

International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

Authors Meet Critics

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Author: Elvin Wyly (University of British Columbia, Canada)
Article: Positively Radical, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(5) pp.889-912

Participants

Bird, Lawrence	Rosa, Brian
Caselli, Davide	Rousseau, Max
Coppola, Alessandro	Santos, Rui
Field, James	Skodra, Julita
He, Huang	Tanulku, Basak
Kadi, Justin	Thompson, James
Lederman, Jacob	Turkmen, Hade
Lefteris, Theodosis	Vianello, Michele
Lonergan, Gwyneth	Wachsmuth, David
Millington, Nate	

Moderators

Yuri Kazepov
Giovanni Torrisi

<Wyly, Elvin> Good morning! [Good evening on your end].

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Good day to you too. We are 10 minutes early. Participants will join us in time. Today we are going to discuss with Elvin Wyly (University of British Columbia, CAN) his article 'Positively Radical', recently published in IJURR. We just need to wait few more minutes to allow all the participants to access the online platform.

<Wyly, Elvin> Sounds good.

<Kazepov, Yuri> Dear All, let me just welcome you with apologies for the network problems we experienced last time. The whole of Urbino – where the server is located – collapsed and we were not able to fix the system in time. I hope everything will go smoothly this time. It is a pleasure to welcome professor Wyly, and we thank him very much for being with us today.

<Wyly, Elvin> Thanks very much for this opportunity!

<Kazepov, Yuri> The format is going to be the same as last time; the participants post questions and comments, and our guest author will react on the basis of this input. So please start posting questions (using the 'question' function). I wish everybody a fruitful online meeting. Giovanni will now take over moderation.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Thanks a lot Professor Kazepov. I just received a question via email from Anthony Barnum. Here it is:

<Barnum, Anthony> I feel that you confuse the words positivism and empiricism. What you refer to as positive methodologies, or positive practices, for me are not exclusive to the realm of positivism. Empirical evidence is used by all scientists. You refer to the fact that there are pure, strong hypotheses, theories, and laws, but I would counter that a hypothesis, theory, or law is no more or less pure, soft, or hard. Maybe more or less scientific, but not more or less good. Why do you think it is necessary to have such dichotomies?

<Wyly, Elvin> Anthony, thanks so much for this important question. There is indeed a tension between positivism and empiricism, and to some degree this reflects the time horizons in which the words and concepts have been used. I have been influenced here by the contributors to Steinmetz' (2005) collection, which specifically deals with 'methodological positivism' -- as distinct from positivism as a vital philosophical position, which our histories tell us has been obsolete for more than half a century. And yet that philosophical position remains crucial as an implicit foundation for some practitioners, and as a hegemonic target to be challenged by others -- and this is why the 'zombie' metaphor is irresistible in these discussions.

You're absolutely correct that 'positive practices' are not the exclusive realm of positivism. But it seems to me that a broad swathe of the social-theoretical critique of the past thirty years has relied on that linkage -- connecting a certain set of methodological practices to a certain set of epistemological and political positions -- for two main reasons: it was historically accurate and it was strategically effective in building support for critical non- or post-positivisms. But the past tense here is important. It's no longer accurate, and I sense from your question that you can see this even better than I can -- the unhinging of epistemology, methodology, and politics. 'Positively radical' represents a very particular kind of generational and disciplinary baggage, perhaps, and your challenge to these dichotomies is valuable and emancipatory.

But I am now thinking that this presents a new way of thinking about the relations between the mundane details of what we do (methodology) and the more grand assertions of what it means (theory, epistemology). Rather than seeing 'laws' as assertions of timeless, unquestionable universals in the tradition of physics-envy, why not see them as intergenerational struggles over politics and consensus? Some 'laws' we accept, and some we challenge, using whatever hybrids of methods that make the most sense for our generation; this does not mean that everything is always open to question -- there are limits, and the backlash to hardcore positivism has done real damage where it has allowed for a powerful hijacking of pop-culture poststructuralism (giving even the nuttiest ideas a 'fair and balanced' hearing alongside legitimate science).

<Thompson, James> Good morning from down the road in Seattle, Elvin! My soon-to-begin dissertational research will commence with a critical narrative that attempts to situate the discipline of architecture at our contemporary moment. Not unlike your article, which I found particularly useful for its cautionary and modest approach, and I am trying to avoid the temptation you mentioned of constructing effigies out of my preceding generation of intellectuals. However, I find myself in a bit of a quandary: even though I am currently housed in an interdisciplinary program, and strive to transcend disciplinary silos, the relatively distinct histories of each discipline remain significant contextual factors. Are there lessons from your piece that you would consider transferable to any other discipline, or must we always examine each discipline on its own terms? How much should I be considering other disciplines or generic outsiders when establishing my own critical narrative?

<Wyly, Elvin> James asked a question about disciplinary translation -- lessons from 'positively radical' that could be applied to other fields. James, I think this depends on the structure and institutional power of different fields. I've become too accustomed, perhaps, to the weak border controls enforced by geography. But other fields police their boundaries more vigilantly, so this shapes the audience. The key issue for me has been the association of certain kinds of methods with certain politics, and trying to reconfigure that.

<Lonergan, Gwyneth> Dr Wyly, I thought you made a very good point regarding the pitfalls of completely renouncing positivism, particularly with regard to the necessity for some objective truths, within a specific context. I'm very sorry, but my question is long. My own research is influenced by Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledge, which rejects both complete objectivity and complete relativism but argues that a particular 'subjugated' social location can yield more insights about the way power operates in society than a relatively privileged location. On the one hand, insights based on situated knowledge can be difficult to 'prove' objectively; on the other hand, Haraway's theory of situated knowledge is clearly open to the same kind of abuse as post-positivism. Do you think strategic positivism can be used in a way that supports the development of situated knowledge, and value the insights that subjugated locations can give?

<Wyly, Elvin> Gwyneth asked a wonderful question relating strategic positivism to

situated knowledge and Haraway's work. I do see many productive connections here, and this is my current remedial reading -- trying to come to terms with Haraway -- and what it might mean for the kinds of things I've been struggling through.

What strikes me as fascinating now, is how 'situated knowledges' are so fast becoming part of the operating system, if you will, of a transnational capitalism that is fast going digital, in all sorts of ways. And this reconfigures the relations between the individual and the collective in ways that are moving very quickly indeed.

These are both excellent questions. First, I think that the disciplinary matrix of the contemporary academy is changing rapidly, and this has both possibilities and pitfalls. It would be arrogant of me to say that 'positively radical' has relevance for other fields, but what I can say is that the history of geography, in its relation with urban questions, is what eventually led me to struggle through some of those issues.

The key for me has been the nature of audiences in different fields, as well as the strength of 'border controls'. The metaphors of imports, exports, invasions, and all the rest make for interesting discussion on what interdisciplinarity means these days. In terms of Haraway's situated knowledge, I'm starting at elementary-school level myself, but trying to learn.

I do think that situated knowledges -- cutting-edge theory over the past generation -- are rapidly being performed in almost real-time today, as so many aspects of life under digital capitalism are speeding up. There seems to be a quick reconfiguration of what subjectivity means, and how theorists -- economists, especially -- are able to implement, in strangely inductive empirical terms, central concepts like consumer sovereignty.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Thanks a lot. Now a question by Lawrence Bird.

<Bird, Lawrence> My question concerns how 'big data', and contemporary attitudes toward information generally, play into the coexistence you are proposing between positivism and radicalism (which I appreciate very much!). There is a lot of experimentation going on today with making information accessible to the general public, especially information related to governance and ecology. Roger Malina, editor of the Arts, Sciences & Technology journal *Leonardo*, has argued that science, and 'big data', are today fundamentally performative rather than purely positive. This seems to relate to your call for a positivism that is about more than just positive knowledge, and a radicalism which is willing to engage with positive knowledge, or to put it more strongly, a radicalism willing to engage aggressively with very large amounts of positive information. I was wondering if you have any comments on this -- is there a specific application of your ideas to this kind of massive positive information?

<Wily, Elvin> Lawrence, thanks so much for this. It's a fabulous question, and it reveals how quickly things are changing. 'Positively radical' was, in so many ways, obsolete with every draft, because of how fast things are moving now, and Big Data is a big part of that.

In recent years I've been playing around with a phrase, 'accidental epistemology,' to refer to how the flood of information is overwhelming the

infrastructure of how to organize knowledge. Thomas Kuhn on crystal meth, if you will -- our paradigm shifts have become smartphone apps, because of the lure of pattern-seeking behaviours in data mining and the like.

I do have mixed feelings about the resources -- not just money, not just technical expertise, etc. -- when progressives and radicals dive into Big Data. Yes, there are possibilities, and progressives and radicals need to work strategically with these data and be there on the front lines. And yet there are limits. I am beginning to wonder if we need a theory of cognitive Malthusianism.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Lawrence, would you like to comment on that?

<Bird, Lawrence> Sure -- that's an intriguing concept. Accidental in the sense that we stumble across new modes of thought that are generated out of these new conditions (of media)?

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, this is it, exactly. Entire domains of public policy are now based on pattern-seeking, in massive storehouses of data. And it is now possible to perform paired-testing methods and experimental research designs in real time. We are seeing quick-run tests out there in Big Data that, back in the 1960s, would have been an entire Ph.D. dissertation. The problem is that these are simultaneous equations, if you will, and the constraints have been relaxed. So that now key parts of public policy have become unhinged from traditional limits or rhythms, because it is possible to hook up to these massive flows of data.

The one figure here I'm trying to figure out is Cass Sunstein, and the role of law and economics in certain areas of U.S. federal policy.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Niklas Luhmann writes about a social meaning which is exceeding its structure of expectations, and there is the need for developing new epistemologies to cope with these new forms of social understanding...

<Wyly, Elvin> Do you mean shared meanings as a result of the structure of consensus, or different perspectives on a particular issue?

<Torrise, Giovanni>...Also a situation in which there is too much data available to process, and too many ways of processing it.

<Wyly, Elvin> Ah, I see -- the structure of meaning versus the architecture of overload!

Yes, indeed. Peter Gould wrote a playful and irreverent -- but very challenging -- article in 1981, 'Letting the data speak for themselves.' He was kidding, and the article goes to great pains to explain how and why.

But it helps us think through some key problems that, at that point in time, really mattered. Mostly, what he was challenging was the old, Newtonian, and general systems logic of boiling everything into regression coefficients, and examining relations at the mean.

But now we're in a different world, and it is possible to sift through massive databases indeed. This is having dramatic consequences for daily practice -- I'm sure

everyone here could tell many, many stories about the lives of students in today's information society, and how that is changing very quickly -- but it is also having consequences for theory, methodology, and perhaps even higher-level philosophical questions. For example, 'spurious correlation' is an epithet by the standards of conventional social science, but with Big Data, spurious correlation is great so long as it is *profitable* spurious correlation.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Exactly! I studied different theories on how society copes with this overload. Which is not just an overload of data, but also an overload of values, principles, possibilities, methodologies, even meaning and meta-meaning. But I do not want take time from our participants, so here is a question from Brian Rosa:

<Rosa, Brian> Hi Elvin- would you have written this article differently after Occupy, Arab Spring, Syntagma Square, etc.? Does radical urban scholarship -- for lack of a better term -- have something to latch onto (like 68 perhaps)? If so, how? And should we think of the '99%' rallying cry as positivist?

<Wyly, Elvin> Brian, wow, this is a wonderful question. Yes, the article would have been very different indeed during/after these events. This is where my own standpoint epistemology really matters. For my entire life -- shaped by the disciplines and geographies where I've been -- the dominant narrative was that the dramatic upheavals of the 1960s were over and done with.

I came of age in a time of conservatism and paradoxically unstable American hegemony, but one where the sense of the 1960s movements was definitively pushed into the past -- even by many of those involved in those movements. The past few years have been remarkable, and have revitalized what Don Mitchell calls 'the pedagogy of the streets'.

When I spent time at a few Occupy events, it was a joy to see things happening, conversations taking place that all the most sophisticated, well-read, and seasoned observers had learned to view with too much caution. 'They don't know the history of how these movements in the past all failed,' some seasoned observers on the Left said.

It was joyful to see that many of those in the Occupy events had not read those histories. They were too busy coming out into the streets. I don't mean to be anti-intellectual, of course, but there is a division of labour in building a better world, and we theorists need to approach it with modesty and insistent optimism. So, is this movement 'positivist'? I think it is, but my definition of 'positivist' is a strange one indeed, and I recognize that.

I also can't imagine us putting 'positivism' anywhere on big banners marching down the street, and that's a major consideration! But in terms of positivism as the creation of consensus on facts -- things done in and by those in society mobilizing for a better world -- and the relations between science, knowledge, and ethics -- yes; in those terms we are in a quite fascinating positivist era.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Brian, would you like to add something?

<Rosa, Brian> I guess I was suggesting mainly that the rhetoric can be positivist,

relying on data of income inequality, which is the other side of what you were saying about 'everyday positivists', and their conflicting feelings about the power of empirical data. Much like overemphasizing 'over 50% of the world lives in cities'. I come from planning to geography, and I can attest to that widespread ambivalence.

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, I see what you mean. That ambivalence is healthy, but we do have to play in this arena, and there's lots of strategic ways to do so.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Thanks to you both

<Rosa, Brian> Thanks!

<Torrise, Giovanni> Let us continue the discussion with a question by Nate Millington:

<Millington, Nate> Hi Professor Wyly. I found the article really thought-provoking, and thanks for being here with us today. I am wondering about the legacy of modernism in urban planning/design: does your attempt to rethink the legacy of positivism also entail a rethinking of the modernist urban imagination? Obviously modernism was a failed project (although one that deserves more critical scrutiny than quick critiques of Le Corbusier, I would argue), but I wonder if you see any benefit to re-thinking the history of modernism? I think the related question is: do you see the state as an integral part of a radical urban politics or are you proposing critical engagements that exist outside of state power?

<Wyly, Elvin> Nate, wow, this is a great question. I think we have several factors going on here.

One is the relation between modernism and its geographies -- i.e., U.S. modernism, Global North modernism, versus the travels of modernity in the Global South, and the current mixtures of cosmopolitan modernisms of transnationalism. Two is the relation between modernism and the state. I have been shaped by Steinmetz's (2007) arguments linking positivism to Fordism, and so that is a very particular kind of modernism. I do think that reconsidering that history is important, but the second part of your question I think is more urgent. I do think the state is a central part of a radical urban politics, but that is going to involve repeated and often dangerous compromises. This is where the movements of the past few years have taught us so much. I remember one of the responses in Occupy, began, 'We in the Occupy movement are repeatedly asked, 'What are your specific demands?' Our first specific demand is that you stop asking for us to be specific about our demands'. We cannot abandon classical, state-centric strategies, but we have to be open to what is happening in the fluidity of coalitions, overwhelming as that often is.

<Torrise, Giovanni> That's a very good and interesting discussion. If anyone would like to intervene at any moment, please contact me in private and I will give the floor to you. Nate, would you like to add something more?

<Wyly, Elvin> [Sorry for long incoherent sentence fragments. I don't have experience

with this kind of intellectual cyborg activity!]

<Torrise, Giovanni> Elvin, you are doing just great.

<Millington, Nate> I'm happy to let others carry on with questions, but I generally agree that fluidity/flexibility is important. One thing that I think is interesting, and relates to the earlier question about big data, is that there seems to be an increasing degree of methodological flexibility within geography, so much so that I read the original article and was thinking 'does this characterize the contemporary moment, in which it seems like all sorts of positions and approaches exist alongside each other'?

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, there is great methodological flexibility indeed -- you raise an excellent point.

<Millington, Nate> It's almost like there is a 'post-post-positivist' move, in which all approaches co-exist, for better or for worse.

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, we are in an era that Jennifer Wolch (2003) nicely formalizes as 'radical openness as method'. I have a passion for this radical openness, but we also have to recognize that it does entail risks and trade-offs in terms of expertise and investments.

<Millington, Nate> Absolutely.

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, the post-post formulation does capture a lot of this. The risks involve our own judgments of expertise and credibility, the definition of who 'we' are in coming to those decisions, and also how 'we' interact with others outside a particular field or domain. At the same time, we are seeing a rapid acceleration in the pace at which certain kinds of knowledge are devalored. This has massive consequences for the curriculum. The new possibilities are exciting, and the new pluralism is exciting, but this has led to a major escalation in the expectations placed upon scholars who are trying to make their mark now.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Lawrence Bird would you like to write something to this point?

< Bird, Lawrence> I'd pick up on Nate's point about flexibility -- I come from a similarly interdisciplinary field, of architecture/urban design. What are the dangers of this coexistence of ideas and flexibility? -- You argue that positivism tempers that, right?

<Wyly, Elvin> I think the main danger is that a sense of fairness allows us to try to be radically open, and then we're easy prey for some fairly powerful, retrograde forces. This involves struggles over science, politics, and theology. And this particular set of configurations, of course, is geographically contingent -- but the intersections and the risks seem to be everywhere.

The history and geography that, for better or worse, occupies my brain is the configuration in the U.S. between social conservatives and economic conservatives, who have proven remarkably adept at co-opting all the language and tactics of the progressive and radical left. So the danger in our world of epistemological and methodological pluralism is how to respond when we encounter fully-developed infrastructures of hegemony, premised on right-wing poststructuralism and post-positivism.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Now, more compliments for the article and an interesting note from Jacob:

<Lederman, Jacob> This is a very exciting article. Thank you. I think the ambition of the topic merits far greater discussion than space allows for here, so I will limit my comments to one particular aspect of your argument. You mention on p.900 that certain phenomena (colonialism, white privilege, patriarchy) are at times operating somehow too powerfully to be fully interrogated by accepted social scientific methods. I found the argument overall quite convincing, but I come back to this paradox and consider, for example, the ethno-methodological (conversation analysis etc.) approach to studying gender or patriarchy, with its de-historicized, rather anti-hermeneutic approach, which can tend to occlude as much as it reveals. I wonder if we ultimately return to the historical roots of post-positivist thought, and the reasons for its emergence. How can we deal with the issues mentioned above? What do we do when standard methods do not adequately capture the power relations we seek to reveal? I appreciate the idea of 'strategic positivism', but wonder if embracing it risks what the Audrey Lourde quote (quoted in Philo, 2009) implies with regard to the master's tools.

<Wyly, Elvin> Jacob, this is wonderful and important. Can you tell me more about de-historicized ethno-methodological approaches?

<Torrise, Giovanni> Please go ahead Jacob. You can interact directly in the 'discussion room'.

<Lederman, Jacob> Am I doing this correctly? I suppose this is something that comes out of the sociological tradition in particular.

<Wyly, Elvin> I think I understand part of your question, and it is an important issue. When standard methods don't capture the power relations that we know must be confronted, then, yes, we do face some difficult choices. There certainly is a danger in using a set of tools in ways that shape our ability to ask certain kinds of questions and ignore others. So in that situation, I think you're right -- using the master's tools may not be the best way to dismantle the master's house. Sometimes it's an effective tactic, and other times it is a distraction.

<Lederman, Jacob> As you mentioned, it is not just quant approaches that have deployed methodological positivism. By de-historicized I suppose I mean that ethnomethodology has sought to isolate particular social relations by jettisoning any

discussion of how these relations encode particular symbolic forms of power etc. that are not easily measured.

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, I see what you mean – I agree, completely. One thing that I think is helpful at this point, is to think about methodology and positivism in the simplest terms. Traditionally, our definition of positivism has been about the measurement of observable relations.

But things have always been complicated, and are fast becoming much more complicated, by what ‘observation’ is. That was part of why I mentioned colonialism, patriarchy, White privilege -- things that are, paradoxically, too big and pervasive to really be ‘observable’ in the standard ways.

But ‘observation’ is itself the key here. That requires a huge investment. It's a collective investment in the language required to build some kind of infrastructure to measure things. And that is a major struggle today, because a lot of the systems of observation that we have learned to challenge -- state-directed Censuses, for example -- are being destroyed, even while private corporate data universes are rapidly expanding and working their way into ever more domains of social, economic, and political life.

<Torrise, Giovanni> We still have many questions to take care of and not much time. This means if you would like to ask a question, please contact me via the private channel. Now Hade Turkmen’s question:

<Turkmen, Hade> My question is about ‘critical realist’ epistemology. Radical geographers are sceptical and even critical (especially when it comes to abstraction) about critical realism. How do you position critical realism in the contested framework of social sciences that you underlined in your article? Do you think that critical realism may meet the needs of positivist elements in radical geography?

<Wyly, Elvin> Hade, thanks so much for this question. I must confess that I don't know much about the critical attacks on critical realism. I do find it extremely helpful and valuable. As a general comment on epistemological debates, I do think that one of the dangers of our radically open world is that our pace of creation of new ways of abstraction and knowledge-creation seems to be very fast indeed. But at the same time, we do not have very well-developed criteria for what domains of knowledge will be thrown away and forgotten. We're creating innumerable eddies of lost philosophies, lost methodologies, and there is a constant pressure for the new. We need to remain open to the new, but we cannot ignore the loss of forgetting and discarding the heritage of philosophies and methodologies achieved in previous generations.

I'm now getting to the age where this is very visceral, to realize the pace of loss -- of passions and ideas of those we have lost in life, and those whom we are also losing in terms of ideas and memories of our students. So, long story short: I do see great possibilities in critical realism integrated with strategic positivism.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Davide Caselli would like to add a short remark. Please go ahead.

<Caselli, Davide> Hi, thanks everybody for this interesting discussion! The question posed by Jacob reminded me of a conference I attended last September in Lyon called 'The Neoliberal City: A Credible Thesis?' in which the main point against the thesis was that 'Neoliberal City' is too general; there is no way to really 'observe' and 'demonstrate' it. Things are more complex, and data does not really support this idea. Do you think that studies on neoliberalism -- like those on white privilege, colonialism, and so on -- may get into the same difficulties?

<Wyly, Elvin> Davide, thanks for this important question. Yes, this can indeed be a problem, and I have enormous respect for those -- like Jenny Robinson (2011) -- who have been working to try to caution us on resorting to the n-word too often, to describe too many things. All I can do is plead guilty, to confess that I resort to a certain vocabulary when presented with certain kinds of patterns, and that sometimes the situation seems to demand a kind of strategic essentialism to start conversations or build coalitions. Even as I do that -- use the phrase 'strategic essentialism' -- I am aware that Spivak hates the way that phrase has become a license for too many generalizations (see Danus et al., 1993).

<Caselli, Davide> Right, that can't be an excuse for a lack of a rigorous analysis.

<Wyly, Elvin> Yet we do have to be careful about the ever-more-fine-grained partitioning of identities, standpoint epistemologies, and situated knowledge that is now possible. This is where ontology and epistemology are changing very fast. We now have partially automated ways in which people are constantly constructed as consumers rather than citizens, and forced to interact with one another in ways that are explicitly shaped by autonomous measurement of previous decisions and expressed preferences.

<Caselli, Davide> But even the definition of 'rigorous analysis' is part of the fight.

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, agreed completely. Given how fast things are changing now, I have recently been forced to try to reconcile our epistemological disagreements by, for example, trying to adhere to the principle that I will respect all positions presented to me by human beings (cf. Lanier, 2011; Schuurman, 2013). This sounds extreme, but consider how much of our intellectual lives these days is now being shaped, at least in the digitally-connected parts of the world, by systems of knowledge production that are automating the process of intellectual property fights, and even partially automating the valorization of reading itself. There is an accidental epistemology of Thomson ISI, for example.

It is not accidental in terms of corporate strategy and entrepreneurial strategy; but it is accidental in terms of us understanding, as intellectual communities, how our students are forming connections, and deciding what and how to read. And this is affecting what you rightly point out as the struggle to define what rigorous analysis is.

<Davide Caselli> Thank you.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Now Alessandro.

<Coppola, Alessandro> I've the sense there is an elephant in the room here (hopefully not in the chat room), that is the role of economics and econometrics. Economics has been invading the realms of sociology, asserting superior methodological effectiveness based on quantitative techniques, and undermining the role of qualitative work. How do you see the role of economics in your theoretical proposal?

<Wyly, Elvin> Yes, economics indeed.

In the midst of the crisis, Francis Fukuyama, of 'End of History' fame, wrote a shockingly open and critical essay, 'What Were They Thinking?' calling mainstream economics to account (Fukuyama and Colby, 2009). It was extraordinary, not necessarily because of what they said – their critical account was a latecomers-to-the-party summary of points made by several generations of critical theorists and heterodox economists – but because of who said it. For a brief period in 2009, it was mainstream to challenge the hegemony of neoclassical economic theory. I do have to be careful here, because, as the saying goes, some of my best friends are economists, ba dum dum! But there is a certain structure of institutional power in the field of economics, and the relations between quantification and pure mathematics, that shapes the possibilities for policy, knowledge, and politics.

So you've got it right -- the elephant is a utility-maximizing creature seeking equilibrium solutions, relying on a certain systems-tautological view of a constructed economic world of individual agents.

The good news is that we have a lot of allies in the struggle against a certain hegemony. The mainstream commentary on economics drives me crazy, but there are, now and then, a few signs of instability in hegemonic economics that give us hope; maybe the elephant can learn to forget the more dangerous ideological pre-commitments.

The bad news is that the period of instability was very short, and things fairly quickly realigned after the months of financial vertigo in 2008 and 2009. Financial and material instability and austerity are liquidating the lives of millions right now, but theoretical and ideological commitments to markets-know-best have been artificially re-stabilized, and pushed back onto the pedestal of a crumbling neoclassical Parthenon.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Hade Turkmen, for a very quick comment, please.

<Turkmen, Hade> I just wanted to clear out the critics of Marxist tradition about critical realism, with a quotation from David Harvey.

It may be an out-dated one but in 1987, Harvey says that 'Sayer proposes a realist philosophy that combines wide-ranging contingency with an understanding of general processes (judged relevant because inherently connected with the events in question). The problem with this superficially attractive method is that there is nothing within it, apart from the judgement of individual researchers, as to what constitutes a special instance to which special processes inhere or as to what contingencies (out of a potentially infinite number) ought to be taken seriously.

There is nothing, in short, to guard against the collapse of scientific understanding into a mass of contingencies exhibiting relations and processes special to each unique event' (quoted by Peet 1997, 173).

<Wyly, Elvin> This is challenging and valuable, and makes me think deeply. We need Harvey, but we do need contingencies as well, and we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good (see also Jones and Hanham, 1995).

<Turkmen, Hade> But at the very end, I agree with you Dr Wyly, about the role of a critical realist approach in radicalising geographical studies. Thanks.

<Wyly, Elvin> We need Harvey + Haraway + Gibson-Graham + Sayer... the list goes on, and this is the essence of the socially negotiated enterprise. I'm trying to reconcile paradoxical and often conflicting traditions, and I do know this is risky. But perhaps this is the essence of how I see positivism -- as a socially negotiated process of deciding, in each generation, what is a scientific fact without quotes, and what is a 'fact' with quotes -- a constructed understanding that we decide is worth protecting and defending in a particular place or time.

<Turkmen, Hade> I agree with you and actually this point was the essence of my question. Thank you.

<Wyly, Elvin> I don't know the precise context of Harvey's quote related by Peet, but at the time that kind of quote probably made sense. Careers were made on the basis of contingencies special to each unique event, and some of these ideas were hijacked by retrograde forces; but the emphasis on situated knowledge and partiality is crucial, even if (perhaps especially when) it is used to start conversations rather than end them.

And it was a brilliant question indeed -- this is a struggle that can be read back through the history of our field, and the history of any field that struggles with its own values. Some fields, of course, don't do that -- but that makes them intellectually dead even if they retain institutional power.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Let us go back to positivism, with a question from Justin Kadi.

<Kadi, Justin> Thanks for the very interesting and thought provoking article! While I'm quite convinced by your argument that 'positivist' methodologies should not be abandoned altogether, based on the wrongly assumed existence of clear linkages between methodologies and politics, I'm wondering what role the social construction of 'truth' plays in your argument. You are referring to conservatives denouncing post-positivist research as 'lies' or just 'imagination', but I was kind of missing what you think of it. So what role would you say should the idea of socially constructed knowledge play in radical urban research? Or should we abandon it altogether in favor of going back to positivism?

<Wyly, Elvin> Justin, thanks for this question -- very valuable. The short answer is that we do not abandon socially constructed knowledge -- all worthwhile knowledge

is socially constructed -- but be aware of the dangers of who is doing the construction. Some constructions can be dangerous indeed! Theories of post-colonialism are constructed. So are drones and missiles!

<Torrise, Giovanni> Thanks very much for the full, yet synthetic answer. Now it is time for the question by Theodosios Lefteris:

<Lefteris, Theodosios> Given the patronage of the epistemological revolution of the 1960s and, on the other hand the a-political claims of urbanists and professionals in the name of positivism, which do you think should be the relation of radical positivism and politics of space?

<Wyly, Elvin> First, a-political claims come in many varieties, and there are some good progressives whose writings do not betray their true politics. This can be a strategic decision, and sometimes it is one that makes a lot of sense. But too often this descends into technocracy, and we need to resist that.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Wonderful. Let us read Michele Vianello and David Wachsmuth's questions:

<Vianello, Michele> You refer to the reform of the census in Canada as something regressive. Arjun Appadurai, in his *Modernity at Large* devotes a chapter to explaining how colonial census helped formalise and crystallise the caste system in India. Also, in France, when the Sarkozy Government tried to implement a census system where ethnic specification had to be declared, there was an upheaval (of progressive forces).

I simply loved your article. Thank you very much, really. I think it will help to build networks out of loose movements. Nevertheless I believe an eye must be kept open on hegemonic practices such as censuses. Could we say that positivism is specifically problematic when it forms an alliance with power?

<Wyly, Elvin> Michelle: you are brilliant. You're absolutely right. The history of the census, however, should not disempower the progressive possibilities of today -- it should just teach us to be very cautious about categorization, representation, generalization, and imputation. The shortest way I can distil this is a simple equation: Anecdote + power = fact (we brainstormed this equation while learning about the lives of 'anecdotes' described in Wyly, and Ponder, 2011). While censuses of information that are publicly available are being destroyed (Shearmur, 2010), there are massive *private* corporate databases that are fast outpacing any public accountability (Lazer et al., 2009). Private corporations have databases with, quite literally, trillions of transactions that can be (and are) constructed as representations of individual consumers and voters. 'Big Data' is the new social physics.

<Wachsmuth, David> Hi Elvin, in your piece you say 'all of us use positivism on a regular basis whenever we use observable evidence to describe recent trends in urban inequality' (p. 905). This seems to set a really low bar for positivism! If that's positivism, sign me up, but I think that most critiques of (methodological) positivism

place more emphasis on what it excludes (e.g. appeals to 'deeper' causal mechanisms, à la Sayer) rather than what is allowed (observable evidence, which any philosophy of science would admit is *sometimes* useful, right?). So while I'm sympathetic to your critique of previous totalizing critiques of positivism, I just don't see what the 'value added' is in trying to retain the term to describe specific methodological manoeuvres, that aren't necessarily particularly controversial within alternative (radical) methodologies. Particularly given your point that most positivists themselves don't actually use the term, why shouldn't we just abandon it to history's dustbin, instead of trying to resuscitate it in a critical sense?

<Wyly, Elvin> David, thanks for this question. Perhaps I do set a low bar for positivism in that quote, but I do think that positivism is a part of our practices in more fundamental ways. I retain the 'positivism' label in part because the critique of it in the twentieth century was so thorough and wide-ranging, and the ghosts are still with us. And I think we have misremembered the entire history of positivism as a political movement -- even if it was a strange one (see Pickering, 1993).

<Torrise, Giovanni> I would like to thank Elvin Wyly very much, for the wonderful chat today. It was really interesting to have the chance to debate with the author.

<Wyly, Elvin> Thank you so much for this discussion -- wonderful questions and ideas and possibilities!

<Kazepov, Yuri> Dear All, let me also thank you for the challenging questions and Elvin for the brilliant answers. This is a good example of how these events go, and I am very happy that we are back on track with the usual high quality. Keep in touch for the next event with Eduardo Marques from Sao Paulo! Ciao to everybody.

<Torrise, Giovanni> The next chat is scheduled with Eduardo Marques (University of Sao Paulo). We will be discussing 'Social Networks, Segregation and Poverty in Sao Paulo', 21 February, 10.00am (GMT-2). Thanks again.

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