1999

Correspondence: Isms and Schisms: Culturalism versus Realism in Security Studies

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Isms and Schisms: Culturalism versus Realism in Security Studies

To the Editors (John S. Duffield writes):

Michael Desch's survey and critique of the new cultural literature in security studies is a welcome addition to the debate about the potential contributions of this research program to the problem of explaining state behavior in the realm of international relations.[1] At a minimum, his article should prompt culturalists to make greater efforts to define their terms as well as to clarify what they have in common and how their individual approaches differ. Nevertheless, Desch's analysis is marred by six flaws that undermine his contention that "the best case that can be made for these new cultural theories is that they are sometimes useful as a supplement to realist theories" (p. 142).

First, Desch mischaracterizes the issues at stake in the debate between realism and culturalism. He repeatedly describes the crucial question as "whether these new theories merely supplement realist theories or actually threaten to supplant them" (pp. 141, pp. 143, 144). This dichotomous characterization, however, needlessly oversimplifies and distorts the debate, because one can easily imagine a variety of other possible relationships between culturalism and realism. One equally plausible alternative is that neither approach is in any sense superior, but that both may be indispensable to any fully satisfactory understanding of security affairs.

Second, Desch employs a double standard in assessing the relative merits of cultural and realist approaches, one that necessarily skews the outcome in favor of realism. He argues that "to make the case that cultural theories should supplant realist theories, the new culturalists would have to demonstrate that their theories outperform realist theories in 'hard cases' for cultural theories" (p. 144). If we are to have confidence in

1. Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), pp. 141–170. Subsequent citations to this article are in parentheses in the text.

his claims about the superiority of realism, however, we must hold it up to the same standard, demonstrating that realist theories consistently outperform their culturalist counterparts in what are hard cases for the former. In fact, Desch later admits the need to employ a more symmetrical methodology for comparing the merits of culturalism and realism when he invokes Imre Lakatos's "three-cornered fight" (p. 158).

Third, Desch's conception of realism is so broad that it obscures what is distinctive about the term and renders comparisons with other approaches problematic. Although he does not explicitly define realism, Desch suggests that the common denominator of realist theories is an emphasis on material factors (pp. 155–156). Yet two of the specific approaches that he includes within the realist research program, organization theory and traditional realism, do not clearly meet even this minimal requirement. Even noncultural strands of organization theory tend to emphasize the rule-determined structures and processes of organizations rather than factors that are indisputably material in nature. As a result, not surprisingly, scholars have often regarded organization theory as a fundamental alternative to central variants of realism, such as balance-of-power theory.[2] Likewise, Desch's passing reference to traditional realism's attention to "other domestic factors such as human nature" (p. 156) does little to bound the concept, and realism certainly has no monopoly on the use of human nature to explain international relations. Finally, Desch's characterization of the work of Randall Schweller as realist (p. 144) may not be controversial. Yet Schweller's emphasis on interests immediately raises the question of the sources of status quo and revisionist preferences, a question for which culturalist theories may be well suited for providing answers. Beyond the obvious definitional problems that it poses, the expansive nature of Desch's conceptualization of realism greatly complicates the task of assessing the relative merits of the realist and cultural approaches, especially where it risks making the two indistinguishable.

A fourth flaw concerns that portion of Desch's analysis devoted to describing three potential challenges to testing the explanatory power of culturalist theories. In fact, these challenges are exaggerated, especially insofar as they are no less true of many strands of realism.[3] Desch first argues that "cultural variables are sometimes hard to clearly define and operationalize" (p. 150). I agree, but the problem is equally true of many of the variables emphasized in realism.[4] For example, Kenneth Waltz, in his seminal exposition of neorealist theory, defines capabilities to include population, size of territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence—none of which is singled out as most important. Surely, at least several of these elements, not to mention the lack of any hierarchy among them, pose

2. Barry Posen, for one, describes organization theory and balance-of-power theory as "two distinct perspectives on state behavior." See Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 34. Scott Sagan draws a similar distinction in Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation," *International Security,* Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1994), pp. 66–107.

3. Desch recognizes that realism is equally subject to his third challenge, which stems precisely from the broad nature of the culturalist and realist research programs as he defines them (pp. 155–157). Consequently, only the first and second challenges will be addressed here.

4. For a more extensive discussion, see William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), chap. 1.

problems of definition, operationalization, and, ultimately, comparison, as Waltz himself acknowledges.[5] Hans Morgenthau's conception of power is even more problematic, including as it does factors such as national character and national morale, which in any case verge perilously close to the cultural.[6] And even when assessments of capabilities are strictly limited to easily measurable material factors, realists may arrive at different conclusions.[7] In fact, Desch concedes in the end that his characterization of the challenge to cultural theories may be overstated: "The definitional problem, however, is largely one of application rather than principle, because it is possible to clearly define and operationalize culture" (p. 152).

The second challenge that Desch identifies is what he terms the "sui generis problem" (pp. 152–155). He notes that "some new culturalists in security studies focus on the particulars of single cases, rather than on factors common to a number of cases, because they assume that each one is sui generis." This tendency, he argues, makes generalizations difficult because it often produces cases that challenge the "unit homogeneity assumption," which holds, in Desch's words, "that cases have enough meaningful similarities to be comparable" (p. 152). Likewise, it means that these culturalists may "have few, if any, systematic elements on which to build their theories," and "without systematic variables, there is no prediction" (p. 153).

This time, Desch offers no last-minute concession, but once again, he greatly exaggerates the challenge. Cultural theories are not inherently limited to emphasizing the uniqueness of cases. Many elements of culture can vary systematically along well-defined dimensions and thus lend themselves to cross-case measurement and comparison. A good example is Iain Johnston's three-dimensional conceptualization of strategic culture.[8] In addition, there is no inherent reason why one cannot make testable predictions on the basis of sui generis cultures. The only requirement is that they have observable behavioral implications. Nor do sui generis characterizations of cultures necessarily violate the unit homogeneity assumption; what matters is that other characteristics of the units under consideration be similar across cases.[9] Finally, the problem is also true of realism insofar as some possible indicators of capabilities do not lend themselves to easy measurement and comparison, as noted above.

Fifth, Desch underestimates the theoretical significance of the case studies that culturalists have conducted. One of his central arguments is that "[cultural] theories, by themselves, do not provide much additional explanatory power beyond existing

5. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 131.
6. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 4th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1967).
7. For example, whereas scholars have traditionally numbered Britain, France, and Japan among the great powers of the interwar period, Randall L. Schweller draws a sharp distinction between them and the three "poles" of the system, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Germany, in Schweller, "Tripolarity and the Second World War," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 1993), pp. 73–103.
8. Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security,* Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 32–64.
9. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 91–94.

theories" (p. 158). In his view, the recent culturalism has "selected cases that do not provide crucial tests that enable us to distinguish which theories are better" (p. 170).

I agree with Desch that some, although not all, of the new cultural literature consists of most likely, indistinguishable, and even disputable cases. Nevertheless, even most likely and indistinguishable cases are useful for establishing the plausibility of cultural theories, which is a necessary first step in the process of theory testing and development.[10] Moreover, the success of cultural theories in most likely cases can be read as the failure of realist theories to explain what for them are hard tests or least likely cases. Thus the subtext of Desch's discussion of most likely cases is that realism cannot itself pass the test that he has erected for culturalism.

In addition, cultural theories have held up well in at least two hard cases, those of postwar, and especially post–Cold War, Germany and Japan. Arguably, these cases pose serious puzzles for realist theory, given that much less change has occurred in the security policies of those states following the end of the Cold War than important strands of realism would predict. Certainly, neorealists began to anticipate as early as 1990 that both Germany and Japan would seek to acquire nuclear weapons, something that neither has done thus far.[11] Instead, the policies they have actually pursued may be better explained in terms of their political cultures.[12]

Significantly, Desch does not deny that these are potentially hard cases, but he terms them premature. This characterization is highly troublesome, however, for it includes no indication of just how long we must wait to be able to draw definitive theoretical conclusions. And even if a longer waiting period is warranted, it would raise serious questions about the utility of realism, questions that should be particularly troubling for Desch given his avowed concern that theories lend themselves to prediction (see, e.g., p. 153).

In fact, Desch largely sidesteps the issue by focusing on the cultures themselves rather than on their effects on national security policy. I do not deny that culture may have international structural origins, as he argues. But the critical issue here is whether a culture, once it comes into existence, can have an important independent influence on state behavior, an influence that should become especially evident when structural variables change. The German and Japanese cases suggest strongly that it can.

Finally, if the studies that culturalists have conducted do not meet his standards, Desch ought to suggest just what cases would be hard ones for cultural theories. And if none can be identified, what does this mean for the enterprise of theory testing?

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10. Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science,* Volume 7, *Strategies of Inquiry* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 108–109.
11. John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security,* Vol. 14, No. 4 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56; and Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security,* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 44–79.
12. See especially Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and John S. Duffield, *World Power Forsaken: Political Culture, International Institutions, and German Security Policy after Unification* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Presumably, it would be all the more important to ascertain whether realism can outperform culturalism in what are least likely cases for the former.

Sixth, and perhaps most seriously, Desch concedes the potential usefulness of cultural theories in so many circumstances that one cannot help but wonder whether they in fact represent a more promising explanatory point of departure than does realism. He first suggests that realism applies primarily to great powers (p. 159) and to situations where a state's security, and secondarily its economic, interests are at stake (p. 160). He then explicitly concedes three circumstances in which cultural theories may provide better explanations: when there is a lag between structural change and alterations in state behavior, when states act contrary to structural imperatives, and when structure is indeterminate.

These concessions greatly undermine Desch's thesis. Certainly, the occasional occurrence of brief lags would not pose a major challenge to realist theory. But if they take place with great frequency, arguably no theory of state behavior would be complete if it failed to include the causes of such lags, be they cultural or otherwise. And if a lag lasts long enough, its explanation presumably becomes at least as important as that of any eventual behavioral change. In the cases of post–Cold War Germany and Japan, the lags are now approaching an entire decade. Surely, if realism is to be of any policy relevance, it must be able to predict the timing of change with more accuracy than that.

In addition, situations involving behavior contrary to structural imperatives or structural indeterminacy appear to be quite common. Empirical anomalies of this nature have often served as the starting point for culturalist and other nonrealist analyses.[13] Moreover, and contrary to Desch's claim that "realists maintain that structure is frequently determinate" (p. 168), many scholars working under the realist banner have found it necessary to introduce nonstructural variables of an ideational nature (perceptions, beliefs, interests, etc.) to account for important international phenomena.[14] Even Waltz is quite explicit about the limited ability of structural theory to explain state behavior.[15]

After reading "Culture Clash," it is difficult not to conclude that, more often than not, the situations of interest to students of international relations are likely to be better explained by cultural factors. Consequently, a superior approach to understanding state behavior might be to start with cultural variables and then to invoke realism as a possible supplement only when the former are found wanting. Of course, many scholars would presumably not wish to go this far. After all, the international system is a logical starting point for any analysis of state behavior. Typically, foreign and security policy is framed against the backdrop of external circumstances. Nevertheless, realist approaches alone will rarely if ever suffice to provide fully satisfactory explanations, in part because this backdrop also includes nonstructural factors and because it is often misperceived, distorted, and even obscured by conditions internal to the state. Alter-

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13. See Ethan B. Kapstein, "Is Realism Dead? The Domestic Sources of International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1995), pp. 751–774.

14. John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 899–912.

15. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, especially pp. 68–73.

native systemic and unit-level variables must necessarily be invoked. Surely, in such a context, the position that cultural and perhaps other approaches are at best mere supplements to realism is untenable.

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To the Editors (Theo Farrell writes):

In "Culture Clash," Michael Desch offers a dismissive assessment of the new culturalist wave in security studies.[1] Desch finds cultural variables hard to define and operationalize, culturalists reluctant to generalize across cases, and inconsistencies within culturalism in security studies such that some cultural theories have more in common with realist theories than with other cultural ones. I deal with each of these criticisms in turn. I then focus on Desch's call for culturalists to subject their theories to "crucial tests." I propose an alternative method, more favored by social scientists and accepted by realists, of comparing realism and culturalism as rival research programs in security studies.

WHAT COUNTS AS CULTURE
Desch's first problem with culturalism in security studies is that "cultural variables are sometimes hard to clearly define and operationalize" (p. 150). He fails to note that this is equally true of material variables. Witness, for example, the debate over how to conceptualize and measure the impact of technological superiority on air-ground combat.[2] Desch dips into anthropology, sociology, and psychology to uncover "a long-standing concern about cultural theories in the social sciences," in particular, with the concern that "'culture' had lost all conceptual clarity" (pp. 150–151). Such concern is simply misplaced when it comes to culturalism in security studies. It is true that culture, broadly defined, encompasses many things including beliefs, symbols, rituals, and practices. However, most culturalists focus on norms, which are defined as intersubjective beliefs about identity and behavior. Norms shape behavior by telling actors who they are and what they can do in given situations. Norms come in two varieties: constitutive norms, which define actors' identities and their situations; and regulative norms, which define normative and normal behavior for actors.[3] A norms approach to security studies is explicitly adopted by Eric Herring, Peter Katzenstein, Jeffrey Legro,

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1. Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), pp. 141–170. Additional references are noted with page numbers in the text.
2. Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us about the Future of Conflict," *International Security,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 139–179. Debate followed in "Symposium on the Gulf War and the Revolution in Military Affairs," *International Security,* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 137–174.
3. David Dessler, "What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?" *International Organization,* Vol. 43, No. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 454–458.