

The End of Great Debates?

Written by Brian C. Schmidt

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BRIAN C. SCHMIDT, FEB 2 2014

The story of the great debates is a dominant part of the self-image of the field and has been repeatedly retold in countless textbooks and “state of the discipline” articles, and it has served as the starting point for most of the orthodox disciplinary histories of International Relations (IR).[1] The chronicle of the disciplinary history of IR in terms of a series of great debates begins with the so-called first great debate between “idealists” (or “utopians”) and “realists” in the 1930s and 1940s. While the interwar “idealists” supposedly envisioned ever-lasting peace through their faith in the League of Nations and international law, World War II is depicted as a glaring anomaly representing a severe crisis in the idealist paradigm, which eventually resulted in its replacement by the realist paradigm that was superior in its ability to explain the ubiquitous struggle for power among sovereign states.

The second great debate, as characteristically described in the literature, took place within the context of the behavioral revolution in the late 1950s and 1960s that was already deeply impacting the social sciences, especially political science, and which pitted “traditionalists” against “behavioralists” or “scientists.” The debate is symbolized by the intellectual exchange between Hedley Bull who sought to defend what he termed the “classical approach,” and Morton Kaplan, who was one of the early advocates of what came to be known as the “scientific approach.”[2] There are divergent perspectives on both the substance and outcome of the second great debate, but the conventional view is that the debate advanced the scientific identity of the field.

There are, oddly enough, two versions of the 1980s third great debate: one, an inter-paradigm debate among realists, pluralists and structuralists; and two, a debate between positivists and post-positivists. Ole Wæver has suggested that one way to get beyond the confusion of viewing recent developments in terms of a singular third debate is by acknowledging that we have entered a fourth debate.

The fourth great debate, according to Wæver, is characterized by a schism between reflectivist approaches, which includes critical theory, post-structuralism, postmodernism and specific versions of constructivism and feminism, that fall under the post-positivism label, and rationalist approaches that define the mainstream theories of neorealism and neoliberalism.[3]

Notwithstanding the popularity and pervasiveness of the great debates in IR, they recently have been subject to sharp criticism. The recent upsurge of interest in the disciplinary history of IR has resulted in a number of scholars questioning the veracity of the great debates. As more attention has been directed toward understanding the history of IR, disciplinary historians have challenged the very idea that the field’s history can be narrated in terms of a series of great debates. This has especially been the case with respect to the first great debate where the emerging revisionist consensus is that the debate between interwar idealists and realists is nothing more than a disciplinary myth.[4]

At the same time, scholars have begun to express displeasure with the field’s paradigm wars and great debates arguing that not only are they inhibiting scientific progress, but they are also preventing us from working on solutions to a bewildering array of global problems. David Lake, for example, openly declares that he has “relatively little patience for the Great Debates in IR and IPE,” and wishes that “scholars would stop contemplating how to do research and simply get on with the business of explaining, understanding, and possibly improving the world we inhabit and, in part, create.”[5] His desire to steer the field toward mid-level theories of specific phenomena dovetails

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with the most recent call for IR scholars to adopt what has been described as “analytic eclecticism.” Proponents of analytic eclecticism, such as Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, also fault the field for organizing itself into distinct paradigms and waging battles against one another. They advocate problem-driven rather than paradigm-driven research, and seek to foster dialogue across approaches so as to help solve substantive problems in international politics.[6]

Given these latest developments, it is reasonable to ask if we have reached the end of the great debates in IR. If disciplinary historians have discovered that the previous great debates are nothing more than myths, and leading scholars in the field are encouraging us to abandon paradigms and paradigmatic debates for mid-range, eclectic theories, might we surmise that there will likely be no future great debates. I argue that this is not going to be the case and, for better or worse, there will be additional great debates in the field of IR. In fact, the contours of a new debate involving the question of whether we have reached the end of IR theory is already taking shape.

Before turning to the contours of the incipient new debate, it is noteworthy to mention that despite the criticisms that disciplinary historians have offered of the previous great debates, the field continues to rely on the imagery of the earlier debates to help understand the present. Yosef Lapid observes that the criticisms of the great debates framework “have in no way crippled the staying power or popularity of the debate approach.”[7] A recent comprehensive review of the field’s textbooks revealed that the new historiographical findings that have called the great debates into question have basically been ignored, and students are presented with the same old story about the evolution of the field.[8] Weaver has argued that it is naïve to believe that the field can simply do away with the great debates as they are “an integral element of the intellectual and social structures of the discipline.”[9] Owing to the indeterminacy of the field’s disciplinary boundaries, the ambiguity of its subject matter, and the lack of agreement on techniques and priorities, all of which have contributed to an enduring identity crisis, the great debates, according to Weaver, have served to organize IR. From this perspective, the field would be at a loss without great debates; great debates about theory are what defines and structures IR.

If we accept this, and there are legitimate grounds to disagree with Weaver, then great debates will continue to arise. The need for great debates is closely tied to the fact that IR continues to suffer from an enduring identity crisis. Since the very beginning, a series of questions about the field’s subject matter, disciplinary boundaries, methods, and theories have been endlessly debated. None of the so-called previous great debates have resolved the field’s enduring identity crisis. In fact the field is experiencing a new crisis; a crisis about whether we have reached the end of grand theory. So at the very moment when some influential voices are calling for the end of paradigm wars, and encouraging scholars to eschew grand theory and embrace mid-range theory, others are worried that this might lead to the end of IR theory, which has been the lodestone of the field. These questions and worries have come to the fore with the publication of a special issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* devoted to the question “The end of International Relations theory?” The editors argue that there has been a precipitous decline in theoretical debate. They suggest that the field has “settled into an uneasy truce on the question of theoretical pluralism/fragmentation.”[10] Yet the special issue also demonstrates that there are divergent opinions about the condition of pluralism, and that some do worry about the possibility that we have reached the end of IR theory. The editors actually add additional anxiety when they claim that the end of IR theory “also raises the question whether what we are witnessing is not only the end of theory *but the end of IR*.”[11]

As evidenced by the wide range of reactions to the intriguing question “the end of International Relations Theory?” the contours of an emerging new debate are not difficult to discern.[12] There is no doubt that debate about the status of IR theory is underway today. This is hardly surprising as the field’s history is characterized by an endless debate about its identity that periodically gives rise to disciplinary crises. Theory, in one form or another, has been perceived as the answer to what ails the field. It is no different today and only time will tell if future disciplinary historians will chronicle the latest episode of disciplinary angst as another great debate.

[1] See, for example, Steve Smith, Steve (1995) “The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory,” in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today*. University Park:

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Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): pp. 1-37, and Brian C. Schmidt, "On the History and Historiography of International Relations," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons eds., *Handbook of International Relations, Second Edition* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013): pp. 3-28.

[2] See Hedley Bull, "International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach," *World Politics*, 18 (1966): 361-377, and Morton Kaplan, "The New Great Debate: Traditionalism vs. Science in International Relations," *World Politics*, 19 (1966): 1-20.

[3] Waever, Ole Waever, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate," in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski eds., *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): pp. 149-85.

[4] Brian C. Schmidt ed., *International Relations and the First Great Debate* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[5] David Lake, "TRIPS Across the Atlantic: Theory and Epistemology in IPE," *Review of International Political Economy* 16 (2009), p. 48.

[6] Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, "Eclectic Theorizing in the Study and Practice of International Relations," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[7] Yosef Lapid, "Sculpting the Academic Identity: Disciplinary Reflections at the Dawn of a New Millennium," in Donald J. Puchala ed., *Visions of International Relations: Assessing an Academic Field* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), p. 4.

[8] Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, "The Big Bangs of IR: What Your Teachers Never told You about 1648 and 1919," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39 (2011): 735-758.

[9] Ole Waever, "The Speech Act of Realism: The Move That Made IR," in Nicolas Guilhot ed., *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 98.

[10] Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Colin Wight, "The end of International Relations theory?" *European Journal of International Relations* 19 (2013), p. 416.

[11] Ibid., p. 419.

[12] A sampling of the reactions can be found at <http://www.whiteoliphant.com/duckofminerva/2013/09/special-event-the-end-of-ir-theory-symposium.html>

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