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Reactions to Positivist Hegemony in the Social Sciences

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Reactions to Positivist Hegemony in the Social Sciences

Harvey, Howitt, and Marchart, respectively, have sought to expand upon commonly taken-for-granted notions of space, scale, and foundation by applying critical analysis of the common usages that the terms imply. Borrowing largely from philosophy and physics, the authors engage in somewhat deconstructionist investigations on how differing and varying meanings can be applied to political analyses. Harvey, for instance, takes an accounting of the several notions of space relative to time, and finds that the distinctions in space/time theorized upon by Newton, Einstein, and later Lefebvre all bear relevance to better understanding social phenomena—even when applying the Marxist lens to understanding existent social interaction under capitalistic conditions. Howitt, looking at scale, questions the relationship between the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ or between the ‘global’ and ‘local’ and finds that analysis of the differences in scale exposes dialectical relations with each other. That is, the local opposes the global or the macro opposes the micro and vice versa, respectively. This dialectical relationship further exposes that scales are socially and politically constructed, representative of a phenomena that is relational, and is thus of important consideration in analysis beyond simple labeling. That is, scale represents more than ‘size’ and ‘complexity’, but also reveals the relational. It is the relational—the relationship between the ‘global’ and its contents or the ‘local’—which provides for or is wont for analytic complexity and theorizing. In turn, it is discovered that there are many scales operating within a given geographical boundary at any given time; hence, to ignore scale or theorizing on scale is as to leave a conceptual gap out of view when attempting to understand scale relative to the social and the political.

Marchart, through tracing the foundations of post-*foundational* thinking out of the Heidegger School, similarly attempts to disrupt taken-for-granted notions of foundations, i.e., universality and totality, and argues that in reality, such foundations do not exist when contemplating the political. That is, the political is not foundational, nor can be traced to any particular foundation, but is instead constantly in flux, flowing, evolving, without beginning or ending, and sometimes contingent. That is to say, while there are conceptions of ‘politics’, ‘the political’ cannot be easily defined. It is a category or realm that privileges concepts or facts beyond others, but is in of itself indescribable in an absolute way. It is the crisis of there not being a foundation—a reference point of certainty—that explains the difficulty in distinguishing between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. As such, to Marchart, the difference between politics and the political came into being conceptually, leaving ‘the political’ to refer to society’s “ontological” dimension, whereas ‘politics’ represents the many formal and informal acts that somewhat confirm the existence of ‘the political’. ‘The political’, as Marchart puts it, “escapes the efforts of political or social domestication.” It is as though the ‘the political’ is ephemeral, and only observed through the various interpersonal and inter-institutional machinations within politics. Yet, ‘the political’ is *grounding*, albeit difficult to define and fleeting. It is the fleeting, ephemeral quality that cannot be understood by positivist or empiricist methodologies, and thus, ‘the political’ is of a theoretical, philosophical nature—yet very real and objective in its resultant effects on ‘politics’. As such, any analysis that rests on the foundational in an attempt at coming

up with positivist or empiricist explanation fall-short of the necessity to explain the political, which is groundless, foundationless, center-less, etc., but nevertheless very real.

Contrary to the Harvey, Howitt, and Marchart, Rosenau doesn't herself question notions of history, but instead explains post-modernist view of history, which questions the validity and analytical utility of *history* in of itself. To post-modernists, history is really a fiction, trumped up by the powerful, who have established a description of events that is termed 'history' but is not reasoned or objective in any way imaginable. That is, the very assumptions that lay at the root of history are faulty, and hence, all reasoning built upon such assumptions is too faulty. As such, some post-modernists see an oncoming 'end' to history altogether; or at least an end to any sense of direction within history. With the end of history come the end of ideology and an end to dialectics of the cosmic scale, such as 'good' overcoming 'evil'. Within post-modernism, there are several different gradations of rejection of history, of course; that is, some do not outright reject history, but find it flawed and in need of serious academic revision. What this sort of post-modernists call for is a more genealogical approach to 'history'. Further, post-modernists question and reject common notions of time. Drawing from physicists, post-modernists see time as a false marker of certainty, with no 'real' existence beyond a particular language-construct; that is, there is no 'real' time. Thus, post-modernist are critical of the use of time—in its common way—in analyzing the social and political. As such, post-modernist believe geography to be inherently political, and thus, should account for the political elements within certain 'spaces'—the power dynamics at play, and the 'who' and 'why' behind such power that use space and time to subordinate. Essentially, to Rosenau, post-modernists seek to incorporate and privilege all that was previously ignored in the study of the social and political.

Clearly, to Rosenau, Harvey, Howitt, and Marchart are post-modernists. It is interesting that Rosenau does not take a stand, but instead expounds on post-modernist thought rather distantly. Post-modernism appears to represent a reaction to *ultra*-empiricism. That is, where at one point, so-called structuralists and conventional geographers moved to explain all phenomena in positivist fashion, leaving much to be desired by way of actually explaining anything, post-modernists have sought to detail and account for the many conceptual flaws that prevent the transmitting of any knowledge from an empiricist endeavor. As the authors rightly point out, this is in large part due to the fact that much of the social and the political go far beyond what can be measured, counted, or plotted on a graph. The political is inherently philosophical, incorporates differing perspectives, different notions of time and space, scale, and foundation. It is precisely the point that post-modernists argue that for there to be *understanding* of the social and political, one's analysis must go beyond the empirically measurable and into that which is quite at home in philosophy or political theory. Harvey, Howitt, and Marchart question the very foundational assumptions that positivists make about time, space, scale, and foundation—which all under elevated scrutiny, appear to bear multiple meanings, all perhaps undefinable, and fleeting. Nevertheless, the consequences of these notions are evident in the way we conceive of things, or seek to know more on things. The questioning and provoking of different thinking in relation to these terms does indeed expose limitations to underlying assumptions about whether we can know what 'politics' or 'the political' is. It is precisely within the domain of the political that matters become difficult to define, yet contentious, contradictory, and typically disputed by one academic faction or another. While I find extreme post-modernism to be hard to believe, the value is clear: one's calculus must account for the nuance and meaning behind all things, if one expects to better understand a given phenomenon under a certain set of conditions at any given time.