to reproduce the sovereign centre from which all knowledge can disseminate.

The Inherent Paradox of Boundaries

If positivism claims at its core the ability to know the world through an independent, objective position of observer, then the question must arise, why do positivists even care that their work is being critiqued by a bunch of marginal, dissident scholars with no alternative position or paradigm to compete with their own? I think we can find the answer in what Walker and Ashley point to as the 'disciplinary crisis of IR'. Walker and Ashley suggest that these works "accentuate and make more evident a sense of crisis, what one might call a crisis of the discipline of international studies. They put the discipline's institutional boundaries in question and put its familiar modes of subjectivity, objectivity, and conduct in doubt."¹⁹ Two points of interest are critical here: first, this crisis is not simply a crisis of international studies; this is a crisis of modernity in general. Second, this crisis stems back to what Walker and Ashley identify as the *crisis of representation* and has to do fundamentally with what Foucault suggests is a crisis that is opened up by the inability of symbols to hold the world together through representation.

The reason that we cannot say that this is simply a crisis of international studies is because this crisis puts the very category of 'international' in doubt. It questions the ability of *any* representation to clearly demarcate the boundary between the inside and the outside. As Jim

George and David Campbell suggest, it questions the very world 'we' come to accept as 'given'²⁰; it questions the very finitude embedded in what we call 'modern man'. Moreover, the boundaries that would separate one dissident struggle from another, or one domain from another, are put into question.

The possibility for this crisis is the space opened up by the crisis of representation. Every representation appears not as an unproblematic copy of that object it is to represent, but as an open text that spills across the supposedly 'secure' boundaries of the self. Walker and Ashley suggest that "on trial is the self-evident reality of objects which might be unambiguously represented, assigned a definite social value, and entered into circulation in a system of communication or exchange."²¹ The subject/object position 'secured' by positivism is also put into doubt. In crisis, the subject and object – which both constitute man – appear not as unproblematic realities, but as texts always being written and secured through a hazardous maze of representations.

This 'crisis' can help us understand the inherent paradox in boundaries. The paradox is produced through the very way in which positivism deals, or does *not* deal with the space opened up by the crisis of representation, and the questions opened up by the *question* of sovereignty. The very paradox of boundaries is that they are never really there. The imagined boundaries of space, time, and identity never have been, nor are they now, real. Indeed, Walker and Ashley suggest that "No such territory ever existed. No exclusionary boundaries ever separated the discipline from other supposedly alien and incommensurable elements of a culture beyond – not in today's disciplinary crisis, and not before."²² The supposedly fixed boundaries of domestic/international, self/other, male/female, citizen/foreigner, etc, never existed; this has never been fixed through time. And the very moment we chose to speak about dissidence or change in these terms already secures a particular answer to the problem. All of these distinctions between society/state, social/political, global/local already constitute the very problem 'we' are trying to deal with, and thus already secure a limited possibility to the answer.

The question that arises is how does positivism secure a particular definition of boundaries when these boundaries are in themselves completely *insecure* and in fact not real? The question is answered by the way in which positivism deals with another question: the question of sovereignty. The 'discipline' of IR must assume at every moment that the question of sovereignty is always already answered if it is to precede 'unproblematically' with its boxes and borders. Dissident writing wants to keep the question of sovereignty always as a *question*. It wants

to ask *how* certain understandings of the world are produced; *whose* world is opened up by these borders; *whose* voices are being silenced and marginalized? It wants to keep the question of sovereignty as something that is always being produced and contested; it wants to see sovereignty as a problem that deserves rigorous and careful attention. Positivism, however, cannot open up the question of sovereignty. It must already assume a location for the sovereign centre: man itself. And in man, a specific sovereign center must be assumed: that of a rational being whose very limitations emanate precisely from himself. Walker and Ashley suggest that the discipline views texts as "objects of judgment" and in doing so "privileges the reader as one possessed of a certain identity bound up with an already given experience and position that is outside the text and presumably shared with other members of a discipline, tradition, a point of view."²³ In this way, positivism is able to maintain a sovereign position of borders only insofar as that sovereign position is produced and maintained by positivism's very inability to deal with the *question* at any moment.

If dissident writing wants to challenge the idea of a sovereign centre that can then go and objectively know the world, it does not want to offer an alternative basis from which one can obtain a better understanding of the world. To do so would only reproduce the very process it is critiquing. However, as I noted earlier, this has often been the very ground upon which post-positivism receives the most critique. As Walker and Ashley note, positivism often dismisses dissident work on the basis that all that dissident work can offer is an 'anything goes' mentality. How can dissident work be taken seriously, it is said, when it cannot hope to offer any *real* resolutions to questions of freedom, democracy, and justice? When freedom itself is questioned, how can one even assume that dissident work *cares* about making the world a better place? Ironically, the response that best answers this question is that it is not that dissident thought does not care about freedom, democracy, and justice. Dissident thought pursues these questions precisely because it is not satisfied with a universal, timeless definition of these terms that is supposed to work for everyone in all times and spaces. It wants to keep the question of these conditions open, as questions that deserve no fixed answer, but must be rigorously explored and continuously questioned. Jim George suggests that post-positivism is not a perspective that does not care about questions of freedom and resistance, but "one that cares enough about the possibilities of such conditions not to endanger them by abrogating responsibility for them *again* to another vanguard, another religion, another Philosophy."²⁴

In this paper, I have tried to avoid returning to a question of which approach is 'better' or which approach we should 'adopt'. I said earlier that this was because I wanted to avoid the claim that dissident writing is claiming yet *another* sovereign center from which it can know the world. I said also that assessing the relative merits of each approach only sets dissident writing up to be placed within a particular box within the already given borders of the discipline. However, I think another reason for my unwillingness to assess the 'pros' and 'cons' of dissident writing should be highlighted here. This third reason is that there is no *one* position from which dissident writers speak. There are a variety of approaches, questions, and problems that dissident writers take up. I have done my best in this paper to highlight what I think are the most important and most common questions that arise from dissident writing; however, I am not claiming to have exhausted all positions or questions, nor am I claiming that we can realistically talk about dissident writing as *a* position.

However, what this paper has shown is that dissident writing is much more complicated than a position that claims 'everything is socially constructed', or 'there is no truth'. If this is so, this is only a starting point. Post-positivism is clearly not satisfied with a world that just says 'everything is socially constructed and therefore anything goes'. I hope to have shown in this paper that it is precisely because these approaches care so much about *whose* world is opened up by certain constructions, and *whose* voices and worlds are closed by these constructions that they cannot be satisfied with an 'anything goes' mentality. Moreover, I hope to have dispelled the possibility that dissident writing can be shut down as something that does not have to be dealt with, that positivism already has an answer for, but as an approach whose questions can no longer be ignored or pushed to the 'margins'.

Notes

¹ Ashley, Richard and Rob Walker, "Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty", *International Studies*, 34:3 (1990): 367.

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 322.

³ Foucault, 322.

⁴ Foucault, 38.

⁵ Foucault, 323.

⁶ Foucault, 323.

⁷ Foucault, 323.

⁸ Foucault, 323.

⁹ Ashley and Walker, 378.

¹⁰ Ashley and Walker, 378.

¹¹ Foucault, 340.

¹² Foucault, 348.

¹³ John Vasquez, "The Post-Positivist Debate", *International Relations Theory Today*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 294.

¹⁴ Vasquez, 237.

¹⁵ Foucault, 379.

¹⁶ Ashley and Walker, 368-369.

¹⁷ Ashley and Walker, 380.

¹⁸ Ashley and Walker, 389-390.

¹⁹ Ashley and Walker, 375.

²⁰ Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations*, (United States: Lynne Rienner Publications Inc, 1994), 288.

²¹ Ashley and Walker, 378.

²² Ashley and Walker, 387.

²³ Ashley and Walker, 371.

²⁴ Jim George, 212.

