

Review - International Relations Theory: Failure or Promise?

Written by Alexander Svitych

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ALEXANDER SVITYCH, OCT 14 2015

Critical Review of "Special Issue: The End of International Relations Theory?"
European Journal of International Relations 19 (3), 2013.

As a subfield of Political Science, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has used theory to conceptualize international relations as a social phenomenon. The most popular theories in this regard have been realism, liberalism, and constructivism. While part of IR scholarship maintains that all three paradigms are inadequate for the contemporary study of international relations, there are promising indications that IR theory is rather on the verge of drastic revision than at its dead-end. Research articles from the Special issue of *EJIR* by and large – albeit with certain exceptions – support this view.

To begin with, it will be fair to say that nearly all contributors to the *EJIR* Special issue express concern and anxiety on the current state of IR theory^[1]. For example, such authors as Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen and Colin Wight highlight the issues of ambiguity on the definition of theory, lack of grand debates, the move from theory development to hypothesis testing, theoretical proliferation and fragmentation, and the contested nature of pluralism^[2]; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt express a shared concern over simplistic hypothesis testing as opposed to theory creating^[3]; Stefano Guzzini points out that the widespread theory reductions to practical knowledge and empirical mode^[4]; and so on.

Notwithstanding the common attitude of preoccupation with the current state of IR theory, none of the authors indicate that classical discipline paradigms – that is realism, liberalism, and constructivism – fail to understand the complex world of international relations^[5]. Quite the opposite, most contributors share an assumption of theory as "the loadstone in the field of International Relations (IR)."^[6] Moreover, while different remedies are suggested to revive the state of contemporary IR theory, none of them deal with the explanatory powers of isms. Instead, a common thread in the Special issue is to find ways to manage the overwhelming variety of theories in IR, while recognizing unique contributions of each of them. Different authors approach this task in different ways.

For example, Dunne, Hansen and Wight introduce the concept of "integrative pluralism" with the purpose of engaging various IR theories with one another. In doing so, the authors seek to find the balance between theoretical fragmentation and a coherent view of global processes. Thus, they assert: "Integrative pluralism accepts and preserves the validity of a wide range of theoretical perspectives and embraces theoretical diversity as a means of providing more comprehensive and multi dimensional accounts of complex phenomena."^[7]

Likewise, Andrew Bennett advocates for a refined concept of pluralism to establish coherent relationships between different paradigms and research programmes. The author offers the concept of "structured pluralism" meaning that "IR scholars can borrow the best ideas from different theoretical traditions and social science disciplines in ways that allow both intelligible discourse and cumulative progress."^[8]

As one final example, Christian Reus-Smit works around the "bracket metatheory thesis" by attempting to re-conceptualize eclectic scholarship paramount in IR. The author contends that eclecticism "needs to be more than

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breaking the bounds of our empirical research traditions; it needs to be more than paradigm transcending.”^[9]

To conclude, the argument of classical IR paradigms not applicable to the contemporary international relations is not plausible. The question is not about each ism having an omnipotent explanatory, constitutive or normative power. No single theory in social sciences can account for the stunning complexity of the social practices. It is also made clear by Dunne, Hansen and Wight: “If we use one lens, we will see the world in one particular way, perhaps with certain elements highlighted and others hidden from view, or placed on the margins. Change the lens and the world may look very different.”^[10] This reminds of a well-known story of blind men touching an elephant and making different conclusions – spear, wall, rope, snake, and so on.

Rather, the core idea underpinning all contributions to the Special issue of *EJIR* is the awareness that new times require redefinition of IR’s conceptual tools and frameworks. More than that, new approaches need to be developed to relate different schools of thoughts in IR theory in a way that the dual – and seemingly contradictory, but not impossible – goal of theoretic diversity and theoretic unity can be met.

Notes:

^[1] A notable exception is David A. Lake’s “Theory is dead, long live theory: The end of the Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 19 (3): 567-587.

^[2] Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, Colin Wight, “The end of International Relations theory?,” *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 19 (3): 405-425.

^[3] John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, “Leaving theory behind: Why simplistic hypothesis testing is bad for International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 19 (3): 427-457.

^[4] Stefano Guzzini, “The ends of International Relations theory: Stages of reflexivity and modes of theorizing,” *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 19 (3): 521-541.

^[5] Even David A. Lake in his bold statement that “theory is dead” does not imply the end of IR theory *per se*, but rather points to its shift from the grand debates phase to middle-range theories, such as open economy politics and democratic peace theory, for instance.

^[6] John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, “Leaving theory behind: Why simplistic hypothesis testing is bad for International Relations”: 428

^[7] Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, Colin Wight, “The end of International Relations theory?”: 416.

^[8] Andrew Bennett, “The mother of all isms: Causal mechanisms and structured pluralism in International Relations theory,” *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 19 (3): 461.

^[9] Christian Reus-Smit, “Beyond metatheory?,” *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 19 (3): 603

^[10] Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, Colin Wight, “The end of International Relations theory?,” 412.

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