Politics of Causal Explanation (ECPR 2011)
Milja Kurki and Hidemi Suganami
Aberystwyth University
mlk@aber.ac.uk and hss@aber.ac.uk

Abstract

In the study of world politics, two opposing positions are discernible on the subject of causal analysis. On the one hand, there are those (Hume-inspired positivists) for whom a search for observable regularities is of central importance; on the other hand, there are those for whom causal analysis is altogether misguided for, according to them, it entails dangerous origins narratives, it is technologising, it assumes hegemonic truth narratives, or it relies on an outdated commitment to firm natural scientific knowledge. In the main body of this paper, we counter the latter group of thinkers by engaging with their arguments critically one by one. However, as we explain in the first part of the paper, our standpoint is not Hume-inspired positivism. We believe that causal accounts in the social and historical studies of world politics are closely intertwined with the account-givers’ interpretations which in turn reflect their political and ethical views. In the final part of the paper, we reflect on the politics of causal enquiry as such as we understand them and invite those who oppose causal enquiries to reflect on theirs.

Introduction

We believe in the central importance of causal enquiries in the study of society and history, in general, and in the historical and social scientific studies of world politics, in particular. Elsewhere we have expounded in some more detail our own autonomous lines of defence for causal analysis. One of us (Kurki, 2008) has drawn attention to the importance of historical and interpretive approaches in subjecting world politics to causal analysis. The other, for his part, has noted that historical investigations are not an exclusive concern of the discipline of History, that there is no good reason why students of International Relations (IR), qua IR students, should not engage in historical enquiries, and that it should be acknowledged that the disciplines of History and IR overlap (Suganami, 2008, 2011). Neither of us wishes to exclude historical studies of world politics from our purview and both of us consider causal analysis to be a central concern of social and historical studies.

We are, of course, not alone among IR scholars to attach key importance to causal enquiries. Those (‘Hume-inspired positivists’) who believe that causal relations are a type of co-variation and that the covering-law model of explanation represents the structure of causal explanation will in fact agree with us on the importance of causal analysis in the study of world politics. As King, Keohane and Verba (1994) and Michael Nicholson (1996), among others, have shown, systematic causal analysis constitutes the heart of social scientific exercise.

However, this does not mean that they and we share understandings of causation and causal explanation. On the contrary, our views diverge considerably from theirs. We have explicitly argued for non-Humean, non-positivist approaches to causal analysis (Kurki, 2008) or certainly have pointed to the limitations of attempts to conduct causal analysis purely in Humean/regularity terms (Suganami, 1996).

This refusal to reduce causal enquiry to Humean causal analysis, focused on the search for regularities, we have argued elsewhere, is an important move. When we understand that causal analysis does not equal study of regularities, we realise the possibility of a wide range of causal explanation in social sciences/history. We come to see the role of
causal analysis quite differently from the positivist mainstream. In fact, we have both argued that causal narratives are central to social science and history and that the essence of causal accounts is explanation, or making a subject intelligible (Suganami, 1996; Kurki, 2008). Shifting causal analysis in this direction, we have noted, brings interpretative activities back into causal analysis. We also believe that causal analysis is closely intertwined with interpretative contestations and therefore, at the rock bottom, with politics and ethics.

Yet we have observed that the shift towards more interpretive models of causal analysis has not taken root quite as well as we had hoped. Indeed, we have, with some concern, noted that a number of our academic colleagues have expressed negative views about the role of causal analysis in the study of world politics. They even appear to consider it as politically or ideologically dangerous on a number of grounds. In particular, causal analysis is condemned as “technologising”, producing pernicious ‘origins’ narratives, or forcing a specific interpretation on others as ‘the truth’.

These criticisms, while not without merit, are ill considered and, for the most part, still rely, we note, on Humean or positivist ideas of causal analysis. Eyebrow-raising against causal analysis in blanket terms, we argue, is counter-productive as it fails to bring out adequately the complex and nuanced politics of causal explanation.

For this reason, we turn here to defend causal analysis not only on philosophical but also on political grounds. We seek to explicitly bring out the politics of causal explanation as well as draw attention to the importance of the politics of causal explanations. This is in order to invite the critics of causal enquiries to sharpen their focus of attack and to appreciate the extent to which a ‘critical political edge’ is present in causal analysis as we conceive of it.

This article proceeds in three steps. Developing our previous works, we first examine the basic contours of a non-Humean approach to causal analysis. We then tackle, step by step, a range of criticisms levelled at causal analysis – that it entails dangerous origin narratives, that it is technologising, that it assumes hegemonic truth narratives, or that it relies on an outdated commitment to firm natural scientific knowledge. We counter these criticisms one by one. In the final section we bring out the politics of causal analysis as we see them, challenging our critics also to reflect on theirs.

**Against Humean positions**

Let us first explain, then, where the two of us stand in relation to Hume-inspired notions of causation and causal explanation dominant amongst positivist social scientists in IR and beyond it.

The Hume-inspired stance is characterised by the regularity theory of causation, the view of causation as a relationship specifically between events, and the idea of explanation along the lines of the covering law model. Elsewhere, we have either rejected these positions (Kurki 2008) or only accepted them with such heavy qualifications (Suganami 1996) that neither of us can be said to subscribe to them, let alone advocate them, as is done, often with seemingly unmovable conviction, by the followers of Hume.

Hume’s (1962[1777], 1969[1739]) regularity theory of causation may be summarised as follows. When we say that one event has caused another – and, for Hume, causal relations are relations specifically between events – what we have in mind is that (in the circumstances, as we should say) the first event brought about, or necessitated, the second event. So, even for Hume, the idea of bringing about, or necessitating, is integral to our concept of causation.²

---

¹ We understand by ‘the politics of causal explanation’ a set of politically significant assumptions and beliefs which underlie our engagement in any causal enquiry; by ‘the politics of causal explanations’ we understand political preferences, biases, or ‘ideologies’, which shape the particular causal explanations we offer.

Hume notes, however, that this idea we entertain has no correspondence in our observations; we have no sensory experience of causing or causal powers realising themselves. Hume’s problem, therefore, is how to give an account of our idea of causal powers/necessity.

As is well known, Hume offers an ingenious causal story here, predating Pavlov’s famous experiments by over 150 years. According to Hume, we develop an idea of causal powers/necessity because and to the extent that we encounter a regular sequence of events, which psychologically conditions us into expecting a relevant effect-type event to follow when we see a cause-type event. Our idea of causal necessity is nothing but this conditioned expectation transposed to the world. For Hume, causal necessity is solely an idea and a causal relation (in the world, which, for Hume, is the empirical world) is nothing but a regularly observable event-sequence.

This is the gist of his regularity theory of causation. Hume’s position is also known as ‘causal idealism’ inasmuch as, for him, causation, in the sense of causal necessitation, is only an idea, and not a feature of the real (mind-independent) world.

Kurki and Suganami are not satisfied by Hume’s explanation of the idea of causal powers/necessitation. In fact, we hold a much wider conception of causation, according to which causal relations obtain not only between events but also among a host of other (partially overlapping) items, e.g., facts, things, situations, structures, and relationships. We also consider that causation is not only about necessitating (in the sense of forcible bringing about of an effect) but that it includes a wide range of modalities, such as enabling, inclining, shaping, influencing, and constraining. But, for the moment, let us focus on Hume’s discussion of causation as relations of events whereby one event necessitates (or forcibly brings about) the other, though only in our imagination.

We do not, in fact, discard Hume entirely. Suganami believes that Hume is right to think that, empirically, nothing appears to happen in the world, or in the relevant segment of it, when what we call ‘causing’ goes on. As even Bhaskar points out, ‘we are never directly aware of causal powers as such’ (2008, 215).

However, Suganami finds enlightening Bhaskar’s remark that while causal powers cannot be shown to exist they can still be known to exist (2008, 186). More specifically, Suganami finds persuasive Bhaskar’s argument, expounded in his A Realist Theory of Science (2008), that, without subscribing to the idea that causal powers are ‘really’ present, i.e., independently of what we think, we could not make sense of what scientists typically do in their profession (in particular, to conduct experiments) and that they would not be able to continue engaging in them. Kurki (2007, 2008), for her part, draws on ‘critical realism’, developing from Bhaskar’s writings, and argues that it is indeed necessary for scientists and other social actors to assume the reality (or mind-independence) of causal powers.

Kurki and Suganami are agreed, therefore, that the mind-independent existence of causal powers is not just an imagination induced by conditioning as Hume would have it but a well-grounded belief. In this, our position differs from that of Hume-inspired positivists. Importantly, causal relations – insofar as they are seen as relations of cause-events and effect-events – are, for us, relations of causal necessitation; causes need not have anything intrinsically to do with regularities with which a cause brings about its effect. Furthermore, as we pointed out, causal relations, for us, are not confined to relations between events, as in Hume, but hold between a range of items and, also importantly, causal relations include modalities other than ‘necessitation’ (or forcible bringing about of the effect-event).

---

3 In Jaegwon Kim’s (1993) terminology, Hume is a causal ‘irrealist’. An opposing position is known as ‘causal realism’, championed by Harré and Madden (1975) and Bhaskar (2008).

4 Here, ‘known’ is used in the sense of ‘believed with good reason’ (as opposed to, say, ‘believed, or imagined, as a result of psychological conditioning or inducement’). As Bhaskar (2008, 249) rightly remarks, ‘[t]here is no way in which we can look at the world and then at a sentence and ask whether they fit’.
All this has a significant consequence for our understanding of the practice of explanation. Suppose we make something happen. ‘To make something happen’ is primordially a causal process. The same process may or may not repeat itself; it probably will under relevantly similar circumstances but that is not relevant to our explanation of this particular causal process.

In our view, what is needed to explain this process, and any other kind of causal process, is a more detailed description to make the process more intelligible, the description, or causal narrative, addressing some of our puzzles about what happens in the process. Our view is that causal explanations take various forms of causal narrative which seeks to explain, or ‘intelligibilify’, how the processes unfold, how it comes about that the end results in question were reached.\

For this, subsumption of a given sequences of events under a regular pattern, as required by the covering law model (CLM) of explanation, is neither necessary nor sufficient. Suganami (2011) in fact believes that following the CLM does not get one very far in explaining the happenings that puzzle us. Kurki (2008) agrees and demonstrates that causal enquiry involves a range of methods to identify a variety of explanatory factors. She argues for adopting a wider conception of cause/causal explanation along the Aristotelian lines, as, she believes, this will enable us to supersede unnecessary and unwarranted divisions within the discipline of IR and enrich our enquiry by broadening the scope of analysis.

Furthermore, to the extent that Hume-inspired social/historical investigations are driven by an empiricist ontology and this ontology’s tendency to see the world in atomistic terms, i.e., as consisting of atomized events or actions of individual agents, without paying attention to its (unobservable) structures, Kurki (2008) considers it overly restrictive. She argues for wider social/historical investigations which incorporate ideas, norms, rules, discourses, or social structures, often associated, in IR, with ‘non-causal’ or so-called ‘constitutive’ approaches. Suganami is sympathetic to Kurki’s line of thinking and is interested in understanding what ideological differences may lie beneath different modes of social enquiry. Crucially, as will be explored later here, we attach importance to the politics embedded in causal accounts focused on different factors and different types of causal narratives.

So this is our non-Humean position on causality, which we have argued should concern IR theorists and historians across methodological divides. If indeed causality concerns interpretive studies too, and is near-ubiquitous in our narratives about our historical/social world, post-positivists should have every reason to embrace a causal perspective. However, this is not so.

So what is the problem?

We have witnessed over the past years that there are, among those who study/teach IR, those who take a negative view of causal enquiries and understand or present themselves as not being engaged in such enquiries. Their reasons for their negative assessment of causal enquiries vary. We wish to begin by examining those who express a sceptical attitude towards cause-and-effect thinking because, they believe, it tends to give rise to the ‘origins’ thinking.

*Causal explanation and the ‘origins’ thinking – comments on Maja Zehfuss’ thinking about causal thinking*

---

5 See Suganami (1999). ‘Where we have no hesitation in making causal statements we can tell some more detailed causal story’, writes Mackie (1974, 45).
6 Kurki considers herself to be left-(post-Marxist)oriented.
In his attempt to explicate Derrida’s idea of ‘deconstruction’, Jonathan Culler uses Nietzsche’s treatment of causal relations as an illustration. Culler’s argument may be paraphrased and summarised as follows.

‘Cause’ and ‘effect’ constitute a conceptual pair but, as is clear from a standard phrase, ‘cause and effect’, it is the first term, ‘cause’ that is given priority over the second; the ‘cause’ is accorded the position of the origin. However, Nietzsche has argued, in the actual sequence of experience, it is the effect that comes first; for example, we experience ‘pain’ and, then, ‘spying, perhaps, a pin, one posits a link and reverses the perceptual or phenomenal order, pain ... pin, to produce a causal sequence, pin ... pain’ (Culler, 1983, 86). It is the effect that causes us to call its cause ‘a cause’ at all.

However, ‘[i]f the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin’ (Culler, 1983, 88). This is not to insist that the cause cannot be treated as the origin of its effect but rather to suggest that the way of thinking, according to which something is given priority over something else as its origin, or what we might call the ‘origins thinking’, is dubious – for it is also possible to argue that the effect is the origin of something coming to be accorded the status of the cause.

Importantly, this ‘deconstructive’ way of engaging with causal relations, Culler points out, does not reject causal thinking as such. To say that it is the occurrence of the effect that causes us to identify its cause is obviously to make a causal statement. To deconstruct ‘causality’ (or the cause-effect pair) is not to reject causal thinking altogether but, by employing causal thinking itself, to show that what is commonly treated as secondary may also be primary and, through this demonstration, to displace the ‘origins thinking’, which gives rise to the idea of the primacy of the cause, or of the effect for that matter, in the first place.

Culler’s exposition of what is involved in ‘deconstruction’, summarised above, may or may not get at the heart of Derrida’s own thinking, but that need not detain us here. What is interesting to observe here is that, while not denying the importance of causal thinking, Culler, through his exposition of Nietzsche’s discussion of causation, has touched on one feature of causal thinking which is picked on by some as being highly problematic. This has to do with the ‘origins thinking’. To say that something caused something else tends to be part of the (politically significant) move to present the cause as though it were the origin, the uncaused cause.

Maja Zehfuss, who has applied Derrida’s thoughts in her critical engagement with contemporary world politics, provides a good illustration here. In a short but important essay, written in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, she (2003) criticizes the prevailing interpretation that these attacks were the cause and the American response – the war against Afghanistan, the war against terrorism – were its effect. Such an interpretation, she notes, is underpinned by a desire not to appear disrespectful of the dead and the prevailing political climate in which ‘explanation’ is treated as ‘exoneration’. She rightly argues that the 9/11 attacks were not the origin, the uncaused cause, of what ensued, but should be considered in the context of the history of inequality, military intervention and imperialism in world politics.

Just as Culler (or Derrida) was not opposed to causal thinking as such in their discussion of ‘deconstruction’, Zehfuss’ target here turns out not to be causal thinking or causal enquiries as such, but a simplistic causal diagnosis which posits what is presented as the cause as though it were itself the origin, the uncaused cause.

Clearly, however, it is through causal enquiries, through encouraging more causal enquiries, that we can prevent one, perhaps simplistic and pernicious, causal narrative from becoming dominant. Zehfuss does not appear to be opposed to this line of thinking in fact, to which Kurki and Suganami both subscribe.
However, in objecting to the dominant American interpretation of the sequence of events, in which the 9/11 attacks were presented as though they were the uncaused cause, the origins of all that followed, Zehfuss points to an important aspect of causal account-giving. Even though there is no such thing as an uncaused cause – for anything that counts as a cause in relation to its effect had in turn been caused insofar as anything that happens has been caused to happen – anyone giving a causal account of a given outcome will have to start the account somewhere. Any causal account has a beginning point; what the causal narrative reveals is how the segment of the world unfolded from that point on and smoothed the way to bring about the outcome.

Herein lies the problem of causal explanation and the problem, we believe, has a political dimension. When we formulate a causal account, what constitutes the beginning point is a choice we make, and this choice has potentially quite significant political implications – just as much as what we focus our attention on as the end result to be explained is a matter of decision, again with perhaps quite important political consequences. This is part of what we have in mind as the politics of causal explanations. And it is precisely because offering or favouring particular causal explanations, especially in the historical/social world, is likely to have political implications that Kurki and Suganami consider it important to engage in causal enquiries, not of a dogmatic kind – as though it is obvious what causes what – but of a critically reflective sort, which keeps open the possibility of different interpretations. Encouraging causal enquiries and debates brings politics back in and we believe we should acknowledge this point.

However, Zehfuss appears to have more critical things to say about the usefulness of causal enquiry as such. She talks about her ‘doubts as to the applicability of the notion of causality’ (2003, 522). Referring, in her notes, to the works of Nietzsche as well as Culler’s discussion of his observation touched on earlier, she explains her doubts as follows (2003, 521-22):

Clearly, the events of September 11 have in some way set off the response, but at the same time the response has dictated what these events were: acts of terrorism from outside, which may be associated not only with a terrorist network, Al-Qaida, but also with a state, Afghanistan. The events of September 11 can function as a cause for the US war effort only thanks to this interpretation, which is an integral part of the war effort itself. The two are not independent, and thus do not fulfil the requirements of cause and effect.

Cause and effect are, of course, never as easily separated as they would need to be and Friedrich Nietzsche argues that this separation is fundamentally artificial and wrong. When people claim that lightning flashes, for example, they ‘posit the same event once as cause and then again as its effect’. Sometimes, cause and effect are mistaken for each other. Moreover, although the cause is supposedly antecedent, it is in fact imagined after the effect has occurred. Thus, cause-and-effect thinking raises more questions than it answers. What is more, in this case it is applied only partially.

That cause-and-effect thinking raises many questions is undoubtedly true; indeed, that is one important reason why Kurki and Suganami are concerned to promote it. In any case, as Culler (1983, 86), among countless others, has suggested, it is well-nigh impossible to remove the idea of causality from our thinking and living.

Still, Zehfuss appears to think that there is something fundamentally wrong or even self-contradictory/impossible about any causal thinking. Unfortunately, she does not articulate her objections very clearly in the above passage or in the rest of her article. Her
two main objections appear to be (1) that cause and effect are supposed to be independent but in the case of the US causal claim, linking its response to what it presents as the cause, the two are interlinked and therefore it does not constitute a genuine causal claim, if there be one; and (2) that, as Nietzsche has pointed out, we identify (or ‘imagine’) a cause only after we know the effect and that, in the American case, it is the response that has dictated what the cause is, or how the events of September 11 are to be presented.

But neither of these claims can be taken as undermining causal thinking as such. Zehfuss’ first claim involves a very common misunderstanding about cause-and-effect relations. To the extent that one event is said to have caused another, it is often suggested that the two events must be independent (Wendt, 1999). There is, however, something intuitively implausible in this assertion inasmuch as the cause and the effect must be, surely, interdependent: the effect happens because of the cause and the cause is a cause only in relation to its effect. It turns out that in an event-to-event causal relation, there is in fact no requirement that the two events be independent of each other; the only requirement is that they be distinct, i.e., not identical, events (Mackie, 1974, 32; Suganami, 2006). After all, if something causes something else, it is ‘something else’ that it causes.

If the US causal claim linked its response – war against terrorism, war against Afghanistan – to what it presented as its cause – Al-Qaeda, supported by Afghanistan, attacking targets in the US – the claim does not ipso facto disqualify as a genuine causal claim: clearly, Al-Qaeda, supported by Afghanistan, attacking targets in the US is not the same event as America’s war against terrorism or war against Afghanistan. Whether the American causal claim is a sound causal claim or not is, of course, a separate issue, concerning which both Zehfuss and we have serious reservations. But the claim is still a genuine causal claim.?

Zehfuss’ second point relates to Nietzsche’s above-noted observation that we experience the effect first and then, and only then, we look for its cause, so that, in an important sense, it is the effect that causes the cause to become the cause.

Kurki and Suganami of course agree with Nietzsche on this point. It cannot be otherwise; it is only when the effect is given precise descriptions that we can go on to identify its causes. In fact, this is only a special case of a more general truism that we need a question, formulated in a specific way, before we can search for a relevant answer.

But the point Zehfuss wishes to convey seems to be a different one. She asserts that the ‘response has dictated what these events are’ and by this she seems to be suggesting that how the US represents the events of September 11 has been ‘dictated’ by what response US has taken.

We cannot, of course, discount the possibility that the US government, humiliated and desperate to demonstrate its power and efficiency, first took the decision to attack Afghanistan and begin a campaign against terrorism and then, in order to justify these decisions, began representing the events of September 11 as ‘acts of terrorism from outside, which may be associated not only with a terrorist network, Al-Qaeda, but also with a state, Afghanistan’ (Zehfuss, 2003, 521).

However, whether this is what happened is clearly an empirical question. It has nothing to do with the observation Nietzsche is making which points to an intrinsic feature of any causal thinking (and, indeed, any explanatory activity). Unfortunately, by making what amounts to her own causal speculation (that the US response ‘dictated’ – causally necessitated – a particular representation of the ‘events of September 11’) seem as though it were consonant with the Nietzschean truism, Zehfuss is in danger of making her causal

---

7 See, further, Suganami 2011.
interpretation appear as though it were necessarily true. This would be ironic given her apparent wish to dissociate herself from causal thinking altogether.

Zehfuss is of course entirely right to say that a simplistic causal narrative of the sort that takes the 9/11 attacks as the origins of everything else that followed in the US war effort is quite unsound. But we believe that Zehfuss overstates her case when she appears to condemn causal thinking itself when what she should have been criticizing is a particular, oversimplistic, causal statement, employed to justify a particular course of action, rather than to make sense of a course of actions and reactions in their social and historical context.

Zehfuss’s line of thinking leads us to take a look at another author who has expressed a similarly negative view about causal thinking. According to Jenny Edkins, causal thinking is misguided because it leads to a ‘technologising’ and de-politicising kind of engagement.

Causal explanation and ‘technologising’ – comments on Jenny Edkins’ thinking about causal thinking

In her richly thought-provoking article, ‘Legality with a Vengeance: Famines and Humanitarian Relief in “Complex Emergencies”’ (1996), Edkins engages in a multi-facetted critique of the causal theories of famine advanced by Malthus, Amartya Sen and others. According to her (1996, 566), ‘[t]o see famine as either a natural disaster, as in the work of Malthus, or as an economic disaster, as in the work of Sen, ignores the way some people benefit from famine: there are what the new “complex emergency” paradigm calls “winners” as well as “losers”’. Later in her article, however, she also criticises causal explanations of famine stemming from this ‘complex emergency’ paradigm.

It is not our purpose here to assess Edkins’ treatment of particular causal theories of famine. It may be that certain dominant causal theories of famine, which Edkins examines, share a weakness that she points to, in particular, the tendency to technologise suffering and treat famine as though it were a scientifically solvable problem. However, we think that her underlying conception of causal thinking itself contains a number of problems which it is our aim to tease out – with the view to showing that Edkins, like Zehfuss, overstates her case.  

Against Sen’s treatment of famine, upon which she focuses much of her attention initially, Edkins writes as follows:

[Sen’s] emphasis on ‘factual investigation’ and ‘cause’ puts the study of ‘starvation’ firmly in the realm of economics and social science: the answers to be sought are not in the form of reasons for actions (why one group of people allowed another group to starve to death; or perhaps why they killed them), but the form of causal explanations. Answers do not lie in the realm of the study of relationships between people, but in the relationship of people to commodities. There is to be no history or narrative of famine, no account of what happened in a particular case in terms of who did what. Instead, there is an account in terms of cause and result, an account that is quantifiable (1996, 565-66; see also Edkins, 2000: 64).

What we notice straightway here is Edkins’ apparent subscription to the notion of causal explanation as necessarily involving the knowledge of co-variation between quantified variables. It should be clear from our earlier exposition of an anti-Humean view of causation and causal explanation, however, that it is possible to conceptualise causation/causal explanation in a radically different way. According to our way of thinking, ‘why one group

---

8 Here, we use Edkins (1996). Edkins (2000) is an expanded version of this article but no change is discernible in her thoughts on causal explanations.
of people allowed another group to starve to death’ – which Edkins seems to consider as an important issue but necessarily omitted from what she allows under her ‘causal’ rubric – would in fact form a key part of what we regard as a causal explanation, or narrative, of what happened in a particular case of famine (provided, of course, that one group of people did allow another group to starve to death in the case being studied). Edkins’ mistrust of causal enquiries appears to be based at least partly on her unquestioning acceptance of the Humean view of causation and causal explanation which is certainly not the only view and, we believe, not even the most sensible one.\(^9\)

However, Edkins’ dissatisfaction with causal thinking appears quite deep-rooted; persuading her to broaden her concept of cause/causal explanation in the direction we suggest might not be sufficient to make her alter her anti-causality stance.

Her complaint against causal thinking with respect to famine appears a few times in her article. The gist of her objection is that a causal approach to a social issue, such as famine, is fundamentally misguided because such an approach treats its subject-matter as though it were a problem that could be prevented or cured by the application of a correct remedy identified by the scientific experts. She writes:

> Seeking a cause makes the problem seem like a sort of disease which we can either prevent (by development) or cure (by relief)… The solution [thereby suggested] is *technical* or *managerial* (1996: 567; emphasis added; see also Edkins, 2000: 66).

And she adds:

> Sen’s analysis can lead to a particular practice of famine relief, one that *technologises* suffering. Although Sen distinguishes his approach strongly from that of Malthus, in this important respect it remains similar. Both lead to a view of famine as a failure, a disease, that can be ‘cured’ or ‘prevented’ by ‘intervention’ by the state or the international community (1996: 568; emphasis added; see also Edkins 2000: 65).

Edkins thinks this situation is problematic and offers two suggestions, inspired by Foucault and Derrida, respectively. She writes:

> What we should be considering, according to Foucault, is not how to solve the problem or cure the ‘disease’, but ‘what use is [it], what functions does it assure, in what strategies is it integrated?’? We should treat famine as a ‘positive present’. What matters is not the search for the origins of famine, but understanding its function in the here and now, in a particular narrative of power and conflict (1996, 567; see also Edkins, 2000: 66).

> Unfortunately, what it means to follow Foucault’s line of approach and to understand how famine functions in a particular narrative of power and conflict, instead of searching for the origins of famine, is not fully spelled out. We would, however, suggest that such a narrative, synchronic/structural rather than diachronic/processual, would still be ‘causal’ in our way of thinking about causality.

> Such a narrative may not be focused on identifying the causes in the sense of the origins of the famine. But it would explore how particular discourses of famine disable, condition and influence the social and political and thereby the relevant social actors, their power relations and their interactions. As we have argued elsewhere, discursive analyses are

\(^9\) For a detailed discussion see Kurki, 2008: 131-132; 139-140.
not non-causal because they do not seek to identify causal laws, specific causal events, or origins. Origins accounts, mechanistic accounts, and medical (or quasi-medical) accounts are all instances of causal explanation but by no means do they exhaust it; discursive analyses that identify conditions of possibility or enabling contexts are just as causal even though the metaphors used to represent them may be different from the standard push-and-pull metaphor (Kurki, 2008).

Edkins’ use of Derrida is more detailed. Indeed, the article is written explicitly from what she calls the ‘Derridean perspective’ (1996, 547). She follows Derrida’s line of thinking especially in critiquing the ‘complex emergency’ paradigm, according to which ‘not only do international emergency intervention and aid not solve the problem of famine; aid, through the mechanisms of power and control which it enables, produces famine’ (1996, 570, emphases original; see also Edkins, 2000: 146).

While seemingly in sympathy with such an interpretation, Edkins in the end treats this line of thinking as falling into the same trap as any other causal (and, for her, necessarily technologising) approach. This is so because ‘[d]espite arguing that aid causes, or renders possible, famine and human rights abuses, it is nevertheless almost immediately suggested that the solutions could be found if “aid donors” approached the situation in a different way’ (1996, 570, emphasis original; see also Edkins, 2000: 147).

At this juncture, however, Edkins’ argument reveals a confusion or conflation of two distinct lines of thinking. On the one hand, she seems to be thinking that in dealing with issues such as famine in the human social sphere, which is an open system, it is not possible to apply any remedy to ensure a cure. She seems to be saying that the consequences of human intervention are unpredictable and that, in the present case, whether famine relief ‘solves or exacerbates the famine is undecidable’ (1996, 570; see also Edkins, 2000: 147). On the other hand, almost immediately, the idea of ‘undecidability’ is re-used in a different way. She explains:

We have here an example of what Derrida calls the “double contradictory imperative”.

On the one hand, famine relief must be given, since food cannot be withheld from the starving. On the other hand, famine relief must be withheld, since it is the relief aid that is causing the famine (1996, 570; see also Edkins 2000: 147).

It is easy to see that this is a standard case of what we usually call a moral dilemma whereby, importantly, the consequences of our decision to intervene or not to intervene are treated as known. Indeed, it is precisely because the consequences are presented as known that the situation can constitute a dilemma. The problem of undecidability in a genuine moral dilemma, however, is not of the same kind as the problem of uncertainty which we frequently face in the human social world whereby, due to its nature as an open system, the consequences of human intervention are difficult to tell, rendering scientific technologising often a misplaced endeavour.

Nevertheless, the gist of Edkins’s argument is that, in dealing with famine, we are faced with a situation of undecidability, which, as Derrida points out, makes it possible and necessary for us to act (ethically and politically) responsibly – precisely because we cannot act with any epistemological certainty with which causal knowledge claims are often presented by those experts who technologise human suffering.10

10 Edkins 1996, 569ff. Derrida’s discussion, which Edkins (1996: 570) draws on, concerns not so much a moral dilemma as a tension between the need to avoid ‘petty little nationalisms’ (Derrida, 1992: 39) and the establishment of ‘a hegemonic centre’ (Derrida, 1992: 40) in the cultural life of Europe. He (1992: 38) characterises this ‘tension’ also as ‘contradiction’ and ‘double injunction’. Such a tension, clearly, cannot be resolved by a scientific causal knowledge. But those who advocate a particular policy in this field are likely to
Kurki and Suganami accept that in the human social sphere causal diagnosis does not attain epistemological certainty. Knowledge claims regarding the human social world, which is an open system, are undoubtedly shaky. No one can claim with certainty that a particular human intervention is going to bring about a definite outcome as intended. This is precisely the reason why we often encounter contending causal interpretations and divergent prescriptions as to what must be done. We believe that contending causal diagnoses and accompanying prescriptions are often related to our moral, political and other value preferences. It is precisely because of this, however, that Kurki and Suganami believe in the necessity to encourage debates between different people advancing different diagnoses and prescriptions. That, for us, is politics and ethics.

But we also believe that differing causal diagnoses are not reducible simply to difference in politics and other value orientations. There is, in our view, some room for debating about the relative plausibility of one causal interpretation against another before we reach the level of political and other value disagreements. Through the afore-noted conflation of the issue of epistemological uncertainty in an open system with that of undecidability in a moral dilemma, Edkins, however, makes it appear as though all cases of uncertainty regarding which causal diagnosis to act upon are necessarily aporetic.

The main disagreement between Edkins and us is thus twofold. Firstly, she subscribes to the Humean conception of causation and causal explanation whereas we do not. Secondly, and consequently, she considers causal enquiry to be intrinsically interconnected with technologising which she treats as a form of de-politicisation; by contrast, we consider causal enquiry especially in the human social sphere almost invariably to produce contending causal interpretations and judgements, which, in our view, are ultimately intertwined with politics.

Truth and causality – a response to David Campbell

A similar, albeit a more specific, line of attack on causal analysis can be found in David Campbell’s work. Campbell has advanced some of the most insightful analyses of the ways in which ‘onto-political’ assumptions embedded in political narratives and interpretations create the conditions of possibility to particular representations of world political processes and realities. For example, he (1998a) famously argued that the Bosnian war was in important senses made possible by the kinds of truth claims media commentators and political and social scientists made about the relationship between ethnicity and conflict.

Accounts of ethnicity and conflict, rather than representing reality, he argues, come to

certainty, of course, is not a realistic goal in any open system, social or natural.

12 It is worth noting here that ‘technologising’ works almost as a blanket term of condemnation in Edkins’ writing. In her book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, she objects to ‘technologising’ involved in reducing historical analysis of traumatic events to ‘a question of truth’ (2003, 168) when what is more important, according to her, is to face ‘truth of a different order’ (2003, 169) and she characterizes indifference to the trauma sufferers’ testimony as ‘technologised’ (2003, 169). In parallel with ‘technologising’, Edkins is critical of ‘criminalising’ also as a form of ‘depoliticisation’ (2003, 228-29). A causal enquiry could of course produce a criminalising narrative but this is not to say that simplistic criminalising narratives are an inevitable outcome of any causal inquiry into traumatic events, such as wars, genocides and famines.

13 Drawing on William Connolly’s work, Campbell (1998, 22) defines ‘onto-political’ as follows: ‘To say a political interpretation is “onto-political” highlights the way in which “it contains fundamental presumptions that establish the possibilities within which its assessment of actuality is presented”.’ Against those approaches in human sciences which do not openly acknowledge their onto-political leanings, Campbell (1998, 23) argues that deconstructionist approach explicitly notes and ‘projects’ ontological presumptions into actual interpretations of reality, acknowledging the key role implicit assumptions play in accounts of reality.
constitute the Bosnian polity and its national-ethnic structure. Thus, it is our narratives presented as true accounts of realities out there that in important senses help construct, or literally make up, the world we study.

Herein lies the cause of Campbell’s wariness of the idea of cause and causal analysis in social sciences. Since there is no single causal narrative that corresponds to ‘what actually happened’, and since all causal narratives can have pernicious and dangerous effects on the social world, we might as well ‘direct attention away from a preoccupation with a search for the cause or origin of something, and focus instead on the political consequences and effects of particular representations and how they came to be’ (Campbell, 1998a, 5). He further notes, in line with his onto-political leanings that his approach is opposed to ‘cataloging, calculating and specifying the “real causes” of an event or process (Campbell, 1998b, 4) and therefore it is the construction of the reality of specific causes that we should concern ourselves with.

This constitutes a deep-running criticism of causal analysis and importantly implicates causal analysis in the politics of construction of the social world. It repeats Zehfuss’s concern with singular accounts of origins but also introduces the idea that causes are never real but rather accounted for, and hence ‘really existing’ only in our narratives. We have elsewhere (e.g. Kurki, 2008) argued against Campbell’s position on two grounds: (1) that it is based implicitly on association of causal analysis with Humean positivist accounts of cause and (2) that it is based implicitly on a causal understanding of the role of discourses and truth claims in the social world since discourses of truth are assumed to impact on the structure of social life. Yet, we feel that these criticisms need to be reinforced by a discussion of two additional objections, which specifically tackle the ‘political’ edge of Campbell’s criticism.

First, we wish to point out that just because we subscribe to the idea that causal explanations are vital aspects of social/historical studies, this does not mean that we believe that a single true causal narrative is easily found for any given case. Commitment to causal analysis does not necessitate a commitment to singular truth claims. In fact, we would emphasise that, in our view, causal analysis is about sorting through, debating and appraising competing causal narratives: this is, in fact, the heart of causal analysis and causal evaluation as we perceive it. A plurality of causal accounts is the starting point for causal debates: if there weren’t many different interpretations of an event or process, causal debates would be meaningless. Causal accounts, then, need not, indeed, should not, aspire to be ‘hegemonic’. Best causal debate is had when those arguing for particular causal interpretations openly and frankly embrace and explore the strengths and weaknesses, as well as biases and political consequences, of their own account as well as those of others.

Importantly, this does not mean that ‘anything goes’, that every account of cause is as good as another. Recognising and exploring the differences and the differential consequences of causal accounts is integral to assessing causal claims and this is, we suggest, what makes careful and fully explorative causal analysis or debate interesting. This also means, however, that the debaters have some commitment to ‘truth’; they acknowledge that some accounts may be better than others – on grounds explored in the debate. If understood in this way, causal analysis allows us to explore in detail the often unexplored and unrecognised structure and consequences of specific formulations of causal relations. In fact, such causal analysis seems very closely attuned to Campbell’s (1998a: 4-5) own call for approaches sensitive to the structure and consequences of truth claims and assumptions, approaches which ‘untie what appears to be sewn up’.

---

14 This is a position comparable in interesting ways to Hayden White’s emphasis on need for a plurality of narratives for narrativization to make sense. See discussion in Campbell, 1998a, 37.

15 Indeed, we find our position curiously close to those of Campbell and Zehfuss; we are in agreement with the pluralist ethos of their work and applaud their efforts to examine world political events from the angle of unusual (causal) narratives. Indeed, it appears to us that what they seek to oppose are simplistic forms of causal
Second, it seems clear to us that if we are unsure of exploring and establishing causal paths, we cannot be sure of what follows from what we believe in. Causal enquiries are central not only to studying how the world works but also to what political consequences our beliefs about how the world works has on the world. Indeed, this is the virtue of causal analysis; it brings together our (inter)subjective experiences with our politics and the world (as accounted for by others as well as ourselves).

Campbell (1998a: 43), along the lines of Hayden White, is of the view that competing narratives are judged by ethico-political criteria and not by their accurate representation of reality. However, we believe not only that the accuracy of competing narratives is subject to comparative assessment (see Suganami 2008) but also that the fact that they are judged by ethico-political criteria makes causal analysis all the more worthy of engagement. It is our belief that causal analysis and debate can be seen as a valuable critical theoretical tool which forces us to appraise, in a reflexive manner, the complexities of any (including our own) causal accounts and their consequences ethically, socially, and politically. Certainly, the fact that we cannot directly access the ‘real causes’ of an event is no reason to abandon causal debates and explorations. Indeed it is these explorations and their consequences that David Campbell is himself exercised by (see Kurki 2008).

In short, we advocate the need to engage in causal enquiry and, as part of that process, to engage in causal debates because different causal interpretations have significant political implications. Campbell rejects simplistic causal accounts and in so doing makes it look as though all causal accounts are problematic. However, what he actually does is to offer a causal account which he considers more sophisticated – although without the sense that he has to justify it or debate about it with others because he is refusing to take part in causal debates with others.

**Natural science and causality – Alexander Wendt on quantum theory**

Another line of response to causal analysis involves a deeper argument, that causal analysis is a notion long abandoned in the natural sciences and that the social sciences are thus foolishly committing themselves to a line of analysis which is outdated and presents a naïve Newtonian commitment to science. This criticism is an important one and has to be handled with considerable care.

The first thing to note is that, when Kurki and Suganami apply the notion of causality, we do not apply it in the same sense as it may be applied by some in the natural sciences, for example in purely mechanistic or regularity-bound senses. ‘Causality’, we emphasise, has specific – and a plurality of – senses in the study of the social and a classical Newtonian world view could not capture them. It is partly because of this that we reject a Humean worldview of regularities and laws for the social world. We are then not arguing for an extension of a natural science perspective of a Newtonian or a Humean kind to the social sciences. Causal language need not be Humean or Newtonian to be causal and to be applicable to description or analysis of social life; for Kurki and Suganami, causal analysis consists of intelligibilifying narratives given as answers to the multiple types of causal questions asked.

The second thing to note is that the view that natural sciences have abandoned causal explanation because of relativity theory, chaos theory and quantum mechanics is highly contentious and is commonly over-stretched in critical social science. One of the key problems the natural sciences – notably physics – have had is that scientists have been rather analysis which have gained hegemonic status, not causal analysis as such. Yet, their reluctance to engage with causal terminology and accounts is, we believe, a mistake.

stumped by the recent developments in experimental and theoretical physics. The structure of the world would appear even more unintelligible to science now than ever before. Indeed, in recent years it has been suggested that we may quite literally be ill-equipped in our intellectual power (developed in context of savannah hunting) to understand the meaning or content of the universe.\(^\text{17}\) Certainly, radical transformations to the conceptual underpinnings of our understandings of the world around us have been required and explorations have indeed taken place as to the very meaning of ‘reality’ or indeed ‘causality’ in the era of post-classical physics.\(^\text{18}\)

In his recent self-critical work, Alex Wendt (2005) explores some recent such developments in detail: notably, he explores the potential consequences of a quantum revolution in the social sciences. He argues that were physicists and neuroscientists be correct about the radical proposition that consciousness is a manifestation of quantum phenomena, this would have radical consequences for social scientists’ understandings of the fact-value distinction, relationship between objects and subjects, and that of matter and ideas. If matter itself is ‘intrinsically subjective’ (Wendt, 2005: 190) and consciousness a manifestation of wave-particle duality and non-locality, this would challenge such Cartesian dualisms that underpin much of social science – positivist, interpretive or constructivist – and would facilitate new radically holistic and ‘intra-actional’ conceptions of society.\(^\text{19}\) Such a model would challenge traditional causal interpretations of the influence of ideas or interaction of humans on social actions; it would show ideas and reasons to be entangled rather than autonomous (and thus would arguably break from independence of causes and effects, a key aspect of Wendtian distinction between reasons and causes).\(^\text{20}\)

We certainly welcome the explorations by Wendt. It is indeed important for social scientists to keep their eyes open to radically different interpretations of the context of social affairs. Yet, Wendt’s speculations are precisely that – as he too recognises, they are speculations with little substantive proof in current natural science as it stands. Crucially, even less evidence has been shown for the relevance of quantum ideas to the structure and functioning of society. As a result, substantive problems remain with his, as well as many others’, attempts to move beyond causal language.

First, it is important to keep in mind the fact that physicists have explored alternative understandings does not mean that they have abandoned the concept of cause. In fact, relativity theory, chaos theory or quantum mechanics need not challenge the concept of causality as such although they may have effects on interpretations of the meaning of causality. Thus, classical linear notions of causality are indeed brought into question by relativity theory and chaos theory. A linear (regularity-deterministic) notion of cause (‘given law Z, if X, then Y’) can be seen as a special case of causal relations only, one that does not necessarily apply in accounting for all processes in the cosmos or even on earth.\(^\text{21}\) Further,

\(^\text{17}\) See Michael Brooks, 2011.
\(^\text{18}\) See, for example, Wallace, 1974.
\(^\text{19}\) By ‘intra-actional’, Wendt highlights the weakness of ‘inter-actional’ understandings of society/physics, where physical separability of objects (or identities) is assumed. For Wendt, intra-action ‘captures the sense in which at the unconscious level individuals are entangled’ in their internal and shared meanings and also become individuated only through their actions (Wendt, 2005, 203). In a quantum approach, he argues, ‘actors lack determinate identities before they are measured’ (Wendt, 2005, 202).
\(^\text{20}\) See discussion earlier in this paper; see also Kurki, 2008: 179.
\(^\text{21}\) Linear regularity-deterministic models of causality can be useful in accounting for some effects in the visible universe, notably classical Newtonian physical relations, but also seem to be challenged by effects of relativity theory, quantum jumps and entanglements as well as some recently discovered gravity characteristics of some regions of the universe. They apply to some types of physical relations then but not all (not necessarily the very micro, nor necessarily the very macro).
the Copenhagen interpretation\textsuperscript{22} of quantum mechanics, with its discovery of what seems to amount to action-at-a-distance (or non-locality) and its commitment to probabilistic interpretation of ‘reality’ of sub-atomic particles seem to challenge any classical realist notions of causality (although it may fit in a probabilistic version of the Humean account). Nonetheless, it is important to note that causality as a principle has not been removed from the science of the quantum world or of the cosmic world. In fact, some recent developments have suggested much the opposite – that, in fact, it is the principle of causality that may stand, even as notions of space and time are relative. Indeed, overturning the view that relativity of spacetime challenges the principle of causality, Len Smolin (2006, 241), referring to recent work on quantum gravity states:

It is not only the case that the spacetime geometry determines what the causal relations are. This can be turned around: Causal relations can determine the spacetime geometry…We now believe… [previous approaches] failed because they ignored the role that causality plays in spacetime. These days, many of us working on quantum gravity believe that causality itself is fundamental – and is thus meaningful even at a level where the notion of space has disappeared.

Our aim here, however, is not – as the above reference may suggest – to seek to appeal to (a specific theory of) natural science to justify or discredit the principle of causality as such for the social sciences. Our position is a much weaker one. We find attempts – by Wendt and others – to quote natural science in defence of social philosophies or theories potentially misleading. Indeed, as Sokal and Bricmont (1997: 2) powerfully warn us, the attempts by social scientists and philosophers to appropriate scientific concepts into their theories and philosophies results in most cases in serious mistakes, misappropriations and abuses of scientific terminology, and also creates a mistaken view that natural science theories or conceptions actually have obvious relevance to the social world. To quote them directly:

Wouldn’it be nice (for us mathematicians and physicists, that is) if Gödel’s theorem or relativity theory did have immediate and deep implications for the study of society? Or if the axiom of choice could be used to study poetry? Or if topology had something to do with the human psyche? But alas, it is not the case (Sokal and Bricmont, 1997, x).

Given the speculative nature of physicists’ engagements with the physical world, and their recurrent returns to causal descriptions, and the poverty of accounts that seek to link natural science descriptions to those of the social world, we would rather not contribute to further muddying of the waters on causal explanation and the relationship between natural and social science concepts.

Our key point here is rather that in the social sciences and history we do and can use the concept of cause to understand the world around us. We do so perhaps in a wider sense than in other fields: we speak of various types of event, process, idea, and structure determining, shaping, influencing, constraining and enabling social actions, interactions, processes and conditions (Kurki, 2008). Furthermore, engaging in causal analyses and debates is of particular significance in the study of the human social world. This is because social phenomena are, to a significant extent, brought about by the thoughts and

\textsuperscript{22} A contested interpretation still challenged by the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox and Bohmian mechanics. See e.g. Bohm, and Hiley, 1995
understandings on the part of the subjects under study and causal notions invariably play very important roles in their thinking and interpretations. It is imperative for students of society and history to engage in causal analyses and debates not the least because their subjects are themselves causally-minded. While the moving away from causal language due to shifts in natural sciences then may initiate moves to new conceptual grounds by social scientists, we would encourage them to do two things: (1) reflect on how causal accounts may still be implicated in their own frameworks, even though these frameworks may be presented as eschewing causal language; and (2) to reflect on the politics of their understandings on (causal) explanation/interpretation. This is important because in the absence of reflection on the politics inherent in their own stance on (causal) explanation/interpretation, they may run the risk of reproducing argumentative logics (of natural science, for example) without adequate attention to the social and political effects of such moves. Wendt’s (2005) attempt is one example of such an effort: it is rich in scientific detail and pushes the conceptual and theoretical boundaries of our thinking in provocative ways by taking account of quantum theories of the mind. Yet, it is surprisingly short on political awareness and reflection of the consequences of such transference of quantum logics to social life. Such reflections, we argue, matter a great deal in dealing with causal logics in the social sciences. No transposition of natural science thinking on causality to social sciences, on our understanding of causality, does away with this unique element of causal analysis in the social sciences.

Conclusion: politics of causal explanation

Above we have laid out various objections to what, in our view, are overstated and, for the most part, inadequately justified criticisms of causal analysis. Our objections not only draw attention to the continued role of causal claims in the critics’ own accounts but, more importantly, emphasise the role of causal inquiry in bringing to light a plurality of explanatory narratives; we consider engagement with contending causal explanations indispensable to critical thinking and political reflexivity. Rather than attacking causal analysis as objectifying, technologizing, or depoliticising, social scientists, historians and IR scholars should, we argue, recognise the central role played by causal analyses in facilitating and structuring (onto-)political debates in academic spheres as well as in world political debates.

As we have argued in earlier works (Kurki 2008; Suganami 1996), different types of causal narratives lead to different types of accounts of how world politics works. Such accounts, we agree, have important roles in shaping how we understand, approach and seek to intervene in the world around us. In this sense causal explanation really does matter; but it matters in a plurality of ways, given the plurality of consequences that may follow from different kinds of causal claims. Thus, for example, political consequences of Huntingtonian and Campbellian lines on ‘ethnic’ conflict are enormous when applied to political debate or political practice. There is a plurality of politics to causal explanations which is the very reason why we consider it vital to engage in causal enquiries and debates.

We suspect that, despite their anti-causal pronouncements (in response, no doubt, to the hegemonic status of positivist causal analysis in social sciences), the critics’ position may in some respects be quite close to ours in fact. Broadly speaking, we believe that they too will emphasise the need to be reflexive about causal claims, the importance of allowing for a pluralism of and debate between causal narratives, the significance of recognising the politics of all causal claims, and the need to oppose simplistic and hegemonic causal claims and their pernicious consequences in the study and practice of world politics. A reflexive approach to causality of the kind we advocate here should be acceptable, even attractive perhaps, to our critics; in any case, we see little reason for scholars of any variety, and especially those who
present themselves as politically engaged, not to take part in causal debates. It is precisely close engagement with causal logics and narratives that enables us to bring out the core structures of argumentation, hidden assumptions and embedded politics of even those accounts which appear, or pretend to be, neutral or apolitical.

No doubt, a suspicion will persist in the minds of the critics of causal analysis. They may suggest, for example, that there are reformist politics to any causal analysis, that causal analysis is at its base seeking to implement a reformist agenda of ‘improving’ social life, but that all such efforts should be seen as politically and ethically problematic.

Following some reflection, we have come to the view that there may indeed be a ‘reformist’ politics underlying the very basic logic of causal analysis. This reformism is fairly simple and under-determining in structure. It seems to us clear (1) that human interventions affect the world and the course of its history, (2) that we speculate on, and can, at least in some cases, predict, the likely consequences of our interventions with some confidence at least in the short term, and (3) that it is our role, as researchers or practitioners, to contribute to reducing harm in the world. Causal analysis we think reflects some commitment to these points. This is because it assumes that we act in the world and its social processes, interact with others and thereby constructing power relations and, in academia as well as practice, seek to reduce rather than increase harm. These assumptions one might call the politics of causal explanation.

What is crucial to note about such underlying politics is that they seem to be, we contend, more widely accepted than often noted or acknowledged. Indeed, we suspect that even those who are most outspoken in their anti-causal stance implicitly adhere to these basic politics of causal explanation. Despite the various criticisms of causal explanations of positivist accounts, we have not come across any accounts that deny the role of human interventions, the importance of our thinking and speculation for social world, or the commitment to reducing harm. We have not encountered a position that adequately articulates the politics against causal explanation.

Crucially, committing to the importance of causal explanation – and thus the basic politics of causal analysis as such – does not entail that we have to have singular analysis of the world or how to change it, that we should think that the world is predestined or that we can necessarily affect the world in such a way as to increase or reduce the level of harm. Indeed, we are both sceptical of those who argue over-confidently that this or that way of organizing mankind is going to, or is destined not to, reduce harm. For example, Suganami (2006) has criticized the so-called solidarists and pluralists (of the English School) for their advocacy without sufficient evidence in relation to the protection of human rights. Yet, Kurki and Suganami are united in our belief that social scientists’ and historians’ social and historical responsibility lies in contributing to reducing harm in the world (and, as social theorists, we can debate about the fundamental issue of what constitutes ‘harm’) and hence in some form to causal enquiries and debates.

This is our politics of causal explanation (underlying our stress on the importance of causal enquiry) and we believe it to be acceptable also to many current critics of causal explanation. If it is not, in the spirit of reflexive critical social inquiry, we call on the critics of causal inquiry to specify further their reasons, and political justifications, for rejection of causal analysis and debate, which for us stands at the heart of, rather than in opposition to, critical social inquiry.

References


---

1 For Milja Kurki’s part, this research has received funding under the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (2007-2013) ERC grant agreement no 202 596. All views remain those of the authors. Milja Kurki is currently the Principal Investigator of ‘Political Economies of Democratization’ project funded by the European Research Council. This piece forms a part of the methodological and theoretical explorations involved in this project.