

“Despite decades of international relations scholarship, the field appears to be no closer to answering its central question of what explains patterns of interstate conflict and cooperation. Moreover, there appears to be no apparent consensus among scholars as to why the field has been unable to make significant progress.”

### Subjective Diagnoses of IR's Growing Pains

As E.H. Carr wrote in *The 20 Years Crisis*, international relations, as a subfield of political science, is in its infancy<sup>1</sup>. That was 68 years ago, and as the above statement notes, many decades have passed since the field was firmly established in universities, in the 1920's at the London School of Economics and at the graduate level in Switzerland, with an official goal of training personnel to staff the ill-fated League of Nations<sup>2</sup>. This would seem to be too long for scholars still to be mired in the same debates, adding only points of contention rather than clear and substantive progress.

It is all too easy to be pessimistic and dismissive of the ongoing debates as a circular and Sisyphean pursuit, undertaken by cantankerous egoists with deeply vested interests, spinning their webs and wheels in a futile attempt to place their own pet theories atop the pedestal. While this may contain some element of cynical truth, holding oneself strictly to the opinion that *nothing* has come of it all would be far more

---

<sup>1</sup> Carr, pg. 3. If the human development framework gets tiresome, I apologize but blame Carr.

<sup>2</sup> The only outside “research” I do here, if Wikipedia can be considered as such:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_relations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_relations)

distasteful, and is furthermore contradicted by the evidence to be presented in this essay. In arguing for a temporal-developmental lens to examine progress, I seek to show that the field has come a long way, and most of the many answers to the central question have shed truthful shards of light on the path to the “correct” one, the grand and synthesized omnithesis which would have to be as large as the world itself to explain and predict all its events and relations.

As to the second part of the statement to be scrutinized, that of consensus among scholars within the field, the contentious nature of the material and the kind of person attracted to study it are readily apparent causes for pessimism. Yet again, there is in the literature a movement, much more gradual than the advances in general knowledge, toward an agreement on what the great barrier to progress has been, and what must be done to scale it. This development has only taken place very slowly over time, as scholars of opposing schools have come to a better understanding of their opponents’ definitions of key concepts and discussions, thereby becoming less likely to misrepresent them in their own attempts to further their favored theories. A remaining step to be taken by some rivals is to consider that their favorites too are flawed and would benefit, at least in their weaker areas, from integrating pieces of treatises specifically written to address them. Only through a synthesis can the field strengthen theoretical soft spots which cause scholars to blush, ask for more time, and equivocate or reframe and forcibly insert contradictory events *ex post* into the pigeon holes provided by their supposedly unscathed theories.

**War toys: Playing with the terms.** Entering the ivory towers of academia could be seen as a rite of passage akin to one’s first day of school. Be it day care, pre-school, or

kindergarten, things get messy, and more is established in terms of how the topic is to be studied than any substantive gains in knowledge. Works like Carr's *Crisis* and Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* set the foundations for further discourse, and thus are treated as classics in the field. Yet like many classics, the general nature of *Politics among Nations* left it open to wide interpretations and applications, most consequentially, the rather nebulous definition of its key concept of power<sup>3</sup>. As it was defined in relative terms and changed depending on one's position, it was only appropriate that all following scholars would play with the definition to serve their own purposes, using it variously to explain, justify, and even *encourage* war as the pursuit of power.

This problem of defining concepts and assumptions unfortunately arises in nearly every article, and this fact itself is a severe impediment to progress and agreement on anything. All too often, the author absconds with an interpretation of others' definitions with the sole intent of destroying it to advance one's own agenda. Alternatively, with more open communication, each side will offer the assumptions of an argument in terms which neither side may accept or understand to the level of the other's satisfaction. In both critical or formative articles, the latter meaning those in which all aspects of a theory or new variation of it are laid out formally, the developmental analogy could be drawn of a younger sibling stealing a toy from the elder, smashing it, and leaving the elder the fairly strange response, instead of crying

---

<sup>3</sup> Two of Morgenthau's definitions of *political power*: "A cyclical relationship between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised" and "The mutual relations of control among the holders of public authority between the latter and the people at large". Morgenthau, pg. 13, 14.

about it and/or moving on, of claiming that the toy was never his or hers in the first place.

Especially egregious examples in the literature, in which the flaws are both fatal and mostly unacknowledged, include Glaser's piece, in which his version of realism is subjected to the vagaries of unit-level analysis, as was consciously avoided in most earlier realist works, to focus on the international system itself, in terms of an odd variable called "greed" and defined only as "motives beyond security"<sup>4</sup> or as he applies it to his purposes, "*desire to expand* for motives other than security"<sup>5</sup>. Another example is John Mearshimer's article, *The False Promise of International Institutions*, which gives a three-step lesson in how *not* to begin an article explaining theories which challenge one's own. Writing in the matter of fact parlance of realists, he conflates--or more likely intentionally equates--regimes, institutions, and multilateralism, calls the definition of them preferred by one institutionalist "largely meaningless", and then conjures his own definition *based on how he estimates* "most institutionalist scholars employ the concept"<sup>6</sup>. Little progress is made by such manipulative play with key terms, and it casts serious doubt as to whether the theories Mearshimer proceeds to discredit have not been constructed of straw.

**IR's endless adolescence/teenagers think they know everything: tenuous experimentation with the sharing of assumptions.** Two of the scholarly journals most referenced here came into being immediately after World Wars I&II, with leaders

---

<sup>4</sup> Glaser, pg. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Glaser, pg. 178, emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Mearshimer, all on pg. 8.

*International Organization* established in 1947<sup>7</sup> and *World Politics* in 1948<sup>8</sup>. These discourses must have begun in a world weary of war, and the seemingly lost hopes placed in international liberalism between wars perhaps created a pessimistic bias toward realism, combined with Morgenthau's book to allow the theory a formal head start. An exigent interest in preventing WWII paired with the greater frequency and eventually again, breadth, in communications allowed scholars and theories in the IR classroom to grow in spurts, in the company of their peers. But with this presumed increase in interdependence, as with teenagers discovering cell phones and text messaging, came increased and more frequent conflict. Entire publications, filled with articles trying to prove everyone else wrong, could be dedicated to airing out these conflicts. And while journal articles may be voted on, the results were far from democratic peace based on mutual respect; rather, one following the discourse over the years might often be heard making the statement given at the outset of this examination.

The 1960's and 70's seem to represent a particularly turbulent era for IR, seen in all its awkwardness when it (re-)discovered the opposite ontology. Now everyone in the class clamored for attention, theories courted one another for compatibility, and there were also many emotional exchanges and flirtatious threats of the "ignore me at your peril" variety. Theories offering different ontologies were strange creatures, the cause of all our troubles, and needed to be treated with kid gloves lest one's own theory be contaminated with cootie assumptions from the other side.

---

<sup>7</sup> All right, a little more outside research... [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Organization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Organization)

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Politics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Politics)

This fragile time of uneven theoretical development created a bullying situation for practitioners of realism, which had matured--that is, conformed to the terms of scientific discourse--earlier than its challengers. This allowed realists for many years to claim superiority or even *accuracy* on empirical grounds, saying that major world events confirmed the predictions of its well-defined and parsimonious framework, whereas no other could offer the same explanatory power.

For Kenneth Waltz, the answer is most simple, in that a state's security is the primary motive and *always* the primary concern. Such are the "virtues" of self-help<sup>9</sup> in an unchanging system whose hierarchy ends with the state. Initial problems arise in that the world has rarely, if ever, in modern history been completely anarchic. States are constrained by other factors than whether offensive or defensive power currently has an advantage, as described by Mearshimer, Van Evera, and others. Even if states are impervious to the suffering of a small or otherwise insignificant population, non-state actors--let's call them what they are: people--indisputably have the ability to empathize and the power to make powerful states intervene on their behalf, or to intervene themselves as transnational actors<sup>10</sup>. Barry Buzan's world society might be able to socialize a state with a neorealist leader, provided that state's population and the rest of

---

<sup>9</sup> Waltz, pg. 108 defines "self help" by states as one of the "virtues of anarchy".

<sup>10</sup> Buzan ascribes much power to the international society, made up of interconnected individuals with multiple identities. In his conclusion on pg. 351 he asserts: "International society sets the rules for what is and what is not legitimate intervention." This suggests that illegitimate intervention or war--any breach of sovereign equality--might raise enough outcry in the international society to force the interloping state to reverse its system-level *faux pas*.

the world hadn't read any of Waltz's books.

As Brooks notes throughout his *Dueling Realisms* article, acting on a constant fear of losing sovereignty, which he identifies as a neorealist prescription, is irrational and unsustainable. By basing security decisions on probabilistic assumptions in the long term, a lessened security threat results in more opportunities for cooperation<sup>11</sup>. His enticements toward nonrealistic theories<sup>12</sup> to complement the post-classical school are also refreshingly appealing. Yet neorealists still show no interest in the opposite ontology, nor in probabilistic games which would compromise their theoretical chastity. Waltz and the sciences themselves share a love for parsimony that would reduce the world to an equation, one which all levels of analysis from the state down would and do resist.

The liberal and constructed worlds described, respectively, by Michael Doyle and Alexander Wendt also assume anarchy, but the roles of ideas and individual agency in shaping states affords them many more options than either classical or neorealism. That war is so terrible would indeed make it all but prohibited in and between good republics in the Kantian sense<sup>13</sup>. Wendt takes the extreme view that states have the power to shape anarchy over time to be more cooperative<sup>14</sup>, a concept which might be

---

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, pg. 458-459.

<sup>12</sup> Brooks, pg. 470.

<sup>13</sup> Doyle, pg. 1160 channels Kant to say that if all states were liberal, democratic republics, not that all wars would end, but that "domestic republican constraints...introduce republican caution".

<sup>14</sup> This is the thesis of Wendt's entire article, but his case for constructing a friendlier anarchy is most vivid in his alien civilization analogy on pg. 405. While necessarily weaker on empiricism and the

seen by die-hard idealists as progress in and of itself. As one who sees at least a little overarching authority over states in the world, I have always thought--perhaps only hopefully--that over-reliance on anarchy was a cop-out and has led to real-world discrepancies with theoretical predictions. It is very comforting to know that scholars who assume anarchy can also find some hope for improvements.

In his idea of a non-deterministic anarchy, Wendt finds an unlikely bedfellow in Steven Van Evera's realist assessment of causes of war based not so much on perception or probability but on real differences in offensive and defensive capabilities. He leaves open the possibility of enforcing international commitments, noting that it is when these break down due to "an unfortunate combination of state preferences and opportunities for action" that conflicts escalating to war occur, and these are not the natural and inevitable products of anarchy<sup>15</sup>. These are all examples of more social theories which do not skip the school dance to take inventory of their bomb shelters.

One could say that realism's voice cracked in front of the whole class when the USSR retrenched itself and dissolved peacefully, without another bellicose peep. Its confidence shaken, feeling threatened, realism reacted predictably by retaliating with threats--what horrors would befall the anarchic world if its principles of security above all were abandoned for--gasp---previously ostracized economic and liberal emphases on

---

historical record, his metaphysical accounts are nonetheless a compelling favorite among the readings so far.

<sup>15</sup> Van Evera, pg. 401-402.

ideas and cooperation as foundations. More crucially, it showed that it was not as predictive as its proponents had been trumpeting, and these became defenders scrambling *post hoc* to fit this most major “single data point”<sup>16</sup> into its framework.

Sensing opportunity not long later, Andrew Moravcsik got liberalism’s empirical act together, addressing the long-standing criticism from realism that it was not fully or clearly formed in predictive hypotheses. Past “proof” of liberalism’s inadequacy<sup>17</sup> was also reframed to be in line with its newly articulated predictions. Yet these and his calls for primacy over realism rang largely rhetorical. They may even be read as a satire of the soloist, one-note drone realists had kept and remain doggedly tied to in using scholarly journals like an air raid alarm to force the class to drop everything and crawl under the desks. I would argue that the field is now, thankfully, too large to fit any longer.

Progress has been made in giving those not constrained by puritanical devotion to objective science and more concerned with preventing war than furthering the glory or security of their motherlands several theoretical paths to creating the world they have

---

<sup>16</sup> Wohlforth, pg. 92 cites this as a defense by some realists against claims of post-CW irrelevance.

Despite agreeing on pg. 95 that no single event could “falsify an entire field of study”, realist infighting is evident as he says using the peaceful end to jettison its change-averse neo-variant would be nearly possible.

<sup>17</sup> Moravcsik, pg. 545-546, takes liberalism’s most glaringly apparent failure and reframes it as precisely what his newly formalized liberal theory would predict to happen, in a manner eerily (or perhaps even facetiously) similar to Waltz’s attempt to reframe the peaceful end of the Cold War in structural realist terms.

always believed possible. These actors are not ignoring realist realities, but they see both possibilities and opportunities for change and will take their profit in the positive gains they make. Such gains are being made even if the actors behind them can't pronounce "gesellschaft"<sup>18</sup> correctly.

**Temporal development issues.** It is clear that in the 1990's, the uneven development of peer theories had begun to even out. Long picked-on theories such as liberalism had old scores to settle with the realist bullies in the class, and a new entry in democratic peace theory<sup>19</sup> showed great and hopeful potential. In the first case, the progress in rhetorical calls for total re-examination could be read as reasons for synthesis in a language realists could understand, and indeed claimed to own. In the second, surely no one would have presented such a theory much earlier and closer in time to its many historical contradictions. Neither professed to be the only answer to the central question, but rather sought to explain better the accumulating real-world anomalies highlighted by realism without changing--or accepting at all--its assumptions or level of analysis.

The most important internal and time-related characteristic of IR which may forever limit the perception of progress is its reactivity. The international problems of tomorrow may or may not be those of today or the ever more distant past, but it is clear

---

<sup>18</sup> Buzan, pg. 333 says of this theory of an international society coming into being: The gesellschaft understanding sees society as being contractual and constructed rather than sentimental and traditional. It is more consciously organizational: societies can be made by acts of will.

<sup>19</sup> Formalized in the scientifically accepted form in 1994 by John Owen, but more or less disproved as a causal factor by Sebastian Rosato less than a decade later.

that real-world problems--exogenous events from the perspective of IR scholars immersed in the current debates---in given periods have shaped which topics receive the most attention<sup>20</sup>, which are deemed the most important and relevant, and which are subject to the most pressing and lively debates in the literature. Many shifts in attention have come as a result of changes in the balance of power described by realism, but some such as nuclear weapons and their implications arose out of new technological developments. Still others represent a movement away from the state as the primary actor a result of greater contact between societies<sup>21</sup>. A grave weakness in IR studies being largely based in the U.S. was revealed after 2001, as the hot and contentious topic of deterring terrorism appeared from virtually out of nowhere<sup>22</sup>, an exemplary article being that of Trager and Zagorcheva<sup>23</sup>.

---

<sup>20</sup> Wohlforth on pg. 104-105 notes, more as an excuse than an explanation, how “selection bias” in case examination by realist scholars was at least partially responsible for realism’s apparent reaction to rather than prediction of the Cold War’s end.

<sup>21</sup> Buzan’s piece both observes and foresees a more powerful “world society” rising to prominence and influence. While such may be influential outside of interstate means, he argues, it has a long way to go before supplanting any states in importance.

<sup>22</sup> Articles listed in Jstor with “terrorism” in the title from 1900-1970: 2. From 1971-2000: 120. From 2001-2007: 71. Not surprising, but worth noting, I think.

<sup>23</sup> Trager & Zagorcheva, pg. 87. In their introductory paragraph, they imply that the phenomenon of terrorism is not new but explicitly state that the current threat facing the USA is. Both the attention given to the problem and the problem itself have changed over time. That the problems being studied are not static, unless one takes a contradictory and strict neorealist view of such non-state actors, compounds the obstacles to progress.

Reacting to rather than predicting major world events is a centrally endemic fact of the field, and the perfect theory which could take into account the infinite variables of the world would be the only way to change this order. Any unexpected event will bring attention to a previously neglected topic, as it must be accounted for by a new theory or reframed so that it conforms to the old ones. After the most seismic world events, both phenomena occur simultaneously within the subfield, and it is easy for those on its periphery to be sucked into its intriguingly contentious whirlpool. In other words, while progress is being made in answering old patterns of conflict and cooperation, IR theory can't anticipate the ways in which increased contact change these patterns and shift the focus of the field. Progress cannot keep pace with new challenges.

**Impediments to consensus depend on perception.** As both sentences in the preliminary statement under scrutiny include the phrase "appears to be," it would be improper to conclude without considering the treatment of perceptions, both in explaining IR's central question and in assessing whether there is any consensus among scholars on why progress has been so limited. In treating the causes of war, Stephen Walt modifies the fundamental "balance of power" theory to include states' perceptions of threat<sup>24</sup>, attempting an expansion its explanatory power. Robert Jervis attempts to help realism explain cooperation by games based on actors' perceptions of how each will respond to one's own action--subjective perceptions of whether the other(s) can be

---

<sup>24</sup> Walt, pg. 283-284 notes the implications of moving from objective to subjective factors, but concludes that as long as "accurate independent information on perceptions" of threats exists, so can accurate analysis be done on the subject.

trusted not to cheat<sup>25</sup>. Whether this is progress is itself a matter of opinion, depending where one stands as to whether the trade-off between objectivity and wider practical application is worth it. Walt, Jervis, and many others would say that excluding all subjective perceptions severely curtails how widely and accurately IR theories can be applied to the real world. That is, at least, a shaky but real union of scholarly opinions.

Conversely, scholars like Rosato<sup>26</sup>, Mearshimer, and Waltz have staked their claims and reputations on using strict scientific analysis to refute causal claims of rivals, but as systematically demolishing hopeful theories of change which are not based on self-help assumptions of realism, it would be very interesting to know what their definitions of progress would be. Or would they do another ontological sidestep away from defining it by reiterating yet again that realism is the way the world works, and it will never change? One can credit Mearshimer for offering something new in offensive or hyper-realism in his book, but otherwise these three seem most comfortable in their relatively easy naysayer roles. While non-realist theories have more and more been based on empirical observation and analysis, the Old Lights agree that these same tools

---

<sup>25</sup> Jervis' *Security Dilemma* piece notes how the subjectivity of perception affects cooperation between two or more people (or states) throughout his article, briefly summed on pg. 168 as "Unless each person thinks that the others will cooperate, he himself will not." And relates subjectivity to security on pg. 174 by noting "Decision makers act in terms of the vulnerability they feel, which may differ from the actual situation." To account for cooperation, realists must diverge from strict objectivity.

<sup>26</sup> Rosato's article could be summarized as an objective attempt, coldly successful, to prove that Democratic Peace Theory is causally bankrupt when subjected to rigorous empirical testing. Don't want to claim he's a realist in the same camp as the latter two, as his article keeps his orientation out of the picture.

are the best for causal dissection and disproof in their top-secret IR laboratories, located variously in underground bunkers and wherever they're currently tenured.

Mearshimer notes in both his book and the *False Promise* article that "America has a rich history of thumbing its nose at realism"<sup>27</sup> based variously on hope for anything more, well, hopeful<sup>28</sup>. So for him, perhaps our inability to accept "grim" reality is the real obstacle to progress toward...complete hopelessness and helplessness to control the aggressive, extraterritorial whims of powerful states? This sounds antithetical to our definition of progress and lends support to the unlikelihood that the immovable force impasse will be won for the "realism is perfect" camp any time soon. Noting that the theories underpinning the optimism are "flawed", Mearshimer stands implicitly as the head counselor of this just-mentioned camp.

Barriers to consensus among scholars on why progress has been minimal, then, rests in their perceptions of their own theories as, if not perfect, at least sufficient and not worth changing until something so much better comes along as to replace realism completely. Practical efforts to subsume, modify, or merely complement pure realism are misperceived as attempts at replacement and are thus predestined to fall short of realists' standards for change.

**Conclusions.** While adherents to neorealist theory have steadfastly kept subjective factors such as perception from coloring their view of the world, such restraint is impossible when assessing a field of study. It is my perception that scholars

---

<sup>27</sup> Mearshimer, pg. 49

<sup>28</sup> or an "optimistic assessment of institutions" Mearshimer, pg. 47

are answering IR's central question for worlds and systems of their own creation. In each of the worlds described, predictions on the central matter hold. The problem of choosing one world from those described which most accurately reflects the current state of the real world is not one which will ever go away. Whether or not they realize it, leaders of states are thus burdened with this choice, some knowing that their decisive action may play a part in the creation of a different world. Again, over time, relations between states are constantly reinventing themselves to create new situations yet to be treated specifically by any theory, book, or article.

Again couching scholarly requirements in developmental terms, Carr's introduction concluded that "mature thought" combines purpose with observation and analysis<sup>29</sup>. To this I would add that mature fields' peer theories may not be mutually compatible in their purest forms, but they seem to have a better record of incorporating and accepting the segments which are, and their scholarly practitioners get along a lot better. All of IR's competing theories have successfully mixed Carr's latter ingredients into their methods, and so, that much is clear progress. Whether that step will in fact generate a universal solution and lead to what "should be" is a contentious scholarly obsession which can only be played out in the field of the future. At present, both progress and consensus on how to proceed in pursuit of it are being held up by the fact that observations and analyses of the world are based on differing ontologies, offering different views of what--if any--international system exists, and whether it can change.

Like many timeless questions, finding the answer to IR's riddle might lead to

---

<sup>29</sup> Carr, pg. 10

great peace of mind, not to mention of the world. But it would also retire from the universities the field dedicated to studying it, freeing scholars from endless journal perusal to play in the green, former battlefields of a Kantian utopia. If the retirement home of international relations is to be such a peaceful, world society, theorized to be the possible objective long before its dedicated scholars set about to take it there, one must forgive them, and the rest of the world, for being impatient to get there.

## Bibliography

- Brooks, Stephen G. 1997. Dueling Realisms. *International Organization*, 51, 3: 445-447.
- Buzan, Barry. 1993. From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School. *International Organization* 47, 3: 327-352.
- Carr, E.H. 1939. *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. London: MacMillan.
- Doyle, Michael. 1986. Liberalism and World Politics. *The American Political Science Review* 80, 4: 1151-1169.
- Glaser, Charles. 1997. The Security Dilemma Revisited. *World Politics* 50, 1: 171-201.
- Jervis, Robert. 1978. Cooperation under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics* 30, 2: 167-214.
- Mearshimer, John. 1994-1995. The False Promise of International Institutions. *International Security* 19, 3: 5-49.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1997. Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics. *International Organization* 51, 4: 512-553.
- Morgenthau, Hans. 1948. *Politics among Nations*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Rosato, Sebastian. 2003 The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory. *American Political Science Review* 97, 4: 585-602.
- Trager, Robert and Dessislava Zagorcheva. 2005/2006. Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done. *International Security* 30, 3: 87-123.
- Van Evera, Steven. 1998. Offense, Defense and the Causes of War. *International Security* 22, 4: 5-43.
- Walt, Stephen. 1988. Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia. *International Organization* 42, 2: 275-316.
- Waltz, Kenneth. 1986. Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power, in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, Robert O. Keohane, ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of State Politics. *International Organization* 46, 2: 391-425.