

Chapter 1

Analytical Perspectives, Analytical Controversies

While the issues with which this volume is principally concerned have, arguably, always divided political analysts, it is only in recent years that they have started to receive the sustained theoretical reflection their importance warrants. Political analysts have always been able to choose from a wide diversity of analytical strategies and have, as a consequence, been divided by such strategies as much as by anything else. Yet, the systematic reflection on the means by which one might adjudicate between contending analytical perspectives has tended to be something of a marginal concern. Moreover, where attention has been paid to the choice of analytical strategies in political science and international relations (for instance, King, Keohane and Verba 1994), the range of strategies considered has tended to be limited to those considered consistent with the dominant positivist assumptions of the discipline's core. Accordingly, the appreciation of alternative analytical strategies and, indeed, the appreciation that there may be more than one way to explore the political world is less widespread than it might be. This is changing – and that is no bad thing.

In this context, the aim of the present volume is two-fold. First, it seeks both to highlight the significance of, and to provide a critical introduction to, a series of issues of contemporary controversy in political analysis. Second, and arguably more significantly, it seeks to contribute to the growing reflexive turn in political science and, perhaps more notably, international relations. In so far as this book can be regarded as a manifesto for anything in particular, it is manifesto for a political analysis more conscious and explicit about the underlying assumptions upon which its choice of analytical strategies is premised and more sensitive to the trade-offs necessarily entailed in any choice of foundational premises. The chapters which follow are, of course, not entirely neutral with respect to such choices. But what they seek to do is to uncover and render explicit the assumptions which make those choices possible. My hope in so doing is to contribute to a political analysis whose internal dialogues, controversies and disputes are char-

acterised by mutual understanding and respect for the analytical choices which lead analysts in often divergent directions.

In this context, the aim of the present chapter is relatively modest. It is to provide the necessary background for the task of later chapters. In it, I consider (briefly) the nature of political analysis itself, before introducing, in a necessarily stylised manner, the core theoretical perspectives which have come to define mainstream debate in political science and international relations today. In the final sections of the chapter, I pare this diversity of perspectives down to three distinct analytical traditions – rationalism, behaviouralism and institutionalism/constructivism. I consider the positions adopted by each with respect to the issues which form the key themes of the volume.

The scope and limits of political analysis

The term ‘political analysis’ is by no means unambiguous. From the outset, then, it is important to be clear what I mean, and what I do not mean, by it in this context. For many, political analysis is synonymous with analytical politics, which is, in turn, synonymous with rational choice theory (see, for instance, Hinich and Munger 1997). That is most definitely *not* the sense of the term invoked here. While I will have much to say about rational choice theory and rationalism more generally, this is not a book about analytical politics. Indeed, it would be to forejudge the issues of this volume to assume from the outset that political analysis can, or should, be circumscribed by rationalist analytical strategies. This book, in keeping with the spirit of the series of which it forms a part, is about the *diversity* of analytical strategies available to those engaged in the analysis of ‘the political’. Though rationalism is one such strategy, and a highly distinctive, influential and important one at that, it is but one strategy among many. It has no privileged or exclusive claim on the analysis of the political or the label political analysis.

To talk of political analysis is not, then, in itself to advance a particular perspective. The term, at least in the sense in which it is deployed here, is neutral with respect to analytical strategies and traditions. This particular conception of political analysis is inclusive. Yet the notion of political analysis that I will seek to advance and defend in this and consecutive chapters is inclusive in another sense too.

Here we move from the descriptive to the prescriptive. For while my concern is to explore the full range of analytical strategies that might inform political inquiry, it is not my intention to hide my preference for certain analytical strategies and perspectives over others. Thus, while I

hope to reveal an inclusive conception of the field of political analysis, the political analysis I will seek to defend is inclusive in another sense – its specification of ‘the political’. While acknowledging that many approaches to political analysis confine themselves to the narrowly political analysis of narrowly political variables, I will call for a conception of the political and of political analysis that is very different. It is explored in far greater detail in Chapter 2. In brief, it is encompassing in two senses.

First, the political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the entire sphere of the social. The implication of this is that events, processes and practices should not be labelled ‘non-political’ or ‘extra-political’ simply by virtue of the specific setting or context in which they occur. All events, processes and practices which occur within the social sphere have the potential to be political and, hence, to be amenable to political analysis. The realm of government is no more innately political, by this definition, than that of culture, law or the domestic sphere. Consequently, the division of domestic labour is no less political – and no less appropriate a subject for political analysis – than the regulation of the domestic division of labour by the state. Indeed, one might well argue that any adequate analysis of the politics of the regulation of the domestic division of labour itself entails a *political* analysis of the domestic division of labour. Yet this raises an obvious question. What makes political analysis *political*? In other words, what distinguishes political analysis from cultural or sociological analyses which might also claim to encompass the entire sphere of the social? What is here required is a definition of the political itself. What makes a political analysis political is the emphasis it places on the political aspect of social relations. In the same way, what makes a cultural analysis cultural is the emphasis it places on the cultural aspects of social relations. A variety of definitions of the political might be offered and are discussed further in the following chapter. The specific definition that I advance, however, is of politics and the political as concerned with the distribution, exercise and consequences of power. A political analysis is, then, one which draws attention to the power relations implicated in social relations. In this sense, politics is not defined by the *locus* of its operation but by its nature as a *process*.

This has interesting implications. For it suggests that the terrain of political analysis, and hence the span of this volume, should include all perspectives, whether consciously political or not, which might have something to say about the distribution and exercise of power. In this sense, the sphere of political analysis is broad indeed, ranging from the narrowly political analysis of narrowly political variables to the sociology of structural inequality within contemporary societies.

This brings us to the second key feature of the political analysis I will seek to defend in this volume. It concerns the role of extra-political variables. Though the definition of the political that I advance in this volume is inclusive, this is not to say that all aspects of the social can be captured in political terms, nor that the political is indistinguishable, say, from the economic or the cultural. Economic and cultural processes may be inherently political – in so far as they concern relations of power they more certainly are – but this does not mean that they are exhausted by this description. This raises the thorny question of the role political analysts should accord to extra-political variables. Again, my approach is inclusive. Political analysts simply cannot afford to leave the analysis of economics to economists, history to historians and so forth. In so far as there are economic and/or cultural conditions of existence of political dynamics, these need to be acknowledged and interrogated by political analysts. Disciplinary boundaries have always been rather arbitrarily drawn and, in an age in which the degree of interdependence between cultural, political and economic processes is increasingly acknowledged those boundaries surely threaten the quality of the analysis we are capable of generating. For, in a world of (acknowledged) interdependence, rigidly disciplinary approaches to social, political and economic analysis will tend to find themselves reliant upon assumptions generated by other disciplinary specialisms whose validity they are either incapable or unwilling to adjudicate. The clear danger is that the conclusions of our analyses may increasingly come to depend upon externally generated assumptions whose empirical content we do not regard ourselves worthy to judge. This is a now all too familiar experience and is nowhere more clear than in the literature on the political economic imperatives globalisation supposedly summons for social democratic regimes. Here the debate circles endlessly around the nature and degree of negotiability of the constraints that economic integration is seen to imply. Opinions vary – wildly (compare Garrett 1998; Gray 1997; C. Pierson 2001; Wickham-Jones 2000). Yet what is almost entirely absent from such discussions is any attempt to describe empirically, let alone to evaluate, the precise nature of social democratic regimes' external economic relations – with respect to trade, finance and foreign direct investment (FDI). Indeed, in the vast majority of accounts a crude, simplistic and never more than anecdotally empirical business school globalisation orthodoxy is simply internalised and assumed to reflect the limits of our knowledge on such matters, with scant regard to the now substantial empirical evidence. That evidence, for what it is worth, shows if anything a consistent de-globalisation of European economies over the last forty years associated with the process, almost wholly absent from the existing debate, of European economic integration (Hay 2002).

The debate on the constraints implied by globalisation (real or imagined) is but one example. What it, and others like it, suggest is that, as political analysts we simply cannot afford, if ever we could, to get by without a rather more thorough grasp of the cognate disciplines on whose assumptions we have increasingly come to rely. That implies a political analysis which refuses to restrict its analytical attentions to obviously political variables and processes; in one sense it implies, too, an interdisciplinary political analysis.

Issues of interdependence and international economic integration raise a final issue, crucial to the practice of contemporary political analysis and integral to the concerns of this volume. That is the relationship between the domestic and the international and, hence, between political science (as traditionally conceived) and international relations. Here, again, I am an advocate of integration and the need to dispense with an arbitrary and increasingly problematic division of labour within political analysis (see also Coates and Hay 2001). It is worth briefly explaining why. It is tempting to argue, as many have, that the world we inhabit is more complex, interdependent and interconnected than ever before. Yet what is important here is not whether contemporary levels of interdependence are unprecedented historically, but that we inhabit an interdependent world which much be analysed as such. The point is that conventional approaches to the social sciences, based on rigid disciplinary and sub-disciplinary fault lines and demarcations, do not prepare us well for a world of interdependence.

In a world in which the domestic and international, the political and the economic were indeed *independent* this would not present a problem – though whether such a world can ever have been said to exist is another matter altogether. Arguably, though patterns of spatial interdependence have changed, the interdependence of political and economic processes at a variety of spatial scales is nothing new. Furthermore, the distinction between, say, political and economic variables – and hence between political science and economics as disciplines – was always arbitrary, the boundary between the two necessarily characterised by interdependencies which have remained poorly understood as a consequence of the often sectarian policing of disciplinary boundaries. These are important points in their own right. Yet the key point for now is that if we accept that we live in an interdependent world which does not respect spatial and sectoral divisions of analytical labour (if ever it did), such divisions of labour will no longer suffice. This entails a political analysis which refuses to accept a resolute internal division of labour between political science and international relations just as it refuses to accept that it can leave the analysis of economic variables to economists.

Analytical perspectives, analytical choices, analytical controversies

The approach to political analysis that I seek to adopt in this book is one in which contending analytical perspectives are adjudicated, as much as possible, in their own terms, rather than those imposed upon them from outside. It is also one which seeks to foreground discussion of such matters by focusing on the *issues* which divide political analysts, rather than the *camps* into which they divide themselves as a consequence. As such this is a book about contemporary controversies in political analysis much more than it is a book about the analytical perspectives themselves. It is less a book about labels and badges of analytical self-identification than it is about the analytical choices which all approaches to political analysis necessarily face. This is reflected in Chapters 2–6, each of which focuses specifically upon a key contemporary controversy – the boundaries of the ‘political’; the relationship between structure and agency; the strategies appropriate to the analysis of political change; the conceptualisation of power; and the relationship between the realm of political practice and the real of political discourse, respectively. Moreover, while Chapter 7 does focus attention on an increasingly influential perspective to political analysis, namely postmodernism, it does so by exploring the challenges this most self-conscious mode of reflection poses to all other approaches to political analysis, rather than by treating it as a perspective in its own right.

This is perhaps a rather unconventional strategy to adopt, but there are good reasons for it. First, to concentrate attention principally on the analytical choices, strategies and rationales of well-established traditions of political analysis may serve merely to reinforce the dominance of those traditions. This, in turn, may have the effect of diverting attention from original and potentially significant interventions which are not easily reconciled with a conventional mapping of the fault-lines of contemporary debate. It may also serve, in so doing, to discourage innovative and heterodox approaches to issues of ongoing controversy. In short, focusing on the lie of the land at any particular moment in time may blind us to the processes already under way serving to reconfigure that landscape.

Second, as a number of recent commentators have noted, it is more difficult than once it was to delineate clearly the boundaries of contemporary analytical approaches. Many important recent contributions (such as rational choice institutionalism in political science and constructivism in international relations theory) have served to explore and thereby transcend the boundaries between perspectives previously con-

sidered distinct and incommensurate (see, for instance, Wæver 1996; S. Smith 2001; von Beyme 1996: 523–5).

Third, if the conventional approach to mapping the discipline's principal divisions is more problematic today than once it was, then this should not lead us to overlook the limitations of such a strategy at each and every stage in the discipline's history. Paradigmatic perspectives have certainly always existed within political science and international relations, but they have rarely been as insular, self-contained, internally consistent and unyielding in their engagement with contending approaches as their invariably clichéd textbook depiction. Accordingly, if political analysis is to be presented as an essentially contested and dynamic field, it is important that we resist the temptation to present it as comprised of a series of timeless, closed and almost entirely self-referential traditions.

The conventional 'textbook' presentation of the discipline's principal fault-lines has never been much more than a crude and distorted cliché – a one-dimensional depiction of a multi-dimensional reality. It is a presentation, as far as possible, that I have sought to resist. In the chapters that follow, then, my aim has been both to respect and to reflect as accurately as possible the positions held by genuine (named) protagonists in the controversies which characterise contemporary political analysis. As far as possible, I have resisted the temptation to fall back on the parsimony and anonymity of the standard 'textbook' formulations of approaches such as behaviouralism, neo-realism and rational choice theory. Nonetheless, it is important for what follows that we establish from the outset the range and diversity of strategies in political analysis. In so doing there is some utility in adopting a perspectival approach, if only as a point of departure for what is to follow. In this sense, the present chapter is something of an exception to the general rule. For in the following section I seek briefly to map the contemporary field of political analysis by examining the key themes, assumptions and contributions of the main perspectives in political science and international relations. These are summarised schematically in Tables 1.1–1.8, designed to provide a point of reference for the chapters which follow.

Mapping the political science mainstream

It is conventional to see the political science mainstream today as characterised by three distinctive perspectives: rational choice theory; behaviouralism; and the new institutionalism. Each adopts a very different approach to political analysis.

Table 1.1 *Rational choice theory*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To import the rigour and predictive power of neo-classical economics into political science ● To produce a deductive science of the political on the basis of a series of simplifying assumptions ● To model (mathematically) the implications of human rationality for political conduct
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individual actors are the basic units of analysis ● They are rational, efficient and instrumental utility-maximisers who seek to maximise personal utility net of cost alone ● They have a clear and 'transitive' hierarchy of preferences such that in any given context there is only one optimal course of action available to them
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The aggregation of individually rational behaviour frequently produces collectively irrational outcomes ● Social welfare is often compromised by collective action problems and 'free-riding' ● The narrow pursuit of self-interest ensures that public officials cannot be trusted to deliver collective welfare (public choice theory) ● The behaviour of political parties in liberal democracies is predictable given the structure of the electoral system and the distribution of voter preferences ● Even where actors share a common collective interest, 'free-riding' is likely to militate against collective action in the absence of other incentives ● Where such collective action dilemmas can be overcome powerful interest groups will deploy 'rent-seeking' behaviour, lobbying for monopoly powers and subsidies that are inefficient <p style="text-align: right;"><i>cont. opposite</i></p>

Rational choice theory is, in essence, what you get if you seek to model political behaviour on the simplifying assumption that political actors are instrumental, self-serving utility-maximisers (Table 1.1). In other words, it seeks to construct stylised (and often mathematical) models of political conduct by assuming that individuals are rational and behave *as if* they engage in a cost-benefit analysis of each and every choice available to them before plumping for the option most likely to maximise their material self-interest. They behave rationally, maximising personal utility net of cost while giving little or no consideration to the consequences, for others, of their behaviour.¹

The purpose of rational choice theory is to produce a deductive and

Table 1.1 Continued

Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rationality ● Collective action problems ● ‘Free-riding’ ● ‘Rent-seeking’
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited attention given to preference formation ● Limited attention given to the institutional contexts in which rationality is exercised ● Relies upon a series of implausible theoretical assumptions ● Though ostensibly predictive, tends to confine itself to post hoc rationalisation ● Limited conception of the human subject ● Deals poorly with contexts in which altruism and collectively rational behaviour is displayed ● Deals poorly with processes of change (though note the contribution of evolutionary game theory)
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anthony Downs’ <i>Economic Theory of Democracy</i> (1957) ● Mancur Olson’s <i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> (1978) ● William A. Niskanen’s <i>Bureaucracy and Representative Government</i> (1971) ● James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s <i>The Calculus of Consent</i> (1962)

predictive science of the political, modelled on precisely the same assumptions that have proved so influential in neo-classical economics. Its contribution to political science has been considerable, drawing attention to the often perverse and collectively irrational effects of individually rational action. It points, in particular to the problem of ‘free-riding’. Here, despite a situation in which cooperation will secure mutual advantage, actors have a perverse incentive not to participate in such collective action. This sounds paradoxical, but the logic, if we assume rationality, is impeccable. For, in situations where collective action is required to achieve a given end, a rational actor knows that her individual behaviour will not influence significantly the overall outcome. Moreover, if others cooperate she will reap the benefits of their cooperation regardless of her participation. So why incur personal costs by taking unilateral action? In such scenarios, the dependence of a favourable outcome upon coordinated or collective action is sufficient to create (perverse) incentives for actors to free ride on the conduct of others. Tragically, if all individuals behave rationally, no cooperation

arises and an outcome which is both collectively and individually sub-optimal ensues.

A now classic example is the so-called ‘tragedy of the commons’, first identified by Garrett Hardin (1968; for an excellent discussion of the strengths and limitations of this perspective see Pepper 1996: 56–9). It provides an intuitively plausible and all too compelling model of the seemingly intractable problem of environmental degradation in contemporary societies. The systematic exploitation and pollution of the environment, it is argued, is set to continue since individual corporations and states, despite a clear collective interest, choose not to impose upon themselves the costs of unilateral environmental action. Their logic is entirely rational. They know that environmental regulation is costly and, in an open international economy, a burden on competitiveness. Accordingly, in the absence of an international agency capable of enforcing the compliance of all states and all corporations, the anticipation of free-riding is sufficient to ensure that corporations and states do not burden themselves with additional costs and taxes. The long-term effects for the environment are all too obvious. Once again, individual rationality translates into collective irrationality.

Though *behaviouralism*, too, would claim to advance a predictive science of the political, it proceeds very differently, basing its approach to political analysis not on the deduction of testable hypotheses from simplifying (and ultimately untestable) assumptions about human nature, but upon extrapolation and generalisation from observed empirical regularities (Table 1.2). In the primacy it gives to evidence and to the search for evidence, behaviouralism might be thought neutral with respect to subject matter. As a consequence it is not, like rational choice theory or the new institutionalism, a distinctive theoretical approach associated with a series of key substantive claims so much as a set of analytical techniques and methodologies. These might be applied – in principle – to any area of political analytic inquiry. That having been said, the tendency to emphasise the observable and those variables which might more easily be quantified, has tended to result in certain distinctive features of behaviouralism. These include a focus on power as decision-making and a tendency to assume that an analysis of the inputs into the political system, such as the pressure exerted by interest groups upon the state, is sufficient to account adequately for political outcomes.

Of the three perspectives which serve to define the mainstream in contemporary political science, the *new institutionalism* is the new pretender (Table 1.3). It has emerged since the early 1980s as a conscious response both to the ‘behavioural revolution’ of the 1960s and to the growing ascendancy of rational choice theory in subsequent decades (see

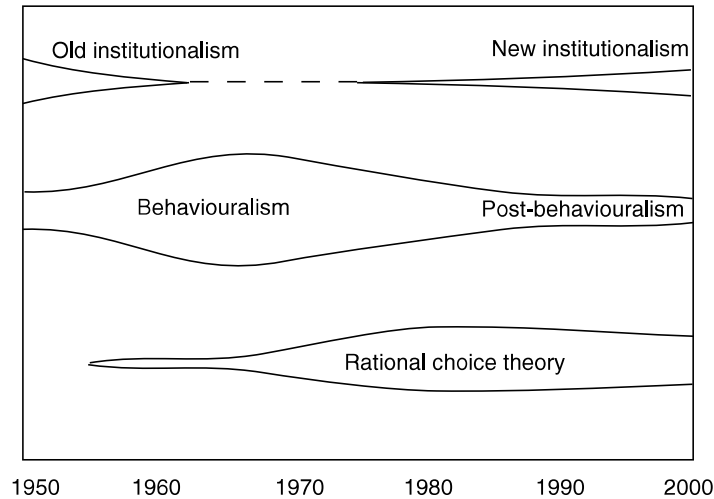
Figure 1.1 *The evolution of mainstream political science*

Figure 1.1).² It marks a return, albeit rather more consciously theorised, to an older tradition of institutional analysis. This had dominated political science in the early decades of the twentieth century. By the 1960s, however, despite the influence it continued to exert on public administration in Europe, it had long since relinquished any ascendancy it had once enjoyed over the discipline as a whole (Peters 1999; Rhodes 1995; W. R. Scott 1995). This was particularly so in the USA, where the legacy of the old institutionalism was negligible.

The new institutionalism departs from the mainstream of the 1980s in two key respects. First, it rejects the simplifying assumptions which make possible rational choice theory's modelling of political behaviour. Second, it challenges the assumed regularity in human behaviour on which rests behaviouralism's reliance on a logic of extrapolation and generalisation (or induction). In their place, new institutionalists propose more complex and plausible assumptions which seek to capture and reflect the complexity and open-endedness of processes of social and political change.

Unremarkably, perhaps, new institutionalism emphasises the mediating role of the *institutional* contexts in which events occur, rejecting what it sees as the input-weighted political analysis of behaviouralism and rational choice theory. In so doing, it draws attention to the significance of history, timing and sequence in explaining political dynamics. It points, in particular, to the 'path dependent' qualities of institutional, and hence political, development, as large and frequently irreversible

Table 1.2 *Behaviouralism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To use rigorous statistical techniques in the analysis of political data ● To develop an inductive science of the political capable of generating predictive hypotheses on the basis of the quantitative analysis of human behaviour at an aggregate level
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The logic of induction is sound – general ‘covering laws’ can be inferred from specific empirical observations ● Political behaviour exhibits regularities over time which allow law-like statements to be generated inductively ● The neutral and dispassionate analysis of raw political data is possible ● There is no separation of appearance and reality
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No <i>a priori</i> theoretical assumptions should be allowed to inform political analysis ● All theoretical propositions and assumptions must be exposed to rigorous and systematic empirical testing before they are deployed deductively ● Ethical judgements must not be allowed to inform, distort or interfere with the systematic collation, recording and analysis of empirical evidence ● Theoretical hypotheses take the form of probabilistic predictions based on the assumption that exhibited regularities in the data analysed are generalisable beyond the immediate context and time period in which the data was collected

cont. opposite

consequences may follow from seemingly minor or contingent events. This places clear limits on a predictive science of the political (P. Pierson 2000). Institutions, they suggest, tend to become embedded in routine and convention and are, consequently, difficult to transform. Accordingly, political time tends to be characterised by periods of relative tranquillity punctuated, periodically, by phases of rapid and intense institutional change.

From relatively humble origins in the movement to ‘bring the state back into’ the more input-weighted or society-centred political analysis of the times (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985), the new institutionalism has grown significantly, with a number of influential converts from rational choice theory (Knight 1992, 2001; North 1990) and, even, behaviouralism (for a discussion of which see Dunleavy 1996). The result has been a series of hybrid positions and a proliferation of inter-paradigm debates within contemporary political science. The most influ-

Table 1.2 Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political power is synonymous with decision-making and may, as a consequence, be operationalised quantitatively ● Political outcomes can largely be derived from an analysis of political inputs
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Causation and correlation ● Statistical significance ● Decision-making
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem of differentiating causation and correlation ● Tends to restrict itself to 'visible' variables and to those which can readily be quantified ● Assumptions about regularity problematise the extent to which behaviouralism can inform an analysis of social and political change ● The dependence of inductive inference on the assumption of regularity renders behaviouralism problematic in periods of social and political change ● Lacks a conception of agency ● Suffers from a narrow conception of politics and power
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Robert A. Dahl's <i>Who Governs?</i> (1961) ● Ted Gurr's <i>Why Men Rebel</i> (1970) ● Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba's <i>Designing Social Inquiry</i> (1994)

ential of such hybrids is undoubtedly rational choice institutionalism which examines the extent to which institutions might provide solutions to collective action problems and, more generally, the (institutional) context-dependence of rationality. Some so-called sociological institutionalists have also sought to apply (neo-)behaviouralist techniques and methods to an institutionalist research agenda (Tolbert and Zucker 1983; Tuma and Hannan 1984).

Mapping the mainstream in international relations

The international relations mainstream is somewhat more complex and contested. It is, partly as a consequence, rather more difficult to specify. Its core is in fact relatively undisputed and comprises classical realism, structural or neo-realism and a position variously referred to as pluralism, liberalism, liberal institutionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, interdependence theory and, as here, neo-liberalism (compare Baldwin 1993; Baylis and Smith 2001; Hollis and Smith 1990b; Jackson and

Table 1.3 *New institutionalism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To restore the link between theoretical assumptions and the reality they purport to represent ● To acknowledge the crucial mediating role of institutions in shaping political conduct and translating political inputs into political outcomes ● To acknowledge the complexity and contingency of political systems
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ‘Institutions matter’ – political conduct is shaped profoundly by the institutional context in which it occurs and acquires significance ● ‘History matters’ – the legacy the past bequeaths to the present is considerable ● Political systems are complex and inherently unpredictable ● Actors do not always behave instrumentally in pursuit of material self-interest
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rationalism and behaviouralism tend to concentrate too heavily on political inputs in explaining political outcomes, ignoring the key mediating role of political institutions ● Institutions become embedded in routine and convention and are, consequently, difficult to reform, transform or replace ● The timing and sequence of events matters since history is ‘path dependent’ – large consequences may follow from small or contingent events ● Actors are socialised within institutional settings which define informal rules and procedures ● Accordingly, logics of appropriateness may better explain political behaviour than those which assume instrumental self-interest <p style="text-align: right;"><i>cont. opposite</i></p>

Sørensen 1999; M. Nicholson 1998; Steans and Pettiford 2001; Wæver 1996).

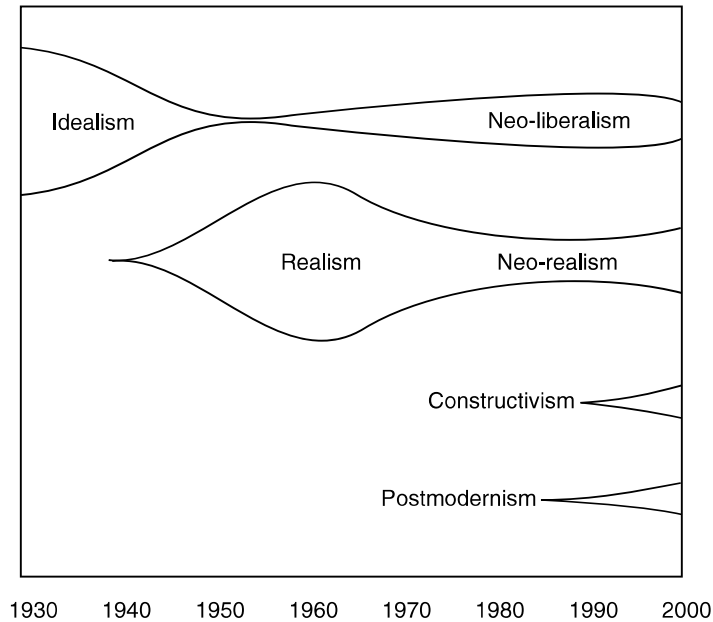
Altogether more contentious is the inclusion of constructivism and postmodernism within the mainstream. For there are many who would suggest that constructivism still has much to prove – not least its scientific status and its substantive contribution to the understanding of world politics (Keohane 1989; Moravcsik 2001) – before it can be welcomed into the court of international relations (IR) theory. And if this is said of constructivism, it need hardly be stated that few, if any, of those who regard themselves as defenders of the mainstream would be prepared to

Table 1.3 Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The rigidity of institutions means that political time tends to be characterised by periods of relative stability, punctuated periodically by phases of intense institutional change
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Institutions ● Path dependence ● Timing/sequence/history ● Punctuated equilibrium
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Despite its sensitivity to history, it is poor at accounting for institutional change, tending merely to invoke (untheorised) exogenous shock ● Tends to exhibit a rather structuralist logic in which actors are prisoners of institutional contexts and the logics of appropriateness they define ● In pointing to the mediating role of institutions and the high degree of variation between institutional contexts, institutionalism tends towards rich description ● It is, as a consequence, perhaps overly reticent of bold theories and hypotheses ● In its emphasis upon path dependence and historical legacies it is rather better at explaining stability than change
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Douglass C. North's <i>Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance</i> (1990) ● Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen and Frank Longstreth's <i>Structuring Politics</i> (1992) ● James G. March and Johan P. Olsen's <i>Rediscovering Institutions</i> (1989) ● Paul Pierson's <i>Dismantling the Welfare State?</i> (1994) ● Theda Skocpol's <i>States and Social Revolutions</i> (1979)

credit postmodernism with a seat at the table. Moreover, and perhaps more to the point, few postmodernists would themselves be happy with such an invitation, seeing any inclusion within the mainstream as an alarming portent of assimilation and capitulation.

So why then insist on discussing constructivism and postmodernism in the context of the mainstream? My reasons are, in fact, relatively simple. The first of these is the seemingly inexorable rise of constructivism in recent years. This might be gauged in a variety of ways, from the large number of converts to its position since the 1990s, its impressive hold over a younger generation of international relations scholars,

Figure 1.2 *The evolution of international relations theory*

the extent to which its contribution has been acknowledged, taken seriously and responded to by the mainstream, or just the reception that a seminal constructivist work, such as Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) has received from neo-realists and neo-liberals alike. If there are still those who would be uncomfortable with constructivism's inclusion within the mainstream, then it is surely only a matter of time before they will be forced to concede that, whether they like it or not, it is already treated as such.

The position of postmodernism is obviously more controversial and there are, I think, good reasons for seeing it less as a (potentially) mainstream perspective than as a challenge to the very notion of a mainstream (see also S. Smith 2001: 241). I include it here for two reasons: (i) because the challenge it poses to the mainstream is, if ultimately problematic, fundamental and worthy of a response; and (ii) because constructivism defines itself, at least in part, in and through its opposition to neo-realism/neo-liberalism on the one hand and postmodernism on the other (Figure 1.2).

In many respects, the key point of departure for *all* contemporary contenders for mainstream status in international relations theory is *realism* (Table 1.4). It was fashioned as a direct response to the naïve or 'utopian idealism' of the period immediately following the Great War (Carr

1939). Such idealism, horrified by the brutality of total war, had sought to build an institutional architecture of international mediation and mutual cooperation that might serve to guarantee perpetual peace. Realism rose to dominance out of the ashes of that optimism in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s. It prided itself upon its sanguine view of world politics, premised on a realist(ic) if depressing view of human nature. Rather like rational choice theory, it effectively derived the instrumental rationality of the state and the anarchical character of a world system in which the state was sovereign from essentially Hobbesian assumptions about human nature. Life was nasty, brutish and, in the context of the late 1930s and early 1940s, all too short. For realists the study of international relations is the study of the interaction between sovereign states whose principal, indeed essentially sole, motivation for action is self-preservation (security) and, in pursuit of that end, the acquisition of power. Realism is, in short, rational choice theory applied at the level of the state system, with states cast in the image of utility-maximising rational actors. The result, a product to a considerable extent of its times, is a most depressing view of human affairs in which conflict is the norm and cooperation a rare and, above all, fragile product not of cooperative intent but of a temporary balancing of strategies of narrow self-interest and mutual distrust.

Neo-realism emerged in the 1970s as an attempt to produce a more refined, rigorous and structural account of world politics – though one still couched very much in realist terms (Table 1.5). It sought to emulate the mathematical rigour (as it saw it) of rational choice theory and, indeed, neo-classical economics through the careful choice of simplifying assumptions on which the rational behaviour of states within the international system might be modelled. Yet rather than proceed from ultimately universal, metaphysical and essentialist assumptions about human nature, as had its realist forebears, it assumed only that states (as unified actors) were rational in the pursuit of relative (rather than absolute) gains. Consequently, given the structure of the international system (anarchy), their behaviour was entirely predictable. For neo-realists, then, the conflictual and competitive nature of inter-state relations was the product not of any innately belligerent or aggressive qualities of states, but merely of the pursuit of national interest under conditions of anarchy.

Neo-liberalism, too, might be seen to share much with realism, though it arose first as a response to realism and was later shaped by its ongoing engagement with neo-realism (Baldwin 1993). (Table 1.6) Moreover, and despite any such similarities, its origins lie in precisely the ‘utopian idealism’ so categorically rejected by realists like E. H. Carr in the late 1930s, an idealism still reflected in its rather more positive and flexible

Table 1.4 *Realism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In the context of the 1930s, to re-inject a healthy dose of realism into the discussion of international relations following the delusions of idealism ● To be sanguine and realistic about the frailty of human nature and to trace the implications for the conduct of international relations ● To render international relations a rigorous and dispassionate science of world politics
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The realm of international relations is governed by objective laws which have their origins in human nature ● The pursuit of power by individuals and states is ubiquitous and unavoidable – consequently, conflict and competition is endemic ● The state is sovereign and the natural unit of analysis in international relations since states recognise no authority above themselves and are autonomous of non-state actors and structures ● States are unified actors, motivated exclusively by considerations of national interest ● National interests are objective ● The principal national interest is that of survival/security ● There is a total separation of domestic and international politics with the former subordinated to the latter
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The study of international relations is the study of the interaction between sovereign states ● The self-interested behaviour of states in the absence of any overarching authority on a global scale produces a condition of anarchy <i>cont. opposite</i>

view of human nature than that of realism. All this having said, neo-liberals like neo-realists and realists before them are, at heart, rationalists, committed to a notion of the human subject as a rational actor carefully weighing up the respective merits and demerits of various courses of action in an attempt to maximise his or her personal utility. Yet here they part company, with neo-liberals drawing rather different conclusions. In particular, and in marked contrast to neo-realism, they emphasise the capacity of human agents to shape their environment and hence their destiny and, in marked contrast to classic realism, their capacity to achieve cooperation for mutual advantage. Characteristically, and as evidence for both, they cite the building of a global capitalist economy regulated by a series of interconnected international institutions. Such achievements, they suggest, demonstrate the conditions under which

Table 1.4 *Continued*

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In so far as conflict is avoided, this is not because of the pacific intentions of states, but precisely because of the balance produced by the aggressive pursuit of power and security by states ● It is naïve to assume that cooperation rather than conflict is the natural condition of world politics ● The evolution of world politics is cyclical, characterised by timeless laws rooted in human nature
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Security ● Sovereignty ● National interest ● Power politics
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited attention to the role of non-state actors ● Little or no consideration to economic processes ● Relies on an impoverished conception of human nature and implausible assumptions ● Narrowly state-centric ● Less an accurate theory of world politics than the image in and through which world politics was made – hence, ‘nothing but a rationalisation of Cold War politics’ (Hoffman 1977: 48)
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● E. H. Carr’s <i>The Twenty Years’ Crisis</i> (1939) ● Hans Morgenthau’s <i>Politics Among Nations</i> (1948)

cooperation may arise and in which states can pursue absolute rather than relative gains.

Though there are clear differences in emphasis between neo-realists and neo-liberals, successive rounds of the so-called ‘inter-paradigm debate’ have drawn the two perspectives ever closer together such that it is now often difficult to position clearly once prominent neo-realists or neo-liberals (Wæver 1996). This has led to the identification of a ‘neo-neo-synthesis’ which some would see as having come to circumscribe the parameters of theoretical debate in mainstream international relations (Kegley 1995; Lamy 2001; S. Smith 2001).

It is this cosy synthesis that constructivism and, in rather more radical terms, postmodernism, challenge. Like the new institutionalism in political science, *constructivism* rejects the rationalism on which the neo-neo-synthesis is premised, seeking to render its analytical assumptions more complex and realistic (Table 1.7). It is also characterised, again like the new institutionalism in political science, by its broadening of the field of political analysis to encompass not just interests but the means by which

Table 1.5 *Neo-realism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To produce a more systematic, rigorous and <i>structural</i> account of international relations in the realist tradition ● To liberate realism from essentialist and universal assumptions about human nature ● To produce a deductive science of world politics on the basis of parsimonious assumptions about the international system
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● World politics can be analysed as if states were unitary rational actors seeking to maximise their expected utility ● The context in which states find themselves – a condition of anarchy – determines the content of the rationality they exhibit ● The behaviour of states can be explained exclusively in terms of the structure of the international system itself, since states are rational and in any given setting there is only one optimal course of action open to them ● The state is again sovereign and the natural unit of analysis in international relations ● However, the role of international institutions in the governance of international relations (both political and economic) cannot be overlooked ● States are, again, unified actors, motivated solely by considerations of national interest ● States seek relative rather than absolute gains
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The anarchical structure of the international system compels states to act as they do ● Accordingly, conflict is a consequence not of state belligerence but of the pursuit of national interest under conditions of anarchy <p style="text-align: right;"><i>cont. opposite</i></p>

interests are identified and constructed in the first place and the institutional context in which such interests are expressed, acted upon and revised. This is a more dynamic and open-ended approach to world politics which refuses to accept the primacy of material over ideational factors, thereby opening up for empirical analysis the whole area of social construction which realism, neo-realism and neo-liberalism had closed off. The overriding theme of constructivist work is the problematic nature of the concept of interests. Material interests are by no means transparent and uncontested. Moreover, it is *perceptions* of interests rather than material interests *per se* on which states act. Consequently, if we wish to understand world politics we need to explore the means and mechanisms by which states come to identify, act upon and

Table 1.5 Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Though states are inherently conflictual and competitive, actual conflict can be averted in situations in which there is a balance of power ● Though there is always a tendency to instability in the international system, this can be attenuated if a dominant state assumes a leadership (or hegemonic) role ● Under such conditions of hegemonic stability international institutions can serve to provide a secure basis for cooperation between nations, such as is evidenced in the international economic system which developed in the post-war period
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Balance of power ● Relative (as opposed to absolute) gains ● Hegemonic stability
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lacks clarity about the conditions of cooperation and the conditions of conflict in the international system ● Incapable either of predicting or of explaining the end of the Cold War despite its focus on the balance of power within the international system ● State-centric ● Displays a very limited and impoverished conception of state agency ● Relies on a series of implausible assumptions about the unity and rationality of the state
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Robert Gilpin's <i>War and Change in World Politics</i> (1981) ● Charles Kindleberger's <i>The World in Depression, 1929–1939</i> (1973) ● Kenneth Waltz's <i>Theory of International Politics</i> (1979)

revise their perception of both their interests and, in the process, their identity – who they are and what they stand for. A favoured example concerns the issue of security itself. States act in response to perceived security threats, not to the (material) volume of armoury which a state might (potentially) direct against them. As Alexander Wendt notes, ‘500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US than five North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the US and the North Koreans are not, and amity and enmity is a function of shared understandings’ (1995: 73). The neo-neo-synthesis has little or no way of dealing with this, appealing, as it does, to a notion of material interests as objective, uncontested and transparent. For constructivists, by contrast, crucial to understanding the conduct of states

Table 1.6 *Neo-liberalism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To counter the state-centrism of realism and neo-realism and to reinsert economic dynamics into international relations ● To explore the possibilities for cooperation within the international system ● To explore the implications of a more flexible and positive view of human nature
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individuals and states, though rational, have the capacity to solve problems through collective action ● International cooperation for mutual advantage is both desirable and possible ● Actors other than states – multi-national corporations, religious and nationalist movements – play a central role in international events ● States cannot be conceptualised as unified actors but are themselves multi-centric and subject to a variety of competing domestic and international pressures ● Power, within the international system, is diffuse and fluid ● Liberal democratic states do not wage war upon one another (the doctrine of the democratic peace) ● Military force is by no means the only, or the most effective, instrument of foreign policy ● States seek absolute rather than relative gains
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An advanced international division of labour within the world economy encourages relations of interdependence and cooperation between nations which are mutually advantageous ● The condition of complex interdependence which characterises the international system renders national economies ever more sensitive and vulnerable to events in other countries <p style="text-align: right;"><i>cont. opposite</i></p>

are the shared or inter-subjective understandings they fashion. In the end, then, if anarchy is indeed the condition of the international system it is important to acknowledge that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt 1992).

If the challenge posed by constructivism to the mainstream is considerable, despite attempts by Wendt and others to convince realists in particular that they have little to fear from taking constructivism seriously (1999, 2000), then that posed by *postmodernism* is altogether more fundamental (Table 1.8). Indeed, arguably it calls into question the whole enterprise of international relations, as it does political analysis

Table 1.6 Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This entails a significant loss of state capacity and autonomy ● There is a complex relationship between domestic and international politics with no clear or consistent hierarchy ● International institutions and organisations, though in some sense themselves the product of state action, may come to assume an independent identity and display agency in their own right
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interdependence/complex interdependence ● Absolute (as opposed to relative) gains ● Cooperation ● International regimes
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Like realism, it lacks clarity about the conditions under which we should expect cooperation and those under which we should expect conflict ● For realists and neo-realists, liberals adopt a naïve and utopian conception of both human nature and the possibilities for international cooperation ● Tends to exaggerate the role of international institutions, the extent of globalisation and the limited capacity of the state ● Tends to legitimate the status quo ● The empirical evidence does not seem to confirm the democratic peace thesis – democratic states can be quite belligerent
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye's <i>Power and Interdependence</i> (1977) ● Joseph S. Nye's <i>Understanding International Conflicts</i> (1993) ● James N. Rosenau's <i>Turbulence in World Politics</i> (1990)

and social science more generally. While it might have some sympathy for the idea that the interests of states are constructions rather than objective properties, postmodernism, quite simply, rejects all of the above. Though it has given rise to a series of substantive contributions to international relations scholarship (see, for instance, Ashley 1987; Campbell 1992; Walker 1993; C. Weber 1995), its principal contribution is to challenge the stated and, above all, unstated assumptions of conventional international relations theory (realist, idealist or constructivist). It problematises and ultimately rejects the notion of a neutral or

Table 1.7 *Constructivism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To open up a ‘middle way’ (Adler) between rationalism (neo-realism and neo-liberalism) and postmodernism ● To explore the implications of acknowledging that political realities are socially constructed and of according ideas an independent role in the analysis of international relations ● To explore the implications of replacing rationalism’s logic of instrumental rationality with a more sociological conception of agency ● To explore the implications of treating interests and preferences as social constructions rather than as objectively given
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Our beliefs play a crucial role in the construction of our reality ● The social and political world is not a given but an inherently intersubjective domain – a product of social construction ● There is no objective social or political reality independent of our understanding of it – there is no social realm independent of human activity ● Ideational factors should be accorded as significant a role in international relations as material factors ● For most constructivists, positivism cannot be reconciled with an emphasis upon the significance of intersubjective understanding
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ‘Anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt) – the structure of the international system does not dictate state behaviour; it is the interaction and intersubjective understandings of states which gives rise to the condition of anarchy <p style="text-align: right;"><i>cont. opposite</i></p>

dispassionate science of international relations, pointing, like constructivism, to the role of theory in the constitution of the objects of its analytical attentions. Yet it takes this line of argument far further, charting the complicity of international relations theory in the reproduction of existing power relations and in the production – invariably in the name of progress, liberty or emancipation – of new power relations while emphasising what it would see as the inherently partisan and political subject-positions from which such theory is written. It suggests, in short, that though students of world politics are loath to admit it, all theories are conceived and formulated to reflect a particular vantage-point or

Table 1.7 Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assesses the transformative impact of novel social constructions (such as the European Union) on the state system ● Emphasises the impact of national norms on international politics and international norms on national politics ● Emphasises the importance of discursive construction and naming in the identification and response, say, to security ‘threats’ – threats are perceptions and it is perceptions rather than realities that are responded to
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social construction ● Intersubjectivity ● Identity
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unified more by what they distance themselves from than by what they share ● For rationalists, much of what they claim theoretically, though plausible, remains either untestable or untested ● May be seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable – the choice between rationalism and postmodernism may be starker than constructivists assume ● Despite its ostensible aim to define and inhabit a middle ground between rationalism and postmodernism, many of its proponents seem to gravitate towards one or other pole ● Despite its theoretical appeal its promise is, as yet, largely unrealised
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Friedrich Kratochwil’s <i>Rules, Norms and Decisions</i> (1989) ● Nicholas Onuf’s <i>A World of Our Making</i> (1989) ● Alexander Wendt’s <i>Social Theory of International Politics</i> (1999)

subject-position in a world characterised by near infinite profusion of potential subject-positions. Consequently, all theories, despite any pretensions they may make to universality, neutrality or scientific status, are partial and partisan. They are, as a consequence, either complicit in the reproduction of the status quo and the power relations it serves to institutionalise or calls for the transformation of the existing state of affairs couched in the name of a progress. The latter can only serve to replace one system of domination and oppression with another.

Table 1.8 *Postmodernism*

Aim/ contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To cast doubt on modernist assumptions about the ability to generate objective knowledge of the social and political world ● To draw attention to the conceptual prisms in and through which supposedly dispassionate and neutral theories are formulated ● To expose the silences, implicit assumptions and universal pretensions of such theories and to reveal the power relations in whose reproduction they are complicit ● To explore the implications of an international relations which does not rely on universal claims, privileged access to knowledge or the possibility of liberation or emancipation from power
Key assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is no neutral vantage-point from which the world can be described and analysed objectively ● All knowledge is partial, partisan and power-serving ● Knowledge claims are never neutral with respect to power relations which are, as a consequence, ubiquitous and diffuse ● There are no facts about the social and political world, only interpretations advanced from a particular vantage-point ● The social and political world is characterised not by sameness and identity but by difference, diversity and ‘otherness’
Key themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The identification and exploration of the way power operates in the discourses and practices of world politics ● The celebration of difference, diversity and plurality <p style="text-align: right;"><i>cont. opposite</i></p>

Postmodernism raises a series of crucial and troubling issues which deserve a sustained and systematic discussion. This will be the principal concern of Chapter 7. Suffice it for now to note that *if* the postmodernist challenge cannot be rebuffed it has very serious implications for the conduct of political analysis and the claims we might legitimately make in its name. It is conventional, both in international relations and political science, to dismiss such issues and to suggest that until such time as postmodernism has something ‘better’ to put in its place, its critique of the mainstream does not deserve to be taken seriously. Though certainly convenient, given the implications of the issues the postmodernist challenge raises, this is wholly inadequate and, in fact, profoundly

Table 1.8 Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A challenge to the notion of history as ‘progress’ ● The attempt to establish universal conditions for human emancipation can only serve, in practice, to replace one set of relations of domination with another – there is no escape from tyranny ● The universal pretensions of general theories and emancipatory projects (metanarratives) is mythical ● Power relations often function through the construction, in language, of hierarchical distinctions of identity/difference, sameness/otherness
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (Incredulity towards) ‘metanarratives’ ● Deconstruction ● Difference/otherness
Silences and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tendency towards nihilism, fatalism and passivity – an abstention from judgement ● Is not postmodernism’s normative respect for ‘difference’ in the end self-defeating – precluding the taking of action to protect that difference? ● Are its implications not profoundly conservative – deconstruction without the possibility of the reconstruction of an alternative? ● Internal contradictions – is not postmodernism itself the metanarrative to end all metanarratives and hence a contradiction in terms? ● Tends towards pure descriptive narrative as opposed to political analysis
Seminal works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● David Campbell’s <i>Writing Security</i> (1992) ● R. J. Walker’s <i>Inside/Outside</i> (1993) ● Cynthia Weber’s <i>Simulating Sovereignty</i> (1995)

irresponsible. Moreover, if the postmodernists are right then there is nothing ‘better’ to put in place of the mainstream, for the enterprise itself is profoundly flawed. Though this is a view that I will ultimately reject, it is one that needs to be examined very closely.

Analytical strategies in contemporary political science and international relations

As the above paragraphs serve to demonstrate, there are certain resemblances between many of the perspectives which have come to charac-

terise the mainstream in political science and their counterparts in international relations. Nonetheless, the degree of dialogue between the two sub-disciplines has been somewhat limited. As I have sought already to suggest, rational choice theory, realism, neo-realism and neo-liberalism are all, essentially, rationalist. Moreover, constructivism in international relations theory and the new institutionalism in political science would seem to perform very similar roles within their respective sub-disciplines, valuing similar things and drawing attention to the role of institutions and ideas in the understanding of complex political change. Finally, behaviouralism, though rather more influential within political science than international relations, might be applied – and, indeed, has been applied – to world politics (see, for instance, Deutsch 1953, 1963; Guertzow 1950; Kaplan 1957; Singer 1968). There are certainly perspectives, such as liberal intergovernmentalism and rational choice institutionalism, which are more difficult to position and seem to inhabit hybrid-locations between rationalism and institutionalism, but this merely reveals the limits of any fixed analytical schema. Within those limits, however, it is plausible to suggest the existence of three distinctive analytical traditions in political analysis which span international relations and political science: *rationalism*, *behaviouralism* and *constructivism/new institutionalism*.³ In what follows, and in keeping with my desire to resist as far as is possible the artificial and polarising distinction between international relations and political science, I will refer not to the sub-discipline-specific perspectives outlined in the preceding section but to the three distinctive analytical strategies on which they rest.

In the remaining sections of this chapter my aim is to introduce the key themes of the volume by examining the stance adopted with respect to a series of key analytical issues by these three analytical paradigms. Their distinctive features are summarised, albeit in a rather stylised fashion, in Table 1.9.

Yet my aim is not to present a commentary on each paradigm in turn. Rather, I introduce the distinctiveness and diversity of analytical strategies adopted in political science and international relations by considering some of the principal analytical issues and choices which divide them. Three issues in particular will prove particularly significant in the chapters which follow. They are: (1) the parsimony versus complexity trade-off; (2) the role of theory within political analysis; and (3) the relationship between political conduct and the context within which it occurs and acquires significance (the thorny perennial of structure and agency). Each warrants a brief introduction at this point.

Table 1.9 *Analytical paradigms in contemporary political science*

	<i>Rationalism</i>	<i>New institutionalism and Constructivism</i>	<i>Behaviouralism</i>
Role of theory	To simplify the world – as a means to generate testable hypotheses	To inform and sensitise analysis to the complexity of the process of change	No analytical role for theory; theory as a language for recording exhibited regularities
Theoretical assumptions	Simple	Complex	None required (evidential)
Analytical approach	Deductive (hypotheses derived from theoretical assumptions)	Sensitising and informative (guides analysis)	Inductive
Method	(Mathematical) modelling; ‘predictive’	Theoretically informed; comparative and historical	Empirical; statistical
Values	Parsimony; predictive capacity	Sophistication; complexity; realism of assumptions	Evidence; methodological rigour; neutrality

The parsimony versus complexity trade-off

Though rarely discussed in any sustained or systematic manner (for an important exception see Sober 1988), the choice – perhaps better seen as a *trade-off* – between parsimony and complexity is central to the selection of analytical strategies in political science and international relations. Yet, as King, Keohane and Verba observe, ‘the word has been used in so many ways in casual conversation and scholarly writings that the principle has become obscured’ (1994: 20).

Before proceeding further, then, it is important that we are clear about what the term implies. Here it is instructive to differentiate clearly

between two rather different logics of political inquiry – the *inductive* and the *deductive*. As we shall see, the trade-off between parsimony and complexity has rather different implications for inductive and deductive approaches to political analysis.

Deductive and inductive logics in political analysis

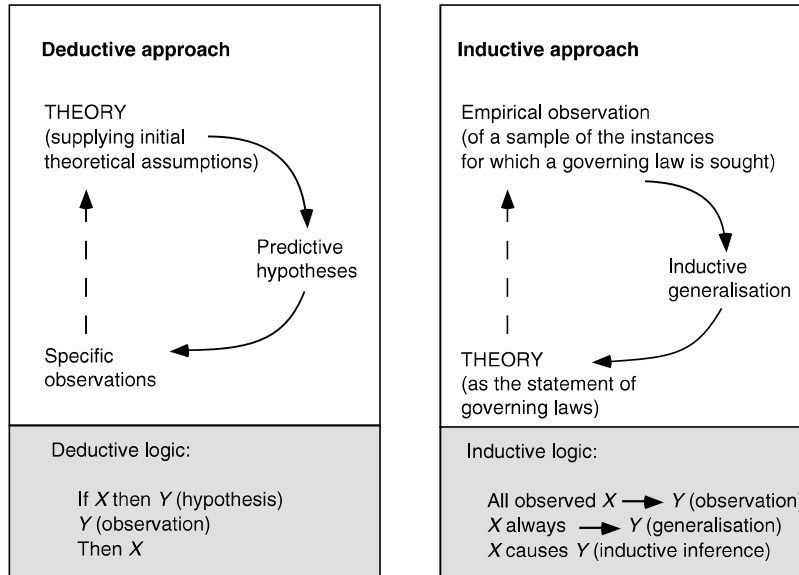
Inductive approaches to political analysis take as their starting point the (supposedly) neutral and dispassionate assessment of empirical evidence. They begin, in short, with specific observations from which they seek to generate (though inductive generalisation and inference) more general or even universal theoretical propositions (Hempel 1966: 11; Wolfe 1924: 450). As Norman Blaikie suggests, induction ‘corresponds to a popular conception of the activities of scientists [as] persons who make careful observations, conduct experiments, rigorously analyse the data obtained, and hence produce new discoveries or theories’ (1993: 133). Theory, in such a strategy, logically follows observation and generalisation and is little more than the statement of generalisable ‘covering laws’ consistent with an existing set of empirical observations (Hempel 1994). This inductive logic is depicted schematically in Figure 1.3.

Induction in the social sciences is associated with *empiricism*, the privileging of evidence and observation over theory, reason or intuition. It proceeds from relatively direct, simple and specific observations (‘in 1992 corporation X left country A for country B with a lower rate of corporate taxation’ or ‘*this* swan is white’) to more general, even universal, covering laws (‘in an era of globalisation capital will leave high-taxation regimes for low-taxation regimes’ or ‘*all* swans are white’).

Deductive approaches to political analysis are essentially a mirror image of such a strategy (see Figure 1.3). Rather than commencing with, and thereby privileging, observation they seek to derive (or deduce) testable propositions or hypotheses from pre-established facts or initial theoretical assumptions. The predictive hypotheses thereby formulated are subsequently exposed to rigorous empirical scrutiny; the hypothesis either confirmed or rejected. The logic is, in Karl Popper’s memorable terms, one of ‘conjecture and refutation’ (1969).

A good example of such a deductive logic is that exhibited in Anthony Downs’ influential *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957); see also Black (1958); Hotelling (1929). Downs starts with a series of simplifying theoretical assumptions which establish the parameters of the model (that parties in democratic polities are analogous to firms in a profit-seeking economy, that both voters and political parties are rational in pursuit of their preferences, that opposition parties seek only election, governments re-election and that parties have complete information as to the distribution of preferences of the electorate, to name but a few).

Figure 1.3 *Deductive and inductive logics in political analysis*



Through a process of logical theoretical deduction, Downs generates the prediction (or hypothesis), that in a first-past-the-post, two-party electoral system in which voters' preferences are normally distributed, the political parties will gravitate towards the preferences of the median voter. In other words, opposition and government will converge on the political centre-ground. Such a prediction was seemingly confirmed by the bipartisan centrism of the US Democrats and Republicans of the time and, indeed, has been resuscitated to account for similarly bipartisan convergence in countries such as Australia, Britain, Ireland and New Zealand in recent years (for a critical assessment of this literature see Hay 1999e: Ch. 3).⁴

Having established the distinctiveness of inductive and deductive rationales in political research, we can now return to the trade-off between parsimony and complexity.

Parsimony, complexity and induction

In inductive approaches to social and political analysis the aim, essentially, is to fit a theoretical model to a set of empirical data. Here parsimony is most simply understood as getting value for one's variables. A parsimonious explanation or model is one which includes as few variables as possible yet which explains (or offers the potential to explain)

as much as possible (see also Jeffreys 1961: 47; Zellner 1984). In some sense, a better explanation (certainly a more complete one) is one which includes more variables. But here we run the risk of sacrificing a simple and elegant account for a complex and sophisticated yet cumbersome and inelegant alternative. In more technical (in fact, classically behaviouralist) terms, we run the risk of ‘saturating’ our model with additional variables each of which account for progressively less of the overall ‘variance’. The casualty in such a strategy is the analytical and explanatory precision of a more *parsimonious* account.

This makes parsimony sound like a very attractive proposition and something to aspire to in one’s theoretical models. Who, after all, could possibly prefer a cumbersome and inelegant account saturated with variables of only marginal (if any) significance when presented with a simple, neat and elegant alternative in which each variable’s contribution to the causal chain is clear and unambiguous? Yet this is to present a somewhat distorted view. An example might serve to indicate why. Say we are interested in formulating a general theory of electoral success and failure in advanced liberal democratic polities. Impressed by the allure of parsimony, we might be tempted to suggest that the key factor predisposing political parties to electoral success at a given election is their success at the previous election.⁵ This is a highly parsimonious model, yet one which is wholly inadequate. While it might well be the case that incumbent administrations are marginally more likely to be re-elected than they are to be expelled from office at any given election, a model of democratic electoral competition incapable of predicting anything other than the perpetuation of a one-party state is at best somewhat anomalous. Clearly parsimony can be taken too far. Our overly simplistic model might be rendered more complex and sophisticated (in other words, less parsimonious) by the incorporation of a series of additional variables – the length of the incumbent administration’s tenure in office, the perceived relative economic competence of the principal parties, and so forth. The question is, of course, how far to go. At what point are the merits of greater complexity more than outweighed by the loss of parsimony their incorporation in the model would entail?

In seeking to draw causal inferences from the observed pattern of correlations between a given set of variables, this is precisely the sort of choice behaviouralist political scientists face on a routine basis. For them, by and large, parsimony is a good thing; a plausible parsimonious explanation is to be preferred to a similarly plausible yet more involved alternative. In the end, however, the choice of how many variables to incorporate – in other words, where precisely to position one’s model on the parsimony–complexity axis – is a subjective judgement, though one influenced significantly by the data under consideration. Some rela-

tionships (and the data sets in and through which behaviouralists investigate such relationships) avail themselves of more parsimonious explanatory models than others.

Parsimony, complexity and the nature of political reality

It is at this point that the discussion of parsimony, to the extent that it occurs at all, usually terminates (see, for instance Miller 1995: 172; Ragin 1994: 214; Ragin, Berg-Schlosser and de Meur 1996: 760–2). Yet it is here, I would suggest, that it should really begin. For if we acknowledge that the extent to which parsimony might be deemed desirable depends upon the object of our analytical attentions, then we can usefully ask under what conditions the world avails itself of parsimonious explanation.

This brings us to a crucial point and one of relevance not only to inductive logics of political inquiry. As King, Keohane and Verba perceptively note, for parsimony to be adopted as a guiding principle of good political analysis implies ‘a judgement, *or even assumption*, about the nature of the world: it is *assumed* to be simple’. Moreover, as they go on to suggest, ‘the principle of choosing theories that imply a simple world is a rule that clearly applies in situations where there is a *high degree of certainty* that the world is indeed simple’. Consequently, ‘we should never insist on parsimony as a general principle of designing theories, but it is useful in those situations where *we have some knowledge of the simplicity of the world we are studying*’ (1994: 20, emphasis mine). This interesting and important passage contains a subtle and highly significant slippage: the progressive blurring (in the emphasised passages) of judgements, assumptions and knowledge of the simplicity of the world we inhabit. What are merely judgements or assertions in the first sentence have acquired the status of knowledge by the second. This raises a series of key questions. Do we have to make (presumably subjective and untestable) *assumptions* about the degree of simplicity or complexity of the world in which we find ourselves, or can we acquire (objective) *knowledge* of such things? What does it mean to have ‘knowledge of the simplicity of the world we are studying’? How would we ever test such a proposition? No clear answers are provided to such disarming questions. However, what is clear is that, in the absence of unambiguous means to assess the degree of complexity of the world we inhabit, the choice between parsimonious and more complex models of political reality appears altogether more arbitrary and subjective than King, Keohane and Verba seem to imply. Here it is instructive to note that, among political scientists, it tends to be behaviouralists who make some of the simplest assumptions about the world in which they find

themselves.⁶ It is perhaps not then surprising that they consistently prize parsimony.

This brings us for the first time to a recurrent theme of this volume. Generally untestable assumptions about the nature of the social and political world affect, fundamentally, the manner in which political analysis is conducted and the status of the knowledge claims we feel we may legitimately make as political analysts.

Parsimony, complexity and deduction

The force of this remark becomes clear if we move from *inductive* logics of political analysis (such as characterise behaviouralism) in which the theoretical generalisations are inferred from the evidence to *deductive* logics (such as characterise rational choice theory and neo-realism) in which testable theoretical hypotheses are derived from initial theoretical assumptions. Here parsimony has rather different implications and is generally taken to refer to the theoretical assumptions upon which the process of theoretical deduction is premised. Opinions and styles of political analysis vary. Certain traditions in political science and international relations – notably rational choice theory and neo-realism – prize themselves on the parsimony of their theoretical assumptions. Others, notably new institutionalism in political science and constructivism in international relations theory, might be seen as reactions to what they perceive to be the dangers of *overly* parsimonious theoretical assumptions (for a particularly lucid explanation, see P. Pierson 2000). They prize themselves not on the parsimony but the realism of their analytical premises.

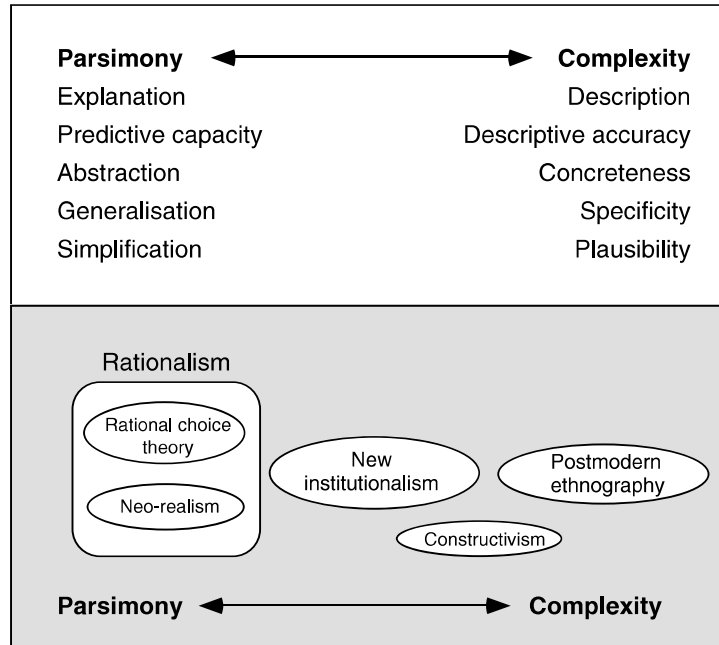
A brief consideration of Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is again instructive. Downs is a rational choice theorist whose model of bipartisan convergence rests, essentially, on the theoretical assumptions out of which it is constructed. Those assumptions are undoubtedly parsimonious, but frankly implausible. Voters are not simply self-serving egoists motivated only by economic self-interest, parties are not blessed with perfect information of the distribution of voter preferences, nor are they motivated solely by the pursuit of office at any cost. Interestingly, Downs himself is prepared to concede the point, clearly stating from the outset that his assumptions are chosen not for their accuracy or sophistication but for their simplicity. As he remarks, 'theoretical models should be tested primarily for the accuracy of their predictions rather than for the reality of their assumptions' (1957: 21).⁷ Though refreshingly sanguine, this might seem like a somewhat strange concession to make. After all, what confidence can we have in a theory based on premises whose implausibility is freely acknowledged by its most prominent exponents? Yet, there is another way of looking at this. For were

Downs to render more complex the theoretical assumptions on which the model is based, it would almost certainly preclude the sort of modelling in which he engages. If there is utility in Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* – probably the single most influential work of political science in the post-war period (Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 32) – then it is largely despite, not because of, the parsimony of its assumptions. Nonetheless, it would have been unthinkable in the absence of such simplifying assumptions.

For increasing numbers of political scientists and international relations theorists, however, this is no excuse. For new institutionalists and constructivists in particular, theoretical assumptions must certainly be plausible and, arguably, as accurate as possible. If, in a complex and interdependent world, this makes political analysis difficult and the sort of mathematical modelling beloved of rational choice theorists and some neo-realists impossible, then so be it. For them, parsimony is a dubious virtue indeed – a synonym for the irrelevance that invariably accompanies high theoretical abstraction. It is, in short, an excuse for indulgent exercises in the production of models with little or no genuine reference to the real world.

What this suggests is that parsimony, at least in deductive approaches to political analysis, is achieved at some price in terms of the realism of theoretical assumptions (a point acknowledged by many rationalists, see Hinich and Munger 1997: 4). This clearly matters. For, notwithstanding the suggestion that it is only the predictive accuracy of analytical models that really counts, the extent to which one can legitimately claim to have explained political outcomes in terms of such models surely depends on the use of credible assumptions.

Yet if parsimony should not be regarded as an unambiguous good, we should perhaps be equally wary of viewing it as an unequivocal evil. For no less problematic is the refusal, often associated with postmodernism, to make theoretical assumptions at all (on the grounds that assumptions distort the complexity of reality). Equally debilitating is the attempt, characteristic of some institutionalists and constructivists, to render our analytical assumptions so complex and sophisticated as to preclude any generalisation between cases. Pure description, at one end of the spectrum, explains nothing yet is true to the complexity of reality. At the other end of the spectrum, abstract theoretical reflection and modelling based on simplifying assumptions (as in rational choice theory) offers the potential to explain much. But it does so only by virtue of the violence it inflicts on the nuance and complexity of the reality it purports to explain. Abstraction and simplification makes prediction possible; but the greater the degree of abstraction and simplification the less useful that prediction is likely to prove. There is, in short a trade-off: parsimony and predictive capacity (the power of explanation) on the one

Figure 1.4 *The parsimony–complexity trade-off*

hand versus accuracy of assumptions (or, in the case of pure description, the absence of assumptions) and the ability to reflect the complexity and indeterminacy of political processes on the other.

The trade-off is captured schematically in Figure 1.4. It provides a particularly useful way of highlighting the range and diversity of rationales underpinning strategies of political analysis.

At the parsimonious end of the spectrum, rationalist perspectives value the predictive capacity that comes with the choice of simplifying theoretical assumptions. Some way towards the opposite end of the spectrum we find the new institutionalists and constructivists who insist on more precisely specified and contextually specific assumptions, scaling down their ambitions for the construction of generalisable and predictive theory as a consequence. Finally, and still further along this axis, we find postmodernists, happy to sacrifice any such lingering (modernist) ambitions. As we shall see in Chapter 7, these authors argue that all theoretical abstractions and generalisations necessarily distort, and thereby do violence to, the distinctiveness of each and every context. Such contexts, they suggest, deserve to be respected for what they are and analysed in their own terms rather than those imposed upon them by political analysts writing, invariably, from altogether different vantage-

points. Postmodernists thus shun generalisation, theoretical abstraction and prediction, preferring instead analyses conducted in terms familiar to the participants in the political behaviour being considered. For them, parsimony is little more than a signal of the universalising, totalising and colonising pretensions of mainstream political science.

The role for and nature of theory in political analysis

This brings us fairly directly to the nature of and role for theory in political science and international relations. It is tempting to assume that theory serves but one purpose in political analysis, a purpose that is essentially the same regardless of the analytical tradition within which that purpose is to be realised. Yet as the above discussion already serves to indicate, this is far from being the case. For positivists, keen to model the analysis of the political upon the natural sciences, a theory is not a theory unless it is capable of generating testable (preferably falsifiable) hypotheses (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 100–5; Nagel 1961). While this perhaps remains the dominant understanding of theory within political analysis, such a restrictive conception is sectarian in dismissing (as atheoretical) those whose philosophical worldview tells them that the political world is so complex and indeterminate that it is not amenable to prediction. It is yet another instance of the imposition of a universal standard which happens to conform to one (of many) strands of political analysis. What it fails to appreciate is that the role for and nature of theory in political analysis is itself variable, reflective of different assumptions about the nature of the political reality being investigated, the extent of the knowledge we can hope to acquire of it, and the strategies appropriate to its analysis. It also fails to acknowledge the theoretical content of precisely such assumptions.

As the previous sections have already made clear, a variety of competing tendencies can be identified in contemporary political science and international relations, pulling in different directions. Three in particular have proved influential in setting the terms of contemporary controversy within the discipline. Each has a rather different conception of the role of theory.

Rationalism and formal theory

First, and perhaps still the dominant strand at least in US political science and international relations, is *rationalism*. This broad school of thought encompasses both rational choice theory in political science and neo-

realism in international relations theory. As we have seen, rationalists, often in the face of mounting criticism from neo-institutionalists and constructivists, continue to value parsimony, predictive power and the scientific assuredness both make possible.

Rationalists are positivists, committed not only to a unity of method between the natural and social sciences (*naturalism*), but to the idea that the natural sciences provide a model of good practice to which the social sciences should aspire. In short, they seek to model political analysis upon the natural sciences. However, as we shall see in more detail in the following chapter, there is more than one way to do this. Rationalists, rather like theoretical physicists, tend to privilege deduction over induction, proceeding on the basis of extremely pared-down and parsimonious theoretical assumptions (invariably relating to the narrow instrumental rationality of political actors or states cast in the image of unified political actors) to derive testable propositions. As in neo-classical economics, on whose assumptions rationalism tends to draw, the preferred mode of analysis is (mathematical) modelling (on rationalism's debt to neo-classical economics see Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Moe 1984; Tullock 1976). This certainly gives the impression of analytical rigour, as a quick glance at the pages of algebraic notation in any issue of the *American Political Science Review* or *International Studies Quarterly* will surely testify. Whether, in the end, pages of algebraic notation tell us anything that words cannot better convey, is an interesting – and understandably contentious – issue.⁸ Whatever one's view, it is important to acknowledge that despite methodological and computational innovations, such modelling entails a significant simplification of the complexity of political life. It is manifestly impossible, computational advances notwithstanding, to render mathematically anything even vaguely approximating the rich complexity of social and political interaction. However impressive and seemingly complex the maths, then, rationalism must assume a world far more simple and predictable than our experiences would suggest.

Paul Pierson makes the point with characteristic clarity:

Since the rise of behaviouralism, many political scientists have had lofty aspirations about developing a science of politics, rooted in parsimony and generalisation and capable of great predictive power. Despite modest achievements over four decades, these aspirations remain. Setbacks are shrugged off with calls for more time or more sustained application of the proper methods, but the inability to generate powerful generalisations that facilitate prediction remains a puzzle. (2000: 266; see also Crick 1962)

In seeking to account for this troubling disparity between ambition and realisation, political scientists have been looking in the wrong place. Rather than focusing quizzically on their various attempts to put positivism into practice in political analysis, they would have been better advised to come to terms with the inherent complexity of political reality. The problem, as Pierson explains, 'lies in the character of the political world itself' (2000: 266). In short, 'reality' does not avail itself of the sort of parsimony on which rationalism is premised.

As the above discussion indicates, the role of theory for rationalists is the simplification of an external reality as a condition of the generation of predictive hypotheses. These are, at least in principle, capable of falsification. That having been said, the emphasis in rational choice theory and more formal variants of neo-realism tends to be on the deduction and derivation from initial assumptions of stylised models of political behaviour, rather than on the testing of the formal models thereby generated. As Melvin J. Hinich and Michael C. Munger explain in an influential text, 'formal theories help social scientists explore "what if?" questions by deducing the implications of a set of premises . . . the particular "what if" implications derived from abstract theory may have little to do with the world of directly observable phenomena' (1997: 1, 4).

This is an important statement, for it suggests something of a tension, characteristic of much rational choice theory, between the practice of rationalism on the one hand and the positivism its exponents invariably espouse on the other. The tension becomes somewhat clearer if we compare the above extract with the following passage, a little later in the same volume:

the external application, or 'testing', of formal theory is by *analogy*: the theory is tested by measuring relationships among observable phenomena, in the hope that the observable phenomena are 'like' the relationships the model focuses on. (1997: 5, emphasis in the original)

Well, which is it to be? Are rationalism's assumptions genuinely chosen for interest's sake as means to the end of conducting hypothetical thought experiments (along the lines, 'what if the world were like this?'). Or are they intended to provide approximations, however rough, of an external reality against which they might be evaluated? In the former case, the plausibility or implausibility of the assumptions is of no great consequence. For the purpose of the process of theoretical deduction is, presumably, to reveal the consequences of a world (unlike our own) in which the hypothecated assumptions *were* true. While this might make rationalism sound like a rather fanciful and indulgent pursuit, the value

of such hypothetical reasoning should not be so easily dismissed. The positing of 'what if' questions can be extremely useful, having the potential to provide, for instance, timely and powerful warnings about the likely consequences of existing political trajectories. If it appears as though political parties increasingly appeal to the electorate in much the same way as corporations appeal to consumers, then it might be useful to model formally the consequences, say, within a two-party, first-past-the-post electoral system, of such a dynamic. The point, of course, would not be to seek to *explain* the conduct of the parties exhibiting such a logic, but rather to point to the positive and/or negative consequences of such a dynamic in the hope that it might either be encouraged or resisted. Such reflection might also draw attention to the conditions under which political parties come to exhibit this particular 'rationality'.⁹

Similarly, were we concerned about the seemingly growing power of capital with respect to the state under conditions of regional and/or global economic integration, we might usefully construct a formal model of an open and global economy in which capital is freely mobile. Though hypothetical, this might allow us to examine the potential implications of further doses of capital liberalisation. Again, the assumptions would be chosen not for their correspondence to the existing state of affairs but as a means of exploring potential futures. The purpose would be not so much to produce predictive hypotheses so much as *conditional predictions*. As in the case of the free mobility of capital, these might take the form of precautionary political warnings of the potential consequences of the untempered unfolding of existing dynamics, made at a point at which such logics might still be checked.

Sadly, however, little work in the rationalist tradition adopts this kind of rationale. Instead, speculative and implausible ('what if') assumptions are used as the basis from which to construct formal models of the polity or economy. Such models are then presented, and frequently accepted by policy-makers, as accurate representations of the systems they purport to reflect. The hypothetical nature of the initial assumptions is now forgotten, as open economy macroeconomic models are used to derive optimal taxation regimes (Tanzi and Schuknecht 1997; Tanzi and Zee 1997), as central banks are given independence on the basis of, frankly, fanciful assumptions about the 'rational expectations' of market actors (Lucas 1973; Kydland and Prescott 1977; Sargent 1986; Sargent and Wallace 1975), and as public bureaucracies are retrenched or marketised on the basis of equally implausible assumptions about the narrow self-interest of public bureaucrats (Buchanan 1977; Niskanen 1971, 1975; Tullock 1965).¹⁰ While these remain the principal contributions of rationalism to the social sciences, its full potential has yet to be realised.

Behaviouralism and inductive theory

The basic principle of behaviouralism is succinctly captured by Steve Smith in the following maxim: 'let the facts, with some help and a receptive audience, speak for themselves' (1995: 7). If rationalism places its emphasis upon the elucidation and deduction from initial theoretical assumptions of hypotheses that are, in principle, testable, then behaviouralism adopts an altogether different logic, proceeding from observation through inductive generalisation to theory. Where rationalism places its emphasis upon the process of logical theoretical deduction, giving little or no sustained attention to the means by which theoretical propositions might be tested empirically, behaviouralism tends to take for granted the means by which theoretical propositions might be inferred from empirical evidence, while focusing considerable attention on the means by which reliable empirical evidence might be gathered in the first place. In short, what rationalism treats as intuitive and unproblematic – namely, the gathering of empirical evidence – behaviouralism problematises; what behaviouralism treats as intuitive and unproblematic – namely, the relationship between theory, inference and deduction – rationalism problematises. Accordingly, while behaviouralists tend to rely upon a simple logic of induction that many rationalists would regard as deeply suspect in its attempt to draw generalisable conclusions from specific observations, rationalists tend to rely upon a similarly simplistic, intuitive and often anecdotal appeal to empirical evidence which many behaviouralists would certainly see as no less problematic.

Shunning theory, certainly as a guide to the investigation of political reality, behaviouralism proceeds from the empirical evidence itself. The (acknowledged) role for theory in pure behaviouralism is, then, strictly limited. Empirical observations, though potentially capable of adjudicating between contending theoretical accounts, are, or at least should be, conducted in a matter that is entirely neutral with respect to such theories. Indeed, ideally, the analysts should be oblivious to all contending theoretical approaches at the point of observation. For the genuinely dispassionate assessment of empirical evidence relies upon, as it implies, the absence of *a priori* assumptions. Thus, as Martin Hollis and Steve Smith suggest,

For behaviouralists, the path to theory started with what was observable, and strict behaviouralists held that there should be no non-observable elements in the theory at all. The guiding light in the search for theory was the methods of the natural sciences (usually equated with physics), construed in strictly observational terms. The social sciences were conceived as a realm of enquiry to which the transfer of these methods was essentially unproblematic. Embarrassment at the

lack of results was brushed off by pointing out that the social sciences were new, and therefore could not be expected to achieve the theoretical power of the natural sciences straight away. (1990: 29b)

Two points might here be made. First, the analogy with physics, as we have already seen, is a poor one, with many theoretical physicists adopting a largely formal and deductive approach considerably at odds with behaviouralism's empiricism. If anything, it is the rather more empirical natural sciences, such as biology or genetics, that classic behaviouralism resembles. That having been said, an older tradition of experimental physics, epitomised by Newtonian mechanics, did exhibit a more inductive approach. Yet this perhaps only serves to draw attention to a second and more general point: the rather dated nature of pure behaviouralism. That the above extract is expressed in the past tense is by no means accidental. That was then, this is now. However influential it might have been in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the USA, few pure behaviouralists remain today. Indeed, it is surely testimony to the severity of the critique that behaviouralism endured in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s that those adopting an essentially inductive approach to political analysis today now invariably refer to themselves not even as 'neo-behaviouralists' but as 'post-behaviouralists' (see, for instance, Easton 1997; Sanders 1995: 64, 74–5). Nonetheless, as David Easton has recently remarked, contemporary political science is characterised by an increasing neo/post-behavioural content (1997). The same might also be said of international relations (for an excellent review see Vasquez 1996).

However qualified in recent years, behaviouralism's core assumptions are simply stated (Crick 1959; Dahl 1961a; Easton 1967: 16–17, 1979: 7, 1997: 14; Hayward 1999: 23; Sanders 1995; S. Smith 1996):

1. Social and political reality can be said to exist 'out there' and is directly accessible to scientific inquiry unencumbered by pre-existing beliefs
2. Political behaviour exhibits discoverable regularities and uniformities, such as might be captured in general 'covering' laws
3. The validity of any such covering laws can be established only by testing them by reference to the relevant political behaviour – all theoretical propositions must be testable
4. The means for acquiring and interpreting data poses a series of methodological challenges and cannot be taken for granted
5. Accuracy and precision in the recording of empirical evidence entails measurement and quantification

6. Ethical judgements and theoretical assumptions must not be allowed to inform, distort, or otherwise interfere with the systematic collation and recording of empirical evidence
7. Data collection, interpretation and explanation logically proceed, and should not be influenced by, concerns relating to the utilisation of the knowledge thereby acquired.

Many of these assumptions (especially 5–7) have been softened considerably since the high point of the ‘behavioural revolution’ in the 1960s. Indeed, most self-proclaimed post-behaviouralists would openly acknowledge the following qualifications:

8. Key variables may be difficult or impossible to quantify or gauge precisely
9. Normative agendas and theoretical assumptions inevitably play a part in influencing the choice of data to be analysed
10. In an age of restricted research funding the anticipated utility and application of research findings can and should inform the choice of research strategy (Easton 1997: 15–20; Sanders 1995: 64–8).

As a consequence, today’s heirs to the behaviouralist inheritance would tend to see the quantitative methods with which they are principally associated not as a necessary condition of a science of the political so much as a potentially useful set of analytical techniques, among others, in the service of such a science. They are thus far more prepared than once they were to accept an academic division of labour within political analysis, rejecting, in so doing, the totalising vision of an integrated behavioural social science in favour of methodological pluralism.

Nonetheless, the basic behaviouralist rationale, as encapsulated in assumptions 1–4 above, remains essentially intact. Post-behaviouralists thus still retain a highly distinctive conception of theory in political analysis and one which is not so very different from that of their behaviouralist forebears. As much as possible, theory should not be allowed to interfere with or, worst still, *inform* empirical observation (as in constructivism and the new institutionalism). Rather, it is best seen as following naturally from empirical observation. Theory, for behaviouralists, is in a sense little more than a language for registering statistical correlations between observed variables – a repository, in short, of empirical generalisations. Theory provides a set of abstracted re-descriptions (couched in the form of empirically testable hypotheses) of the patterns exhibited in observed political data. As David Sanders usefully suggests, it acts as something of a short-hand, ‘distancing the analyst from the potentially overwhelming detail of what can be directly

observed, so that abstract deductions can be made about the connections between different phenomena' (1995: 74).

In this way, as James C. Charlesworth notes, behaviouralists are

at once modest and immodest . . . [T]hey do not pretend to know the origin and destiny of man [*sic*], but conclude that the only way to understand him is to observe him and record what he does in the courtroom, in the legislative hall, in the hustings. If enough records are kept we can predict after a while (on an actuarial basis) what he will do in the presence of recognised stimuli. Thus we can objectively and inductively discover *what* and *where* and *how* and *when*, although not *why*. (1967: 3, emphasis in the original)

This is an important point and brings us to the limitations of behaviouralism, about which we will have more to say presently and in later chapters. Those limitations tend to derive from the fundamental (meta-theoretical) assumptions which make behaviouralism possible, and which behaviouralists tend not to acknowledge as theoretical (or meta-theoretical) assumptions in the first place. Arguably this already problematises their central conviction that the analysis and interpretation of empirical evidence should be conducted in a theoretical vacuum. As soon as one acknowledges, as many post-behaviouralists now would, that to presume a world in which appearance and reality are one and the same (assumption 1) or in which social relations exhibit discoverable regularities and uniformities over time (assumption 2) is itself to make (untestable) theoretical assumptions, behaviouralism's pristine empiricism is quickly tarnished.

While the first of these assumptions is, in the end, a matter of belief (either reality presents itself to us as really it is, or it does not), the second is arguably more of a matter of convenience. For while human behaviour does, undoubtedly, exhibit regularities over time, such regularities are far from universal, varying both historically and culturally. Few would now accept that what might be inferred inductively about political behaviour, say, from an analysis of voting behaviour in Britain before the passing of the 1832 Reform Act would have much to say about voting behaviour in the Czech Republic today. What allows behaviouralists to draw predictive inferences from the empirical evidence they analyse is the convenient assumption that any regularities thereby observed will continue to hold in the future – or, indeed, in other cultural contexts or institutional domains. Under certain conditions, that may well be an appropriate assumption to make, but it effectively silences behaviouralism's contribution to the analysis of political change.

Less fundamental, perhaps, but arguably no less significant in matters of substantive political analysis, is behaviouralism's 'tendency to empha-

size what can be easily measured rather than what might be theoretically important' (Sanders 1995: 65). We have already encountered a similar limitation of rationalism – namely the tendency to emphasise that which might easily be incorporated within a formal model, at the expense of that which might be more causally significant. Largely as a consequence of these mutually reinforcing tendencies in rationalism and behaviouralism a series of crucial issues, such as the role of ideas in processes of political causation (discussed in Chapter 6), have remained systematically unexplored. As a consequence, behaviouralists (and, indeed, rationalists) invariably overlook the significance of subjective and/or cultural factors in political processes. Often, as Walter Berns has persuasively argued, the most significant aspects of political 'reality' are invisible to the analyst only concerned to describe and catalogue or, worst still, to model an unfolding sequence of events. As he suggests in a revealing example, racial segregation

is only seen by the observer because he [*sic*] can see the injustice of the practice . . . Through the 'eye of the mind' we are enabled to see the injustice and hence the political; with the eye alone we would see only men of dark skin sitting in the balconies of theatres marked 'coloured', or *not* sitting at Woolworth lunch counters. Out of the millions of so-called factual events that pass within the range of our vision, we could not single out these events except as they are seen by the eye of a mind that is not blinded by prejudice or a fallacious theoretical commitment. It is this commitment that accounts for political science books devoid of political content. (Cited in Sibley 1967: 55)

No less troubling, as Sanders again notes, is behaviouralism's 'tendency to concentrate on readily observed phenomena – such as voting – rather than the more subtle, and perhaps deeper, structural forces that promote stability and change in social and political systems' (1995: 66). Ironically, this leaves behaviouralists incapable of accounting for precisely the stability and regularity of the political world which they assume and on which their appeal to induction rests. The combination of such limiting factors serves perhaps to indicate why rationalism and behaviouralism have so frequently provided the point of departure for alternative approaches to political analysis. It is to two of these, the new institutionalism and constructivism, that we now turn.

New institutionalism, constructivism and theory as a heuristic device

While rationalism is relatively easily characterised in terms of its deductive and formal theory and behaviouralism in terms of its empiricist

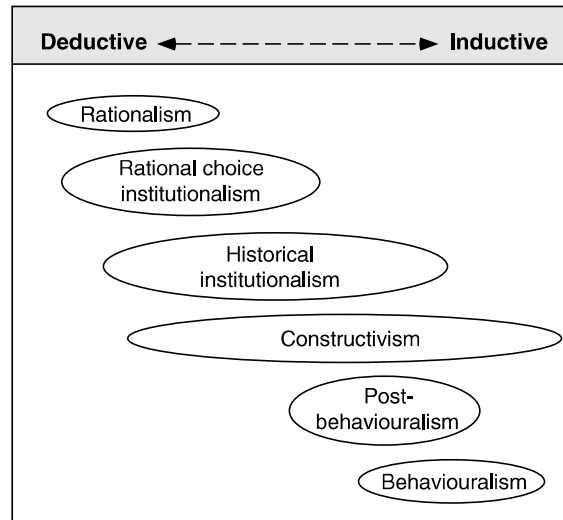
appeal to the logic of induction, the new institutionalism in political science and constructivism in international relations are rather more disparate schools of thought. In terms of their understanding of the nature of and role for theory they are characterised more by what they reject than what they embrace (Christiansen, Jørgensen and Wiener 2001: 4; Hall and Taylor 1996: 936; Hay and Wincott 1998; Peters 1999: 15–7; W. R. Scott 1995: 26). As such, they are united, more than anything else, by their opposition to behaviouralism and, if in a rather more uneven and somewhat lesser extent, rationalism.¹¹ While it is probably something of an exaggeration, then, there is surely some substance to Grant Jordan's suggestion that the new institutionalism has attracted the attention it has largely because the label signalled 'a disposition to oppose the political science mainstream' (1990: 482).¹² With a similar caveat the same might also be said of constructivism's opposition to the so-called 'neo-neo-synthesis' in international relations theory (Baldwin 1993; Kegley 1995; Lamy 2001; S. Smith 2001; Wæver 1996).

What is clear, however, is that proponents of the new institutionalism and constructivism are united in their resistance to purely deductive and purely inductive logics in political analysis. At the same time, both are broad churches in such matters, with so-called rational choice institutionalists and 'thin' constructivists like Wendt himself close to one end of the spectrum and historical and sociological institutionalists and more radical constructivists close to the other (for a perhaps overly stylised depiction see Figure 1.5).

When compared with more formal and purist variants of rationalism, rational choice institutionalism certainly tends to be more cautious in its specification of initial assumptions, seeking to capture theoretically something of the detail of the specific institutional contexts within which actors' 'rationality' is exercised.¹³ This often precludes the sort of formal modelling otherwise characteristic of rationalism while encouraging a rather closer appeal to the empirical evidence. Thus, though by no means inductive in approach, rational choice institutionalism exhibits a *qualified* deductive logic. Similarly, though from the other end of spectrum, while historical and sociological institutionalists and radical constructivists tend to shun what they regard as the overly theoreticist abstraction of purely deductive models in favour of richer descriptive narratives (see, for instance Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 12), such narratives are invariably informed by abstract theoretical reflections and are thus far from purely inductive (see, especially, Skocpol 1979: 33–40, 1994: 322–3; cf. Burawoy 1989; Kiser and Hechter 1991).

Accordingly, historical institutionalists and constructivists in particular tend to view theory in rather different terms to behaviouralists and rationalists. Yes, theory is about simplifying a complex external reality,

Figure 1.5 *Inductive and deductive logics in the new institutionalism and constructivism*



but not as a means of modelling it, nor of drawing predictive inferences on the basis of observed regularities. Rather, theory is a guide to empirical exploration, a means of reflecting more or less abstractly upon complex processes of institutional evolution and transformation in order to highlight key periods or phases of change which warrant closer empirical scrutiny. Theory sensitises the analyst to the causal processes being elucidated, selecting from the rich complexity of events the underlying mechanisms and processes of change.

In this way, institutionalist and constructivist political analysis proceeds by way of a *dialogue* between theory and evidence as the analyst, often painstakingly, pieces together a rich and *theoretically informed* historical narrative. In preference to the more abstract and generic explanations offered by rationalists and behaviouralists, such historical narratives seek to preserve and capture the complexity and specificity of the process of change under consideration, examining the interplay of actors, ideas and institutions and establishing the conditions of existence of the mechanisms of evolution and transformation described. Institutionalists and constructivists thus resolutely refuse to foreclose or prejudge discussion of the temporality of change by fitting to it a more general covering law or model. Instead they pay particularly close attention to the specificity of sequence and timing in the precise context under consideration (see, for instance, Campbell and Pedersen 2001b, 2001c; Hay 2001b; P. Pierson 2000; Skowronek 1993, 1995).

The emphasis of such work tends to be upon the identification and tracing of causal processes over time and the theoretical elucidation of such processes – on *process-tracing* and *process-elucidation* (Katzenstein 1978; Krasner 1984; Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 21–2). In contrast to behaviouralism and rationalism, then, these contending approaches tend to value the accuracy and specificity of assumptions in a world of acknowledged complexity. They are also quick to emphasise the limitations of political analysis as a *predictive* science of the political (domestic, comparative or international), pointing to the inherent complexity and contingency (or open-endedness) of processes of change in which human subjects are involved. For them, the intrinsically unpredictable character of human behaviour renders a predictive science of the political impossible. Institutionalists and constructivists thus tend to target and problematise the simplifying assumptions employed in rationalism and behaviouralism which have made such a predictive science *appear* possible (see Table 1.10). Accordingly, they come to focus, theoretically and more substantively, on those areas of political analysis and inquiry closed off by such attempts to preserve a pristine and predictive science of the political.

Where behaviouralists simply assume a political universe characterised by the regularities which might render possible a predictive (albeit probabilistic) science of the political, institutionalists and constructivists prefer (ironically, perhaps) a more empirical approach which refuses to foreclose the issue theoretically. Thus, rather than take regularity as a given, they explore the conditions of existence of both regularities and of irregularities in political behaviour. As such they treat the issue of change and temporality (discussed further in Chapter 4) as an open empirical matter rather than one to be resolved on the basis of analytical convenience. Similarly, where rationalists assume the rationality of political actors blessed with perfect information in the pursuit of egoistic self-interest alone, institutionalists and constructivists adopt a more flexible and, again, empirical approach, acknowledging the open-ended nature of the process of strategic deliberation and the role of ideas in shaping the range of strategic options considered by actors. As Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo explain,

By taking the goals, strategies and preferences as something to be explained, historical institutionalists show that, unless something is known about the context, broad assumptions about ‘self-interested behaviour’ are empty . . . [H]istorical institutionalists would not have trouble with the . . . idea that political actors are acting strategically to achieve their ends. But clearly it is not very useful simply to leave it at that. We need a historically based analysis to tell us what they

Table 1.10 *Beyond rationalism and behaviouralism*

	<i>Parsimonious assumptions of rationalism and behaviouralism</i>	<i>New institutionalism and constructivism</i>	
		<i>Theoretical stance</i>	<i>Substantive concerns</i>
Regularity	Political world characterised by regularities	The question of regularity/irregularity is empirical and context-dependent	Elucidation of the mechanisms and temporality of institutional and behavioural change
Rationality	Rationality is universal – time and context-invariant	Rationality is culture-, context- and time-dependent; the relationship between rationality and exhibited behaviour is empirical	Elucidation of the process of strategic deliberation
Closure/openness of political systems	Political systems are closed and predictable	Political systems are open and contingent	Analysis of the evolution and transformation of social and political systems
Causal role for ideas in political analysis?	Materialism: ideas have no independent causal efficacy	Ideas (knowledge, norms, convictions) influence political behaviour; they are irreducible to material factors	Elucidation of the mechanisms and temporality of ideational change and the role of ideas in institutional change

are trying to maximise and why they emphasise certain goals over others. (1992: 9)

Again, where both behaviouralists and rationalists assume that political systems are, like those examined in the natural sciences, closed and predictable, institutionalists and constructivists make no such assumption, acknowledging the contingency injected into political systems by political actors themselves. For them the limitations of a predictive science of

politics reside not so much in the limitations of political scientists and scholars of international relations, but in the inherently contingent and indeterminant nature of our subject matter. In the search for a predictive science of politics we are bound to be disappointed because there is no predictive science of the political to be had.

Context and conduct: dealing with the 'problem' of agency

This brings us fairly directly to a quite fundamental issue which lies at the heart of this volume and which is explored at some length in the following chapters. It is what might here be termed the 'problem' of human agency. Arguably what renders the social sciences qualitatively different from the physical sciences is that the former must deal with conscious and reflective subjects, capable of acting differently under the same stimuli, whereas the units which comprise the latter can be assumed inanimate, unreflexive and hence entirely predictable in response to external stimuli. Agency injects an inherent indeterminacy and contingency into human affairs for which there is simply no analogy in the physical sciences (see also Bernstein *et al.* 2000).

In itself, there is probably nothing terribly contentious about this claim. Yet it has important implications, particularly for those keen to model the science of the political upon the natural sciences. For, if actors' behaviour is not given by the context in which they find themselves (in the same way that a particle's kinetic energy is given by the gravitational field within which it is situated) – indeed, if actors may refashion the context in which they find themselves and hence any regularities it may previously have given rise to – then what hope is there for a predictive science of the political? It is for precisely this reason that agency does indeed pose a 'problem' for aspiring political *scientists*.

The central contention of what is to follow, and a logical correlate of the above argument, is simply stated. If one is prepared to acknowledge that human agency does inject an inherent indeterminacy and contingency into all social systems, then this poses a fundamental and largely insurmountable problem for a predictive science of the political modelled upon the natural sciences.¹⁴ If agency, and the indeterminacy that its acknowledgement implies, poses a fundamental problem for positivists (committed not only to a unity of method between the natural and social sciences but to the idea that the natural sciences provide that method), then it is interesting to note that it is a problem handled very differently by behaviouralists and rationalists. Consider each in turn.

Behaviouralism: aggregation as a 'solution' to the 'problem' of agency

In so far as behaviouralism deals with the problem of agency at all, it does so in the same way as whole animal biology (which also has to cope with, certainly, animate and, arguably, reflexive subjects). It does so by (statistical) *aggregation*. The logic here is relatively simple. While the behaviour of any single individual (fruit fly, gazelle or human) is likely to prove unpredictable, even in response to a common stimulus, analysis of a *population* of individuals will invariably throw up patterns of behaviour which can be detailed, described and catalogued. Thus, for instance, while the preferences of voters will vary from one to another, the distribution of voter preferences may well exhibit a consistent pattern which might be exposed to empirical analysis. Strictly speaking, then, for behaviouralists it is such exhibited regularities in the behaviour of political populations rather than political behaviour itself that forms the subject matter of political analysis. If one assumes, as behaviouralists invariably do, that such exhibited regularities are generalisable beyond the immediate context and time-frame within which they were observed, a probabilistic and predictive science of political behaviour is possible, after a fashion. The logic of such probabilistic prediction runs something like this:

1. Empirical observations in a particular context over a particular time-frame (or, more likely, at a particular instant) reveal a series of (statistically significant) correlations between the observed variables
2. Let us assume that such correlations are indeed generalisable beyond the context in which, and the time period over which, they were generated
3. On the basis of this assumption, we can infer that in another context over another period in time the same relationship between these variables will pertain
4. If the relationship holds, then we can predict the following . . .

What is clear from the above is that this is a science of the political in which there is no recognition of the role of agents as anything other than the carriers of behaviours which aggregate to form a particular pattern. It is, moreover, a mode of political analysis which, in its concern to map the relationship between variables often sampled at the same moment in time, finds it very difficult to differentiate between mere *correlation* and genuine *causation* (C. Marsh 1982: Chs 2, 4; Miller 1995: 168–79). Finally, while this type of probabilistic predictive inference may be valid under conditions of social and political stability, it is almost wholly incapable of dealing with periods of social and political upheaval and trans-

formation. For in these, arguably the most interesting periods of political time, the assumption of regularity on which its inductive logic is premised is shattered, as agents depart from the 'rules' which had previously governed their behaviour and 'make history' (cf. Callinicos 1989).

Rationalism: taking the choice out of rational choice

If behaviouralism is characterised by the attempt to by-pass the question of agency through statistical aggregation, then rationalism responds to the challenge of agency in a very different and rather more direct fashion. As I shall argue at greater length and in more detail in the Chapter 3, rationalism is characteristically ingenious in its attempts to negotiate the indeterminacy that would otherwise be injected into its stylised modelling of rational choice by agency.

In this respect, above all, rational choice theory is not all that it might first appear. What, after all, could be better placed to deal with the 'problem' of agency than a perspective which emphasises the rationality exhibited by (presumably) conscious and reflective actors in the process of making choices? Is it any wonder that an author of the stature of David Easton should describe rational choice theory as the predominant post-behavioural response to 'behaviouralism's neglect of the actor' (1997: 20)? In one sense, he is right to do so, for rationalism probably does owe its ascendancy in those quarters of the discipline in which it is ascendant to its perceived ability to offer a solution to the problem of agency that behaviouralism left unresolved. Yet that solution, as I will argue, is almost entirely illusory and it is here that Easton surely gets it wrong.¹⁵ The rational actor model, he suggests,

gained sway because it inadvertently fit into the voluntarist tendencies of the countercultural sentiments of the time . . . The image of the individual was subtly changed by rational modelling. He or she was not just a subject reacting to external circumstances but was proactive – choosing, selecting, rejecting in terms of his or her own preferences or utility-maximising behaviour. The focus shifted decisively from the structure or constraints surrounding behaviour . . . to the actor and his or her strategies of choice in pursuit of individual volitions. (1997: 21–2)

The extent to which voluntarism (the view that individuals are essentially masters of their own destiny) chimed with the 'countercultural sentiments of the time' need not concern us here. The point is that, all appearances to the contrary and such sentiments notwithstanding, rationalism is in fact about as far from voluntarism as one can get. For,

within any rationalist model, we know one thing above all: that the actor will behave rationally, maximising his or her personal utility. Moreover, we know that there is, by definition, only one optimal course of action by which the actor's personal utility might be maximised. It follows, logically, that *a rational actor in a given context will always choose precisely the same course of action*. So much for voluntarism. What this implies is that the agent's 'choice' (in fact the absence of choice) is rendered entirely predictable given the context. Accordingly, for rationalist models, context determines conduct, structure determines agency. While actors are free to choose, they will always choose the optimal strategy; consequently, their behaviour is entirely predictable. This is most clearly seen in neo- or *structural* realism (Waltz 1979), in which the rational conduct of states is considered derivable from the anarchic character of the international system.

It is in this way that rationalism deals with the problem of the contingency otherwise injected into social systems by agency. It does so simply by denying that agents exercise any meaningful choice at the moment of strategic deliberation. They have, if you like, a nominal choice between rationality and irrationality but, as rational actors, always opt for the former. This is an extremely ingenious and convenient, if perhaps rather disingenuous, solution to the problem of agency and one which does salvage a (natural) science of the political. Yet it does so only on the basis of denying the inherent indeterminacy of individual choice. It relies, in short and in the name of parsimony once again, on a convenient assumption that we know to be false: that individuals in a given context will always choose the same (rational) option. In so doing it translates what would otherwise be a moment of contingency and indeterminism (at least from the political analyst's point of view) into one of complete and absolute determinism.

Dealing with structure and agency: post-positivism

Behaviouralism and rationalism go to considerable pains to avoid having to acknowledge what, to the uninitiated, might appear entirely obvious: the ability of actors to transform both the environment and the laws governing the environment in which they find themselves. This may seem, at best, somewhat bizarre, at worst, wilfully perverse. However, as I have sought to demonstrate, for positivists in particular, there is much at stake in these issues. If they concede, or are forced to concede, the capacity of actors to influence the course of social and political change and hence the contingency of social and political systems, then they may also have to abandon any pretensions for a science of the political capable of generating testable (i.e. predictive) hypotheses. The best

that might be hoped for is a more *retrospective* science of the political, capable of adjudicating between contending accounts of events that have already occurred. The limits of such a political science are wonderfully encapsulated in Jack Hayward's disarming aphorism, 'political scientists have the capacity to offer some hindsight, a little insight and almost no foresight' (1999: 34). This may indeed be all that we can legitimately aspire to as political analysts, a view now silently endorsed by many; but it is far less than rationalists and behaviouralists have traditionally projected for the discipline.

For self-professed post-positivists, however, it is not agency *per se* that poses the problem, but the relationship between structure and agency, conduct and context. For behaviouralists and rationalists, of course, the relationship between structure and agency is quite simple. As I have argued, behaviouralists are interested principally in the (structural) regularities exhibited in political behaviour; and for rationalists, agency is essentially reducible to the (structural) context in which it is exercised. For institutionalists, constructivists, critical theorists and other avowed post-positivists, however, things are more complex and involved. Indeed, arguably the central controversy of contemporary political analysis concerns the dynamic relationship between conduct and context, agents and structure. It is to a detailed examination of that relationship that we turn in Chapter 3.

The structure of the book

My aim in this chapter has been to introduce the theoretical perspectives which tend to characterise the mainstream within political science and international relations, pointing to the analytical choices, trade-offs and strategies on which they are premised.

In Chapter 2, we turn to two of the most frequently asked questions of political analysis – *should political analysis be scientific?* and *what does it mean to claim that it should?* – and two of the most infrequently asked questions – *should political analysis be political?* and *what is the nature of the 'political' that forms the subject matter of political analysis?* These questions, as we shall see, lie at the heart of the contemporary controversies that divide those engaged in the analysis of the political. It is important to deal with these issues first since we can say little about the techniques and strategies of political analysis and the claims that one might make for them, without first giving due attention to the nature of the 'political' and to the implications of according 'scientific' status to its analysis. My aim is to demonstrate the essentially

contested nature both of the boundaries of 'politics' and the 'political' on the one hand, and the nature of 'scientific' enquiry on the other.

In Chapter 3 we turn to another crucial question that has consistently plagued political analysis and divided political analysts: that of the relationship between political actors and political institutions, between political conduct and political context, between structure and agency. Questions of structure and agency, however implicit, are implicated in all attempts to fashion notions of social and political causality. Accordingly, we can benefit greatly from seeking to render explicit the conceptions of structure and agency that we necessarily appeal to, thereby interrogating the notions of causality we formulate. The argument of this chapter also proceeds in two parts.

In the first, I demonstrate the pathologies of both *structuralism* (the tendency to reduce social and political outcomes to the operation of institutional or structural beyond the control of actors) and *intentionalism* (the tendency to account for observable effects in purely agential terms), before considering, in the second, a series of recent attempts to move beyond the unhelpful and polarising dualism of structure and agency. I demonstrate how such perspectives *might*, and indeed *have been*, used to inform discussions of social and political causality and complex institutional change.

This theme is developed further in Chapter 4. Despite Régis Debray's enticing comment that 'time is to politics what space is to geometry' (1973: 103), contemporary political analysis exhibits considerable difficulties in accounting for continuity and discontinuity and in reflecting theoretically the uneven temporality of political change. I argue that there are two principle reasons for this. First, the complexity and uneven temporality of political change can only be grasped if structuralist and intentionalist tendencies are first rejected and a more complex view of the relationship between structure and agency is set in their place. Second, positivist tendencies within political science prize predictive capacity, parsimony and the simplifying assumptions that this entails. The result has been to privilege simple, general and 'elegant' theoretical models that cannot deal adequately with complex political dynamics. For the simplifying assumptions upon which they draw, and by which their parsimony is achieved, tend to involve an understanding of context as static and unchanging. In the attempt to move beyond these limitations, I examine those contemporary developments in political analysis (associated, in particular, with the new institutionalism) that offer the potential for a more adequate understanding of political change, continuity and discontinuity.

In Chapter 5 I turn my attention to the highly contested concept of

power, focusing on the Anglo-American discussion of the concept arising out of classical pluralism in the post-war period and the contrasting discussion of the term in continental Europe which follows the work of Michel Foucault. That political analysts remain divided by the common language of power is perhaps testimony to the centrality of the concept to political inquiry. For power is probably the most universal and fundamental concept of political analysis. It has been, and continues to be, the subject of extended and heated debate. I review the highly influential 'faces of power' controversy, examining the extent to which its various protagonists succeed in transcending the residues of behaviouralism that they inherit from classic pluralism. I advance a definition of power as 'context-shaping' and demonstrate how this helps us to disentangle the notions of power, responsibility and culpability that the faces of power debate conflates. In so doing, I suggest that we differentiate clearly between analytical questions concerning the identification of power within social and political contexts, and normative questions concerning the critique of the distribution and exercise of power thus identified.

In the final section of the chapter, I consider the challenge posed to orthodox accounts of power and to mainstream conceptions of political analysis more generally by the work of Michel Foucault. I examine critically his conception of power as ubiquitous and as manifest in a constant succession of 'power-knowledge regimes'. His argument, if accepted, has important implications for the practice of political inquiry, especially that which would claim to inform an emancipatory politics of resistance to relations of power and domination. Foucault's disarming and provocative perspective rejects the notion of a neutral vantage-point from which the relative merits of different power-knowledge regimes might be adjudicated, paving the way in so doing to the postmodernist position considered in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 6, attention switches from a concern with structure, agency and power to a consideration of the increasingly controversial question of the relationship between the material realm and the realm of ideas. In recent years this has emerged as an issue of crucial significance and much controversy in debates on the appropriate analytical techniques and strategies of political analysis. Like the question of structure and agency, however, there has been a certain tendency for political analysts to choose between one of two rather polarised positions on this question. These might be referred to as *materialism* and *idealism*. Materialists refuse to accord much significance to the role of ideas, insisting that notions of causality must be couched in material (normally institutional, political or economic) terms. Idealists, by contrast, argue that in so far as one can posit a notion of reality, that reality is itself the product of 'discursive con-

struction'. Quite simply, there is no external or pre-discursive reality outside of our constructions and imaginings of it.

If we are to move beyond this stark opposition, constructivism and the new institutionalism have much to offer. Drawing on both perspectives, I argue that political actors inhabit complex and densely structured institutional environments that favour or privilege certain strategies over others. Yet such actors do not appropriate these contexts directly, blessed with a perfect knowledge of the contours of the terrain. Rather their ability and capacity to act strategically is mediated and filtered through perceptions (and indeed mis-perceptions) of the context they inhabit. These may either facilitate or militate against their ability to realise their intentions through strategic action. This basic schema allows a sophisticated analysis of institutional change over time that is sensitive both to the uneven temporality of political change (referred to in Chapter 4) and to the independent role of ideas in the mediation of political dynamics.

In Chapter 7 the focus turns eventually to the rather shadowy notion of postmodernism. My aim is to demonstrate that postmodernism represents perhaps the greatest single challenge to the strategies and techniques of political analysis (classical and contemporary, positivist and interpretivist alike). I present a guide to its key theorists and to its key claims – its incredulity towards 'metanarratives', its epistemological scepticism, its disavowal of critical theory, and its tendency towards relativism. I argue that despite its obvious and increasing appeal, postmodernism is but one way of answering the key questions dealt with in this volume that currently trouble and divide political analysts. Although it may provide an important corrective to the characteristic tendency of political analysts to assume a privileged vantage-point from which to accord their insights a scientific status, the relativism and political fatalism with which it is so often associated are not warranted. Political analysis after postmodernism is still possible.

In the Conclusion, I aim to draw together the disparate strands of the argument presented in the preceding chapters, in presenting one interpretation of what political analysis after postmodernism might look like. Contemporary political analysis, it is argued, can no longer afford to privilege the political in explanations of political phenomenon; must be sensitive to the perils of structuralism and intentionalism, materialism and idealism; must give far greater consideration to the uneven temporality of political change and the importance of political ideas therein; and must take seriously the challenge presented by postmodernist critics, above all by acknowledging the value-laden and normative content of many of its assumptions. These ideas are illustrated with respect to a particularly significant, contentious and potent example: that of global-

isation. I conclude then by demonstrating how the ideas discussed in previous chapters can be brought to bear on the question of the limits of the political (and of political autonomy in particular) in an era of much-vaunted globalisation.

Chapter 2

What's 'Political' About Political Science?

A *reflexive revolution* seems recently to have engulfed the discourse and discipline of political science on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ For the first time in a long time, political scientists and those no longer quite so happy to embrace the 'science' designation, debate the very nature of their subject matter and the claims they might legitimately make about it.

This debate is both descriptive and prescriptive. For, it refers not only to the practices and habits of political science as a discipline but also to the revisions to such disciplinary conventions that a sustained reflection on the nature of the 'political' and on the claims we might legitimately make about it suggests. In Europe, where this debate has perhaps been rather more explicit and long-running, controversy has tended to focus around the very definition of the legitimate terrain of political inquiry (see for instance Leftwich 1984a) and, more recently, the challenge posed to the political science and international relations mainstream by the distinctly post-positivist agendas of constructivism, critical realism, post-structuralism and postmodernism (for a flavour see Booth and Smith 1995; Hollis and Smith 1990b; Marsh and Stoker 1995). In recent years, however, the debate has been joined by the North American core of the discipline (see, for instance Almond 1990; Der Derian 1995; George 1994; Green and Shapiro 1994; Lapid and Kratochwil 1995; Wendt 1999).² Thus, American political scientists, just as much as their European counterparts, are currently embroiled in a host of fundamental debates, disputes and controversies over the discipline's legitimate concerns and what might be taken to constitute 'minimal professional competence' within the discipline' (Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 6).

This return to fundamentals has invariably been occasioned by one of three tendencies: (i) the rejection of the 'malestream' mainstream by feminist scholars (see, for instance, Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996a); (ii) the challenge posed to the ascendancy of rational choice theory and behaviouralism in political science by neo-statist and neo-institutionalist perspectives (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985; March and Olsen 1984, 1989; Skocpol 1979; Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth 1992;

for a review see Hall and Taylor 1996); and (iii) that posed to neo-realism and neo-liberalism in international relations theory by both constructivism and more radically 'reflectivist' or postmodernist positions (see, for instance, Adler 1997; Ashley 1984; Campbell 1992; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Ruggie 1998; S. Smith 2001; Tickner 1993; Walker 1993; Wendt 1992, 1999). This contestation of the mainstream has served to problematise a series of quite basic and fundamental issues on which the principal protagonists remain, and are likely to remain, divided and with which this volume is principally concerned. These include: (i) the nature of political power and the techniques appropriate to its analysis; (ii) the relationship between political conduct and political context (more conventionally, structure and agency); (iii) the respective significance of behavioural, institutional and ideational factors in political explanation; (iv) the relationship between the political world and the ideas held by political actors about that political world (more conventionally, the relationship between the material and the discursive); and (v) the nature of political time and the understanding of social and political change.

It is with two yet more fundamental issues, however, that I am principally concerned in this chapter. They relate to the nature of the 'political' that forms the focus of our analytical attentions (the 'political' question) and the status of the claims we might make about such a subject matter (the 'science' question). The former involves us in posing some quite basic questions about the nature of the political world itself – its essence (if it might be said to possess one), its boundaries and the constituent units out of which it is comprised. The latter is certainly no less significant, raising the question of what we have the potential to know about the (political) objects of our enquiry and the means by which we might come to realise that potential.

These are, arguably, the most two most basic questions of all for political analysts. For, what kind of discipline, we might ask, lacks a clear sense of its terrain of enquiry and the means appropriate to adjudicate contending accounts of what occurs within that domain? Yet, to point to the logical primacy of such issues is, of course, not to suggest that they have always been accorded the attention such a fundamental nature might warrant. Nor is it to suggest that they have been accorded equal attention.

Despite the paltry interest it has attracted over the years, of the two, the question of the nature and scope of the political is logically prior. For the degree of confidence that we might have in the knowledge we acquire of our subject matter (our answer to the 'science' question) depends, crucially, on what we choose that subject matter to be (our answer to the 'political' question). In short, the claims we might make

of our subject matter are conditional upon the nature of that subject matter. It is, then, with the concept of the 'political' that we must begin.

Yet, before doing so, it is important to introduce the terminology in which such debates tend to be conducted.

Ontology and epistemology: the 'political question' and the 'science question'

From the outset it is important to puncture the veil of impenetrability which invariably accompanies the philosophy of the social sciences, the language of ontology, epistemology and methodology in particular. In the philosophy of the social sciences, what we have thus far termed the political question is referred to as an *ontological* issue; what we have thus far termed the science question is referred to as an *epistemological* issue. Both, as we shall see, have *methodological* implications.

It is in many respects unfortunate that what are, in fact, simple and intuitive ideas should be referred to in a language which is far from immediately transparent and accessible. Nonetheless, this is the language in which much political analytical debate is now conducted and it is important that we familiarise ourselves with it before we proceed.

Ontology, is, literally, the science or philosophy of being.³ As a first step in the process of clarification, this may not seem like progress. Rather more illuminating is Norman Blaikie's definition. Ontology, he suggests, 'refers to the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social [or, by extension, political] enquiry makes about the nature of social [or political] reality – claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with one another' (1993: 6). Ontology relates to *being*, to what *is*, to what *exists*. One's ontological position is, then, one's answer to the question: what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated? Alternatively, what exists that we might acquire knowledge of? However put, this is a rather significant question and one whose answer may determine, to a considerable extent, the content of the political analysis we are likely to engage in and, indeed, what we regard as an (adequate) political explanation. Thus, for 'ontological atomists', convinced in Hobbesian terms that 'basic human needs, capacities and motivations arise in each individual without regard to any specific feature of social groups or social interactions' (Fay 1996: 31), there can be no appeal in political explanation to social interactions, processes or structures. For 'ontological structuralists', by contrast, it is the appeal to human needs and capacities that is ruled inadmissible in the court of political analysis. Similarly, for those convinced of a separation of appearance and reality

– such that we cannot ‘trust’ our senses to reveal to us that which is real as distinct from that which merely presents itself to us *as if* it were real – political analysis is likely to be a more complex process than for those prepared to accept that reality presents itself to us in a direct and unmediated fashion.

A great variety of ontological questions can be posited. Adapting Uskali Mäki’s thoughtful (and pioneering) reflections on economic ontology (2001: 3) to the political realm, we might suggest that all of the following are ontological questions:

What is the polity made of? What are its constituents and how do they hang together? What kinds of general principles govern its functioning, and its change? Are they causal principles and, if so, what is the nature of political causation? What drives political actors and what mental capacities do they possess? Do individual preferences and social institutions exist, and in what sense? Are (and of) these things historically and culturally invariant universals, or are they relative to context?

Yet the ontological questions with which we will principally be concerned are the following:

- The relationship between structure and agency (the focus of Chapter 2)
- The extent of the causal and/or constitutive role of ideas in the determination of political outcomes (the focus of Chapter 6)
- The extent to which social and political systems exhibit organic (as opposed to atomistic) qualities (in which the product of social interaction is greater than the sum of its component parts)

and, most fundamentally of all;

- The extent (if any) of the separation of appearance and reality – the extent to which the social and political world presents itself to us as really it is such that what is real is observable.

The crucial point to note about each of these issues is that they cannot be resolved empirically. Ultimately, no amount of empirical evidence can refute the (ontological) claims of the ontological atomist or the ontological structuralist; neither can it confirm or reject the assumption that there is no separation of appearance and reality.⁴

Epistemology, again defined literally, is the science or philosophy of knowledge.⁵ In Blaikie’s terms, it refers ‘to the claims or assumptions made about the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of reality’ (1993: 6–7). In short, if the ontologist asks ‘what exists to be known?’, then the epistemologist asks ‘what are the conditions of acquiring

knowledge of that which exists?'. Epistemology concerns itself with such issues as the degree of certainty we might legitimately claim for the conclusions we are tempted to draw from our analyses, the extent to which specific knowledge claims might be generalised beyond the immediate context in which our observations were made and, in general terms, how we might adjudicate and defend a preference between contending political explanations.

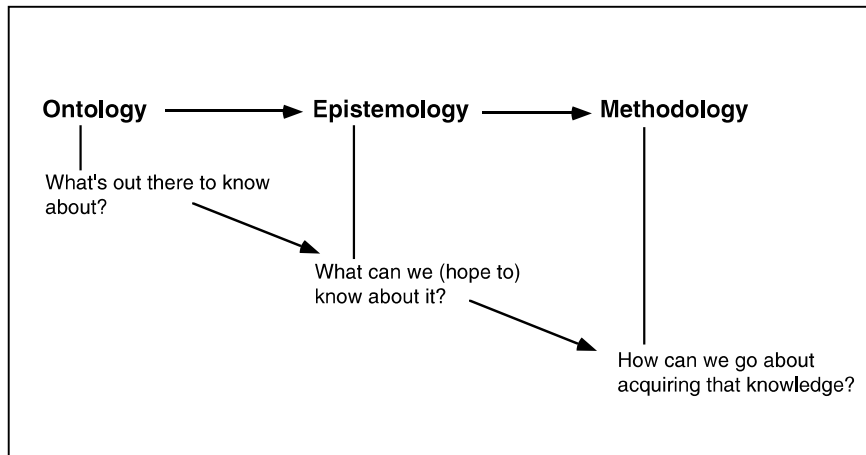
Methodology relates to the choice of analytical strategy and research design which underpins substantive research. As Blaikie again helpfully explains, 'methodology is the analysis of how research should or does proceed' (1993: 7). Thus, although methodology establishes the principles which might guide the choice of method, it should not be confused with the methods and techniques of research themselves. Indeed, methodologists frequently draw the distinction between the two, emphasising the extent of the gulf between what they regard as established methodological principles and perhaps equally well-established methodological practices. For our purposes methodology is best understood as the means by which we reflect upon the methods appropriate to realise fully our potential to acquire knowledge of that which exists.

What this brief discussion hopefully serves to demonstrate is that ontology, epistemology and methodology, though closely related, are irreducible. Moreover, their relationship is directional in the sense that ontology logically precedes epistemology which logically precedes methodology.

To summarise, *ontology relates to the nature of the social and political world, epistemology to what we can know about it and methodology to how we might go about acquiring that knowledge*. The directional dependence of this relationship is summarised schematically in Figure 2.1.

To suggest that ontological considerations are both irreducible and logically prior to those of epistemology is not, however, to suggest that they are unrelated. The degree of confidence that we might have for the claims we make about political phenomena, for instance, is likely to vary significantly depending on our view of the relationship between the ideas we formulate on the one hand and the political referents of those ideas on the other (the focus of Chapter 6). In this way, our ontology may shape our epistemology. If we are happy to conceive of ourselves as disinterested and dispassionate observers of an external (political) reality existing independently of our conceptions of it then we are likely to be rather more confident epistemologically than if we are prepared to concede that: (i) we are, at best, partisan participant observers; (ii) that there is no neutral vantage-point from which the political can be viewed

Figure 2.1 *Ontology, epistemology and methodology: a directional dependence*



objectively; and that (iii) the ideas we fashion of the political context we inhabit influence our behaviour and hence the unfolding dynamic of that political context.⁶ These are issues to which we return.

Second, the significance of ontological and epistemological questions for the practice and, indeed, the status of political science can scarcely be overstated. Chief among the ontological and epistemological concerns of this chapter are the nature of the political and the possibility of a science of the political. As their shorthand designation as the ‘political question’ and the ‘science question’ might imply, a political science without a ready answer to both – and hence without a clear sense of what there is to know and what might be known about it – scarcely warrants the label political science.

Moreover, if we put these two questions together we get the question of political science itself: *what is the nature and purpose of political science?* Posed in such a direct and stark a manner, this may well be a rather uncomfortable question to ask. For such a simple and obvious question surely demands an equally obvious and simple answer. In the absence of an intuitively appealing, instantaneous and collective response from the discipline, we might well be advised not to raise such issues, at least in public. But burying our heads in the sand is not a realistic option either, as we are increasingly called upon to justify our practices publicly. As Gerry Stoker notes, ‘the case for setting out explicitly the core features of political science . . . has become increasingly compelling as the outside world increasingly demands evaluations of both

its teaching and research' (1995: 1; cf. Goodin and Klingemann 1996). Whether that task is as simple as Stoker's disarming remark seems to imply is an interesting question, and one which will concern us presently. Suffice it for now to note that while we may well be able to agree on the questions that divide us, the 'core features of political science' remain as contested as ever. Indeed, arguably, they have become if anything rather more contested as an array of authors have felt the need to respond in recent years to the challenge here summarised by Stoker. In so far as the 'core' of the discipline might be identified, it remains remarkably elusive and hardly lends itself towards the type of unequivocal and unambiguous statement that Stoker's challenge would seem to require. While such a state of affairs persists, the best we can perhaps do is to acknowledge, with the appropriate twinge of embarrassment, that it is far easier to identify (and thereby justify) the purpose of a particular piece of political analysis than it is to make the more general case for political analysis which is not so much a distinct mode of enquiry as a collection of often mutually incompatible analytical strategies. For many, this is a deeply worrying and depressing state of affairs; for just as many others, however, it is a sign of theoretical vibrancy and intellectual pluralism (cf. Rule 1997).

Nonetheless, while generalised answers to such discomfoting questions may be difficult to reach at least in any consensual fashion and while, for many, attempts to establish standards of 'minimal professional competence' within the 'discipline' are part of the problem and not the solution, there is much that can be gained from thinking aloud about such issues. Indeed, if the community of political scientists and political analysts is to establish in its own procedures the type of informed and democratic dialogue that it so frequently espouses for others (Dryzek 1990; Giddens 1994; cf. Cohen and Rogers 1995; Habermas 1993, 1996), it is precisely to such fundamental foundational and procedural questions that it must attend. While we will no doubt continue to be divided by our answers, it is important that we consider what we can and should legitimately expect of political analysts. Can we aspire to 'science' and, if so, what precisely does that aspiration entail? Is there a radical separation between the subject matter of the natural and the social 'sciences' which might qualify the extent to which social and political analysts can make 'scientific' claims? Are there costs of modelling the analysis of the political upon the natural sciences? And, if so, do they more than outweigh the benefits? Are the questions that *can* be answered objectively or scientifically the most interesting and compelling ones? These are the themes of this chapter. They serve as points of departure for the argument to follow.

Specifying and respecifying the political

Quite clearly, and despite the various claims made about the disciplinary nature of political science, there are no definitive nor for that matter even commonly accepted answers to such questions. The nature of political analysis is, like the focus of its attentions, profoundly value-laden, profoundly contested and above all profoundly political. It is, then, not that surprising that with few rare exceptions, political analysts have tended to shy away from the question of the nature of politics or of the political itself (for notable exceptions see, for instance, Arendt 1958; Crick 1962; Duverger 1964/6; Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 7–9; Lasswell 1936/50; Leftwich 1984a; Morgenthau 1948).⁷ Thus, rather than justify, defend or even render explicit the conception of the political appealed to within political analysis, the tendency has been to proceed on the basis of an implicit and unquestioned conception of the legitimate terrain of political inquiry.

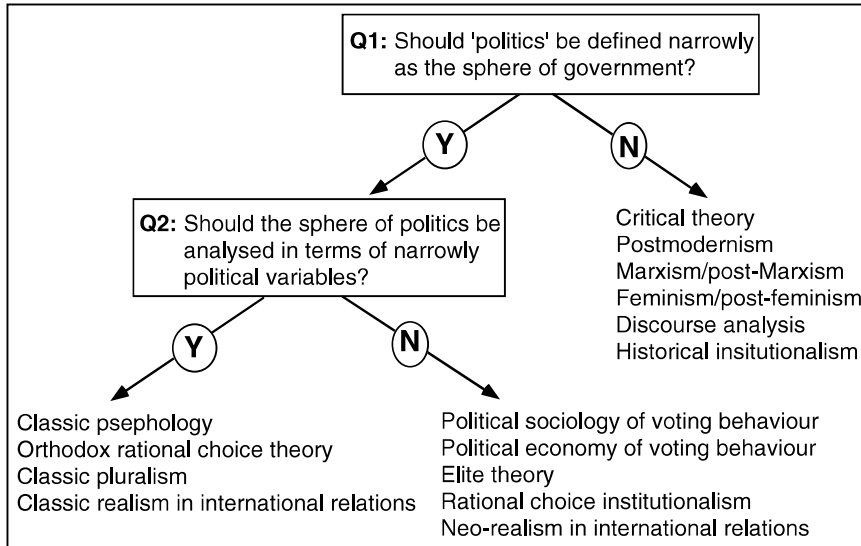
Where the concept of ‘politics’ or, more usefully perhaps, the ‘political’ has been rendered explicit this has remained very much on the margins of the discipline. It has usually taken the form of a challenge to the parochialism and formalism held to characterise a political science ‘mainstream’, in particular by feminist scholars (Benhabib 1996; Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996a; see also Leftwich 1984a). Through a rather protracted and attritional process, such criticism has in recent years begun to scratch the surface of a previously tightly guarded and policed disciplinary core, facilitating the emergence of a more interdisciplinary, even post-disciplinary analysis of the political – an integral part of a more integrated social science.

If the conception of the ‘political’ within political science has still to attract significant attention, the same is certainly not true of ‘science’. It is no exaggeration to suggest that hundreds of books and thousands of articles have been written on the (more or less) scientific status of knowledge claims made within the social ‘sciences’, the imperative to be ‘scientific’ and, indeed, the very nature of ‘science’ itself.⁸

That the ‘political’ has given rise to a paltry smattering of interest while the ‘scientific’ has generated a remarkable profusion of literature, at least among more reflexive political analysts, might suggest that the two questions are in fact rather unrelated. Yet further reflection would suggest otherwise. For, by and large, those with the most narrow, restrictive and formal conceptions of politics are the most attached to the label ‘science’ and most likely to acknowledge no qualitative difference between the subject matters of the natural and social sciences (see Figure 2.2).

This suggests, again, a directional dependence between the epistemo-

Figure 2.2 *Alternative conceptions of the political in political analysis*



logical and the ontological. Yet we need to proceed with some caution here. Directional dependence there certainly is; but that directional dependence is not determinant. Ultimately one's epistemology is not reducible to one's ontology. What this means, in more practical terms, is that we should resist the temptation to jump too swiftly to the conclusion that whether one can conceive of the practice of political analysis as scientific or not is in turn ultimately dependent upon the conception of the political – a narrow conception of the political sustaining a claim to a scientific epistemology that a more inclusive conception might not. Nor, indeed, should we uncritically accept the converse – that a belief in the unity of method between the natural and social sciences (naturalism) necessitates a narrow specification of the political. There are at least two good reasons for this.

First, the consequences of so doing are to create a powerful temptation to sacrifice a more integral and inclusive conception of the political (such as that proposed by feminist critics of the mainstream) on the altar of the scientific imperative. Moreover, as we shall see, there may be good reasons for rejecting both *naturalism* (in Bhaskar's terms 'the thesis that there are or can be an essential unity of method between the natural and social sciences' (1989: 67)) and *positivism* (the view that the methods of the latter should be modelled on the former since the natural sciences provide a privileged, indeed the *only* access to neutrality and objectivity – in short, 'truth'). Accordingly, there is no reason to

suggest that a more restrictive specification of the political will liberate us from the 'limits of naturalism' (Bhaskar 1979).

Whatever the reasons, then, for the characteristic affinity between a restrictive view of the political and a positivistic view of scientific method, they are not based on logical correspondence. More plausible, perhaps, is that they are bound up with a certain professionalisation of 'knowledge' (and the pursuit of knowledge) within the 'discipline' and the academy more generally. Here we might note the vested interest bound up in rigidly policing disciplinary boundaries and the rhetorical authority conjured in the 'scientific' claims that positivism might sustain. When we note, further, that a rigidly specified disciplinary core almost necessarily entails a narrow conception of the discipline's subject matter and that claims to positivism are only likely to be taken seriously if accompanied by the confident proclamation of naturalism, then the relationship between professionalisation and a narrowly political and rigidly scientific conception of the discipline would appear somewhat more than merely contingent. There may be obvious reasons for this. Put simply, if one wishes to preserve and defend a disciplinary core and to see that continuing resources are available for the analysis of its content, it is likely to prove instrumental to specify narrowly one's subject matter and to claim for its analysis scientific status.

In this context, it is surely telling to note that outside of the political science mainstream (or, as some would have it, the political science 'malestream'), the concept of the political is rarely held synonymous with the realm of formal government. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that it is *only* within the political science mainstream (and even here only in certain quarters) that such a narrow specification of the political retains many enthusiasts.

The tarnished authority of science?

In assessing the reasons for the contemporary reappraisal of the content and status of political analysis, one final factor is also relevant. Interestingly, and as a growing number of commentators have noted, 'science' is not quite all that it once was; its rhetorical authority tarnished somewhat in a society characterised, for many, by a proliferation of 'high-consequence risks' with which scientific 'progress' itself appears directly implicated.⁹ Consequently, the softening of naturalist and positivist claims in recent years and the corresponding broadening of the concept of the political may reflect, as some have suggested, a certain re-evaluation of the utility to be gained by constructing political science in the image of its previously more esteemed big brother.¹⁰ As an explanation for the re-evaluation of the scientific content of political analysis

this would certainly appear more plausible than any more profound change of heart on the part of a discipline that has always been characterised, as much as by anything else, by its pragmatism.¹¹ What is clear is that, for the first time in a long time, the question of political science has become admissible again in the court of political analysis.

The nature of politics, the nature of the political

Although they can agree on little else, there is at least some unanimity within the discipline that political analysis is concerned essentially with the analysis of the processes and practices of politics.¹² Yet, as we shall soon see, this covers a multitude of differing perspectives, and a wide diversity of often mutually incompatible approaches to the political. Definitions of the legitimate terrain of political analysis range broadly, from 'politics is what the government does' at one end of the spectrum to 'the personal is the political' at the other. Thus political analysts differ widely over the relevance of extra-political factors (the economic, the social, the cultural) in political analysis. Some, for instance, insist that a political science worthy of the name must resolutely privilege the political (constructing political explanations of political phenomena) while others favour a more avowedly multi-dimensional approach (compare, for instance, Easton 1979; Keohane 1986; Moravcsik 1997, 1998; Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979; with Grofman 1997: 77–8; D. Marsh 1995; Vasquez 1998; Wendt 1999). And this, it should be noted, is to put to one side their equally diverging views on the nature of the political itself.¹³

In turning our attention to the scope and range of the political we can usefully distinguish between a series of closely related (if not quite interchangeable) conceptual dualisms often associated with the delimiting of the political (see also Hay and Marsh 1999a). These are summarised in Table 2.1.

For those who wish to delineate strictly the sphere of political inquiry, the focus of political analysis is generally specified by the first term of

Table 2.1 *Delimiting the Political*

<i>Political</i>	<i>Extra-political</i>
Public	Private
Governmental	Extra-governmental
State	Society

each conceptual pairing. Politics (big 'P') is concerned with the public sphere, the state and the sphere of governmental activity because politics (little 'p') occurs only in such arenas. From such a perspective, the personal is certainly not political – *by definition*. Moreover, with respect to all but the first dualism, the processes by which, say, trade unions select their leadership and formulate strategy are again not political – *by definition*. Such a focus, narrow as it is, has a certain obvious appeal in specifying precisely a subject matter.¹⁴ Nonetheless, such a definition has serious and potentially rather disturbing consequences. To be fair, few authors have sought to defend such a rigidly formalistic understanding of the limits of the political. Nonetheless, analyses which confine themselves in practice to the narrowly political analysis of narrowly political variables abound.¹⁵

To begin with, it is important to note the deeply normative (and, in any lay sense of the term, 'political') content of this boundary question. This suggests an interesting comparison with other arenas in which the boundaries of the 'political' are contested. The call to restrict the realm of the political has become extremely familiar in recent years, occurring with increasing regularity in the rhetoric and practice of public policy reform since the 1980s. This raises an interesting question: is the populist cry to 'take the political out of' . . . sport, the economy, the domestic sphere, and so forth, so very different from the theoretical attempt to delimit tightly the political realm? Suffice it to note that party political attempts to circumscribe the scope of the political have in recent years tended to be associated with the neoliberal and libertarian right. They have been expressed in terms of the desire to restrict, or further restrict, the realm of government from the overbearing influence of a Leviathan, and in so doing to remove from public scrutiny and accountability an area of social regulation. It is no huge leap to suggest that there may be similar consequences of a restrictive *conceptual* definition of the political. For, if we are to conceive of political analysis as one means (albeit, one means among many) of exposing political practice to public scrutiny, then to restrict one's definition of the political to the juridico-political (that most narrowly and formally constitutive of the state) is to disavow the democratic privilege afforded political analysts.

Two points might here be made. First, to restrict the analysis of the political to that conventionally held to lie within the sphere of formal politics (that associated with the state, the Government and the process of government narrowly conceived) at a particular context at a particular moment in time is to exclude a consideration of the mechanisms, processes and, above all, struggles and conflicts by which the 'political' comes to be thus understood. It is, in short, to treat as immutable, given

and *apolitical* our fluid and contested conceptions of the legitimate scope, scale and penetration of government and the state within the private sphere, civil society and the economy. It is to deprive the political analyst of the conceptual armoury to interrogate the processes by which the realm of the political is both specified and respecified. A political analysis that restricts its field of vision to that formally (and legally) codified as such is, in this respect, complicit in the exclusions which such a formal politics sustains. It is perhaps not merely a science *of* the state, but a science *for* the state. This, as we shall see in Chapter 5, is an argument frequently made of pluralist and neo-pluralist perspectives.

Beyond 'malestream' political analysis: the feminist challenge

This suggests a second parallel line of critique, associated in particular with contemporary feminist scholarship. Stated most simply, to insist that the political is synonymous with the public sphere is to exclude from political analysis the private arena within which much of women's oppression, subordination and, indeed, *resistance* occurs. It is, moreover, to dismiss as apolitical (or perhaps even *pre-political*)¹⁶ all struggles, whether self-consciously political or not, on the part of women which do not manage to traverse the public-private divide. For it is only in so doing that they can thereby register themselves as 'political'. More fundamentally still, it is to exclude from consideration the processes by which the historical and contemporary confinement of women to a predominantly 'private' existence centred upon the family and domestic 'duty' have been sustained, reproduced and, increasingly, challenged (Elshtain 1981; Pateman 1989; Young 1987; for a useful review see Ackelsberg and Shanley 1996). It is, in the most profound way, to deny the possibility of a feminist political analysis.

Feminism, in its concern to interrogate the politics of women's subordination in all the contexts in which it occurs, thus constitutes a profound challenge to the traditional and conservative conception of the political that has tended to dominate malestream political science. Similarly, malestream political science constitutes a fundamental rejection of the very space from which a feminist political analysis might be constructed. In this context it is surely telling to note the response of some liberal political theorists to such attempts by feminists to reclaim for critical social inquiry more generally the concept of the political. This has been to misrepresent fundamentally feminists' call for a broadening of the definition of the political, by presenting it as an invitation for the state to encroach still further into the pristine and pre-political arena of privacy that they identify *beyond* 'the political'. In so doing they betray

their own inability to think beyond their own narrow and formal conception of politics. For, to see politics beyond the realm of the public sphere, as feminists do, is not to invite a colonisation of the latter by the state. As Nancy Hirshmann and Christine Di Stefano note, 'feminism offers a radical challenge to the notion of politics itself and has instigated a redefinition of politics to include things that 'mainstream' theory considers completely non-political, such as the body and sexuality, the family and interpersonal relationships' (1996b: 6). This in no way constitutes an invitation to the state to engage in the formal political regulation of the body, sexuality, the family and interpersonal relationships. Such a reading is made all the more ridiculous when the characteristic antipathy of feminist theorists towards a *patriarchal* state, intimately associated with the subordination of women, is considered (for a variety of views on which, see Allen 1990; Brown 1992; M. Daly 1978; MacKinnon 1985; Pateman 1989).

Revising the political: from politics as arena to politics as process

It is one thing to dismiss the parochial, conservative and perhaps malestream definitions of the political that have tended to characterise traditional and contemporary mainstream political science alike; it is quite another to advance an alternative formulation of politics and the political. Yet feminist scholars, at least in recent years, have not shied away from this task of 'revising the political' (Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996a). Nonetheless, in considering alternative and more inclusive conceptions of the political it would be wrong to give the impression that it is only feminists who have seen the need to reject a rigid legal/institutional definition of politics. As Iris Marion Young notes, it is not only women who are relegated to the realm of the private sphere (1990: 100–1). Consequently, it is not only feminists who sought to acknowledge the politics of the private sphere.

As Adrian Leftwich is surely right to note, 'the single most important factor involved in influencing the way people implicitly or explicitly conceive of politics is whether they define it primarily in terms of a *process*, or whether they define it in terms of the place or places where it happens, that is in terms of an *arena* or institutional forum' (1984b: 10, emphasis in the original). It is clear that for those who would restrict the realm of political inquiry to that of the state, the public sphere or government, politics (a term they prefer to the political) is an arena. Politics is the process of governing, an activity or a range of activities made meaningful, significant and worthy of investigation by virtue of the (formal)

context in which it occurs. The same processes displaced, mirrored or reproduced in other institutional environments are not, by definitional fiat, political. As such, they remain the preserve of other disciplines. The feminist's concern with the patriarchal character of the institution of the nuclear family, for instance, whatever the merits of such a focus, simply lies beyond the realm of political inquiry thus conceived and has no place within such a political science.¹⁷ This, by and large, is the approach adopted by the behaviouralist and rationalist core of the discipline.

By contrast, those for whom the political (a term they tend to prefer to politics) is ubiquitous, occurring (or at least having the potential to occur) in all social contexts in all societies at all points in their history, must clearly reject such a narrow definition of politics as an arena. Political inquiry, within such an alternative framework, is concerned with *process*; more specifically, with the (uneven) distribution of power, wealth and resources. As such it may occur in any institutional and social environment, however mundane, however parochial. As Leftwich again notes, politics thus conceived 'is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private'. It may occur, 'in all human groups, institutions and societies' (1984c: 63).

Yet if this captures the spirit of the contemporary challenge to an institutionally rigid specification of the terrain of political inquiry, then it still leaves largely unanswered the question with which we began – *what is politics?* By now it should come as no great surprise that opinions vary as to its defining essence. Some emphasise violence, though not necessarily *physical* force, concentrating for instance on mechanisms of coercion, persuasion and what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms 'symbolic violence' by which the deployment of physical force is deferred.¹⁸ Others emphasise distributional conflict over scarce resources (though one might argue that in the advanced capitalist North the issue is less one of scarce resources *per se* than of distribution so unequal as to render plentiful resources scarce in certain social locations). Still others emphasise the claim to legitimate authority or the conflict arising from the paucity of human judgement (Moodie 1984).

Yet the conception of the political which captures most fully the challenge posed by contemporary feminism and critical theory, and arguably the most inclusive, is that which conceives of politics as power and political inquiry as the identification and interrogation of the distribution, exercise and consequences of power. This position is well expressed by David Held and Adrian Leftwich,

politics is about power; about the forces which influence and reflect its distribution and use; and about the effect of this on resource use

and distribution; it is about the 'transformatory capacity' of social agents, agencies and institutions; it is not about Government or government alone. (1984: 144)

Yet arguably even this merely displaces the problem. For politics is defined in terms of power; and power itself remains unspecified. Suffice it to say that there is no more contested concept in political analysis than that of power. As I shall argue in Chapter 5, political science is divided by a common language – that of power. Clearly, however, only certain conceptions of power are compatible with the spirit of Held and Leftwich's remarks. Indeed they allude to a specific conception of power in their tangential reference to Anthony Giddens' notion of power as 'transformatory capacity' (1981: Ch. 2). Such a conception might be further specified in the following terms.

Power . . . is about context-shaping, about the capacity of actors to redefine the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others. More formally we can define power . . . as the ability of actors (whether individual or collective) to 'have an effect' upon the context which defines the range of possibilities of others. (Hay 1997a: 50)

Yet there is at least one obvious objection to such an integral and universal conception of politics. This is well articulated by Andrew Heywood, 'one danger of expanding "the political" to include all social institutions . . . is that it comes close to defining everything as politics, thus rendering the term itself almost meaningless' (1994: 25–6). Though superficially attractive, this is, I think, to confuse and conflate a conception of *politics as an arena* on the one hand and *politics as a process* on the other. Were one to advance a conception of politics as a locus, site or institutional arena and then suggest that this arena were universal, Heywood's comments would be entirely appropriate. We would merely have emptied the term 'politics' of all content, effectively dispensing with the distinction between the political and the extra-political. Yet to suggest that politics *as process* has the potential to exist in all *social* locations, since all social relations can be characterised as relations of power (making them potential subjects of political inquiry), is neither to insist that we must see politics everywhere, nor that such social relations are exhausted by their description and analysis in political terms. It is to suggest that political analysis avails us of the opportunity to interrogate power relations in any social context without either suggesting that we could or should reduce our analysis to that. Nor is it to suggest that viewing specific social relations in terms of political categories (of power and domination, etc.) will necessarily further our

inquiries. To suggest that all social relations have political dimensions is to open to scrutiny the power relations that pervade social institutions, without in any sense denying the economic and cultural processes with which they are articulated. Though all social relations may also be political relations, this does not imply that they are *only* political relations, nor that they can adequately be understood in such terms. It is useful – indeed, I would suggest essential – to be able to consider relations of domestic violence for instance as political relations. To suggest that they are exhausted by their description in such terms, however, would be to present an analysis that is both grossly distorting and wholly inadequate. The political is perhaps then best seen as an aspect or moment of the social, articulated with other moments (such as the economic or the cultural). Though politics may be everywhere, nothing is exhaustively political.

Science, politics and ethics

If there is much at stake in political scientists' attempts to specify the terrain of legitimate political inquiry, then there is certainly no less at stake in adjudicating the claims that political analysts might make of this subject matter. Yet, as noted above, while the former has prompted comparatively little explicit attention, the 'science question' has provoked almost incessant and intense controversy. Opinions again range widely. In so far as these can be arrayed along a spectrum – and it is to distort somewhat the complexity of the issues at hand to suggest that they can – this ranges from (i) those who would like to construct political science in the image of the 'hard' and value-neutral physical sciences, via (ii) those who deny the neutrality of the latter and wish to 'reclaim' a conception of 'science' liberated from the conceptual shackles of positivism and feigned value-neutrality, to (iii) those happy to leave the fundamentally tarnished concept of science to such natural scientists as would wish to embrace it while openly acknowledging the essentially normative and value-laden nature of social and political analysis and the ethical responsibilities this places upon the analyst. A number of issues are involved here which it is useful to unpack in terms of a series of key questions:

- Q1 What does it mean to claim that a statement or theory is scientific?
What is science?
- Q2 Are scientific claims theory- and/or value-neutral?
- Q3 Can there be an essential unity of method between the natural sciences and social/political inquiry (the basis of *naturalism*)?

- Q4 Should social/political inquiry be modelled on the natural sciences (the basis of *positivism*, of which naturalism is a necessary but not in itself sufficient condition)?
- Q5 Can social/political analysts afford to dispense with the rhetorically significant claim to scientific knowledge?
- Q6 Are there privileged vantage points from which knowledge of the social and political world can be generated?

When cast in such terms, what is revealed is a complex, voluminous and multi-faceted debate (for excellent introductions to which see Benton and Craib 2001; Blaikie 1993; Bohman 1991; Delanty 1997; Fay 1996; Hollis 1994; Kincaid 1996; Kukla 2000; May and Williams 1998; M. Williams 2000). The following remarks may, as a consequence, only serve to scratch the service of that debate. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive survey but to indicate the nature of the issues at stake in such discussions.

Cartesianism and the Enlightenment

Let us begin, as it were, at the beginning with Descartes and the birth of the modern sciences in seventeenth-century Europe. The distinctiveness of Descartes' approach was its rigorous attempt, an attempt that would later come to characterise the Enlightenment more generally, to liberate reason and knowledge from the clutches of traditional clerical authority. From its inception, then, modern science was deeply associated with the secularisation of knowledge. As Martin Hollis notes, 'by removing the imprimatur of Reason from all traditional authorities and [by] giving it to every reflective individual with an open mind, Descartes laid the ground for a secular science, which would be neutral on questions of meaning and value' (1994: 16). That, at least, was his aim. There is no little irony in the fact that contemporary debate in the philosophy of science (whether natural or social) seems to have come full circle, returning to the question of whether there is any qualitative difference between the knowledge claims made in the name of science and those made in the name of religion (Feyerabend 1987; for commentaries see Chalmers 1986; Couvalis 1988, 1989, 1997: 111–39).

If knowledge and reason were to be prised from the clutches of a clerical elite, some basis from which to generate and ground alternatively premised knowledge claims had first to be established. The basis from which to construct such secular knowledge claims was sought in innate human characteristics. As Alan Chalmers explains,

Since it is human beings who produce and appraise knowledge in general and scientific knowledge in particular, to understand the ways

in which knowledge can be appropriately acquired and appraised we must consider the nature of the individual humans who acquire and appraise it. (1990: 12)

He goes on to suggest that, for seventeenth-century philosophers of science, those relevant characteristics were 'the capacity of humans to reason and the capacity of humans to observe the world by way of the senses' (1990: 12).

This was to give rise to two rival traditions of scientific inquiry with *rationalists* emphasising reason and deduction, whilst *empiricists* placed their confidence in the dispassionate observation of an external reality.

Rationalism

Descartes was a rationalist, arguing for an approach premised on the development – through reflection, 'intellectual intuition' and, as he put it, the 'natural light of reason' – of general axioms from which might be derived an understanding of the underlying and unobservable structures which he believed constituted the 'reality' of the natural order. In so doing he appealed to the (ontological) distinction between appearance and reality, arguing that it was only by deploying the innate human capacities of reason and intuition that one could transcend the ephemeral world of surface appearance to reveal the structured reality beneath. This argument clearly mirrors that now frequently made by philosophical realists (for instance, Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1975, 1979, 1989; Delanty 1997: Ch. 6; Harré 1970; Harré and Madden 1975; Sayer 1992). The spirit of Descartes' rationalism is beautifully depicted in Bernard de Fontenelle's allegorical introduction to the new astronomy, *The Plurality of Worlds*, published in 1686. In this remarkable volume, the author sought to explain to an elite yet lay audience the operation of nature as revealed by (Cartesian) science and philosophy:

Upon this I fancy to myself that Nature very much resembleth an Opera, where you stand, you do not see the stage as really it is; but it is plac'd with advantage, and all the Wheels and Movements are hid, to make the Representation the more agreeable. Nor do you trouble yourself how, or by what means the Machines are moved, though certainly an Engineer in the Pit is affected with what doth not touch you; he is pleas'd with the motion, and is demonstrating to himself on what it depends, and how it comes to pass. This Engineer then is like a Philosopher, though the difficulty is greater on the Philosopher's part, the Machines of the Theatre being nothing so curious as those of Nature, which disposeth her Wheels and Springs

so out of sight, that we have been long a-guessing at the movement of the Universe. (1686/1929, cited in Hollis 1994: 27)

There are problems with such a schema, enticing and elegant though it certainly is. For our access to reality (a reality, recall, not accessible from surface experience) comes only through logical deduction from axioms that we can never test and must simply assume as valid. These axioms are in turn the product of inspiration, one might even suggest divine inspiration. Is this so very different from seeking a religious sanction for knowledge claims?¹⁹ The arbitrariness of so doing is clear, and surely flies in the face of Descartes' attempt to generate a secular foundation for objective knowledge.

Empiricism and the principle of induction

If rationalism placed its faith, so to speak, in the mind and the realm of reason, then empiricism came to privilege experience, assuming (conveniently) that there is no appearance–reality dichotomy and that the world presents itself to us in a direct, 'real' and unmediated way through our senses. In this way empiricism's deductive logic can be replaced with an inductive approach, proceeding from particular observations through inductive generalisation to general axioms or covering laws. These tend to take the form of observable correlations rather perhaps than explanations *per se*. This, as should now be clear, is the classical antecedent of modern-day behaviouralism. Behaviouralism is to seventeenth-century empiricism what rational choice theory is to Cartesian rationalism.

Yet such an approach is scarcely less arbitrary than its Cartesian counterpart, relying on two at best questionable and untestable assumptions: (i) that reality does indeed present itself to us in a direct and unmediated way (the very antithesis of the rationalists' starting point, it should be noted); and (ii) that what has been found true in known cases to date will also hold true in other cases where the same conditions pertain (the principle of induction). Accordingly, once the behaviour of a single apple falling from a tree has been observed and analysed so as to reveal the details of its motion and hence the 'laws' governing its descent, we can expect similar objects to behave in a manner consistent with those laws. This, at any rate, is the assumption which makes empiricism possible. Though not strictly untestable, this assumption is unverifiable. For how, other than observing each and every instance for which a covering law is formulated, does one verify the proposition that the covering law is correct?

Moreover, however plausible and intuitive such an assumption might seem in the realm of the physical sciences, it is far more problematic in a world populated by active, conscious and reflexive social subjects. We are back to the 'problem' of agency introduced in Chapter 1. For, once identified as general laws governing social behaviour, social scientific propositions enter public discourse. Once in this public domain they may lead actors to modify their behaviour, effectively changing the rules of the game. Thus, even something as mundane as identifying an inner-city area as a high crime zone may initiate a fresh and complex series of causal processes with important, if initially unpredictable, implications for the subsequent rate of crime in the area. Such effects may be entirely unintended. However, in many cases propositions in the social sciences are formulated with the explicit intention of disrupting the regularities on which they are based.

In this way, social and political analysts may come to play an active role in the reproduction and transformation of the very conduct that forms the focus of their attentions. There is simply no analogy in the natural sciences. Intentionality and reflexivity are complications which the natural sciences do not have to deal with; molecules do not modify their behaviour in the light of the claims scientists may make about it. This is an issue to which we will return in much greater detail in Chapters 6.

A further problem, alluded to in Chapter 1 and again above, might usefully be introduced at this point. It concerns the question of causality. At best, it seems, empiricism can establish observable correlations between events. Yet this is hardly sufficient to establish causation, on which any adequate conception of explanation must surely be founded (de Vaus 1991: 5; May 1997: 104). Ultimately, pure empiricism can establish no basis for adjudicating between relations of cause and effect on the one hand and mere coincidence on the other, save except for:

1. an appeal to other cases in which a similar sequence can be observed (a probabilistic approach), and
2. an appeal to arguments about the specific temporality of that sequence (causal factors must be chronologically prior to those they might explain).

As Martin Hollis notes, within an empiricist epistemology 'a cause is simply an instance of a regularity and a causal law or law of nature simply a regularity made up of instances . . . The cause of an event is thus a regular sequence which we have come to expect to hold' (1994: 48–9).

If accepted, this has important implications. For while an inductive

and empiricist approach might supply us with potentially useful sets of correlations, an inherently interpretative and creative act of translation is still required to produce something recognisable as a causal explanation from such correlations.

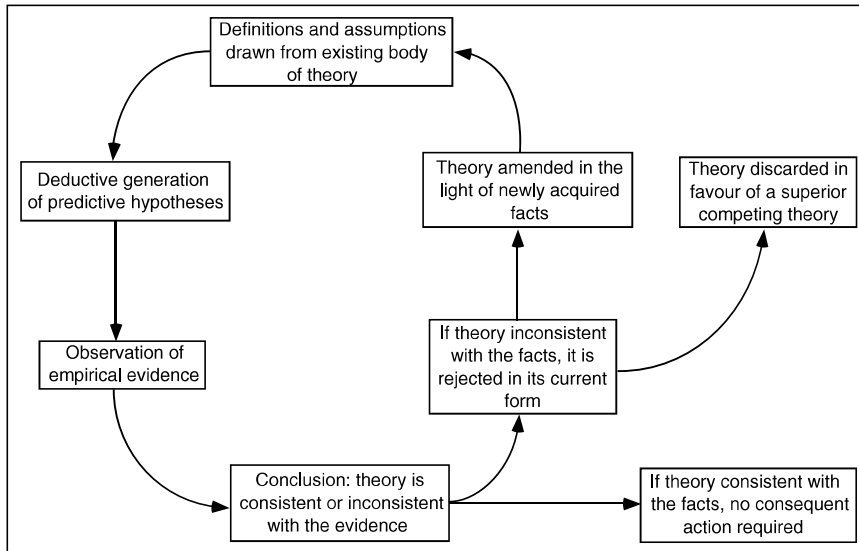
The logic of positivist social inquiry

Despite such more or less fundamental problems, and the existence of a substantial literature charting them in infinitesimal detail, empiricism continues to dominate the natural sciences and certain sections of the social sciences. Within political science its clearest exponents are the behaviouralists who deny the existence of underlying mechanisms and structures not apparent to the immediate participants in social and political conduct, concentrate on the analysis of observable behaviour and insist that all explanation be subject to empirical testing (for an admirable summary, see Sanders 1995; see also Carmines and Huckfeldt 1996; King, Keohane and Verba 1994).

As argued in Chapter 1, however, modern-day behaviouralists tend to soften the rigid empiricism and purist logic of induction this would imply. Contemporary empiricism thus proceeds in the following manner. A confidence in the principle of induction allows general theoretical statements or law-like generalisations to be derived inductively from empirical regularities between observed phenomena. Yet in a departure from classic empiricism, suggesting a certain rapprochement with rationalism, the resulting body of theory may be used to generate, deductively, a series of hypotheses and predictions. These, in clear violation of the strictures of narrow empiricism, are inevitably theory-laden (Easton 1997; Sanders 1995). Such propositions and predictions are subsequently exposed to empirical testing, leading either to (partial) verification of the thesis (and the theory on which it is premised) or rejection and the consequent revision or replacement of the existing theory (this is depicted schematically in Figure 2.3).

This positivist approach to social inquiry has been exposed to a range of rather different critiques. These range from (i) those who would wish to tighten its purchase on the 'reality' it claims to reveal, to (ii) those who seek to demonstrate its fundamental and irredeemable contradictions, to (iii) those pointing to the 'limits of naturalism' who would merely wish to challenge the appropriateness of such a framework for the analysis of social phenomena, to (iv) those who would reject the very scientific label it seeks to systematise. It is to the challenge to positivism, both historical and contemporary, and the implications for the scientific content of political analysis that we now turn.

Figure 2.3 *The logic of positivist social and political analysis*



The retreat from positivism

Popper's positivist revisionism

When it comes to the epistemology of science, the influence of Karl Popper can hardly be overstated. Despite launching what amounts to a profound critique of the practice of traditional positivism, his contribution should certainly be seen as a *revision* rather than a rejection of positivism. As a devout believer in *naturalism* he has come to be championed by advocates of an empirical approach to both the natural and social sciences as the saviour of (an albeit qualified) positivism from its own internal contradictions and its many detractors.²⁰

Popper's target is the principle of induction, conventionally held to distinguish science from pseudo-science and metaphysics. The scientific method, for classic positivists, is characterised by induction – the movement from observation and experiment to scientific law. It is this, its defenders suggest, that differentiates science from pseudo-science, science from speculation; and it is this that Popper rejects. There is, he suggests, no logical way of deducing general (far less universal) theories from particular statements. If there were, as classic positivists attest, then the weight of confirming empirical evidence would indeed provide an indication of the veracity (or truth-content) of a theoretical system. The

consequence, that the theories of Marx, Adler and Freud (for which, he conceded, there was much confirming evidence) should be regarded as scientific, was so unpalatable to him that it led him to seek alternative and rather more discriminating means of differentiating science from pseudo-science. Popper's disdain for Marxism in particular, and the irritation it so obviously caused him that such a theory might be accorded the label 'scientific', is well captured in his comment that 'a Marxist could not open a newspaper without finding on every page confirming evidence for his [*sic*] interpretation of history' (Popper 1969: 35). This observation, and others like it for Freud, Adler and the like, led Popper to the conclusion that 'the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability' (37). Marxism was not scientific since whatever was observed (be it *A*, the absence of *A*, or the opposite of *A*) could be adequately accounted for within the body of the theory after the fact.²¹ In short, Marxism was pseudo-scientific not because it lacked confirming evidence but because it simply could not be refuted.

The basis of the argument is worth examining in just a little more detail. The principle of induction states that the more *As* are found to be like *B*, the better confirmed is the hypothesis that *As* are *Bs*. Thus, if a hypothesis (*H*) implies an observation (*O*), and this anticipated observation is confirmed, then the hypothesis is verified (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1 The principle of induction

- (1) $H \rightarrow O$
- (2) O
- \therefore (3) H

Popper rejects this as an invalid inference. In its place, he proposes a logic of falsifiability (Box 2.2).

Box 2.2 The principle of falsification

- (1) $H \rightarrow O$
- (2) not O
- \therefore (3) not H

The process of empirical testing, Popper argues, should not proceed on the basis of seeking to establish verification for a hypothesis, since no amount of confirming evidence can warrant the claim that the hypothesis is correct. Rather, it should seek to eliminate false hypotheses, since

a falsification is final. A statement can never be verified, but it can be exposed to rigorous and incessant testing. For Popper, then, scientific theory, at best, is composed of a set of provisional truth claims constantly in the process of being refuted. Truth is never absolute though falsification is. The genuine scientist is thus animated by what might at first appear a rather perverse and perplexing drive to falsify any plausible theoretical proposition she generates. For it is only by so doing that she can improve the state of our knowledge of the natural and social environment.

Popper's 'falsificationism' has proved phenomenally influential. It is probably fair to suggest that the majority of social and political scientists who regard themselves as positivists profess some variant of falsificationism (whether strictly Popperian or in its qualified, Lakatosian, guise).²² Nonetheless, there are three obvious objections to the account Popper presents, a significant advance on classic positivism though it undoubtedly is.

The first is largely semantic and can be dealt with fairly swiftly. It constitutes a direct attack on Popper's claimed asymmetry between confirming and falsifying statements – the notion that we can never have enough confirming evidence to verify a thesis, but that one piece of evidence inconsistent with the thesis is terminal. The critics point out that this asymmetry is purely semantic. For, in Roberta Corvi's admirably succinct summary, 'whenever we falsify a statement we automatically verify its negation' (1997: 23). This may sound devastating for falsificationism, but an example quickly reveals that this elegant (if pedantic) criticism is somewhat less devastating than it might at first appear. Consider Popper's own illustration, the statement 'all swans are white'. If we falsify this statement by observing a black creature that we are prepared to concede is a swan, we are indeed verifying the statement's negation, the statement 'not all swans are white'.²³ The point is, however, that this latter statement cannot, in Popper's terms, be falsified, whereas it can be verified – the observation of one black swan will suffice. The asymmetry persists, even if our labelling of the statements which comprise it has to be reversed. The logic of Popper's argument, if not the precise terminology within which it is couched, remains essentially intact.

A second and ultimately far more fundamental criticism concerns the extent to which we can be certain about a statement or proposition's falsification. For Popper, let us recall, the moment of falsification is perhaps the only moment in the scientific process in which there is an unmistakable and decisive moment of clarity and revelation, the moment in which 'truth' speaks to science. Yet, as Martin Hollis explains,

there cannot possibly be such a decisive moment unless we are sure that the same would always occur if the test were repeated. But that depends on an inductive inference from the present occasion to the next . . . Deny the soundness of induction [as Popper does], and we have no reason to eliminate a theory just because its predictions have not been upheld on particular occasions. If Popper has indeed shown that induction is a myth, we cannot rest content with the logic of falsification. (1994: 76)

Popper, it seems, has been hoisted by his own petard. His response, that this may be true but that it does not invalidate the claimed asymmetry between basic and universal statements and the ability of the former – *if* true – to refute the latter, does not seem altogether adequate and concedes much ground (1985: 185). For it is to acknowledge, at pain of self-contradiction, that all claims, whether verifications or falsification, are provisional and probabilistic. It is, in short, to relativise the notion of scientific progress that Popper had sought to defend. For if, as Popper seems to concede, not even falsification may provide adequate grounds for adjudicating knowledge claims and knowledge claims are regularly adjudicated within both the natural and social sciences then science may well be a far more arbitrary, or at least norm-driven, mode of conduct than most positivists would be happy to acknowledge. For some then, far from rescuing positivism, Popper may well have buried it.²⁴

A final objection, which merely shuffles further soil over the coffin of Popperian falsificationism and empiricism alike, concerns Popper's assumption that theories can be tested in the singular on which, arguably, the edifice of positivism hangs. The philosopher Quine in a remarkable essay, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', convincingly demonstrates that it is impossible to test single hypotheses in isolation from others (1953). As Harold Kincaid neatly puts it, 'hypotheses do not confront experience or evidence one by one' (1996: 20). Consider an example. When we observe evidence from an electron microscope inconsistent, say, with a widely accepted theory of the molecular composition of a given material, do we revise our theory of the way in which the electron microscope operates, our theory of the way in which the image in front of us is produced, or the theory of the molecular composition of the substance itself? Should we question the purity of the sample, the dedication of the technician who prepared it, or the physics and chemistry of the processes used in that preparation – or, indeed, should we put in a requisition for a new electron microscope? The truism that no scientific proposition can ever be tested in isolation from others presents considerable difficulties for the scientist diligently following Popper's

prescriptions since she can never hope to identify and isolate precisely the guilty false theoretical proposition that her observations refute. Still further space is opened for the role of scientific norm and convention in dictating the course of scientific development, forcing a concession many would see as bringing Popper perilously close to abandoning any claim for science's privileged access to reality, truth and knowledge.

The limits of naturalism

Thus far our discussion has tended to assume that there is no sharp distinction to be drawn between the natural and social sciences and that common methodological standards can and should be brought to bear in each domain of scientific inquiry. This is the basic premise of naturalism, a position often associated with positivism, though by no means reducible to it. It does not, however, take much thought to reveal that the subject matter of the social and political sciences is in certain crucial respects qualitatively different from that of the natural sciences, for reasons already touched upon. In making this claim I follow Roy Bhaskar in arguing that 'it is the nature of the object that determines the form of its science . . . to investigate the limits of naturalism is *ipso facto* to investigate the conditions which make social science, whether or not it is actualised in practice, possible' (1989: 67–8).

Bhaskar, though ultimately a defender of a highly qualified and distinctly non-positivist naturalism, is nonetheless acutely aware that 'ontological, epistemological and relational considerations reveal differences that place limits on the possibility of naturalism, or rather qualify the form it must take in the social sciences' (1989: 67). In particular, he identifies three clear qualitative differences between the subject matter of the social and natural sciences which places limits on the possibility of methodological affinities between their respective 'sciences':

1. social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern
2. social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activity
3. social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring (so that the tendencies they ground may not be universal in the sense of space–time-invariant) (Bhaskar 1989: 79).

Though Bhaskar suggests that even given these fundamental differences in subject matter, a qualified naturalism is still possible (and, as such, desirable), it is clear that such a naturalism simply cannot be grounded in positivism (however modified its inductivist logic).

The limitations of positivism within the social sciences are revealed if we consider the evolution and transformation of a complex social system such as the global political economy. For it is in such systems, characterised as they are by incessant change that the (simplifying) assumptions used by positivists to generate scientific models, propositions and testable hypotheses about the social and political environment are rendered most problematic. The most basic assumption of the natural sciences – arguably the assumption that makes most if not all natural science possible (and a very good assumption at that) – is that the rules of the game do not change with time. The laws of physics, for instance, can be assumed to pertain in all situations – past, present or future. Each time an apple falls, its motion can be accounted for adequately (given a few starting conditions) by the application of Newtonian physics. Moreover, that just such an apple fell in just such a way to land on Newton's head can be assumed not to have changed the 'natural' and trans-historical laws of physics; but only our understanding of them.²⁵ Consequently, natural scientists never have to deal with the effects of their understandings on the very rules of the game that form the subject matter of those understandings.

Sadly for those who study them (and thankfully for those who participate in them), neither assumption is valid for social and political systems. In so far as they can be identified, the rules of social and political life are themselves subject to constant reproduction, renewal and transformation. They are, one might suggest, culturally, spatially and historically specific. This is simply not the case for the laws of gravity,²⁶ or even, say, for Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle which can both be assumed universal. Furthermore, in what Anthony Giddens rather cryptically refers to as the 'double hermeneutic' (1984: 374), the ideas that we all hold about the social and political world – whether as theorists, commentators or merely as social subjects – *are part of that world* and may profoundly shape it.²⁷ Thus, whereas 'theories in the natural sciences which have been replaced by others which do the job better are of no interest to the current practice of science . . . this cannot be the case [as in the social sciences] where those theories have helped to constitute what they interpret or explicate' (1984: xxxv).

The nature of the 'economic' and the 'political' is different after Keynes and Marx in a way that the 'physical' and the 'natural' is not after Newton or Einstein.²⁸

Conclusion: the limits of political science and the ethics of political analysis

The above remarks raise two crucial issues which many would see as compromising fundamentally the basis for a *science* of the social or

political altogether – if, by science, we mean the ability to generate neutral, dispassionate and objective knowledge claims.

The first concerns the unavoidable location of the social or political analyst within the social and political environment that forms the subject of his or her analytical attentions. This, it is suggested, compromises the notion of the disinterested, dispassionate and above all *external* gaze of the analyst so central to the claim that science provides a privileged vantage-point and a direct access to knowledge of an external reality. The analyst, commentator, theorist, lay participant and scientist alike are all socially and politically embedded within a complex and densely structured institutional and cultural landscape which they cannot simply escape by climbing the ivory tower of academe to look down with scientific dispassion and disinterest on all they survey. On what basis then can the scientist claim a more privileged access to knowledge? On what basis should we adjudicate between the variety of mutually incompatible accounts generated by a variety of differentially located social participants (some of them claiming scientific licence for their propositions, others none)? Moreover, if the analyst can indeed legitimately claim no privileged access to reality, truth and knowledge, what implications does this have for the claims that the analyst does make about the social and political environment?

If an acknowledgement of the social embeddedness of the social or political analyst raises certain epistemological issues about the claims to knowledge that such a subject might make, then this should not allow us to overlook the ethical dilemmas that this recognition also throws up. Social and political commentators sensitive to the epistemological issues discussed above may choose not to claim a privileged vantage-point from which to adjudicate knowledge claims, but they do nonetheless inhabit a peculiarly privileged position in the potential shaping of (ideas about) the social and political context in which they write. For, as in the case of Keynes or Marx discussed above, social and political analysts (whether they claim a scientific pedigree for their ideas or not) may come to redefine perceptions of the politically desirable, the politically possible and the politically necessary, thereby altering – in some cases quite profoundly – the realm of the possible, the feasible and the desirable.

This brings us eventually to the crucial question of ethics and above all the ethical responsibilities of social and political analysts, a consideration of which the discourse of science tends to displace. There are perhaps three distinct ways of dealing with the closely related ethical and epistemological concerns dealt with in the preceding paragraphs. The first and perhaps the easiest is simply to ignore them as, arguably, positivists have done for decades, hiding behind the comforting rhetoric of science, objectivity, neutrality and truth. Quite simply, if one refuses to acknowledge the normative content of social and political analysis

then the question of ethical responsibility does not arise, save except for the ethical imperative to seek out and reveal 'the truth'. A second, and perhaps increasingly widespread response (associated in particular with relativism, post-structuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction) has been to acknowledge and indeed openly embrace the value- and theory-laden nature of all social and political inquiry. Such authors take extremely seriously the ethical responsibilities that this brings (particularly for those 'others' repeatedly marginalised, silenced and subjugated by the privileged voice of science). Their response is to deny both the possibility of generating social scientific knowledge and of grounding a critical theory capable of thinking that things might be different and of seeking to influence conceptions of the possible, the feasible and the desirable.

There is, however, a possible third way which avoids both the parochialism and self-assuredness of positivism's blindness to ethical considerations and the nihilism and fatalism frequently engendered by relativism (see Chapter 7). This is to insist that, like its subject matter, the analysis of social and political processes is itself inherently, irredeemably and essentially political. Thus, as soon as we move from the realm of mere description to that of explanation we move from the realm of science to that of interpretation. In this realm there are no privileged vantage-points, merely the conflict between alternative and competing narratives premised on different ontological, ethical and normative assumptions. To take seriously the ethical responsibility that comes with an acknowledgement that epistemology cannot adjudicate political claims is then to insist on three things: (i) that political analysis remains essentially political and refuses to abandon its ability to think of a world different from our own simply because such claims cannot be adjudicated with ultimate certainty; (ii) that it seeks to acknowledge its necessarily normative content; and (iii) that it strives to render as explicit as possible the normative and ethical assumptions on which it is premised. It is perhaps only in the context of discussions within political analysis that to insist on this would be to insist on very much at all. Such an insistence, however, maps out the terrain of the critical political analysis I seek to defend in this volume.