The International Studies Profession

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VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Marking a Weberian Moment: Our Discipline Looks Ahead

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That the discipline of International Relations is again in disarray was the prevailing theme of a seminar titled Visions of International Relations, held at the University of South Carolina in autumn 1998. This essay is at once a reflection on the discussions that took place at the seminar and a representation of views that I offered as a participant. It comments on the epistemological issues in contention in the "third great debate" in International Relations, and it raises questions about the place and legitimacy of humanistic approaches to the study of relations among states and peoples. By my reckoning, International Relations is a full-fledged, full-blown, autonomous, legitimate and accomplished academic discipline, and ought not to be thought of as a subfield of political science or of any other of the social sciences.

Keywords: third debate, humanities, epistemology, visions

The appearance of a new journal like International Studies Perspectives ought to be a cause for celebration since our filing cabinet for wisdom now has another drawer. Starting a new journal ought perhaps also to be an occasion for reflection on the field of intellectual endeavor that the publication seeks to monitor or on the range of new knowledge that it otherwise seeks to record. Such was the case in 1908, when the editorship of the journal "Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik" passed into the hands of Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Edgar Jaffé. Weber grasped the opportunity to inquire into the state of German social science at the turn of the twentieth century. "When a social science journal ... appears for the first time ...," Weber wrote, "it is customary to ask about its "line," that is, in the case at hand, what standards of social scientific scholarship were the editors of Archiv going to establish (Weber, 1949:50). Weber's inquiry of course became the classic essay "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy." It needed to be written, Weber reasoned, because there was at the time some urgency in asking about the scope and especially the methods of social science. German scholarship at the turn of the twentieth century was still caught up in a methodenstreit, or quarrel among methods, that, in Weber's words, led to "bitter conflict about the apparently most elementary problems of our discipline" (Weber, 1949:51).

Max Weber's efforts, not only in his methodological essays but in much of his later work, were attempts to bridge the epistemological chasms that separated the "positivists" from the "idealists," or "objectivists" and "historicism" as they were

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sometimes called, among European scholars. The former held that human affairs could and should be studied by social scientists using methods similar to those employed by natural scientists. They also expected that similar results in the form of causal laws would follow. The latter, for their part, denied "the possibilities of scientific work in the field of human culture" (Hughes, 1938:306). They stood by their interpretative approaches and doubted whether useful generalizations could ever be gleaned from the countless contingencies of historical experience. Weber managed to transcend the positivist-idealistic divide in his own work, integrating as he did systematic observation leading to theoretical generalization and interpretive historiography in works like The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Weber, 1958). Not surprisingly, Weber's work drew criticisms from both the positivists and the idealists, which encouraged his colleagues and successors to continue their intellectual feuding.

Deja Vu?

As we in the field of International Relations1 are well aware, the methodenstreit continues even today. It even raises some of the same issues that divided European scholars in the nineteenth century. We in IR call it the "third great debate." There is among many of us who are professionally involved in trying to better understand the world of relations among states and peoples a rather urgent feeling need to more clearly define, or redefine, our field of study. Needed too are increased communication, greater tolerance, and more civility among IR scholars. One effort at encouraging a dialogue among scholars was undertaken in the autumn of 1998 at the University of South Carolina where the Walker Institute of International Studies sponsored a symposium titled "Contemporary International Relations: Assessing an Academic Field" (Puchala, ed., forthcoming). What I will offer is one vision of the field of International Relations. It combines reflections upon what I believe I heard at the seminar with what I presented at the seminar and with what I have come to understand more generally about the state of our field.

My aim is to encourage more discussion by inviting responses, perhaps by provoking them.

A Discipline in Disarray?

To the extent that the discipline of International Relations is in disarray, as the course of discussion at the Visions seminar clearly suggested, the major differences and disagreements among scholars are not for the most part about the contours, concerns, or even the causes of the post-Cold War world. There is, I believe, substantial agreement that studying international relations today requires examining interactions between states and peoples, with at least as much attention paid to people as to states. If Samuel Huntington's provocative recent writings alert us to anything it is that intercultural interactions are likely to be as consequential in shaping the world of the twenty-first century as intergovernmental interactions (Huntington, 1996). Encounters among cultures via their agents need to be studied more intensely and much more creatively than has been the case. Yet another temporary title for the symposium was "Is There a Discipline of International Relations," and the answer appears to be "yes," at least in the sense that there are several schools of thought and several areas of expertise within the discipline. But perhaps the most important lesson from the seminar was that the interplay between the various schools of thought and the various areas of expertise is not yet fully understood.

1In this essay I shall refer to the discipline or field as International Relations (or simply IR), and the object of study, that is, relations among states and peoples, as international relations.
Enduring challenges to the Enlightenment project are reemerging in Russia, and new ones are coming from Asia and the Islamic world (Mazrui, 1990; Said, 1992; Kelly, 1998; Kelly, 1999). These need to be attentively assessed.

When problematized, all of these aspects of the changing world around us add up to a priming agenda for our field. The real problem, and the thrust of this essay, is how to proceed through the agenda. As most of us are well aware, considerable controversy surrounds how research in International Relations should be conducted, and there are even questions about who is qualified to conduct it.

In these regards, the exercise at the University of South Carolina removed any expectations that discussing visions of international relations could or would yield a singular vision. To this extent at least, our discussions echoed our disciplinary immersions, which is surely again immersed in a “great debate.”

One might dismiss the “great debates” in the study of international relations as intellectual diversions, describe them as “games that professors play,” deconstruct them as Foucault-inspired genealogies, or dignify them as Kuhnian paradigm shifts. But, the questions debated are intellectually important because they are about the identity of an institution, that is, our field, International Relations. Moreover, the debates themselves have been anything but trivial in their consequences. Scholarly careers have been (and are today being) established, challenged, and in some cases ruined depending upon partisanship. Journals have been turned into ramparts, book reviews into cannons, academic meetings into gatherings of cults, academic departments into cathedrals, tenure and promotion processes into inquisitions, graduate students into foot soldiers or pawns, and idealists into cynics. Concurrently, contributions to understanding have slipped between subcultural cracks, or been garbled in mutually incomprehensible discourses or political issues about intellectual turf. Would that academic debates were only diversions, but they almost never are.

Questions about the focus, nature, integrity, procedures, and objectives of scholarship in the field of International Relations are certainly not new. During the last half century, many of us working in this field have seen such issues debated at least three times, once by “realists” vs. “idealists,” then by “traditionalists” vs. “scientists,” and at present by what I suppose we could call “mainstream” vs. “radical.” The issues were framed and focused somewhat differently at different times: the first debate centered on questions of ontology and concerns the true or real nature of relations among states. E. H. Carr, as we all know, debated the first debate with himself and displayed his thinking for the rest of us in his classic The Twenty Years’ Crisis (1939). This exercise initiated in the late 1980s prompted three succeeding scholarly generations to take sides, which indeed they did. The second debate centered on questions of methodology, that is, on what are the most reliable and valid means to study international relations. Hedley Bull, Raymond Aron, and Stanley Hoffmann, among others, rallied the traditionalists around interpretative historiography and historical sociology, while Morton Kaplan, J. David Singer, Charles McClelland, and others confirmed a science of International Relations with nomological aims (Hoffmann, 1968; Kaplan, 1961; Aron, 1966; Bull, 1966; McClelland, 1966; Singer, 1969). The methodology confrontation was highlighted in Katz Knorr and James N. Rosenau’s Contending Approaches to International Politics (1969). Its intensity was dramatized in Ora Young’s memorable “naked Emperor” review of Bruce Russett’s International Regions and the International System in the April 1969 issue of World Politics (Russet, 1967; Young, 1969). This second debate prompted two succeeding generations to take sides, and again they did.

Neither the first nor the second of the great debates were really debates at all, inasmuch as commentators spoke past one another and closure was never reached. Therefore, these debates never really ended. Acknowledging this, Yosef Lapid signaled in 1989 that the first and second debates about the study of international relations had evolved into a third, which is rocking our field today (Lapid, 1989). The issues that centered both of the earlier debates are still in contention among us, and some insist that ontology and/or methodology remain the principal concerns. However, this third debate is really much broader because it raises questions about the identity of the academic field of International Relations. It is also much deeper because it brings to the surface epistemological issues concerning what we can know.

In contrast to what happened during the second debate, what is currently dividing scholars in our field is much more of a quarrel about research methods. For one thing, methodological issues per se are less contentious than they once were since quantification has been largely taken off of the debating table. Nowadays most agree that statistical analyses have their uses, and also, of course, their limitations. The issues today are much more epistemological than methodological. Concerns about the philosophy of knowledge were largely circumvented in earlier renditions of the “great debates” about the study of international relations. Notably, even Max Weber wanted to avoid questions such as these, and side-stepped them in his methodological essay as “questions far deeper than those raised here” (Weber, 1949a). But, as I will explain in a moment, epistemological issues can no longer be avoided in the study of international relations (or in social science more generally) because gauntlets have been tossed by both postmodernism and constructivism. Complicating the epistemological debate is the question of whether the study of international relations ought to be an exclusively social-scientific undertaking. Some opt for this exclusiveness, while others point out that the works of humanists, not only historians but also novelists, poets, dramatists, sculptors, and painters, constitute legitimate and oftentimes important contributions to understanding the realm of human experience. Can our field accommodate the artists’ insights, and how will it handle the methodological/epistemological, and indeed the pedagogical, questions that such intellectual eclecticism would raise?

All of these concerns about foundations, methods, and scope of course beg the question of what exactly is our field? What is it that the student of international relations studies? What is central? What is marginal? What belongs intellectually elsewhere? Is the student of international relations a contributor to a discrete academic discipline, or a putter within a curious subfield of one or another of the broader disciplines? In whatever way this question is answered, or even if the issue of disciplinary autonomy is dismissed as not being very important (Starr, forthcoming), with us still is the question of why we are studying international relations. Should we be seeking pronouncements of recognizable relevance to the world of practical affairs, or will esoteric communications amongst ourselves meet our professional obligations? (Kurth, 1992). Questioning the policy relevance of our work interestingly brings us back to Max Weber (Weber, 1949). But it also raises some gnawing normative issues, not least of which is the matter of where our “ideologies” (realism/liberalism) end and where our “theories” begin.

A Third Debate?

The picket lines in the third debate are not as readily discernible as in the earlier ones, although it is not too far off the mark to say that one main group of contenders deems the study of international relations to be a project for social science and in so doing accepts rather uncritically the epistemological assumptions that support a correspondence theory of truth (Roty, 1979:151–164). This was the position of the majority of contributors to the Visions symposium, who rather forcefully made the case for science. To wit, there is an objective reality “out there,” which is not only knowable but sufficiently regular in its causes and...
his skepticism: great fanfare, methodological virtuosity, and prodigious efforts have thus far yielded rather few notable findings and even fewer "laws" of international behavior. Granted that normal science is slow moving, as the scientists of IR are quick to emphasize, but it has been forty years, and we might perhaps expect somewhat more from the enterprise.

Still, the most important issues are epistemological, not methodological. Space considerations here do not allow for an elaborate critique of scientific epistemologies, though, as I trust my readers are aware, there has been considerable philosophical pondering in recent decades about the origins of knowledge, scientific, humanistic, or otherwise. Much of this point to the recognition that there are no unimpeachable groundings for anything we might like to define as "truth," particularly when that is conceived of as observational or propositional correspondence with something we define as "reality" (Marcus and Fisher, 1986:7-16; Fuchala, 1995). Critics therefore contend that science, and particularly social science, as an approach to knowledge is not sufficiently distinct from other approaches to warrant any privileged epistemological position (White, 1978:29). Some in the field of International Relations welcome this as refreshing news.

The harshest critics of science as applied to the study of international relations are the apostles of postmodernism (see, e.g., Smith, 1995; and contributions to Smith, Booth, and Zalewski, 1996, and Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989). Postmodernists deny that there is an "objective reality" that can be known or that, in any event, there is no objective language in which knowledge can be coded and intersubjectively transmitted. Therefore, what is purported to be scientific truths based on correspondence to reality can be nothing more than justifications for beliefs (Rorty, 1979:170). Statements about reality invaritably privilege the values of subjects, that is, those making the statements, and these utterances therefore can and should be reconstructed down to their normative cores. The postmodern project reduces knowledge about international relations to subjective prejudice, and while it can evoke skepticism about science, as it surely has, it nevertheless offers no alternative. In postmodernism there is no research agenda for International Relations, save deconstruction, because there can be no attainable knowledge. This is harsh criticism indeed. Still, those of us who remain committed to trying to better understand international relations are entitled to wonder where it gets us.

More moderate dissenters against the mainstream recognize that science is but one of the several meaningful discourses available for describing and explaining the human experience (for philosophic context see Cassirer, 1944). Yet, unlike the postmodernists, these scholars accept that such experiences can be explained in intersubjectively meaningful ways. Constructivists, for example, posit only "reality" we can know is that which we construct using the signs and symbols of our language (Onuf, 1989; Wendt, 1992). This of course also makes "objective reality" an oxymoron and similarly challenges the epistemological foundation of science. However, the constructivists say, we are able to "socially construct" our worlds through communication and conversation, which permits us to reach intersubjective agreements about their contours and dynamics. We may even 

We research in the constructivist mode consists in describing the worlds that the agents of international relations socially construct. This is accomplished by studying and interpreting the vocabularies of their discourses. Since these worlds are built of symbols, we gain access to them by interpreting these symbols. The methods here are essentially hermeneutic, which amounts, interestingly, to the
International Relations; several grant degrees in International Relations, including the doctorate. We might call International Relations a field if we are so predisposed, as long as we understand that what we mean by "field" is the intellectual canvas that displays the phenomena in which we are interested. This would be similar to Hayden White's use of the term "field" when, discussing historiography, he described the historian's field as a phenomenon ranging through time and across space, which displays the flux of human motivations, perceptions, actions, relationships, and results which intellectuals seek to render intelligible (White, 1978:65-66, 1973:5-6). Our field too is to be identified in terms of the world in which we are interested, and the purpose of our discipline is to render this world intelligible. Let us, then, avoid thinking of our discipline as a "subfield" of something else. It's not. Our discipline has subfields of its own.

Despite all of its differences and debates, the uniqueness of our discipline is in the objects of our attention, and our unity is in our research agenda. Scholars in the discipline of International Relations seek to identify and explain phenomena that result from encounters among states and peoples, and in particular to contemplate the uniqueness of such phenomena. We seek to understand what happens when states encounter one another, when other organizations operating across political or cultural boundaries encounter one another, when peoples as cultural communities encounter one another, and when entities of all of these varieties encounter others. Each encounter involves agents that need to be identified, processes that need to be tracked, and outcomes that need to be inventoried and explained. As a result of the efforts of several generations of scholars, our discipline has made considerable progress toward building a sophisticated descriptive framework for understanding and explaining global politics, and why such outcomes occur. With regard to other kinds of inter-organizational encounters, our discipline has some way yet to go, and with regard to inter-cultural encounters, which we have neglected for far too long, we have not yet reached the point of identifying exactly what happens, or may happen, when cultural communities meet in either space or time. There is, therefore, a great deal of work still to be done.

To be sure, phenomena analogous to those in which our discipline is interested may occur in other fields of human affairs and the student of international relations can gain insight by examining these. It is also the case that practitioners of cognate disciplines may wish to carve out subfields within their disciplines concerned with international or transnational manifestations of problems that interest us. Therefore, we welcome this as a productive enterprise. But the distinctive nature of International Relations as a discipline is that we focus our attentions on a cluster of inter-organizational and inter-cultural phenomena that we have theoretically identified and conceptually constructed, and that are preeminently of interest to us because they occur in a realm of human affairs that we are motivated and trained to study. Our investigations into these outcomes have contributed to a distinctive corpus of knowledge that may or may not inform the "international" subfields of other disciplines. Other disciplines should perhaps learn more from International Relations than they apparently are, but this is something about which we can do little. Our concerns must be with the phenomena that we are trying to explain and not with what cognate disciplines are trying to explain.

As for our intra-disciplinary debates, they will likely continue. The third debate, however, may turn out to be salutary by establishing that there are multiple pathways to knowledge about international relations, and that at least should open the way to the incorporation of the insights of the Humanities into our discipline. Acknowledging that there are multiple pathways to knowledge might
also lead us to accept what William James frequently referred to as pragmatic truth, or knowledge that is useful enough to guide human behavior reasonably successfully toward human objectives (James, 1975). If epistemological exclusiveness could be waived, and today it is largely up to IR's scientists to waive it, the way would also be opened to transforming the study of international relations from a battleground of contending factions into a continuing, and indeed exciting, dialogue among intellectuals interested in better understanding relations among states and peoples. What those of us who study international relations might agree that we are seeking is edification. This is different from objective truth, which is at least elusive and possibly mythical. Edification, Richard Rorty wrote in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, means human intellectual and spiritual growth arrived at by considering and contrasting constantly new or alternative ways of describing reality (Rorty, 1979:361). Each project—mythology, religion, history, art, science—has its own discourses, and each of these yields interpretations of human beings and human affairs by its own methods and its own justifications. Edification comes from a continuing conversation among discourses. Would it not be refreshing if such continuing conversation, and not periodic great debates, became the intellectual mode of International Relations?

References

Stimulating Simulations: Making the European Union a Classroom Reality

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This article examines the organization and development of the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation Consortium (MEUSC), with special emphasis on linking theory to practice within its simulation program. The MEUSC program, initiated in 1993, brings fifteen colleges and universities to Washington, D.C., each December for an intercollegiate experiential learning exercise on the European Union. During the simulation, students meet with professional diplomats from both the United States and Europe, and they engage in consensus-building activities that mirror the decision-making processes of the EU Commission, Parliament, Council of Ministers, and the European Council. As a result, participants are able to refine and enhance a range of academic and practical skills that are keys for success in today's political and business worlds. The authors of this article make special use of a survey that was undertaken to gauge the impact of the simulation on its participants and, thus, its success as an educational venture.

Keywords: European Union, simulation, decision-making, active learning.

"I had no idea I knew so much!" As educators at the college level, students to internalize and draw upon the knowledge that is imparted in the teaching process. Very simply, we try to instill within our students ownership about the material we teach and expect them to learn. It's easier said than done. Yet a growing number of political scientists and have succeeded in accomplishing this goal by participating in a multi-level academic venture that models the primary decision-making institution of the European Union.

Student comment during the December 1999 MEUSC European Union Simulations.

Published by Blackwell Publishers, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, and 108 Cowley Road, Oxford.