

In Defence of Pluralism in the Social Sciences

Michael Keating

University of Aberdeen
School of Social Science
Dunbar Street
Aberdeen AB24 3QY
Email: Michael.keating@abdn.ac.uk

Donatella della Porta

Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute,
Badia Fiesolana, 50014 S. Domenico di Fiesole, Italy
Email: Donatella.dellaporta@eui.eu

Abstract

There are five levels in social inquiry: ontology; epistemology; approaches; methodology; and methods, which we see as means of gathering information. There is no determinate relationship such that one school will consistently choose the same options all the way down. We can cross between what are often seen as competing world views, at various of these levels. Natural sciences have not arrived at a unified field theory and there is no reason why social sciences have to do so.

Key words: methodology; pluralism; epistemology

Discovering Pluralism

As with many other social phenomena, scientific reflection is prompted by contingent events. In our case, this was the need to develop a methodological course for doctoral students coming to the European University Institute with different disciplinary backgrounds, national traditions and individual preferences. This, initially pragmatic, task stimulated us, although we had never thought of ourselves as methodologists, to reflect more deeply on our methodological choices and those of our students. It was only towards the end of the (three years) preparation of our edited volume on *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (Della Porta and Keating, 2008) (henceforth *Approaches and Methodologies*) that we started to use the term *methodological pluralism* to describe what we were doing. Adding *A pluralistic perspective* as subtitle of the volume— as a conscious but not yet fully worked-out choice—had the positive effect of forcing us to reflect more systematically about our central proposition. However, it also obliged us to explain more clearly what this really means and what it does not. The term pluralism has a positive normative charge but it is used in various ways and, if it is to be more than a liberal platitude, we need to delimitate more clearly our own conceptualization of the term.

As we explain below, we see methodological pluralism in one sense as an empirical concept, pointing to the way that most science research occupies a broad middle-ground rather than conforming to the strict criteria postulated by the various competing schools. Most scholars work with nuanced assumptions and a moderate

epistemological position and combine approaches in rather pragmatic ways. At the same time, methodological pluralism represents a normative view that in order for the social science to develop, we need to promote diversity, rather than a single way of doing things. Here, we go beyond relativism, as acknowledgment of the existence of different ways of doing things, and to stress what unites, instead than what divides the social sciences; unity, however comes from opening up the field rather than insisting on conformity to one model.

[Key Quote 1 about here]

Science Wars

The social sciences are given to recurrent debates and disputes about approaches, methodologies and methods, which often take the form of a dichotomous contrast running between opposing world views. On each side we are presented with a pillar running from ontology, through epistemology and on to specific methods, with no possibility of crossing over to other pillar or mixing elements from each. For example, Marsh and Stoker (1995: 290) wrote that ‘...within the discipline there are authors utilising perspectives as diverse as rational choice theory and discourse analysis. The former operates from a positivist epistemological position and emphasises quantitative analysis; the latter operates from a relativist epistemological position and concentrates on qualitative analysis.’ By the third edition of their book, they presented a much more complex picture (Marsh and Stoker, 2010).

We agree that the Manichean vision is misleading. We identified, in *Approaches and Methodologies*, five levels of social inquiry that need to be addressed, and at which differences are manifested. The most basic is

ontology, what the social world consists of, how far concepts correspond to real phenomena and what are the building blocks of analysis. The second is epistemology, of how we can know about the world. The third is approaches, schemes of analysis often based on assumptions about relationships, for example between rational-choice, actor-based approaches and culturalist or socio-biological approaches. The fourth is methodology, the way in which we operationalise our concepts and choose to analyse them. The fifth is methods, which we see as means of gathering information. While there is a close connection among these levels, we argued that there is no determinate relationship such that one school will consistently choose the same options all the way down. We therefore deny a necessary progress from a specific ontology → epistemology → approach → methodology → method.

The argument that social sciences must have a consistent set of ontologies and epistemologies owes a lot to the natural sciences, where knowledge is seen as consistent and cumulative. It is assumed in this analogy that science is about generating theories that reflect as accurately as possible the material world. Ironically, the natural sciences themselves can go for a long time without agreement on some of the fundamental building blocks of knowledge. Physics has two quite different conceptions of light, which are used as appropriate to answer questions or to explain different phenomena. Scientists might aspire to a unified or field theory that would resolve the conflict between relativity and quantum mechanics but this does not stop them from doing good science in the meantime; and it may be that the conflict will never be resolved. Nor does science always insist on an identity between theory and material reality; theories rather are often ways of understanding the hidden dimensions of phenomena not amenable to positivist description (which now seems to

amount to most of the universe). Science proceeds rather by conceptualisation and both concepts and units of analysis depend on the question we are asking. As Rescher (1993: 41) notes: ‘There is no simple, unique, ideally adequate concept-framework for “describing the world.” The botanist, horticulturalist, landscape gardener and painter will operate from diverse cognitive “points of view” to describe the self-same garden.’

If this is so in relation to the natural world, it is even more so in the social domain. This is because, even more than in the natural sciences, we are relying on concepts at a high level of abstraction. Only if we insist on a one-to-one correspondence between concepts and a concrete social world can we insist that our concepts are correct and other people’s are wrong (Kratochwil, 2008). Indeed even most positivist social scientists will admit that social science works with concepts and abstractions that should not be ‘reified’; but some of them nonetheless insist that there must be a single grid of concepts, usable for all purposes (Sartori, 2009).

Going beyond the epistemological level, choices have to be made throughout the research process, which are not always easy to align on one easily defined cleavage such as positivists versus interpretivism, and even less quantitative versus qualitative methods. There is, that is, not just one choice (and one *Methodenstreit*), but a plurality of choices and tensions. The presence of multiple points of contention makes dialogues between different positions, to a certain extent, easier. As pluralist approaches to group politics contend, overlapping conflicts also mean overlapping membership, and therefore blurred, permeable boundaries. Moreover, none of the issues of disagreement can be defined as a dichotomous choice, being rather continuum. Social science owes much both to natural science and to the humanities and indeed has developed as a ‘third way’ between them. It thus has the possibility of

borrowing from one or the other or from both without having to confine itself to the epistemology or methods of either.

Beyond Dichotomies

Epistemological questions traditionally pits positivist versus interpretivist (hermeneutic) views, often linked with ontological assumptions about the existence of a physical world or the reality of the social world. In practice, assumptions about how we can capture the reality – and how much of it– vary in more subtle ways. Few believe that social scientists are able easily to get hold of the external reality, but few believe that a reality does not exist at all. Positivist researchers recognise the importance of concepts and theories as filters between the external reality and our knowledge of it, and the need to avoid reifying them. Constructivists do not abandon the search for some inter-subjective knowledge, however contextual and contested. The focus on either the external reality or the subjective perception of it is a matter of degree, and often changes as we move from a research project to the next, or even as we report on our research. Critical realism provides an intuitively plausible middle ground that has now been given a rigorous intellectual justification (Bhaskar, 2002).

[Key Quote 2 about here]

The same can be said of the division on the search for generalisable knowledge versus the understanding of specific case, or for explanation versus understanding. Even though the various epistemological positions differ on their assumptions about social science's capacity to develop covering laws, most researchers combine, in a Gramscian way, pessimism of the reason with optimism of the will; they express some scepticism about our capacity to build general laws (and so test and test again

the results of previous research), but also some hope that research on specific cases can produce results that are useful also to understand other cases.

Beyond the shifting balance between generalisable and contextual knowledge (often solved with the search for historically specific but generalisable knowledge) preferences vary on the means to achieve it. The debates between inductive construction of theories versus deductive verification/falsification of them cuts across positivists as well as constructivists. Indeed, the distinction itself can be exaggerated. What is often described as the deductive approach, starting with a theory and testing it empirically, is not truly deductive, since deduction proceeds entirely by reasoning from premises. It is better described as the hypothetico-deductive approach or deductive/empirical approach, combining both pure theory and empirical work. Even the 'deductive' part of this is rarely truly deductive in practice. Rather, the initial hypotheses are constructed on the basis of previous research in a rather inductive manner. On the other hand, more directly inductive research usually starts from theoretical questions and produces new ones, without each time throwing away the results of previous work in order to start from the beginning. Grounded theory has long sought a middle way here (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), although it now covers a broad field, with some its exponents more insistent on universalisation than others. As Howard S. Becker observed long ago, challenging the idea that quantitative and qualitative research each has its distinct epistemological assumptions : '(the) two styles of works do place differing emphasis on the understanding of specific of historical or ethnographic cases as opposed to general laws of social interaction. But the two styles also imply one another. Every analysis of a case rests, explicitly or implicitly, on some general laws, and every general law supposes that the investigation of particular cases would show that law at work' (Becker, 1996: 53-54.)

Moving to methods, the traditional sharp distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods can be questioned. Quantitative methods require qualitative observations at various points; and qualitative analysis often refers to quantities in attempts to support the validity of its arguments. Mixed-method strategies combining large and small N and triangulation of different methods are rarely opposed in principle, even though not often applied in practice. The identification of positivist epistemology with quantitative methods on the one hand, and interpretivist epistemology with qualitative methods on the other, hides as much as it reveals. While ethnography and qualitative methods are primarily about the way subjects construct their world-views, they also have a strong orientation to the knowledge of the external reality. On the other hand, quantitative methods are also used to investigate subjective perceptions. Discourse analysis, even in its more subjectivist forms, may use quantitative techniques. Theory (method) driven versus field (problem) driven strategies divide ethnographers as well as quantitative researchers.

We can continue to map disagreements that cut across the traditional epistemological and methodological divides. Scholars disagree on the best units of analysis of their research. Ontological individualists insist that only individuals exist, but this is to confuse real existence with the conceptual categories of research. Individuals exist in a physical sense but that does not mean that conceptual categories beyond the individual are not important. Methodological individualists prefer individuals as the units of analysis on the basis of the assumption that only individuals can act. Others instead take social interactions and/or complex institutions as the constitutive units of their disciplines. Here as well, however, there is space for combinations of units of analysis in multilevel designs in both qualitative as well as quantitative research. Indeed, much survey research uses individuals as units of

observation and analysis but invokes characteristics at a higher level of analysis, such as social class, as the explanatory variables; that is there is not a necessary correspondence between the units of analysis and the level of analysis, which is a theoretical question. The choice of individual or collectivity depends once again on the question being asked. Similarly the age-old conflict between structure and agency cuts across other divisions. Beliefs in the supreme explanatory capacity of economic structures versus values or interest versus norms have kept alive most disputes in the social science beyond epistemological or methodological boundaries.

Nor is social science cumulative. Consider what the American political scientists do with their 'bringing in back in' debates. These typically involve a search for a parsimonious theory of social action that could unify or define the field; behaviourism and rational choice in their time are examples. Then political scientists observe that their theories are either explaining less and less about phenomena, or depend on ever more stringent assumptions (or both) and seek to round them out. They do this by re-inventing old concepts while seeking to subject them to much the same logic as their existing models. The result is a reincorporation of ideas from adjacent fields or disciplines but while losing the richness of the concepts themselves. So we had the state brought back in during the 1980s without an appreciation of the strong historical and normative connotations of the term. History was brought back without sufficient appreciation of the subtleties and traps of historiography or the way in which the past does not merely influence the present; the present influences our accounts and understandings of the past. Ideas are brought back, but as a separate variable, their weight balanced against that of interests as though they were analytically and practically distinct. Norms and values are brought back without drawing on the rich tradition of cultural analysis in Weberian sociology. Culture,

which is essentially an inter-subjective concept, based on relationships among people, is brought back reduced to an individual-level characteristic so as to fit the prevailing positivist and individualist paradigm (although we have just noticed an effort to ‘bring back in’ Weberian notions of culture in Hall and Lamont, 2009).

[Key Quote 3 about here]

Faced with this complexity, the forced nature of the binary choices often presented and the existence in research practice of a large middle ground, we made a plea in *Approaches and Methodologies* for a pluralist perspective, combining different methods as appropriate for the problem under investigation.

Towards Pluralism

Our pluralist proposal goes, however, beyond the observation of a plurality of methodological cleavages and the denial of the presence of one best way to knowledge. We also plea for a *principled* pluralism.

There are those who think that their own approach is right and that everyone should conform to it. Others think that they have the one right way but realize that it is not shared by everyone and they might even be in the minority, so others must be accommodated; these are the pragmatic pluralists. In Caterino and Schram’s definition (2006: 4), the current state in political science is characterized as a constrained pluralism, that is ‘a partial hegemony that limits methodological diversity’. This may take the form of liberal tolerance or what in the Cold War was known as peaceful co-existence. It may also take the form of a provisional pluralism in which the existence of a diversity of points of view can be considered to enrich the discipline but then provide a market in which truth will drive out error. So eventually pluralism will give way to received truth. This might be considered analogous to the natural sciences,

were it not for the fact, as noted above, that the natural sciences last for a long time with competing theories. Then there are those who think that pluralism can be justified in itself; these are the principled pluralists, among whom we placed ourselves.

Principled pluralism, is more than the observation of the dilemma between complexity and parsimony and the varied approaches that it produces. Nor is it a matter of accepting the legitimacy of distinct and self-contained schools which, for practical reasons cannot be reconciled and which we must, as liberals, tolerate even where disagreeing with them. It is not merely a matter of humbly accepting the limits to knowledge. On the contrary, it is something positive. We argue for pluralism at a deep level and as an enduring feature of the social sciences.

This conception of pluralism is consistent with seeing the social sciences not as a single, cumulative enterprise but as a complex field (Steinmetz, 2005). A pluralist vision involves some assumptions about the ways in which disciplines are perceived and in the narrative of their evolution. In this sense, it is not (only) normative, but also reflect on the existing plurality of ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies (not to speak of methods). There are multiple points of connection, comparison and mutual learning, which cannot be systematized or placed within exclusive schools and pillars. So methodological pluralism recognizes that, in the development of the social sciences, a plurality of points of view not only have coexisted, but also have been often in dialogue with each other. In the actual development of research and theorization in the social science, the image that methods and methodologies derive directly from prior epistemological or even ontological positions is misleading. Most of the time, these choices are made for more contingent and pragmatic reasons. The availability of data sets as well as the need to compare different contexts can push towards the use of more or less sophisticated statistical analysis. Collaborations

among scholars with different methodological skills and experiences in problem-driven research projects favour triangulation of methods. The state-of-the art in one subfield can push others towards quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods to make research more interesting. Availability of research funds as well as individual skills of course also play a role in the methodological choices. Attention to micro-meso-macrolinks and causal mechanisms often pushes towards combinations on different units of analysis and related theories (from structuralism to symbolic interactionism). Epistemological preferences are therefore often constructed ‘in action’, and/or remain implicit in a research design as well as in the construction of a scholar’s professional identity.

[Key Quote 4 about here]

A methodologically pluralist approach does not accept the teleological or linear narrative of institutionalization and paradigm consolidation. It thus avoids the circularity of continually re-introducing concepts in an illusory pursuit of completeness. Progress represents, rather, a dialectical process of challenge, incorporation and adaptation. Concepts borrowed from adjacent disciplines are not stripped down or adapted to the existing paradigm but taken seriously in their complexity. Of course, if we brought back in everything that might be relevant, we would be overwhelmed by complexity and defeat the purpose of the exercise, which is to gain some analytical leverage. Social knowledge must then by definition be partial and the search for a parsimonious and unified theory is an illusion.

Lastly, let us make clear what pluralism is not. It is not a matter merely of accepting the legitimacy of distinct and self-contained schools which, for practical reasons cannot be reconciled and which we must, as liberals, tolerate even where disagreeing with them. Nor is it merely a matter of humbly accepting the limits to

knowledge. Pluralism does not entail a hybridity or synthesis in which differences disappear or purely pragmatic compromises are made. On the contrary, it is something positive at a rather deeper level and as an enduring feature of the social sciences. Pluralism does not develop from pillarization. We can draw by a parallel here between methodological pluralism and social and cultural pluralism in contemporary liberal theory. Here the existence of distinct cultures is seen not as a problem but an asset, enriching the experience of society and individuals. For this, it is necessary that the diverse cultures not be sealed from each other but interact; but the condition for this is that they themselves be maintained rather than dissolving into the melting pot. There may be syntheses of different approaches and some may be transformed radically, but the aim is not the creation of a unified theory; since we argue that such a theory is impossible, any effort to do so would stifle the development of the discipline. Pluralism emphatically does not entail a relativism or indifference, in which any approach must be considered as good as any other, with no basis for choosing between them; rather they must challenge each other and defend themselves on the basis of their utility for answering the questions that they pose. A nihilism that contends that questions cannot be answered does not meet this requirement any more than does an insistence on the strict canons of positivism.

A European approach?

It would contradict our central argument to advocate a single European political science or to identify some essential items to distinguish it from the American variety. Yet the European context is important. Exponents of rational choice, of constructivism or of historical institutionalism are much the same on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, however, there is a greater plurality of approaches. National

intellectual traditions are multiple, and there is less of a tendency for one approach to dominate at any time or in any institution. As with the European project itself, different perspectives and expectations must live together in greater or lesser harmony without a shared telos.

Speaking of national traditions risks reifying them and suggesting a uniformity that does not exist, yet certain ideas continue to be stressed in particular countries, as do specific approaches. For example, the concept of the state has a meaning in France and Germany that is difficult to convey in the United States or the United Kingdom. By contrast, American scholars, while downplaying the concept of the state in domestic politics, often give it supreme importance in international relations. French social science traditionally tends to an abstraction that contrasts with the empiricism of the English-speaking world. As emerging disciplines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political science and sociology were linked in some countries to the older disciplines of history and law and these legacies are still visible. In many countries, international relations emerged as a discipline separate from comparative politics. The division between political science and sociology is sharper in the United Kingdom and the United States than in France or Italy. Sometimes these contrasts reflect differences in the political and social realities of the countries concerned. France has traditionally had a strong state. American politics has revolved around interest-group pluralism within a rather narrowly defined value system (at least until the revival of the religious cleavage). Yet the difference in intellectual emphasis does not always reflect an underlying social reality, as opposed to different ways of thinking about politics and society. There is thus great value in taking the concepts and ideas from one country and seeking to apply them comparatively, and

more generally in seeking concepts that travel, both as an aid to comparative research and as an antidote to methodological nationalism.

[Key Quote 5 about here]

There has always been an international market in ideas, peaking at times such as the Renaissance or the eighteenth-century Enlightenment; but since the twentieth century, this has greatly intensified. The existence of a common language, successively Latin, French and English, encourages this, but itself may shape the ideas and their reception. For our purposes, two arenas are important: the market of ideas within Europe, and transatlantic trade as the United States has ascended to a dominant position within the social science research world. For example, the ‘behavioural revolution’ in the 1960s was American in origin but powerfully affected European thinking from the 1970s onwards, emphasizing universalism, quantification and rigour. Rational choice theory, so influential from the 1980s, was not an American monopoly but was strongest there and was powerfully aided by the strength of US social science in the global market. Other ideas have more complex histories. Organizational analysis was imported from the United States in the 1950s by Michel Crozier and others, who transformed it into a particularly French form of science, the ‘sociology of organizations’. This in turn was taken up by British scholars and brought back into the English-speaking world. Here it encountered the ‘new institutionalism’, which had been working with similar ideas, starting from a different basis, as a reaction to behaviourism and rational choice. European sociology was influenced by American approaches, but also developed and then diffused new ideas of its own. Among others, French sociologist Alain Touraine was influenced by Parsonian functionalism when developing his theory of society, and European ethno-methodologists by Erwin Goffman. In all these fields, ideas developed by European

scholars travelled to the other side of the Atlantic, with particularly strong impacts on theorization and research on such issues as power (Foucault), communication (Habermas), culture (Bourdieu).

It would be deeply unfortunate if this process of learning and mutual influence were to be put at risk by the search for a unified European political science in the belief that only with our own paradigm can we survive in global competition.

References

- Becker, H. S. (1996) 'The Epistemology of Qualitative Research', in R. Jessor, A. Colby and R.A. Schwender (eds.) *Essays on Ethnography and Human Development*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp. 53-71,
- Bhaskar, R. (2002) *Reflections on meta-reality: transcendence, emancipation and everyday life*, New Delhi and London: Sage.
- Caterino, B. and Schram, S.F. (eds.) (2006) 'Introduction: Reframing the Debate', in B. Caterino and S. F. Schram (eds.), *Making Political Science Matter*, New York, New York University Press, pp. 1-16.
- Della Porta, D. and Keating, M. (eds.) (2008) *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1999) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, New York: Aldine Transaction.
- Hall, P. and Lamont, M. (2009) 'Introduction', in P. Hall and M. Lamont (eds.) *Successful Societies. How Institutions and Culture Affect Health*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-22.

- Kratochwil, F. (2008) 'Constructivism: what is is (not) and how it matters', in D. Della Porta and Mi. Keating (eds.) *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 80-98.
- Marsh, David and Gerry Stoker (1995), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Marsh, David and Gerry Stoker (2010), 'Introduction', in David March and Gerry Stoker (eds), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 3rd edn., Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp1-12..
- Rescher, N. (1993) *Pluralism. Against the Demand for Consensus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sartori, G. (2009) 'Concept misformation in comparative politics', in D. Collier and J. Gerring (eds) *Concepts and methods in social science: Giovanni Sartori and his legacy*, London: Routledge, pp.13-41.
- Steinmetz, G. (2005) 'Positivism and Its Others in the Social Sciences', in G. Steinmetz (ed.) *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences. Positivism and its Epistemological Others*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, pp. 1-57.

About the authors

Michael Keating is Professor of Politics and ESRC Professorial Fellow at the University of Aberdeen and was previously Professor of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. His principal interests are territorial politics and nationalism and he is currently working on a major project on Rescaling Europe.

Donatella della Porta is professor of sociology at the European University Institute, on leave of absence from the University of Florence, where she teaches political science. She has carried out comparative research mainly on political violence, social movements, corruption, public order policing.

Key Quotes:

‘The term pluralism has a positive normative charge but it is used in various ways and, if it is to be more than a liberal platitude, we need to delimitate more clearly our own conceptualization of the term’

‘Even though the various epistemological positions differ on their assumptions about social science’s capacity to develop covering laws, most researchers combine, in a Gramscian way, pessimism of the reason with optimism of the will’

‘The identification of positivist epistemology with quantitative methods on the one hand, and interpretativist epistemology with qualitative methods on the other, hides as much as it reveals’

‘In the actual development of research and theorization in the social science, the image that methods and methodologies derive directly from prior epistemological or even ontological positions is misleading’

‘It would contradict our central argument to advocate a single European political science or to identify some essential items to distinguish it from the American variety. Yet the European context is important.’