

## Cognitive dimensions of politics: relativism and rationalism

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This article investigates whether there are necessarily links between relativist and rationalist thinking and the nature of the politics that ensues from these epistemologies. Claims that posit such linkages have permeated political theory as well as the philosophy of science for many decades. The arguments in earlier as well as more recent discourses to this end are appraised here, with no necessary causal link being found between the claims of these discourses and the conventional world of politics. Political theory and metatheory are not substitutes for the thought that informs political action, and hence the nature of politics. The analysis suggests that the two epistemologies can co-exist, irrespective of whether politics is democratic or autocratic in nature. To the extent that epistemologies inform political thought, their nature does not pre-determine the nature of the politics that they inform; the latter is rather a function of substantive claims contained in the epistemologies themselves, of the complex and dynamic interaction between these claims, and of a multitude of other factors.

### Kognitiewe dimensies van die politiek: relativisme en rasionalisme

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die vraag of daar noodwendig verbintenisse bestaan tussen relativistiese en rasionalistiese denke en die aard van politiek wat uit hierdie epistemologieë en denkwyses mag voortspruit. Uitsprake wat sodanige verbintenisse beweer kom reeds verskeie dekades in politieke teorie en die wetenskapsfilosofie voor. Argumente hieroor in vroeëre sowel as meer resente debatte word ondersoek. Geen noodwendige kousale verbintenis tussen die aansprake wat in hierdie debatte voorkom en die konvensionele wêreld van die politiek kon bevestig word nie. Politieke teorie sowel as metateorie is nie substitute vir die denke wat politieke handeling rig nie. Die ondersoek suggereer dat beide die epistemologieë naas mekaar kan bestaan ongeag die aard van die politiek, hetsy demokraties of outokraties. Tot die mate wat hierdie epistemologieë wel politieke denke mag beïnvloed, word die aard van politiek self nie voorafbepaal deur die aard van die epistemologieë nie. Laasgenoemde is eerder afhanklik van die substantiewe aansprake wat in sulke denkstelsels vervat is, die dinamiese interaksie wat hieruit voortspruit, naas 'n magdom ander faktore.

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That thought and action are somehow related seems indisputable; almost self-evident.<sup>1</sup> The nature of this relationship is, however, an extremely complex one and notoriously difficult to analyse. The aim of this article is to explore one dimension of the very complex set of connections that may obtain between the realms of the abstract and the concrete, and it does so by posing the following question: Are particular forms of knowledge and particular modes of cognition related to distinct types of political behaviour and hence to the nature of politics?

More specifically, the article purports to explore whether relativism and its epistemological and axiological mirror-image, rationalism, have significant implications for the world of politics. Of course, these positions as analysed and portrayed in the sciences, and in the philosophy of both the social and the natural sciences, are not and can never be substituted for first-order political thoughts and actions. With this in mind, one could thus attempt to answer the above question in two distinct ways. The first is to use the reconstructions and analyses of second- and third-order discourses of what cognitive patterns are presumed to obtain in first-order practices, then to explore the implications of these epistemologies with regard to real world parallels, and to draw some conclusions. The second would be actually to attempt to analyse first-order political thoughts and actions and then to infer conclusions about the nature of the connections that may obtain between these categories within the confines of the case study. This article proceeds along the lines of the former approach. While both have their intrinsic and unique limitations, they share the assumption that the cognitive is the link between the epistemological and the axiological on the one hand, and the psychological dimension of behaviour on the other. Psychological relativism and rationalism represent doctrines that are related to, but not to be confused with, the maxims of epistemological relativism and rationalism. The area of overlap between the psychological and the epistemic is the cognitive dimension of human action. Its psychological dimensions connect it with the "self" in matters political, and its philosophical questions connect it with the epistemological and axiological categories.

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## 1. The two positions

### 1.1 Relativism

Relativism can be described as a set of views that acknowledge the legitimacy, the divergent nature and the uniqueness of different ideas, practices and phenomena. It is especially relevant to what is right or wrong, good or bad, and true or false. The existence of an absolute and universal standard by means of which these scales of ethics, morality and truth can be judged is rejected. A relativistic norm, dependent on and derived from personal beliefs and circumstances, cultural orientation and practices, and historical consciousness, is suggested as the way in which to deal with variations on these scales. Its origins are as ancient as the writings of Protagoras, the Greek Sophist of the fifth century BC, and as modern as the writings and practices of our own time. Relativity theory as formulated by Einstein in the early part of the twentieth century is related to relativism, and there are important similarities to be found, but the two are not interchangeable. The former is primarily a scientific concept, whereas relativism permeates both science and social consciousness. The universal validity of the former has yet to be disproved, while the latter is more of an attitude, a pseudo-ideology whose ubiquitous nature is not always fully realised (Stankiewicz 1972: Proposition 30).

### 1.2 Rationalism

Unlike relativism, which does not base its rationale on any specific source of knowledge, rationalism in its philosophical use is a theory that bases its legitimacy and authority on exactly such a source. In philosophical terms, rationalism contends that the only source of truthful knowing is the knowledge that is gained by human reasoning. Reasoning and rational analysis alone can yield logical truths as well as true substantive knowledge about the world, and in its purest form, rationalism contends that no recourse to empirical observation, personal experience or historical understanding is required for this purpose. As an intellectual attitude to life and the universe, rationalism is not easy to pin down, though nothing may seem simpler. In philosophy, the work of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, all seventeenth-century rationalists, is usually held to be the cornerstone of modern rationalism. Their conviction was that true knowledge acquired by reason could be couched in a mathema-

Faure/Cognitive dimensions of politics: relativism and rationalism

tical structure, and that valid inferences could logically be deduced from such a scheme (cf Barker 1968: 37, Urmson 1976: 245-6). During the twentieth century a number of philosophers defended the rationalist position in some way or other. Popper (and his critical rationalism) is probably the best known example of modern rationalism. Unlike the older varieties of continental rationalism, modern rationalism incorporates empirical sources of knowledge into its epistemological doctrines.

### 1.3 Mirror-images

What can be said about these seemingly opposite positions? As outlined above, the most glaring difference is that relativism accords history and the sociological underpinnings of knowledge an all-important status, while rationalism denies them that status. For relativism there is no single truth, but many truths that are forever changing in a world that does not, and cannot, have a determinate ontology — there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the world has a single determinate nature. Rationalism, on the other hand, presupposes that there is a category of knowledge derived from a particular source which is the only truthful way and, while such knowledge is not necessarily immune to its own evolution, the category itself is not subject to the whims of historical and sociological experience. There is a “rational key”, so to speak, which is determinate and authoritative. Reason is its guiding principle and it can unlock understanding that can transcend the contradictions inherent in culture and history, space and time.

## 2. The early discourses

### 2.1 Correspondence: elusive or an illusion?

The hypothesis that relativism is supportive of democratic politics and rationalism supportive of autocratic politics is useful in initiating the analysis of whether any correspondence exists between the categories of academic reconstructions on the one hand and first-order political reality on the other. Of course, the hypothesis could just as well have claimed the opposite, for its role is purely functional. Astoundingly, the older discourses in political theory and the philosophy of science make claims and argue about this correspondence in a manner that seems to cover all possible forms of linkage. In political science and political

theory, the very same problem addressed by this article was vigorously debated shortly after World War II. Starting this analysis at that point seems prudent, since that debate contains arguments that claim: a symmetrical correspondence; an asymmetrical correspondence; the absence of any correspondence, and the possibility of variable correspondence.

### 2.1.1 Symmetrical correspondence

Almost sixty years ago Hans Kelsen (1948: 906-14), the well-known legal philosopher, argued in a manner that endorses the hypothesis and its correspondences as postulated above. For him, philosophical absolutism (his substitute for rationalism) is tantamount to an epistemological totalitarianism that can only result in a politics of a similar nature, while epistemological relativism would translate into the equalitarian nature of democratic politics, in particular. For Kelsen the cognitive link between philosophical absolutism and politics is the connection and overlap that exists between ethics as a branch of philosophy and political theory as a dimension of political reality. Relativism as a branch of epistemology links with reality in such a way that the two epistemic antagonisms have external parallels in the political mirror-images of autocracy and democracy. Philosophical absolutism is the metaphysical view that there is an absolute reality that is immune to space and time, and this corresponds to the possibility of absolute truth and absolute values. Relativism is, in turn, a doctrine that locates reality within the confines of empirical knowledge and human experience. Since absolute reality is, for Kelsen, beyond human experience, the object of knowable experience must be relative to the individual knower and his or her space and time, which must render truth and values relative as well (cf Kelsen 1948: 906-10).

In Kelsen's argument the political personification of perfection and the absolute will invariably lead to an organic state ruled by an absolute monarch, rather as Louis XIV expressed it in his famous phrase "l'état c'est moi". As the secular representative of perfect truth, the absolute monarch will articulate values that are the same for everyone, since the state itself is based on inequality and the absence of freedom. Fascism, National Socialism, and Bolshevism, in principle, are the same type of political absolutism, except that the visible incarnation of the deified ruler of the state is called by another name, be it Generalissimo,

Führer or some superhuman group claiming god-like attributes. By contrast, the relativistic manifestation of the state is something akin to “l'état c'est nous”. This type of political relativism or democracy results from the doctrine of equality, in particular. The argument here is that extreme relativism would result in a solipsism, where the only political reality would be that of individual understanding, which is an absolute category in itself. Given a multiplicity of individuals, this would bring about an unacceptable pluralism, but since these concepts are equal, their equality opens up the possibility for a democratic and relativistic politics (cf Kelsen 1948: 908-9).

Finally, Kelsen regards it as no coincidence that the great metaphysicians in the history of political thought were in favour of autocracy, while their relativistic counterparts were protagonists of democracy. The former group includes Plato, the greatest metaphysician of all times, who countered Protagoras's “man is the measure of all things” and Euripides' preference for democracy with “God is the measure of all things”, and his ideal state: a perfect autocracy ruled by a philosopher-king (cf Kelsen 1948: 911-2).

For Kelsen, we may then conclude, the symmetrical correspondence between rationalism and autocracy on the one hand, and relativism and democracy on the other, is a near perfect one.

### 2.1.2 Asymmetrical correspondence

Diametrically opposed to Kelsen's views is the argument espoused by Williamson (1947: 147-77).<sup>2</sup> This author does not challenge the sincerity of Kelsen's devotion to democracy, but rather the actual logic of his analysis. Williamson's divergence with Kelsen starts with what

2 It should be noted that Williamson's article was published one year before that of Kelsen (1948). His response, however, is to earlier German and English publications of Kelsen which were reproduced in the English article published in 1948. This accounts for the seeming contradiction that Williamson appears to be responding to an article published a year after his own. Kelsen's (1948) English article is basically a restatement of his earlier views which were widely influential in the period before World War II. The earlier German sources that Williamson cites in his article are the following: Kelsen H, *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (Berlin, 1925), and *Das Problem der Souveränität und die Theorie des Völkerrechts* (Tübingen, 1928). Kelsen's 1948 article also contains a number of references to his earlier works.

he takes to be the flawed assumption that rationally based discoveries and understanding will inexorably be imposed on all, even against their will. The counterpart of this assumption — that relativists who do not share such a rationalist understanding (or who are in doubt, without an opinion) are necessarily always tolerant — is for Williamson equally fallacious.

Williamson suggests that understanding the difference between rationalism and relativism as analogous to the difference between conviction and doubt or scepticism is altogether too simplistic. In real-world parallels with their psychological complexities, people oscillate between these extremes, sometimes convinced of personal understanding and sometimes in doubt about it. With regard to the latter, when feelings of doubt are harboured, Williamson argues, intensity of political feeling is often a compensation for depth of understanding. The intensity of feeling results from the fear that personally held convictions will not stand up to more powerful arguments held by others. This can, and has in the past resulted in the persecution of those others. Such persecution is not an evangelistic act of persuading others; it is fundamentally a species of self-defence (Williamson 1947: 152). Such instances are, for Williamson, the mirror-image of claims that rational understanding combined with conscience contains the logical necessity of leading the way to autocracy. What it does entail is that, whereas rationalism bases its claims on the authority of understanding, relativism bases its claims on a majority or the aggregate of opinions. It is not true that freedom of discussion relieves one of the obligation of thinking; rather, if one cannot understand, then one can always count votes and support. Rationalism bases itself on principles, whereas relativism has recourse to procedures reflecting majorities. The former would argue that right is might, while the latter would argue that might is right. Williamson rejects the latter notion, arguing, for example, that not even the unanimous consent of the German people could have justified the holocaust (Williamson 1947: 160), and that consent may never be seen as primary or original; it is always secondary and derivative. Like Kelsen, Williamson uses philosophical texts (in some instances the very same ones used by Kelsen) and historical events to demonstrate the asymmetrical linkages that he favours.

Faure/Cognitive dimensions of politics: relativism and rationalism

For Williamson, unlike Kelsen, we may thus conclude that the asymmetrical correspondence between rationalism and autocracy, on the one hand, and relativism and democracy, on the other, is a near perfect one.

### 2.1.3 The absence of correspondence and the possibility of variable correspondence

The two preceding arguments provide the proverbial “both sides of the coin”, and logic suggests that they cannot both be correct. However, there is yet another possibility which implies that both can be wrong, and that correspondences cannot be conclusively demonstrated. If correct, such a view would of course open up the possibility of spurious and historically specific connections, but it is conditional on not finding any logical connection between the categories concerned.

Oppenheim’s (1950: 951-60) appraisal of the preceding arguments does exactly this: after attempting to establish whether there are any logical, political, psychological and/or historical connections between the epistemological and the political categories under investigation, he concludes that there are no necessary connections between them whatsoever. The most important connection, the logical, is refuted because of the inability of the epistemologies to pronounce on the ultimate purpose of their respective political doctrines. Ethical relativism and empiricism (the latter, for Oppenheim, lying somewhere between the two rival epistemologies) claim that value judgements cannot be validated or empirically verified, and hence they cannot pronounce a preference for either political doctrines. Philosophical absolutism, or rationalism, on the other hand, claims that it can pronounce on an *a priori* basis that certain value judgements are true or false. However, for Oppenheim, rationalism cannot prove the truth of either, “autocracy is best” or “democracy is best” without assuming some other additional premise, apart from the validity of rationalism itself. Oppenheim maintains that there is no objective method of deciding the truth of either statements. Neither logic nor experience is of any help and the only recourse that rationalism has is to intuition, which is purely subjective. For Oppenheim (1950: 953-4), one is therefore free from any logical or empirical restrictions and may prefer either autocracy or democracy, irrespective of the epistemology one favours. Oppenheim finds no necessary political, psychological or historical connections between the categories



either. Those connections that do obtain are variable, and this is especially the case in the history of political thought, where protagonists of both political doctrines often oscillate between relativistic and rationalistic elements in their arguments (Oppenheim 1950: 956).

This argument, therefore, cannot lead to any other conclusion than the absence of any correspondence, or the possibility of variable correspondence.

## 2.2 What do these early debates yield?

Viewed collectively, the three arguments above do not conclusively confirm or disprove the presumed correspondence suggested in the hypothesis. In fact, they leave open the possibility that there is not necessarily a correspondence between second- and third-order theory on the one hand, and first-order political activities on the other. As has been suggested, the relationship between thought and action is one matter, but the relationship between theory and practice is, in fact, not necessarily identical or a substitute. As understood in this article, these relationships could only be interchangeable if theory as a second- and third-order construction were synonymous with political thought in the first order, and this seems to be questionable, given the arguments presented.

## 3. More recent discourses

During the half-century since the above views about connections between modes of thinking and the nature of politics were expressed, the two modes of thought have continued to make their influence felt in various first-order areas of political life and public morality. Similarly, the various second- and third-order arguments referred to above have repeatedly reincarnated themselves in the writings of numerous scholars during the same period.

These influences and arguments cannot be covered in detail here; attention can only be drawn to a few examples. In the category of first-order political life and public morality, the increased sensitivity with which many governments deal with minority, language, group and human rights is often cited as one of the successes of relativistic thinking. Accepting and legitimising cultural diversity, it is argued, is a questioning of the wisdom of the old order that signifies the search for a new

morality based on an understanding of contextual uniqueness. The sexual revolution of the sixties, the so-called new morality, the alternative press, alternative music, the so-called counter-culture movement, issues associated with abortion, euthanasia, cloning and stem cell research, and the challenging of the doctrine of *ex cathedra* Catholicism are also all examples of the search for a new morality that often questions the wisdom of old, entrenched practices. In such controversies the polar differences of opinion can usually be traced back to the underlying premises of relativism and rationalism.

The same period also yielded the replication of second- and third-order arguments that either corroborated or refuted the earlier positions, and these have permeated much of political theory, given its reliance on, preoccupation with, and in many instances its fascination with meta-theoretical issues. It has even been argued that political theory has become alienated from the true objects of its study by replacing the conventional first-order world of politics with controversies taken from the philosophy of social science (cf Gunnell 1980: 440-60). The re-statement of the positions, whether explicit or implicit, runs through the history of recent political theory like a golden thread. Starting with Arnold Brecht's (1959) thesis of scientific value relativism (value alter-nativism), it proceeds through the tenets of behaviourism, behaviour-alism and post-behaviouralism. Expositors of post-behaviouralism, critical theory and political philosophy challenged the objective rationality of logical positivist-empiricist political science. For many scholars, relevance to the needs of humanity, rather than the "myth of objectivity", became the driving force of intellectual inquiry. Work produced in the philosophy of science convinced many political scientists that paradigms (cf Kuhn 1970) and research programmes (cf Lakatos 1970) were, in effect, spatio-temporal frameworks that could not be transcended; historicism and its concomitant relativism were to be accepted as unavoidable and integral elements of science. Paul Feyerabend's (1975) work in the philosophy of science endorsed this underlying relativism with the claim that the best methodology is that of anarchism, and that "anything goes" is a laudable point of scientific departure. The so-called critical rationalists (Popper and his followers), on the other hand, claimed that historicism could be refuted conclusively by logical argument (cf Popper 1961). To them, the procedures of critical rationalism constituted

the key to piecemeal social engineering and embodied the cognitive foundation of open societies that would ensure and secure the future of democracy (cf Popper 1963). The more recent influence of the so-called rational choice model, as well as the commitment of modernism and post-modernism to relativism, attest to the pervasive influence of the two positions. It would be appropriate to suggest that the underlying tension between relativism and rationalism has indirectly shaped and driven much of the theoretical debate in modern political science.

It is to the thoughts of these two highly influential expositors of this period that we now turn.

### 3.1 A relativist perspective — restating symmetrical correspondence

The philosopher Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) is one of the twentieth century's best-known and most controversial exponents of relativism in science and politics. He has been described in many ways — as a defender (and later a critic) of Popper's critical rationalism; as brilliant but irresponsible; as a maverick; as a pluralist; as an anarchist; as the worst enemy of science; as a critic of the philosophy of science itself, and as a relativist. His thoughts cannot be simply summarised, since they changed considerably during his career. The only systematic pattern in this change is the progressive move away from the rationalist position towards a relativist one. He published extensively, and it could be said that his position is well reflected in his *tour de force*, *Against method*, published in 1975, and *Farewell to reason*, published in 1987 (cf Preston 1997).

Feyerabend's first published article (in 1947) dealt with modern physics, and in it he strongly subscribed to positivism. In 1958, in two papers, he argued against positivism based on the falsificationist views of Popper. By the mid-sixties he had started to move away from these views and to subscribe to theoretical pluralism — the notion that as many as possible alternative theories should be offered and defended in order to maximise the probability of falsifying existing theories. The contextual theory of meaning which was to be developed in more detail is already evident in this pluralist conception. In the early 1970s he attacked Popper from a Kuhnian perspective and also published an essay in which he outlined an anarchistic theory of knowledge, which he claimed to have obtained from the liberalism in J S Mill's *On liberty*

(1859) (cf Preston 1997). The main thesis of *Against method* is that there is no such a thing as scientific method; it ridicules all attempts to demonstrate such a form of rationality — “the events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure; there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation but are missing elsewhere” (Feyerabend 1975: 1). Shortly afterwards, he expressly subscribed to the idea of relativism in an article. His book *Science in a free society* followed in 1978. In it, the political implications of epistemological anarchism are explored, while the philosophical position of relativism is re-endorsed. *Science as an art* (1984) relegates the entire history of science to change without progress, re-stating relativism in even stronger terms. *Farewell to reason* (1987) again explores the relativist theme, especially its “Protagorean” account (cf Preston 1997). Shortly before his death, Feyerabend displayed some uneasiness with relativism. *Killing time: the autobiography of Paul Feyerabend* was completed shortly before his death, and published in 1995.

Feyerabend’s scepticism towards the rationalist conception of science is well captured by three questions which he posed in a lecture at Sussex University in 1974, namely: What’s so great about knowledge? What’s so great about science? What’s so great about truth? Feyerabend’s answers to these questions often came in the form of other questions, or of negation, telling us what science is not, rather than what it is. Does science differ from witchcraft, cognitively speaking? Is it really the only way for us to organise our experience cognitively? For him, the knowledge enterprise needed breathing space, not a crippling control by some tradition, and all sources of knowledge had to be investigated on an equal footing. For Feyerabend, rationalist and empiricist historiographical accounts of science were simply misleading. Pluralism, anarchism, aesthetic appeal and social bias were decisive factors in the history of science, but were not acknowledged by those who controlled it. The rule “anything goes” depicted Feyerabend’s conception of science very well. He subscribed to Kuhn’s notion of pre-paradigmatic science, as well as the “irrationalist” overtones in paradigm switches. People had to be liberated from the rationalist stranglehold of concepts such as “objectivity”, “rationality” and “truth” (cf Preston 1997).

In spite of his methodological anarchism, Feyerabend never endorsed political anarchism. In fact, there is not a very strong parallel between

his “politics of philosophy and science” and his “philosophy and science of politics”. His political thought is not as well developed as his philosophical ideas, and could probably be summarised as a blend of liberalism and social democracy. For him, all intellectual traditions ought to have equal access to power, and the separation of church and state should also be applied with regard to science and the state. As practised in Western societies, science has a privileged position with regard to political power, and it should be brought under democratic control. Scientific “experts”, in particular, should be viewed with scepticism and mistrust. His *Farewell to reason* questions the so-called free and diverse scientific practices that exist in Western societies. Underneath the surface of diversity, Feyerabend sensed a monolithic monotonous category of consensus controlling the liberty of intellectual expression in an imperialist and uniform manner. Relativism is the only guarantee of cultural diversity and the avoidance of totalitarianism. To this end, Feyerabend promoted the notion of argumentative evaluation (sensitivity to the beliefs of others) and criticised philosophers who dismissed diversity under the guise of “objectivity” and “reason”, which were “deified hangovers of autocratic times” (cf Preston 1997). The “true-for-them” and “true-for-us” approach is, therefore, at the heart of his intellectual and cultural relativism. The world has an indeterminate, plural quality, and the Homeric gods and the subatomic particles of modern microphysics are simply different ways in which our “being” responds to an “unknowable” world (cf Preston 1997).

### 3.2 A rationalist perspective — restating asymmetrical correspondence

Karl Popper (1902-1994) is generally regarded as one of the previous century’s most famous and influential philosophers of science. His social and political philosophy, based on his epistemology, is equally well known. He views himself as a critical rationalist, a proponent of the hypothetico-deductive scientific method, and an opponent of scepticism, historicism, conventionalism and relativism in science and politics. He vigorously opposes inductivism and historicism and, on the basis of his criticism of the latter, became the champion and defender of the so-called “open society”, as well as a critic of totalitarianism. Popper’s thought covers a range of fields, and there is an under-

Faure/Cognitive dimensions of politics: relativism and rationalism

lying systemic unity between his views on logic, epistemology, science, historical and social development and his normative political theory. In fact, it all constitutes a cosmology, an attempt to understand the world of which we and our knowledge are but a part. His views on critical rationalism are the cornerstone of this. Some of his best-known works include *The logic of scientific discovery* (1959), *The poverty of historicism* (1961), *The open society and its enemies* (1963), *Conjectures and refutations* (1974), *Unended quest* (1976) and *Objective knowledge* (1979).

Popper rejects rationalism in the Cartesian sense of elevating reason to the highest source of knowledge. For him, such an approach is an unacceptable form of “intellectualism”. However, rationalism does entail the critical application of reason to solving the problems of knowledge. For Popper, no source of knowledge is sacred; they are all subject to critical investigation (critical rationalism). Advancement of knowledge consists, mainly, in the modification of earlier knowledge, refuting conjectures where necessary. A scientist who opts for critical rationalism does so on the basis of an ethical choice. Such a choice requires self-investigation and always carries the commitment to a type of Socratic modesty; the ignorance of the scientist is acknowledged, and critical rationalism is always coupled with a willingness to learn from past mistakes (cf Faure & Venter 1993: 29-30).

Popper is more concerned with the correct application of scientific procedures (method) than with the results that such procedures may produce. He rejects induction as the criterion distinguishing between science and metaphysics on the grounds of its non-logical nature, arguing that no number of successive corroborating observations can exclude the possibility that “all swans are white” may be false (Popper 1959: 27-8). As a new criterion for distinguishing between these categories, he proposes that it must be possible for a scientific system (hypothesis, proposition, theory) to be refuted by experience (Popper 1959: 44). This does not render metaphysics meaningless; it simply excludes it from the domain of potentially falsifiable scientific knowledge. He also subscribes to the idea that all observational attempts at falsifying knowledge are “theory-laden” and tainted with meaning (Popper 1959: 93-4). The procedural key to this falsification is as follows. The logical deductions of the theory are compared to the internal consistency of the theoretical system; the logical form of the theory is scrutinised to

establish whether it has empirical substance or merely contains tautologies; it is compared to other theories to establish whether it represents any scientific advance, and it is then empirically applied to establish whether it is reconcilable with the world of practice (Popper 1959: 32-3). He further refines these procedures by introducing the notions of corroboration and verisimilitude, the former referring to the historical performance of a theory in withstanding falsification attempts, and the latter to the relative (or comparative) truth content of a theory (Popper 1979: 118-9). To this he adds the idea of ontological pluralism: the existence of three separate but inter-connected worlds, World I representing physical objects; World II human consciousness, and World III the objective world of books and publications containing, *inter alia*, scientific theories. Worlds I and III can only interact through the intervention and mediation of World II (using the procedures previously outlined), which will ensure that knowledge can evolve, not unlike the Darwinist concept of biological evolution (cf Popper 1979: 108, 145, 154, 155). In short, this is the essence of Popper's epistemology of critical rationalism. It is in fact his *Leitmotiv*:

The central problem of epistemology has always been and still is the problem of the growth of knowledge. And the growth of knowledge can be studied best by studying the growth of scientific knowledge (Popper 1959: 15).

Popper extends his scientific epistemology to the social sciences, arguing that there is a methodological unity that binds all forms of science. The logical fabric of social science is no different from that of natural science; it is the same logic that structures the relations between *explanans* and *explanandum* in all cases (Popper 1961: 131). The social sciences should also be conducted in terms of methodological individualism, not via a holism or a collectivism that uses non-empirical categories such as classes, societies and civilisations. For Popper (1961: 136), individuals are the true study objects of social science, but this does not imply that such a science should be based on the laws of psychology. In fact, his methodological individualism is anti-psychologist in nature, not on logical, but on moral grounds, because of the fear that knowledge of laws of the psyche would deprive individuals of their liberty (Popper 1961: 158-9). Popper also rejects the notion that history can be manipulated through conspiracy by a group of individuals. Such

conspiracies do exist, of course, but their unintended and unforeseen consequences are beyond human control, and their significance should not be overestimated (Popper 1973: 330-1). Social science should explore the promising possibilities of rational models in fields such as decision-making in economics, and the extent to which actual behaviour deviates from rational prediction in the absence of sufficient knowledge (Popper 1961: 140-2). By criticising and refuting theories, social science can aspire to the same objectivity as the natural sciences reflected in World III. The positivist-inductivist conception of objectivity is untenable, since it dehumanises science when it expects the scientist to strip him/herself of bias — in itself a biased requirement. It is only through the procedures of critical rationalism that social science can aspire to objectivity — that is, Popper's objectivity (cf Faure & Venter 1993: 36-8).

Popper's political thought is based on his strategy of demonstrating that the presuppositions of totalitarianism are logically flawed. His rejection of historicism — the notion that there are discernible patterns in history which constitute the basis for large-scale "utopian" engineering — is all-important in this respect, namely (1961: v-vi): the course of the history of the human race is significantly influenced by any increase in the knowledge available to mankind; there are no rational or scientific methods that can serve to predict the future increase in scientific knowledge, and, on the above grounds, the possibility of theoretical history (a historical social science comparable with theoretical physics) must be rejected. A scientific theory of historical development, to serve as a basis for predicting history or the future, is simply not possible, and the fundamental aim of historical method, then, seems to be based upon fallacies that must finally lead to the rejection of historicism. On these grounds, Popper attacks historicist thinkers of the "closed" society (Plato, Hegel and Marx), and suggests that the historical indeterminist method of piecemeal social engineering is the best means of ensuring an "open" democratic society. In essence, Popper extrapolates the logical procedures of the scientific process to the realm of politics, suggesting that political policies and actions should be continually criticised and adapted (where necessary) in order to eliminate anomalies (cf Faure & Venter 1993: 38-43).



### 3.3 Denying the possibility of correspondence

John Gunnell is one of the most articulate political theorists on the various orders of discourse and the linkages (or absence thereof) that structure the relationship between academic discourse on the one hand, and political discourse on the other (cf Gunnell 1993: 563-84). His thesis is that relativism and rationalism in second- and third-order discourse have very little to do with their use in the first-order world of politics and its concomitant discourse. The pervasive influence of relativism in political theory and other second- and third-order discourses such as ethics and philosophy is brought about by rationalism's continuing insistence that there are transcontextual criteria of certainty, and by the relationship between theory and practice. Only if the search for such criteria is abandoned, can the problem of relativism be addressed and the disparity between theory and practice be faced squarely. Gunnell's point is that second- and third-order discourses are parasitic on first-order phenomena, but that the solution of the latter's problems is not dependent on the theories produced in the former. Metatheoretical debates may reflect first-order problems and their solutions, but meta-theory does not inform the thought that structures action in first-order instances, although it sometimes claims epistemic privilege and authority to do so with regard to the world of practice. Similarly, practical problems do not necessarily spring from theoretical or philosophical problems, doctrines or misgivings. Not only is there very little intervention by theoreticians and philosophers in practice, but they have no authority to do so, even if they wish to (Gunnell 1993: 563-4).

Gunnell argues that political theory is essentially a rationalist and foundationalist enterprise, given its reliance on philosophy. Its failure to find transcontextual meaning (which would provide authority in terms of practical judgement) causes a philosophical nervousness when personalised or contextual criteria are suggested by relativists. The consequences of judgements derived in such a manner are then often imputed by rationalists to the first order of political action while they simultaneously point to the grave dangers that it may hold for liberal and democratic practices. This is then a typical

... metatheoretical reflection of the practical dilemma of an enterprise devoted in principle to political criticism and evaluation but both institutionally estranged from political life and genetically limited to some form of the idea of theoretical intervention (Gunnell 1993: 568).

Gunnell therefore denies that necessary linkages exist between the epistemologies of relativism and rationalism in second- and third-order discourse and their counterparts in the conventional world of politics.

#### 4. Analysis and appraisal

The six views presented above represent two slices from the history of second- and third-order discourse as it applies to the hypothesis of this article. Moreover they each represent arguments confirming the hypothesis, arguments disconfirming the hypothesis and arguing for the confirmation of its inverse, and arguments that the hypothesis is not testable due to variable causality or the absence of any causality. In this respect several points are apparent:

- There is no consensus in second- and third-order discourses as to whether relativism or rationalism will be supportive of a particular type of politics, be it democracy or autocracy.
- Supposed linkages are imputed, ascribed to or inferred from philosophical texts or historical political events to demonstrate the purported linkage preferred by some of the authors.
- Though not fully explored here, in some instances the same philosophical texts are used by different authors with opposing views on the nature of linkages to demonstrate linkage, depending on what excerpt is quoted from the text or how it is interpreted.
- In the cases of the authors who argue for linkages, whether symmetrical or asymmetrical, the viewpoints of relativism and rationalism seem to be in an adversarial zero-sum relationship: more of the one is less of the other, with concomitant political implications.
- Relating to the previous point, the possibility that both the epistemologies of relativism and rationalism can co-exist in support of either democracy or autocracy is not specifically explored by any of the authors except Oppenheim, who does so only by implication. The possibility of a necessary co-existence of both viewpoints to make politics of whatever nature possible, therefore, certainly warrants further investigation. If simultaneous co-existence of the viewpoints in philosophical texts, and especially everyday political activity, is indeed the case, the logical corollary would be that neither of the two orientations in its extreme manifestation would allow

for the conventional world of political activity. It is to theoretical constructs of these two extreme positions that we now turn in order to probe their implications, albeit heuristically.

The most extreme form of relativism that can be conceived of by way of a theoretical construct is absolute relativism (cf also Faure 1999: 52-69). This position simply postulates that there are as many points of view or beliefs as there are observers or participants in a particular frame of reference, with each view or belief differing from all the others. In a cognitive sense, absolute relativism can be equated with an epistemology of solipsism: a theory that locates reality entirely in the mind of the beholder (cf Kelsen's reference to this above). Solipsism specifically rejects the influence of involuntary experiences of the external world as having any value, whether through direct observation or through processes brought about by interaction with others. Solipsism thus entails that knowledge of, or a belief as to what is correct is fixed entirely by the individual's conscious awareness of what is valid knowledge. The implication of such a solipsistic situation is that the same phenomenon or category may be viewed or understood entirely differently by two or more individuals. There is no possibility of the convergence of understanding or belief; there is no possibility of developing any mutually shared knowledge, except by coincidence. It leaves no room for the evolution of knowledge, whether through persuasion or experience, the spatio-temporal dimensions of existence.

If we gauge the views of Kelsen, and especially those of Feyerabend against this construct, one can hypothetically imagine a situation in which a collection of individuals would have fixed and divergent ideas about the world. One could describe their epistemology as that of solipsism, or absolute relativism. Where would such a situation lead; what would its outcome be? We could reasonably infer that the situation would not be characterised by any shared (or even partly shared) understanding of what constitutes political life. In such a situation there would be no ontology of what politics is, or should be. At most, there would be as many ontologies of the world as there were participants in the situation. The interaction between participants in such a pluralistic situation could not be anything other than highly personal and individualistic. Absolute relativism precludes the development of any common understanding of the world; there could be no shared rationality. The

only form of “rationality” that can exist in this construct would be that of the individual, and such “rationality” would be totally dominated by the individual’s own understanding of the world in terms of space and time — that is his or her awareness in a synchronic and diachronic sense. It is reasonable to expect that participants’ interests, fulfilling the individual *telos*, acting in terms of fixed and differing beliefs, would dominate the situation. Is all this the logical outcome of extreme relativism, albeit hypothetical? In fairness to Feyerabend, it must be noted that his relativism is one in which great care and sympathy should be displayed toward the views of others; his relativism is in fact a very tolerant orientation. Is this not contradictory to the line of argument developed thus far? It is suggested here, however, that if everybody were to pursue relativism to its extreme limits, the ensuing situation would not be unlike (in fact, it would be very similar to) conditions in the so-called state of nature found in social contract theory. More specifically, extreme relativism would resemble the anarchical war-like condition of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651), or (very unlikely) that of the idyllic happiness of Rousseau’s state of nature in his *Du contrat social* (1762).

Relativist politics, including Feyerabend’s version of it, will destroy the fabric of politics if pursued to its extreme logical limits. Real-world politics has no existence outside the “protective shield” of societies and communities which are more-or-less democratic in orientation. It can exist by virtue of, and as a consequence of the latter, not as its precondition or its end. If taken to extremes, it will not and cannot result in the withering away of (Feyerabend’s) inhibiting elements of democracy; it will itself inevitably create these elements. Space and time as dimensions of human existence need to be shared voluntarily to a minimal degree for benevolent politics to take effect.

Extreme relativism with all the particularistic and anarchistic baggage suggested by this construct would indeed make politics in its conventional form impossible.

What would a theoretical construct of absolute rationalism (cf also Faure 1999: 52-69) yield for the world of politics? Extreme or pure rationalism suggests that pure reason alone could yield an absolute category that would be immune to its inertial frames of reference. In simple cognitive terms it implies that different observations or applications from different vantage points (inertial frames of reference) will

always yield the same result when an absolute category is observed. The corollary of this is that, whereas space and time are nullified when dealing with an absolute category, space and time themselves could be transformed when the category itself approximates an absolute status.

Rationalist politics, as exemplified by Popper's critical rationalism in particular, displays an uncanny resemblance to the basic cognitive relations contained in the construct of absolute rationalism. Much as the absolute category in the construct is unaffected by any inertial frame of reference, Popper's critical rationalism contains the implicit pretence that it can transcend the meaning and contradictions in culture and history (space and time) by subjecting them to the inevitable outcome of his "rationalist key". This is his scientific method which is accessible to all, the only proviso being that its rules be followed diligently by all who use it. In principle, all users of the method, irrespective of their contextual perspective, should yield the same outcome when they apply the method to the same problem. By virtue of falsification, political contradictions will be exposed and piecemeal political action will rectify the matter.

Popper's rationalist politics is explicitly anti-historicist in orientation, denying that history (time itself) can contain any special meaning or political significance. The historicist refutation is by means of a clinical instrument that by itself, and in itself, contains no meaning — namely logic. Popper's dedication to pluralism, and especially to ontological pluralism (his three worlds) is superficially convincing, but ultimately deceptive. All that is required to uncover the true monistic character is simple retroductive argument which, by way of regress, singles out and exposes the one ontology. In effect, all worlds (Popper's and those of others) must pass the test of critical rationalism, which is in essence Popper's true ontology. This is the only real ontology, the one containing the set of procedural tests that serve as the demarcation criterion of what is ultimately meaningful to science and politics. Popper's rationalist position is thus monistic, rational and logical in the extreme. His insistence on adhering to these rules is truly stoic, and Feyerabend's objection to this dogmatism is quite understandable; it even engenders sympathy.

What if we push this position to its hypothetical extreme? What would ensue in a community where all participants were falsifica-

Faure/Cognitive dimensions of politics: relativism and rationalism

tionists continually eliminating contradictions subsequently rectified by piecemeal political engineering? Potentially, culture and history (space and time) would be dealt with in the same manner by all concerned, and individual action would be structured by the same logical procedures as public action. Politics as a form of social action driven by differences would make room for agreement, a large-scale uniform consensus on how to deal with everything. Exit politics as we know it — the withering away of politics would be replaced not by Marx's ideal society but by Popper's ideal form of political action shared by everyone. Politics would become redundant.

Extreme rationalism with all the monistic, consensual and uniform features suggested by this construct would indeed render politics in its conventional form not only unrecognisable, but redundant.

## 5. Conclusion

What, then, may be concluded about the preceding arguments and analysis? Is it not, as Gunnell (1993: 566) suggests, a controversy of polarised abstractions and a dispute that gives intellectuals a bad name among people with common sense? Is it not a dispute that thrives on the horror of being labelled either a relativist or a rationalist and on the delight of judging others to be the one or the other?

Based on the preceding analysis, my understanding is that the second- and third-order arguments presented and analysed above do not conclusively prove linkages between the axiologies and the epistemologies of relativism and rationalism on the one hand, and democratic or autocratic politics on the other. The attempt to demonstrate linkages fails simply because the nature of the political thought that informs political decisions and actions is much too complex and heterogeneous in real-life situations to be reduced to monolithic sets of beliefs, whether relativist or rationalist. To misrepresent their manifestation in the first order as the independent variable that mirrors philosophically constructed political implications can only result in presumed linkages not founded on reality. This is exactly what the authors who claim to find linkages do, and, as has been mentioned, the theories that their arguments represent are not substitutes for the thought that informs politics in the first order. The viewpoints certainly co-exist in all instances of first-

order politics, and to trace their respective complex and permeating influences in political life is empirically almost impossible and moreover beyond the reach of logical argument. It should also be stressed that both viewpoints could conceivably favour either democracy or autocracy, the point being that an axiology or an epistemology *per se* does not have political affiliations or necessary and unavoidable consequences merely because of what it is. What will determine its political preference is what emanates and ensues from it substantively, whether claims, preferences, utterances, arguments, following choice rules, political actions or the like. Relativists could propagate and favour either democracy or autocracy, as could rationalists.

If the theoretical constructs used above do indeed point to the fact that extreme relativism and rationalism, respectively, imply the impossibility of politics for the former and the redundancy of politics for the latter, it must be concluded that co-existence of the viewpoints is what makes politics possible and inevitable. A theoretical construct to explain this category may conveniently be called relationism (cf also Faure 1999: 52-60). It is similar to what is called Galilean relativity, and, translated into simple cognitive terms, tells us that different observations of the same phenomenon could produce differing but correct results, the difference being attributable to the “inertial frame of reference” from which the observation is made. The construct of relationism characterises the public domain of politics far more realistically than the constructs of extreme relativism or extreme rationalism, the corollary of inertial frames of reference being space and time, culture and history. Heuristically, relationism suggests that politics cannot be completely rational or relativist, nor can it exist without a minimal measure of both of these viewpoints.

Cognitively, relationism suggests that similar and different consensual categories about the same facets of the world be postulated. The corollary in the philosophy of science is, of course, the well-known notions of paradigms and research programmes suggested by Kuhn (1970), Lakatos (1970) and others. The major variations in these notions are the pre-paradigmatic, the multi-paradigmatic and the paradigmatic (normal science) conceptions of science. All these fall within the ambit and parameters of the construct of relationism, and they could be equated, albeit very roughly, with political epistemologies. Relationism in a pre-paradigmatic political dispensation would very strongly approximate

the features of absolute relativism described above. On the other hand, a paradigmatic political dispensation would lie closer to the absolute rationalism described above. The former would be characterised by little consensual agreement on political rules and procedures, while the latter would operate in terms of large-scale consensus about such rules and procedures. In turn, the multi-paradigmatic conception of politics would represent a mix of the two conceptions. All three, however, would be congruent with the construct of relationism. In political terms relationism would suggest a situation with no absolutely fixed notion of what the ontology of politics might entail; there is not one single ontology of politics, but a number of them, each of them driven and constituted by a sense of what is rational, as it is relatively determined by the frameworks (cultural and historical) from which they derive. This is exactly what relationism entails. Relationism in politics would thus incorporate rational as well as relativist elements, and would entail personal as well as abstract notions of what the content and meaning of culture and history signify for the domain of politics. By its very nature, it would imply a qualified tolerance towards the views of others in a complex and pluralist mix of the relative importance of culture and history as cognitive frameworks that constitute our understanding of the public domain. It would simultaneously also require that the abstract rules governing the nature of the public domain, whatever its form, be respected. Relativism is required for the former, while only rationalism can provide the latter.

The hypotheses that relativism is supportive of democratic politics, and rationalism of autocratic politics, as well as their respective inverse claims, namely that rationalism is supportive of democratic politics, and relativism of autocratic politics, are therefore not confirmed by the research of this article. Its findings do, however, suggest that the following hypothesis may warrant further consideration and research: relativism and rationalism necessarily co-exist in the conventional world of politics, whether democratic or autocratic in nature.

Finding corroborating evidence for this statement would have far-reaching implications for the long-standing controversy about the political implications of relativist and rationalist thinking.



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