Understanding in political science: The plurality of epistemic interests.

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Abstract

Nowadays, theoretical perspectives like Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Marxism, Feminism and Rational Choice Theory compete in International Relations faculties to provide us with the best possible understanding of international affairs, or to provide any scientific understanding at all of what goes on in this world. In this paper, I start with the question of whether unifying these different theories will increase understanding – understanding being traditionally linked to unification in the philosophy of science literature. Studying scientific practice and the reactions of scholars to unificationist attempts, we get an insight into what scientific understanding means for the International Relations scholars and for political scientists in general. What understanding consists of for them – which conditions it should live up to – is made explicit by linking it to the different epistemic interests scholars have and showing how these interests facilitate (or obstruct) understanding. Scientific understanding is not connected with unification, but with the plurality of epistemic interests and theoretical pluralism. Hence, a pluralistic view of understanding is defended.

1. Introduction.

Upon a first encounter with the field of International Relations (IR) studies, we stumble into a plurality of theoretical perspectives some of which, such as Realism and Liberalism, have already been around for decades, while others, such as Constructivism, are more recent. A recent survey among IR scholars working in the USA gives us a rough idea of the weight attached to these different perspectives. Answering the question w*hat paradigm in International Relations are you primarily committed to in your research?,* 25% chose Realism/neorealism, 33% Liberalism/neoliberalism, 15% Constructivism, 7% Marxism/globalism, and 20% 'Other' among which the most significant were Rational Choice Theory and Feminism.[2]

An analysis of the distribution of scholars among these six most important theoretical perspectives in IR makes it is clear that the field is neither converging towards a broad consensus nor completely scattered. In what follows, I analyse the dynamics of the field, and in particular two debates that concern the plurality of theories and the search for unity. The first debate regards the possibility and desirability of *substituting* the existing theoretical perspectives with one perspective, i.e., Rational Choice Theory. The second debate explores the possibility of a *synthesis* of (some of) these different perspectives. Through this analysis, I show what the participants' idea of (increased) understanding might be – that is, where the dynamics of the field should lead us – and, subsequently, I try to make this idea of understanding philosophically explicit. Finally, this philosophical

elaboration is illustrated through a discussion of the relation between Feminism and Rational Choice Theory within the practice of social science.

2. Unification and Understanding.

In a traditional view, scientific understanding is linked to unification, or reducing the number of theories, cf. Philip Kitcher 1989. From this point of view, the question of whether the unification of the different theoretical perspectives in IR would increase understanding has to be answered positively: "Science advances our understanding of nature by showing us how to derive descriptions of many phenomena, using the same patterns of derivation again and again, and, in demonstrating this, it teaches us how to reduce the number of types of facts we have to accept as ultimate (or brute)." (Kitcher 1989, 432) In contrast, I intend to show that an analysis of social scientific practice and the reactions of scholars to unificationist attempts indicate the need for a more nuanced answer to this question and that this analysis can provide us with a deeper insight into scientific understanding in social science which is different from the traditional view.

In the social sciences, there have been several projects attempting to unify the field. One of the projects I discuss here – and the one that is considered the most successful nowadays – is the incorporation of the social sciences within the framework of Rational Choice Theory and game theory. In order to test whether Kitcher's (1989) view holds, then, we have to ask: Do we achieve increased understanding through such an incorporation within a single

overarching framework? The second project I discuss concerns the quest to reduce the plurality of perspectives through a synthesis. Does such a unifying synthesis increase understanding? Let us start with the promises of Rational Choice Theory.

3. Unification in Practice I: The Promises of Rational Choice Theory.

In the social sciences, one of the most successful unificationist projects is the so-called *economics takeover* or *economics imperialism*.[3] After a short introduction to this project, I focus on the crucial question of whether this advocacy of Rational Choice Theory increases understanding in political science.

The central idea of the economics takeover is that economists (and other social scientists) improve knowledge in the social sciences by applying the dominant or orthodox theory and method in economics far beyond its original home. The aim is to increase our understanding of the social world, of social action, by advocating a unifying theory for the individual in the social sciences, one that is closely linked to economics and the idea of the homo economicus. “Economics imperialism is a matter of persistent pursuit to increase the degree of unification provided by rational choice theory by way of applying it to new types of explanandum phenomena that are located in territories that are occupied by disciplines other than economics.” (Mäki 2002, 240) As such, it seems to be the best candidate in the social sciences with which to test Kitcher’s (1989) view.

Characteristic features of the economics takeover are the development of formal models for the social sciences, whatever the subject matter; the inclusion of the notion of maximising agents, in line with Rational Choice Theory (RCT); a general downgrading of the significance of history, culture, and dynamics (in space and time). Current advocates of the unificationist project include, e.g.: Herbert Gintis (cf., his 2004 work, in which he argues that –finally- the conditions for unity in the behavioural sciences have been created, referring to the theoretical tools of rational actor model and game theory); Robert Bates, Rui de Figueiredo, and Barry Weingast, who "explore the possibilities for theoretical integration by suggesting how some of the fundamental concepts used by interpretivists can be incorporated into rational choice theory." (Bates et al. 1998: 606); Margaret Levi, Elinor Ostrom, and James Alt, who "expect the next century to witness a major flowering of scientific achievement across the social sciences similar to the neo-Darwinian synthesis of this past century in biology." (Levi et al.1999, 337)

Advocates of the economics takeover and the application of RCT in political science might claim that they provide explanatory mechanisms that are transparent and coherent, and that their explanatory theory is eminently plausible, and so should be confidently accepted, as a means of engendering understanding. However, it is questionable whether this unified explanatory theory, and the class of understanding it purports to convey are generally accepted as providing (increased) understanding. Even if this unification induces a kind of understanding (given some *epistemic interests*[4]), certain critiques formulated within

political science point out that it does not provide the kind of understanding desired by some groups and communities in society.

Let us look at some of these critiques resisting unification. Some critics start by noting that the economics takeover (i.e., increasing the degree of unification by applying Rational Choice Theory in territories outside economics, encapsulating political science, sociology, anthropology, history, etc) has indeed, especially in political science, led to a growing percentage of journal articles using the RCT-perspective. This has been documented for political science in general by Donald Green and Ian Shapiro (1994) and for International Relations studies by Stephen Walt (1999). These critics then go on to argue that much of this growing body of formal RCT-literature is irrelevant. According to them, it does not answer important societal questions and 'real-world problems'. Concerning the discipline of International Relations studies, Stephen Walt (1999, 46) has drawn the following conclusion: "In this sense, much of the recent formal work in security studies reflects the "cult of irrelevance" that pervades much of contemporary social science. Instead of using their expertise to address important real-world problems, academics often focus on narrow and trivial problems that may impress their colleagues but are of little practical value. If formal theory were to dominate security studies as it has other areas of political science, much of the scholarship in the field would likely be produced by people with impressive technical skills but little or no substantive knowledge of history, politics, or strategy." It is as a result of this tendency that the relevance of academic political science for (parts of) the public is decreasing.[5]

The unificationist project of the economics takeover has been labelled *theory*- and *method-driven*, as opposed to *problem*- or *question-driven*. This method-driven research leads, according to Ian Shapiro, to the "self-serving construction of problems, misuse of data in various ways, and related pathologies summed up in the old adage that if the only tool you have is a hammer everything around you starts to look like a nail." (2002, 598) For example, "making a fetish of prediction can undermine problem-driven research via wag-the-dog scenarios in which we elect to study phenomena because they seem to admit the possibility of prediction rather than because we have independent reasons for thinking it worthwhile to study them." (2002, 609) This is the economics takeover perceived as eager to advance the dominant economic theory and method by the self-serving construction of political problems and by substituting existing theories and/or methods in political science with its own, but not really interested in finding answers to unaddressed political questions.[6]

Reactions such as these show that some people do not get satisfactory answers when they apply RCT in a (new) context related to their political questions and epistemic interests. Similar reactions have arisen recently within the economics discipline itself, criticising the dominance of neoclassical or mainstream economics (related to RCT). Some students and researchers are left with questions. A notable example is the recent petition signed by French students (which appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, 21 June 2000). One quote from this is indicative: "Most of us have chosen to study economics so as *to acquire*

a deep understanding of the economic phenomena with which the citizens of today are confronted. But the teaching that is offered, that is to say for the most part neoclassical theory or approaches derived from it, does not generally answer this expectation. Indeed, even when the theory legitimately detaches itself from contingencies in the first instance, it rarely carries out the necessary return to the facts. (…) Furthermore, this gap in the teaching, this disregard for concrete realities, poses an enormous problem for those who would like to render themselves *useful* to economic and social actors." (This English version of the French petition can be found on www.paecon.net, consulted February 2007, *my italics*)[7]

In this discipline too, then, a number of questions are unsatisfactorily addressed by the unifying theory. Instead the French students want: "a pluralism of approaches, adapted to the complexity of the objects and to the uncertainty surrounding most of the big questions in economics (unemployment, inequalities, the place of financial markets, the advantages and disadvantages of free-trade, globalization, economic development, etc.)." (*Le Monde*, 20 June 2000, English version on www.paecon.net, consulted February 2007)

Taking into account the above complaints and critiques from scientific practitioners and students of the economics takeover, one tends to conclude that the unificationist project has not necessarily increased understanding. Several phenomena and real-world problems are being neglected by it (due, critics claim, to unificationist attempts to apply theory- or method-driven approaches to address them). And yet it seems crucial for understanding

that the problems or questions which people (not as a unity but rather as a plurality) face and want to answer and understand are taken into account. I will develop this viewpoint in Section 5.

4. Unification in Practice II: The Idea of a Synthesis.

One important unificationist attempt is, as discussed above, to substitute or replace the main theoretical perspectives in the International Relations discipline, i.e., Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Marxism, Feminism and Rational Choice Theory, with the last of these. A more general unificationist way of dealing with the variety of theoretical perspectives is to plea for a synthesis (rather than a substitution).

In his contribution to a forum discussing the question *Are Dialogue and Synthesis Possible in International Relations?* Andrew Moravcsik (2003) presents such a plea. This is a view that is very common among social scientists, that scientific progress is made when a set of competing theories is replaced with one synthesising theory: "Theory synthesis is not only possible and desirable but it is constitutive of any coherent understanding of international relations as a progressive and empirical social science." (Moravcsik 2003, 131) There is "the need to combine theories to explain complex real-world events". (Idem, 135).

According to Moravcsik, "We should think more about the ways in which theoretical syntheses might help us to understand concrete events in world politics."[8] (Idem, 136) In

the light of what follows, it is interesting to note that Moravcsik uses an unqualified (*unitary*, one might say) *us* when talking about understanding. As such, his plea not only endorses the synthesis, but also rejects the pluralism advocated by other contributions to the same forum.

In contrast, some defend pluralism because they are sceptical about the possibility of a synthesis. One such is Friedrich Kratochwil (2003, 124): "The thrust of the questions is that dialogue and synthesis are all of one cloth, that everything can be debated out, and that some integral new whole is likely to emerge to command our assent if we all do our homework. But considering how seldom debates establish such consensus, it might be useful to take this experiential datum as a starting point and to inquire into the reasons why communication across, and often even within, different theoretical perspectives is so difficult."

Others endorse pluralism as a positive value, arguing that a synthesis theory as defended by Moravcsik, though it may be 'disguised' as a complete view, is actually only a partial view. An example of this viewpoint is Steve Smith: "Dialogue is not going to be easy, or even possible, in international relations until the discipline becomes less dominated by a narrow orthodoxy reflecting historically and culturally *specific interests*. Such a change will take time but until it is achieved the discipline will continue to reflect one limited, partial view about the structures and processes of the one world of international politics." (Smith 2003, 143, *my italics*) In this view, the surplus value of plurality and dialogue

should be emphasised and any acceptance of a synthesis theory as the unifying theory (making all others obsolete) should be considered a deterioration of the discipline: “In contrast [with synthesis], dialogue certainly implies a willingness to concede that a particular theory might only be of limited or partial relevance and that other viewpoints are worthy of consideration.” (Smith 2003, 141)

The convenor of the forum on dialogue and synthesis in the International Relations discipline, Gunther Hellmann, draws the following conclusion: “eventually the argument boils down to the question of how useful we find looking at the world from the perspective we choose.” (Hellmann 2003, 148) Hellmann’s emphasis on *usefulness* leads me to the explication of understanding.

5. The Role of Epistemic Interests and Adequacy in Understanding.

In order to explicate understanding and to grasp the role of *usefulness* in it let me first refer to my earlier work on explanations in social science. There I emphasized the importance of taking epistemic interests into account when making a choice among different forms of explanation (and the plurality of theories from which these explanations derive) and regarded explanations as answers to explanation-seeking why-questions, the formulation of which helps to make the explananda as explicit as possible and to draw attention to the underlying the epistemic interests of the *explainee*. From this viewpoint, a good explanation should not be understood as merely the *accurate* (in relation to reality)

explanation of a social phenomenon, but also as an *adequate* (in relation to the epistemic interests of the explainee) answer of an explanation-seeking question concerning a social phenomenon.[9] Usefulness depends on adequacy as well as accuracy.

Analogous considerations have to be made when talking about understanding. If we want to get a grip on what achieving understanding requires in social science attention should be paid to the (variety of) interests of the *understandees*.[10] Understanding does not depend merely on the *accuracy* of the explanations provided by a theory but also on its *adequacy* in relation to the interests of the understandee.

In the objectivist view of understanding of Trout (2002) this distinction between accuracy and adequacy is missing. For Trout the accuracy suffices to provide understanding. Henk de Regt (2004) rightly criticizes Trout's view and pleads for the inclusion of pragmatic elements: "Understanding is not only knowing the formula, but in addition *being able to use* the formula in the case at hand." (de Regt, 2004: 101, *his italics*) Accuracy is not the only criterion: "Scientists prefer a more intelligible theory over a less intelligible one, sometimes even at the cost of some accuracy, not because it gives them a 'feels right' sense of understanding but rather because they have to be able to use the theory." (de Regt 2004, 105)

Following this approach, scientific theories provide understanding of the social world if they offer the understandees an adequate answer to their problems, i.e., one that that gives

an idea of what to do, how to act, to solve a problem. To do this, they must fit with the interests of the understandees and have a certain familiarity within their life-worlds and personal experiences. This familiarity ensures that the adequate theory is accessible to the understandee, and usable given the questions to be answered or the problems to be solved. It enables individuals and social groups to intervene in the social world using the theory in order to reach their goals (empowerment, emancipation, social benefits, etc.). The theories that help people to understand social phenomena will thus provide more than merely theoretical knowledge.[11]

The overview of debates in Section 3 and 4 provided us with several examples of how accurate theories might be irrelevant for some groups, and how attention should be paid to adequacy when talking about understanding. As was seen, Rational Choice Theory just does not raise some questions about social phenomena or at least not in a way that coincides with the interests of the knower or understandee. For instance, neoclassical, *mainstream* economics does not provide the French students with the understanding they are looking for concerning questions of unemployment, inequalities, the place of financial markets, the advantages and disadvantages of free-trade, and so on. Their interests (constitutive of their questions) have not been addressed adequately. Here the pragmatic elements matter: we should not only ask whether a theory is accurate (warranted by sufficient evidence, etc.) but also whether it is cast in a form that is adequate for the understandee (that is, cognitively accessible to the situated knower who wants to use the theory) and whether it is useful to and in line with her interests so that it will help her to

solve her problems. A theory can be accurate (in relation to reality), yet fail these pragmatic tests.

The debate concerning the idea of a synthesising theory in IR illustrates the importance of epistemic interests too. The advocate of synthesis, Andrew Moravcsik, either supposes that the accuracy of a synthesising theory suffices (with adequacy not being taken into account), or neglects the possibility of there being epistemic interests different from his own (cf. the unitary *us* when he talks about understanding, supra), or presupposes that the synthesising theory will always provide the most adequate answer (notwithstanding the variety of possible epistemic interests). Steve Smith is more sensitive to the differences qua interests, as we have seen above.

When Moravcsik suggests that the "theoretical syntheses might help *us* to understand concrete events in world politics" (2003, 136, *my italics*), one should raise the question of what *us* or *our* understanding means; whose understanding? Which epistemic interests are being addressed? In social science, this kind of question is often neglected, especially by the so-called orthodoxy (where Smith refers to, cf. supra), by the dominant perspective. (As a parenthesis, I would suggest that neglecting the *variety* of interests to be addressed opens up the way for unification and synthesis.) Smith emphasizes that this orthodox perspective on the social world, though not necessarily false, is only *partial*, addressing dominant interests. Non-dominant or disadvantaged groups might be interested in *different* aspects of social reality, looking for knowledge that is useful for understanding and

overcoming their systematic disadvantages, framing questions, devising theoretical classifications, and so forth, with this aim in mind.

Elizabeth Anderson (2003), discussing feminist epistemology and philosophy of science, summarizes the characteristics of these non-orthodox theories in social science very aptly: "Critical theories aim to empower the oppressed to improve their situation. They therefore incorporate pragmatic constraints on theories of the social world. To serve their critical aim, social theories must (a) represent the social world in relation to the interests of the oppressed, i.e., those who are the subjects of study; (b) supply an account of that world which is accessible to the subjects of study, *which enables them to understand their problems*, and (c) supply an account of the world which is usable by the subjects to study to improve their condition." (Anderson 2003, 11, *my italics*) To achieve increased understanding (addressing the plurality of possible interests), then, developing a plurality of theoretical perspectives seems to be a better option than unification. The unificationist attempts seem to lead to the neglect of some interests, obstructing a *deep understanding* (cf. the French students' petition, supra); similarly, the elaboration of one synthesising theory only provides a *partial understanding* (cf. Steve Smith, supra).

6. Understanding in Practice: Feminism and Rational Choice Theory.

To illustrate that the plurality of epistemic interests is better served by a plurality of theoretical perspectives than by a unified one, I discuss here the different standpoints

feminists have adopted in the discussion concerning the benefits of Rational Choice Theory and the possibilities of a synthesis between RCT and Feminism. This also gives me the opportunity to put some critiques of orthodoxy into perspective.

Browsing through the different evaluations feminists have made of RCT, we can distinguish at least three positions. The first one rejects RCT, disagreeing with its ontological commitments, and articulates a different image of the actor as the basis for feminist theory. A second position accepts RCT as the dominant theory and wants to enrich it with feminist research interests. The third position develops a balanced view by specifying the cases in which RCT is adequate, and those in which it is definitely not. Let us now elaborate these positions.

Rejecting Rational Choice Theory.

There are those feminist voices that reject the notion of *homo economicus*, rational man, outright, because of its ontological commitments (accepting these would preclude them from considering the theory as useful for providing any understanding). The decontextualised individualism and the privileging of reason over other capacities trouble many feminists (e.g., Nedelsky 1989; Meyers 1989). According to them, the *homo economicus* as an autonomous, self-transparent, opportunistic, calculating, self-reliant, self-confident, (continuously) healthy actor, ignores the significance of unchosen circumstances and interpersonal relationships, eclipses family, friendship, passionate love,

and community, and dismisses dependency as a defective form of selfhood, while care-giving responsibilities vanish along with children, the disabled, and the frail elderly. On the basis of this kind of critique RCT is rejected entirely. These feminist social scientists want, on the contrary, to emphasize the connectedness and embeddedness of the self.[12]

A lot of these feminist critiques of RCT reflect the scepticism of modernist, unitary accounts of the self, and, as such, many feminists are joining the poststructuralists in declaring the death of the autonomous, self-reflective individual. This might, however, be detrimental to feminist aims; giving up the idea of a core self and coherent identity, and the capacity to describe and reflect on one's experience might undermine feminist emancipatory objectives for which a view of selfhood and reason seems indispensable. I get back to this issue below.

Enriching Rational Choice Theory.

There are those feminists who do not reject RCT or neoclassical theory in economics, but want instead to see its research agenda adjusted or enlarged to include, for example, the gender division of labour (paid versus unpaid work, unequal pay for equal work, etc.), the consequences of policy for women, and modelling the household production and distribution using bargaining theory. In this way, they hope to add to RCT typically feminist research interests which have not been addressed before because the dominant social group has not been interested.

This viewpoint, then, does not – as the first group of feminists does – radically reject RCT and neoclassical theory. The idea is rather to accommodate feminist research priorities within neoclassical economics and RCT, and, as such, to extend them with new insights without undermining them. Indeed, according to this position, bringing in the feminist interests, we would achieve increased understanding and further the unificationist attempt of RCT.

Unification and Strategic Pluralism.

Before discussing the third position feminists have adopted in relation to RCT, which will substantiate my pluralistic view of understanding, I want to compare the first two positions and point to some links with the debates on synthesis and economics imperialism. In both debates there exists an orthodoxy/heterodoxy dichotomy; critics point to the orthodoxy's attempt to impose its views via a synthesis or economics imperialism on minority or heterodox theories in the field, while the orthodoxy sees no surplus value in the heterodox theories because its theory could explain the same phenomena in a better and more unified way. A similar dichotomy can be found between the two first positions in the discussion concerning Rational Choice Theory and feminism. The second position - *enriching Rational Choice Theory* – neither questions the orthodoxy, nor criticizes its unificationist agenda while the first position radically rejects the unificationist attempt to impose

Rational Choice Theory and replaces the ontological view on the actor with its own alternative.

In my earlier work, I have shown that these two positions – orthodox, unificationist theory and the radically heterodox theory – share a *winner-takes-all-approach* to social science and that they are monistic contenders for unification (Van Bouwel 2004). This approach often leads to facile conclusions, for instance, that showing that a theory does not work in some situations means a falsification of the usefulness in other situations, and showing it works in some situations is a guarantee it will work in other/all situations. Both leave out the pragmatic aspects of explanation and understanding and neglect to take the plurality of epistemic interests into account.

The heterodox position, in its criticism of the unificationist attempts of orthodoxy, often claims to be pluralist. Whether they are really pluralist or whether this claim is only a strategy to gain some (professional) space remains to be seen. The latter would be an example of *strategic pluralism*: "primarily just a strategic move in the game of trying to dominate a field or profession. Those in the minority proclaim the virtues of pluralism in an effort to legitimate their opposition to a dominant point of view. But one can be pretty sure that, if the insurgent group were itself ever to become dominant, talk of pluralism would subside and they would become every bit as monistic as those whom they had replaced." (Giere 2006, 40) These remarks are important in order to understand how a pluralist view of understanding has to be conceived so as to leave unificationist attempts

behind. The third position in the discussion on feminism and RCT will help me illustrate this view.

Rational Choice Theory within a Pluralist Framework.

A third group of feminists has developed a balanced view, which does not reject RCT outright, but limiting its usefulness to specific cases, arguing that in other cases, alternative theories will be more adequate. The selection of the most adequate theory is made by comparing theories and taking interests and usefulness into account. A good example can be found in Elizabeth Anderson's (2001) article *Should feminists reject rational choice theory?* Analysing the feminist angle on health care policies taken by Kristin Luker's *Taking Chances*, Anderson reaches the conclusion that the answer (to her title) "depends on our purposes, and on the aspect of RCT being used" (Anderson 2001, 391). RCT, she believes, offers both resources for and obstacles to understanding the problems women face and helping them overcome them. Let us start with the resources.

Rational Choice Theory can be used to answer questions addressing feminist interests in the following way: "One feminist aim is to ensure that the health-care system effectively delivers contraception to the women who need it. Luker's use of the deliberative theory of rational choice effectively illuminates the motivations that deter many sexually active women from using contraception, even when they have an interest in doing so. Here the function of rational choice theory is *to make women's choices intelligible in terms of their*

motivations, so the health-care system responds to women's needs as they see them." (Anderson 2001, 391, *my italics*) An example of the benefits of using RCT would be: "Luker suggests that once health-care practitioners recognize that women have a stake in seeing their sexual activity as spontaneous, and tend to stop contraception between relationships, they can respond by providing drop-in contraceptive services, rather than requiring women to make appointments weeks in advance." (Anderson 2001, 391-392)

On the other hand, Rational Choice Theory does also present obstacles to understanding the problems women face. Only using RCT precludes the identification of obstructions to women's rationality and autonomy. Anderson does not agree with Luker's use of RCT to vindicate the rationality of women: "Merely showing that women's choices can be fit into the accounting framework of a cost-benefit analysis is not enough to vindicate women's rationality. Nor should feminists want to rush to judgment on this score. We should be interested in identifying obstacles to the achievements of women's autonomy and rationality, rather than assuming that women face no problems in this area." (Anderson 2001, 392)

Hence, social scientists should also consider alternative theories in order to identify the social circumstances that undermine women's rationality and autonomy: "With respect to the feminist goal of identifying realization of, or impediments to, women's rationality, the application of the formal theory of rational choice to women's choices poses an obstacle. It effaces the distinction between action on one's own autonomous preferences, and action

governed by oppressive social norms. (…) [It] fails to distinguish between autonomous and heteronomous preferences, and thus fails to mark distinctions of vital interest to feminists (…). [RCT] thus represent people as acting on their own preferences, when they may just be yielding to the demands and expectations of others, or governed by oppressive or incoherent social norms. (…) Feminists can target internalised sexist social norms for critical attention only if we represent them as factors influencing women's choices that are independent of –and indeed, contrary to– their autonomous personal preferences. Luker's representation of women's sexual agency as rational ignores the numerous social conditions that undermine women's rational autonomy with respect to their sexual decisions." (Ibid.)

Anderson's analysis shows us how, depending on the specific interests one has (and the research questions these generate), different theories can be the most adequate. Understanding that the existing plurality of theories in social science can help answer questions generated by a plurality of interests should make us cherish theoretical pluralism rather than attempt unification. (This does not imply that every existing theory is indispensable; comparing theories when addressing specific questions will enable us to distinguish good from bad theories. It does, however, entail that reducing the plurality of theories to one unifying theory result in a loss of opportunities to achieve understanding).

The balanced analysis of Anderson illustrates how the winner-takes-all approach can be left behind; the proposed unification under RCT does not provide understanding for all at

all times (independent of interests and context), but it does serve some epistemic interests. Moreover, not rejecting RCT (and its ontological commitments) outright solves the problem raised in relation to the first feminist position, where questioning the rationality of the individual risks undermining the emancipatory objectives of feminism. And it is precisely this that feminism pursues: "Feminist theory (…) tries *to understand the social world so as to enable* certain kinds of liberating changes in it." (Anderson 2001, 393, *my italics*)

7. Conclusion: A Pluralistic View of Understanding in the Social Sciences.

Starting from the plurality of theoretical perspectives in International Relations studies, I have revisited debates on synthesis and unification to conclude that the plurality of social theories can answer research questions in relation to a plurality of epistemic interests. Accounts of the social world are selected on the basis of one's interests and the questions they generate, and of the extent to which the answers these provide are usable and facilitate understanding in the context of the problems to be solved.

Hence, when trying to grasp the relation between theory and understanding, it is not only important to consider the *accuracy* of theories but also to take their *adequacy* into account. This latter depends on the epistemic interests of the understandee. Thus, an adequate theory should be cast in a form that is accessible to the understandee, and usable given the questions to be answered or the problems to be solved. These interests can facilitate or

obstruct understanding; some accounts of the world are more accessible – in line with the interests of the understandee – and enable individuals or groups to understand their problems. For instance, feminism theorizes in ways that women can use to improve their lives; it implies that women should be able to recognize themselves and their lives in feminist accounts of women's predicaments (cf., Anderson 2001 and 2003).

Feminism gives us a good illustration of the impact of interests on the selection of theories to achieve understanding. Its relation to Rational Choice Theory – the best candidate in the social sciences to refute Kitcher 1989 – was discussed, and I concluded that, if we want to maximize understanding, the ideal of unification (be it by RCT, be it by an alternative theory) is not desirable because of the plurality of epistemic interests to be addressed. Even if unification conveys understanding for some (relative to their interests at a given time), it will always obstruct understanding for others (with different interests). Recognizing the plurality of possible epistemic interests will help us to move on from the *winners-takes-all-approach* to social science (as was shown by Elizabeth Anderson's evaluation of RCT), and to stop regarding the plurality of theoretical perspectives – present in International Relations studies – as a problem. On the contrary, theoretical pluralism is a strength in achieving understanding.

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FOOTNOTES

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[2] These data and the methodology used to obtain them can be found in Peterson, Tierney and Maliniak (2005).

[3] The term *imperialism* might sound too negative, but, actually one of the pioneers of the approach, Gary Becker, one of whose works (Becker 1976) is the *locus classicus*, agrees with this label: '*This definition of "economic imperialism" is probably a good description of what I do.'* (Swedberg 1990, 39)

[4] The role of *epistemic interests* will be explicated in Section 5.

[5] Robert D. Putnam warns us – in relation to irrelevance – of the dangers of *policy research* migrating towards *schools of public administration*, just as happened with practical economic studies, which changed from the economics department to *business schools*: *"If one compares the size of economics departments and business schools in today's academy, the cost of reducing a social science to sterile theoretical endeavors is obvious."* (Quoted on www.paecon.net, consulted February 2007)

[6] The increasing 'colonization' of political science by economists has led to so much discontent that an anti-imperialist movement, named *Mr. Perestroika*, has been created. The movement was initiated in the year 2000, with a mass e-mailing by *Mr. Perestroika*. Schram (2003) discusses the Mr. Perestroika movement in political science, e.g.: "the ways

in which contemporary social science all too often fails to produce the kind of knowledge that can meaningfully inform social life." (Schram 2003, 836). The Perestroikans' main focus is that major journals in the field have been preoccupied with publishing research that conforms to the *economics takeover* features.

[7] Out of this petition arose a broad movement called *Post-Autistic Economics.* It has a lot in common with the *Mr. Perestroika* movement, albeit that it is mainly aligned against the dominance of neoclassical economics within economics and in support of heterodox economics. A history of the movement can be found on: www.paecon.net.

[8] The reference to *concrete events* can be understood as an implicit critique of the *constructivists* and *reflectivists* and their metatheoretical travails which lead them away from dealing with the explanation and understanding of world politics, according to Moravcsik.

[9] For more details on this view of explanation, see: Van Bouwel and Weber (2002) & Weber and Van Bouwel (2002).

[10] This analogy between explaining and understanding does not however imply that explaining and understanding are the same. Contrary to Hempel (1965), I do not consider scientific understanding a by-product of scientific explanations, so that acquiring explanations of a phenomenon automatically leads to its understanding. In what follows, it will become clear that more is needed in order to talk of understanding.

[11] Notice the similarities with the contribution of Sabina Leonelli to this volume, albeit that the focus here is not on the embodied knowledge and epistemic skills of the individual *scientific researcher*, but on the usefulness of social scientific theories for *social groups*

and individuals (both scientists and non-scientists) and their ability to use these theories. Here, understanding goes public (a similar Deweyan move can be found in Bohman 1999).

[12] The critique of the lack of embeddedness of the actor in RCT and neoclassical economics is not exclusively feminist. See, for instance, Davis (2003).