Chapter 9

A Skin Not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science

PAUL FURLONG AND DAVID MARSH

A number of chapters in this book contain references to ontology and epistemology, some of them relatively lengthy (see for example, Chapters 1, 4 and 8). Perhaps more often, positions on these issues are implicit, but no less significant (see Chapters 2 and 5). Each social scientist's orientation to his or her subject is shaped by his/her ontological and epistemological position. Even if these positions are unacknowledged, they shape the approach to theory and the methods which the social scientist uses. At first the questions raised seem difficult, but they are not issues that can be avoided. Because they shape our approach, they are like a skin not a sweater; they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit. In our view, all students of political science should recognize their own ontological and epistemological positions and be able to defend them. This means they need to understand the alternative positions on these fundamental questions. As such, this chapter aims to introduce these ontological and epistemological questions in as accessible a way as possible for readers who are new to these issues.

The chapter is divided into three major sections. In the first section, we introduce the concepts of 'ontology' and 'epistemology' and consider how they relate. The second section then outlines different positions on ontology and epistemology and the arguments which have been put forward for and against these positions. Finally, we illustrate how these different positions shape the approaches that researchers take to their research by focusing on research in two broad areas: globalization, and multi-level governance.

Ontology and epistemology introduced

As we have emphasized, ontology and epistemology are contested issues.

So, while there is general agreement about what the terms mean, there is much less agreement about either the ontological and epistemological positions that researchers adopt or the relationship between ontology and epistemology. We begin this section by outlining the meaning of the terms ontology and epistemology before discussing the relationship between the two, which, as we shall see, is a particularly contested issue.

The meaning of ontology and epistemology (and methodology)

Ontological questions focus on the very nature of 'being'; literally, an ontology is a theory of 'being' (the word derives from the Greek for 'existence'). This sounds difficult, but it really isn't. The key ontological question is: What is the form and nature of reality and, consequently, what is there that can be known about it? To put it another way, the main issue is whether there is a 'real' world 'out there' that is, in an important sense, independent of our knowledge of it. As we shall see below, there are two broad ontological positions, although the nomenclature changes: foundationalism/ objectivism/realism, which posits a 'real' world, 'out there', independent of our knowledge of it; and anti-foundationalism/constructivism/relativism, which sees the world as socially constructed.

If an ontological position reflects the researcher's view about the nature of the world, his or her epistemological position reflects his/her view of what we can know about the world it; literally, an epistemology is a theory of knowledge. As such, the key epistemological question is: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known? Again, this sounds difficult, but the basic concerns are not too difficult, as we shall see below.

There are two key questions in relation to epistemology. Can an observer identify 'real' or 'objective' relations between social phenomena? If so, how? The first question itself subsumes two issues. Initially, it takes us back to ontology; an anti-foundationalist ontology (see below for a discussion) argues that there is not a 'real' world, which exists independently of the meaning which actors attach to their action. This entails an interpretivist theory of knowledge: it would be illogical to argue for our capacity for independent knowledge of an external world we do not believe exists.

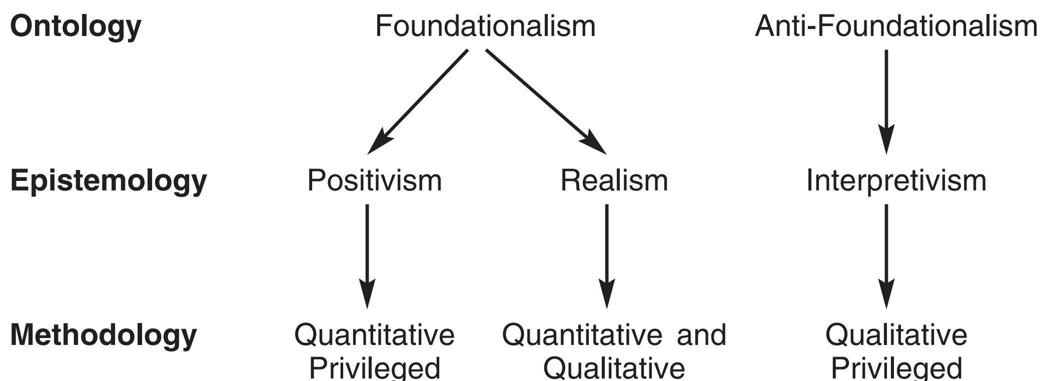
At the same time, such an anti-foundationalist would also suggest that no observer can be 'objective' because s/he lives in the social world and is affected by the social constructions of 'reality'. This evokes what is sometimes called the double hermeneutic; the world is interpreted by the actors (one hermeneutic level) and their interpretation is interpreted by the observer (a second hermeneutic level).

The second question raises another important, and clearly related, issue. To the extent that we can establish 'real' relationships between social phenomena, can we do this simply through direct observation, or are there some relationships which 'exist', but are not directly observable. The answers one gives to these questions shape one's epistemological position and, in particular, how one understands the concepts of causality and explanation (see Craig Parson's discussion of these in Chapter 4). As such, our argument here is that ontology and epistemology are related. A foundationalist ontology leads to either a positivist or a realist epistemology, while an anti-foundationalist ontology leads to an interpretivist epistemology. However, we acknowledge that this is a contested position, which would not be accepted by post-structuralists, and this is an issue discussed in the next section. In addition, it also needs emphasizing that one's epistemological position has clear methodological implications, an issue to which we return throughout this chapter. So, positivists tend to privilege quantitative methods, while interpretivists privilege qualitative methods (see Figure 9.1).

The relationship between ontology and epistemology

Ontological and epistemological issues are inevitably related given that epistemology is concerned with how human agents can inquire about and make sense of ontology. However, the relationship between ontology and epistemology is a contested issue. Indeed, Hay (2007a) argues that we cannot prove an ontological position, or indeed the relationship between ontology and epistemology. Rather, we should adopt a position which makes sense to us and use it consistently, while acknowledging that it is contested.

Figure 9.1 *Connecting ontology, epistemology and methodology*



Hay contends that ontology precedes epistemology:

> Ontology 'relates to the nature of the social and political world' and epistemology 'to what we can know about it', [so] ontology is logically prior in the sense that the 'it' in the second term [the definition of epistemology] is, and can only be, specified by the first [the definition of ontology]. This, I contend, is a point of logic, not of meta-theory. (Hay, 2007: 117)

However, post-structuralists do not agree. So Dixon and Paul Jones III claim (quoted in Bates and Jenkins, 2007: 60):

> Ontological assumptions put the cart before the horse, for ontology is itself grounded in epistemology about how we *know* 'what the world is like'; in other words, the analysis of ontology invariably shows it to rest upon epistemological priors that enable claims about the structure of the real world. For example, the ontological divisions between physical and social phenomena, or between individual agency and sociospatial structure … [are] the result of epistemology that segments reality and experience in order to comprehend them both.

Spencer (2000) accuses this post-structuralist line of argument of reducing questions of ontology to questions of epistemology (what is usually termed the 'epistemic fallacy'). He continues:

> There is no escaping having a theory of ontology, it is only a question of whether or not it is consciously acknowledged and studied or whether it is left as an implicit presupposition of one's theory of epistemology. In the case of postmodernists, the dilemma of relativism always auto-subverts their philosophical position. Whilst they deny that there is such a thing as truth (clinging to the realm of epistemology and denying that ontology is even a legitimate subject) any argument they make must surely be making an assertion about the way things are (hence having a theory, albeit implicit and contradictory, of ontology).

For Spencer, ontology cannot, and should not, be reduced to epistemology, because, if it is, everything becomes thought and discourse and social structures/the material world have no causal power (see Chapter 10 for examples of how these philosophical issues work out when dealing with meta-theoretical issues, like structure/agency, the material and the ideational and stability and change). As he puts it (2000: 15):

> (Post-Structuralists refuse) to countenance the idea that knowledge stands in a causal relationship to both society and to the entities of which

> it is knowledge. Knowledge is influenced, and indeed is dependent upon, society through received ideas and through the provision of the very apparatus of thought, in particular through language. This makes history … But knowledge is also knowledge *of* something – of nature or society. This makes science itself a legitimate field of study, studying knowledge not as a social product but as a reflection of the entities of which it is knowledge. Hence, it is possible that knowledge is a social phenomenon but that the entities that it studies are not, that is, that they exist independently of society.

Here, Spencer is not claiming that ideas or discourses do not affect how the 'real world' impacts on agents/groups, but only that these are ideas/discourses about 'real', that is extra-discursive, social phenomena.

It is clear then that the relationship between ontology and epistemology is strongly contested. Post-structuralists see the two as co-constitutive. As Smith (1996) puts it:

> Ontological claims … without an epistemological warrant is dogma … epistemology matters because it determines of what we can have knowledge; moreover, it is not possible to wish it away, or undermine its importance, by arguing, as is fashionably the case … that ontology is prior to epistemology … I see neither ontology nor epistemology as prior to the other, but instead see the two of them as mutually and inextricably interrelated. (Cited in Bates and Jenkins, 2007: 60)

Indeed, even Bates and Jenkins (2007: 60) acknowledge that post-structuralism can 'consciously conflate ontology and epistemology'.

In contrast, Spencer (2000: 2) poses an important question: how can we have a theory about what knowledge is, without some presupposition about the nature of the world? There is no uncontentious way to resolve this issue. We side with Spencer, while you may side with Smith (1996) or Bates and Jenkins (2007). It is your choice. However, it is crucial that you recognize the consequence of adopting different ontological and epistemological positions and different views on the relationship between the two. In the next section, we outline various positions on first ontology and the epistemology, which will make some of the issues discussed to date clearer.

Ontological and epistemological positions

Here we begin by distinguishing between broad ontological and epistemological positions, before considering the various epistemological posi-

tions, and the contestations between them, in more depth. Finally, in this section we identify why such debates, and the positions researchers adopt, are important. Our broad argument is that they shape what we study as social scientists, how we study it and what we think we can claim as a result of that study. In this section, we distinguish between broad positions, although ones which have been given a variety of names. We also need to recognize that not everyone, indeed not even all contributors to this volume would accept our classification; to emphasize the point again, this is a very contested area.

One contestation is particularly important and that concerns how we should categorize post-structuralist approaches. As we saw, they deny the utility, or possibility, of a distinction between ontology and epistemology and are strongly idealist in Spencer's (2000) terms. Consequently, we could locate them in our anti-foundationalist ontological category and our interpretivist epistemological category. However, as Parsons (Chapter 4) emphasizes, if post-structuralism is a variant of constructivism, it is a particular one and he sees modern constructivism (discussed briefly below) in epistemological terms as interested in explanation and engaging with more mainstream political science approaches.

This paragraph immediately raises another issue. Even if we establish broad categories to classify ontological and, particularly epistemological, positions, there will be different strands within each of these broad positions and the boundaries between them may be blurred. Two examples will suffice here. First, to return to Parsons's point above, there are significant epistemological differences between different strands of constructivism. Second, increasingly the boundary between realism, more specifically critical realism, and interpretivism as epistemological positions are being blurred, as is clear in the work of Hay discussed below and in Chapter 10. Here we distinguish between two broad ontological positions, subject to the health warnings above: foundationalism, more commonly seen as objectivism or realism; and anti-foundationalism, more commonly seen as constructivism or relativism. As we have already emphasized, post-structuralists deny any separation between ontology an epistemology. Such researchers would clearly deny that they have an ontological position and, as such, many would put them into a separate category and the reader needs to recognize that qualification when considering what follows. We classify them as anti-foundationalists, because they deny the existence of any extra-discursive 'reality'.

Foundationalism/objectivism/realism

Foundationalism is commonly termed either objectivism or realism. The key point here however is that the different terminology refers to the same

position. From this perspective, the world is viewed as composed of discrete objects which possess properties that are independent of the observer/researcher. As such, all researchers should view and understand these objects in the same way if they have the necessary skills and good judgement. So, to put it another way, there is a real world which exists independently of our knowledge of it. As such, Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 159) argue that those adopting this position, whom they term objectivists, posit the existence of objective, absolute and unconditional truths.

There are significant differences within this position, notably between epistemological positivists and epistemological realists (see below). In this vein, epistemological realists emphasize the role that theory plays in any interpretation of the causal power of any structure/institution in that real world; so the real world effect on actions is mediated by ideas. Similarly, realists would recognize the partialities of researchers who interpret the world and have a more limited understanding of truth than positivists. However, they share the crucial feature of a foundationalist position – that there is a real world out there with independent causal powers (essentially the position defended by Spencer above).

Anti-foundationalism/ constructivism/relativism

In contrast, anti-foundationalism/constructivism/relativism, the other broad ontological perspective, is less easy to classify; there is more variety, as one would expect, given the constructivist position. However, the position has some common features. Guba and Lincoln identify three (1994: 110):

1. In this perspective, realities are local and specific; they vary between individuals/groups. As such, constructions are ontological elements of reality. They are not true, but rather more informed or more consistent. Consequently, although all constructions are meaningful, some are flawed because they are inconsistent or incomplete.
2. At the same time, reality is not discovered, as it is from the other ontological position, rather it is actively constructed. As we saw above, this means that the distinction between ontology and epistemology is blurred. To put it another way, it is the actor (and the values he holds) who decides what is rational. Given this perspective no actor can be objective or value-free actor.
3. Overall, reality is socially constructed, but, while it is individual who construct that world and reflect on it, there views are shaped by social, political and cultural processes.

It is important to emphasize one point here. Our claim that anti-foundationalists argue that there is not a real world out there independent of our knowledge of it is a limited one. We are not claiming that such researchers do not acknowledge that there are tables/mountains/institutions and so on. Rather, they contend that this 'reality' has no social role/causal power independent of the agent's/group's/society's understanding of it.

Distinguishing broad epistemological positions

With regard to epistemological positions, there are different ways of classifying them and even less agreement as to the best way of doing so. Probably, the most common classification, used elsewhere in this book, distinguishes between scientific (sometimes positivist) and hermeneutic (or interpretivist) positions. We begin with a brief review of that distinction, before proposing an alternative, which distinguishes between positivist, realist and interpretivist positions.

The development of social science, as it name implies, was influenced by ideas about the nature of scientific understanding. In particular, the *empiricist* tradition played a crucial role in the development of social science. David Hume argued that knowledge starts from our senses. On the basis of such direct experience we could develop generalizations about the relationship between physical phenomena. The aim was to develop causal statements which specified that, under a given set of conditions, there would be regular and predictable outcomes (on this see Hollis and Smith, 1991, Chapter 3). The adherents of the scientific tradition saw social science as analogous to natural science. In ontological terms they were foundationalists; they thought there was a real world 'out there' which was external to agents. Their focus was upon identifying the *causes* of social behaviour and their emphasis upon *explanation* and, initially, many felt that the use of rigorous 'scientific' methods would allow social scientists to develop laws, similar in status to scientific laws, which would hold across time and space.

In methodological terms, the scientific tradition was very influenced by logical positivism which utilised a very straightforward characterisation of the form of scientific investigation (see Chapter 1). As Hollis and Smith put it (1991: 50):

> To detect the regularities in nature, propose a generalisation, deduce what it implies for the next case and observe whether the prediction succeeds. If it does, no consequent action is needed; if it does not, then either discard the generalisation or amend it and [test the] fresh [predictions].

In contrast, there is an alternative, hermeneutic (the word derives from the Greek for 'to interpret') or interpretivist tradition. The adherents of this position are anti-foundationalists, believing that the world is socially-constructed. They focus upon the *meaning* of behaviour. The emphasis is upon *understanding*, rather than *explanation* (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of this important distinction). Understanding relates to human reasoning and intentions as grounds for social action. In this tradition, it is not possible to establish causal relationships between phenomena that hold across time and space, since social phenomena are not subject to the same kind of observation as natural science phenomena.

We prefer another classification because the scientific tradition identified by Hollis and Smith conflates two distinct positions, positivism and realism. Positivists adhere to a foundationalist ontology and are concerned to establish causal relationships between social phenomema, thus developing explanatory, and indeed predictive, models. The realist shares the same broad ontological position, although with the difference identified above. However, realists, unlike positivists, do not privilege direct observation. The realist believes that there are deep structural relationships between social phenomena which can't be directly observed, but which are crucial for any explanation of behaviour. So, as an example, a realist might argue that patriarchy as a structure cannot be directly observed, although we can see many of the consequences of it; we return to this example later.

The distinction between positivist, realist and interpretivist approaches (see Figure 9.1) is examined in more depth in the next section. The categories we are using would be disputed by other social scientists. We use these distinctions to avoid the conflation of positivism and realism involved in the first distinction. This relates to the argument we made earlier about the need to keep theory of being and theory of knowledge analytically separate. Some social scientists such as Bevir and Rhodes (see below) would want to make further distinctions within the interpretivist tradition (as indeed does Parsons). We deal with this and other criticisms when we look at the variants within the three positions we identify.

In our view, ontological and epistemological concerns cannot, and shouldn't, be ignored or downgraded. Two points are important here. First, ontological and epistemological positions shouldn't be treated like a sweater which can be 'put on' when we are addressing such philosophical issues and 'taken off' when we are doing research. In our view, the dominance of a fairly crude positivist epistemology throughout much of the post-war period encouraged many social scientists to dismiss ontological questions and regard epistemological issues as more or less resolved, with only the details left to be decided by those interested in such

matters. Such social scientists have tended to acknowledge the importance of epistemology without considering it necessary to deal with it in detail; positivism has been regarded as a comforting pullover that can be put on where necessary. In contrast, for us epistemology, to say nothing of ontology, is far from being a closed debate.

Secondly, researchers cannot adopt one position at one time for one project and another on another occasion for a different project. These positions are not interchangeable because they reflect fundamental different approaches to what social science is and how we do it. A researcher's epistemological position is reflected in what is studied, how it is studied and the status the researcher gives to his/her findings. So, a positivist looks for causal relationships, tends to prefer quantitative analysis and wants to produce 'objective' and generalizable findings. A researcher from within the interpretivist tradition is concerned with understanding, not explanation, focuses on the meaning that actions have for agents, tends to use qualitative evidence and offers his/her results as one interpretation of the relationship between the social phenomena studied. Realism is less easy to classify in this way. The realists are looking for causal relationships, but argue that many important relationships between social phenomena can't be observed. This means they may use quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data will only be appropriate for those relationships that are directly observable. In contrast, the unobservable relationships can only be established indirectly; we can observe other relationships which, our theory tells us, are the result of those unobservable pre-relationships. We return to these issues in the next section.

Interrogating different approaches to ontology and epistemology

Here we outline the positivist, the interpretivist and the realist positions in more detail. We focus on: the major criticisms of the positions; the variations within these positions; and the way the positions have changed over time.

Positivism

The core of positivism is fairly straightforward, although of course there are variants within it:

- Positivism is based upon a foundationalist ontology. So, to the positivist, like the realist, but, unlike many in the interpretivist position, the world exists independently of our knowledge of it.

- To the positivist, natural science and social science are broadly analogous. We can establish regular relationship between social phenomenon; using theory to generate hypotheses which can be tested by direct observation. In this view, and in clear contrast to the realist, there are no deep structures that can't be directly observed. Traditionally, positivism contended that there is no appearance/reality dichotomy and that the world is real and not socially constructed. So, direct observation can serve as an independent test of the validity of a theory. Crucially, an observer can be objective in the way s/he undertakes such observations. Researchers from the interpretivist tradition rarely accept any notion of objectivity. Realists accept that all observation is mediated by theory; to the realist, theory plays the crucial role in allowing the researcher to distinguish between those social phenomena which are directly observable and those which are not.
- To positivists the aim of social science is to make causal statements; in their view it is possible to, and we should attempt to, establish causal relationships between social phenomena. They share this aim with realists, while interpretivists deny the possibility of such statements.
- Positivists also argue that it is possible to separate completely empirical questions, questions about what is, from normative questions, questions about what should be. Traditionally, positivists thought that the goal of social science was to pursue empirical questions, while philosophy, meta-physics or religion pursued the normative questions. If we can separate empirical and normative research questions, then it is possible for social science to be objective and value free. Realists and, especially, those from within the interpretivist tradition, would reject that proposition.

Many social scientists are positivists, although much of the positivism is implicit rather than explicit. The behavioural revolution in the social sciences in the 1960s, dealt with by David Sanders in Chapter 1, was an attempt to introduce scientific method into the study of society. It was an explicit reaction to political theory, which it saw as concerned with normative questions, and traditional institutionalism, which it saw as lacking theoretical and methodological rigour. In contrast, it was based upon an objectivist/realist/foundationalist ontology and, most often, a quantitative methodology. The view was that a social 'science' was possible if we followed the scientific method; deriving hypotheses from theory and then testing them in an attempt to falsify them. We needed 'objective' measures of our social phenomena, our variables; so we would focus upon 'hard' data – from government statistics, election results –and so on – rather than 'soft' data – from interviews or participant observation. So, for example, if a positivist was studying political participation, s/he

would be interested in measuring the level of voting, party or pressure group membership, direct action and so on, and relating it to demographic variables such as class, gender, race and education. The aim would be to establish the precise nature of the relationship between these variables and participation in order to produce causal models. We shall return to this example later. As is now widely acknowledged, the ontological and epistemological position adopted had clear methodological implications that the scientific aspirations and confidence of the behavioural revolution tended to mask.

The criticism of positivism takes two broad forms. The first line of criticism broadly argues that, in following the methods of science, positivists misinterpret how science really proceeds. Two lines of argument have been particularly important here. First, there is the pragmatist position of Quine (1961) who develops two crucial critiques of positivism (for a fuller exposition see Hollis and Smith, 1991: 55–7):

1. Quine argues that any knowledge we derive from the five senses is mediated by the concepts we use to analyze it, so there is no way of classifying, or even describing, experience without interpreting it.
2. This means that theory and experiment are not simply separable, rather theory affects both the facts we focus on and how we interpret them. This, in turn, may affect the conclusions we draw if the facts appear to falsify the theory. If we observe 'facts' which are inconsistent with the theory, we might decide that the facts are wrong rather than that the theory is wrong. Of course, this undermines the notion that observation alone can serve to falsify a theory.

Second, there is Kuhn's view (1970) that, at any given time, science tends to be dominated by a particular paradigm that is unquestioned and which affects the questions scientists ask and how they interpret what they observe (for a fuller discussion, see Hollis and Smith, 1991: 57–61). Consequently, scientific investigation is not 'open', as positivism implies, rather particular arguments are excluded in advance. There is a paradigm shift when a lot of empirical observation leads certain brave scientists to question the dominant paradigm, but until that time, and for the most part, scientists discard observations which don't fit (obviously this fits well with the second of Quine's criticisms above) and embrace the results which confirm the paradigm.

The second main line of criticism of positivism is more particular to social science. It argues that there are obvious differences between social and physical or natural phenomena that make social 'science' impossible. Three differences are particularly important. Firstly, social structures, unlike natural structures, don't exist independently of the activities they

shape. So, for example, marriage is a social institution or structure, but it is also a lived experience, particularly, although not exclusively, for those who are married. This lived experience affects agents understanding of the institution and also helps change it. Secondly, and relatedly, social structures, unlike natural structures, don't exist independently of agents' views of what they are doing in the activity. People are reflexive; they reflect on what they are doing and often change their actions in the light of that reflection. This leads us to the third difference. Social structures, unlike natural structures, change as a result of the actions of agents; in most senses the social world varies across time and space. Some positivist social scientists minimize these differences, but, to the extent they are accepted, they point towards a more interpretivist epistemological position.

Many positivists avoid these critiques which are put in the 'toohard basket'; they merely get on with their empirical work, solving puzzles from within a positive paradigm. When they do acknowledge other perspectives that acknowledgement can be perfunctory, an assertion easily demonstrated by a brief consideration of King, Keohane and Verba's (1994) treatment of interpretive (for them this appears to subsume realist) approaches. Essentially, King, Keohane and Verba argue that interpretivist approaches, by which the actually mean interpretivist methods, have utility as long as they are integrated into a positivist, or scientific as they term it, position. In this vein, they assert:

> In our view, however, science … and interpretation are *not* fundamentally different endeavors aimed at divergent goals. Both rely on preparing careful descriptions, gain deep understanding of the world, asking good questions, formulating falsifiable hypothesis on the basis of more general theories, and collecting the evidence needed to evaluated those hypotheses. (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 37)

They continue:

> Yet once hypotheses have been formulated, demonstrating their correctness … requires valid scientific inferences. The procedure for inference followed by interpretivist social scientists, furthermore, must incorporate the same standards as those followed by other qualitative and quantitative researchers. (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 38)

As we emphasized, King, Keohane and Verba see interpretivism as a methodological orientation, which may have utility, rather than an epistemological position. So, they view interpretivism as a means of generating better questions to be utilized within a positivist framework. Indeed,

it almost seems that they are advocating a major/minor methodological mix (see Marsh and Read, 2002), in which qualitative, interpretivist, methods are used to generate better questions for survey research designed to test, and attempt to falsify, hypotheses.

It also bears repetition that King, Keohane and Verba seem to conflate realism and interpretivism. So, in their section on interpretivism, they assert the usual positivist critique of epistemological realism: 'social scientists who focus on only overt, *observable*, behaviors are missing a lot, but how are we to know if we cannot see?' (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 41).

Although King, Keohane and Verba are among the foremost US political scientists, there are much more sophisticated positivists, among them Sanders and John who write in this volume, who are more willing to acknowledge and respond to criticisms of the position. It is particularly worth examining David Sanders's view in a little more detail because it represents an excellent example of the modern, more sophisticated, positivist position. Sanders accepts he has been strongly influenced by the positivist position, but acknowledges the 'ferocious philosophical criticism' to which it was subjected. He argues that modern behaviouralists who might also be called 'post-positivists' acknowledge the interdependence of theory and observation, recognize that normative questions are important and not always easy to separate from empirical questions, and accept that other traditions have a key role to play in political and social analysis. As such, this post-positivism has moved a significant way from more traditional positivism, largely as a result of the type of criticisms outlined here.

However, the ontological and epistemological problems haven't gone away, rather they have been elided. Two quotes from Sanders illustrate the point. First, he asserts in this volume (see p. 29):

> Modern behaviouralists simply prefer to subject their own theoretical claims to empirical test. They also suspect that scholars working in non-empirical traditions are never able to provide a satisfactory answer to the crucial question: 'How would you know if you were wrong?'

Later he continues (p. 40):

> [M]odern behaviouralists accept that theory must play a central role in social analysis, they also recognize the possibility that different theoretical perspectives might generate different observations. Obviously, this possibility renders the task of subjecting rival theories to empirical testing rather more complicated. According to contemporary behaviouralists,

> however, it does not render the task any less significant. Whatever observations a theory may engender, if it is to be considered a truly explanatory theory, it must generate falsifiable predictions that are not contradicted by the available empirical evidence. A social enquiry is, by definition, about what people do, think or say. There is, ultimately, nothing else other than people doing, thinking and saying things – whatever fancy concepts analysts might use in order to characterize 'reality'. Behaviouralism allows all theories to make whatever characterization of 'reality' they like. However, if they are to be considered explanatory, they must make statements about what people will do, think or say, given certain conditions. There is no reason why each theory should not be evaluated on its own observational terms. But unless a theory can be evaluated – that is, tested empirically – on its own observational terms, behaviouralists are not prepared to grant it the status of explanatory theory in the first place.

This is a sophisticated statement of a positivist epistemological position, but it is still essentially positivist. Again, like King, Keohane and Verba, the aim is to use observation (of whatever type) to test hypothesized relationships between the social phenomena studied. Research from within other traditions must still be judged against the positivists' criteria: 'observation must be used in order to conduct a systematic empirical test of the theory that is being posited'. Yet, that is not a standard most researchers from within an interpretivist tradition could accept, because they do not believe that direct observation can be objective and used as a test of 'reality'. Most realists would also have a problem with Sanders's position because they would see many of the key relationships as unobservable.

One other aspect of Sanders's position is important here. He accepts that interpretation and meaning are important, which might suggest that the differences between positivist and interpretivist traditions are beginning to dissolve. So, Sanders (see p. 31) in criticizing previous studies of voting behaviour: 'There are other areas – relating to the way in which individuals reflect, to a greater or lesser degree, upon themselves – here behavioural electoral research has simply not dared to tread.' He recognizes that such factors might, or might not, be important, but emphasizes that they would be difficult to study empirically. However, the crucial point is that Sanders wants to treat interpretation and meaning as intervening variables. In this view, how a voter understands the parties and his/her position may affect his/her voting behaviour. At best this acknowledges only one aspect of the double hermeneutic; the interpretivist tradition would argue that we also need to acknowledge the dependence of the observer on socially-constructed filters affecting frameworks of knowledge.

So, positivism has changed in response to criticism. Post-positivism is

much less assertive that there is only way of doing social science. However, positivists like King, Keohane and Verba still fail to acknowledge that ontological and epistemological differences can't be solved by methodological integration. Positivism still privileges explanation, rather than understanding, and the primacy of direct observation. In our terms, it is still objectivist/realist/foundationalist and firmly located in the scientific tradition.

The interpretivist position

The interpretivist (often called a constructivist) position is clearly the most varied, as Parsons (Chapter 4) demonstrates. Parsons distinguishes very clearly between postmodern interpretivists and what he terms 'modern' constructivists, although he recognizes that other lines could be drawn. We return to these distinctions below, but begin by outlining what we see as the core of the position.

The interpretivist tradition is the obvious 'other' of positivism. However, it is a much broader church than positivism, as Parsons demonstrates. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin with an outline of the core of the position.

- In the interpretivist tradition, researchers contend that the world is socially or discursively constructed; a distinctive feature of all interpretivist approaches therefore is that that they are based on to a greater or lesser extent on an anti-foundationalist ontology.
- This means that for researchers working within this tradition, social phenomena cannot be understood independently of our interpretation of them; rather it is these interpretations/understandings of social phenomena that directly affect outcomes. It is the interpretations/meanings of social phenomena that are crucial; interpretations/meanings that can only be established and understood within discourses, contexts or traditions. Consequently, we should focus on identifying those discourses or traditions and establishing the interpretations and meanings they attach to social phenomena.
- This approach acknowledges that 'objective' analysis of the kind aspired to in the natural sciences is unattainable. Social 'scientists' (interpretivists would not use this term) are not privileged, but themselves operate within discourses or traditions. Knowledge is theoretically or discursively laden. As such, this position acknowledges the double hermeneutic.

This position has clear methodological implications. It argues that there is no objective truth, that the world is socially constructed and that the

role of social 'science' is to study those social constructions. Quantitative methods can be blunt instruments and may produce misleading data. In contrast, we need to utilize qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups and vignettes to help us establish how people understand their world. So, for example, someone operating from within this tradition studying political participation would start by trying to establish how people understand 'the political' and 'political' participation. In addition, the position puts a premium on the reflexivity of the researcher. She must be as aware as possible of her partialities and, as far as possible, take those into account when interpreting her respondent's interpretation of their experiences/actions. Consequently, from this perspective quantitative methods are again blunt instruments.

Yet some, maybe an increasing number of interpretivists would want to explain, not merely understand. Parsons is an excellent case in point. He argues (see pp. 90–1 in this volume):

> 'Modern' constructivists… think that we can posit social construction among actors but still manage to make some acceptable (if modestly tentative) claims about how the socially-constructed world 'really' works. The core of their position is usually quite simple (and is also a standard position in non-constructivist scholarship): just being aware of our inclination to interpretive bias helps us to solve the problem. If we set up careful research designs, and submit our arguments to open debate among a wide range of people with different views, then we can arrive at pragmatically acceptable claims about how the world really works. In short, for modern constructivists – like for other 'modern' scholars – how much the world is socially constructed is something we can document.

Here, the emphasis is upon a systematic study of the respondents' social constructions and clear and effective reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Even so, the claims that could be made for explanation on the basis of such research would not satisfy many behaviouralists, as Parsons himself acknowledges.

The major criticism of the interpretivist tradition comes, unsurprisingly, from positivists, though some realists would agree with elements of that critique. To positivists, the interpretivist tradition merely offers opinions or subjective judgements about the world (that, of course, is the core of King, Keohane and Verba's implicit critique of interpretivism). As such, to a positivist, there is no basis on which to judge the validity of an interpetivist's knowledge claims. One person's view of the world, and of the relationship between social phenomena within it, is as good as another's view. To the positivist this means that such research is akin to history, or

even fiction, whereas they aspire to a science of society. It is difficult for someone in the interpretivist tradition to answer this accusation, because it is based on a totally different ontological view and reflects a different epistemology and, thus, a different view of what social science is about. However, as we shall see, most researchers do believe that it is possible to generalize, if only in a limited sense. Perhaps more interestingly, even Bevir and Rhodes (2002; 2003), whom Parsons might not see as modern constructivists, attempt to defend their approach against this positivist critique by establishing a basis on which they can make knowledge claims; on which they can claim that one interpretation, or narrative, is superior to another. We shall return to their argument below.

Bevir and Rhodes (2002, Ch. 2) distinguish between the hermeneutic and postmodern, or post-structuralist, strands in the interpretivist position (see also Spencer, 2000, on this distinction). In essence, the hermeneutic tradition is idealist; it argues that we need to understand the meanings people attach to social behaviour. So, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of texts and actions. This involves the use of ethnographic techniques (participant observation, transcribing texts, keeping diaries, etc. to produce what Geertz (1973) calls 'thick description'. As Bevir and Rhodes put it (2003: 22), quoting Geertz, the aim is to establish: 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to'. However, ethnographers do generalize. They develop a narrative about the past based upon the meanings which the actions had for social actors. Then, on the basis of this 'thick description', they offer an interpretation of what this tells us about the society. The point is that these interpretations are always partial, in both senses of the world, and provisional; they are not 'true'.

Bevir and Rhodes (2002) emphasize that post-structuralism and postmodernism have provided a powerful challenge to foundationalism in both philosophy and social science. Yet, as they also point out, this variant of the interpretivist tradition is itself so diverse that it is difficult, if not impossible, to characterize. They overcome this problem by focusing on the work of Michael Foucault, who is perhaps the best known writer in this broad tradition. He, like most post-structuralists, is a strong opponent of foundationalism, and indeed would deny any separation between ontology and epistemology, and the modernisation project associated with the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thought contended that: the basis of human knowledge is direct experience; as such, it is possible to develop an 'objective' view of the 'real' world (thus, it denies both elements of the double hermeneutic); language is transparent or neutral; and that human history is inevitably progressive, with present knowledge building on past knowledge to improve our information about the world and our ability to control it.

In contrast, Foucault argues that experience is acquired within a prior discourse. As such, language is crucial because institutions and actions only acquire a meaning through language. Thus, as Bevir and Rhodes argue (2003: 23), to Foucault: 'to understand an object or action, political scientists have to interpret it in the wider discourse of which it is part'. This means that, as Bevir and Rhodes stress, it is the social discourse, rather than the beliefs of individuals, which are crucial to Foucault's version of the interpretivist position. The identification of that discourse, and the role it plays in structuring meanings, is thus the key concern of those adopting this approach (for an example of this broad approach in use, see Howarth, 1995).

Bevir and Rhodes develop their own take on the interpretivist tradition. It is particularly interesting because it directly addresses the key issue raised in the positivist critique of this tradition. They argue that social science is about the development of narratives, not theories. As such, they stress the importance of understanding and the impossibility of absolute knowledge claims, but they want to explain and they defend a limited notion of objectivity. Broadly, Bevir and Rhodes are within the hermeneutic, rather than the postmodern, or post-structuralist, stream of the interpretivist tradition. As such, they follow Geertz and others in arguing that it is possible to produce explanations within the interpretivist tradition. However, their understanding of explanation is very different from that of a positivist. In their view, the researcher can produce an explanation of an event or of the relationship between social phenomena. But this explanation is built upon their interpretation of the meanings the actors involved gave to their actions. What is produced is a narrative which is particular, to that time and space, and partial, being based on a subjective interpretation of the views of, most likely, only some of the actors involved. Consequently, any such narrative must be provisional; there are no absolute truth claims.

However, Bevir and Rhodes do wish to make some, more limited, knowledge claims. They contend: 'Although, we do not have access to pure facts that we can use to declare particular interpretations to be true or false, we can still hang on to the idea of objectivity.' They follow Reed (1993) and argue (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 38) that a field of study 'is a co-operative intellectual *practice*, with a *tradition* of historically produced norms, rules, conventions and standards of excellence that remain subject to critical debate, and with a *narrative* content that gives meaning to it'. They continue, quoting Reed (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 38):

> [Practice, tradition and narrative provide] for a negotiated and dynamic set of standards through which rational debate and argumen-

> tation between proponents of rival perspectives or approaches is possible [where] these standards are historically embedded within social practices, traditions and narratives which provide 'embedded reasons' ... for judging an argument true or false or an action right or wrong .

Such criteria are not universal or objective, rather, in Reed's (1993: 177) words, they are: 'shared criteria for assessing ... knowledge claims'. To Bevir and Rhodes, like Reed, postmodernism errs in failing to acknowledge 'significant, grounded rationality' that is to be found in these practices and traditions (Reed, 1993: 177).

In Bevir and Rhodes' view (2003: 39), such knowledge claims are not self-referential because they can be 'reconfirmed' at three distinct points:

> The first is when we translate our concepts for fieldwork: that is, are they meaningful to practitioners and users and if not, why not? The second is when we reconstruct narratives from the conversations: that is, is the story logical and consistent with the data? And the third is when we redefine and translate our concepts because of the academic community's judgement on the narratives: that is, does the story meet the agreed knowledge criteria?

Overall, they argue (2003: 39):

> To overcome this difficulty, we should conceive of objective knowledge, less as what our community happens to agree on, and more as a normative standard embedded in a practice of criticising and comparing rival accounts of 'agreed facts'. The anti-foundational nature of this practice lies in its appeal, not to given facts, but to those agreed in a particular community or conversation. In addition, and of key importance, the normative, critical bite of our approach lies in conducting the comparison by the rules of intellectual honesty. These rules originate in anti-foundationalism and not in a straightforward acceptance of the norms of the relevant community or conversation.

As we can see then, there are a number of variants within the interpretivist tradition. However, they are all anti-foundationalist and critical of positivism. These approaches have become much more common in political science over the last few decades for a number of reasons. First, increasingly philosophical critiques have led to the questioning of positivism. Second, the post-structuralist turn in social science has had an affect on political science, although much less so than in sociology. Third, normative political theory has changed fundamentally. Historically, it was foundationalist; the

aim was to establish some absolute notion of the good or of justice. As Buckler argues in Chapter 8, that is no longer the case. Some normative political theorists have been influence by postmodernism, again variously defined, and more by the work of Quine and others. Now, most political theorists are anti-foundationalists or, at the very least, have a very limited conception of any universal foundations. Fourth, as Randall shows in Chapter 6, much, but by no means all, feminist thought has been strongly influenced by post-structuralism; it is anti-foundationalist and operates within the interpretivist tradition. As such, we can see the influence of this interpretivist tradition very broadly across political science.

Realism

Realism shares an ontological position with positivism, but, in epistemological terms, modern realism has a great more in common with interpretivism. The core views of classical realism are again fairly clear and owe much to Marx's work:

- To realists, the world exists independently of our knowledge of it. In ontological terms they, like positivists, are foundationalists.
- Again like positivists, realists contend that social phenomena/structures do have causal powers, so we can make causal statements.
- However, unlike positivists, realists contend that not all social phenomena, and the relationships between them, are directly observable. There are deep structures that cannot be observed and what can be observed may offer a false picture of those phenomena/structures and their effects (for an excellent exposition of this position see Smith, in Hollis and Smith, 1991: 205–8; see also Sayer, 2000, and Elder Vass, 2007). However, as Smith puts it, although we cannot observe those structures: 'positing their existence gives us the best explanation of social action. To use a phrase familiar to the philosophy of science, we are involved in 'inference to the best explanation' (Hollis and Smith, 1991: 207). As such, to a realist there is often a dichotomy between reality and appearance. This is a very important issue because it has clear methodological implications. It means that realists do not accept that what appears to be so, or, perhaps more significantly, what actors say is so, is necessarily so. As an example, classical Marxism, and Marxism is the archetypal classical realism, argued that there was a difference between 'real' interests, which reflect material reality, and perceived interests, which may be manipulated by the powerful forces in society. Given this view, we cannot merely ask people what their interests are, because we would merely be identifying their manipulated interests, not their 'real' interests.

The criticisms of classical realism were of two sorts, which reflect different epistemological positions. The positivists denied the existence of unobservable structures (for example, see the quote from King, Keohane and Verba above). More importantly, positing them makes the knowledge claims of realism untestable and thus unfalsifiable. As such, realist claims that rely on the effect of unobservable structures have the same status to positivists as the claims of scholars from within the interpretivist tradition. In contrast, authors from the interpretivist tradition criticize the ontological claims of realism. In their view, there are no structures that are independent of social action and no 'objective' basis on which to observe the actions or infer the deep structures. So, realist claims that structures cause social action are rejected on both ontological and epistemological grounds.

In our view, contemporary realism has been significantly influenced by the interpretivist critique. In particular, this modern critical realism acknowledges two points. First, while social phenomena exist independently of our interpretation of them, our interpretation/understanding of them affects outcomes. So, structures don't determine, rather they constrain and facilitate. Social science involves the study of reflexive agents who interpret and change structures. Second, our knowledge of the world is fallible; it is theory-laden. We need to identify and understand both the external 'reality' and the social construction of that 'reality' if we are to explain the relationship between social phenomena.

Realism also has clear methodological implications. It suggests that there is a real world 'out there', but emphasizes that outcomes are shaped by the way in which that world is socially constructed. As such, it would acknowledge the utility of both quantitative and qualitative data. So, for example, they might use quantitative methods to identify the extent to which financial markets are 'globalized'. However, they would also want to analyze qualitatively how globalization is perceived, or discursively constructed, by governments, because the realist argument would be that both the 'reality' and the discursive construction affects what government does in response to global pressures. We shall return to this example later.

Modern realism then attempts to acknowledge much of the interpretivist critique, while retaining a commitment to causal explanation and, specifically, the causal powers of unobservable structures. The key problem here of course it that it is not easy, indeed many would see it as impossible, to combine scientific and interpretivist positions because they have such fundamentally different ontological and epistemological underpinnings, one focusing on explanation and the other on understanding (on this point, see Hollis and Smith, 1991: 212). Having considered how these categories relate to some important issues in the social sciences, we can now move on to apply the arguments to particular cases so as to illustrate their use and their limits.

Ontology and epistemology in political science: a case study of globalization

The aim in this section is to examine how a researcher's ontological and epistemological position affects the way s/he approaches empirical questions in political science using one example, the literature on globalization. The literature on globalization has mushroomed in the last two decades. It has been common to distinguish between processes or aspects of globalization; so many authors have distinguished between economic, political and cultural processes, while acknowledging that they are interrelated. In this vein, many have argued that economic globalization has grown apace and that this process has significantly restricted the autonomy of the nation state. Indeed, Ohmae (1996) went as far as to claim that only two economic forces, global financial markets and trans-national corporations, would play any role in the politics of the future. In his view, the future role of states will be analogous to the current role of parish or town councils. At the same time, other authors have focused on cultural globalization, suggesting that world culture is being increasingly homogeneous, in the view of most reflecting a growing US hegemony. Certainly, there is little doubt that the issue of globalization is a crucial one for those interested in questions of contemporary political economy and governance.

Political scientists have probably been most concerned with economic globalization and the way in which it restricts the autonomy of the state and have, most often, utilized an objectivist/realist/foundationalist ontology and a positivist epistemology, although, as we shall see below, significant more recent work is realist. In contrast, sociologists and, especially, cultural studies academics, concentrate upon cultural globalization, operating from a constructivist, relativist/anti-foundationalist and interpretivist position.

The main debate about economic globalization has concerned the extent to which it has increased. There are two main positions. Some authors, like Ohmae (1990), who are christened hyperglobalists by Held *et al. (*1999) and seen as first wave theorists by Hay and Marsh (2000), argue that there has been a massive increase in various indicators of economic globalization: direct foreign investment; international bank lending; trans-national production; international trade, etc. In contrast, authors such as Hirst and Thompson (1999), christened sceptics by Held *et al.* (1999) and seen by Hay and Marsh (2000) as second wave theorists, argue that the process is more limited. More specifically, they suggest that: globalization is not a new phenomenon; regionalization, rather than globalization, is a better description of the changes that have occurred; and the only area in which there has been significant globalization is in relation to financial markets. We are not concerned here with the detail of

this argument. Our point is that both sets of authors agree about what constitutes evidence of globalization and how we can go about studying that evidence. Here, globalization is an economic process that can be measured quantitatively, indeed there is large agreement as to the appropriate measures, and which, to the extent that it exists, has an effect on patterns of governance.

More recently, other authors have been, in most cases implicitly rather than explicitly, critical of this ontological and epistemological approach. The point is easily made if we return to two ways of classifying the literature on globalization to which we have already referred. Held *et al.* contrast hyperglobalist and sceptical approaches to globalization with a third approach to which they adhere; the transformationalist thesis. In contrast, Hay and Marsh (2000) identify a third wave of the globalization literature that builds upon a critique of the first two waves. These two 'third ways' share something in common, but they differ significantly in a manner that reflects ontological and epistemological debates.

The transformationalists differ significantly from the sceptics in that they share

> a conviction that, at the dawn of a new millennium, globalisation is a central driving force behind the rapid social, political and economic changes that are reshaping modern societies and world order … In this respect, globalisation is conceived as a powerful transformative force which is responsible for a massive shake out of societies, economies, institutions of governance and world order. (Held *et al.*, 1999: 7)

Held *et al.* also emphasize the major way in which the transformationalist account parts company with both the other two positions (1999: 7):

> The transformationalists make no claims about the future trajectory of globalisation … Rather [they] emphasise globalisation as a long-term historical process which is inscribed with contradictions and which is significantly shaped by conjunctural factors.

So, they argue that: there are 'real' social, political and economic changes occurring in the world; globalization is a cause of these changes, a transformative force; but there is no inevitable process of globalization which, as social scientists, we can identify. This last point is especially important here. The putative development of globalization is dependent on the actions of agents, whether individuals, companies, institutions or states; as such, it is a socially constructed process. It seems clear then that the transformative position is a realist one.

This position has methodological consequences. It points strongly to comparative analysis, because the emphasis is upon how different countries, and indeed different companies and markets, are affected by, and respond to, this process of globalization in different ways. If globalization is not an inevitable, or universal, process, then we need to focus on how it is differently experienced in different contexts.

This point is even clearer if we turn to what Hay and Marsh call the third wave literature on globalization. Hay and Marsh (2000: 6) follow Held *et al.* in arguing that we: 'shouldn't make essentialising and reifying assumptions about the effects, consequences, or even the very existence, of globalisation'. Rather, globalization is a series of contradictory and contingent processes. More specifically, they suggest that, for many authors, especially the hyperglobalists, globalization is a process without a subject. In contrast, they argue that it is agents who construct globalization and, as such, the researcher should identify the actors involved and how they perceive and discursively construct globalizing tendencies.

However, Hay and Marsh go further to contend that these discursive constructions have significant effects on outcomes. So, they suggest that it is the discursive construction of globalization that affects government economic policies, rather than the 'real' processes of globalization. As such, and taking the UK as an example, their argument would run along the following lines:

- While there has been a significant increase in regionalism in patterns of trading and a globalization of financial markets, there is limited evidence that Britain is locked into a globalized political economy which determines the economic policy which the British government can adopt.
- However, British governments, and especially the Blair government, argued that it was constrained in that way. To them, the extent of globalization is such that the pursuit of neoliberal policies is inevitable; there is no alternative.
- The dominant discursive construction of globalization has a crucial effect on what governments do; for example predisposing these governments to purse neoliberal, active labour market policies.

We are not concerned here about the validity or otherwise of this argument. The crucial point here is that this view clearly marks a break with the positivism that underpins most work on globalization. To Hay and Marsh, there may be 'real' processes at work, but the way they affect outcomes is mediated by the discursive construction(s) of these processes. This argument has both realist and interpretivist elements. There is an appeal to a real world, but the emphasis is on the discursive construction

of that world. This position illustrates how realist and interpretivist positions interface. In our view, this position is a realist one if it recognizes that there is an interactive or dialectical relationship between the 'real' world and the discourses. A realist would acknowledge not only that discourses have real effects, in this case that the dominant discourse of globalization shapes economic policy, but also that the 'real' processes of globalization constrain the resonance of different discourses. So, if the dominant discourse is at odds with the 'reality', alternative discourses can appeal to that 'reality deficit'. However, if it is merely the discourses that have the causal power, then, in our view, it is an interpretivist position (see Chapter 10 for a more extended discussion of this issue).

There are other approaches to globalization which are clearly located in an interpretivist tradition. As we emphasized above, most of these approaches stress cultural globalization. Of course, as Held *et al.* point out (1999: 328), the concept of culture has a long and complex history but: 'normally refers to the social construction, articulation and reception of meaning'. This definition immediately suggests an anti-foundationalist ontology and, most often, an interpretivist epistemology.

It is obviously possible to approach the issue of cultural globalization utilizing a positivist epistemology. So, one could focus empirically on the extent to which certain cultural icons, for example, Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Madonna, have become universal, or whether colonialism was associated with a similar global culture (see Held *et al.*, 1999: Chapter 7). However, the focus of a cultural studies approach to globalization is much more likely to be on 'difference'; a crucial value to post-structuralists. Two points are important here. First, the argument would be that there are various discourses about globalization, none of which is 'true', although at any time one discourse may be dominant. Second, while one discourse may dominate, it can be, and will always be, resisted; different agents – citizens and researchers – will offer different narrations of globalization and its effects. In this way, this alternative 'cultural studies' approach reflects an anti-foundationalist ontological and an interpretivist epistemological position.

Conclusion

It is not possible to resolve ontological and epistemological disputes in a way that all would accept. Rather, we have sought to introduce the reader to these complex issues in a way designed to make them intelligible to a non-philosopher. In our view, a number of points are crucial:

- Ontological and epistemological positions are better viewed as a skin,

not a sweater. It may be tempting to attempt to find a synthesis of all the available positions, in the hope that, at some level of analysis, agreement is possible over these fundamental issues. Unfortunately, experience and logic combine to warn against this temptation. They continue because they reflect disagreements not just about logic or technicalities but about the proper scope of human action in society. In other words, they are questions which relate to deep-rooted moral positions. These moral positions may be internally coherent, but they seem incompatible with one another, except in so far as they all include some appeal to intellectual and ethical tolerance of diversity.

- In the face of these difficulties, another strategy, alluring at least to risk-averse researchers, is to avoid the issue. Far from being safe, this position is actually the opposite, since it does not enable one to distinguish between good and bad research and between good and bad arguments. The least one can say about these issues is that they are of sufficient importance to warrant a genuine commitment to come to terms with them. Coming to terms with the issues requires one to think through the different arguments separately, to compare them and to evaluate them. As we emphasize at the beginning of this chapter, this means that all researchers should identify and acknowledge their epistemological and ontological underpinnings and how these affect their research design and research method and, most importantly, the claims the make on the basis of what their research reveals.

The purpose of this chapter has been to encourage this and to attempt to provide an introduction to some of the main ideas and methods involved. Like everyone else, we have an ontological and epistemological position, and a position on the relationship between ontology and epistemology, which we acknowledge. However, our aim has been to introduce readers to the variety of positions; it is up to you do decide where you stand.

Further reading

- See all the debates stimulated by the version of this chapter in the second edition of this volume (Bates and Jenkins, 2007; Hay, 2007a; Marsh and Furlong, 2007).
- The best introductions to the philosophy of science and social science are Chalmers (1986, 1990) and Winch (1958).
- For an accessible overview of ontology and epistemology see Hay (2002) and Della Porta and Keating (2008).

- On the positivist approach see Kuhn (1970), Hempel (1965, 1966); or Halfpenny (1982).
- On the interpretive approach see Bevir and Rhodes (2003), especially Chapter 2.
- On realism see Sayer (2000) and McAnulla (2006).
- On the relationship between ontology and epistemology see Spencer (2000).