Neo-rationalism: A Third Way? How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the "Isms"

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JIMMY ZHONGMIN ZHANG, JUL 27 2015

Neo-rationalism: A Third Way? Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the "Isms"

In "Why 'Isms' are Evil," David Lake argues that paradigmatic approaches to international relations theory are inherently counterproductive. [1] According to Lake, paradigms reify research traditions, reward extremism, induce scholars to mistake research traditions for actual theory, contribute to data bias, and compel scholars to seek intellectual hegemony. Lake advocates "rationalism" as an alternative approach to international relations, focusing on interests, interactions, and institutions, and not exclusively on one particular driving force behind international conflict.[2] I agree with Lake that a rationalist approach can mitigate ideological extremism and data bias problems. However, eliminating the study of paradigms together is not the solution.

This paper advocates "neo-rationalism," a third approach to the teaching of IR that combines the most positive elements of "rationalism" and current paradigmatic approaches. [3] Paradigmatic approaches are often necessary but not sufficient for addressing problems in the international community. Hans Morgenthau states that "theory is like the skeleton, which, while invisible to the naked eye, gives form and function to the body."[4] I want to take Morgenthau's analogy one step further. While macro-level IR paradigms crucially compose the "skeleton" of the policymaking body, I contend that micro-level IR theories are the hands of the body. Though hands cannot function without the body's skeleton, only those "hands" can impact policy and provide predictive power.

Just like human beings need arms, hands, and fingers to perform daily tasks, policymakers need micro-level theories to explain, predict, and resolve international conflicts. For example, policymakers can use micro theories to analyze counterinsurgency strategies, explore different definitions of the "national interest," study when to participate in humanitarian intervention, determine when nations engage in diversionary war, and investigate Iran and North Korea's motives for obtaining nuclear weapons.[5] Simply using a "skeleton" is not enough; a simple "skeleton" is only political theory.

Based on this analysis, I argue that IR theory should be taught primarily at the micro-level. Scholars should spend most of their time discussing, debating, and analyzing micro theories relating to history, comparative politics, comparative economics, and elite/leadership decision making. For example, understanding how domestic political, economic, and military variables impact the individual foreign policy behaviors of China, Japan, and Taiwan can naturally provide insight into Northeast Asia's geopolitical security situation, even better than a macro balance of power analysis can. Sure, micro theories almost always employ macro-level IR paradigms to some extent. However, micro theories also employ historical data and comparative politics to explain the behaviors of states or individual actors.

I believe that the fields of Comparative Politics and International Relations should never have been separated. Yes, macro level paradigms should still be taught, but professors should only teach paradigms to enable students to link micro-level theory to overarching theoretical concepts. Additionally, most micro theories incorporate elements of multiple paradigms. Therefore, most macro-level analysis should be eclectic, and scholars should analyze realism, liberalism, constructivism, rationalism, and other paradigms with equal importance instead of debating which is the

most important. IR must be taught with a diversity of viewpoints, paying balanced attention to each individual viewpoint.

This paper contains three sections. First, I support my argument with three specific examples and engage in a comparative study of the utility of micro-level IR theory and macro-level IR paradigms. Second, I outline "neo-rationalism," a new approach to the study of IR focused on micro-level theory and comparative politics, which can strengthen bonds between the academic and policymaking communities. Finally, I attempt to ward off two expected critiques of my proposal.

Macro-Level Paradigms as Blueprints for Micro-Level Theories

Micro-level theories are the "hands of the body" that can advance concrete policy solutions, while macro-level paradigms support the body. As such, paradigms are certainly important but not for the reasons many scholars have stated. Paradigms aren't useful because they explain the primary driving force behind international conflict; they are useful because they provide vital foundations for many micro-level theories, which, in turn, explain and predict specific aspects of international behavior. International relations students should continue to study paradigms but not as obsessively as in the status quo.

I will analyze three micro-level theories, including Brodie's understanding of the national interest, Amy Oakes's study of diversionary war, and Walter's theory of successful humanitarian intervention. These theories can explain why specific patterns occur in the international system, advise policymakers on how to resolve current conflicts, and predict the future occurrences of similar events. Even so, each of these examples will lose substantial power without adequate paradigmatic support.

Consider Bernard Brodie's theory regarding the national interest. According to Brodie, leaders determine national interests based on state power, state history, leaders' life experiences, and foreign policy ideologies (whether leaders are liberals, realists, constructivists, etc).[6] Furthermore, Brodie argues that it is easier to obtain domestic support for foreign policy when a threat is close and direct, another state's actions threaten to impose significant costs on the state, and a commitment to act will not result in significant costs.[7] Brodie's micro-level theory incorporates elements of paradigms, history, and elite decision making. Analysts need strong understandings of paradigms to determine whether leaders' foreign policy outlooks are more realist, liberal, or constructivist. Additionally, a background in realism is required to evaluate state power, determine whether a threat is close and direct, and measure "significant costs." Brodie also evaluates state history and leaders' life experiences, which are non-paradigmatic considerations. Since half of Brodie's theory considers paradigms, IR scholars will not be able to fully utilize the theory or place the national interest into a larger international context without paradigmatic support.

Next, we analyze Amy Oakes's theory of diversionary war. According to Oakes, diversionary war is likely to occur when four main conditions are met.[8] First, domestic unrest must place tremendous pressure on a regime. Second, the regime must be unwilling to repress the populace because of insufficient resources. Third, the regime must also be unable to coordinate reforms because of insufficient resources. Finally, a symbolic target that can be easily conquered must exist. This micro-level theory incorporates aspects of realism and constructivism. A regime's evaluations of declining material capabilities, as well as reactions to resource scarcity, are realist considerations. Also, without a thorough understanding of constructivism, it will be difficult to predict what constitutes a socially constructed "symbolic target." Other considerations include comparative economics, elite decision making, and domestic politics. Though this theory aims to predict when diversionary war occurs, almost half of it cannot function without an understanding of macro-level paradigms.

Finally, we evaluate Barbara Walter's analysis of foreign intervention in civil wars. According to Walter, explicit settlements that end civil wars are rare because warring parties fear vulnerability, and no party can ensure that the other side will abide by the agreed conditions.[9] Walter argues that it is beneficial for foreign parties to moderate peace agreements, reduce fear and insecurity, and ensure credible guarantees on settlements.[10] Walter's theory incorporates many elements of liberalism, demonstrating that it is often necessary for outside parties or institutions to step in and mediate disputes. Through Walter provides micro-level recommendations, it is difficult to understand her

analysis without a paradigmatic background.

As I have demonstrated, paradigms belong in political theory and have no ability to provide policy recommendations by themselves. However, paradigms support micro theories. Micro-level theories can incorporate multiple paradigms to make predictions, explore costs and benefits of different policy options, and help provide policy recommendations. IR scholars should adopt an eclectic approach that focuses on the equal importance of many different paradigms. Rather than engage in frivolous debates about which paradigm contains the most important driving force behind international conflict, scholars should contemplate multiple paradigms to construct micro-level theories that can promote peace, facilitate negotiations, engage adversaries strategically, and save lives.

Towards a New Approach to the Study of IR

I advocate "neo-rationalism," a new approach to the study of IR in undergraduate curricula based on four main recommendations. First, as previously mentioned, professors should continue to teach macro-level paradigms but adopt an eclectic approach, a la Peter Katzenstein.[11] Most micro-level theories need to incorporate multiple paradigmatic considerations to explain actions, predict actor behavior, or make policy recommendations. Educators should emphasize the equal importance of different paradigms and highlight that multiple paradigms can all contribute to macro-level theories. Viewing case studies through realist, liberal, and constructive lenses can yield different conclusions about actors' motives and interactions. Students must be able to understand and appreciate these perspectives equally. A balanced approach will also help students understand and construct their own micro-level theories, which are essential for graduate school and careers in policy analysis.

Second, international relations students must study micro-level theories extensively, and introductory international relations courses should spend less time on paradigmatic approaches. Policymakers apply micro-level theories in government and think tanks and rarely use paradigms by themselves to analyze case studies. Introductory courses should focus more on international case studies, elite politics, US foreign policy, international law, insurgency and terrorism, and environmental security. Based on interests developed during interlocutors courses, students can then proceed to take more specialized courses focused on these specific policy areas later in their undergraduate program.

Third, international relations majors must have a firm understanding of comparative politics to comprehensively and independently formulate original theories. Students should be encouraged to focus on one specific region, like East Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East, and take courses on political, economic, educational, and foreign policy in that region. For example, in order to analyze the security implications of international trade between the United States and China, it is important to have a thorough knowledge of United States and Chinese political and economic institutions. To analyze how sharp changes in rainfall affect security in African nations, it is important to understand how political and economic institutions operate in those nations, and if institutions have the capacity to allocate aid to affected communities. To analyze how radicalization in countries like Pakistan threatens US national security, it is important to understand how Pakistani educational institutions operate. Universities should also encourage students to study abroad in regions that they are interested in to enhance their linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Finally, we must bridge the gap between the academic and policymaking communities. Universities should do more to facilitate student interactions with policymakers in government organizations, international organizations, and nonprofits. Additionally, an international relations undergraduate program should also train undergraduates in vital analysis and communication skills, including policy brief writing, clear and consist memo writing, and public speaking, which are critical for policy careers. William and Mary's Project on International Peace and Security, an undergraduate think tank, gives students opportunities to draft an original policy brief about an issue important to international security and present their research to a panel of DC policymakers at the end of the year. We should continue to promote similar initiatives nationwide and internationally.

Responding to Two Objections

Proponents of the status quo will undoubtedly respond to my proposal; let us address two expected critiques. First,

scholars might argue that focusing on micro-level theory relies too heavily on comparative politics and learning from history. For example, David Galula's counterinsurgency recommendations may be useful to policymakers, but they have little relevance to overarching paradigms. Galula relies mainly on historical evidence and comparative politics to construct his theory and makes four different recommendations.[12] First, Galula recommends that counterinsurgents need to have the support of native communities to "clean an area," rebuild a region politically, and persuade communities to submit to order. Second, counterinsurgents should rally the active minority in favor of the counterinsurgency movement and persuade supporters to spread the word to other community members. Third, counterinsurgents must publicly showcase their progress and convince the population that victory can be obtained. Finally, counterinsurgency efforts must be concentrated in one area at a time rather than be diluted throughout the entire territory. Galula composes these recommendations by analyzing Mao Zedong's insurgency patterns, Shining Path insurgency strategies, as well as other notable historical examples. He also incorporates data on how government institutions in different countries react to insurrections.

While most micro theories rely on paradigmatic support, not all micro theories do. I insist that whether or not micro-level theories are derived from paradigms is irrelevant, as long as theories are useful to policymakers. Galula's counterinsurgency theory, indeed, falls more into the field of comparative politics than into international relations. However, I reiterate that comparative politics and international relations should never have been separated, and IR students should have detailed backgrounds in comparative politics. We should teach paradigms only because they are essential to most micro theories. When paradigms are not essential, they should not matter. We should not be concerned about paradigms when policymakers can still use Galula's theory to facilitate counterinsurgency planning and strategy.

Second, others might argue that micro-level theories are far too narrow, lack useful organizational structures, and we may never find the primary driving force behind international behavior without paradigmatic debates. So long as we continue to study paradigms, we will still have the background needed to apply micro theories to a larger international arena. Additionally, finding the primary driving force behind international behavior may be impossible. Even if we do manage to accurately determine the primary driving force behind international conflict, we still cannot rely on that "primary force" to predict future conflicts. Different countries can apply the "primary driving force" in different ways, depending on micro-level political, economic, and cultural considerations, leading to wildly different behaviors. We must still rely on micro-level theories and comparative politics to predict and explain conflicts and state behavior.

Conclusion

Paradigmatic debates are indeed counterproductive. However, rationalism, as championed by David Lake, is not an effective reform and will only introduce another "ism" to the table instead of facilitating policy recommendations and micro theory development. We must instead blend the positive elements of "rationalism" and current paradigmatic approaches to develop a more practical approach to the study of international relations.

With the rise of ISIS, Russian annexation of Crimea, and new challenges such as global warming, pandemic diseases, and an offense-dominant cyber domain, comparative politics and foreign area studies are becoming more and more important. We must more extensively incorporate these fields into the teaching of IR and strengthen bonds between academic and policymaking communities. International relations scholars should and must not simply analyze paradigms from the sidelines. Today's students are tomorrow's leaders, and we must give the next generation of scholars and analysts the tools they need to suggest policy recommendations, predict when conflicts will occur, and write and communicate effectively.

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Footnotes:

[1] I define paradigm as a school of thought, example, or pattern that makes up the basis of theory development. A theory, on the other hand, attempts to explain why patterns or regularities repeat. I employ these definitions throughout the rest of this paper.

[2] David Lake, "Why ''isms'' Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress," *International Studies Quarterly* 55 (2011): 465-80.

[3] "International relations" is abbreviated as IR.

[4] Nicolas Guilhot, "Appendix 2," *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*, New York: Columbia UP, 2011, 263-67.

[5] I will provide more examples throughout section II of this paper.

[6] Bernard Brodie, "Vital National Interests: By Whom and How Determined?" In *Strategy and National Interests: Reflections for the Future*. (Washington, D.C.: National Strategy Information Center, 1971), 11-14.

[7] Ibid

[8] Amy Oakes, *Diversionary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict*, Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, an Imprint of Stanford UP, 2012.

[9] Barbara Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51.3 (1997): 335-64.

[10] Ibid

[11] Peter Katzenstein and Nubuo Okawara, "Japan, Asian-Pacific Security, and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism," *International Security* 26.3 (2001): 153-85.

[12] David Galula and John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006.

Written by: Jimmy Zhongmin Zhang
Written at: College of William and Mary
Written for: Professor David Dessler
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