

International Relations Theory and Theoretical Autonomy

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Introduction

A topic of this sort may seem to imply a historiographic inquiry into the formation of International Relations (IR). It has been largely accepted that since its inception, IR theory went through three successive stages: a debate between political idealism and political realism in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by a debate between ‘history and science’ in the 1950s and 1960s, finally replaced by a tripartite debate between positivism, postmodernism and constructivism in the late 1980s.¹ What follows however is not an exercise in disciplinary genealogy. It is rather an attempt to press three points about what IR has become and what it may become, if we embrace more a reflective attitude towards our own enterprise as IR theorists. Expressionist Paul Klee once said, ‘I want to portray man only as he might be’. Following Klee’s insight about the possibility of multiple modalities of representation, this paper goes on to discuss the alternative images of IR. The aim is to articulate some key analytical puzzles and moral dilemmas linked to the study of things variously called ‘international relations’, ‘world politics’, ‘international affairs’ or a ‘globalized world’, not to register the ailments of an allegedly homogeneous IR discipline or offer therapy for its recovery.² Such a therapeutic approach cannot be fruitful because it takes the identity of IR for granted. My goal in contrast is to problematise this identity.

The main question this paper addresses is: what is IR *theory* and what do alternative conceptions of such theory imply for IR as an *autonomous* academic field? The focus is mostly on theory, although the concluding section returns to the theme of theoretical and disciplinary autonomy. This guiding question is approached by considering three arguments about (in this order):

¹ For a contending view see Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Emmanuel Navon, ‘The “third debate” revisited’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2001), pp. 611-625; Peter Wilson, ‘The myth of the “first great debate”’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 24, no. 5 (1998), pp. 1-15.

² For a view questioning the idea that IR is a ‘discipline’ or a self-contained field see Robert M. A. Crawford, *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline* (London, Routledge 2000). I agree with Crawford’s argument that IR is much more like an open-ended discourse but continue to use the word discipline in deference to convention and for purposes of analytical clarity since elaborate distinctions cannot be developed in a relatively short exposition such as this one.

- (1) The place of science in IR theorising
- (2) The rise of modernity and the advent of positivism as scientific theory
- (3) The possibility of imagining IR theory as political theory or ‘normative theory’.

I wish to defend the view that the study of international or global issues calls for political theorising and that, as a consequence of this, IR theory is best understood as a form of political theory (or more precisely, as ‘international political theory’). Given the abundance and diversity of specialised literatures in the field, such an enterprise might appear suspect or even downright simplistic. And indeed, I am about to paint a caricature of the field and its accepted modes of theorising. ‘Caricature’ here does not stand for an oversimplification or distortion but for an identification of character—a portrait that captures the defining, or the most crucial, features of an identity.

Despite their diversity, contemporary IR discourses are caught up in a web of highly-specialised terminology which leads to an ever increasing conceptual fragmentation. Sadly, IR is reminiscent of a Tower of Babel where new ‘isms’ are invented in the hope that the supply of neologisms can meet, or even suppress, the demand for systematic reflection. This tendency is worrying as it implies that labels can replace the need to rethink carefully and for ourselves the dilemmas which we have inherited from the past, from a repository of shared traditions.

The Science of Politics

Such an intellectual amnesia is particularly common among the advocates of a science of International Relations. Neorealism and neoliberalism—which established themselves as the canon of mainstream IR theorising since the 1980s—are grounded in the premises of rational choice (‘rationalism’) or public choice theory.³ The latter is a species of Economics itself conceived as branch of science, that is, as Econometrics. The key postulates are well-known—self-interested and atomistic agents seek to maximise utility (or minimise disutility), given a predefined matrix of preferences

³ See David A. Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

over outcomes.⁴ The central organising concept is *homo economicus*, an abstract modification of a real human being, who acts so as to prevail over competitors and whose single overarching goal is utility maximisation (assuming the existence and desirability of an abstract good whose value or utility can be assessed on a nominal scale, given a uniform scale of measurement—be it ‘quanta of pleasure or pain’, or ‘money’). We act, on this view, to gain benefits over others by guessing and anticipating shrewdly their strategic calculation. The implication for the sphere of politics is that political elites act to maximise their own benefits (re-election or institutional power) rather than to serve the public. The solution to this problem is institutional design—the creation of institutions (notably, a constitutional mechanism) which can control, if not eliminate altogether, the self-serving propensities of decision-makers. The result is an elegant scientific model which can predict (prospectively) or explain (retrospectively) the behaviour of political agents in both domestic and international settings.

Although it is satisfactory as scientific theory, for it explains a lot on the basis of few parsimonious assumptions, rational choice has serious limitations. What it leaves out is language, morality, deliberation, ideology, history, or almost everything we associate with the rubric of politics. *Homo economicus* is a mute agent who does not deliberate with other political subjects or participate in shared social practices such as rules or language—all other human beings are seen as a sheer strategic constraint on the agent’s perimeter of manoeuvre. These limitations do not stem from rationalism’s subject matter, from the point that it explores economic as opposed to say aesthetic issues, but from the fundamental philosophical perspective which underpins it: science. An alternative fundamental perspective—which is *not* scientific (let us leave it unlabelled)—would produce an alternative theoretical body, Political Economy, despite that in both cases the concern is with economic conduct (action under the conditions of scarcity of resources and differential endowment with such resources). Unlike econometricians, political economists are not occupied with abstract models governing the behaviour of similarly abstract agents. On the contrary,

⁴ Key texts for the rational choice paradigm are Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd edn (New York, Wiley [1963]); Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and The Theory of Groups* (New York: Schocken Books [1968]). The ‘bible’ of rational choice theory is John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 2nd edn (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947).

they see capital as a social relationship—that is, as a meaningful and socially-embedded relationship which presupposes the historical situatedness of actors (and observers) as well as the thorny question of ideology.

Every theory reflects an implicit fundamental or philosophical (metatheoretical) perspective. Theoretical knowledge is inherently perspectival. Not simply individual theories are partial or one-sided representations of what we call ‘the world’, but the elementary perspectives or ‘paradigms’ (in scientific parlance) which underpin such theories are themselves partial. Moreover, different theories do not merely paint different *parts* of reality; each theory always lays claim on the *whole of reality*—each is a ‘platform of understanding’ (Oakeshott) from which the whole can be grasped. ‘Reality,’ Oakeshott wrote in a Hegelian vein, ‘has no parts, and in this sense, everything asserted of reality is asserted as of it as a whole’.⁵ ‘As platforms of understanding, theories comprise a set of postulates or assumptions. Each platform allows us to drift atop the sea of human meaning, but no theory, no matter how elaborate and rigorous, can capture the totality of human experience. Meaning is inherently incomplete because it emerges *via* the exclusion or elimination of alternative meanings: to say something is always not to say something else.

The Rise of Positivism and Modernity

The idea of such radical perspectivism, revealed in the writing of Oakeshott and Kuhn, postulates the full relativism of theoretical knowledge.⁶ This idea however is vehemently rejected by positivists. Positivism I argue is dangerous, but not in itself—since every more or less conceptually coherent approach has the right to exist. It is dangerous because in claiming its right to exist, positivism denies this right to others. It exemplifies what an author recently called ‘the monologue of science’.⁷ That positivism is monological, as opposed to dialogical or pluralist, is the core reason, I think, as to why many scholars, especially in the UK academia, find it disturbing that

⁵ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 169.

⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1962]).

⁷ Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘The Monologue of “Science”’, *International Studies Review*, vol. 5 (2003), pp. 124-128.

over the past 60 years mainstream IR theory has been *positivist* and that IR is, for the most part, still defined as a positivist ‘social science’.

Positivism asserts theoretical monism and denies pluralism because it is dedicated to an assumption known as the ‘unity of science’. Positivist theorising in other words is a species of scientific theorising whose key premise is that knowledge is unitary. It is assumed that there is one world ‘out there’ and that one type of theory—positivist scientific theory—can explain its workings. For Popper, thus, scientific theorising progresses by a process of self-correction (falsification) to produce an increasingly accurate knowledge of the world (‘the growth of knowledge’).⁸ (Below, I explore the troubling implication of this idea—namely, that the growth of knowledge promises us a technological control over nature and society).

The major defect of Popperianism is its exclusive empiricism. Popper argued that observation is theory-dependent at the stage of theory-construction (in the sense that a theory always tells us *what* to observe—for example, things such as ‘class conflict’, ‘war’, ‘revolutions’, ‘state conduct’)—but empirically-dependent at the stage of theory-testing.⁹ Data at the end of the day decide the fate of the theory being tested. Detecting a falsifying instance is a sufficient warrant to reject the theory in question. Lakatos’ objection to Popper’s scheme was that its criterion is too harsh: if we were to follow it, no theory will survive. Because individual theories are too vulnerable to empirical disconfirmation, Lakatos argued, scientists rely on whole bodies of theory—that is, ‘research programs’ whose ‘protective belts’ prevent a recalcitrant data from killing a research program before it has reached its full potential.¹⁰ Like Kuhn and unlike Popper, Lakatos emphasised the importance of criteria for selecting between parallel bodies of theory—hence the role of scientific

⁸ Thomas Kuhn’s position is interesting. While he rejects the simple cumulation-of-knowledge doctrine, since different paradigms produce different kind or incommensurable knowledge, he none the less claims that scientific progress is possible since new paradigms provide us with an ability to solve a greater range of puzzles. See Thomas Kuhn, “Afterwords,” in *World Changes*, edited by Paul Horwich (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, 1993) Regarding the decision to switch from one paradigm to another (which may be termed ‘disunity-of-knowledge doctrine’), Kuhn says: ‘Decision of this sort can only be made on faith’, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 158.

⁹ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959); Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1965).

¹⁰ Imre Lakatos, ‘Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes’, in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91-196.

practice and intersubjective agreement between scientists—rather than formal procedures of theory-building or theory testing (which apply to single theories). The recognition that the construction of science has a sociological dimension is revealed in Kuhn’s and Lakatos’ vocabularies— the usage of terms such as ‘paradigm’ and ‘research program’ as opposed to ‘theory’, favoured by Popper.

Empiricism furthermore is a slippery slope because it leads us to assume, incorrectly, that there is such thing as ‘pure data’. IR scholars who argue: ‘Let the theory which best describes the facts of international politics win the day’ espouse this bold empiricist attitude.¹¹ The trouble with this is that *datum* is not the same as *factum*. Unlike *datum*, *factum* is a product of prior theory. The idea of conceptually unadulterated facts which can be used to “test” theory is gravely misleading because facts are inevitably theory-laden. A fact is not an object but a logical *proposition* derived from another proposition. More precisely expressed, facts are conclusions drawn from the starting assumptions of a particular theory. There are different facts simply because there are different theories, and because not all theorists are willing to subscribe to the same starting assumptions. In this sense, the influx of critical theory, poststructuralism, constructivism and other normative approaches to the positivism-dominated IR field in the late 1980s is not a new ‘stage’ in the discipline,¹² but a recovery from a theoretical amnesia. It is a belated recognition of theoretical pluralism.

Further, to embrace empiricism as *the* standard of IR theory is to refuse to acknowledge the worth of theorising as an intellectual activity. For the positivist, theory is nothing but a method—or even more superficially, a *technique*—of discovering, aggregating, and generalising data into patterns or regularities, not a

¹¹ The empiricist creed lurks behind Robert Keohane’s well-known argument advanced in his ISA Presidential Address, and later, article, ‘International Institutions: Two Approaches’, *International Studies Quarterly* (1988), vol. 32, pp. 379-396. As Keohane argued, poststructuralists and constructivists will be admitted to the IR mainstream if they come up with ‘systematic empirical investigations’ (p. 393). The whole point however is that researchers from poststructuralist and constructivist persuasion doubt the very cogency of categories such as ‘systematic’ or ‘empirical testing’—they are proponents of *normative* theory, not of empirical theory. But while Keohane’s criticism of non-conventional IR approaches was sympathetic, other mainstream scholars are downright hostile—for example, Randall Schweller’s comments on the writings of critical theorist Andrew Linklater. See Randall L. Schweller, ‘Fantasy Theory’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 25 (1999), pp. 147-150.

¹² Yosef Lapid, ‘*Quo Vadis* International Relations? Further Reflections on the ‘Next Stage’ of International Theory’, *Millennium*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1989), pp. 77-88.

reflective enterprise which involves the explication of hidden assumptions, the justification of a choice of concepts, and the clarification of the logical relationships between such concepts. The typical move in positivist research is to reduce the issue of concept formation to that of measurement. Relevant here is Marcuse's sardonic remark that in modern American society, marked by the ascendancy of instrumental rationality, it is universally and falsely believed that 'operationalisation' or the measurement of something is a substitute for the identity of this something. In his words:

Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behaviour* in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension. The trend may be related a development in scientific method: operationalism in the physical, behavioralism in the social sciences. The common feature is a total empiricism in the treatment of concepts; their meaning is restricted to the representation of particular operations and behaviour.¹³

Along similar lines, Hedley Bull criticized Karl Deutsch for substituting the idea of 'integration' between nations (in the European Community) with a measurement of the volume of foreign trade and mail services exchanged between them. 'Foreign trade,' Bull exclaimed, 'is foreign trade'¹⁴, nothing else. We need theory which tells us explicitly why a key concept *I* ('integration') is operationalised by *FT* ('foreign trade'). This relationship cannot be safely assumed away, it has to be argued—this is the whole point of theorising.

The question of measurement is of fundamental importance and my intent is not to dismiss it. Let me provide an example. As Eddington wrote, in his exposition of the special theory of relativity, measurement translates a highly abstract theory, modelled upon mathematics, into a less abstract theory, modelled upon physics. The

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society* (London: Sphere Books, 1968 [1964]) p. 27, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Hedley Bull, 'The Case for a Classical Approach', *World Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1960), pp. 361-377, p. 374.

fact that the speed of light is measured as 300,000 km/s makes the theory of special relativity intelligible—it brings into existence a *physical* universe out of the infinite number of conceivable *mathematical* universes.¹⁵ Unlike the mathematical world, the physical world has concrete substance (the light in such a world moves with a certain speed, not just with *any* speed). The aim of theorising then is to move away from the realm of the purely abstract and into that of the less abstract. Or to vary the argument, theorising is driven by an impulse to understand a concrete thing—this or that (the Cold War, Jim crossing the street, the Black Friday in 1929)—and theory is the mediation necessary to complete this task. On this reading, positivism is defective not because it tends to confuse the identity of concepts with their measurement but because the philosophical issue of measurement is treated as if it were a matter of operationalisation *technique*.

Critique of Positivism: IR as Political Theory

It is often alleged that IR is a stronghold of positivism because it developed as an American social science in the aftermath of World War II. Before 1945, the US foreign policy was isolationist and there was no obvious need to study international relations—that is, the relations between the US and the rest of the globe. The war changed all that: America became the new hegemon, and all of sudden it experienced a pressing need for a ‘crash course in political science,’ in the apt expression of Hedley Bull. Science—rather than ‘the classical approach’ integrating philosophy, law and history—Bull argued, offered the requisite ‘short cut’. American political science was born to serve the managerial project of the new superpower.¹⁶ This is perhaps why Realism, an approach of ‘power politics’ rather than diplomatic history or international law became dominant in the discipline. In the US to this day the majority of Departments are named ‘Political Science’ rather than ‘International

¹⁵ A. S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), esp. ch. 6.

¹⁶ Hoffmann, Stanley, [1977], ‘An American Social Science: International Relations’, *Daedalus* vol. 106, no. 3 (1977), pp. 41-60 reprinted in Stanley Hoffmann (ed.), *Janus and Minerva: Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), pp 3-24; Ekkehart Krippendorf, ‘The Dominance of American Approaches in International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 16 (1987), pp. 207-215; Steve Smith, ‘Hegemonic Power, Hegemonic Discipline? The Superpower Status of the American Study of International Relations’, in James Rosenau (ed.), *Global Voices: Dialogues in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), pp 55-82; Steve Smith, ‘The Development of International Relations as a Social Science,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 16 (1987), pp. 189-206.

Relations', as is the case in Europe. That is, international relations are examined to the extent that they have relevance for US policy-makers and US academia.

While this argument tells us a good deal about the IR field, it is a little bit too tidy. In this context it is requisite to return to Marcuse's critique of American society, which he lamented, has become a bastion of instrumental rationality. This criticism, however caustic, is not parochial—it is a critique of modernity, of modern societies in the West, not just of America. Positivism, aside for being a scientific theory, is the prevailing ethos of the modern subject. Obsession with operationalisation techniques—statistical tables, numbers, and scales—reflects the modernist hope that human beings can effectively discipline nature as well as human society. It is not accidental that positivists embrace as articles of faith the assumption that the principles which govern the social world are, at bottom, the same as the principles found in the natural world ('naturalism'), and that human practices can be examined 'objectively' or 'without the impurity of the researcher's personal bias' ('fact-value distinction') the same way the movement of atomic particles can be disinterestedly described. As a result, political scientists *qua* positivists argue that IR theory should be empirically-orientated or that it should generate policy advice that brings about the desirable changes in the *actual* world of international politics ('policy scientism'). They thereby suggest that theorising is never just a conceptual grid for understanding this world.

But Oakeshott has warned us about the pitfalls of modernity as a mentality which prioritises such 'technical knowledge' at the expense of 'practical knowledge'.¹⁷ The first sort of knowledge can be captured into a rule book and anyone can be trained into its formal principles but the latter sort can solely be learnt by doing—it is a *craft*. Unlike training, *leaning* presupposes that one understands the activity of politics as a participant, not as an abstract observer. This does not mean that formal principles of political action cannot be distilled, but that they are unavoidably abridgments of actual 'forms of life', of specific historical practices. And since politics is an activity of specific human collectivities—Oakeshott was particularly interested in the history of the post sixteenth-century European state—

¹⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics: And Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), esp. pp. 5-6.

properly speaking, there can be no ‘science of politics’. An ahistorical, value-free theory such as positivism simply will not do. It does advance our technical knowledge but it remains at odds with the idiom of practical knowledge.

This Oakeshottian sentiment alludes to the possibility of thinking of IR theory as political theory. Like all politics, international politics ultimately involves the actions and thoughts of human beings—decision-makers, soldiers, people engaged in war effort or citizens disputing humanitarian intervention aboard. It involves moral deliberation and issues of legitimacy, the most obvious of which is the requirement to justify the use of violence inside the political community but also between political communities. Scientific approaches, and particularly positivist social science which puts the premises of the hard sciences on the pedestal, cannot adequately respond to these concerns. If politics is thought of as an activity among intelligent beings, then, the major premise of positivism—the fact-value distinction—cannot be sustained. For if politics is, in the words of Charles Taylor, a ‘science of man’ rather than a ‘science of nature’, it involves choices which cannot be defended except by reference to some values. Chris Brown expresses the same idea by noting that politics is an intellectual field that investigates the question of *justice*.¹⁸ This definition indicates that it is deceptive to search for a clear-cut division between the study of domestic politics and the study of international politics.

Conclusion

This brings us to the final question of disciplinary autonomy. One of the drives behind IR the image as a social science has been the wish to present it as an autonomous area of research. Why fund departments of IR and Political Science if they do not tell us something different from History, International Law, and Philosophy? But such a differentiation, if it can be purchased at all, has a high price. To endorse it, is to accept that international relations is a value-free enterprise; that international politics is something apolitical.

¹⁸ Chris Brown, ‘Theories of International Justice’, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1997), pp. 273-297.

Values do not show our commitment to a particular methodology—to procedures of establishing the facts, testing theories, or constructing hypotheses. They are related to fundamental questions of epistemology (to claims about the possibility of knowing) and ontology (to claims about what there is in the world). When Hedley Bull attacked the proponents of positive science and defended history, interpretation and philosophy, he did not make a case for method. He argued that the very *object* of investigation, the world of international politics as such, is value-laden. In the same way, ‘violence’ is a normative term which cannot be replaced (nor operationalised as) a term borrowed from positive science such as ‘force’.

What appears to be the case, then, is that our vocabularies are imbued with value-choices. To give just an example, when we talk about the ‘war in Iraq’ as opposed to the ‘invasion of Iraq’, *war* and *invasion* are not descriptive terms. They betray values. And values are not just additives which interfere with the ideal of objective scientific inquiry—for theory it itself nothing but a statement of value. Far from arriving late at the scene of scientific research, theory is always already there.

If the propositions advanced in this paper bear scrutiny, IR can be seen as an autonomous field only in the sense that it is a platform for criticising conventional notions of politics. IR theory in short becomes *international political theory* which criticises *classical political theory* and its traditional arguments about citizenship, political obligation, and the legitimacy of coercion.¹⁹ Such an image of IR is no longer one of a distinct social science with its own subject matter—restricted to the investigation of issues such as war and peace—but a novel intervention into a line of inquiry about the human condition which is millennia old.

¹⁹ The prospect of a closer relationship between political theory and international relations is embraced by many authors. See Brown, ‘Theories of International Justice’; Nicholas Rengger, ‘Political Theory and International Relations: Promised Land or Exit from Eden?’, *International Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 4 (2000), pp. 755-770; Steve Smith, ‘The Forty Years Detour: The Resurgence of Normative Theory in International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 21, no 3. (1992), pp. 489-506; Mervyn Frost, ‘A Turn Not Taken: Ethics in IR at the Millennium’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 24 (1998), pp. 119-132; Brian Schmidt, ‘Together Again: Reuniting Political Theory and International Relations Theory’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2002), pp. 115-140; John Weltman, ‘On the Interpretation of International Thought’, *The Review of Politics*, vol. 44, no.1 (1982), pp. 27-41; Rob Walker, ‘History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1989), pp. 163-183.