

# The Neumannian Methodology

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“The life and work of...” This clichéd phrase often heads the biographies of wise persons. In Iver Brynild Neumann’s case, we would hold that the two are indivisible – one can only be understood in context of and in prolongation of the other. The personal, bodily, autobiographical, social, academic, and scholarly are inseparable – research to Iver is a continuation of life by other means. In this essay, we seek to unpack *the Neumannian Methodology*, which we argue is one and the same across Iver’s academic work, mentoring practices, and social life: as a scholar, supervisor, colleague and private individual. By methodology, we here mean both the philosophy behind our goals and what we want to achieve – in research as well as in everyday life – and our practical ways of approaching, systematising and dealing with the complex phenomena that we come across. We all have methodologies, but they are rarely so explicit, consistent and transcending the personal and professional spheres as they are in Iver’s case (although part of the Neumannian Methodology is also to not be dogmatic, and therefore to occasionally radically break with the methodology, defying expectations). This chapter draws on a form of institutional auto-ethnography, building on our personal and professional engagement with Iver inside and outside NUPI – the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs – where he spent a majority of his academic career. We proceed in two parts, where the first concerns the more academic and institutional aspects of Iver’s methodology, and the second how some of the same principles have been applied by Iver as mentor and colleague. At the end, we tie these two parts together, reflecting on the connections between Iver’s methodology and the institutional and private practices he has initiated and promoted throughout his career.

## Iver and the Ideas of NUPI

While Iver has worked at and been affiliated with several research institutions during his career, there is little doubt that his chief academic home has been NUPI. Iver started to work at NUPI in 1988, when he was 29 years old. For the majority of his time at NUPI he was a regular member of the faculty, but he has also served as the institute's research director (2008–11) and acting director (2011). The Iver–NUPI relationship was a reciprocal one: NUPI gave Iver an academic home and shaped his professional career both as an influential IR scholar and Norwegian public intellectual (de Carvalho, Friis, and Græger, 2024). At the same time, Iver was an instrumental figure in framing NUPI's intellectual orientation and academic culture, particularly in the period it transitioned from a policy think-tank to a fully-fledged research institute. Iver played a key role not only in the formation of NUPI's International Relations (IR) community, but also its Russia department and its research on Norwegian foreign policy and diplomacy (Skånland 2009). His approach to academic life and to conducting good scholarship left a longstanding imprint on how things were 'done around here' at the institute long after Iver himself had left for new adventures. For many years, though, Iver was the NUPI 'comeback kid', the one who always returned 'home' from externships in the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian studies department at the University of Oslo, and as Montague Burton professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).<sup>1</sup> In 2018, in his most recent NUPI farewell speech – before taking up the position as director of the Norwegian Social Research institute (Nova) – Iver quoted the Eagles: "NUPI", he said, "is like the Hotel California. You can check out anytime you like. But you can never leave." While Iver remains outside of NUPI (he has since taken up the position as director of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, FNI), many of his ideas are still reflected in NUPI's research and research practices. Even now, from the outside, he continues to include new and early-career NUPI researchers in his masterclasses on theory and methodology, wherever they are held.

Iver gave voice to a persistent theoretical idea at NUPI. Occasionally, Iver has had to correct a claim that he is a constructivist: he is a *poststructuralist*. To keep it simple: whilst constructivism often operates within the confines of the IR discipline's orthodoxy – substituting ideas or norms for interests and leaving the rest as it is – poststructuralism is more external in its critique. As the name tells us, *post*-structuralism is sceptical of grand structural narratives, preferring to investigate phenomena locally, whilst not shying away from *analytical* generalisations. A similar approach is central to social anthropology; Iver's other academic orientation besides political science (see below). Post-structuralism began with political and moral goals: to reveal and critique power structures in society, to rework political subjectivities,

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<sup>1</sup> Leira, Shams Lahijani and Wigen (2024) chart Neumann's changing affiliations and expanding intellectual contributions as a form of nomadism.

to engage in *struggles*. There is however also a poststructuralist *methodology*; one that is also critical, but not in the immediate political sense. Whilst Iver's works include explicit critiques of power and the state, it is the methodological aspect of poststructuralism that has been his main legacy in academic work at NUPI ("poststructuralists also have a duty of methodological care", see Neumann 2017). Poststructuralism, as Neumann argues, provides the theoretical basis for selecting methods. When particular ways of thinking and doing things are established as natural and commonsensical, they are a formidable source of power. Disentangling how these emerge and are naturalized is therefore also an affront to power, although less explicitly so.

Against this backdrop, Iver has encouraged his students to do two things, no matter the area of analysis or the theoretical stances involved: first, find the tools to scrutinise why, how, and when things are made to seem incontrovertible. Wittgenstein's point here was that the language we use is practical. The meanings of words and concepts reside in how we use and act upon them, not in the objects they refer to. Such uses and actions are therefore an indispensable part of social analysis, too (Neumann 2002). Second, and connected: look for historical representations of what you study. Iver encourages going further back, looking at history as a series of connected practices, processes, and dynamics that may show us how ways of representing, legitimizing, and acting habitually lead to real consequences for whatever we study.

The post-structuralist approach that Iver introduced to NUPI was controversial (See also Eriksen, 2024). He ended up being on the frontlines in an academic fight between traditional rationalism and 'unscientific' newer approaches in Norwegian political science during the 1990s and early 2000s. Indicative to this was when he established the publication series 'Investigations into power and globalisation' (see Neumann and Sending 2003). It was presented as an alternative to and, indeed, a critique of a government-appointed group set to investigate 'Power and Democracy' in Norway (NOU 2003: 19): the series critiqued the official group's choice of theory, analytical focus, and definition of power. Also owing to the dismissive reactions from established institutions, Iver's methodology and approach crystallized at NUPI. Despite charges of poststructuralism being 'higher bullshit', covering up banalities in complex language, Iver's approach and defence of it paid dividends at the institute. One likely explanation for this, is the often neglected fact that a poststructuralist methodology is a call for empiricism. Not in the sense of the facts 'speaking for themselves', but rather a concrete tracing of how social forms come into being, at the surface. In a way, one agrees with Oscar Wilde that "it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible..." (The Picture of Dorian Gray). In post-structuralist methodology, puzzles are related to eminently traceable empirical concerns, focussing on the observable, the specific, and – yes – the *causal*. Here, clear, engaging language is of the essence, something which is reflected in – and has indeed become somewhat of a trademark for – many Iver's own publications.

Even if the research we do at NUPI is diverse, reading between the proverbial lines of our work one can glimpse a certain ‘family resemblance’ that, at least in part, is a result of Iver’s influence at the institute. His decidedly empirical, local-yet-general, no-nonsense way of approaching highly theoretical topics like the social constitution of meaning, the linguistic construction of reality, and the historicity of knowledge implies a distinctive way of “thinking” and practicing IR. Regardless of topic, it is to *always* focus *also* on the history and emergence of what we investigate, to question what is taken for granted, to be sensitive to the way actors speak and behave, to look at relations and not only things. No matter the substance – be it Russian foreign policy, climate and the environment, diplomatic history, transatlantic relations and security policy, Norwegian defence policy, international development, or hegemony and global order – the gist of the Neumannian methodology has been making its mark on a swath of academic work coming out of NUPI, including a number of PhD dissertations which he (co-)supervised.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Iver’s is in many respects also a very *pragmatic*, non-dogmatic inclination. “As long as it works, it works”, Iver might say, reflecting a form of bricolage produced by restructuring and reshuffling existing materials, transcending academic borders and deconstructing established discourses to reconstruct them in new ways. What something means is what practical consequences follows from accepting it, and what doesn’t work... well, into the archive of history!<sup>3</sup> To describe this form of bricolage and hybrid creativity, Eriksen quotes Salman Rushdie: “A bit of this and a bit of that; that is how newness enters the world” (Eriksen 2003). Or, as Iver imagines Foucault to have told him from the beyond, “take what you need [from me] ...and get on with it, look at the local sequences, avoid the trans-historical.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Uses of the Other: Iver, the Anthropologist*

Precisely this form of pragmatism suits Iver’s second disciplinary home – anthropology – well (see also Bartelson 2024 and Rumelili 2024). When Iver in 2009 completed his second doctorate, this time in social anthropology, while being NUPI’s Director of Research, this was not only a testament to his productivity. It also highlights one of the disciplines that influenced him when producing his IR scholarship (other influences include philosophy, history, sociology, popular culture and, most recently, archaeology). There is a trajectory in Iver’s work drawing inspiration from anthropology, where he has served as a broker and mediator in bringing anthropological ideas out of their tribal confines and into the IR discipline. The social construction of identity and

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<sup>2</sup> Græger (2007), Leira (2011), Haugevik (2014), Andersen (2016), Schia (2015), Friis (2018), and Sverdrup-Thygeson (2019).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.iep.utm.edu/pragmati/>

<sup>4</sup> Neumann, Iver B. (2016) Deep hanging out with Michel Foucault. In: Lebow, Richard Ned, Schouten, Peer and Suganami, Hidemi, (eds.) *The Return of the Theorists: Dialogues with Great Thinkers in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, pp. 427-434.

identity politics in *Uses of the Other* (1998) is an early case in point, where he drew on anthropological perspectives arguing that thinking in terms of the “self” and “other” is productive also in the study of world politics. Iver extended Barth’s perspective on ethnicity – as being constructed in the practical interface of different groups and their ongoing boundary negotiation (1969) – to collective identity formation in general. His work has consistently underlined this intersubjective aspect of identity and social categories: how the varying distances between “selves” and “others” are construed in practice through interactions (cf. with Bartelson, 2024; Rumelili, 2024.; and Reshetnikov, 2024.). Attuned to a poststructuralist methodology, it is important to move away from analyses based on beliefs, norms and ideas, and rather privilege the practical and concrete. This perspective not only lends itself to established anthropological perspectives but has also been seminal to the ‘practice turn in IR’ (Neumann 2002). Further, together with Cecilie B. Neumann, Iver has explored the methodological dilemmas of the intersubjective and situated researcher in the research process (Neumann and Neumann 2018). In *Kinship in International Relations* (2018), co-edited with Kristin Haugevik, the seminal anthropological concept of kinship is used as a heuristic device to explore “how kinship – whether constituted by blood, practices or metaphors – profoundly impacts on contemporary political structures, processes and outcomes” (Neumann, Haugevik and Lie 2018: 1).

Many of these ideas and perspectives are not limited to anthropology. Yet, many of them have been strange to mainstream political science where Iver, as an intellectual broker, has imported them into IR, created newness and contributed to take IR as a discipline in new directions. Yet, the causal arrow points in two directions: whereas Iver put anthropology’s methodological and analytical perspectives to use in IR, he also influenced anthropologists’ study of topics often thought of as beyond the remit of conventional anthropology. His doctorate in anthropology drew on ethnographic fieldwork from within the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Neumann 2012) and provided an innovative, anthropological account of the state and its bureaucratic practices. Informal practices, networks and knowledge formation within a ministry, Iver argued, contribute to reproduce its external representation. This account helps us understand the continuity of institutions and politics from below, despite other directives from the top. In this regard, his auto-ethnography of speechwriting within the ministry (Neumann 2007) demonstrated not only how anthropologists can study the state bottom-up but also the importance for political scientists to move beyond the official representations and attend to the informal practices producing them.

Combined with poststructuralism, such exchanges with the discipline of anthropology increased the relative importance of empirical and practice-oriented perspectives among political scientists and IR scholars at NUPI, whilst the small group of NUPI anthropologists found an academic home for studies of e.g. the UN peacebuilding bureaucracy in Liberia (Schia 2015) or

World Bank state formation practices in Uganda (Lie 2015). Iver would also, at times, quiz NUPI's anthropologists by asking intricate questions about a small tribe or phenomenon found in unfamiliar anthropological texts: why read Evens-Pritchard's classic work on witchcraft among the Azande when you could rather read his less-known work on sexual inversion among the same Sudanese tribe? We interpret this as an expression of a contagious curiosity, triggering innovation and reading outside the orthodoxy, often pushing at the research frontier.

### **How and Where to be a scholar: Iver at home with NUPI**

Methodology is not researchers' latex gloves to handle the world – we are part of what we study. One implication of this outlook is that who we are affect our stance also in what and how we do research (Neumann & Neumann 2015). Further, methodology as a concept is not limited to the academic sphere. We all follow methodologies in our everyday ways of going about. A key ingredient in Iver's methodology is to denaturalize stuff that most of us take for granted. We take for granted, for example, that manuscripts are not annotated in the bathtub, that handwriting should be legible, that business dinners take place in white-tablecloth restaurants, that poststructuralists are not politically conservative, that the consequential activities at academic conferences are panels and workshops, that the "I" should be avoided in academic writing, and that solemn academics do not spontaneously burst into song, or wear sci-fi costumes to academic panels. As a scholar, supervisor and mentor, Iver saw it as his task both to communicate prevailing 'best practices' of scholarship, and to challenge the notion that there is only one way of doing things.

The concern for an anthropology of knowledge and power has been visible in how Iver has helped students and new colleagues handle life in the tribe that roams our professional field – all the mundane aspects of institutions, conventions, associations, publishers, and relations with colleagues in and out of IR, are all parts of science and our disciplines. In addition to publications, they are part of what makes IR a scientific genre (Neumann 2015). Disciplines and scholarship are also bundles of practices, just as anything else in life. Iver's methodology as a scholar has therefore also engaged the social practices that make up International Relations, of which he has inexhaustible knowledge. Iver's educational short-texts on top journals of the IR discipline, published sequentially in NUPI's own Scandinavian-language academic journal *Internasjonal Politikk* in 2007-9 is a case in point. This is an exercise that Iver has often replicated in teaching, and in conversations.

### ***Masters and Doctors in the Making***

All PhD students have one or more formal advisors. However, more informal mentors and sponsors often play an equally crucial role in academic life. A key function of a mentor is to 'act as

guide in the rite of passage from novice to professional' (Lyons, Scroggins, and Rule 1990, 278). The mentor can be a teacher of important skills and knowledge, a sponsor facilitating integration into the scientific community, and a collaborator in concrete research projects (Bäker et. Al 2020). At NUPI, Iver fulfilled both the formal and informal function. He (co-)supervised many PhD dissertations written at the institute, but he also took on a role as informal mentor and sponsor for a number of other NUPI colleagues. This included giving feedback on texts-in-progress as well as more general advice on how to conduct research and navigate in academic circles. Some of this knowledge transfer took place in larger groups through formalised, even institutionalised, activities at NUPI. Others had a more *ad hoc*, informal character – given one-to-one and at the spur of the moment.

For Iver, a key methodological tool for professionalising academic practices at NUPI became the theory seminar. A well-known and institutionalised NUPI event, the seminar typically hosted 8–10 IR scholars each year, and both academic superstars and up-and-coming scholars were invited to present their ongoing work. Some 25 years after the seminar series was institutionalised, the list of presenters reads like a Who's Who of IR's (recent) past, present and future. A written paper was mandatory, and the presentation would be followed by an exchange with the audience, often related to theoretical aspects of the presentation. The theory seminar can be seen as a front-stage ritual, in the sense that the invitation itself served to recognise the guest's intellectual position in contemporary scholarship. It thus marked a rite de passage, in the sense that tough theoretical questions were encouraged, but in the end of the ritual, the speaker would be (re)integrated in the NUPI family. Unlike most NUPI events, the theory seminars were not principally aimed at the general public. NUPI scholars in the audience nearly always outnumbered external attendees, and this was intentional. This way, the seminar became a methodological tool both for placing NUPI on the map as an institution of academic excellence, to engender intellectual cohesion and for fostering a professional culture among NUPI colleagues. The sessions exposed NUPI staff to cutting-edge research, allowing for critical thinking and exchange of ideas in an intellectually stimulating environment. A similar logic applied to the even-more-intense, annual "Master Class" concept, another of Iver's institutional innovations which has remained in place at NUPI. To Master Classes, a top IR scholar would be invited to hold a series of lectures on a specific theme (e.g., power, the state, philosophy of science) with an appropriate level of abstraction, to ensure relevance to the diverse fields of study of those attending. The class would run over a couple of days, and the audience would be expected to have read and prepared ahead. The event usually also included a session where the NUPI participants presented their work-in-progress to the guest or vice versa.<sup>5</sup> The theory seminar and Master Class

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in December 2009, Iver organized a three-day Master Class at NUPI, at which Patrick T. Jackson presented his book manuscript *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (Routledge, 2010). The book is

proved to be effective ways of building – and nurturing – scholarly networks between top IR scholars and NUPI academics.

A third example of an institutionalised NUPI practice introduced by Iver, is the *Mock Viva* for PhD students in the final stages of their dissertations. A few months before the expected submission date, an external guest would be invited to read and offer critical feedback on the current version of the text, helping candidates strengthen their argument and prepare for scholarly critique. Finally, the occasional *publication seminar*, which Iver would give internally at NUPI, also deserves mentioning. Here, Iver would explain how publication practices work, using his own manuscript review processes as examples and attach some of the harshest rejection letters he had received to the invitation. The effect was formidable: if scholars of Iver's calibre were also harshly rejected, then maybe our own setbacks were not as fatal?

These rituals and institutionalised practices – the theory seminar, the Master Classes, the Mock Vivas and the publication seminar – were and have remained important to NUPI's academic culture. Iver was not alone in shaping and implementing them, but his role was instrumental. It is unlikely that this particular recipe, and way of doing things, would have acquired the same authoritative position at the institute had it not been for Iver's dedication to them.

Still, as per Iver's methodology, the rituals and organized events would be of little value had they not been accompanied by more informal 'backstage' practices aimed at further stimulating scholarly dialogue. In prolongation of the rituals and institutionalised formats described above, Iver would always make sure to invite guests and speakers to an *informal dinner* with selected colleagues. Instead of arranging small business dinners at downtown venues with a few senior colleagues, the guest would be welcomed to dinner in someone's home, usually Iver's own. Saving expenses, this meant that more people could be included around the table: junior colleagues and students with relevant expertise and/or interests were invited (and expected to accept the invitation – otherwise the chance may not come again). NUPI colleagues would take turns preparing the dinners – shopping for groceries, and preparing the food. The invited speaker would often be present during preparation, which represented a further opportunity for junior scholars to chat informally. The ambience would be informal and cordial, and Iver's family would often be present. Iver's seating arrangements were also strategic – “who needs to talk?” – and in addition to socialising with the guest, the dinners also served to build collegiality among NUPI scholars with a shared interest in theory. For many of the participants, these events served as bricks in a larger community-building project. They helped generate a sense of belonging and ‘wennes’. For those not in the inner circle, they may have had the opposite effect.

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Jackson's most cited to date. In the acknowledgments, he describes discussions at the NUPI seminar as “critical” for writing up the book.



A key philosophy behind inviting top scholars to NUPI, was one of building and facilitating networks and relations – both for the institution and for the individual scholar. For many of us, already knowing some faces and names in the discipline was a great advantage when we made our debuts at the international conference stage. When Iver was research director at NUPI in the mid- and late 2000s, young and aspiring colleagues were strongly advised to present their work at international conferences, which in most cases meant the annual convention of the International Studies Association (ISA). The idea was that scholars should, as early as possible, make themselves vulnerable to critique, get to know the rules of the game and start building academic networks. For Iver, the ritual and practice of *conferencing* included far more than the formal program. Just as textual data should be complemented “by different kinds of contextual data from the field” (Neumann 2002: 628), so should academic performances at roundtables and panels be accompanied by informal conversations over a drink in the reception area. Iver is known to have ‘reprimanded’ junior scholars for having spent too much time on the formal conference programme, and too little on introducing themselves to and talking to scholars in bars and foyers (see also Nexon and Jackson 2024). An important part of Iver’s methodology as a senior academic was indeed to help introduce new scholars to both the formal and the informal international academic arena, as well as to link scholars working on related themes – potentially for future joint research endeavours. It should here be noted that to Iver, ‘related’ themes must be broadly understood. Many of us have a story about Iver introducing us to “so-and-so who does work on x” in a bar. “You two should talk!”, he would exclaim, for then to promptly leave. Sometimes the connection would not be clear to anyone but Iver.

The way Iver opened his home and included his family in professional settings, and encouraged friendly socialising at international conferences in addition to scholarly engagement, could be seen as testimony to how the ‘professional’ and the ‘private’ sphere in Iver’s case cannot be separated in a meaningful way. Conversely, Iver has often invoked the idea of metaphorical kinship when speaking about his doctoral students, referring to himself as ‘Doktorvater’ and frequently stressing that he sees the role as a lifelong commitment rather than a time-limited task (see Neumann, Haugevik and Lie 2018: xx). Against this backdrop, it is probably unsurprising that Iver’s *supervision* methodology too was based largely on informal practices and jargon. As doctoral supervisor for several of his NUPI colleagues, Iver had little patience for formalities, reporting and forms – he privileged the everyday, informal talk in the hallways over regularised, structured meetings. Former doctoral students and mentees vividly remember how he would stop by the door and query when there would be “more text”. If there was nothing new to report, he would come back the next day asking the same question, dismissing explanations and excuses. If one struggled intellectually with fundamental academic concerns, one would often be told to leapfrog them, to postpone addressing them in the dissertation’s book version – which was

expected. The explanation for this is simple: Iver is the antidote to procrastination – he finds pleasure in keeping up the pace, no matter what. As an editor of volumes and special issues, Iver’s often repeated mantra is to ‘lead from the front’. In joint projects, he will send out his own contributions as early as possible to set an example and keep other contributors on their toes. If you send a text to Iver asking for comments, chances are you will have it back the next day with some overarching comments on pitch as well as some suggestions for further reading. Typing up his comments on his iPad, Iver clearly prioritises swiftness over orthography, so his students and mentees must be prepared to develop decryption skills.

### **CONCLUSION: A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL**

Why this obsession with theory seminars and Master Classes, with getting publications out, organizing dinners, building networks, and hanging around in the bar at conferences? In this chapter, we set ourselves the ambition to follow Iver’s poststructural insistence on denaturalising and unpacking the relations that create the phenomenon we are interested in, and going back in time to investigate historical practices. The main connection between the many aspects of the Neumannian methodology – between conducting research, building institutions and communities, and mentoring – is how Iver is a public intellectual in a double sense. Yes, with his analyses he appeals to the general public, but the “publicness” is also at the core of Iver’s passion for science. Making one’s thoughts, ideas, and work public is an integrated and compulsory part of being a scholar. This goes both ways: one is always expected to attend colleagues’ presentations and seminars. Academia is about relations and the sharing of ideas and knowledge. Iver has little patience for scholars protecting their knowledge or insights, or not being generous with citations. Science should be as public as possible, because that is the engine of our trade, and what we owe our peers and our societies. This also translates to Iver’s claim that nothing is research before it is published.

This publicness, and openness to new intellectual impulses and interdisciplinary perspectives, was central in forming a research community and intellectual milieu at NUPI. At the same time, as we know from Iver’s own poststructuralist research, forming distinctions and borders are important to produce a collective. Indeed, here it seems appropriate to return to a slightly paraphrased version of our opening description of the post-structuralist research agenda and its aim to reveal and critique established orders and power structures, rework subjectivities, and engage in struggles. Iver’s efforts to build a scholarly community at NUPI through distinct practices, and our own contributions to this endeavour, also certainly involved processes of “othering” – distinguishing oneself and one’s methodology from that of others – externally and internally. As noted above, the very endeavour was helped by skirmishes with political science departments at Norwegian universities, often dominated by neo-positivistic trends. It is our hope

that by presenting these reflections on our positionality relative to the topic at hand (Neumann & Neumann) we have disentangled some aspects of the Neumannian methodology. This also means that we have fulfilled the classical purpose of a *Festschrift*, as formulated by C. Wright Mills' student Irwing Horowitz decades ago: "they are not just retrospective, but prospective. That is to say the *Festschrift* is a *Beruf*, a call to further work, effort, and energy, a call to the improvement of learning, of a discipline, a science, an artistic vision, or an intellectual position" (Horowitz 1986: 237). That is, in fact, also the most important lesson of the Neumannian Methodology.

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