Everything You Didn't Want to Know about Research

*(and were afraid to ask)

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Slide

Researchers face a dilemma. Bassagordian's Basic Principle states: 'By definition, when researching the unknown, you do not know what you will find or even if you have found it'. Prosaically, many discoveries stem from accidents. Archimedes realized how to calculate volume while having a bath. According to an early scientific myth, he then ran naked through Athens shouting '*Eureka*', 'I've found it'. Dunn and Wood identified Viagra by chance, as famously did Fleming penicillin. (Another myth: Fleming took months to realize the importance of the 'mould juice' he had stumbled upon.) By contrast, normal science (discussed below) works by following procedures within set parameters. Research consists effectively in adding detail within established frameworks of knowledge. Possibilities not recognized by the model are largely ignored. So, what should aspiring researchers do?

By way of answer, I briefly review my own research, including the role that chance plays. Then I turn to the vexing question of what we mean by knowledge, theory and method for the study of South East Asia. What lessons might we learn from this? And, finally, are there more general issues at stake?

You may be asking yourselves though: 'Do I need to bother with such questions? Why can't I just get on with my project?' Previous generations thought the same – and they were almost always wrong. You are not usually told this, but university libraries are stacked with monuments to past mistakes. Not to question what you are doing is to skate on thin ice. (Video)

I read Social Anthropology with reference to South East Asia at Cambridge. As a middle-class Brit in the late 1960s, I had no experience of the societies anthropologists usually studied. So, I applied to, and taught at, the University of Singapore for a year where I had to lecture on Clifford Geertz's writings on Bali, which were as elegant as they seemed unlikely. So, for my PhD I went to SOAS where the last great Dutch scholar of Bali, Christiaan Hooykaas, worked. You probably imagine Bali as a tourist destination, but its renown stemmed from being one of the most complex cultures in the world. Margaret Mead said it was so intricate that the only way to study it was to be parachuted in clueless. I studied Indonesian and Balinese for two years, which included background research in Leiden. I was then deemed fit for fieldwork.

Classical ethnography British-style is unusual. Historically, it consisted largely of lining up the natives and asking them questions. Then a Polish research student at the LSE, Bronislaw Malinowski, went to the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia shortly before the First World War broke out. As a harmless enemy alien, he was told to stay put for a few months until hostilities ceased. Four years later he staggered out, having accidentally invented intensive ethnography by participant-observation. It enables an unparalleled knowledge of social institutions, not as ideals, but in practice (Slide). It underwrites a critical distance born of alienation, which Lévi-Strauss hailed as the cultural equivalent of psychoanalysis. Now ethnography straddles the great European epistemological divide between knowledge through explanation and understanding through interpretation. It instantiates an irreducible double discursivity between Western academic and indigenous ways of thinking. And it became the standard method for

British anthropologists. While the results are rewarding, the full-blown version is arduous, lonely, frustrating and painful, unless you are a masochist bred by English public schools.[1]

The first question is how you select your field site. After much discussion with local Balinese I chose a remote hill village where I was probably the third non-Indonesian to set foot. Here chance stepped in. Twenty-one (one in five) men had been shot or tortured to death as so-called communists four years before. And their families lived cheek by jowl with the killers. People feared I was a government spy and shunned me. Specialized in symbolic anthropology, I found everyone had other preoccupations. Coping with acute poverty and settling scores for the massacres were more interesting than chatting with a potentially dangerous foreigner. As happens, gradually people started to accept me, but I had to study what they were interested in. I learned more about politics than I imagined possible. After two years, I had pretty exhaustive details on the seven hundred inhabitants of the village. These included changes in land holdings since records began; yields of rice harvests, other crops and sources of income; membership of work groups, details of kinship, marriage, caste; political factions; temple and voluntary group affiliation and changes. With such materials, statistics were effectively superfluous. I could trace the shifting relationships of any person since the Dutch arrived in 1908 and knew details of their intimate lives, like who was sleeping with whom, of which even their partners were unaware. Emerging with excessive empirical detail about one Balinese village and a PhD thesis of ¼ million words or 5 kg, I exemplified Edward Teller's definition of a specialist as someone who knows everything about nothing.

So far, so good. Starting by discovering what I was trained to, unfortunately I found out too much. Anthropologists relied for their object of study on relative constants: something you can get hold of and preferably count or measure. These were social structure (defined as jural rules), collective representations (beliefs, values, worldviews) and social organization (defined as standardized modes of co-activity). Balinese had these in superabundance but, if you looked carefully at what they actually did and said, everything liquified, like Salvador Dali's clocks (Slide). Quite simply Balinese seemed continually to rework their laws, corporate groups and social arrangements in the light of circumstances. They were not confused by this: just I.

The admirable precept of grasping 'the native's point of view' has a drawback. The scholars' and natives' worldviews are of different kinds. We have science: they have magic and belief. We have reason: they have rationalization. We have history: they have myth. We have explanations: they have interpretations. Our accounts are true: theirs are folk tales. These distinctions are constitutive of academic knowledge. Without them the entire scientific rationale of studying other peoples collapses. Sitting day after day listening to Balinese talking, their explanations or interpretations were quite as coherent as mine – they just used incommensurate presuppositions. On what grounds was I to dismiss theirs? Anthropologists have in varying degree wrestled with this problem but almost all swim, as it were, with one foot on the solid bottom of Western epistemology.

[1] Purists argue that anything short of a year (ideally two years) of intensive fieldwork by participant-observation is not ethnography proper. However, even shortish periods of in-depth involvement in the lived worlds of our subjects of study enriches most research. At the least, it serves as an effective antidote to the pre-articulated work of previous scholars and official accounts. Most research tends to be based on the versions of an élite or an unrepresentative selection of people. So, experiencing how a wide range of people actually live, argue and act in daily life is an invaluable corrective. It is particularly salutary to offset the findings of questionnaires and surveys, because the questions asked are formulated within a discourse quite different from those of our subjects.

If anthropological theory was proving so wobbly, how secure were the foundations of Western knowledge in universal reason? Was understanding instead relative to a given way of life in Wittgenstein's terms? Where did explanation end and interpretation or description begin? Crucially, what were the implications if different peoples worked with different presuppositions? Grappling with these questions has led me on a forty-year intellectual peregrination.

If research is about finding evidence that fits your frame of reference, you can always find some. (Slide) What if the models are so fundamentally wrong that they miss much of what happens? Concepts like structure and system are axiomatic to post-Aristotelian explanation which aims to establish what is necessary, fixed and determining behind everyday appearances. Other considerations – everything that is contingent – should be omitted as irrelevant. But what if people presuppose that everything is in flux: all matter, all animate forms, all ideas are continually transforming? Then anticipating and mastering change requires radically different strategies from trying to nail down flux through structure. A world of transformability fits observable practice and squares with how Balinese understand and act upon the world. The Greek thinker Heraclitus (of whom Aristotle unsurprisingly disapproved) said you can't step into the same river twice. My Balinese friends retorted this was simplistic: the same person cannot step into the same river twice.

The question arose of what to do for my next fieldtrip. Intellectual curiosity suggested researching Balinese indigenous philosophy. But the topic was outside the scope of recognized knowledge and like jumping off a cliff at night. To mitigate the risks, I proposed sending religious texts from the research village to my mentor, Hooykaas, while I would investigate cultural presuppositions. Two weeks before the trip, Hooykaas died in a traffic accident. It was over the cliff – without a parachute. I plunged into asking Balinese how they thought about and questioned the world they lived in. What were their ideas about space, time, causation, agency, meaning, the human subject and so on? How did they reason, explain and interpret the world about them?

What followed was, figuratively, like living downstream when a dam bursts. Not only did ordinary villagers have categories, terminology and procedures for more or less everything we do. In some respects, they were significantly more sophisticated. For example, they had nine terms for what we would call 'meaning': topic, import, exegesis, point, purpose, substance, the intended reference, material and immaterial outcomes. Asking 'What is the meaning?' in Bali is meaningless. Another example: Hooykaas had complained that Balinese did not know the meanings of the complex offerings they made. (Slide) While researching words for knowing, I discovered there were two terms with quite different truth conditions. *Uning* involved being able to furnish empirical evidence; whereas *nurah* implied to guess, to think is the case, to know but be unable to prove, to have heard say. Asking if they could *nurah* about offerings, ideas and suggestions came tumbling out. Translating uncritically from European languages to Balinese committed an elementary category mistake.

Like Father Charles Bouillevaux who was credited with 'discovering' Angkor, I had bumped into a world that Balinese, like the Khmer, knew all about, even if we didn't. Like most young scholars, I was trained in one discipline and knew little of others. Blundering around in the dark, I kept making discoveries with little idea what they were or their implications. On my return, desperate to understand what I had found, I learned that a handful of Western philosophers had been working on similar issues. Balinese folk accounts also had,

I discovered, antecedents in three Indian philosophical schools: Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya and Buddhism. Establishing there were relevant parallels, however, merely raised new questions. As a friend wickedly suggested, obviously peasants did not wander around with logical primers in their hands. The philosophical arguments, whether European or Indian, were highly abstract and were articulated using a Western intellectual genealogy. By contrast, Balinese were arguing as part of daily practice, not reflectively: it was philosophy on the hoof.

How successfully could I expound Balinese ideas in writing? So doing required working between Anthropology, Philology, Area Studies and Philosophy. As a means of introducing new problems to a broader readership, I think it worked. However, it faced a major hurdle. I was elucidating Balinese categories using the formidable explanatory power of academic paradigms. It is easy to over-systematize the subtleties of Balinese practice. We tend not to notice our epistemological imperialism because the quality of research is judged by, and academic esteem conferred for, skill in deploying the hegemonic discourse. This has led me in search a radical account of practice, including presuppositions in practice, that did not over-interpret what Balinese were doing.

How do we cope with what, for convenience, I shall label 'double discursivity'? There are different strategies, depending on one's discipline and the materials available. The most common is to take cultural sources and interpret them using Western academic categories.[2] A widely-cited example is Geertz's analysis of person, time and conduct in Bali (1966). He suggested that Balinese lacked a coherent sense of self, lived in a timeless world, in which fear of stage fright and the risk of climax dominated public life. (This last argument he took straight from Bateson and Mead 1942.) The argument shook several world-famous anthropologists and philosophers sufficiently to ask me in person whether Geertz's claim was well founded. If it were, it would fundamentally change our thinking about about mind, consciousness, even humanity itself. Geertz was quite wrong for interesting reasons. He had applied European categories and criteria to interpret Balinese, not their own. By collapsing their discourse uncritically into a Western academic one, he made nonsense of them.

Faced with this problem, what are young researchers to do? There are three obvious strategic options: what is acceptable; what is marketable; and what scholarly. Research students are wise to ensure you are acceptable to your examiners. As academia now emulates business, the marketable tends to rule these days. (Scholarship takes its revenge though. Geertz is no longer taken seriously by anyone who knows the topics he wrote on.) Granted that double discursivity remains the elephant in the room, how come it is rarely addressed head on? (Slide)

As this talk is about doctoral research, I shall be brief about my later work. My next extended fieldwork set out to examine how Balinese used radically different presuppositions in daily life. How did they reproduce and reflect on their social institutions and themselves? Why not ask them? Their answers were surprising clear. They made themselves fully formed humans and wrestled to cope with the world through elaborate cycles of rites (*pañcayadnya*). They reflected on public matters through meetings; and on the non-manifest using mediums. On who they were and how to act they drew on theatre which in Bali was a popular, not an élite activity. After a couple of months, the villagers whom I had asked came to me and said things were changing. I should not ignore television, which had become widely watched by the

[2] A worrying example is the widespread use of questionnaires and surveys, which are almost always articulated uncritically using the categories, criteria and presuppositions of Western academic disciplines, as if this were normal and unproblematic, instead of an exercise in hegemony.

late 1980s. I had little interest in television but, if villagers were watching, so should I. A year later, I returned to London a rarity: someone who had conducted intensive ethnography not only of television audiences, but non-Western ones. I had hundreds of hours of recordings of Balinese commenting on television, theatre and their ideas about viewing. By accident – or, more precisely, by listening to the locals – I stumbled into what came to be called Anthropology of Media.

Over the next decade I spent 2-3 months each year watching and working with village television audiences. (Slide) Viewing is a highly social and participatory activity. The shocking revelation though was how differently people engaged with television. It revealed something neither I – nor most media scholars, let alone television producers – could have imagined possible. It was a world of intricate practices from styles of commenting, to complex modes of engaging, to how viewers later used what they extrapolated. Media Studies is only possible by ignoring – or caricaturing – viewers' practices. Styles of interpreting and arguing were subtle and original. Scholars bandied about the word 'practice', but had little idea what was involved. Moreover, so-called 'ordinary people' habitually argued among themselves with a sophistication few had recognized, let alone researched.

Three points are worth noting. First, audience research using quantitative surveys or focus groups looked like an exercise in corporate fantasy aimed at hiding what was going on. That, of course, was the point. Second, it was hard to study South East Asian societies without appreciating how comprehensively people's information, knowledge and opinions are articulated by broadcast and – more recently – social media. Almost everything we think we know is, in fact, thoroughly mediated. Astonishingly, political scientists were still writing books about contemporary Indonesian politics, including the rise of political Islam, ignoring newspapers let alone the hundreds of hours of daily broadcast coverage. Third, if ethnographic research into media highlighted new domains of viewing practices, what about media production, which had been treated as relatively unproblematic? An Indonesian proverb runs: *Katak di bawah tempurung.* A frog living under a coconut shell thinks it knows all about the world until someone kicks over the shell. There are lots of frogs and coconut shells around.

Pursuing the theme of media practices took me into Media and Cultural Studies, and into researching media production practices in Bali and Central Java. The work was enriched by a generation of my research students who were researching mainstream media production as practice *inter alia* in Indonesia, Singapore, China, India, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Sudan and Lebanon. The next step was to take practice as constitutive – with no ifs or buts. In place of society, you treat the social as an infinite play of difference, which is ceaselessly articulated and disarticulated through argument, disagreement and so forth. This led to a project that I have just finished, called *How Indonesians Argue*.[3] Now I am embarking on an account of Bali which replaces European academic categories and modes of reasoning with Balinese.

What would have happened if I had followed the advice you may have been given? Ignore theory: it is not important. Focus on methods and skills: just accept society, culture, history, texts, language, interpretation and meaning as they appear to be. I would never have contributed to mainstream debates in Social, Cultural and Philosophical Anthropology, never set up EIDOS (a European network critical of development), never been one of the founders of Media Anthropology and Ethnography of Media, nor shifted to Cultural and Media Studies,

[3] Available at: http://www.criticalia.org/symposia--panels/how-indonesians-argue.html.

nor questioned systemic Eurocentrism, let alone taken practice seriously. Life would have been comfortable instead of worrying fifty years later what on earth I am trying to do.

What's it all about then?

Enough about me. How about knowledge? There is a story about a London taxi driver talking about his famous customers from politicians to actresses. He added: 'I once had a philosopher in my cab, Bertrand Russell. So I asked him: "What's it all about then, Bertie?" Do you know? The bloke couldn't tell me.' Let me try and do better by reviewing some issues of knowledge, theory, method and writing.

Knowledge

Students are told that their research is supposed to make a contribution to knowledge. But what is knowledge? Universities like to present it as something cumulative. We now have much more than we did before. This presupposes knowledge to be a substance It also buys into the capitalist metaphor of accumulation, so creating a vicious circle. But new knowledge often renders what went before obsolete or plain wrong. The adage goes: Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. So what did history say? (Slide) Ignoring this advice, many academics tell their students to be empirical or pragmatic, which they confuse with Realism (Slide). Empiricism broadly presupposes that human sense experience is the sufficient basis of all knowledge. Among the obvious problems is that it cannot account for such simple concepts as relationships. I speak here with some background, as I was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, where Francis Bacon founded European scientific empiricism four hundred years ago. Evidently precious few scholars have bothered to read what he wrote, because they repeatedly commit fundamental errors that he labelled the 'four idols of the mind' (Slide).

Skipping to the twentieth-century, there was a battle over the nature of scientific knowledge.[4] (Slide) Karl Popper's conservative stance was that theories develop progressively through a process of conjecture and refutation. Thomas Kuhn's retort in *The structure of scientific revolutions* came as a slap in the face. Kuhn argued that 'normal science', which is what most of you are doing, inevitably faces the inadequacy of its axioms, at which point revolution threatens. If another explanatory framework – or 'paradigm' – explains the evidence better, it may become the new normal. Revolutions have social aspects: often it is awkward

[4] A more fundamental and devastating challenge to ideas of knowledge, whether in the natural or human sciences, was propounded by the pragmatist philosopher Quine. He argued on logical grounds that theory is underdetermined by evidence. Facts are not strong enough to determine a single correct theory: logically and empirically there are always several alternatives.

> The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges… But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience… If this view is right, it is misleading to speak of the empirical content of an individual statement – especially if it is a statement at all remote from the experiential periphery of the field (Quine 1953:42-3).

The possibility undermines the grounds for believing that the knower (the researcher) is superior to the known (the 'objects' of study). Whereas Popper's and Kuhn's arguments strictly apply only to the natural sciences, Quine's argument works across all forms of explanation and interpretation. Indeed Quine used radical translation (i.e. between two non-cognate languages) as an example. Quine's opponents admit that no one has yet advanced a satisfactory rebuttal.

young researchers who challenge the entrenched professoriate, who fight back by withholding grants or sacking them.[5] (Slide)

Paul Feyerabend went further and argued that different theories involve incommensurable presuppositions. So science as a neat evolutionary scheme based on rational experimentation is yet another myth. Taking a high moment of empiricism, he showed that Galileo's case for heliocentrism faked both results and reasoning. (Slide) Another example: Democritus had proposed the existence of atoms about 400 BCE, but it was not until 1895 that we had any empirical evidence. Other iconic figures of Western knowledge are equally suspect. Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was part of his studies in the occult and alchemy.

Knowledge, being abstract, is made accessible through metaphor. Just think of how we talk about mapping fields of knowledge or conquering nature. Training (of students) is not just a horticultural metaphor: that is its etymology. The favourite these days is the capitalist metaphor. Its revolutionary antithesis is so frightening that virtually everyone tries to ignore it. New knowledge destroys old knowledge. Just as the Copernican destroyed the Ptolemaic geocentric model or the Einsteinian the Newtonian, Anthropology is littered with conveniently forgotten corpses like Functionalism, Structural-Functionalism, Formalism, Structuralism or Symbolic Interactionism. Two under-estimated Russians, Bakhtin and Vološinov, proposed an interesting alternative: dialogue as open, reciprocal and unfinalizable. On this account, social life consists of acts of thinking, speaking and doing which are informed by previous acts and anticipate subsequent ones. What we call structure, language and other generalizations are, in Cultural Studies terms, monologic attempts to reify the practices of articulating, counter-articulating and disarticulating that go on unceasingly. I find it a provocative and useful image.

Theory

Theory is used in many senses (Slide). Historically the Greek *theōría* broadly meant speculation or contemplation, from which Aristotle derived three modes of activity: *theoria*, thinking; *praxis*, doing; *poeisis*, producing.[6] (Slide) From this, our distinction between theory and practice comes by a curious route (Slide). In English theory has come to connote a scheme or system of ideas or statements that explain or interpret facts or phenomena.[7] Several distinct usages are relevant (Slide). (The logical and explanatory senses may not apply to research into South East Asian social and cultural phenomena.) The others are pertinent, but raise broad questions. If we are involved in interpretation, what is the relationship between the analysts' and participants' interpretations? And, if we reflect (use *theoria*) on categories of understanding, what are the limits of, and the relationship between, our and the participants'

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[5] A well-known example from classical Physics is the co-existence of two theories of light, one of which explains it as waves, the other as corpuscles. Traditionally both could explain the phenomenon more or less adequately. A more recent example is the incompatibility of relativity and quantum theories.

[6] Many accounts omit another Aristotelian category, which is particularly relevant to any discussion of social action, namely phronesis.

> In Aristotle's words ***phronesis*** is a 'true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man.' ***Phronesis*** goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (***episteme***) and technical knowledge or know-how (***techne***) and involves judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor. I will argue that ***phronesis*** is commonly involved in social practice, and that therefore attempts to reduce social science and theory either to ***episteme*** or ***techne***, or to comprehend them in those terms, are misguided (Flyvberg 2001: 12; bold type in original).

[7] Note the OED definition: 'a mental scheme of something to be done, or of the method of doing it' (OED 3.3.) and later 'a scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena' (4a.)

categories of understanding? In short, we are confronted with issues of interpretation (hermeneutics), critical theory and double discursivity.

You may have spotted a serious weakness in these accounts. They still ask: 'What is theory?' and ignore 'How do you do theory'? This is not a question of method, but of how you theorize – an issue many of you face. Most models stress abstract coherent systems, but sideline how central disagreement, ambiguity, uncertainty and indeterminacy are. How does theory change? How does it relate to what people actually do on any occasion? What about discussing and arguing, which make up the history of disciplinary debate? We are offered a world reminiscent of Plato's cave – abstract ideals shorn of practice. An alternative way of thinking about theory is as inculcated skills: you learn to read, analyze, write and, indeed, theorize.

Where does this leave us? How to choose evidence, reason and infer, argue, present the results – and take the first steps towards a job – are, of course, what your respective academic disciplines are about. Note the term 'discipline', which, crucially, is also a verb. You are being disciplined very much like the soldiers in Foucault's *Discipline and punish* (1977). Universities take raw young humans and convert them by means of techniques of training through a series of graded tasks, surveillance and examination into acceptable – in other words, normalized – subjects. Postgraduates were not always so hyper-regimented. The joke in Cambridge in the late 1960s was that on Day One research students were pointed towards the University Library and told to come back in three years. My experience at SOAS was not dissimilar. The only supervision for my thesis draft lasted two minutes and consisted of the comment: 'Pavilion is spelled with one 'l'.

The two visions stand in such stark contrast, we might ask: 'What is knowledge about?'[8] There are two nineteenth-century European grand narratives of knowledge. One was revolutionary and emancipatory: people have the right to free themselves from everything that prevents them governing themselves. The other, instantiated in the University of Berlin, was speculative: science for its own sake, but with von Humboldt's *caveat* that it should orient itself to 'the spiritual and moral training of the nation'.[9] These visions have since lost much of their legitimacy (Slide).

Most academics I know still espouse such ideals. However, university managers, mostly with derisory intellectual qualifications, are too busy marketing and spouting management-speak to be bothered (Slide). *Theoria* becomes collapsed into *techne*; universities become glorified technical colleges. Contemplative disciplines like Philosophy or critical ones like Cultural Studies have largely disappeared or been trivialized. Meanwhile academics are disciplined and cowed by vacuous exercises in quality control and league tables. (Had Wittgenstein been subject to quality controls, he would have been dismissed, because famously his lectures broke all the pedagogic nostrums.)[10] All this serves government and corporations

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[8] One of the more interesting approaches to knowledge is the anthropologist Jules Henry's idea of the 'hidden curriculum' (1963). Behind the ostensible goal of education (from Latin *educare*, to lead out) of leading pupils towards the light of reason and knowledge, educational practice teaches a quite antithetical lesson more suited to the humdrum jobs that most children will go on to. That is the instilling the fear of failure.

[9] Lyotard 1984: 35. Von Humboldt 1810: 126; cited in Lyotard 1984: 32.

[10] The interesting question is not how academia fairly obviously disciplines its inmates into docile bodies and governed souls, but the current transformation of capitalism. As Deleuze noted, what capitalism 'wants to sell is services'.

> The conquests of the market are made by grabbing control and no longer by disciplinary training…Corruption thereby gains a new power. Marketing has become the center or the 'soul' of the corporation. We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world. The operation of markets is now the instrument of social

who want docile bodies and governed minds. They like numbers; and dislike and fear people thinking critically. (Contrary to some beliefs, quantification is not about people, but 'the normal', Slide).

Method

If theory is ambiguous, method is often plain murky. As noted, separating theory from method is nonsensical (Slide). So why the recent obsession with methodology (which, strictly, is discourse on method)? Foucault on discipline is relevant here. Soldiers are drilled not to query why they must do something (like kill other humans) and not to think for themselves. Focusing upon method anaesthetizes questions about what you are investigating in the first place, and why. Stressing *techne* marginalizes the risks of reflection.

When research students asked the famous Oxford anthropologist, Evans-Pritchard, how to do ethnography, his reply was three words: 'Mind your manners'. The advice is thoughtful. My field research can be seen as learning to mind my manners. (Slide) You have to become versed in the language people use in its fullest sense, which involves the cultural connotations of what they say. Ethnography teaches humility. You have the chance to listen to what people actually talk about in daily life. Taken seriously, manners mean treating everyone as equals – here as dialogic subjects and intellectuals. Gramsci was apt: 'All men are intellectuals… but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (1971: 9). The drawback of interviews and questionnaires is they distance the interlocutors and risk reasserting the superiority of the researcher over the researched. That is not all. Power lies with whoever gets to articulate the disseminated version of events. So how you infer your argument from the materials is political, as any post-structural or postcolonial scholar knows. Then there is the moral responsibility for what you publish, and what access or right of reply your subjects have. Much of the edifice of method(ology) can be encapsulated in three words.

Some lessons 1: Confusing representations with facts

Part of my first fieldtrip comprised mapping villagers' genealogies as far back as they could remember. Balinese have several different kinds of named marriage arrangements: by general agreement, elopement, marriage by capture, parental decision and so on. As I was collating the results, I discovered that the respective families often stated the terms of the union differently. When I asked other villagers which marriage kind it was, they looked at me pityingly and explained that the different parties often had antithetical ideas. I had tried to extrapolate legal fact from divergent understandings. It became evident that how people represented themselves to others varied depended on the circumstances. Young scholars anxious to gather solid data easily fail to appreciate that these are not given (*data*)[11] but are articulations. Cultural facts are not independent of how people represent something *as* something to someone on some occasion for some purpose. When the Frankfurt School talked of critical theory, they were stressing that representations, including ideology, are inflected by class position. How different social groups articulate the world differently is a central concern of Cultural Studies scholars, for whom culture is not a shared system, but a site of struggle. Distinctions of class, ethnicity, gender, religion, generation and so on work themselves out through conflicting articulations and counter-articulations. Some people, like the poor and ethnic minorities, may even be

control and forms the impudent breed of our masters. Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous (Deleuze 1992: 6).

[11] *Data* is the Latin past participle from the verb to give. So it is literally what is given. What we are dealing with however is not given by nature but how humans in society articulated some state of affairs.

effectively disarticulated and so silenced. Our accounts usually rely heavily on the great, good or verbally fluent. We need to avoid confusing particular representations with fact and so collude in hegemonizing our subjects of study.[12]

Do these concerns apply to quantitative, as against qualitative, research? Evidently they do. The problem of what constitutes facts still applies. However, if you are studying large samples, you have to make working assumptions that ignore individual differences and context in order to establish broader trends.[13] It all depends on the purposes of the research.

Some lessons 2: Fieldwork

What lessons did I learn from fieldwork *inter alia*?

1. *How to engage?* Thinking in Bali, as many places, is a social activity. One-to-one interviews are an alien Western cultural practice, used in Bali mostly by police and military intelligence when interrogating suspects. So I worked by interpolating myself into groups of people who regularly socialized. I rarely asked questions; discussions lasted hours and meandered all over the place, while I took notes and tape-recorded, with their agreement. It is inefficient for getting answers to pre-formulated questions, but excellent for immersion into Balinese discourse.
2. *Who is in charge?* One day early on in the research, I was talking to people including the village head, who interrupted me in Balinese to explain that, as backward hill-billies, they did not speak Indonesian. Six months later, while I was struggling to say something particularly complex in Balinese, he patted my knee and said in perfect Bahasa Indonesia: 'Just use Indonesian'. Everyone had decided that I could not become one of them until I spoke and thought in Balinese. We like to imagine we are agents and the locals the subjects of inquiry. I had just received a lesson in the reverse. Also, in a community with so many skeletons to hide – literally – domesticating me was a matter of urgency.
3. *How relevant is academic knowledge?* In the compound where I lived, the bathroom was adjacent to the kitchen. Every day while shaving I could not help hearing the family talking. To my horror I realized that no matter where conversation ranged, it effectively eluded conventional academic knowledge. Scholarly models occupied a different,

[12] In many societies, being a member of the élite often entails that you are expected to articulate a coherent (if highly ideological) account of your society, just as 'ordinary people' are considered incapable of so doing and arrogant if they try. The implications should be obvious. There is also a very dangerous trap in relying heavily on what Harris called 'the well-informed informant' (1968: 514-68). This person is often a local intellectual, who has thought through a society's practices to produce a coherent system out of them. A celebrated example is Victor Turner's reliance for much of his information on the Ndembu from one informant, Muchono, a local healer and brilliant synthesizer, who was however so detested by other Ndembu that he was forced to live well outside the village boundaries.

A surprising amount of anthropological (and I suspect other disciplinary) knowledge rests upon the use of such singularly gifted informants. The drawback is that these accounts are typical only of themselves – or even unique to the occasion. Once I was interviewed as part of a British ESRC project on supervision of research students. When we had finished, the interviewer thanked me, as I was the first person who had given a systematic account of the different aspects of PhD supervision, which she asked if she could use for her write up. I warned her that my thinking about the topic was pretty muddled and incomplete. The requirements of being coherent in the interview had somehow led me to create system on the spot. Later that day I tried to write down the model I had outlined, but could no longer recall it. So much for system.

[13] There is helpful summary of the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches in Mahoney & Goertz 2006. For a defence of individual case studies against naturalist arguments about systematic hypothesis testing, see Flyvbjerg 2001: 159-212.

rarefied universe that had precious little bearing on how people spoke and acted. Daily practice largely defies theoretical understanding. This last still haunts me. The problem may not matter if your concern is to shove Bali kicking and screaming into modern consumer society. It matters a great deal if you are trying to appreciate how Balinese understand and engage with the world around them.

Some lessons 3: Writing

Beyond the advice you have been given in your specific academic disciplines, I have three thoughts.

1. *How do you arrive at the finished product?* As noted, our facts are mostly labile, context-sensitive and fractured. Now scholarship consists of serially re-articulating 'raw materials' (note the metaphor), but the epistemological status of our primary sources is less obvious than might appear. To take an anthropological example, our empirical evidence is people thinking, talking and acting *about* thinking, talking and acting. Our thinking about these already involves third-order articulations. Note-taking (when we textualize events) is fourth-order. Reworking these through successive drafts into papers, then articles and monographs involves further serial extrapolation and remoteness from what actually occurred.[14] Such distancing occurs similarly in other disciplines.
2. *What is expected of a thesis?* The simple answer is: 'Read the regulations governing PhD theses', as examiners must follow them. Note the wording of the University of London rubric, (Oxford's are almost identical, Slide). Significantly, the full version has only one reference to new facts, two to argument and four to critical thinking.
3. *How do you structure your writing?* Different disciplines have different preferences. However, writing involves arguing – but students are rarely taught how to argue. Using question and answer works surprisingly well. Asking the right question, as Heisenberg stated, is half way to the answer. Pursued consistently throughout any work, it provides a clear structure and prevents straying too far.[15]

Rounding up - Practice

I have stressed practices as objects of inquiry. Even when claiming to be empirical, European thought privileges systems not the actions that make, remake or undermine them; nor who represents what, as what, when. In Balinese studies, models of kinship structure stress the importance of preferred patrilateral parallel cousin (Father's Brother's Daughter actual or classificatory) marriage. Scrutiny showed that the incidence in the village to be 1.4%. People were actively avoiding it. The same held for most other generalizations about Balinese social

[14] I discuss these steps and other studiously ignored issues of ethnographic inquiry in Hobart 1996. If you are working with pre-given materials, it might appear that it simplifies matters. Quite the contrary. Pre-structured sources create all kinds of imponderables, because you have no control over the quality of the evidence, its biases, the conditions under which it was articulated and for what purpose.

[15] Question and answer is a well-established and highly rigorous method of argument (see Collingwood 1939: 29-43). It provides an admirable structure for a monograph or PhD thesis. You start out by stating at the beginning of a work, what are the key questions you are asking and why. This then leads to sub-sets of questions which you raise, then answer, in each chapter sequentially, so that the answer to one question raises a further question until you reach the conclusion. At that point you return to your original question(s) and explain the position at which you have arrived. It can be a neat move then to indicate what new questions might be worth asking in future research. Although you may feel you have said the last word, any work raises further questions – and so leads to further inquiry and further answers.

structure. So why the consistent disparity? It is easy to accept what you are told by well-informed informants or previous scholars, but it takes months of painstaking inquiry to establish what actually happens. Anyhow people articulate their lives differently under different circumstances. You can, of course, get away with cutting corners – for a time. Clifford Geertz's writings made him famous until a later generation of careful scholars showed almost every claim about Balinese culture to be false. Actuality eventually gets in the way of even the most beautiful models.

How then should research students proceed? You may well not have the time or opportunity to investigate all you wish in detail. I have two suggestions. First, remember the fluid nature of what people articulate as facts. Second, recognize that scholarship itself is an assemblage of practices. We read, ask questions, take notes, disagree, textualize – or sometimes visualize – what we encounter and so forth. That is Baconian empiricism which deals in observable practices not with abstract order (Slide).

Presuppositions

While some scholars now appreciate the importance of practice, why consider presuppositions? Are they not just the kind of airy-fairy abstractions I was dismissing? A little history is necessary. Aristotle gave metaphysics a bad name (Slide), whereas it is better understood as the study of presuppositions that *were actually made on an occasion*. If so, it becomes an effective means of analyzing practice. 'So what?' you might say. Inquiry into presuppositions has a distinguished intellectual genealogy. It underpins approaches as diverse as Oxford Anthropology, the so-called 'ontological turn' to the post-structural critiques of Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault. It has also helped to recast our understanding of South East Asia. Errington rethought how Malays read *hikayat* (1979) and Sweeney the nature of literacy (1987). Becker highlighted the non-Aristotelian presuppositions informing Javanese shadow theatre (1979). Worsley unveiled unimagined worlds in Old Javanese and classical Balinese texts, as well as Balinese paintings (1984). Weiner revealed the presuppositions behind Balinese understandings of their own history (1995). I have examined how Balinese ideas of what exists, styles of reasoning or criteria for interpreting are in flagrant breach of Western canons. It has, of course, not stopped scholars from hegemonically imposing their own interpretations against the evidence. The growth of knowledge often looks more like the growth of ignorance.

Some thoughts

These scattered thoughts address the role of contingency, the unpredictability of the everyday and the limits of systems. Trained at Cambridge, SOAS and Leiden, I arrogantly assumed the superiority of the knower to the known. We are the experts who have come to tell them about themselves. The last fifty years have been about realizing how wrong I was. Mathematicians supposedly peak before they are thirty, whereas philosophers only mature by about sixty. South East Asian scholars are closer to the latter as our understanding gradually deepens. If theory is underdetermined by evidence, it is easy to impose your own model. By contrast being critical in the strong sense of criticizing your own categories and practices is harder. 'Mind your manners' invites humility, as does appreciating the role of presuppositions and practice. As Shakespeare put it:

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy (Hamlet I.5:159–167).

Slide

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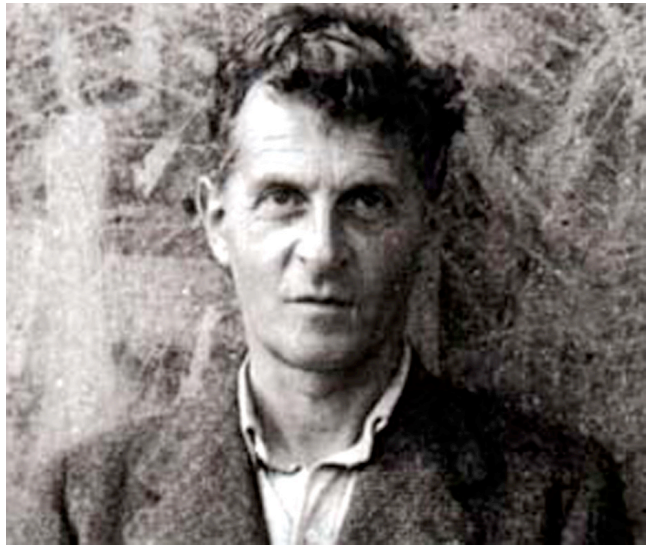
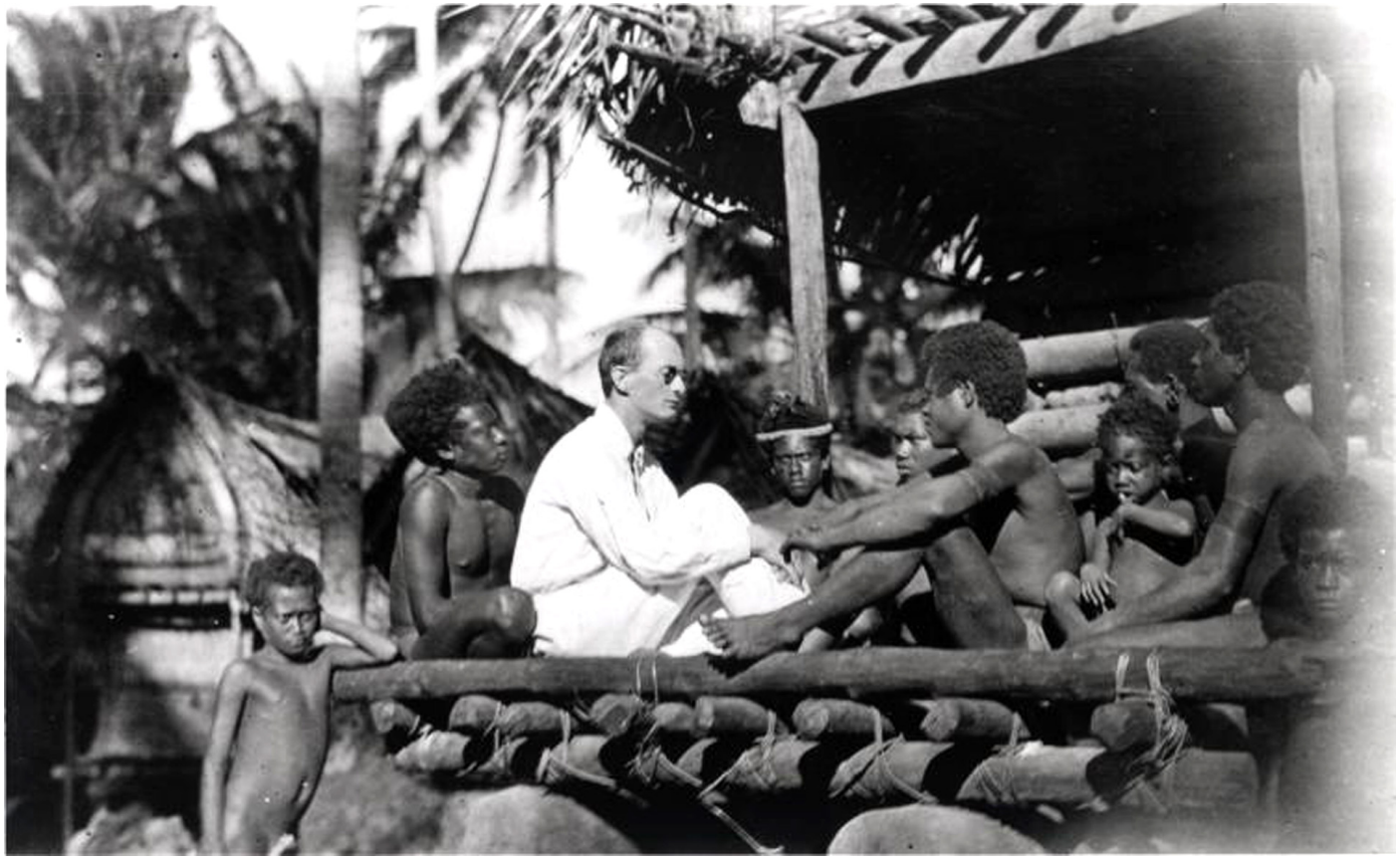
He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast (Leonardo da Vinci).



Philosophy is not a theory but an activity (Wittgenstein *Tractatus* 4, 112).

Skating on thin ice

The ultimate purpose of ethnography



Ethnography's 'final goal is… to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world'

(Malinowski *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* 60).

What Balinese social structure looked like

Theorizing in anticipation of evidence

Sherlock Holmes - the celebrated detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

On being asked what a mysterious set of facts meant. “I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”
Sherlock Holmes from *A scandal in Bohemia*.

Dr Joseph Bell - the great diagnostician on whom Holmes was modelled

Do Balinese ‘know’ the meaning of offerings?

The question is a category mistake and so meaningless

How to address double discursivity

Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof (J.K. Galbraith *Economics: peace and laughter* 50).

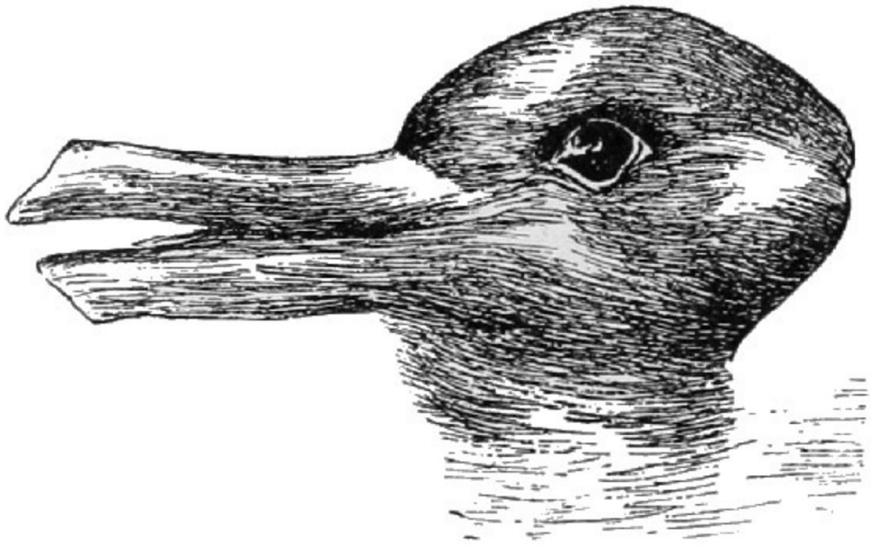
Television Viewing in a Balinese family

Critical thinking is neither new nor ‘Western’

The duty of the man who investigates the writings of scientists, if learning the truth is his goal, is to make himself an enemy of all that he reads, and ... attack it from every side. He should also suspect himself as he performs his critical examination of it, so that he may avoid falling into either prejudice or leniency (*The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham* Book 3, 3).

Alhazen - Hasan Ibn al-Haytham
circa CE 965-1040

Realism as Stupidity



Wittgenstein's Duck-Rabbit

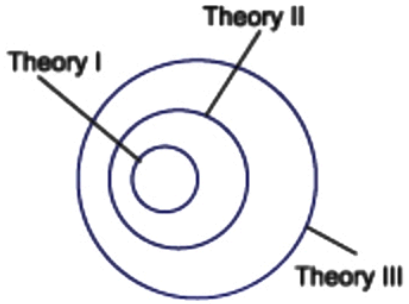
In low-grade or unscientific thinking we hardly know that we are making any presuppositions at all. Because of their tangled condition, the thoughts which come up out of the bottom of our minds present a deceptive appearance of 'immediacy'… And if I never think at all except in this quite casual and unscientific way, I shall always be content to believe this is all that knowledge can ever be: the simple 'intuition' or 'apprehension' of things confronting us which absolutely and in themselves just are what we 'intuit' or 'apprehend' them as being. This theory of knowledge is called 'realism'; and 'realism' is based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely human stupidity (Collingwood *An essay on metaphysics* 34).

Bacon's four idols

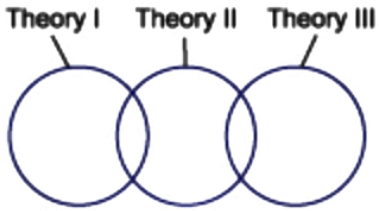
1. 'Idols of the tribe' (human nature) - human senses and perceptions are not the measure of things but reflect the perceiver rather than the world.
2. 'Idols of the cave' (individual biases) - these stem from your character, mood, upbringing, education, people you admire and the environment.
3. 'Idols of the market place' - how words fundamentally mislead through the habits of talking and thinking we pick up in conversation.
4. 'Idols of the theatre' - all dogmas and generalizations. All systems stage a fictitious world and impute an order which is not actually there in the world.

Sir Francis Bacon
CE 1561-1626

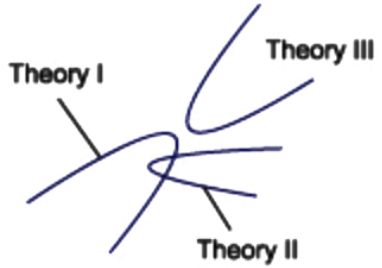
The argument about scientific theory



"Popper"
Each theory builds progressively on the theories preceding it.



"Kuhn"
Paradigms are incommensurate, and encompass some parts of previous paradigms but reject other parts.



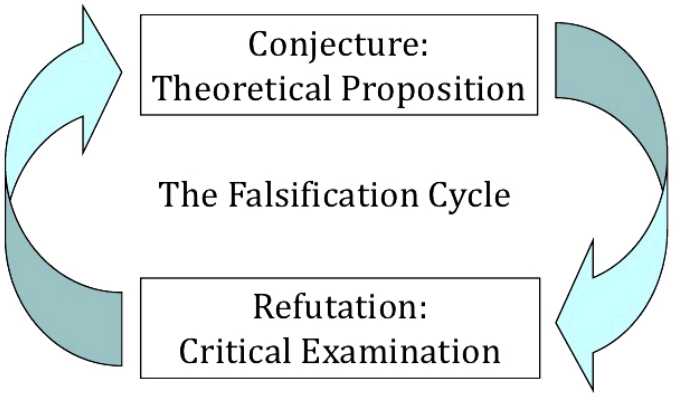
"Feyerabend"
Theories have little to do with previous theories, and are not coherent or consistent.

Popper: theory develops progressively through the process of conjecture and refutation.

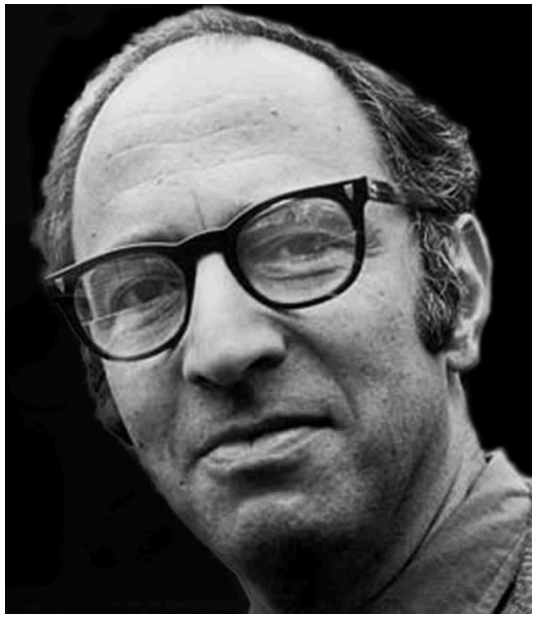
Kuhn: old theory is displaced and disproven by new theory through a process of intermittent revolution.

Feyerabend: theories differ so fundamentally that they are largely incommensurable.

Conjecture and Refutation

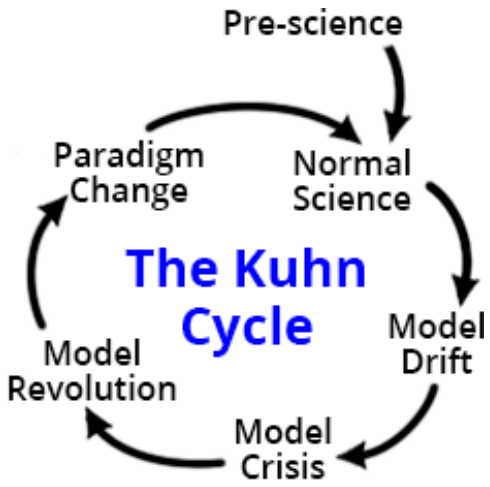


Kuhn on ‘normal science’ and revolution

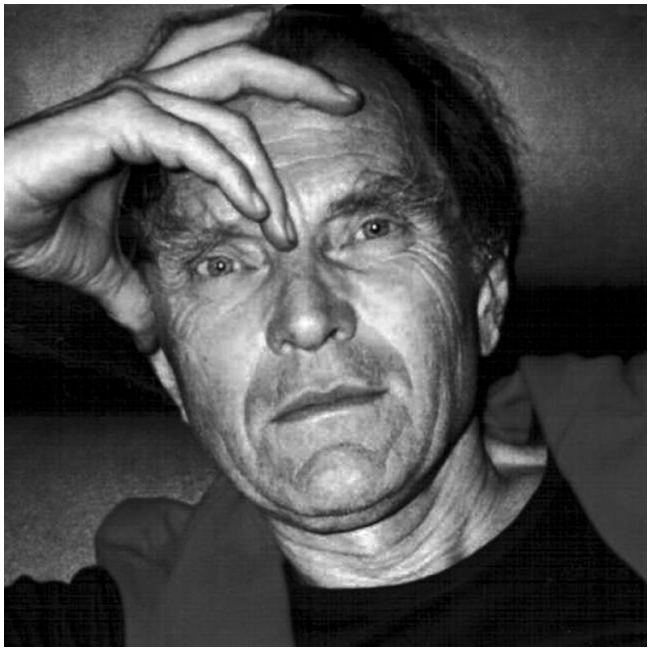


Thomas Kuhn

Against Popper’s conservative argument of knowledge being cumulative, Kuhn thought it more exact to call it a phase of ‘normal science’ based on an accepted model, or ‘paradigm’. However, exceptions inevitably mount up, some being incontrovertible, so threatening to undermine its very foundations. Sooner or later someone suggests a radically alternative paradigm, upon which a period of revolution follows. If successful, the new paradigm becomes the basis of a new normal science and life gets back to ‘normal’.

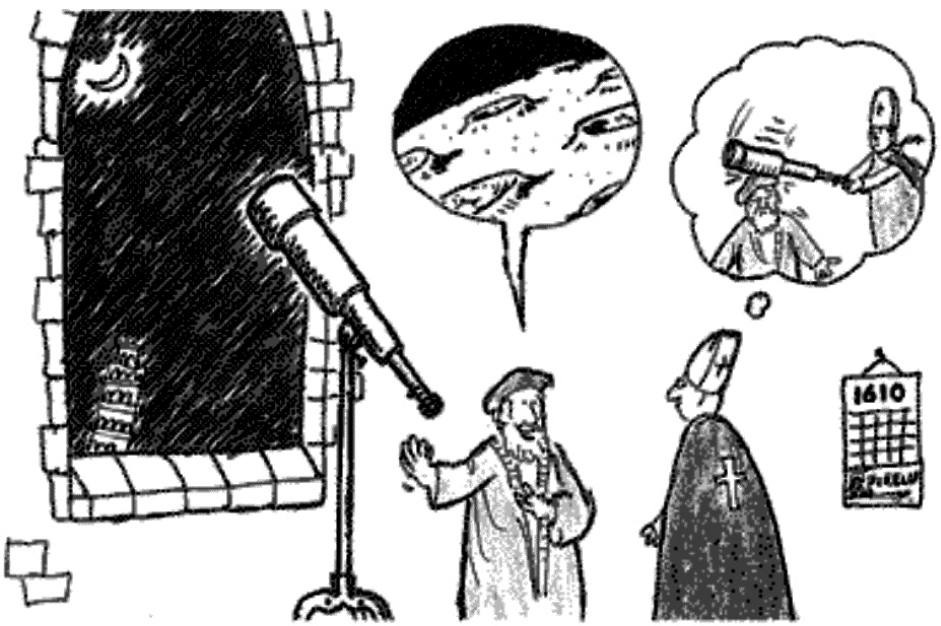


Famous scientific myths - Galileo?



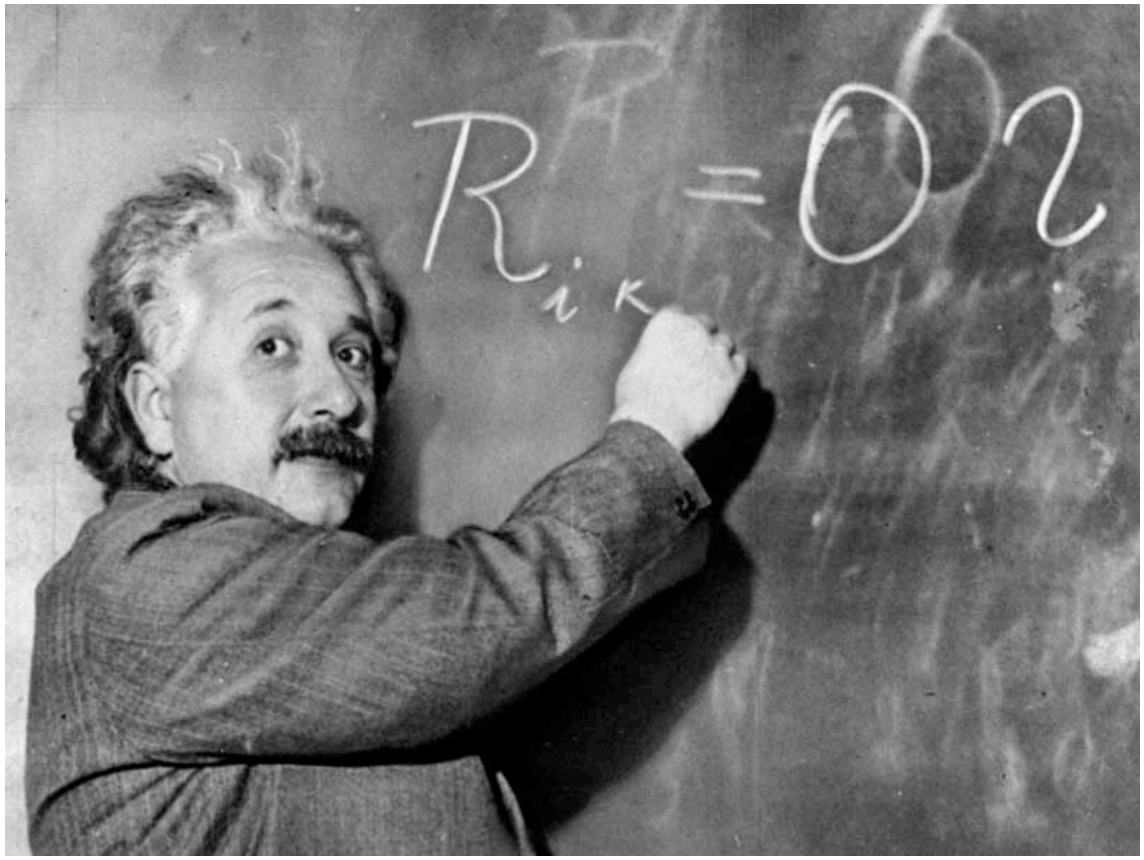
Paul Feyerabend

[Galileo] offers no theoretical reasons why the telescope should be expected to give a true picture of the sky. Nor does the initial experience with the telescope provide such reasons. The first telescopic observations of the sky are indistinct, indeterminate, contradictory and in conflict with what everyone can see with his unaided eyes. And, the only theory that could have helped to separate telescopic illusions from veridical phenomena was refuted by simple tests (Feyerabend *Against method* 6).



Galileo discusses his discoveries with the church.

What is theory?



Einstein as the popular stereotype of a theorist

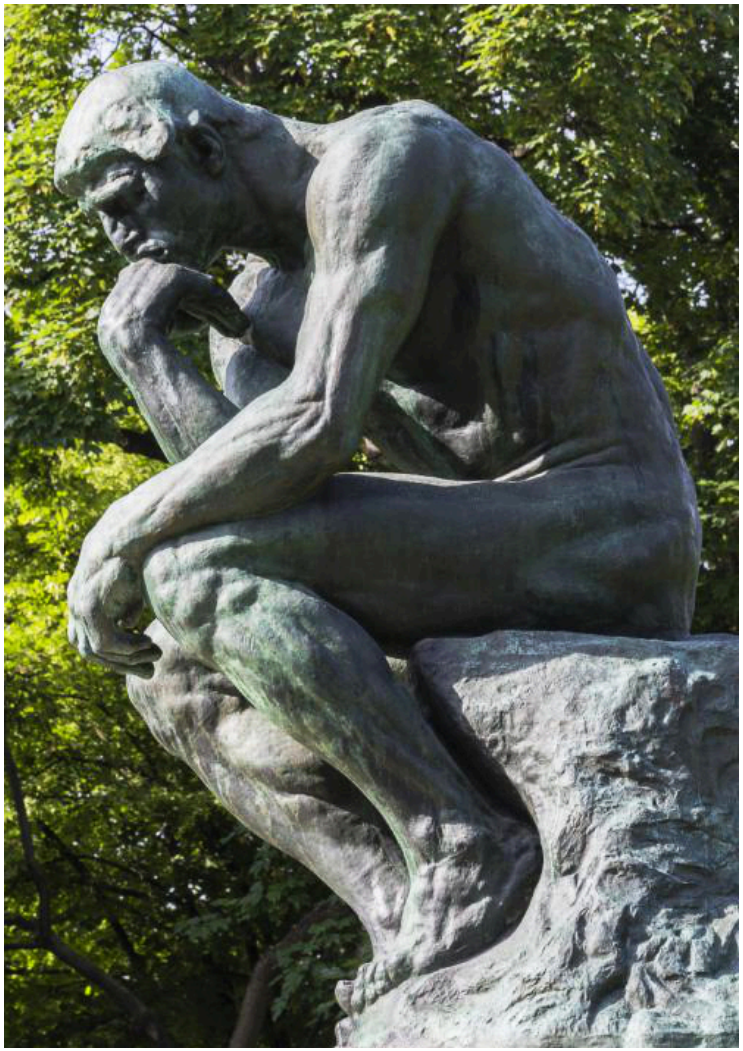
Theory may be a hunch, the opposite of practice, an evolving explanation, a practical theory or reflective practice, a hypothesis, a model or heuristic, a clearly developed argument that has evolved under the pressure of rigorous critique, or an interrelated set of propositions or empirical connections between concepts… These vastly different definitions and descriptions beg the question, what really is theory? (Kezar *To use or not to use theory* 284).

Greek Modes of Activity

Theoria — Speculation, contemplation, reflecting on, looking at.

Praxis — Doing, embodying, acting upon, putting *theoria* into practice.

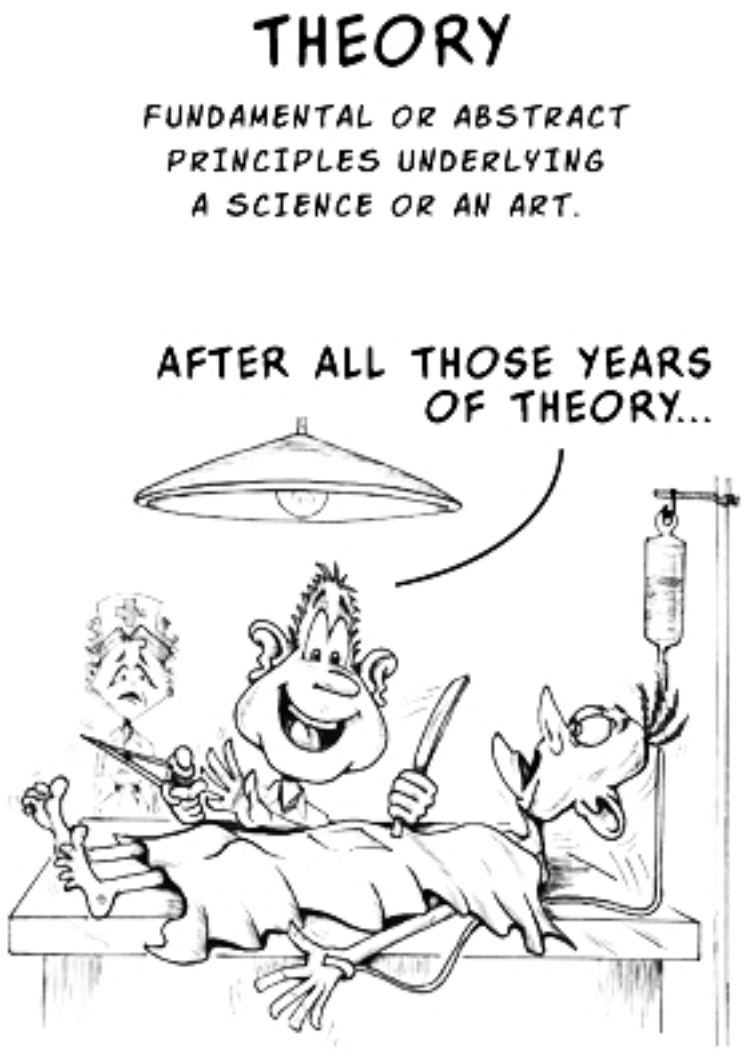
Poeisis — Making, producing, bringing into existence something that did not exist before.



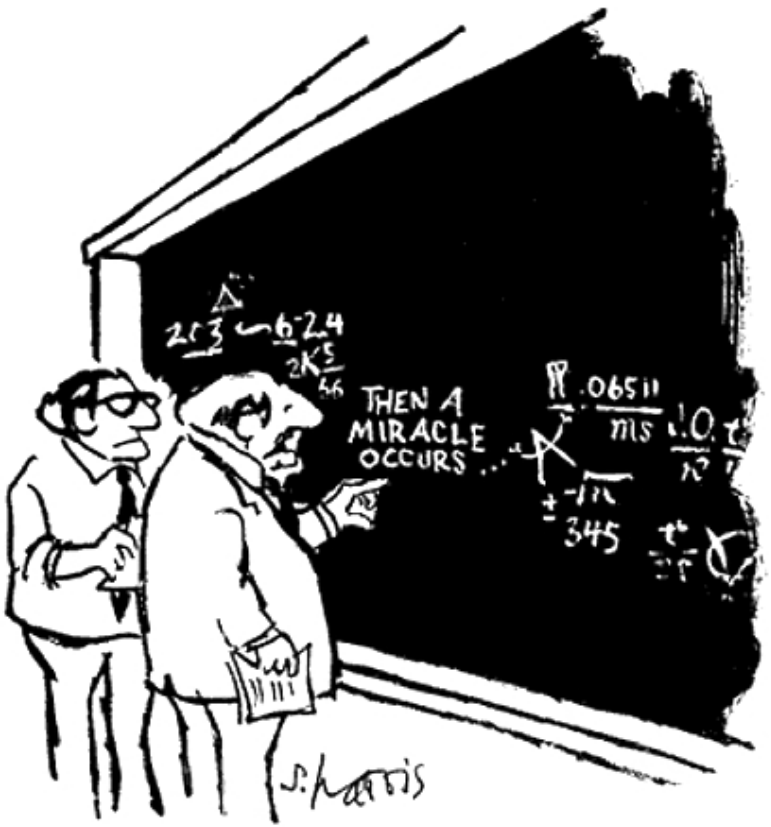
Rodin's Penseur (Thinker)

Theory and practice

The division between theory and practice like so much that nowadays we take for granted, was a survival from the Middle Ages and the great universities are institutions based on medieval ideas, whose life and work are still hedged about by the medieval interpretation of the Greek distinction between the contemplative life and the practical life as a division between two classes of specialists (Collingwood *Autobiography* 150).



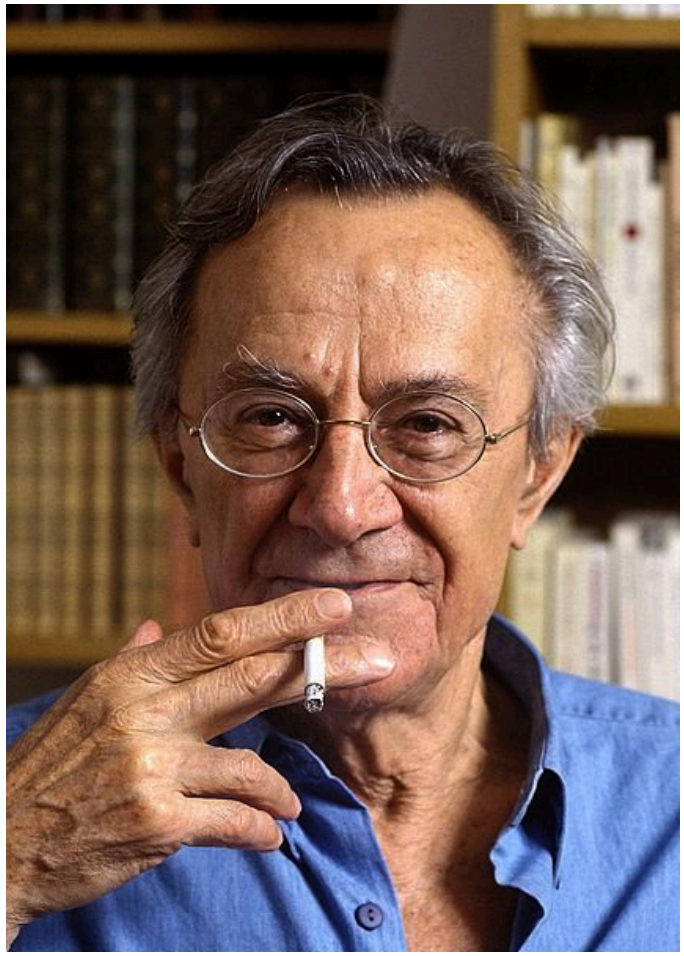
Uses of the term ‘theory’



“I think you should be more explicit here in step two.”

1. A logically-connected system of general propositions;
2. The explanation or interpretation of particular social phenomena;
3. The interpretation of the arguments extrapolated from some source, such as an author’s writings;
4. A way of looking at the world, world view/categories of understanding (From Abend *The meaning of theory*).

The role of modern universities



Universities and the institutions of higher learning are called upon to create skills, and no longer ideals – so many doctors, so many teachers in a given discipline, so many engineers, so many administrators, etc. The transmission of knowledge is no longer designed to train an élite capable of guiding the nation towards its emancipation, but to supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by its institutions (Lyotard *The postmodern condition* 48).

The art of bamboozling - quantifying quality

The title of an old British TV Sit-Com

Why quantification can't cope with individuals

In statistical affairs ... the first care before all else is to lose sight of the man taken in isolation in order to consider him only as a fraction of the species. It is necessary to strip him of his individuality to arrive at the elimination of all accidental effects that individuality can introduce into the question (French Academy of Sciences, *Paris,* 5 *October* 1835).

Statistics can be applied only when we have classes that can be regarded as 'infinite masses' (Hacking, *The taming of chance*).

A false dichotomy: theory *versus* practice

R. G. Collingwood

The philosopher Collingwood noted the entailment of Francis Bacon's empiricism.

The 'experimental method' in natural science is the method wherein a scientist comes to understand a natural process by interfering with it. Where this method is used there is no purely theoretical thinking; theory goes hand in hand with practice (*New Leviathan* 125).

As the point is strikingly obvious, how come so many academics fail to recognize or act upon the implications?

Minding your manners

A Javanese representation of the meeting of two cultures

From a relief from Borobodur

University of London Regulations governing PhD

A thesis shall…form a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power; and be an integrated whole and present a coherent argument.

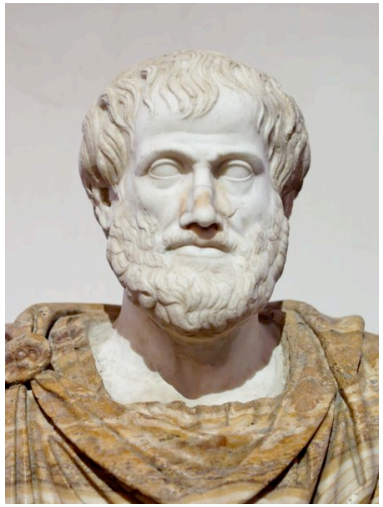
Senate House—George Orwell's Ministry of Truth in his book *1984*

Imagining order

I regard every one of the accepted systems as the staging and acting out of a fable, making a fictitious staged world of its own... The human intellect is inherently apt to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds there. Many things in nature are unique and not like anything else; but the intellect devises for them non-existent parallels and correspondences and relatives (Bacon *Novum organon* 1620 # 44-5).

Metaphysics as practice

[Aristotle had two definitions] 1. Metaphysics is the science of pure being. 2. Metaphysics is the science which deals with the presuppositions underlying ordinary science… The first of these two propositions cannot be true because a science of pure being is a contradiction in terms. The second proposition I take to be true (Collingwood *Essay on metaphysics* 11-12).



Aristotle

Metaphysics is not about fantasy or 'merely academic', but about practice.

Every metaphysical question either is simply the question what absolute presuppositions **were made on a certain occasion**, or is capable of being resolved into a number of such questions (Collingwood *Essay on metaphysics* 49).

A Balinese Villager's Vision: Pan Brayut

By contrast to the neatly ordered aristocratic vision,
popular accounts are often distinctly riotous.