

# The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

Written by Adam Groves

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## The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 16 2007

*'For many postpositivists, positivism is not only epistemologically and ontologically flawed; it is also co-responsible for many of the social ills and political catastrophes of the modern world. Yet, for many positivists the postpositivist assault amounts to advocating subjectivism, irresponsible relativism and lack of standards, which work against conducting proper research and the effort to make the human condition better' (Patomaki and Wight, 2000: 214)*

### Introduction

Positivist approaches dominate the contemporary study of social science. However, in recent years, post-positivists have sought to instigate a sweeping rejection of positivism's so-called 'scientific' assumptions. Causal analysis has proved to be a major target of the 'post-positivist assault'. Whilst positivist thinkers maintain that it represents the only systematic approach to social science research, post-positivists reject it as neither necessary nor desirable. Instead, they advocate 'more sophisticated interpretations... [to] remedy' the 'defects' that underlie the positivist paradigm (Winch, 1990[1956]: 66).

This essay will critically analyse the notion that there is a fundamental difference between the tasks of 'explaining' (comprehending 'causes') and 'understanding' (comprehending 'reasons'). First, the essay will examine the emergence of the sharp division, which has come to be accepted as existent between 'explaining' (which is advocated by positivists) and 'understanding' (which is advocated by post-positivists). Second, one important consequence of the division will be demonstrated by showing how the intellectual battles between positivists and post-positivists, as well as the occasional attempts at reconciliation between them, have been instrumental in positivism's dominance. Finally, the work of Milja Kurki will be drawn upon to argue that the concept of causation should be broadened, thereby exposing the interrelated nature of 'explaining' and 'understanding' without reducing one to the other. This will allow for positivism's dominance to be effectively challenged.

### Explaining Positivism and Understanding Post-Positivism

## The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

Written by Adam Groves

In order to comprehend how and why causal analysis has come to be at the centre of a polarised struggle between two major approaches within the social sciences, it is necessary to trace its development. The modern philosophy of science is founded on a radical positivist critique of metaphysics advanced by David Hume in the eighteenth century. He argued that speculation about the nature of 'reality' is futile; 'there are only perceptions based upon Impressions, and Ideas' (Patomaki and Wight, 2000: 219; also Kurki, 2006: 192). For Hume then, the "science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation" (2007 [1739]: 11).

However, as Patomaki and Wight observe, 'in limiting what can be meaningfully said of the world to what could be experienced, Hume faced a difficult problem vis-a-vis causation' (2000: 220): if one accepts Hume's analysis, then when we observe regular successions of events there is no 'real' or 'natural' connection. Hume's solution was to argue that 'the mind through 'custom' comes to [perceive] these events in such a way as to create the 'illusionary belief' in a causal connection' (Kurki, 2006: 192). Kurki observes numerous important assumptions inherent within this approach: 'causal relations are tied to regularities'; these regularities are observable; and causal relations are 'regularity deterministic' thus enabling us to formulate 'when A then B' statements (2006: 192-193).

Hume's thinking has been enthusiastically adopted by positivist thinkers to create a philosophy of science based on laws and generalised patterns of observables. Kurki argues:

'in the course of the twentieth century causal *explanation* has become closely tied up with analysis of 'general laws': science has come to be understood to be about finding falsifiable, predictive, observation-based regularities, or generalisations. Interestingly, Humean assumptions have become so widely accepted that they have been increasingly 'taken for granted' in most philosophy of science debates' (2006: 193, emphasis mine)

The legacy of Hume's work is evident in the 'Humean' assumptions of King, Keohane and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994). Widely regarded as the defining text of contemporary social science research design, it provides guidance which aims to make research 'systematic, rigorous, and cumulative' (Collier, Seawright and Munck, 2004: 21). King, Keohane and Verba argue that 'all good research can be understood—indeed, is best understood—to derive from the same underlying logic of inference. Both quantitative and qualitative research can be systematic and scientific (1994: 4-5)'. For our purposes, it is crucial to note that King, Keohane and Verba have a 'scientific' and 'systematic' conception of causality, which they seek to apply to both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Causality is understood as the 'causal effect' of the explanatory variable and causal relations are understood as necessarily observable, quantifiable and (preferably) generalisable.

## The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

Written by Adam Groves

Despite King, Keohane and Verba's claim to have united quantitative and qualitative research around a 'unified logic of [positivist] inference' (1994: 3), the post-positivist assault continues. As early as 1958, Peter Winch had argued that humans (and thus, the social sciences) are subject to fundamentally different principles to those which govern the natural sciences. For Winch, human reactions are not just more complex, they are of a different *kind* (1990 [1958]: 72-73). They cannot be explained through simple 'causal generalisations about the individual's reaction to his environment' but rather must be understood through 'knowledge of the institutions and ways of life which give [our] acts their meaning' (ibid: 83).

If one recognises 'a regularity or uniformity [as] the constant recurrence of the same kind of event on the same kind of occasion' then, logically, 'statements of uniformity presuppose judgements of identity'. But if identity is necessarily relative to some rule, 'two events which count as qualitatively similar from the point of view of one rule would count as different from the point of view of another' (ibid: 83). Identity is therefore understood as crucial to one's interpretation of events. Furthermore, in understanding social institutions one must consider not only those rules 'governing the scientific investigation itself' (as in the natural sciences) but also 'what the sociologist is studying' (ibid: 87).

Thus, Winch argues that rules and generalisations are not possible without *first understanding* not only 'beliefs *within* a given mode of discourse, but of whole modes of discourse' (ibid: 110). For Winch then, the positivist approach is defective:

'Ideas cannot be torn out of their context... the relation between the idea and context is an internal one. The idea gets its sense from the role it plays in the system. It is nonsensical to take several systems of ideas, find an element in each which can be expressed in the same verbal form, and then claim to have discovered an idea which is common to all the systems (ibid: 107)

Rather than seeking to explain and generalise, post-positivists claim to focus on 'understanding..., grasping the point or meaning of what is being done or said'. Winch asserts that 'this is a notion far removed from the world of statistics or causal laws: it is closer to the realm of discourse and to the internal realms that link the parts of a realm of discourse' (ibid: 115).

The sharp distinctions drawn between positivist and post-positivist approaches—and between 'explaining' and 'understanding'—are evident in the work of numerous contemporary International Relations thinkers. On the one hand, King, Keohane and Verba seek to *teach* post-positivists how to 'fashion scholarly research to make valid descriptive and causal inferences' (1994:3). On the other, Jenny Edkins states that notions of cause and effect are

# The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

Written by Adam Groves

'untenable' and claims that they have resulted in inadequate responses to some of the world's most pressing problems (in Kurki, 2006: 198; also Edkins, 2002). It appears, on the face of it, that there are irreconcilable differences regarding the two camps' understanding of cause.

## Complimentary Processes? Reifying the Dominant Approach

The post-positivist assault on the concept of cause has been misdirected and misleading. Drawing on the work of Milja Kurki, this essay will now demonstrate that the intellectual battles between the two approaches, as well as the occasional attempts at reconciliation between them, have taken place on Humean territory. The result has been to reify and legitimise positivist assumptions.

King, Keohane and Verba's claim to have unified quantitative and qualitative research around 'good *science*' jarred with post-positivist thinkers and incited a series of critiques of its positivist causal analysis (Collier, Seawright and Munck, 2004: 21). However, theirs is not the only attempt which has been made to settle (or capture) the argument. Ninety years previously, Max Weber grappled with the same dichotomy between 'explaining' (or 'causal explanation') and 'understanding' (or 'interpretive understanding'). He argued that 'explaining' and 'understanding' represented the two fundamental routes to gain an adequate comprehension of issues in the social sciences. Weber sought to utilise the two approaches within a single framework by asserting that only when there exists a 'correspondence between the theoretical interpretation of motivation and its empirical verification' can a case be considered 'established' (Weber, 1978 [1909-1920]: 11). Thus the 'overt action and the meaning' must both be 'correctly apprehended and at the same time their relation [must be] meaningfully comprehensible' (ibid: 12). In other words, sociological reality in the full sense cannot be achieved unless an analysis is both subjectively *and* causally adequate. It appeared that Weber had reconciled the two approaches; both had a role to play:

'If adequacy in respect to meaning is lacking, then no matter how high the degree of uniformity and how precisely its probability can be numerically determined, it is still an incomprehensible statistical probability... On the other hand, even the most perfect adequacy on the level of meaning has causal significance from a sociological point of view only insofar as there is some kind of proof for the existence of a probability' (ibid).

However, on closer reading, one can see that Weber privileges the positivist position. The basis for *understanding*, we are told, 'can be either rational, which can be further subdivided into logical and mathematical, or it can be of an emotionally empathic or artistically appreciative quality' (ibid: 5). Weber asserts that 'the highest degree of rational understanding is achieved in cases of logically or mathematically related propositions', which may even be 'immediately and unambiguously intelligible'. These are preferred to 'empathic or appreciative accuracy' obtained through 'sympathetic participation' (ibid). Similarly, the basis for causal *explanation* can be either

## The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

Written by Adam Groves

'verification of subjective interpretation by comparison' or statistical inference. Whilst the latter is championed as providing the possibility of unambiguous interpretation, the former is dismissed as rarely 'feasible with relative accuracy' (ibid: 10). Thus, even in his attempt to unite 'understanding' and 'explaining' within a complimentary framework, Weber is guilty of reifying and legitimising positivist causal assumptions which, as will now be shown, already dominate analysis in the social sciences to the discipline's detriment.

First though, the role that post-positivist thinkers themselves have had in maintaining the dominance of causal analysis over interpretivist approaches merits brief attention. Both critical theorists and poststructuralists have been too quick to dismiss the concept of cause. Their combative assertions that the notion is inadequate, defective and untenable (Edkins, Cox in Kurki, 2006: 198; Winch, 1990[1956]: 66) uncritically accept the legitimacy of the Humean assumptions which underpin it – they do not seek to reveal alternative possibilities and, as such, deny themselves the opportunity to capture (or even identify) the concept in a more holistic form. Kurki summarises that 'because of her seemingly positivist understanding of causation, Edkins rejects the concept too swiftly and, thereby ignores her own 'implicit' causal claims' (2006: 199). Post-positivist thinkers have simultaneously challenged, yet reinforced, the Humean concept of cause and, in doing so, have legitimised the assumptions which underpin positivism's dominance in contemporary social science research.

### Lowering the Stakes: A Calmer Debate and a More Inclusive Understanding

Whilst thinkers such as King, Keohane and Verba and Max Weber have moved to reduce explaining and understanding into a single framework (largely on positivist terms), post-positivist thinkers have conspicuously failed to engage critically with the concept of cause. The result is that causal analysis has been narrowed and reified in its Humean form. Either it is seen as *the* answer, or it is rejected out of hand. However, a more inclusive understanding of the concept is both feasible and desirable.

Critical realists have begun this process by challenging a number of Humean assumptions. They have refocused on the importance of an ontological conception of causation thereby transcending the 'regularity dependence' from which Humeanism suffers. Kurki writes that 'for philosophical realists, regularities although accepted as possibly indicative of underlying causal structures, are deemed *neither necessary nor sufficient* for establishing a causal explanation'. They are thus understood as 'only one form of data amongst many' and cannot in themselves provide 'scientifically objective causal analysis' (2006: 202). Crucially, critical realists have sought to reconfigure the debate by rejecting the idea that meaningful human action is 'uncaused'. To the contrary, they assert that 'ideas, meanings and reasons are important precisely because they are causal' (ibid: 203). As such, whilst critical realists recognise that the world is shaped by 'ontologically real things and processes'

# **The Cause of Positivism's Dominance**

Written by Adam Groves

they also demonstrate that 'in coming to know those forces, we will always be inevitably informed by the social and political context that we inhabit' (ibid). In this way, a space is provided for a middle ground by demonstrating how the tasks of understanding and explaining are both legitimate. Furthermore, far from privileging one over the other, the two approaches are recognised as intimately interrelated.

However, a further step is necessary to challenge the dominance of the Humean discourse. Drawing on the work of Aristotle, Milja Kurki convincingly demonstrates that the concept of causation should stretch beyond the current narrow understanding, which sees it merely as a pushing or pulling force 'by which something is made'. This represents only one dimension of causation – what Aristotle termed 'efficient causes'. Additionally, Kurki highlights the role of 'final causes (for the sake of which something is made)'; 'material causes (material out of which something is made)' and 'formal causes' (ideas according to which something is made) (ibid: 206). There are several advantages to this more holistic concept of cause. By acknowledging material causes (as part of a larger framework of causation) one is able to recognise their impact, whilst avoiding the 'deterministic overtones often attached to more materially based explanations of the social world' (ibid: 207). Similarly, by acknowledging the role of formal causes, one is able to recognise the importance of ideas, rules, norms and discourses in 'constraining and enabling' social action. This allows for a shift away from the positivist emphasis simply on pushing and pulling forces and exposes a 'deeper level of causality in the social world' than is recognised by the positivist approach (ibid: 208). Lastly, the notion of 'final causes' recognises that 'social action, even when unplanned and spontaneous, is inevitably premised on intentionality of human agency'. Thus, final causes represent a 'contributory cause that 'for the sake of which' something is done' (ibid: 209).

The framework advanced by Kurki allows for a more pluralistic conception of cause, and subsequently enables new questions to be asked. In widening the understanding of causal analysis it opens up new possibilities for debates; no longer is 'cause' necessarily a concept which sits solely in Humean territory. As such, the framework draws out the interrelated nature of understanding and explaining by pointing toward the significance of discourse, norms and ideas. Far from 'reducing one to the other' however, the framework allows for 'cause' and 'understanding' to be placed on an equal footing within a broader conception of causal analysis.

## **Conclusion**

As observed by Patomaki and Wight at the beginning of this essay, the most appropriate way to conduct research in contemporary social science is an issue which is hotly contested by positivists (who advocate causal analysis – or explaining) and post-positivists (who advocate an interpretative approach – or understanding).

# The Cause of Positivism's Dominance

Written by Adam Groves

Currently, positivism—grounded in a Humean conception of cause—dominates the discipline. Whilst there have been some attempts to reconcile the two approaches, this has largely taken place on positivist terms. Furthermore, post-positivists have reified and legitimised the Humean underpinnings of causal analysis by accepting it (if then dismissing it) at face-value. The failure to recognise the mutual relationship between explaining and understanding has allowed for the positivist approach to capture the concept to the detriment of the social sciences; several aspects of causal analysis have been all but ignored.

As such, this essay has drawn upon the work of Milja Kurki to argue that a broader conception of cause is necessary. This approach exposes the interrelated nature of 'understanding' and 'explaining' and raises the possibility for new questions to be asked by social science researchers. No longer is it simply an issue of accepting (efficient) causal analysis (as positivists do) or dismissing it (as post-positivists have done). One must account for the influence of formal, material and final causes also. In adopting this approach then, one is able to challenge positivism's dominance on new grounds, undermining the centrality of the Humean territory it resolutely occupies.

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## **The Cause of Positivism's Dominance**

Written by Adam Groves

with the IR tradition of realism.

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### **About the author:**

Adam Groves has an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University and a BSc in International Relations from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Adam co-founded the website in November 2007.