

## “The Thucydidean Legacy of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism”

Ioannis Th. Mazis<sup>1</sup>, Markos I. Troulis<sup>2</sup> and Xanthippi Domatioti<sup>3</sup>

*Corresponding Author: Ioannis Th. Mazis*

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**ABSTRACT:** Which are the modern roots of the theories of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism? Which are the epistemological and methodological bases that a conflict is profound? Being descriptive theories, both Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism have been constructed on the basis of axial hypotheses tested through historical practical case studies. They represent complementary approaches, based on the common Thucydidean legacy of description and analysis emphasizing ontology. In the modern framework of scientific debate, there are also common roots, while the commonalities are more between them in comparison with other theoretical approaches even included in the same scientific field. Under this lens, the current paper endeavours to decode all those reasons making the two theoretical approaches two – even not identical – twins of Thucydides.

**Keywords:** Epistemology, IR theory, Systemic Geopolitical Analysis, Thucydides, Ontology, Structural Realism, Imre Lakatos

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### I. INTRODUCTION

A rhetoric question to be posed as a starting point: Can a structural realist define himself closer to a constructivist rather than a scholar of systemic geopolitical analysis? In the opposite, is a scholar of systemic geopolitical analysis legitimized to have more disputes and theoretical divergences with a supporter of critical geopolitics or a structural realist? This is about crucial questions, which cease to be rhetoric when comparative analysis is not implemented under epistemological, methodological and thus essential preconditions, but under pretexts and conditions of academic antagonisms, which are profoundly provoked by the absolute ignorance of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis as a field and a method (especially with regard to the mathematical and the cartographical methods characterizing it) from the exclusive supporters of the respective theoretical approaches. On this line of thought, the current paper aims to compare the theoretical approaches of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism in the light of the legacy of Thucydides identified with description, ontologically oriented analysis and objectiveness. This debate is fueled by the remarks of modern scholars, who have formalized the epistemological and methodological conclusions reached exactly through the analysis of the “Peloponnesian War”.<sup>4</sup> Below, some principal epistemological remarks are made since it is necessary to explain how and why Thucydides, Mackinder, Waltz, Popper, Kuhn and Lakatos are examined together. Afterwards, we proceed into issues of “Causality, Falsifiability and Predictability” with the core divergence of the two fields on the capability of measuring and predicting, but also with the prompt that their methodologies of examining causality own common routes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr d' État, Professor of Economic Geography and Geopolitical Theory, Head of the Department of Turkish Studies and Modern Asian Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

<sup>2</sup> Dr / Post Doc., Adjunct Lecturer of International Relations Theory, Geopolitics and Turkey's Foreign Policy, Department of Turkish Studies and Modern Asian Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

<sup>3</sup> Research Fellow of the Laboratory of ‘Geocultural Analyses of the Greater Middle East-Turkey’, Department of Turkish Studies and Modern Asian Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

<sup>4</sup> Thucydides (2000) *History of the Peloponnesian War*. London: Penguin.

<sup>5</sup> Mazis, I. Th. And Troulis, M. I. (2019) Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism: Parallel routes and common challenges. *IOSR Journal of Business and Management*, 21 (20), pp. 1-6.

### Principal Epistemological Remarks

Referring to Systemic Geopolitical Analysis, this is structured under conditions of Interdisciplinary Analysis Models for the international spectrum. For this reason, the “general synthesis of positivism and neo-positivism complemented by the Popperian and Kuhnian critical contribution up to the margins of the Lakatian proposal”<sup>6</sup> is proved to be the basic precondition for the best reading of the ontology of international politics after the specialization in a specific scientific field, offering the necessary discipline.

This means that the neo-positivist framework represented an evolutionary step forward, but it is also necessary to be combined with positivism and not remaining only to its philosophical moral. Neo-positivism, as this was developed in the middle war period in Austria and Germany, bestowed a philosophical thought of emphasizing on empiricism and the logical-typical analysis, while it set metaphysics at the epicenter of its critique. The given framework is specific and thus, its figuration with positivist references is necessary; however, it is at the antipode of meta-positivism, as this is reflected by critical geopolitics. As it has been mentioned already, critical geopolitics insists to focus on geostrategic aspects referring, however, to geopolitics; i.e. it refers to geopolitics, but it moves towards policy recommendations defined by individual actors’ strategic aims and not by the objective analysis and the clear description of the ontology itself.

In parallel, as it also happens in international relations theory, meta-positivists identify their academic work with a tendency of “patricide”; i.e. deconstructing emblematic figures of classical theory such as Thucydides and Sir Halford Mackinder<sup>7</sup> respectively. However, this endeavour takes place without a cohesive argumentation, but with an unproven verbiage of theological substance. Moreover, under the philosophical weight of such emblematic figures of thought on international politics, a clear distinction is observed regarding methodology, with the respective presence or absence ideations to be profound in the margins of the respective distinction between ontology and deontology, or descriptive analysis and ideological orientation.

All these indicate the epistemological and methodological convergences on major issues between structural realism and systemic geopolitical analysis, outlining also their big “scientific opponent”. In parallel, they describe the necessity of an operational correlation of positivism and neo-positivism with the aim of a better deepening in the ontology of the international system. It is worth to be underlined that the positivist framework is allocated by Leszek Kolakowski among phenomenism, nominalism, cognitivism and naturalism.<sup>8</sup> In Kolakowski’s words, positivism is described in the light of the afore-mentioned terms having the common ground of indicating the element of relativity-subjectivity of perception and in these terms, the influence it exerts on the evolution of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

In specific, phenomenism refers to the framework of knowledge acquired in terms of images-phenomena. Nominalism emphasizes on names and terminology of the field indicating the symbolism, which characterizes the use of terms and their subjectivity. Cognitivism deepens into evaluation process and normative declarations as inadequate towards the upmost aim of knowledge production and codification. Finally, naturalism refers to the profound tendency of social sciences and humanities to adopt the methodological preconditions of natural sciences.<sup>10</sup>

On the line of Kolakowski’s thought, positivism is understood via four assumptions.<sup>11</sup> First, via the methodological convergence, it aims to the unity of science and in these terms, deconstructs any further typological and methodological distinctions. Second, it proceeds into the clear distinction of description and evaluation giving the relevant weight to events and ideas, non-history or any other subjective views. Third, it is characterized by an emphasis on normativities and models (or paradigms), which set the scientific framework with discipline and typological cohesion. Fourth, it is identified with a commitment to empirical epistemology and thus, to pragmatological test of hypotheses or, in other words, comparative scenarios-argumentations.<sup>12</sup> Referring to positivism and the description of its scientific legacy on the axis of theory-making and predictability, it has been highlighted that:

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<sup>6</sup> Mazis, I. Th. (2002) *Geopolitics: Theory and praxis / Geopolitiki: Theoria kai praxi* [in Greek]. Athens: Papazisis and ELIAMEP. Pp. 51-52.

<sup>7</sup> Mackinder, H. J. (1981) *Democratic ideals and reality*. London: Praeger.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in: Wight, C. (2006) *Agents, structures and international relations: Politics as ontology*. New York: Cambridge university press. P. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Troulis, M. I. (2016) Conditions of science and the ontological background of international relations theory [in Greek]. *Political and social sciences*, 2, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> On a thorough analysis of naturalism in Thucydides’s work, see: Zagorin, P. (2005) *Thucydides: An introduction for the common reader*. Princeton: Princeton university press. P. 146-151.

<sup>11</sup> Troulis, M. I. (2016) op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> This typology belongs to Steve Smith and it is cited in : Wight, C. (2006) op. cit., p. 20.

“Science in the positivist framework represents a system of research and knowledge production, which is seen valid when is constructed on empirical, observable and countable data in order to create hypotheses, explanatory mechanisms and thought them to construct theory. This theory will be a general extension of scientific truths and data and its basic characteristic will be its predictability”.<sup>13</sup>

In the same work of Ioannis Th. Mazis, Hans Morgenthau’s views have been declared with reference to the incapability of social sciences to be identified with natural sciences, since “the first refer to a continuous cause-and-effect analysis, while the others refer to partial causes acting on standing objects”.<sup>14</sup> The core difference between positivism and neo-positivism is related with the inclusion by the second of “the wholehearted embrace of the Cartesian split between the knowing subject and the known object—a split that made it necessary to find ingenious ways to cross the gap between the mind and the world, and to avoid error when so doing. Valid claims, for a neopositivist, correspond to the (mind-independent) world, and hypothesis testing is the key neopositivist procedure for evaluating claims to see whether they do in fact so correspond”.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, neo-positivism does not neglect the parameter of count and evaluation, but this does not mean that it is developed without epistemological precondition identified with ontology. As it is described correctly by Panayiotis Kondylis:

“Popper was formed into line with neo-positivism with the aim to put an end to the ideational and diehard German tradition in sciences of spirit. Also, he does not want to be identified with the monistic ontology of neo-positivism and not to accept induction as a means of implementing this programme. He approached the neo-positivist question of a methodologically united science with terminological means concluding to a reconstruction of the action of scientific subject; i.e. to a re-evaluation of the subject – according to the older conventionalism – and the theory vis-à-vis experience (of senses)”.<sup>16</sup>

### **Causality, Falsifiability and Predictability**

Measurement and evaluation concludes to the description of the tendency and finally prediction, an aim and scope of systemic geopolitical analysis. Description of orientation is a desirable scientific conclusion, given with great accuracy by systemic geopolitical analysis, while the aim is the multidimensional and comparative analysis of adequate data to be developed towards an exact prediction. Profoundly, this is not about a multi-case-study determinism. The accurate definition represent a continuous explanatory procedure on the basis of the special characteristics of each phenomenon or case study and in contrary to the deduction of structural realism. Nevertheless, systemic geopolitical analysis still aims to accurately define and further proceed into the description of international effects under the lens of the perception that an experiment may contribute to the construction of a prediction mechanism.

It has been highlighted that John Mearsheimer – disagreeing with Kenneth Waltz and agreeing with Colin Elman – does not refer directly to a prediction but he notes that international relations theory may function also as a theory of foreign policy; i.e. as an explanatory tool for individual states’ behaviours.<sup>17</sup> Structural realism does not contain any mechanism of accurate prediction, but it offers a thorough method of knowledge and elaboration into the problematique of interstate relations, a fact which is the basic interface with systemic geopolitical analysis. Besides, in any case, the construction of causality is the core issue towards reaching conclusions, regardless of the possibility the causal links to be defined in terms of historiography or geography. Perception and evaluation in terms of epistemology is defined “by the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs”.<sup>18</sup>

In order to describe causal links, structural realism refers to the “laboratory of history” on the axis of the empirical axiom that “answers to historical questions are not found in constructed theory, but the answers to

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<sup>13</sup> Mazis, I. Th. (2012) *Metatheoretical critical approach of international relations and geopolitics. The neopositivist frame / Metatheoritiki Kritiki Diethnon skhesseon kai Geopolitikis. To neothetikistiko plaisio* (in Greek). Athens: Papazisis. P. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Mazis, I. Th. (2012) op. cit., pp. 202-204.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, P. T. (2011) *The conduct of inquiry in international relations: Philosophy of science and its implications for the study of world politics*. London: Routledge. P. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Kondylis, P. (2007) *Politics and the human (Volume 1)* (in Greek). Athens: Themelio. P. 222.

<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001) *The tragedy of Great Power politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. P. 422. It is worth to be mentioned that Mearsheimer endeavours, in the conclusion of his magnum opus, to describe the general trend of evolutions with regard to the future of the balance of power in the Pacific Ocean between the USA and China, as well as the crucial intervening role of Japan.

<sup>18</sup> Alston, W. P. (2005) *Beyond ‘justification’: Dimensions of epistemic evaluation*. Ithaca: Cornell university press. P. 29.

theoretical problems are found in history”.<sup>19</sup> This means that, in the margins of the dipole of theory and history, structural realism looks for a common denominator; i.e. finding common data contributes towards making an analysis of the relative trend. On the other side, systemic geopolitical analysis refers also to the “laboratory of history” to decode and reach conclusions, apart from geography of course, which is both a valuable “explanatory tool” and a significant in practice formative element. The common basis of all the afore-mentioned methodological and epistemological conclusions could be summarized by Karl Popper’s words:

“Although historicism is fundamentally antinaturalistic, it is by no means opposed to the A idea that there is a common element in the methods of the physical and the social sciences. This may be due to the fact that historicists as a rule adopt the view (which I fully share) that sociology, like physics, is a branch of knowledge which aims, at the same time, to be theoretical and empirical. By saying that it is a theoretical discipline we mean that sociology has to explain and to predict events, with the help of theories or of universal laws (which it tries to discover). By describing sociology as empirical, we mean to say that it is backed by experience that the events it explains and predicts are observable facts, and that observation is the basis for the acceptance or rejection of any propounded theory. When we speak of success in physics we have in mind the success of its predictions: and the success of its predictions can be said to be the same as the empirical corroboration of the laws of physics. When we contrast the relative”.<sup>20</sup>

On the basis of deepening (also) into history, systemic geopolitical analysis records the significance of falsifiability. Via falsifiability, Karl Popper endeavoured to contradict the basic idea of positivists that a theoretical hypothesis has to be tested in terms of its capability to be verified and contrarily to be examined whether it is falsified.<sup>21</sup> The incapability of a theory to be tested on its hypotheses’ falsifiability represents a core problem, since the elements setting aside theories are much more important than those verifying them.<sup>22</sup>

For example, testing an abstract and/or empirically unproven artwork – e.g. a poem – always concludes to be proven unfalsifiable. For this reason, epistemological substance of a field is proven by the capability of its axioms to be falsified; i.e. falsifiable and not necessarily falsified. Falsifiability stabilizes the Popperian framework of epistemology in accordance with consistency, continuing accumulation, thoroughness and predictability. This precondition is absolutely correlated with systemic geopolitical analysis.<sup>23</sup>

On the opposite, the methodology of structural realism does not contradict the Popperian framework, although it does not encapsulate the necessary discipline. Falsifiability is adopted and subsumed to the process of theoretical hypotheses’ construction, without deconstructing theory ipso facto but empowering it in the diachrony. Theory is broadened and adjusts, a fact which changes it completely affecting its level of discipline, in contrary of Stephen Van Evera’s line of defence vis-à-vis Karl Popper’s legacy. According to Van Evera:

“If a theory passes many strong tests but then flunks a test of a previously untested prediction, this usually means that the theory requires previously unidentified antecedent conditions to operate. We react by reframing the theory to include the antecedent condition, thus narrowing the scope of the theory’s claims to exclude the flunked test. In Popper’s terms we now have a new theory· however, all the tests passed by the old theory also corroborate the new, leaving it in very strong shape at birth. Thus confirming tests tell us a great deal – about the old theory, about its repaired replacement, and about any later versions. Popper’s contrary argument stems partly from his strange assumption that once theories are stated they are promptly accepted, hence evidence in their favour is unimportant because it merely reinforces a pre-existing belief in the theory. The opposite is more often true: most new ideas face hostile prejudice even after confirming evidence accumulates”.<sup>24</sup>

On this line of thought and with reference to the epistemological precondition of falsifiability, Van Evera continues citing Imre Lakatos:

“Theories cannot be falsified before their replacement emerges”. Imre Lakatos claims that “there is no falsification [of theory] before the emergence of a better theory”, and “falsification cannot precede the better

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<sup>19</sup> Kondylis, P. (1998) *The invisible chronology of thought: Answers to 28 questions* (in Greek). Athens: Nefeli. P. 75. In correlation with the significance of empiricism and verification via historical examples, it is underlined correctly by Panagiotis Kondylis in the same work that: “My core interest in my historical works is to tangibly explain the explanatory value of my general overview of human issues. *If a specific theory can define over a common denominator and perceive in a common way issues and phenomena, which are distanced from each other on a first view, then this produces many advantages*”. Kondylis, P. (1998) op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Popper, K. (2002) *The poverty of historicism*. London: Routledge. P. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, P. T. (2011) op. cit., pp. 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Mazis, I. Th. (2012) op. cit., pp. 201-220.

<sup>23</sup> Mazis, I. Th. (2012) op. cit., pp. 201-220.

<sup>24</sup> Van Evera, S. (1997) *Guide to methods for students of political science*. Ithaca: Cornell university press. Pp. 43-44.

theory”. This claim is too sweeping. It applies only to theories that fail some tests but retain some explanatory power. We should retain these theories until a stronger replacement arrives. But if testing shows that a theory has no explanatory power, we should reject it whether or not a replacement theory is at hand. Many science programs – for example, medical research – advance by routinely testing theories against null hypotheses and rejecting those that fail, whether or not replacements are ready”.<sup>25</sup>

Popper’s remarks on falsifiability represented an answers to “Vienna Circle” and the principle of verifiability, which is profoundly summarized to the successful test of hypotheses with the aim to be indicated true. The inter-historical experience – as it was underlined above by Panayiotis Kondylis on his remarks on “common denominator” – verifies a theory and it develops it via continuing accumulation. This accumulation cancels, deconstructs, weakens, but at the same time confirms, develops and empowers theoretical dynamic, since it is about broadening and addition of the substance of theory construction; i.e. its aim in practice. In addition, beyond these remarks and in accordance with falsifiability and verifiability as well as underlining the undoubted significance of predictability, the Lakatian axiom of epistemology is underlined:

“A program is progressive when its theoretical evolution is followed by the empirical still predicting successfully. It is degenerate when its theoretical evolution lacks in comparison with its empirical offering post hoc explanations to random discoveries or events having been predicted and discovered by opposite programs, not predicting new-like events and not presenting new empirical content”.<sup>26</sup>

Theory ought “to be supported by true and verifiable axioms, to be specific and to this respect, to express specific and cohesive causal links”.<sup>27</sup> If it is in accordance with these preconditions, it accesses – among others – predictability, while the incapability of defining the end and the existence of thoroughness is identified with the absence of theoretical substance. This is applicable in practice, but it is also epistemologically defined when it is subsumed to a specific, disciplinary and cohesive typology.

In the case of structural realism, verifiability is not doubted by definition but it is applied by deduction, characterizing its axioms, since Waltz emphasizes on the necessary generalization of theory. As a scholar of systemic geopolitical analysis would put it, structural realism can be subsumed – even not explicitly – to the terms of verifiability, but this is achievable because it “sets the bar low”. Hence, “neorealist generalization” is contradicted as “not epistemologically disciplinary approach” by systemic geopolitical analysis, even if their convergence on the basics (i.e. reading of the field of interstate antagonisms and how these are explained) is undisputedly recognized.

For Kenneth Waltz, theory cannot explain any kind of specialities,<sup>28</sup> and this is chosen in order to obtain “flexibility” and consequently, explanatory capability. This flexibility offers verifiability and credibility, contributing towards the description of trends and orientations – and not determinisms of mathematical content – of human behaviour and the collectivities’ interactions on a worldwide level. Facts and conditions, supporting the procedure of theoretical tests, are characterized by stabilized indications and specific conclusions beyond subjectivities and blinkered remarks. According to structural realism, deduction represents the necessary precondition for constructing adequately verified hypotheses for international effects of interstate antagonism for power.

## II. CONCLUSION

Without any doubt, when debate reaches issues of convergence with the legacy of Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos, epistemological, methodological and typological divergences are made clear between the two fields of the current study. However, these divergences can be a starting point of complementarity if the core questions – posed by the basic figures of each scientific field – are examined thoroughly. On the one side, structural realism is stably oriented to the “deduced” and “generalized” neglecting

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<sup>25</sup> Van Evera, S. (1997) op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Mazis, I. Th. (2012) op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> Troulis, M. I. (2016) op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> This parameter is one of the three characteristics of the so-called “good theory”, as it is defined by Kenneth Waltz. The other two significant characteristics are related to the stricture and the explanatory broadness of the theoretical process a mechanism of description of the international phenomena and not as a tool of policy recommendations and geostrategic inclinations. First, “*a theory contains at least one theoretical assumption. Such assumptions are not factual. One therefore cannot legitimately ask if they are true, but only if they are useful*”. Second, “*theories must be evaluated in terms of what they claim to explain. Balance-of-power theory claims to explain the results of states’ actions, under given conditions, and those results may not be foreshadowed in any of the actors’ motives or be contained as objectives in their policies*”. Waltz, K. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: MA: Addison-Wesley. Pp. 117-118.

to deepen into the unseen and uncountable issues of interstate antagonism and remarking that a further deepening could endanger any cohesive explanatory mechanism. For neorealism, such an endeavour would be a mistake and inclined to fail, since its “epistemological quiver” is incapable to apply so complex and multidimensional demands.

On the other side, systemic geopolitical analysis answers to the “necessary deduction” via the “multidimensional analytics” / “interdisciplinary approach”; i.e. via the development of Interdisciplinary Analysis Models, as a research aim of interdisciplinary groups, with the supervision of geography/geopolitical analyst, “whose contribution could contribute towards a common theoretical hard core”.<sup>29</sup> Ratzelian method of approaching international evolutions or any kind of geopolitical issues as well as the holistic analytics developed in Leipzig (Positivist Cycle of Leipzig or School of Leipzig), deeply influences the interdisciplinary approach of systemic geopolitical analysis and this represents the springboard of multi-parametrical and not of geodeterminist explanations of international evolutions or of any other issue of geopolitical substance.<sup>30</sup>

As they would further the relevant demands from the neorealist theoretical approach, the hesitance of prediction, and also of explicit and specific reference to – the afore-mentioned terms – of verifiability and falsifiability are endeavoured to be covered by a changing use of tools given by different scientific fields, with the relevant suitable scientific specializations. In any case, the correlation with the upmost aim of reading the ontology of the international system accordingly, represents an undoubtedly basic starting point for a process of debate, complementarity and finally, synthesis.

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Ioannis Th. Mazis “The Thucydidean Legacy of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism” International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI), vol. 08, no. 10, 2019, pp. 45-50

<sup>29</sup> See: Mazis, I. Th. (2012) op. cit.. Domatioti, X. (2018) *Systemic geopolitical analysis. Interscientific and multi-methodological approach* (Foreword by Ioannis Th. Mazis) (in Greek). Athens: Leimon. P. 74.

<sup>30</sup> Domatioti, X. (2018) op. cit., p. 74.