Whereas the first generation of realists in international relations relied on philosophical insight and historical experience to address particular foreign policy problems—an approach now called “classical realism”—the second generation embraced the methods of social science to explain state behavior in general. In the 1980s, this effort led to the ascendancy of Kenneth Waltz’s “neorealism,” which ignores the particular characteristics of states (e.g., their ideologies, economic systems, ties of friendship, and the personalities of leaders) in order to explain their behavior solely from the constraint exercised by the “anarchic structure.” This structure consists of the absence of central authority among states, and of the distribution of capabilities (i.e., power) across them. Neorealism predicts that states balance each other’s power either by their own efforts or in alliance with others, and that balances of power form recurrently in the international system.

Since the mid-1990s, the (intentional) inability of neorealism to account for variations in the behavior of states caused by their characteristics has prompted the rise of “neoclassical realism.” Its proponents insert the particular characteristics of a state—especially its perception of a primary cause and its foreign policy (the effect). It is hoped that this approach will yield a synthesis between the empirical richness of the case-study method and the analytical rigor of Waltz’s structuralism.

SEE ALSO  Deterrence, Mutual; Hobbes, Thomas; Machiavelli, Niccolò; Morgenthau, Hans; United Nations; Waltz, Kenneth

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Markus Fischer

REALIST THEORY

Theoretical schools and trends represent more than abstract, free-floating ideas. They are socially moored, and need to be seen in relation to other intellectual and social trends. “Realism” has been present in philosophical thought at least since Aristotle, but the return of realism in recent years can be best understood as a reaction against the dominance of “postmodernism” in the academy, especially in the humanities and humanistic social sciences. What we have now come to call postmodernism (even when some of its adherents disavow the label) is a theoretical position that relies on a definable epistemic stance—what the philosopher Bernard Williams has called the stance of the “denier.” At the most general level, what is being denied is the value of such intellectual (and social) ideals as truth and objectivity.

The current version of realism in literary and cultural disciplines emerged as a response to postmodernism as an epistemological position. Drawing on sources in realist philosophy of science (e.g., the work of Putnam and Boyd; see Antony [1993] for a good exposition), and in solidarity with the progressive goals of postmodernist...
Realist Theory

thinkers, recent versions of realist theory, identified as “critical realism” or “postpositivist realism,” attempt to go beyond both idealism and positivism without relying on the relativist and skeptical stance that characterizes postmodernist thought of various stripes (see Steinmetz 1998 on “critical realism,” inspired by Bhaskar’s work; on postpositivist realism, see Boyd 1988; Livingston 1988; S. Mohanty 1997, 2004; Moya and Hames-García 2000). In the social sciences, where postmodernism has had at best marginal influence, some critics of positivism invoke postmodernist theses about the social and discursive construction of social phenomena to move beyond narrow empiricism, but other theorists of social science, suspicious of postmodernism, are more robustly realist (see Calhoun 1995; Gilbert 2001). (Postmodernists and contemporary antipositivist realists share a commitment to one version or another of the social construction idea, but much depends on how that idea is specified and developed.)

Key postmodernist figures such as Jacques Derrida saw themselves as deconstructing the idealist substructure of “Western thought,” the idealism that sometimes permeates even some self-avowed materialist approaches. Contemporary realists share the anti-idealist perspective of deconstruction and other strands of postmodernism but also develop a nonpositivist account of the very concepts postmodernists wanted to deny—concepts such as truth and objectivity most centrally, but also reference (Boyd 1988; S. Mohanty 2004), causation (Miller 1987; also see Somers 1998, a sociologist who draws on an alternative tradition of realism), identity, and experience (Alcoff 2000; S. Mohanty 1993; Moya and Hames-García 2000; Siebers 2004).

A serious debate between the postmodernist position and the contemporary realist one has barely begun, and narrowly partisan rhetoric, mistaking intellectual disagreement for political hostility, has prevented a genuine engagement. But the implications of the questions that are being scrutinized are large—and these questions could, for the first time in recent years, gather practitioners of the humanities and the social sciences together on common intellectual ground.

Beyond Positivism

Often, key theoretical slogans become more useful when their underlying claims are questioned and clarified. The postmodernist movement relies, for instance, on a critique of illegitimate and overly general historical accounts—what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) and many others following his lead called “grand narratives.” On one level the rejection of grand narratives is a rejection of ethnocentric (Hegelian) accounts of entire cultures and civilizations. But on another level the critique extends more generally to all explanations—historical or social (see Spivak 1990 for one typical example). The danger with this approach is that it is too extreme, conflating as it does all kinds of idealization, legitimate and illegitimate. After all, all explanation (in the natural and the social sciences) requires idealization, the tracing of a perspicuous pattern through the vast mass of available data, and an indiscriminate skepticism toward all grand narratives and all explanations prevents us from distinguishing good, productive use of idealization from overly general and distorting ideal accounts.

A more useful critical approach would examine the ways in which both Hegelian idealizations of history and positivist methodologies, despite their differences, demand (as Richard Miller [1987] puts it about the latter) a debilitating “worship of generality.” As Miller argues, the positivist “covering law” model of explanation relies on an overly abstract understanding of phenomena, given its primary commitment to “subsumption under general laws,” scientific or historical. Realist philosophers of science such as Miller thus typically emphasize an approach that is more hermeneutical, reflexive, and dialectical.

The crucial antipositivist point made by realist philosophers of science and social science is this: Background or auxiliary theories, which are ineliminable, have epistemic significance; there are no theory-indepent “methods” and there is no unmediated knowledge. This is a hermeneutical point on which they agree with such forebears of postmodernism as Martin Heidegger, who urged that we acknowledge the theoretical “forestructures” of understanding. Realists such as Hilary Putnam and Richard Boyd would differ sharply from Heidegger’s postmodernist descendants, however, by insisting that a nonpositivist objective knowledge is possible and that it is gained by taking the epistemic import of our background theories seriously. Putnam’s antipositivist insights lead him and others not toward relativism or skepticism but to a sophisticated notion of objectivity as theory dependent and situated. On this view, objectivity is not neutrality; rather, it is the product of active engagement with the content and implications of our theoretical and ideological presuppositions. For Putnam and others, the postmodernist denial of objectivity rests, ironically, on an essentially positivist framework: The postmodernist thinks that the only possible form of objectivity is a positivist one, based on the idea of a completely atheoretical and aperspectival knower. And when the postmodernist (rightly) sees that such a knower is a dangerous fiction, a false myth, he or she (wrongly) concludes that objectivity as such is impossible to achieve. That conclusion follows only if one agrees with the postmodernist that the positivist conception of objectivity is the only candidate available. The nonpositivist account of theory-mediated (or theory-dependent) objectivity is an attempt to sketch an
alternative notion of objective knowledge that is dialectical, hermeneutical, and situated.

**SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL KNOWLEDGE**

Richard Boyd (1988) makes the important argument that after recent developments in realist philosophy it is possible to see how the justification of moral claims is not altogether different from justification procedures in natural science. Both rely on a holistic process of achieving “reflective equilibrium” (Rawls’s phrase) among our various beliefs, theories, and rational conjectures. The sharp positivist distinction between the “hard” sciences and the softer areas of human knowledge is untenable on this view. Boyd proposes a materialist account of the human good as based on our best scientific understanding of human nature—our deepest needs and capacities, for instance—and on our best conjectures about how these needs can be met and these capacities realized. Realist thinkers argue that even the most “objective” moral—and aesthetic—theory be seen as corrigible, since it is the product of social inquiry. Even when such inquiry is based in everyday practice, it is rational—in the broadest sense of the word—and purposive, and hence not all that different from inquiry in the natural sciences (Babbitt 1990; Boyd 1988; Gilbert 2001; S. Mohanty 1997, 2001; Railton 2003).

**REHABILITATING IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE**

In literary and cultural theory, where postmodernist ideas have been immensely popular, realist theorists have outlined a series of proposals about such key concepts as experience and identity (and, more recently, values). Extending the nonpositivist view of moral objectivity to these social-theoretical domains, realists have argued since the mid-1990s against a purely constructivist view of experience and identity, showing how both can be not only “constructed” but also “real” (see Alcoff 2000, 2006; S. Mohanty 1993; Moya 2002; Moya and Hames-García 2000; Siebers 2004; Wilkerson 2000). The key thesis here is that claims about our subjective experiences and social identities are mediated by ideology and social context, and by theoretical presuppositions, but are nonetheless evaluable claims. They are explanations, and can be evaluated by comparing them with other relevant and competing explanations—since they refer not to mysterious inner essences but “outward,” to key features of the social world and to the individual’s location in that world. This theoretical proposal counters the postmodernist argument that experiences and identities are purely constructed and hence epistemically unreliable (Culler 1982; Scott 1991).

Realists about identity argue, moreover, that the future of progressive social struggles depends on greater clarity about the ways in which identity claims are justified, clarity about where and why such claims are valid, and where and why they are specious. Realists propose that we take the epistemic content of experiences and identities of minoritized groups seriously, since they contain alternative (buried or explicit) accounts of the world we all share. The development of objective knowledge about society grows out of an engagement with such alternative perspectives (see the ongoing work of the Future of Minority Studies Project).

One important consequence of this rehabilitation of identity is we can see how the best kind of moral universalism (the kind that underwrites our conceptions of human rights, for instance) is compatible with those particularist moral claims that require us to take minority identities seriously. Instead of railing against all aspects of Enlightenment thought, realists suggest how the best strands of Enlightenment universalism can accommodate—and indeed complement—the identity-based struggles of minoritized groups (e.g., women, racialized populations, gays and lesbians, the disabled) in a modern, diverse society (S. Mohanty 1997; C. Mohanty 2003; Teuton 2006).

**SEE ALSO** Civilization; Culture; Derrida, Jacques; Empiricism; Epistemology; Hermeneutics; Human Rights; Idealism; Identity; Social; Minorities; Narratives; Objectivity; Philosophy; Philosophy of Science; Politics; Identity; Postivism; Postmodernism; Relativism; Social Science; Subjectivity: Overview; Universalism

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Reality


Satya P. Mohanty

REALITY

In everyday usage, reality refers to the universe that exists independent of our thoughts. Dreams or delusions, which we experience when we are asleep or are otherwise not in full possession of our senses, are examples of the nonreal.

In philosophy, this commonsense view is known as realism. The opposing view in which only our thoughts are real is called idealism. An intermediate view is dualism, in which reality is composed of both the concrete objects of experience, which we call matter, and some other nonmaterial element usually associated with mind and perhaps some external supernatural substance called spirit. While dualism is a common belief within most of the world’s religions, it is nonparsimonious in the sense that no evidence requires the complication of dual realities. Spirit can be incorporated into either realism or idealism, although it is explicitly excluded in a form of realism called materialism. In the materialist view, matter and perhaps space and time are all that exist.

Associated with many thinkers since ancient times in both the East and the West, idealism asserts that our only knowledge of the outside world comes from perceptions, which are developed in the mind. So, it is reasoned but not proved that these are the only entities that can be real. The implication of idealism is that our thoughts are somehow more perfect, more truthful than the raw data that
30 Morgenthau, Politics among Nations, Part IV. Human Behavior 35 power." This is illustrated by a statement such as the following: "The test of political success is the degree to which one is able to maintain, to increase, or to demonstrate one's power over others." Power appears as an end in itself, whereas a greater emphasis on the first root of political discord would credit power as an instrument necessary for success in competitive. While demonstrating the usefulness of the first image, Augustine and Spinoza, Niebuhr and Morgenthau also help to make clear the limits of its serviceability. It is hoped that this approach will yield a synthesis between the empirical richness of the case-study method and the analytical rigor of Waltz’s structuralism. SEE ALSO Deterrence, Mutual; Hobbes, Thomas; Machiavelli, Niccolò; Morgenthau, Hans; United Nations; Waltz, Kenneth. BIBLIOGRAPHY. Boesche, Roger. 2003. The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. Carr, Edward Hallett. 1939. The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations. a. Niccolo Machiavelli. b. Thucydides. c. Hans Morgenthau. d. Kenneth Waltz. Kenneth Waltz argues that the key difference between domestic and international orders lies in their. a. wealth distribution. b. ideology. c. structures. d. security. During the interwar period of 1919 to 1939 the academic perspective called criticized the_ perspective that advocated the League of Nations. a. liberal/realist b. realist/liberal c. moderate/Benthamite d. Wilsonian/Hobbesian. Contrasted with liberalism, conservatism places a higher value on_. A. advocates equal rights for women but also supports a more progressive policy agenda that would include social justice, peace, economic well-being, and ecological balance.