



Article

To what extent is post-positivism 'practised' in International Relations? Evidence from China and the USA

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Abstract

It is now more than three decades since various post-positivist approaches were introduced into the discipline of International Relations (IR) by scholars launching 'massive attacks' on positivism. However, many continue to express concern about the 'marginalization' of post-positivist scholarship within IR, while others discuss how and why 'theoretical proliferation' has come about in the field, convinced that IR is 'a plural, and pluralist, field.' Neither group, however, offers the empirical evidence needed to sustain its argument. To provide such evidence, this article undertakes an empirical investigation of the extent to which post-positivist research is practised in contemporary IR, examining publishing and teaching practices in American IR, and the rapidly emerging Chinese IR community. The findings of this investigation will be useful in broadening the debate about theoretical diversity in the discipline.

Keywords

International Relations (IR), post-positivism, practice, Chinese IR, American IR

Introduction

It is now more than three decades since post-positivism made its entry into the study of International Relations (IR).¹ Since the third (or fourth) 'great debate' in the 1980s – a debate between 'rationalism' and 'reflectivism' (Keohane, 1988; Lapid, 1989; Wæver, 1996) – IR scholarship began to accept diverse post-positivist (or 'reflectivist' to use Robert Keohane's term) approaches, namely critical theory, feminist theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, and scientific realism. The overall theoretical terrain of contemporary IR has become richer and wider thanks to the emergence and development of post-positivism. However, an important question that arises is, to what extent is post-positivist research *practised* in IR? In particular, the existence of diverse post-positivist theories is one thing, but practice is quite another. While the former might be a necessary condition for a pluralistic field of study, it cannot be a sufficient condition – if such existence is not matched well by corresponding *practice* in published and taught disciplines.

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It is in such respect that this article intends to look into the extent to which contemporary IR embraces post-positivist research through an empirical examination of publishing and teaching practices in IR communities. This investigation can serve as a useful point from which more fruitful bearings may be taken in making sense of where IR stands in terms of diversity: many IR scholars continue to express concern about the ‘marginalization’ of post-positivist scholarship within the field (Hamati-Ataya, 2013, 2014; Jackson, 2011; Reus-Smit, 2013; van der Ree, 2013), while others discuss the specific characters of pluralism (e.g., ‘disengaged,’ ‘engaged,’ or ‘integrative’ forms of pluralism), with a conviction that IR is ‘a plural, and pluralist, field’ (Rengger, 2015: 32; see also Lebow, 2011: 1220). However, neither group offers the empirical evidence needed to sustain its arguments, which necessitates the investigation that this article intends to undertake.

Here, I focus on American IR and the rapidly emerging Chinese IR community. The rationales for choosing these two particular IR communities as the cases to be examined are twofold. First, it is American IR scholarship that commands a dominant presence in the *institutional* structure of the discipline (Kristensen, 2015). Furthermore, American IR continues to act as ‘the epicenter for a worldwide IR community engaged in a set of research programs and theoretical debates’ (Ikenberry, 2009: 203) while, as J Ann Tickner (2011: 609) aptly points out, Europe ‘did grant American IR a “scientific” legitimacy.’ As such, it is necessary to understand the status of post-positivist scholarship in the American IR community by examining its research and teaching practices in order to identify the influence of post-positivism in the field.

At the same time, however, several scholars have expected that ‘US parochialism’ and ‘growing interest in IR outside the core [i.e., the United States], in particular, in “rising” countries such as China’ would lead to the rapid waning of existing American disciplinary power, while opening up new spaces for the study of international relations (Acharya and Buzan, 2010; Tickner, 2013: 629; Tickner and Wæver, 2009). As such, an examination of the study of IR in China would generate important and interesting evidence which could serve to discern how pluralistic IR theory has become. In addition, it is a well-known fact that Chinese scholars have been making considerable attempts to develop an IR theory with ‘Chinese characteristics.’ Yaqing Qin of the China Foreign Affairs University asserts that a Chinese IR theory ‘is ... *inevitable* to emerge along with the great economic and social transformation that China has been experiencing ...’ (Qin, 2007: 313). Although consensus on what the ‘Chinese characteristics’ actually are has yet to be made, Marxism always comes forward as one of the main ‘characteristics’ of China (Song, 2001: 68). Given that the philosophical underpinnings of Marxism underlie critical theory’s normative analyses and its understandings of what theory should do (Devetak, 2014: 420–421), Chinese IR is an important case to be examined for identifying to what extent post-positivist research, including that of critical theory, has come to permeate contemporary IR.

To what extent is post-positivism ‘practised’ in IR?

Research and teaching practices in American IR

Since there are a number of excellent studies that explore how IR is researched/published and taught in the United States, the following investigation builds on the existing studies. Among them, let us first consider the comprehensive research of Daniel Maliniak and his colleagues, which analyses the current state and recent trends of IR scholarship and pedagogy in the US using two sets of data – every article published in the field’s 12 leading journals (of which eight are published in the US) from 1980 to 2007², and the results of three recent surveys of IR faculties at four-year colleges and universities in the US. Their findings show a strong and increasing commitment to positivist research among American IR scholars. More specifically, the research has found that

about 58% of all articles published in the major journals were 'positivist' in 1980 and that by 2006 that number had climbed to almost 90%.³ The findings also indicate that around 70% of all American IR scholars surveyed describe their work as positivist. More importantly, they show that younger IR scholars are more likely to call themselves positivists: 'sixty-five percent of scholars who received their Ph.D.'s before 1980 described themselves as positivists, while 71% of those who received their degrees in 2000 or later were positivists' (Maliniak et al., 2011: 453–456). In this context, Maliniak et al. note that there is 'a remarkable and growing consensus within the US academy that a positivist epistemology should guide IR research.' It should therefore come as no surprise that 'since 2002 more articles published in the major journals employ quantitative methods than any other approach' (Maliniak et al., 2011: 454).

On the other hand, the American IR community appears to enjoy 'theoretical' diversity in the sense that no single theoretical paradigm dominates the community. It is, however, 'limited' diversity based on a clear commitment to positivism. According to the data provided by Maliniak et al.'s study, more than 70% of the contemporary IR literature produced in the US is perceived to fit within the three major theoretical paradigms – namely realism, liberalism, and conventional constructivism – all of which lie *within* the 'epistemological' ambit of positivism. Of course, constructivists are less likely to adopt positivism's traditional epistemology and methodology as compared with scholars advancing the other two theoretical paradigms, but 'most of the leading constructivists in the US, unlike their European counterparts, identify themselves as positivist' (Maliniak et al., 2011: 454, footnote 42).

The fact that IR is organized largely by the three major theoretical paradigms is also identified in the classrooms of American colleges and universities. A series of surveys conducted by the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project⁴ show that IR faculty in the US devote a great deal of time in introductory IR courses to the study or application of the major theoretical paradigms, particularly realism, the theoretical underpinnings of which are based on positivism. While its share of class time may have declined, realism still dominates IR teaching within the US. For example, 24% of class time in 2004, 25% in 2006, and 23% in 2008 were devoted to this paradigm; these percentages are larger than for any other theoretical paradigm. On the other hand, the data show that the IR faculty members surveyed in the US spent none of their class time on one of the representative post-positivist perspectives, namely feminism, in 2004; the amount of class time devoted to it increased in 2008, yet still remained low at 5%. Not surprisingly, this trend matches well with the contents of American IR textbooks. Elizabeth Matthews and Rhonda Callaway's content analysis of 18 undergraduate IR textbooks currently used in the US demonstrates that most of the theoretical coverage is devoted to realism, followed by liberalism, with constructivism at a distant third (Matthews and Callaway, 2015: 197–200).

What the foregoing indicates is that it is positivist epistemological and methodological commitments within which the bulk of IR studies and teaching practices in the US are embedded at the moment. Many pertinent studies concur with this observation (Hagmann and Biersteker, 2014; Lipson et al., 2007; Mead, 2010). This worries those who support post-positivist research – given the enduring and powerful influence of the American scholarly community on the configuration of the field of IR.

Research and teaching practices in Chinese IR

One aspect that could be more worrying from the perspective of post-positivist (and pluralist) IR scholars is the lack of difference between trends in American IR and those within the newly emerging Chinese IR scholarship. The latter also lacks sufficient attention to alternative or critical approaches, as opposed to positivism. Let me clarify this further by presenting empirical evidence.

An investigation of all articles published by China's four leading political science and IR journals – 现代国际关系 (*Journal of Contemporary International Relations (JCIR)*), 世界经济与政治 (*Journal of World Economics and Politics (JWEP)*), 国际政治研究 (*Journal of International Studies (JIS)*), and 外交评论 (*Journal of Foreign Affairs Review (JFAR)*) – over the last 20 years (1994–2014) shows that there are virtually no studies using a post-positivist approach. More specifically, my research team first searched the databases of China's National Social Science Database (CNSSD, <http://www.nssd.org/>) and China's National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, <http://epub.cnki.net/KNS/>), both of which provide full-text Chinese scholarly articles published in more than 9,900 journals across the social sciences in order to find where Chinese articles on international relations, international political economy, international security, and foreign policy have been published. With these findings, we undertook a further investigation of the publication databases of all academic organizations of political science and IR based in China, including the China National Association for International Studies.

In addition to this, we also looked into where (i.e., in which journals) studies of political science and IR faculty members at the top 15 Chinese universities appear most frequently in order to ensure the representative nature of the journals to be examined. To this end, we analysed their research CVs as well as the journal publication data gathered from the CNSSD and the CNKI. This was once again crosschecked with the results of our earlier investigation of the publications and publication outlets of Chinese political science and IR organizations. As a result, we found that 现代国际关系 (*JCIR*), 世界经济与政治 (*JWEP*), 国际政治研究 (*JIS*), and 外交评论 (*JFAR*) are representative/leading academic journals in the field of IR in China, and that there have been 11,607 articles published in Chinese over the past twenty years (1994–2014) in those journals.

Then, an in-depth keyword-based search – in both Chinese and English,⁶ using both online materials (i.e., HTML or PDF versions) and printed issues – of all of the 11,607 articles was carried out in order to see how many of them use post-positivist approaches. The keywords used here included six broad sets of categories: post-positivism; critical theory; feminist theory; scientific realism; post-structuralism; and constructivism. In each category, more specific terms and scholars' names relevant to the representative categories were coded. For example, the keyword category of 'critical theory' included eight specific, related terms in both Chinese and English, including Frankfurt School and emancipation.

In the category of constructivism, we also included the name 'Alexander Wendt,' as well as those of 'Friedrich Kratochwil' and 'Nicholas Onuf,' for Wendt's constructivism walks a fine line between positivism and post-positivism: it lies well outside positivism's traditional ambit from an ontological perspective, while largely subscribing to the tenets of positivism in epistemological terms (Wendt, 1999). A different research strategy was taken in the case of feminism in Chinese IR. The centerpiece of my investigation is *post-positivism*, and feminist IR theory can be *both* positivist and post-positivist. Given these, we chose (among other keywords) J Ann Tickner and Christine Sylvester as search terms, for they are representative scholars working on *post-positivist* feminist theory.

In total, six sets of keywords and 38 related terms were used in our survey. The results show that Chinese IR has little interest in post-positivist research; of the 11,607 articles analysed, only 569 studies (4.9%) relate to post-positivism. This figure includes articles merely mentioning any of the 38 related terms (see Table 1 below). Furthermore, recall that the figure includes articles that discuss Alexander Wendt and his constructivism, bordering on positivism. As such, the number of articles 'directly' committed to post-positivist research is likely to be *much smaller* than 4.9%. For example, if the name 'Alexander Wendt' was not included, the number dropped to 4.2%.

In effect, our survey indicates that most of the theoretical IR studies in China use two major 'rationalist' IR theories, namely neorealism and neoliberalism: 78% of the theoretical articles

Table 1. Major China-based journal articles related to post-positivist research.

Keywords and related terms (searched in Chinese and English, using both online materials and printed issues)	批判理论 (Critical theory)	科学的实在论/科学实在论 (Scientific realism)	建构主义 (Constructivism)	后结构主义 (Post-structuralism)
Sets of keywords	女性主义/ 女权主义 (Feminism)	科学的实在论/科学实在论 (Scientific realism)	建构主义 (Constructivism)	后结构主义 (Post-structuralism)
Related terms	女性主义者 (Feminist) 社会性别 (Gender) 女权主义立场论 (Feminist Standpoint) 解释学 (Hermeneutics) 解释学 (Interpretivism)	实在论** (Realism) 实在主义者 (Realist) 超越/超迈的 实在论 (Transcendental Realism) 批判实在论 (Critical realism) 罗伊·巴斯卡 (Roy Bhaskar) 罗姆·哈瑞 (Rom Harré)	社会的建构 (Social Construction) 社会理论 (Social theory) 国际政治社会学理论 (Social theory of international politics) 国际规范 (International norm) 亚历山大·温特 (Alexander Wendt) 尼古拉斯·奥努夫 (Nicholas Onuf) 约翰·鲁杰 (John Ruggie) 克拉托克维尔 (Friedrich Kratochwil)	后现代主义/ 後现代主义 (Post-modernism) 后现代性 (Post-modernity) 康培尔 (David Campbell) 雅克·德里达 (Jacques Derrida) 米歇尔·福柯 (Michel Foucault)
Number of the keywords and related terms and names found in major Chinese journals				
<i>Journal of Contemporary International Relations</i>	37	0	37	24
<i>Journal of World Economics and Politics Studies</i>	11	6	120	23
<i>Journal of Foreign Affairs Review</i>	3	3	27	6
Total	51	9	284	53
	17/11,607* (0.6%)	11/11,607 (0.07%)	204/11,607 (1.7%)	65/11,607 (0.5%)

*Total number of articles published in the four major Chinese journals from 1994 to December 2014.
 **The terms ‘实在论’ (realism) and ‘实在主义者’ (realist) coded above do not refer to political realism in the field of IR, which should be translated into ‘现实主义’.
 Sources: 中国国际关系学会 <http://www.cnisr.org>, 外交评论 <http://wjxy.chinajournal.net.cn>, 中国现代国际关系研究院 <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/chinese>, 现代国际关系 <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/chinese/bookView.aspx?cid=136>, 台湾政治学 <http://www.tpsshome.org.tw>, China's National Social Science Database (<http://www.nssd.org/>), and China's National Knowledge Infrastructure (<http://epub.cnki.net/KNS>) (accessed 19 August 2013–12 April 2015).

surveyed are perceived to fit within these theories. Recent studies on developments in IR theory in China reached similar conclusions (see Chen, 2011; Qin, 2011; Wang and Blyth, 2013). For instance, Yaqing Qin (2011: 249) acknowledges that ‘most of the research works in China in the last 30 years have been using the three mainstream American IR theories [realism, liberalism, and constructivism]’ – with liberalism having an edge, although, as mentioned earlier, Chinese scholars have made considerable attempts to build a new IR theory that reflects ‘Chinese characteristics.’

This is an interesting but disappointing finding, particularly for those engaged in moving IR beyond the long-standing American disciplinary dominance toward a pluralistic field that embraces ‘post’-positivism and ‘Global IR’ more fully than has hitherto been the case in IR. For example, recall the fact that Marxism is widely considered to be one of the key ‘Chinese characteristics.’ Menghao Hu writes: ‘There are many different kinds of IR theories in the world. However, in the final analysis there are only two. One is Marxist IR theory and the other is the bourgeois IR theory’ (Hu, 1991, quoted in Song, 2001: 64). Further, Marxism, in various forms, underlies critical theory’s understanding of what theory should do (Devetak, 2014: 420–421). Nevertheless, as the above survey has confirmed, critical theory, one of the representative theoretical approaches of post-positivism, remains at ‘the margins of the margins’ of the Chinese IR community: 0.3%. It is, in Shambaugh’s word (2011: 347), a ‘negligible’ theory in China.

Assuredly, there are also a few ‘China-based’ journals that publish articles in *English* rather than Chinese; these include the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* and the *Chinese Journal of International Politics (CJIP)*. In particular, *CJIP* is worthy of further inspection here, for this journal, which was recently listed in the Social Science Citation Index, is currently managed by the Institute of Modern International Relations, Tsinghua University and publishes articles in English with the aim of advancing not only ‘the systematic and rigorous study of international relations’, but also ‘Chinese IR’ based on the so-called ‘Tsinghua Approach’ (Zhang, 2012: 73).

Yet, the results of a search of *all* articles published in *CJIP* from 2006, when the journal’s first issue came out, until December 2014 confirm the earlier observation that post-positivist research is on the margins of the Chinese IR community; a total of 131 articles were published in *CJIP* during that period; among them, there are only 12 articles that mention and/or discuss post-positivism. What is more interesting is the fact that the seven most cited sources in *CJIP* are *not* Chinese journals, but major ‘American’ journals, namely *International Studies Quarterly*, *American Political Science Review*, *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Organization*, *World Politics*, and *Foreign Affairs*. In short, there is little difference between research trends in American IR and those within the newly emerging Chinese IR scholarship in terms of the prevailing influence of positivism.

The proclivity of the Chinese IR community found through the analysis of journal publication patterns is also discernible in *teaching* practices. An examination of the curricula of all political science and IR departments at the top 15 universities in China, including Beijing University, Renmin University, Fudan University, and Tsinghua University,⁷ shows that there is no single graduate seminar, let alone undergraduate IR course, designed to teach post-positivism-related theories, including feminist theory and critical theory. In addition, I looked into IR teaching in China by analysing the syllabi of the major Chinese universities’ introductory IR theory courses for the 2013–2014 academic year; the findings of the investigation indicate that realism, liberalism – particularly neo-liberal institutionalism – and ‘conventional’ constructivism account for the vast majority of class time, whereas almost none of the major theories or concepts under the heading of post-positivism appear in the syllabi.⁸ Of course, there is a limited number of IR classes in China that teach (alongside others) post-positivist theories. Yet, as the survey has shown, these are more exceptional examples rather than representative cases in a generally accepted teaching practice in the Chinese IR community. Furthermore, when post-positivism is discussed in the IR classroom in

China, almost all of the core readings are devoted to constructivism, particularly to constructivism-related books and articles written by leading *American* constructivists who often identify themselves as ‘positivist’. In sum, the investigation of the teachings of Chinese IR further elucidates the earlier findings that post-positivist research remains at the margin of the Chinese IR community in terms of practice.

The enduring dominance of positivism in IR

The results of the empirical examination show that post-positivist research is not fully accepted (i.e., practised) as a serious alternative to positivism, either in American IR, or in the newly emerging Chinese IR community, which is often expected to take a different path of development with a critical edge. This is also evidence that confirms several IR scholars’ concerns about the ‘marginalization’ of post-positivist scholarship within the field (Hamati-Ataya, 2013, 2014; Jackson, 2011; Reus-Smit, 2013; van der Ree, 2013).

An important question then is ‘Why has post-positivism failed to serve as a powerful contender to positivism in the American and Chinese IR communities?’ The following sections will address this ‘why question.’ To this end, I first review the pertinent literature with the aim of finding ‘shared answers’ to the question. Then I offer, from a socio-epistemic perspective, some complementary thoughts useful in addressing this question.

A common-sense response

Let me begin to address the above question by considering a common-sense response. Positivism, as a way of producing truth claims, is fully satisfying, so there is no need to go ‘beyond’ it. Of course, we know – at a common-sense level – that the answer is no. The birth of *post-positivism* began with the rejection of and dissatisfaction with positivist epistemological and methodological assumptions and their dominance in IR; otherwise, there is no point in persistently calling for a pluralistic IR (Dunne et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Jackson, 2011, 2015; Lapid, 2003; Wight, 2013), and the entire *raison d’être* behind post-positivism is lost. Furthermore, in the Philosophy of Science (PoS) – from which IR scholarship often imports multifarious theories and concepts in order to ground its discipline on ‘an unshakable ‘scientific’ foundation’ – the positivist orthodoxy ‘began to crumble’ in the 1970s; its hegemonic position has now been overthrown (Hollis and Smith, 1990: 67; Monteiro and Ruby, 2009: 15; Wight, 2002: 40). This makes the question raised above more puzzling. Although positivism is no longer a ‘secure’ or formidable foundation of an epistemology or methodology from which to draw in the PoS, why has IR – which frequently turns its attention to the PoS in search of ‘scientific’ credentials – failed to move ‘beyond’ positivism, leaving post-positivist research at the ‘margins’ of the discipline?

‘Shared answers’: the limitations of post-positivist research

In relation to the why question, a more plausible answer than the common-sense response considered above could be made along the following lines: there is a clear need for an alternative to positivism, and we have post-positivist theory; yet, as demonstrated earlier, it has failed to establish itself as a clear alternative to the mainstream positivist thinking in IR.. A review of the pertinent literature shows that certain common reasons for this failure run through each contribution to the literature, although there are some differences in emphasis: first, terminological and conceptual ambiguity within post-positivist IR scholarship; second, the absence of a shared epistemological platform on which ‘distinctly different’ post-positivist theories can stand together; and third, post-positivists’ utter

rejection of a positivist account of science without a corresponding development of their own version of science (Brecher and Harvey, 2002; Guzzini, 2013; Hamati-Ataya, 2014; Jackson, 2011; Kurki and Wight, 2013; Lake, 2013; Smith, 2002; Smith et al., 1996: 32). Let me discuss these points in more detail.

First, terminological and conceptual ambiguity is often pointed out as one of the serious problems that hinder the growth of post-positivist IR scholarship. For example, consider the reflexive observation of IR theorist Hamati-Ataya, who has been calling for ‘strong reflexivity’ with a view that post-positivist research is ‘superior’ to positivism (Hamati-Ataya, 2014: 155, 171–172). She has pointed out that terms such as ‘reflexivity’, ‘self-reflexivity’ or ‘self-reflection’ are sometimes used without any attempt to define the differences between them’ (Hamati-Ataya, 2013: 669–670, 672). Put simply, ‘reflexivity’ despite the frequent use of the term within post-positivist scholarship, is an elusive term used without conceptual clarity; this in turn causes confusion with respect to what a post-positivist ontology is supposed to look like or what distinguishes the epistemological concerns of ‘reflexive’ scholarship from those of other academic traditions in IR.

On the other hand, in the course of appraising the inter-paradigm debate of the 1970s and the disputed achievements of the various ‘post’ approaches that are challenging the dominance of positivism in IR, leading IR scholar Steve Smith offers a sharp critique: ‘the vast majority of international relations research over the last 30 years has rested implicitly on positivist assumptions ... All too often positivism-as-epistemology continues to play the same role as before ... [Meanwhile] post-positivist accounts are working with distinctively different epistemologies; it is this which explains *why* there is *no* prospect of them constituting an alternative’ (Smith et al., 1996: 32–35, 50, emphasis added). Other concerned scholars agree with Smith. Exhibiting a deep concern about the lack of progress and knowledge accumulation in IR, Michael Brecher and Frank Harvey, for example, write that alternative and critical perspectives ‘encompass an array of research programs and findings that are not easily grouped into a common set of beliefs, theories or conclusions.’ Then they ask: ‘If those who share common interests and perspectives have difficulty agreeing on what they have accomplished to date, how can they establish clear targets to facilitate creative dialogue across these diverse perspectives and subfields?’ (Brecher and Harvey, 2002: 2). In other words, post-positivist scholarship has failed to establish a ‘coherent’ epistemological ground; criticisms are frequently made that although alternatives to positivism are commonly grouped together under the heading of post-positivism, in many respects, all they have in common is ‘a rejection of positivism’ (Kurki and Wight, 2013: 23; Smith et al., 1996: 6, 12).

Related to this point is the third reason: post-positivists’ passive hesitation or active resistance when it comes to developing discussion, let alone consensus, regarding what constitutes good ‘science’ and what scientific research of international relations should entail. Nuno Monteiro and Keven Ruby’s (2009) careful review of the long history of the ‘science’ debate in IR clearly reveals the continued influence of (various forms of) positivism in IR’s persistent attempts to legitimize itself as a scientific field of study. Of course, IR now has an emerging set of critical or new positions keen to repudiate a positivist account of science; yet ‘even those concerned to reject a scientific approach to IR tend to do so on the basis of a general acceptance of the positivist model of science’ (Kurki and Wight, 2013: 16). In a similar vein, Patrick Jackson comments: ‘In many ways, the field has not gotten beyond the situation that Wendt lamented in 1992, in which “Science [positivism] disciplines Dissent [post-positivism] for not defining a conventional research program, and Dissent celebrates its liberation from Science” ’ (Jackson, 2011: 182). So, to paraphrase Roy Bhaskar’s words of more than 30 years ago, it is still positivism that ‘usurps the title of science’ (Bhaskar, 1978: 8) in IR. This implies that post-positivist IR scholarship tends either to reject the idea of applying ‘scientific’ methods to social phenomena (i.e., anti-naturalism) or to abandon the project of ‘science’ altogether (i.e., anti-scientism) even if there is a wide set of legitimate

understandings of science (Archer et al., 1998; Patomäki, 2002). Viewed in this sense, an important question that needs to be pondered becomes ‘what exactly this non-positivist social “science” is all about’ (Guzzini and Leander, 2006: 80).

As reviewed above, all three major sets of reasons are surely relevant, with varying degrees of significance, to the question of why post-positivist scholarship has failed to serve as a serious alternative to positivism and researchers have already begun to address these issues. For example, there have been recent attempts to cast new light on the functions and ends of science in IR and to refine (or broaden) conventional conceptions of science or causation (Jackson, 2011; Kurki, 2008). Guzzini, for example, has recently proposed four modes of theorizing – ‘normative, meta-theoretical, ontological/constitutive and empirical’ – each of which has different yet ‘connected’ ends of science (Guzzini, 2013: 533–535). Attempts have also been made to clarify meanings of the concept of ‘reflexivity’ and to redress post-positivists’ ‘mistaken conflation’ of science (in general) with a particular version of science, namely a positivist representation (Joseph and Wight, 2010), while stretching the traditional ambit of post-positivist epistemology to engage in the realm of empirical knowledge (Guzzini, 2013; Hamati-Ataya, 2013, 2014; Lynch, 2008). Thus, it can be said that the move to go ‘beyond’ positivism and to activate post-positivist IR scholarship is ongoing.

Socio-epistemic issues at stake

It is, I believe, at this point that we need to take a step back and consider a more fundamental question, a question often under-recognized yet very important. If the aforementioned issues that have *in-worldly* orientations (i.e., the limitations of post-positivism) are adequately addressed, then will an active post-positivist scholarship serving as a powerful alternative to positivism be brought about in contemporary IR?

Here, it should be mentioned that positivism, too, has serious *internal* limitations. Ontologically, it leads us to settle on a truncated and impoverished view of the rich and complex textures of world reality; epistemologically, it imposes unnecessary restrictions on the range of possible causes of social phenomena, and methodologically, it suffers from theory-ladenness of observation. Particularly, within the positivist view of science and scientific explanations, epistemology and ontology become tied together: what is known is what can be experienced and/or observed and what ‘is’ is what can be known – Roy Bhaskar (1978: 28) has called this ‘the epistemic fallacy.’ Put simply, many actual events never become empirical. For these reasons, among others, the once-dominant position of positivism has now met its demise in the PoS (Wight, 2002: 40).

Nonetheless, as seen earlier, most of what American and Chinese IR communities publishes and teaches is replete with positivist understandings and approaches, despite the serious limitations of positivism. The three sets of shortcomings associated with post-positivist research reviewed above, therefore, are not the only answer to the question of why it still remains at ‘the margins’ of IR. In other words, lines of explanations and theorizing different from or critical of positivism, despite their internal limitations, could have been taught at universities and could have appeared in academic journals far more widely and frequently than has been the case thus far. This is especially so, given the fact that many IR scholars, including those who often invoke a strict rationalist ontology and follow a deductive-nomological modeling, have been calling for ‘a pluralistic IR’ that embraces the validity of a wide range of epistemological, theoretical and methodological perspectives (Dunne et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Jackson, 2015; Kratochwil, 2003; Lapid, 2003; Lebow, 2011; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013). Viewed in this light, the above why-question needs to be rephrased as follows: why does positivist research still remain at the centre of IR, despite its serious internal limitations?

It seems worth taking a cue from Thomas Kuhn (1962) and revisiting the why question. To summarize Kuhn's insights crudely for now, mainstream theorists, wedded to the standard interpretations and methods that allow them to dominate their field, tend first to deny that the anomaly exists; it is deemed to be a trivial or transient phenomenon. Then, as the salience of the anomaly becomes undeniable, scholars – especially younger scholars less invested professionally in the standard and conventional approach – develop new or alternative theoretical lenses through which the anomaly can be explained. If this new theoretical approach supersedes the old one, it becomes the 'new paradigm' for successive inquiry, even though the major proponents and practitioners of the *existing* paradigm, Kuhn reports, rarely convert to the new one or tend to resist such a paradigm change. This is the case even when confronted with overwhelming evidence that the latter approach can explain more phenomena or explain existing phenomena better.

The summary above does not do full justice to Kuhn's much more detailed analysis, yet it is sufficient to aid us in understanding his key accounts of the *path-dependent* structure of scientific evolution. The most significant finding of Kuhn's work, in my view, is that 'scientific', and thereby 'acceptable' knowledge is in effect the 'sociological' (by-)product of communal practices determined (or at least, governed) by the major paradigm within a given scholarly community (Kuhn, 1962).

Two important implications for IR come from Kuhn's insights. First, alternatives to positivism are currently trapped at the stage of being ignored or denied. Second, this occurs not because mainstream positivist IR theory is faultless nor because its alternative has no utility, but rather because doing IR based on positivism is seen as 'normal.' Throughout the long history of the great debates in IR, positivist ideas and accounts have been at the centre of attention. Further, from the first great debate of the 1920s and 1930s until the inter-paradigm debate of the 1970s, it has been positivists who dominated the debates in the discipline, which allowed their approach to serve as a 'standard' approach. Once established as standard or common-sense, the approach became so powerful that irrespective of whether it had serious weaknesses and was confronted with anomalies, it defined not merely our conceptual possibilities but also our analytical and practical horizons. This implies that positivism, as a standard way to conduct inquiry in IR, determines what counts as the 'valid' subject matter of IR and what counts as 'acceptable' knowledge of international relations in both published and taught disciplines. Most IR scholars thus set the definitions of their research problems by recourse to the standard (namely, positivist) epistemology, and assess evidence produced by methodological procedures that correspond to the standard. In other words, the entire practice of the conduct of inquiry – the selection and framing of research puzzles, the representation and interpretation of relevant empirical observations, and the specification of evidentiary standards – tends to increasingly be undertaken in accordance with the positivist approach in the field of IR, which is naturally reflected in the classroom.

This also applies to 'Chinese IR.' For example, when the meaning (or the purpose) of theory is taught or discussed in an IR classroom in China, what is largely invoked for teaching and discussion is positivist understandings of the theory, namely generality. Even in the discussion of 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics,' several Chinese IR scholars argue that 'as part of social sciences,' Chinese IR theory should seek 'universality, generality' in order to be recognized as being 'scientific' (Song, 2001: 68). Interestingly (or naturally, from a socio-epistemic perspective), such a positivism-oriented understanding of theory and methodology is more easily discernible in the studies by the younger generations of Chinese IR scholars who have attended *American* universities; those young Chinese scholars, in this vein, tend to remain sceptical about building an 'indigenous' IR theory. Going a step further, one might expect that, as the number of such foreign-trained Chinese scholars returning to their homeland increases, 'the Gramscian hegemonic status of Western [positivist] IR' (Chen, 2011: 16) is likely to continue to remain intact in China.

All of the above adds up to the consequence that doing IR based on positivist principles is considered a 'normal' undertaking, and thereby establishes itself as a 'norm.' Just as states are socialized into the international 'system,' IR scholars are also socialized into the existing IR disciplinary 'system.' This academic disciplinary socialization entails selection, which tends towards the elimination of approaches or explanations that do not fit into the socialized, or to put it more clearly, 'standardized' practice. As demonstrated earlier, there is not much difference between research and teaching trends in American IR and those within the newly emerging Chinese IR community. Obviously, this is not because Chinese scholars seek to resemble their American counterparts. It is because they believe that a positivist approach to 'doing IR' – an approach that remains mainstream in the US when it comes to the study of international relations – is 'normal' and 'scientific.' Even Yan Xuetong (2011), who is one of the representative Chinese scholars advocating traditional Chinese thought as an alternative source to Western (American)-centric IR theorizing, emphasizes the importance of 'scientific methods' defined in empirical and explanatory terms.

In particular, the 'standardized' disciplinary practice is reinforced within journal publication systems, and ideas or methods peculiar to the field's mainstream approach tend to comprise the first cull by the publication system. Moreover, socialization within IR applies not only to scholars already working in it, but also more directly to those willing to enter it. As Thomas Biersteker comments, 'PhD candidates are educated in the canon of the discipline in order to enable them to engage in the core debates, as well as to be *marketable* in the broader discipline of political science' (Biersteker, 2009: 310–318). Such a (market) socialization process leads graduate students to be oriented to the professional 'norm' of their academic disciplines. Trapped between pursuit of knowledge and pursuit of career, their motivations to work on new and/or critical approaches are sidelined. This ultimately leads to sameness that makes for intellectual reproduction in the field, generating an enduring prevalence of the existing mainstream theory and a perpetuation of the mode of theory application based on the standard/positivist principles, rather than theory development; a logical, or more to the point, social corollary of this is the 'general' IR research and teaching trends observed earlier. Viewed in this light, the issue of disciplinary socialization in the field is critical, for it entails reproduction of the mainstream understanding and approach through socialized practice of selection and exclusion.

Concluding remarks

Of course, I am not saying that disciplinary socialization processes and mechanisms are the *sole* issue at stake in affecting the status of post-positivist IR scholarship. As already discussed, the three sets of limitations of post-positivism must be addressed if post-positivist scholarship is to have a more secure foundation in the field. Yet, equally important, I believe that without addressing the socio-epistemic issues – namely the current disciplinary socialization practices and socialized mechanisms associated with IR publication systems and pedagogy – post-positivism is likely to continue to remain at the 'margins' of the field. Once again recall the fact that positivism, too, has serious 'internal' limitations and it, nonetheless, has attained its powerful and unyielding influence in IR 'as a result of sociological factors' and processes (Jackson, 2015: 13).

What is crucial from a post-positivist perspective then is to render IR more fully attentive to the fact that many legitimate (and potentially promising) ways of making truth claims exist 'out there,' beyond positivism. That is, post-positivist research, despite its shortcomings, needs to be accepted as a 'normal' and a different kind of 'scientific' approach when it comes to inquiry into world politics if it is to become a powerful contender for acceptance in IR; this involves the dynamics of disciplinary socialization. It is, I believe, right here that we ought to *ask ourselves* whether or not our research and teaching 'practices' have been rich enough to embrace the diverse

approaches of post-positivism and encourage pluralism in the field. As noted, positivism has severe limitations. Moreover, there have been constant calls for a more pluralistic IR. Nevertheless, if we are still living in a positivist IR world, then the present state of IR has emerged out of our own practice – as an individual or as a collective – and willingness to persist with the mainstream positivist perspective for social and institutional incentives and related disincentives. If not, then from where? Is IR *ex nihilo*? At the end of the day, IR as an academic discipline is what we make of it. A meaningful change in the discipline – that is, to move a positivism-centered IR toward a pluralistic field of study especially in terms of practice – requires a robust recognition of this point. Furthermore, recognizing that IR is indeed of ‘our making’ can lead to an important realization that it is scholars who have the ability to change the existing state and structure of IR; this in turn opens up wide avenues in which critical self-reflexivity is undertaken. Without critical self-reflexivity, it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring about change. The practice of pluralism, after all, begins with the self.

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Notes

1. This article follows the convention of using ‘IR’ to denote the academic discipline of International Relations and ‘international relations’ to indicate its substantive domain of study (i.e., the practice of world politics).
2. They include: *International Organization*; *International Security*; *International Studies Quarterly*; *Journal of Conflict Resolution*; *Journal of Peace Research*; *Journal of Politics*; *Security Studies*; *World Politics*; *American Political Science Review*; *American Journal of Political Science*; *British Journal of Political Science*; and *European Journal of International Relations*.
3. Maliniak et al. (2011: 455) code ‘positivist’ works as those ‘that implicitly or explicitly assume that theoretical or empirical propositions are testable, make causal claims, seek to explain and predict phenomena ...’.
4. Since 2004, the Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project has surveyed faculty members at colleges and universities who teach or conduct research on international relations in more than 20 countries, including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The surveyed countries do not, however, include China. For further details, see http://www.wm.edu/offices/itpit/_documents/trip/trip_around_the_world_2011.pdf
5. These universities were selected according to the ‘Times Higher Education Asia University Rankings 2014,’ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2013-14/regional-ranking/region/asia/> (accessed 11 June 2015).
6. In addition, when our keyword-based search was carried out in Chinese, both Mandarin and Cantonese were used for a more accurate representation.
7. They include: Beijing University, Fudan University, Remin University of China, Tsinghua University, University of Science and Technology of China; Nanjing University; Zhejiang University; Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Wuhan University of Technology; Sun Yat-Sen University; Tianjin University; Wuhan University; East China Normal University; Harbin Institute of Technology; and Dalian University of Technology.

8. This investigation of Chinese IR courses and teaching practices is based on 23 syllabi gathered from 21 faculty members who teach and/or conduct research in international politics at the major Chinese universities.

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