In Defence of Pluralism. Combining approaches in the social sciences

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Abstract

The social sciences have been racked by arguments about ontology, epistemology, approaches, methods and methodology. There is a tendency to reduce these to a dualist division between two schools. This is misleading, since there are numerous cross-cutting cleavages and there is no necessary correspondence between choices at each of the five levels. Instead of seeking a unified field theory, social scientists should see methodological pluralism as a positive and permanent feature. Pluralism exists at the level of the system, where the existence of different approaches sustains debate and innovation. It can also be a feature of individual research projects, where researchers can use different approaches to answer different questions, and can triangulate methods in search of better understanding of complex phenomena.

Social Science Wars

The social sciences are given to recurrent debates and disputes about approaches, methodologies and methods. These often become heated and ideological, taking on a life of their own as group signifiers but making the life of young researchers increasingly difficult. It was not always so. As Whimster (2007: 109) notes:

It is one of the heavy burdens of postgraduate training in social research methods that some part of this conflict has to be imbibed (even though the slightly more farcical situation seems to have been reached where these debates now come down to a choice between ‘hard’ quantitative methods v. ‘soft’ qualitative methods; a choice that makes risible any credible claim to research design). Weber simply walks across this line, seemingly unaware of the sound of gunfire.

There is indeed a narrative of the social sciences rooted in a positivistic approach, while on the opposite side there is a narrative of resistance to this, which takes an equally stark and absolute form. The result is a vision of disciplines divided along a main cleavage, with scholars aligning around the two poles. Marsh and Stoker (1995: 290) write uncritically 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.’ We consider this Manichean vision misleading. On the one hand, most scholars do not locate themselves on the (assumed) main cleavage before starting their research and, on the other, the choices made vis-à-vis issues of epistemology, methodology and methods are multiple and cross-cut those cleavages.

In fact, social scientists have different opinions on a number of questions that run through all steps of the research process. These choices 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. Additionally, none of the issues of disagreement can be defined as a dichotomous choice, being instead practiced more as a continuum. As social sciences have been built as a ‘third way’ between natural science and the humanities the temptation to borrow from one or the other has always been present, in tension with the attempt to define the specificities of a different field.

In various chapters of our Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences (della Porta and Keating 2008a), we identified several axes of disagreement, rather than a single one. We looked at the consequent choices, presenting some of the oppositions but also the trade-offs and possible
complementarities. We also identified a large middle ground, in which most social science work is actually located.

**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 however in more nuanced ways. Few believe that social scientists are able to easily get hold of the external reality, but few believe that a reality does not exist at all. Positivist researchers recognize the importance of concepts and theories as filters between the external reality and our knowledge of it, while 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).

The same can be said of the division on the search for generalizable 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 generalizable and contextual knowledge (often solved with the search for historically specific but generalizable 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. What is more, the distinction 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 grounded theory itself now covers a broad field, with some its exponents more insistent on universalization than others. As Howard S. Becker observed long ago, challenging the existence of specific epistemological assumptions for quantitative versus qualitative research: ‘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’ (7)

Moving to methods, the traditional distinction of qualitative versus quantitative methods has often been questioned. Quantitative methods require qualitative observations in different steps of the research project; and qualitative analysis often refers to quantities in attempts to support the validity of certain arguments. ‘Quantitative researchers rarely totally deny the utility of qualitative research’ (Bryman 1988), and qualitative researchers usually have no preconception against numbers. Mixed-
method strategies combining large and small N and triangulation of different methods are rarely opposed in principle, even though (especially the former) not often applied in practice. It has been recognized long ago that the assumed parallel between positivist epistemology and quantitative methods on the one hand, and interpretativist epistemology and 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 unites 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. 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.

Finally, social scientists are divided about their main constituency. Some support strong disciplinary boundaries, as they believe in the necessity to build up internally shared concepts and norms, while others want to cross as much as possible those boundaries, or even reshuffling them (as in some readings of the report of the Gulbenkian Foundation, see Wallerstein et al. 1996). Some believe in the neutrality of the social sciences and in their capacity to act in a value-free way, distinguishing between normative theories and social sciences. Others consider instead that social scientists cannot and should not avoid hot social problems, but to the contrary contribute to address them, either helping the governments or siding with the subaltern classes. On all these choices, various degrees of radicality exist, and researchers tend to recognize the risks of both extreme positions, find different balances in different moments of their activities.

**The Meaning of Pluralism**

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 in the Social Sciences* (della Porta and Keating, 2008) for a pluralist perspective, combining different methods as appropriate for the problem under investigation. Pluralism, as we noted, can have different meanings as there can be various pluralist practices.

In our understanding, pluralism is not to be confused with the pluralist tradition in American political science, as ‘methodological conception, that stresses the need to analyze the plurality of political and social interest groups for a realistic understanding of political outcomes’ (Pipers Woerterbuch zur Politik, , http://www.hyperpolitics.net/hyperdictionary/index.php?entry=pluralism ). We also are definitively not going back to the old debate in the analysis of local power between
elitist, analysing reputation of power, and pluralist, addressing positional power. Rather we are addressing pluralism within the scientific enterprise itself.

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 below, that the natural sciences last for a long time with competing theories.

Then there are those who think that pluralism can be justified itself; these are the principled pluralists, among whom we placed ourselves when we chose to add A Pluralist Perspective as subtitle for our Approaches and Methodologies. We have since been challenged to explain how pluralism is possible, what it really means (other than a liberal platitude) and how approaches can properly be combined rather than mixed and matched eclectically. 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 that of 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, even if it does somehow exist. The third has to do with 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 about methodology, the way in which we operationalize 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. This is most obvious in the choice of methods, since it is (as mentioned) patently untrue that the choice of quantitative vs. qualitative methods is driven by deeper questions of ontology and epistemology. We make the argument more strongly, however, by disputing also the other supposed natural affinities. Refusing the idea that the social sciences have to build upon one and just one specific ontology → epistemology → approach -→ methodology -→ method, we plead for a wider pluralism.

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 (the ‘correspondence theory’ of truth). In practice, the natural sciences 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 phenomena. Scientists mostly aspire to a unified field theory that would resolve the conflict between relativity and quantum mechanics but this does not stop them 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 conceptualization 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 level of abstraction beyond the concrete. 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). Yet even most positivist social scientists will admit that social science works with concepts and abstractions that should not be ‘reified’. Variables, the building blocks of much positivist comparative research, are even more of an abstraction, based on a particular conceptualization and a definition that is provided by the research question and not by the ‘real world’ itself. It is puzzling to find positivists insisting that we should proceed by variables and, at the same time, operating with a correspondence theory of the truth. Cases are, of course, also conceptual abstractions.

Nor is social science cumulative. On the contrary, especially in American political science, it seems to proceed by a search for parsimony, leading to ever more reductionist theories, which then need to be corrected by adding back in factors that were thrown overboard in the previous round. So political scientists have in recent decades ‘brought back in’ the actor, the state, history and ideas (this is discussed below). 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.

Methodological pluralism, however, is more than the observation of this 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 would argue for pluralism at a rather deeper level and as an enduring feature of the social sciences. 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.

This conception of pluralism is consistent with seeing the social sciences not as a single, cumulative enterprise but as a field. A pluralist vision involves some assumptions about the ways in which disciplines are perceived (as a Luhmann system versus a Bourdieu field) 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). So there are multiple points of connection, comparison and mutual learning. These cannot be systematized or placed within exclusive schools and pillars.

Lastly, let us make clear what pluralism is not. It does not mean that social sciences should exist in separate silos, in peaceful co-existence. Pluralism does not develop from pillarization. On the contrary, channels and communication are required. As developed below, pluralism requires high quality discourse among different points of view. Social scientists have different values: ‘Different practitioners of social inquiry necessarily approach the world with very different value-ordering and regard different aspects of particular phenomena as being of interest’ (Jackson 2004, 95). As Max Weber had suggested long ago, the solution is not to aim at excluding some of these values, in
the name of an homogeneous logic, but to make these values explicit and implement related
methodological choices in rigorous ways. Nor does pluralism mean a hybridity or synthesis in
which differences disappear or purely pragmatic compromises are made. And it 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.

**Pluralism as a Systemic Feature**

Pluralism, as a feature of social science as a whole and in our sense, requires communication across
the field. Communication does not require that we share the same foundations, as the more
positivist social scientists often insist; if it did, we would have made little progress indeed. We do
not need to share conceptualizations of things in order to communicate; concepts are always partial,
fallible; we can never say that our concept is ‘right’ (Rescher 1993). To say this is not, however, to
go to the other extreme and insist that we can just assert anything we like and demand that other
people take us seriously. Rescher (1993) discerns four grounds for disagreement:

- Theses: answers to questions about facts;
- Reasons: grounds, what counts as evidence;
- Standards: ways and means of weighing evidence;
- Objectives: ultimate purpose of investigation

The conventional positivist would argue that the first can be resolved by appeal to the evidence,
while disagreement on the second and third would make debate and exchange impossible. In
practice, however, we do argue all the time about these things and refine our standards as a result.
Social science, we would argue, may progress, but not in a linear manner. It can do this in more or
in less productive ways.

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. So culture,
which is essentially an inter-subjective concept, based on relationships among people, is reduced to
an individual-level characteristic so as to fit the prevailing positivist and individualist paradigm, as
in Lane and Ersson (2005), or the less sophisticated works on social capital, including Putnam
(1993).

In contrast, observing the plurality of choices and the multiplicity of options in the evolution of the
social sciences, 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. In a similar vein, Keith Topper talked of ‘the disorder of political inquiry’, advocating a critical pluralism, Peter Galison of ‘trading zones’ within disciplined field of inquiry (both cited in Caterino and Schram 2006, 4) and Schram (2004) of a ‘post paradigmatic’ social science.

This means that it is not sufficient for a plurality of points of view to coexist; they must also be in dialogue with each other. This is not just at one level, say that of epistemology, after which dialogue is closed off or, at the other end, methods, but right the way through. As mentioned above, the idea that in the concrete development of research and theorization, choice of methods and methodologies derive in direct ways from assumed epistemological or even ontological positions is misleading. Bhaskar (2002: 44) criticizes the ‘poverty of purely abstract, formal, analytical reasoning. There is nowhere in science where you will actually get a stable belief system coherently worked out… Where that happens is in the writing up of a research report so that it can be well refereed and published in a journal and start your career. Otherwise scientists never obey the laws of logic, they never observe analytical reasoning. They always think dialectically.’

Most of the time, choices of methods and methodologies are in fact made on the basis of more contingent and pragmatic reasons. The availability of rich 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 endowed with different methodological skills and experiences in problem-driven research projects favour triangulation of different methods. The state-of-the art in a specific subfield can make the use of quantitative, qualitative or mix-methods more interesting. Availability of research funds as well as individual skills of course also play a role in the methodological choices, defining the existing options. Attention to micro-meso-micro links 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.

Also, sub-disciplines differ in their attention to the different steps of research. Political and social theorists reflect a great deal on concept development and deductive theorization, and methodologists stress the importance of data collection and data analysis. Beyond the path-dependency from the past, the disciplinary proximity with other ‘sister’ disciplines also helps explain the ways in which some scholars developed general preferences. Methodological individualism is a basis for theorizing through modelling closely resembling economics. Attention to institutions and culture (see, respectively, Steinmo 2008; Keating 2008) is more influenced by historical approaches. The epistemological assumption about the need to ‘understand the world in order to change it’ – as French political scientist Pierre Favre (2005) put it – finds support among normative theorists but also from administrative scientists, who are usually more interested in the policy (or political) relevance of the social sciences. Qualitative scholars usually give more attention to the conceptualization as the development of ‘systematized concepts’, while quantitativists focus their concerns on operationalization (that is, the choice of indicators) (Adcock and Collier 2001). Moreover, even if American influence since the 1950s has had a homogenizing impact on sociology and political science, there is still some truth in the stereotypical vision of more attention to empirical investigation in the Anglo-Saxon culture and to theory building on the European continent. At the national level, such relatively young disciplines as sociology and political science still reflect the impact of the different disciplines that nurtured them: for example, philosophy in Italy versus law in France for political science (Favre 1985; Morlino 1989).

The social sciences emerge therefore as plural and contested fields. Mainstream methodological assumptions within disciplines and subdisciplines change in time, without following any natural
trend or inherent law of specialization or professionalization. If Luhmann had predicted the
development of autonomous systems, not only but especially the social sciences have developed as
contested fields, with some accepted rules and a common authority (habitus, in Bourdieu’s term),
but also much internal disagreements. In fact, in a field diverse positions exist, even though ‘certain
ideological-methodological positions have more (field specific) scientific capital than others’
(Steinmetz 2005b, 287). This means disciplines are contested fields, where however common
projects ‘define the stakes, the struggles, the issues’ (Burawoy 2005, 519).

Looking at the interconnections between disciplines, one observes processes of imitation and/or
learning, but also the definition and re-definition of disciplinary boundaries on the basis of a
differentiation from the ‘disciplinary Others’ (Steinmetz 2005a, 2). So, for instance, political
science developed from within political theory, which became a subfield of political science,
struggling for (organizational and symbolic) autonomy. In the methodological struggle within
sociology, some look at economics with envy, others learn from linguistic studies or from
anthropology.

In the evolution of methodological approaches in disciplinary fields and sub-fields, the influence of
specific scholars has been mentioned. In anthropology, the influence of Clifford Geertz in spreading
the criticism of illusionary objectivity of positivist approaches to methods, anti-determinism, the
search for ‘thick description’ and holistic visions has been noted (Keane 2005, 60 ff.). The work of
E.P. Thompson influenced the shift from the new social history to the new cultural history and that
of Michel Foucault and his ‘micro-physical’ approach to power the evolution of cultural history
(Sewell 2005, 181 ff.).

To take an example, William H. Sewell Jr. (2005) recalls the several and varied conditions that
influence methodological choices, and how they tend to shift in disciplinary and individual
trajectories. New social history, for instance, underwent a ‘meteoric rise’ in the 1960s and the
1970s, and an equally rapid displacement by new cultural history in the following two decades. In a
sort of autobiographic account, Sewell reminds the impact on his initial methodological choices of
the family he came from (in particular, the strong positivistic preference of his sociologist father) as
well as the country he studied (France, with the dominance of the Annales school), and the impacts
on his further choices of interdisciplinary experiences and cross-disciplinary fertilization (from the
social sciences in the development of social history, from the humanities in the development of
cultural history).

Personal experiences resonate, however, with general trends. In history, there were frequent
individual trajectories from—remaining with Sewell—‘a committed new social historian’, making
large use of quantitative data, towards a cultural approach. The environmental influences on this
generational trajectory of social historians included the initial, politically motivated desire to focus
the research on the ‘ordinary people’s like experience’, through the quantitative analysis of various
records (census, tax registers, city directories, etc.). Then, the cultural move of feminist and ethnic
minority movements brought about a commitment to the study of cultural elements such as
thoughts, feelings and experiences, and the related preference for qualitative research on texts
(Sewell 2005). 1 According to Sandra Harding (2005, 347), ‘New social justice movements, such as
feminism, race- and ethnicity-based movements, postcolonialisms, and new forms of class-based
movements, persistently identify positivist rules of social and natural sciences as organizing and
legitimating the oppression, exploitation and domination that these groups have experienced’. In

1 Sewell (2005, 184) speaks of a sort of conversion, ‘a sudden and exhilarating reshaping of one’s
intellectual and moral world.’
particular, scholars referring to these movements criticized positivist lack of concern with subjectivity as well as pretence of ethical neutrality.

The prevailing Zeitgeist also influences the methodological choices of various disciplines, with positivism resonant with the social determinism of the Fordist regime of macro-economic regulation, and the experienced volatility linked with Post-Fordism flexibility as ‘a fundamental source of the post-modernist sensitivity’ (Sewell 2005, 198). In fact, Fordism favoured a positivistic approach, not only because of the general ideological affinities (such as the belief in general laws, replication and prediction), but more in concrete through sustained state funding for social research as well as overlapping personnel between government agencies and sociology departments (Steinmetz 2005b, 278). With the crisis of Fordism, in Sewell’s (2005:201) reconstruction:

the cultural turn was also fuelled, in ways we were essentially unaware of, by a secret affinity with an emergent logic of capitalist development. Cultural history’s tendency to celebrate the plasticity of all social forms made good political sense as a critique of Fordist social determinism, as well as of the entrenched social determinism of gender and race. But its critical force in the context of a capitalist regime of flexible accumulation is far more ambiguous. Indeed, such a celebration indicates an acknowledged and troubling complicity between the cultural turn and the emergence of contemporary flexible forms of capitalism.

Calls to go ‘beyond the cultural turn’ signal a potential new turn in history (Eley 2005), but also in the humanities and social sciences more generally. Similarly, the social sciences are influenced by developments in the natural sciences. The ascendancy of physics as the most prestigious natural science for much of the twentieth century may account for the so-called ‘physics envy’, in which social behaviour was to be reduced to the certainties of Newtonian mechanics. This was challenged on a number of grounds, including the insistence that physics itself had moved on and was now more tolerant of uncertainty and indeterminacy (Delanty, 1999). The more recent interest in evolutionary and organic theories of change is not unrelated to the ascendancy of the bio-sciences as the most prestigious and leading-edge sector in the natural sciences; indeed we may be in danger of swapping physics-envy for biology-envy.

The field evolution is therefore not determined by an inherent logic of specialization or the final dominance of an hegemonic or true paradigm but by a complex process of successive turns and twists, self-reflexivity and trials and errors, with the contemporary presences of multiple choices and plural values about what the social sciences are about.

**Combination and Triangulation: Pluralism at the individual level**

We argue, therefore, that pluralism is a necessary feature of the field of social sciences and not a temporary way-point on the route to a grand unified field theory. It is not to be deplored as a necessary consequence of the partial state of our knowledge but rather celebrated as a resource for better understanding the complexities of the social world. Arguing for pluralism at the individual level or within research projects is an altogether more difficult matter and we are certainly not claiming that a researcher can reasonably hold incompatible views, combine radically competing epistemologies or, indeed, just mix and match approaches without any order or reason. There is not place in the academy for systematic intellectual schizophrenia or self-contradiction.

The existence of a pluralist field, however, does permit and encourage us to combine approaches in multiple ways. There is no necessary alignment of specific ontologies, epistemologies,
methodologies and methods. These are separate levels and social scientists can move across them, depending on the question at issue. So rational choice approaches need not be linked to positivist epistemology (as already noted this is a rather strange combination) but can be linked to culture, where the latter provides motivation. A broadly positivist epistemology is not necessarily incompatible with ethnographic methods, where these are seen as ways of getting more information. Interpretation is a necessity in all social science, since data do not ‘speak for themselves’ and does not necessarily imply a normative relativism or an anti-realist ontology. Looking at cases in a holistic way or placing them in historical or spatial contexts does not necessarily violate the canons of comparative research, since both cases and variables are artefacts of our research design. Analysis of discourse can be a way of exploring motivation and ideas without linking it to radical forms of interpretivist epistemology. The alternative to traditional positivism is not, therefore, merely a scepticism in which commensurate knowledge and comparison are impossible. Rather, by reaching across its internal divisions and into adjacent disciplines, political science can find common ground between its various streams. Debate among political scientists can take place on the basis of reasoned argument invoking various forms of evidence and interpretation.

Just as in the natural sciences, we may use different approaches to answer different questions. The questions may be descriptive (what?), analytical (how?), explanatory (why?) or normative (so what?) and different approaches might be used for each. If we are sceptical about complete explanations, we may take different explanations, each with an element of explanatory power as in Alison’s (1999) famous study or the multiple perspective approaches. There is an old distinction between understanding (Verstehen) and explanation (Erklaerung) as alternative aims in social research, the former tending to concentrate on cases and the latter on generalization. Yet this does not have to produce a strict dichotomy since learning more about one case and less about a large number of cases are simply different ways of approaching complex reality. We can do both, using case-oriented research for the former and variable-oriented methods for the latter. Similarly, rational-actor models may give us important insights into a case without having to assume that structures do not matter. The neo-institutionalism debate has recognized three forms, based on rational choice, historical path-dependency and norms. This threefold distinction may be relevant in explaining the genesis of neo-institutionalism in political science, but we see no reason why they could not be combined in individual projects to explain different aspects or stages. Indeed, a long tradition in Weberian sociology and political science does just this, although perhaps using slightly different vocabulary (choice or decision instead of rational choice; history instead of path-dependency; and culture instead of norms). Historical approaches can be combined with behavioural ones, especially if we take history seriously, as a contested field whose interpretation is linked to and shaped by present events. Challenges from new issues like multiculturalism or European integration mean that normative questions have forced their way back into the mainstream and rich literature is emerging that combines normative analysis with empirical research (Bauböck, 2008).

Pluralism can also be introduced in the form of triangulation. Triangulation also involves different advantages and risks when applied at the different levels, such as sources, methods, methodologies. Triangulation of sources, such as written and oral, or points of view of different actors is welcomed by most scholars, the only limit being logistics. The same can be said of triangulation of instruments of measurement, such as of different questions (or formulations of the same question) in both surveys and qualitative interviews, as well as of the combination of cases (e.g. multiple observations) or strategies of measurement (e.g. positional power versus reputational power).

A more ambitious conception of triangulation refers to the choices of multiple methods and the triangulation among them within a given paradigm. So, small N studies can help developing hypotheses for the collection of data on large N samples and large N comparison for singling out
hypotheses, whose mechanisms are later analysed on small N; o. In a mainly quantitative research design, qualitative instruments can be used for the preparation of a questionnaire, while in mainly qualitative research design counting units that fit within a certain conceptualization is considered as a validity check (Bryman 1988). The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as of small N and large N comparison is in fact often discussed under the label of mixed methods. This is consistent even with the most positivist approaches which otherwise insist on a single ontology and epistemology (Laitin, 2006, King, Keohane and Verba, 1994). Quite unchallenged is the assumption that ‘The convergence or agreement between two methods enhances our belief that the results are valid and not a methodological artifact’ (Bouchard 1976, 268).

The common theme in discussions of triangulation has been the desire to overcome problems of bias and validity. It has been argued that the deficiencies of any one method can be overcome by combining methods and so capitalize on the individual strength. There is however discussion about the extent to which in mixed methods strategies the different methods are really given equal status, or if one is usually taken as ancillary to the other. If David L. Latin (2006: 39-40) proposes that ‘within the scientific frame, a tripartite methodology that includes narrative (the essential component to phronesis), formal and statistical analysis is the best defence have against error and the surest hope for valid inference’, he still defends the capacity of the social sciences to make ‘reasonably good probability estimate of individual behaviour’ as a proof of the scientific nature of the discipline. His view that narrative provides plausibility tests for formal model, mechanisms to link dependent and independent variables in statistical analysis and to analyse residuals so that new models can be built, is criticized by Flyvbjerg (2006: 57, 63) who, although agreeing that both quantitative and qualitative analysis are needed for a sound development of the social sciences, defined Laitin’s conceptions of science as ‘noninnovative, noncontroversial and ad-hoc’, as it is based upon a subordination of narrative to formal modelling and statistical methods.

The point is also often made that nobody can excel in both qualitative and quantitative methods, as our energies are limited. However, it is also true that the most methodologically aware among the social scientists tend to combine reflections on both types of methodologies. The volume edited by Brady and Collier (2004) is a good illustration of a profitable collaboration between a quantitative and a qualitative scholar. Even if we tend to choose a path, or have a greater sensitivity for one or the other method and/or methodology, we do often happen to combine (often in collaborative efforts) different ones.

Moreover, there has been concerns that the use of triangulation is plagued by a lack of awareness of the different and incommensurate ontological and epistemological assumptions associated with various methods and theories (Blaikie 1991). If within neopositivist approaches a main problem might be the incompatibility of the results offered by different quantitative techniques (and so of technical commensurability), for interpretativists epistemological commensurability seems more relevant.

Pluralism in this sense does require that we know what we are doing and specify it clearly. It is, ironically, on these grounds that we would criticize many research projects that are ostensibly based on a single approach and set of assumptions. Rational choice analyses often develop a theoretical and deductive argument, and pursue empirical work at the same time, while failing to realize that these are epistemologically distinct (neo-classical economists do this all the time). Historical institutionalists bring in history without recognizing the distinctive nature of historical material, which is inherently based on selection and interpretation (Keating, 2009). Culture is invoked as an explanation for behaviour without recognizing that this belongs in the intersubjective realm and cannot be reduced to individual-level survey data (Keating, 2008).

However, it also requires recognizing that the social science disciplines we want should, to use Schram’s (2004, 20) synthesis, ‘encourage scholars to draw on a variety of methods, from a diversity of theoretical perspectives, combining theory an empirical work in different and creative ways’.
Concluding

In sum, our defence of pluralism is based both on the observation of how the social sciences have developed and of normative beliefs about the best ways forward. First, we have observed that the image of a single dominant or true methodologies is as misleading as the assumed coherence of ontologies, epistemologies, approaches, methodologies and methods. Second we have argued for principled pluralism at both systemic and, with more caution, individual level. In our perspective, the social sciences have not and should not have a single and consistent set of ontologies and epistemologies, approaches and methodologies. Pluralism as an enduring feature of the social sciences should instead defend the existence of a plurality of views as an important asset. Knowledge in this sense does not develop in a straight, cumulative path but from communication between different visions, following different paths. That disagreements within the discipline can rarely be solved by facts is not a limit to be accepted but the way forward, if the different viewpoints do not simply co-exist but also engage in reciprocal dialogue.

These reflections allow us to address a question we have often been confronted with: to what extent a pluralist perspective does accept exclusionary visions? Or, to rephrase the question in a way that is commonly debated with reference to various forms of pluralism, to what extent should we be (methodologically) tolerant of the (methodologically) intolerant? In this paper, we have stated that we consider the true believers in the supremacy of a single ontology → epistemology → approach → methodology → method as pernicious for the development of the social sciences. This also means that the pluralism we advocate is not yet another consistent ontological or epistemological approach. Rather, it is a statement about the legitimacy of different points of view, that however remain open to dialogue with the others.

References


