

Entropy Versus Thought Traditions: IR Theory Isn't Dead Yet

Written by Robert L. Oprisko

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ROBERT L. OPRISKO, JUN 16 2014

The demise of international relations theory has been much heralded. In the recent past, it appears that theorizing about the end was one of, if not the greatest pastimes of many IR theorists. Beginning at ISA 2012, three panels were formed for the sole purpose of exploring this question. These panels lead to a special edition of the European Journal of International Relations and to a symposium on the academic blog, The Duck of Minerva.

Joining the fray, Randall Schweller, (Ohio State) has recently published, *Maxwell's Demon and the Golden Apple: Global Discord in the New Millennium* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2014), a continuation of his article "Ennui Becomes Us" in the *National Interest*, which he expanded upon in an interview on *Counterpoint*. His argument is succinct:

Contemporary international relations is moving toward a state of entropy. Chaos and randomness abound. . . . The increasing disorder of our world will lead eventually to a sort of global ennui mixed with a disturbingly large dose of individual extremism and dogmatic posturing by states. It is the result of the unstemmable tide of entropy. A world subsumed by the inexorable forces of randomness, tipped off its axis, swirling in a cloud of information overload.

The scientific connection to Schweller's argument is rooted in physics generally and thermodynamics specifically. The premise says that in a closed system, which he takes the international system to be, disorganization will either remain constant or increase.

We are, therefore, doomed to a maximum state of entropy, a final equilibrium. He suggests that IR Theory is doomed because of a diminishing ability to predict action and reaction in the system. He predicts that, at the macro level, "international politics will become increasingly volatile and unpredictable," (Kindle Locations 1910-1911) and, at the micro level, humans are experiencing, "a general sense of banality and loss of meaning in life. . . . boredom and alienation." (Kindle Locations 2452-2454).

I concur with Szarejko's conclusion in his review of Schweller's book, "The book ultimately fails to convince the reader of its main premises . . . Traditional IR theory may not be dead yet." However, I am loathe to put down entropy and energy as tools for engaging the international system. In fact, I believe that this book proves a tremendous foil to Alexander Wendt's (Schweller's colleague at Ohio State) article, "Why a World State is Inevitable" in which Wendt argues that final teleology is drawing us closer to a single politically sovereign organization. What if they are both wrong because they're both right? What if the world is trending toward both entropic chaos and rigid structure at the same time?

If we assume that the international political arena is a closed system for all intents and purposes, we find ourselves in familiar territory. We enjoy the comforts of our old friends the levels of analysis: individual, group (states, typically), and system. There is a dynamic tension between chaos (power and sovereignty held by the smallest political unit – individual humans) and order (power and sovereignty held by the largest political unit – a system-state). So where does this tension come from? The answer, is energy.

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The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of an isolated system never decreases because isolated systems always evolve toward thermodynamic equilibrium, a state of maximum entropy. However, the international system isn't simply a physical/material realm; it is, if we are to believe the hierarchical models of our universities and colleges, a social one. Social energy is the key to solving this problem. In order to construct a socio-political order of some kind you need to invest energy. Whether you are a warlord creating peace through superior firepower and laying waste and devastation by the sword or a diplomat par excellence schmoozing your way through the rubber-chicken dinners of polite conversation, you are investing energy. And, if you're lucky, other people will begin to share your vision and will begin investing energy in it as well. This is what we call a harmony of interests, the garlic and crucifix of many realist scholars. We can see how this works. Take the European Union, for example of trending toward a system-state. It began as the European Coal and Steel Community, a partnership between France, Germany, and the Benelux states in order to incentivize peace. It worked and the idea grew. The EU's expansion into a global order is, however, unlikely. Russia is actively operating as a political balance to expansion east, into the Ukraine and the United States is unlikely to cede sovereignty over the Western Hemisphere and become subservient to the old world. It only takes one malcontent to form a political relationship, making a universal harmony of interests effectively improbable to achieve and impossible to maintain indefinitely. The ultimate fate of the EU is unknown, but we can be assured that its demise is likely if its constituent members stop investing their time and energy into the project.

Entropy isn't, however, assured in a social system. Hobbes' Leviathan specifically and social contract theory generally are arguments both against chaos and anarchy and for social structure and authority. People willingly cede sovereignty to others and buy into their delusions of grandeur that become visionary creations precisely because the necessary energy to turn madness into genius is invested. The absolute freedom and liberation of being one's own political unit is intoxicating until realization dawns that all others enjoy the same and you can't force them to act as you wish or be certain of what they intend to do about you – a person whom they can't control and about whom they are anxious.

In conclusion what we have learned is that social and political reality is the failure to achieve an absolute state of either chaos or structure. The system exists and that the comfort of established order is seductive to some. Similarly, humans exist and the liberating freedom of anarchy is seductive to others. The lesson from Schweller should not be that IR theory is ending, but that the state, as we know it, may very well be obsolete. If people aren't enjoying the benefits that they anticipate from the state and the system no longer functions along the lines of our meticulously established and firmly defended thought traditions, at some point fewer and fewer people will invest their time and energy in either the nation-state or the paradigms that take the state as a given, forgetting that individuals are the first order of analysis.

New paradigms in IR theory are extending from both Bourdieu's practice-centric theories and existentialism/formal ontology. Other theorists are following Schweller in linking IR to hard sciences like physics and biology. What this signals to me is not that IR Theory is dead, but that it is enjoying a renaissance in novel and dynamic ideas that will keep theorists entertained and debating for years. Like Granny Weatherwax gone a-borrowing, IR Theory is quite alive, even if all evidence is to the contrary.

About the author:

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