

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

EUI Working Paper **SPS** No. 2003/16

Reflections on Theory and Practice

A modified version of the Inaugural Lecture
delivered on the occasion of the Degree Conferring Ceremony
of the European University Institute, 3 October 2003

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Printed in Italy in November 2003
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I.

The contribution of a theory to our understanding of political practice has been one of the perennial issues in debates on the possibility and the limits of a science of politics (Aristotle, 1971, 1951) Aside from thorny epistemological issues—of interest mainly to the academic fraternity (Bernstein, 1971) —there remains the more general question of how knowledge relates to action (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988) and this problem is, in turn, linked to our notions of representation, civic duty, participation, legitimacy and resistance. In other words: should our world go on as it is or should we not change it, and if the latter is the case, what should we change and how are we to go about it (Cox, 1996).

If it is the task of a theory to provide some type of “warranted knowledge”, and if the world is not simply “there” but in the process of being continuously made, then providing a theory in the sense of a simply fitting a theoretical structure to „reality“ seems rather problematic indeed. This thought has led in physics to heated debates because it explodes the idea that „the world“ is pre-existing and that, like a clock that would re-run precisely the way ours did were it to be set in motion again (Zeilinger, 2003). While after Poincaré who laid the foundations for chaos theory (Poincaré, 1892, 1902) hardly any of the natural scientists would assent to this strict Lapalicean notion, resistance to the generative capacity of nature is rather widespread. Einstein's notion that reality was "there", even if hidden by some veil that had to be lifted in order to make a discovery, might be, as Anton Zeilinger, a well-known quantum physicist, has pointed out, an entirely inappropriate metaphor for capturing the actual practice of modern science (Zeilinger, 2003). There might be no „*there*“ there, in the sense we are accustomed to, as matter changes in quirky ways and reality turns out to be much more malleable and processual than the imagery of fixed things (res) implies. “Reality” would then not only encompass all of what is the case, that is the old notion of the *kosmos noetos*, or the *universitas rerurm*, but it would also contain all *which is possible* or *what could be the case*, as the notion of an immutable being, grounding and encompassing everything, is abandoned.

Whatever we might think about such speculations in theoretical physics challenging our notions of “reality” and of “science” alike (Toulmin, 2001) one thing seems to be clear. Since the *social* world is not natural but one of artifice, as Aristotle (Aristotle, 19561. Bk I, ch. 2 p.28f) pointed out, an, at first blush, radical idea attains great plausibility. Thinking coherently about the social world might have less to do with our ability to produce theories that satisfy the criterion of correspondence between our concepts and the world, than with our capacity to develop a critical awareness that choosing certain descriptions of our practices over others has consequences for our understandings and actions. But even if we adhered to a strict correspondence view of theories, we have to

realize that reality is a poor philosophers stone, given the over-determination of actions, the small numbers / many variables problem etc. Thus tests of our theories are—not surprisingly—usually inconclusive. What is at issue in most theoretical debates is, therefore, the plausibility of choosing one description over another and the consequences of this choice. Such a debate is the more like one justifying an interpretation rather than one of choosing the greater accuracy of a theory's representations.

In this context even „non events“, or counter-factuals (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996) might be of greater importance than the at first unproblematic “data“ that have been gathered and that are now matched with our theoretical concepts. Furthermore, this view explains also why the terms of the political discourse are not only contested (Conolly, 1983) —being part of different political projects—but inherently „fuzzy“, because they attain their meaning largely from links to other concepts and not from a one-to-one correspondence with a world “out there”.

It is this problem that I want to address in greater detail since without such a “world” „relativism“ seems to raise its ugly head and the anxieties engendered by this loss are not any smaller than those of the past when people learned that the earth is not flat or that we are not at the center of the universe. As formerly, there seems nothing one could hold onto, or to find one's feet in and thus charges of nihilism are quickly made.

II.

If the concepts of our theories no longer mirror simply reality, how is one to proceed? If the power of our theoretical terms is not a function of their agreements with the “world out there”, but rather a result of the principles of construction informing our assertions, and if disciplinary understandings are frequently not the result of insights but of often forgotten argumentative gambits and „normalizing“ practices as Foucault has argued, what is there besides endless deconstruction and self-serving and logically unsustainable claims of the relativism of all knowledge?

I think none of these conclusions follows. There are three—perhaps even interconnected—reasons, why I reject both the notion that the world has to be “out there”, for otherwise we could not make knowledge claims, and that, conversely, the denial of a „world out there“ inevitably results in nihilism.

The first reason concerns our language and the apparent paradox that is involved in arguing that „everything is relative“. The second addresses the problematic understanding of „truth“ as correspondence, and the third is the realization that what serves as an „explanation“ of a particular phenomenon is not context-independent and specifiable in neutral epistemological principles that define the "scientific approach" across all fields and disciplines. Particularly when practical questions elicit the request for an explanation, what counts as an

explanation involves further specification and elaboration, a deliberation about the options in this case, it might involve analogous reasoning from case to case, but not necessarily generalizations or nomic laws (Kratowil, 1989) or those criteria presumably derived from the „successful“ natural sciences. All of these reasons deserve some further scrutiny as they are of decisive importance for any type of theorizing.

Let me address now the first claim, i.e. the argument that the relativity of knowledge presupposes a non-relativist standpoint since otherwise one involves oneself in a performative contradiction. The liars paradox of antiquity in which a Cretan says “all Cretans are liars“ is often quoted with satisfaction in this context. But even here a brief reflection shows that such judgements concerning the sense or nonsense of an assertion have more to do with how we use our language, which perspective we take, than with the problem of how things are. Consider for a moment only the „switch“ from the first to the third person singular. While clearly the first person utterance involves the speaker in a performative self-contradiction the sentence „Linus, a Cretan says, all Cretans are liars“ is not nonsensical but „true“ (he actually said it!). Thus switching the perspective from the first to the third person changes the conditions of assertability. Similarly, if we modify the above „all“ statement and say „Most Cretans say that Cretans are Liars“ we might have nearly something of a social science „finding“, if the statement is based on some sampling of public opinion. Thus we become again aware that it is the *semantic system* and not some unproblematic “thing out there” that is at work when we try to adjudicate truth claims. In addition to the usual semantic distinction between object and observer we have to realize that the point, from where observations are made, matters. In other words we have to deal with the problem of “observing” the observation, that is we also have to move to an observation of a higher order. Interestingly enough this realization was systematically not dealt with in epistemology until the emergence of modern systems' theory. It was only in treatises about representation, such as the one of Giovan Battista Alberti, where the central perspective in painting was developed, that those problems were addressed. Contrasting a mirror image (which is a simple “repetition”) with a perspectival representation (which is the result of a deliberate “construction”), Alberti (Salvemini, 1990) realizes the “artificial” nature of such a representation—despite the fact that the picture thus construed is taken to be “true” rendition of reality.

Thus, without wanting to go deeper into the problem of dissolving paradoxes, one thing seems pretty obvious, i.e. that „truth“ is not a property of the „world“, but of *assertions about the world*. In short, truth claims require indeed a non-idiosyncratic, i.e. non-relativist point of view, but from this fact it does not follow that this non-idiosyncratic or inter-subjective framework is the world „out there“. This leads us to the second problem mentioned above concerning the correspondence between „things“ and concepts. The world is “there” but it is not directly reachable by us and thus adjudicating the issue

whether or not our concept capture the reality „behind“ the concepts might be as futile as trying to convert foreign currency into the „real money“ of dollars and gold (Buscemi, 1993) All ‘money’ is a convention determining value and facilitating exchange, even if some forms or some of the materials might command at times greater appreciation than others. Nevertheless, it seems rather odd when material conditions—as for example in the case of in gold—are adduced as reasons, particularly in our a time that has seen a revolutionary increase in the *virtual nature* of money, as the blips on the computer screens of currency dealers demonstrate. In short, a moment's reflection discloses, that the negation of “things” as brute facts, or of the “givenness” of the world (Searle 1995) does not dispense with „truth“, only that the criteria for such claims are no longer decidable by simple iconic or representational criteria. In other words: we never test against the world but always only against some theory of the world, and we “translate” from one theory to the other instead of simply pointing to things.

This approach to truth turns our attention away from representational issues and focuses instead on the role of metaphors, on the ways of looking at the world and of utilizing a vocabulary for describing the world. For example the change from a conception of politics exemplified by the notion of a "body politic" to the one of "contract" in the 17th century was one of the most far-reaching conceptual revolutions, as an entirely new set of significant puzzles emerged (Kratowil, 1994) The important point to realize however is that the new conceptualization can neither be reached from the old vocabulary and its logic, nor can the new set of concepts or questions be interpreted as hitting upon or approximating a „correct“ representation of reality. A community or a state are neither a „body“ nor a "contract" and while the latter vocabulary raises a host of new questions by foregrounding certain problems while putting others into the background, it cannot be said that the change involved is one of a greater approximation to a pre-existing reality. In short, the new vocabulary lets us see things in a new way and creates new opportunities for different practices and experiences that side step the old vocabulary which was getting into the way. As Richard Rorty suggested:

Such creations are not the result of successfully fitting together pieces of a puzzle. They are not discoveries of a reality behind appearances, of an undistorted view of the whole picture with which to replace myopic views of its parts. The proper analogy is... the invention of new tools taking the place of old tools. To come up with such a vocabulary is more like discarding the lever and the chock because one envisages the pulley (Rorty, 1989:12)

A perfect example along these lines is e.g. the refusal of the American founding fathers to speak the language of sovereignty in the European idiom. Based on the understandings of the „republican tradition“ that reaches via

Harrington, Botero and Machiavelli to Polybios and indeed back to Aristotle, and innovating in their attempts to find a solution to the twin dilemmas of tyranny and anarchy (Deudney, 1995), they created a constitutional order and a federal form of government that solved both dilemmas simultaneously. But precisely because the remedies for both dilemmas required contradictory organizational answers—enabling and disabling the government at the same time—the idea of a supreme authority being the final arbiter in all cases had to be abandoned. The problem of how authority and legitimacy could be joined was thereby posed in a different way, but the old puzzles of sovereignty, i.e. its indivisibility and its location—problems that had preoccupied theorists from Bodin to Hobbes—did not even arise. Now neither the government, nor one of its branches, nor even „the people“ possessed or were the locus of sovereignty. Rather the Constitution itself and the political process—described by Lincoln in the felicitous phrase as the “government of the people, for the people by the people”—was thus legitimated, institutionalized and exalted as „sovereign“.

Similar observations can be made in the case of the emerging European Union. The usual vocabulary according to which the member states „transferred“ some of their sovereignty to Brussels where it must now somewhere “lie around” (Waeber, 1994: 11) is hardly useful in illuminating the problem. Here the old vocabulary gets in the way and the puzzles it creates are—quite significantly—not those of the political *praxis* which despite stop and go always manages to find new ways of coping, but rather of a representational „theory“ according to which sovereignty has to stand for something and if this something is no longer in its old place, it must have moved.

These last remarks have important implications for the third problem mentioned above, the issue of explanation. As we have seen questions about the changing nature of sovereignty are usually part and parcel of practical concerns and political projects. In other words many more concerns than merely causal connections enter into our queries for explanations, and it would be missing the point if we refused to answer such questions because they do not conform to the standard scientific form of a causal explanation. Two examples shall illustrate this point.

Let us first take one of the arguments in the globalization debate that states have increasingly become price takers rather than price makers (Strange, 1993). Obviously this argument was animated by a fear that the loss of control by public authorities might foretell the „end“ of the state and, consequently, speculations about the new importance of regions or of the new possibilities of networks (Castells, 2000), and their capacity to generate new forms of association have become the rage. But neither the fears, nor the hopes seem at closer inspection to be as appropriate as they were made out to be. States will remain central actors for the attainment of public goods because even from an economic perspective only states can properly guarantee property rights. Furthermore, networks are not the simple non-hierarchical forms that can generate egalitarian patterns of participation. After all, crucial nodal points

emerge quickly or rather never disappear as the work on “hubs” in the global economy show (Sassen, 2000), which introduce the effects usually associated with hierarchies. Finally, the fact that all of sub-Saharan Africa for example possesses only about the same number of telephones as Manhattan alone, demonstrates that the prospects for a global participatory democracy are nothing but phantasms (Everard 2000: 34).

But be this as it may. What is important here is that both with the fears about the benign consequences of the global transformation questions about legitimacy and responsibility inevitably entered the picture. Behind the question of how things work, or how they came into being—which involves us in examining the causal connections and the tracing of paths— we see here also a pronounced concern with the prospect that these transformations might *endanger* our political projects. They might not only *not* accomplish the purported goals but foreclose future choices, since attempts of reasserting „sovereignty“ at some later point cannot magically bring us back to a meanwhile increasingly imaginary status quo. As Louis Pauly once shrewdly remarked:

The social and political implications of expanding international capital mobility are not fully understood. The associated obligations of both states and citizens have not been clearly debated ... In short; if a regime of international capital mobility is now commonly depicted as inevitably governing the life of citizens in an increasingly global economy, the consent of the governed has not adequately been sought out....at issue is the legitimacy of an emergent regime, not the sovereignty of the states participating in it. (Pauly, 1995: 371)

A similar problematic emerges for Ruggie's example of the effects of a redescription of a policy problem concerning the current account deficit of the USA in the 90s (Ruggie, 1994). While traditional trade policy and the attendant „data“ are still predicated on the view that separate economies are dealing with each other through arms length exchanges, the emergence of global production has thoroughly upset this picture. For example, as it actually happened, anti-dumping charges could be brought by a Japanese firm producing typewriters in the US against an American firm that imports the same commodity from its off shore facilities in the Third World. The growing divergence between ownership and location has diametrically opposed policy implications for employment and economic growth. Already more than a decade ago the US Department of Commerce pointed out „that the country's 1991 trade deficit of 28 billion would have been a 24 billion surplus if measured by US ownership rather than by the location of the production”. Which of these descriptions is appropriate and is taken as the unproblematic framework for orienting action is obviously not reducible to a question of simple causal connections, but must be assessed by taking into account the context and the problems we want to address.

In this view the concepts we use for practical matters are more like signals for action than labels for things. Precisely because we try to address practical problems with them, *judgement* rather than the truth of our generalization underlying our predictions or explanations are at stake. If we work from the assumption that the world in whose making we are involved is contingent, then our reasoning in making choices as well as in explaining them will be more concerned with tracing the process of deliberation, with the mapping of alternatives, with the (im) plausibility of counter-factuals and the intricacies resulting from the famous „Cleopatra’s nose“ problem of Pascal, rather than from the issues of subsumption under nomic laws generalizations or logical necessities. This involves us in a certain paradox.

The better our explanations of a concrete phenomenon is the better established the causal connections must be (Elster, 1978:175). However, in order to distinguish causation from mere correlation we have to engage in counterfactual analysis. But this means that the strength of the causal argument ultimately depends on the plausibility of comparing the actual with some counterfactuals, i.e. with the construction of other plausible worlds. Which of the plausible world is selected as a plausible alternative depends on what we think then agents in question know about their „world“, what dispositions we impute to them and which factors we hold constant and consider as „constraints“ (Hawthorne, 1991:167f). Such deliberations, in turn, justify our judgements about available alternatives.

The upshot of this argument is that traditional theories, or rather traditional epistemological ideals, might be of little help in understanding problems of action, as they are silent on the issue of „invention“ on the one hand (that is in imagining other worlds) and on the question of how to classify an action on the other hand. In other words, contrary to the idea of traditional epistemology we see that „causal“ explanations which analyze phenomena in terms of efficient causes, are only a small part of what we want to know when we ask for an explanation. Equally important is often the question of what the phenomenon of the situation at hand is a "case“ of (Wendt, 1999, chap. 2). This might require „constitutive“ explanations, i.e. placing a phenomenon in a context and showing how it fits with certain other phenomena and practices, rather than naming the antecedent conditions of the present situation. What is at issue here is rather the “ what is it” than the "what was it caused by" that gives rise to the question and demands an answer. The latter questions are certainly not irrelevant or superfluous, but they can not by themselves sustain the claim that only questions of this type need to be asked. And neither can they sustain the claim that only answers given to these types of questions deserve the name of an explanation. What sovereignty is and how it functions i.e. how it informs our practices (Kratochwil, 2002), is a different question of what brought this institutional form into existence. The latter might require a historical account that however will be more of a narrative than a statement of nomic laws or causal necessities. The former will involve accounts that focus on the

relationship of the whole to its parts rather than on efficient causes. It is this thought that justifies the notion of interdisciplinary research—as in the design of this European University Institute.

III.

At this point let us tie together some of the considerations concerning the problem of theory and practice. Different from the conventional approach that focuses on issues of methodology and starts from some preconceived notion of *the scientific method* and of conceiving of theory building solely in terms of applying these standards to a new subject matter, I argued that beginning with a greater appreciation of the problems of praxis and its contingencies represents a more promising avenue for building better theories. Such a critical reflection on praxis corrects some of the blind spots and unwarranted claims of traditional theorizing, particularly in view of the peculiarities of the social world. As I argued, the notion that we can arrive at warranted knowledge when we test our theories against the "world out there", is rather naïve, even when applied to the traditional hard sciences. But such a conception is even more problematic for the social world that is not natural but continuously being constructed by the activities of the agents. This world of artifice comes into being only through certain concepts and common understandings—a problem already mentioned by Aristotle's famous remarks in the second chapter of book One of his *Politics*—and all attempts of going "behind" these concepts to „reality“ itself are rather misconceived.

Theory conceived as a critical and self-reflexive enterprise does not deal with the social world as if it were something like a big furniture store where the social facts stand around like tables chairs or couches, analogous to "natural kinds", quite aside from the fact that this latter image of science seems to be beholden to an ideal that certainly is no longer held by scientists or philosophers of science. Instead, what we saw is that a particular mode of explanation that focuses on the constitution of the phenomena and their fit within a certain institutional order, is of particular importance for our understanding of the social world. Seeing what something is will not be simply matching a concept to some external reality, because our concepts and vocabularies are, as we have said, always involves us in the making of this world, in a political project. Consequently, they are not only contestable, they also have fuzzy boundaries, because they usually involve several dimensions (Davis, 2001). Who would not remember the controversies about what can count as a democracy in both the comparative and international relations literature? Precisely because our concepts do not represent natural kinds but usually develop out of a paradigmatic example, which then is applied to other cases by extensions and analogies, as the cognitive revolution in psychology has shown (Lakoff 1987), we cannot simply follow the classical procedures of classification of genus and

species via the *differentia specifica*. Thus although neither classical ontology nor the categories of the mind provide the incontrovertible fundament that can silence all disagreement, such a world, accessible to us only by our very own constructs, is nevertheless, far from arbitrary.

Coming to terms with these parameters of our understanding means not only to understand the social world as a product of history but also to understand historical reality itself always as a cut through many possible worlds. Instead of understanding the world as a "given" and deriving possibilities either from the telos inherent in things or the overall historical process, we have to realize that the ontology of „things“ and objects we take for granted in everyday life, depends always on a specific selection out of a manifold of possibilities.

„Seeing“ this, is to engage in precisely the enterprise of theorizing that begins with the original astonishment (*thaumazein*) and the ensuing inquiry very much like the Aristotelian account on the purpose and origin of theorizing. It is, as it was for Aristotle and in his many successors through the ages, still a "view", but it is no longer a view of things that always have to be “by necessity” so, as Aristotle believed, or as others would have it, of universally valid statements a la Popper’s “Third World”(Popper, 1972). As I argued above, apparently not even nature is fixed, but certainly not the historical world. Nevertheless, theorizing remains charged with the tasks of providing a “view of the whole”, even if the latter is only partial and a historical product that is always in the process of becoming. This might be disappointing for those who, like Hobbes, still believed in a mode of social reflection *more geometrico*, as well as for those who believe in the eternal and indubitable categories of the mind, because they fear that otherwise the original Cartesian anxiety would paralyze us all. Having shed the metaphysical props of eternity and necessity, it is a view that, on the contrary, sets us free to make our historical world and to take responsibility for the political projects that we try to realize. Thus, in spite of its contingency and historicity, there cannot be anything more practical than such a type of theory.

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