

The potential and the pitfalls of metatheory in IR

Os potenciais e as armadilhas da metateoria em Relações Internacionais

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ABSTRACT

Metatheory is a type of systematic discourse on theory in a given academic discipline. This article further explores this notion of metatheory and critically discusses a number of views against and in favour of metatheory in International Relations (IR). There are 'strong' and 'mild' claims against metatheoretical IR that should not be ignored. Nevertheless, some of the claims against metatheory in IR contradict themselves. Besides, the 'strong' claim that aims for the complete elimination of metatheoretical discourse in IR depends on metatheory as a presupposition. For this reason, it cannot be maintained. 'Mild' claims, on the other hand, acknowledge to some extent the potential of metatheory in IR, whilst pointing out contingent problems in its current form. Some of these issues are acknowledged and contrasted with a number of claims in favour of metatheory, leading to a moderate defence of metatheoretical discourse in IR.

Keywords: metatheory, philosophy of social science, philosophy of science, IR theory, methodology.

RESUMO

A metateoria é uma forma de discurso sistemático sobre teorias numa dada disciplina académica. Este artigo explora esta definição de metateoria e discute criticamente algumas visões contrárias e favoráveis à metateoria em Relações Internacionais (RI). Existem objeções 'fortes' e 'brandas' à metateorização na disciplina. Apesar de algum mérito nesses posicionamentos contrários à metateoria, alguns pontos se contradizem. Além disso, as objeções 'fortes,' que visam à completa eliminação do discurso metateórico de RI, dependem da metateoria em seu pressuposto. Por isso, elas não podem ser mantidas. Já as objeções 'brandas' reconhecem alguma medida de contribuição positiva do discurso metateórico em RI, mas apontam problemas contingentes na forma como ele é realizado. Alguns desses problemas são reconhecidos e contrapostos a uma série de argumentos favoráveis à metateoria, numa defesa moderada de um espaço para metateorização na disciplina.

Palavras-chave: Metateoria, Filosofia das ciências sociais, Filosofia da ciência, Teorias de RI, Metodologia.

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A controversial topic

Metatheory, or systematic discourse about theory, is a controversial topic in International Relations (IR) scholarship. For better or for worse, it has played an important role in key disciplinary debates and attracted a considerable negative response from some IR scholars and practitioners. “IR theorising is in a state of chronic epistemological, normative, methodological, and ontological contestation” (WESLEY, 2001, p.453). The highly contested status of this kind of scholarly discourse has drawn comments from those for and against metatheorising IR. A good number of well-known studies that focus mainly on metatheoretical issues have recently emerged in the field. Although it may be argued that metatheory has been implicit in the historical formation of IR as a whole (WIGHT, 2002), the growing specialisation and self-awareness of these studies suggest that a metatheoretical sub-field in the discipline is likely to emerge. This is not surprising in light of similar cases of self-reflective fields of research in other disciplines like Sociology (Philosophy of Social Science) and Economics (Economic Methodology). The new configuration of metatheoretical discourse in IR is worth following on its own merits, but if it indeed crystallises into a sub-field, then IR scholars shall be left with yet another justification for analysing the ‘potential’ and ‘pitfalls’ of metatheory in IR.

In this article, I provide a starting point for this kind of exercise with a three-step study. First, I present philosophical and conceptual arguments in light of the most general contributions to the definition and description of metatheory (BUNGE, 1998a) and of its roles in social science (BUNGE, 1996; GIDDENS, 1979; RITZER, 1992B; TILLY, 2008). Second, I go to IR proper and look at the general perceptions of the issue, which can be both positive and negative. Third, with a brief discussion of this literature I return to philosophical analysis and add my own argument in favour of IR metatheory. My starting point is the definition of metatheory as ‘systematic discourse on theory’ and an exploration of the analytic implications of this definition. I suggest that, despite their main empirical focus, scientific academic disciplines also have some space for metatheoretical research (FREIRE, 2010).

This study moves beyond the basics and looks at what metatheory has concretely been doing in the specific case of IR. My review of the literature for and against metatheory in the discipline reveals some of the perceptions of key IR scholars. On the one hand, the potential positive roles that metatheory may play in the discipline are highlighted. Amongst them are the clarification, evaluation and improvement of theoretical material, the adjustment of conceptual systems from one context to another, the examination of the discipline itself, and finally, the specific use of metatheory as a theoretical tool in some cases. On the other hand, there are those who emphasise the negative roles metatheory has played, and can play, in the field. Some of these roles are contingent on an increase in complexity and fragmentation of the discipline or a decrease in relevance and attractiveness of IR research and teaching. In this category, we may also speak of destructive political dynamics in which metatheory

is said to be involved in a few different ways. Besides these contingent ‘externalities,’ metatheory is portrayed as intrinsically negative in the case of a field like IR for analytic reasons. This is the ‘radical,’ or ‘strong,’ argument against metatheoretical discourse in IR. Since the study of theories must not be conflated with the study of world politics, it follows that, other things being equal, there is a trade-off between metatheory and the actual study of political practice at the global level—which is what IR is supposed to do in the first place.

Despite its strengths and spark of correctness, the strong claim against metatheory does not hold water from a logical point of view. In the discussion I offer in light of my conceptual exploration of what metatheory is and does, and in light of the main complaints against metatheory, I conclude that, due to its conditions of possibility, any strong argument for the complete elimination of metatheory from the discursive domain of an academic discipline will incur in contradiction. This means that, at least to some extent, metatheory will always be around and we will have to grapple with it. Notice that I do not intend to defend the status quo of metatheory in IR. There are quite a few problems with the way it has arranged itself to date, although there are indications of improvement. The question then is not so much whether we need metatheory in the field, but rather, whether (and how) we can improve IR metatheory to avoid several of the shortcomings rightly pointed out by its critics. My argument, therefore, unites *a priori* philosophical analysis to *a posteriori* arguments in IR on the subject. It deals with what metatheory generally does as such, and with what it has been doing in IR as a matter of contingency.

Theory and metatheory

Metatheory is usually defined as ‘theory of theory.’ This definition appears in a more or less consistent form in the philosophy of science (BUNGE, 1998a, p.36), in general social science (BUNGE, 1996, p.1-8; 108-34) and even in IR (KURKI; WIGHT, 2007, p.14). It obviously begs for further clarification of what ‘theory’ means, since the term figures in both parts of the concept. Theory, as any other key word, is understood in light of different approaches, not only in scholarship but also in everyday use (STRAUSS, 2009, p.31-66). For this reason, it is not surprising that, despite their agreement on the basic concept, scholars will have different notions of what metatheory looks like and how it operates (GIERE, 1988, p.1). Nevertheless, it is still possible to attain a ‘common denominator’ (as it were) across the main conceptual notions of ‘theory’ to apply it to ‘metatheory.’ In any case, it is clear from my initial definition that metatheory is a specific kind of theory, namely one that primarily focuses on theories. I should note, moreover, that metatheory, being a kind of theory, is also an object in itself. That is, because metatheory is a ‘theory of theory,’ and because it is a kind of theory, it follows that it can eventually be employed in the theoretical study of metatheories. This is an important implication because, even before we open up the concept of ‘metatheory,’ it denotes one crucial role played by metatheory: that of theorising about *metatheory* (LAKATOS, 1978, p.152). I shall return to this point at the end of the paper.

Let us now proceed to a brief examination of metatheory in light of what I have called the ‘common denominator’ shared by different conceptual views of theory. Strictly speaking, an empirical theory is a set of systematically arranged propositions of a hypothetical nature “within which valid arguments (i.e., deductive chains) can be constructed” (BUNGE, 1996, p.114). Theories are artefacts intended to make sense of an abstract organisation of evidence (STAFLEU, 1981, 1982). There are two main opposing views of theories in the specialised literature. One, under the influence of logical positivism, emphasises the *syntactic* and formal features of theoretical systems (NAGEL, 1961; WARTOFSKY, 1968). In this vein, theories are seen as “collections of statements that can have a formal representation as axiomatic systems.” Whilst looking at a theory, we would be able to “separate the logical structure of a theory (*calculus*) from its factual content.” Some of these sentences would be ‘un-interpreted’ logical derivations from axioms, whereas several of them would be ‘interpreted’ logical, observational and theoretical terms (BORTOLOTTI, 2008, p.55). This view was very popular in the golden age of logical positivism. Albert Einstein (2006, p.56), for example, defined theories as “the totality of the primary concepts, i.e., concepts directly connected with sense experiences, and theorems connecting them.” Of paramount importance is “the aim to represent the multitude of concepts and theorems, close to experience, as theorems, logically deduced and belonging to a basis, as narrow as possible of fundamental concepts and fundamental relations which themselves can be chosen freely” (EINSTEIN, 2006, p.57). According to him, “by means of such concepts and mental relations between them, we are able to orient ourselves in the labyrinth of sense impressions” (EINSTEIN, 2006, p.53).

With the emergence of several challenges to the logical positivist theory of science, a new understanding of theories has been developed which emphasises *semantic* properties, i.e., the connection between theories and reality. The syntactic view, according to its critics, “suffers from a number of serious oversimplifications, due in large part to its almost exclusive concern with formal aspects” (ACHINSTEIN, 1964, p.328). Too much emphasis on the formal and syntactic features of theories can detract from a proper understanding of how they work in scientific practice (RICE, 2000, p.240ff). The semantic view, for this reason, postulates that “we should not begin with the language itself, but with the scientific practices in which the language is used” (GIERE, 2004, p.743), a key practice being that of representation. Models are the main ‘bridge’ between scientific representation and reality and, for this reason, the semantic view speaks more of models than theories as such (GIERE, 1988, p.86; PSILLOS, 2007, p.228). Bas van Fraassen (1980, p.44), who is known for his defence of the semantic notion, concurs that a theory should be presented “in the first instance by identifying a class of structures as its models.” He adds that “the language used to express the theory is neither basic nor unique,” in contrast with the syntactic view: “the same class of structures could well be described in radically different ways.” Contrary to Frigg and Hartmann’s (2009, p.23) reading that the semantic approach requires the rejection of formal axiomatisation, advocates of this view of theories

have defended the procedure under certain conditions (ACHINSTEIN, 1968, p.153-4). In any case, there are other fruitful ways of formalising and presenting theoretical models, and these should also be taken into account (VAN FRAASSEN, 1980, p.67).

Critiques of the semantic view have also emerged. It has been pointed out that “the semantic view of theories is, in most of its guises, not about theories at all, but about models, because the former are defined solely in terms of the latter,” and “what we typically call ‘scientific knowledge’ is not completely captured by [...] reducing theories to models” (MORRISON, 2007, p.195-6). However, this does not mean that either syntactic or semantic approaches should be completely discarded altogether, but rather should be understood as shedding light on different roles played by theoretical material in science. There is, indeed, a ‘common denominator’ across these two ‘extremes’ (HENDRY; PSILLOS, 2007, p.124). We may certainly think of theories as systematic arrangements of propositions, but we also have to bear in mind that their point is not only to organise data, but also to represent a given ‘cut’ of reality. Moreover, it is clear that both approaches stress the need for clarity and a certain degree of formality in the presentation of theories (BUNGE, 1998a, p.503). Of course, theories are not ‘born’ clear and concise. Formalisation is a procedure that develops throughout the history of a research programme. On the whole, we may still speak of theories and models as ‘hypothetical-deductive’ chains of arguments, even in social science (BUNGE, 1999a, p.1).

If, however, we are too strict in the formal requirements for calling something a ‘theory,’ ignoring this historical aspect, we will not be doing justice to the widespread use of the term. The same applies to ‘metatheory.’ If we require a strictly axiomatised or even just robustly formalised conceptual system focused on the study of theories themselves, we may ‘deflate’ the term to the extent that only metamathematics will still be a good referent (BUNGE, 1998a, p.436-7). There are several ways of (meta)theorising and also of formalising an argument. Sometimes diagrams and equations may be appropriate, sometimes plain text will be more than enough. It is good practice to be conceptually clear, which means being formal and systematic to a minimum extent. For these reasons, and in order to avoid misunderstanding related to either ‘extreme’ view of theory, I prefer to speak of metatheory in terms of ‘systematic discourse about theory.’ The main elements are still here: it is minimally formal; it is a set of interrelated propositions (systematic discourse), and it focuses to a great extent on theory. This definition is flexible enough that much of what we call ‘metatheory’ outside mathematics is not excluded by default, but it is also limited enough to rule out statements such as “I don’t like theory, it’s too boring” (which I am sure we hear quite often from first-year undergraduates). Metatheory, then, is systematic discourse about theory.

What does metatheory do? How does it operate? It is hard to make a parsimonious ‘closed list’ of its roles because, in abstract, there are many possible uses for systematic discourse in which theory figures as the main subject matter, or one of the main objects of analysis. We can, for example, speak of theories in connection with empirical reality and other theories. We can also speak about elements or parts of a certain

theory or its historical development over time. We can speak about a 'metascientific' analysis of an academic discipline in which its main theories figure as a key part of the explanation about how that field works (RADNITZKY, 1970). We can also speak about the adjustment of theoretical material from one context to another, or from wide (Philosophy) to narrow (Theory) and so on. A further way of expanding this list is the possibility of being hermeneutical (what it means), explanatory (how it works), critical (what is wrong) and even normative (what should be the case) about theory. Arguably all these 'points of entry' into theory go together in most cases. But the fact remains that their coherent diversity widens the scope of roles for metatheory in any given setting, simply by implication from its definition.² Instead of unpacking all of these in detail, I look at the roles that have been ascribed to metatheory in the empirical case of IR.

2. Thus, metatheory is more than merely a theory where 'theory' figures as a 'dependent variable'.

The potential of metatheory in IR.....

A growing number of IR scholars point out the potential of metatheory and are generally supportive of metatheoretical investigation. They urge us to look at systematic discourse about theory as some sort of conceptual 'mechanism' that enables certain discursive manoeuvres deemed necessary to the discipline. Because it opens up this kind of space, metatheory is seen as providing a positive contribution to the field. The positive roles of metatheoretical research are broadly organised into two categories: those pertaining to theoretical material in isolation somehow, and those that also take into account contexts that are external to this material.

Internal positive roles of metatheory

Most explicit defences of metatheoretical scholarship in IR focus on the first kind of roles for metatheory, i.e., those pertaining to theoretical material as such (LAUDAN, 1977, p.45-69). In this category, metatheory figures as the primary framework enabling the clarification, evaluation and improvement of theories (BUNGE, 1999, p.88). By 'clarification,' I mean a hermeneutically charitable treatment of theoretical material aiming at its clear exposition. This may or may not include a further step toward the formalisation of the theory under scrutiny (see BUNGE, 1972; and the debate in SUPPE, 1974) but the important element here is the attempt to grasp and clarify the concepts of a theory, the way they relate to each other in key propositions, and the way these propositions relate to each other (ADLER; VAN DOREN, 1972, p.96-107). This kind of effort is visible in attempts to 'rationally reconstruct' theoretical material in IR, such as, for example, John Vasquez's (1999) study of Realist theories and their relationship to empirical research or Stefano Guzzini's (2000) analysis of the introduction and formation of IR Constructivism. Other cases involve work particularly related to disciplinary history, like Brian Schmidt's (1998) detailed exposition of early 20th century theories of world politics. Others prefer to focus on individual authors, or 'key

figures' (NEUMANN; WAEVER, 1997). One example is Keith Topper's (1998) thorough critical review of Kenneth Waltz's contribution and Ian Hall's (2006) monograph providing a close reading of Martin Wight's international thought.

Of course, a good deal of metatheoretical research in IR has been dedicated to the critiques of some of these 'reconstructions' and to offering alternative readings. Once metatheoretical space as clarification of theories is opened up, it will almost certainly attract all sorts of correlated metatheoretical discourses emerging from an initial step. Not only that: the issue of questioning the very principles on which these attempts to clarify theory reside is also likely to emerge. I want to illustrate this with a couple of minor debates as well as a more encompassing debate. I begin with the discussion between Colin Wight and poststructuralist theorists David Campbell and Roxanne Lynn Doty. In response to Campbell's (1998) defence of Nietzschean 'perspectivism' for security studies in a review article, Wight (1999) questioned the interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy and its implications. The rejoinder questioned traditional criteria for hermeneutic validation and the 'closure' of 'pre-mature writing' (CAMPBELL, 1999). In another minor debate, a poststructural reading of the agency-structure problem (DOTY, 1997) was questioned (WIGHT, 1999b) and the rejoinder came along the same lines, with particular reference to Jacques Derrida's notion of 'openness' of interpretations (DOTY, 1999). To that, Wight (2000) replied that Derrida's contribution to hermeneutics should, to say the least, clearly *not* be read in the same way as a handbook of French cooking, although there is certainly space to discuss whether a specific interpretation is or is not a persuasive one. A more encompassing debate as illustration is Schmidt's (1998) defence of an 'internalist' and contextualised reading of theoretical material against IR 'externalists' like Stanley Hoffmann (1977, p.41-7) and Torbjorn Knutsen (1997, p.6), according to whom events like the end of the Cold War and other grandiose political and social moments determine variation in theoretical thought. Careful interpretation and 'reconstruction' is perceived as a requirement in order to avoid "misleading and simplistic depiction" of theoretical material, especially in the case of "past authors and eras" (VIGNESWARAN; QUIRK, 2010, p.107). This is particularly relevant when these "classical authors" are "employed by contemporary theorists to articulate particular positions" that might be extremely problematic (BROWN; NARDIN; RENGGER, 2002, p.3). Historical or otherwise, this kind of argument over exegetical principles is, of course, framed as ancillary to the aim of clarifying theoretical texts.

Clarification, however, occurs very rarely as an end in itself. It is generally viewed as contributing to the evaluation and improvement of theoretical material (RITZER, 1992a, p.11). The evaluative element is very easy to understand if we look, for example, at the role played by formalisation in the clarification of theories: when the distinction between core and auxiliary propositions becomes clear, then not only are we able to tell the story of the development of that research programme, but also evaluate it in a way that does not harm its elementary points or that abandons them altogether (LAKATOS, 1970). Moreover, formalisation

quite often implicates methodological adjustment of theoretical propositions for the purpose of orienting them towards empirical investigation (BUNGE, 1998b; MORRISON, 2007, p.197). For example, if we are talking about 'power' as a theoretical notion we may also want to bridge that with empirical or discursive reality by using some indicator, variable or category to help us locate and analyse power in that cut of reality (MATTERN, 2008, p.694-7). Last, but not least, formalisation also helps distinguish between propositions that are integral to the theory, whether in an axiomatic way or whether by implication, and separate these bits from 'noise,' digressions, side comments, and propositions that aim to shed light on others but which are not properly parts of the theory (STAFLEU, 1987). Reducing the number of elements to be critically analysed and putting them in evidence are definitely a starting point for internal criticism. In this procedure, the metatheorist tries the theory's internal consistency in light of the logically prior effort of 'reconstruction' of the relevant material from, say, the book or wider text in which it originally figures. Waltz's Neorealism is not the same thing as *Theory of International Politics*.

Together with evaluation of theory comes the improvement of theory. Sometimes testing a theory within the context of a research programme leads to further theorising and internal improvement of the programme. For example, John Mearsheimer's (2001) rejected some points of Neorealism and proposed the further refinement taking into account geography, sub-systems and more external efforts and strategies apart from balancing. This kind of intellectual episode does not occur solely in neat and tidy theories like Neorealism. Other examples are Hedley Bull's (1977, p.8-21) refinement of Martin Wight's (1977, p.21-45) concept of 'states-system,' rejecting a 'suzerain system' as a category and including hierarchy rather as an institution of international societies under the heading 'Great-Power directorate.' And then Adam Watson's (1992, p.10-7) further discussion of the theme restoring the notion of suzerainty but including it in a 'spectrum' ranging from more to less hierarchical as a key mechanism constituting a great deal of processes in international systems and societies. This kind of further clarification, criticism and refinement often occur within a research programme.

Despite this, metatheory may often lead to the improvement of theory in a sense that is external to a specific theory. It may lead to the demise, at least temporarily, of a certain research programme by the metatheorist to pursue a distinct theoretical avenue on the same issue. In this vein, metatheoretical research can, and does, open up space for new theories which purport to solve problems that the previous ones could not handle (but see LAUDAN, 1990, p.27-30). Perhaps the most remarkable illustration is the role that metatheoretical critiques of Waltz's works played for a full decade in IR leading to the introduction of a plethora of new approaches in the late 1980s and early 1990s (GUZZINI, 2000, p.156-7). This is the way in which the incipience of Wendtian constructivism is framed, to mention only one episode (REUS-SMIT; SNIDAL, 2008, p.26). The chronology and themes of Wendt's works reveal such moves of introducing original theory with the claim that, after critical examination, the mainstream approaches were found wanting (BRGLEZ, 2001, p.139).

To sum up thus far: metatheory in IR may be connected to the positive roles of clarification, examination and improvement of theories. In these potentially constructive contributions to the discipline, the key referents of metatheoretical discourse are singled-out theories.

Contextual positive roles of metatheory

Metatheory may also contribute positively to IR in relation to theories and their context. This means that metatheoretical discourse, while still retaining its core focus on conceptual systems, may perhaps take a step further and consider these systems in conjunction with other theories, or perhaps in light of institutionalised features of the academic discipline. What is common to each of these approaches is the fact that none of them stops at the analysis of a single theory or research programme by itself.

The first contextual positive role of metatheory in IR to be mentioned is that of adjusting conceptual systems from one context to another. Guzzini's (2000, p.151) reconstruction of the introduction of Wendt's Constructivism to IR spends a great deal of space discussing how that theorist 'transposed' the philosophical approach of scientific realism, together with the agent-structure discussion in the philosophy of social science, into the IR debates in a "meta-theoretical shift." It should also be noted that the approach would have been significantly different from what it is now had Wendt not placed such a move at the centre of his presentation of the approach. As a result of the conceptual 'assemblage' that ensued, not only is IR Constructivism a 'house divided,' but also its formation over time looks considerably distinct from its broad social theory counterpart (FIERKE; JØRGENSEN, 2001). This metatheoretical 'bridge' from philosophy to theory occurs regularly. We may think, for example, of scientific realism in IR (JOSEPH; WIGHT, 2010; KURKI, 2008). Others would have a more specific agenda and would be interested in applying the works of specific thinkers like F.A. Hayek (van de HAAR, 2009), Antonio Gramsci (COX, 1983), Michel Foucault (LOBO-GUERRERO, 2011) and so forth. An important matter to note is that the original theoretical material need not come from philosophy, although metatheory is specifically useful in adjusting the wideness of philosophy to the specificity of empirical theoretical research. In other words, metatheory can also 'bridge' between one empirical theory applied to a certain domain of knowledge as well as IR theory (BUNGE, 1999b, p.13-4; REUS-SMIT; SNIDAL, 2008, p.29).

A final way of 'bridging' between theory in one context and another has theoretical material from IR on both sides. This has to do with the re-launch of 'eclecticism' in IR theorising. Dissatisfied with the 'insulation' of research programmes in the field, key scholars now call for a more 'open' attitude towards rival theories, with a shift to problem-oriented scholarship, rather than research aimed at defending a certain 'paradigm' (LAKE, 2011). 'Eclecticism' is portrayed as the main vehicle for overcoming disciplinary fragmentation: it is a way of theorising "that seeks to extricate, translate, and selectively integrate analytic elements

[...] of theories or narratives that have been developed within separate paradigms but that address related aspects of substantive problems that have both scholarly and practical significance” (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2010, p.10). Although those defending this view are critical of the ‘crystal-lising’ effects that metatheory has in the field (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2011, p.481-2), they openly acknowledge that the metatheoretical domain is inescapable, and that we might as well use it to foster an ‘eclectic’ attitude (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2010, p.25-37).

We must understand the ontologies and the epistemological principles at the core of paradigms if we wish to combine some of their elements to make sense of a given problem [...]. In spite of the different metatheoretical foundations associated with various paradigms, it is possible to explore empirical issues and problems through eclectic, recombinant modes of inquiry that extract, translate, and creatively redeploy theoretical elements drawn from contending traditions (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2011, p.482).

‘Analytic eclecticism’ illustrates the potential contributions of metatheoretical analysis in enabling inter-theoretical ‘assemblages’ in IR, which require close attention to the ‘infrastructure’ of research programmes in the discipline.

Going beyond the adjustment of conceptual systems from one context to another, metatheory may also connect theories to their ‘external’ context. It may do so in at least three ways: by providing a ‘self-image’ to the discipline, by discussing what IR should be studying and by denouncing the limitations of scholarship in the field. An initial relevant goal here is that of providing a systematic understanding of IR as a discipline. In such an account of the field, theories still play a central role, but are also linked to the institutional status of IR scholarship. There are at least three ways in which this can happen. The first has to do with constructing and debating what Steve Smith (1995) calls ‘self-images’ of the discipline, that is, accounts of the configuration of IR scholarship. This can be done in several ways, including disciplinary history, analyses of what the (meta) theoretical divides in the field are and some sort of application of ‘sociology of knowledge’ to the study of the institutionalised discipline itself (WAEVER, 2010). Metatheory not only elaborates such ‘self-images’ but also critically assesses them. An interesting case is that of Hoffmann’s (1977) picture of IR scholarship, theoretical or otherwise, as predominantly a reflection of policy interests in the United States. This view of IR as an ‘American social science’ was commonplace in ‘self-imagetic’ works (HOLSTI, 1985; SMITH, 1987; 2000; 2002) and has now been questioned on several grounds (ACHARYA, 2011; TICKNER; WAEVER, 2009; TURTON, 2011). Part of the (still metatheoretical) critique of this ‘self-image’ is the complaint that it tends to construct a narrative which denies agency to peripheral scholars (BILGIN, 2008). It portrays them as mere copiers of theories produced at the core of the discipline, whereas specific studies (CUNNINGHAM-CROSS, 2011; TURTON; FREIRE, 2009) detect not only the ‘blending’ of knowledge from both origins but also a distinct dynamic of constrained innovation in peripheral contexts that we must not ignore in our attempt to better understand IR as a discipline (SCHMIDT, 2006, p.264-7).

A second metatheoretical way of analysing the relation between theories and the 'external' disciplinary context has a more normative undertone and refers to the clarification of our object of study. Particularly in the early decades of the discipline, IR theorists have debated to a considerable extent the issues of an object of study and how to theorise about it. One may think, for example, of the way the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics started off with the crucial question of defining an 'international system' and how to study it, and how the discussion was followed up even by the later English School (BUZAN, 1993). Another relevant example is the involvement of C.A.W. Manning in lobbying for separate IR departments in Britain, always trying to explain what made IR distinctive in terms of its subject matter and why such content demands a discipline of its own (SUGANAMI, 2001). In the US, a key problem was finding the appropriate 'level of analysis' that IR should focus on. Waltz's (1979, Chap. 2-4) discussion of 'systemic' versus 'reductionist' approaches to world politics is clearly of a metatheoretical character. Waltz's frame for this issue is still a point of reference for those arguing about how to theorise IR in light of several positions on social ontology, especially connected to the agent-structure problem (WENDT, 1987; WIGHT, 2006). The common point shared by these cases is that they all involve to some extent a systematic argument about what kinds of entities we do, or should, study using IR theories. In different ways, they all represent some sort of account of what IR as a discipline should be theoretically about, or what IR theory should aim toward.

Even when there is agreement on what we should theorise about, there is considerable diversity in the ways of theorising world politics, a feature that leads to the third element of metatheoretical discourse linking theory to its 'external' disciplinary context. In this case, the analysis has to do with limitations of IR theoretical discourse (LIEBER, 1973, p. viii). There is an increasingly popular narrative about what makes good IR scholarship (VAN EVERA, 1997; KING, KEOHANE; VERBA, 1994). This mainstream way of studying world politics is by no means exempt from criticism, especially after the so-called 'postpositivist turn' in IR (LAPID, 1989). Particularly pivotal in this debate is the positivist and/or empiricist discourse of science that disqualifies other ways of theorising world politics as 'unscientific' (JACKSON, 2011, p.10-23). 'Science equals positivism' is a formula further reproduced by several of the postpositivists themselves, who will quite happily agree that science is positivism and that, therefore, IR cannot (and should not) attempt to be scientific (KURKI, 2006, p.215; WIGHT, 2002, p.37). While mainstream scholars have generally paid lip service to disciplinary pluralism in their replies, the 'solution' to perceived problems in postpositivist IR scholarship is that it should adjust itself to the mainstream (KEOHANE, 1988). A group of postpositivists, especially those of a scientific realist persuasion, have argued for the possibility of non-positivist social science (PATOMÄKI; WIGHT, 2000). Meanwhile, those postpositivists who still cling to the ideal of scientific IR are accused of 'positivism' (and all the negative connotation brought by it) by fellow postpositivists of a more 'radical,' anti-science line (FIERKE, 2007, p.174; GEORGE, 1994, p.127). This critical dis-

cussion of the limits of IR as a discipline with reference to distinct ways of theorising world politics is, therefore, another metatheoretical battlefield.

So far, I have discussed on the two main ways in which metatheory may positively move beyond the mere analysis of one theory in isolation. It may serve as a 'bridge,' adjusting theoretical material from one context to another and it may also serve as an element for understanding theory with reference to IR as a discipline in a variety of ways. There is, still, a third main positive role for metatheory focusing on the context of theories, namely, that of metatheories as theoretical tools. This role is very specific to a certain style of social theory. It assumes that ideas, including theories, somehow have an impact on the social world that deserves to be theoretically studied. 'Constitutive theories' are particularly relevant here, because they purport "to analyse the different forms of reflection about the nature and character of world politics and to stress that these forms of knowledge do not simply mirror the world, but also help to shape it" (BURCHILL; LINKLATER, 2005, p.18). "Theories of international politics," says R.B.J. Walker (1993, p.6), "are more interesting as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained than as explanations of contemporary world politics." Because metatheory is systematic analysis of theories, it follows that this kind of theory about theories-in-society will by definition have 'something metatheoretical' to it (WEBER, 2009, p.1-8). This is what I call 'metatheory as a tool of theory': although there is "a considerable measure of metatheory, of theorizing about the theories of international politics" in constitutive social theorising, the main point is to understand the social world, and a systematic analysis of theories is just a step on the way (DER DERIAN, 1989, p.7).

However, the opposite also applies: because theories are artefacts constructed within a certain social context, looking at the connection between such a context and the production of scientific scholarship (including theory) is also a possibility for metatheoretical research. This is 'social theory as a tool of metatheory,' especially welcomed by what Robert Cox (1981, p.128-31) calls 'critical theory,' the metatheoretical role of which is to underline the context in which theories are produced (and the context they produce), with a view to social change and emancipation. Like constitutive theory, critical theory is also concerned about the social impact of ideas, including theories (COX, 2008, p.87). Unlike constitutive theory, though, critical theory makes the normative agenda more explicit and also emphasises the other side of the issue, focusing on the origins and aims of theory. Andrew Linklater (1996, p.279), another key proponent of critical theory in IR, stresses the integration of these elements: "Critical theory invites observers to reflect upon the social construction and effects of knowledge and to consider how claims about neutrality can conceal the role knowledge plays in reproducing unsatisfactory social arrangements." Marysia Zalewski (1996, p.345) stresses the normative agenda of critical theory. According to her, the metatheoretical use of social theory is a kind of "moral and political imperative in both understanding the nature of theory and theory's relationship with the world." We can think, to mention one example, of how Grant and Newland (1991, p.5) highlight gender as a constraining and enabling contextual mechanism in the production of theory:

The exclusion of women's experience from the conceptualization of international relations has had negative consequences both for the discipline and for male and female inhabitants of the real world [...]. [T]his exclusion has resulted in an academic field excessively focused on conflict and anarchy, and a way of practising statecraft and formulating strategy that is excessively focused on competition and fear.

To sum up: metatheory also plays a role with reference to the context of theories when it functions as a tool of social theory and when it employs social theory as one of its tools. As Holsti (1998, p.46) puts it, "Scholarship is a part of the world, but is also a world of its own."

The pitfalls of metatheory in IR

Despite its potential, metatheory has not remained unchallenged in the academic discipline of IR. Critics of metatheoretical investigation fall into two main categories. Some, on the 'radical' side, are concerned with what they perceive as necessary effects of certain intrinsic features of metatheory. They advance a strong argument against metatheoretical research in IR. However, the vast majority of critics do indeed acknowledge some limited legitimate role for metatheory and simply point out that, unfortunately, the record of this kind of debate and investigation in the field is quite poor. This is how they advance the 'mild' argument against metatheoretical discourse in IR. They complain about negative effects and 'externalities,' such as an increase in the complexity of the issues, the emergence of several pedagogical problems and, finally, the political pitfalls of metatheory.

The 'radical' critique of metatheory

The 'radical, or 'strong,' argument against metatheoretical discourse in IR has a positive and a normative side. Positively, it states that this kind of research and debate is intrinsically unable to tackle the issues with which IR is supposed to deal. Normatively, it argues against metatheory in IR so that we can move on to the actual substance the field should be addressing. The starting point of such 'radical' critique of metatheory is the idea that metatheory is, as David Armstrong (1995, p.537) puts it, "inherently parasitic" because "it cannot produce paradigms of its own." Hence, says Schmidt (1997, p.111), "It would be a great mistake to believe that metatheory can provide authoritative answers about how to study international politics." The writings of political theorist John G. Gunnell (1979; 1986; 1998) supply most of the ammunition for this point of view. He postulates a sharply differentiated series of possible 'discursive layers' or 'orders' in social reality, each matching its respective practical counterpart. A first-order, basic, practice (say 'playing football') does not depend on another practice and, therefore, needs to be distinguished from a second-order practice, which, in turn, relies upon a first-order practice for its existence (such as 'coaching football'). Now, each of these practical activities has its respective intrinsic discursive 'domain' with a 'logic' of its own. For instance, the quality of the utterances of those playing football are inherently distinct from those of a coach, talking from outside

about the match being played. The first kind of discourse, *practical* discourse, will eventually shape the match itself and may lead to goal scoring, etc. The other kind of discourse, which is of a *metapractical* quality, is simply *not* that influential on the playing field. Therefore, it follows that we should not expect to solve the practical issues of a football match by means of metapractical discourse. There is more to Gunnell's argument. When it comes to politics, we can think of yet another extra discursive 'layer.' There is political practice as such (first order), then scholarship on political practice (second order) and, finally, metatheoretical discourse (third order). Metatheory is neither political practice nor political theory and, therefore, cannot perform what political theory or political practice is supposed to do. World politics on the ground is simply "not normally or logically open to metatheoretical arbitration" (GUNNELL, 1998, p.20).

The fact that metatheory does not theorise about world politics or is intrinsically different from international political practice as such, however, is just the beginning of the problem. A further argument has to do with the failure of the quest for higher-order 'foundations' for theory. Although Gunnell (2011) himself marginally touches on this issue when he discusses metatheoretical IR, when Monteiro and Ruby (2009) transpose the 'discursive orders' argument from social and political science to IR, they bring it to another stage. Their focus is on the inability of the philosophy of science to provide foundations for theoretical discourse in the field, describing most IR metatheoretical debates as seeking "a foundation to ground the discipline" (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.16). Metatheory, in their view, aims to "settle the science debate once for all" in the pursuit of "a single foundation to define IR's relationship to science" (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.17), that is, "*the proper foundation for IR as a whole*" (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.22). Although never demonstrated with proper evidence, the authors argue by repetition that metatheory has been operating as a kind of "imperial project" in which a given philosophical worldview attempts to 'colonise' the other available positions in IR by allegedly defending a unique and exclusive "unshakable foundation" with which all should agree (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.19; cf. 22-3; 43). The problem, then, emerges from the fact that higher-order discourse that is "supposed to solve" the foundation issue (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.24) is actually far from doing that. Metatheoretical debates *still* "continue their quest for an unshakable philosophical foundation, capable of settling once and for all the most fundamental questions in the field – its scope, goals, criteria, standards, and methods" (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.22). In other words, says Kratochwil (2007, p.2), "this project of securing knowledge through [...] finding absolute foundations failed." It has actually led to the "fragmentation of the discipline along meta-theoretical lines" (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.17), an intrinsic problem that happens when we conflate discursive orders. As Schmidt (1997, p.111) notes, it occurs due to "the inherent foundationalist tendency and problematic nature of metatheoretical arguments."

This leads to the next problem. Besides being inherently unable to operate at lower levels of discourse and practice, and on top of its failure to bring a single foundation to IR, metatheory also distorts debates of a

theoretical nature into *metatheoretical* prejudice: “What most consistently divides these schools of thought are not their substantive claims about the specific phenomena but their metatheoretical assumptions concerning how such claims could be developed and supported” (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2010). From “judging work on its substantive contribution,” IR has been increasingly making “a priori judgments based on foundational commitments on what constitutes legitimate work in IR” and based on “the degree to which the chosen approach conforms to a particular conception of science” (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.18). In fact, I would go even further and say that this also applies to non-mainstream views that deny any role for science in the study in world politics based exactly on a ‘positivist’ label attached to the opposite camp. Holsti (2000, p.31) summarises the fragmented configuration of the field due to, among other things, the ‘misunderstanding’ that emerges when positions are pre-judged based on their metatheoretical commitments:

Misunderstanding [...] is indicated when people speak past each other. When is this the case? Usually, it is when people believe they are right and all others are wrong. It is seen in the habit or stance of arguing that my methodology or, worse still, my metatheoretical preference is valid, whereas yours is not...

It is important to note, here, that this fragmentation is explicitly portrayed in terms of metatheoretical ‘imperialism.’ As Gunnell himself implies, there is an inherent tendency for this kind of higher-order discourse to ‘infiltrate’ the lower orders. IR, politics and social science in general should work for a clearer separation between each discursive order and, as second-order practices, these fields should go back to their corresponding discursive order. It is understandable, then, that even someone partly sympathetic to metatheory, like Fred Halliday (1995, p.745), will say that metatheoretical and methodological issues “should be discussed where they belong, in philosophy departments.” Taken in the stronger sense, what this ‘strong’ position asks for is a *radical* ‘deflation,’ if not total elimination, of metatheory in IR.

Negative externalities of metatheory

IR scholars acknowledge other kinds of fragmentation incidentally brought by metatheory into the discipline. In weaker or ‘milder’ negative views of metatheoretical scholarship, they consider the negative externality of increased complexity in the field. Because of questionable features in the formation of metatheoretical discourse in IR, the discipline has become more ‘complicated’ to understand (Holsti in an interview with JONES, 2002, p.622-3) and, in some cases, has been turned into a battlefield for what Lake (2011, p.465-6) calls “academic sects,” leading to “less understanding rather than more.” Using another metaphor, Ciprut (2000, p. xii) affirms that “the discipline of ‘international’ relations has developed into an ocean in which distal archipelagos, themselves subdivided into islets of theory, provide abode to aborigines who speak with each other in their local tongue, using mutually reassuring code.” We may go even further and think about divisions along *styles* of research, with one ‘islet’ for theorists, another for those doing empirical research and a third

for metatheory. Instead of J. David Singer's (1972) "two-culture problem," we have a division of at least three 'cultures' in IR, with (meta)theorists "close to achieving a situation in which they have marginalised everyone else" (BROWN, 2006, p.678), whereas non-theorists may be driven by "a generalised anti-intellectualism" (BROWN, 2006, p.685). Lack of dialogue across different research programmes and, more importantly, across different styles of research, has, therefore, led the field to further complication in its internal arrangement. Considering its impact on the crystallisation of such 'islets,' metatheoretical debates in IR have understandably been blamed at least in part for the situation.

In addition to these types of fragmentation, another issue leading to increased complexity in the discipline has to do with the 'bridging' role of metatheory and the poor quality of metatheoretical research in IR. Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2001, p.32) observe that several debates "have been imported into IR from other disciplines [...], lacking very often the expertise that gave rise to them in the first place." The pitfalls of bridging between other disciplines and IR include the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of theoretical material. This problem is particularly likely to happen when the material being 'imported' possesses prestigious pedigree. Thus, Hollis and Smith (1991, p.393-4) warn us to "beware of gurus":

It is tempting to import positions from elsewhere in the social sciences, complete with the sacred names of theorists associated with them. These gurus may be too simply credited with a coherent analysis which solves the problem or at least indicates where a solution will be found [...]. The danger is not that the importers believe in magic themselves but that they break into previously accepted theory by means of compressed survey articles which identify gaps tailor-made for the new guru. The imported positions are then presented in a summary form which suggests that they have only to be stated to be believed.

Like a magnet, once introduced this kind of procedure tends to attract a considerable amount of metatheoretical argument about what the correct interpretation for the 'imported' material should be, what we are and are not allowed to do with it in IR, and what are the correct criteria to adjudicate these questions. Metatheory, then, brings further complexity to the configuration of the discipline as both a 'fragmenting' and 'bridging' mechanism.

There are, besides, three minor negative externalities of metatheoretical scholarship in IR. The first one is connected to the 'bridging' role of metatheory. Because many contributions at this discursive layer of the discipline are a move from other disciplines into IR, there is a 'time lag' issue (HOLLIS; SMITH, 1991, p.393). Schmidt (1997, p.107) identifies "a recurrent pattern" in the process: metatheoretical debates in social science "come belatedly to international relations." It may be a matter of "intellectual fashions" as Nicholson (2000, p.196) puts it, or simply a lack of awareness of the fact that some of these issues "have been fought over and sometimes resolved elsewhere" (BUZAN; LITTLE, 2001, p.32). "It seems," says Nicholson, "that we are all eager readers of the *New York Review of Books*, but only get our copies ten years late." This kind of delay, probably unavoidable, further complicates the status of metatheoretical IR.

A second problem relates to intelligibility. Scholars like Stephen Van Evera (1997, p.2; see 44 note 55) find the vocabulary “abstruse and unuseful” and may decide to ignore it altogether, even when they write about theory-building. Although non-mainstream metatheoretical research has been challenged on this account (HALLIDAY, 1995, p.739), the same can also be said for approaches considered to be more ‘orthodox’ (Waltz in an interview with HALLIDAY; ROSENBERG, 1998, p.386). Wallace (1996, p.305) puts it quite bluntly when he says that “obscure terminology” may “hide our knowledge” and, even worse, lead us to “lose ourselves in scholastic word games.” Lack of intelligibility is, in this view, another way in which metatheory has a negative impact on IR, by increasing the complexity of the field (HOLSTI, 2000, p.29).

A third and minor externality has to do with the perception that this kind of research is one of the most unexciting issues that can possibly arise in social science. “We need more spirited and wider intellectual and policy debates, not less animated or narrower ones” (NAU, 2011, p.491). In the debates on how to theorise IR in the 1960s, Hans Morgenthau (1966, p.74) expressed concern and boredom with an emerging situation of “new scholasticism.” Others were even clearer about the issue: “Scholarship about scholarship, like theory about theory, and teaching about teaching, is rarely very stimulating,” and, unfortunately, such things “are not in short supply in the field of international relations” (NEAL; HAMLETT, 1969, p.281). This remains the case, as even (meta)theorists like Walker feel there is too much metatheory around, made “usually in a very crude way, and far too much boring research and writing is produced as a consequence” (interview with PORTER, 2001, p.143). The overall result is what Lapid (1989, p.236) calls “a prescription for a rigorous philosophy-avoidance strategy.” Says Daly (2008, p.57):

Engagement with ontological and epistemological issues in political study has been arguably less than full-blooded. Too often it seems that they are treated as unpleasant hurdles to be quickly vaulted in order to get on with the ‘business’ of political analysis.

This feature further complicates the configuration of research in IR simply by providing disincentives to careful and detailed engagement with metatheory.

The pedagogy and politics of metatheory

Two negative externalities of metatheoretical IR deserve to be singled out as they go beyond the confines of this kind of debate and also lead to effects related to the engagement of the IR community with society in general. Another reason to highlight these pitfalls of metatheory is their close links with perceived intrinsic problems of metatheoretical discourse and some of the externalities I have already mentioned. The first point here relates to metatheory in the classroom, and the second point, to political aspects of metatheoretical research and debates.

First, there are practical and critical problems as they relate to the teaching, or pedagogy, of metatheory. Commenting on the practical side, Guzzini (2001, p.110-1) treats metatheoretical discourse as paramount to the

IR curriculum, dealing with it in a predominantly favourable way. However, if badly taught, it could also lead to negative consequences, like “moving the discussion too early to a highly theoretical level” or leaving “a certain taste of *ad-hoc*-ness to it,” depending on how the material is organised. Courses focusing on “meta-theoretical differences” across IR approaches tend to be taught in a “top-down manner,” being conducive to students’ passivity. The only alternative, emphasising active learning, is necessarily “time-intensive” as it requires closer interaction and feedback. Halliday (1995, p.745) proposes a paradoxical alternative. We have seen already that he is of the opinion that metatheory is better left to philosophy departments. However, he also believes it to be “important for social sciences, IR included” and that students should be “more literate in” philosophy of social science. How to reconcile these two opposing drives? The first one distances metatheory from the IR lecture theatre, and the other brings IR students to the philosophy department. Regardless of the department, IR students often find themselves, as Arie Kacowicz (1993, p.76-9) puts it, “puzzled and in some cases confused by the analytical abstractions,” perhaps “lost” in the “logical and theoretical abstractions of the lectures,” finding the material “too abstract and detached from reality,” while what they actually expect is “a more comprehensive and concrete discussion of international problems.” Wallace (1996, p.305) concurs: “Our student audience – at least, our undergraduates – need something more straightforward; and a wider audience will remain beyond reach unless addressed in terms which they can understand without too much difficulty.”³

3. Guzzini and Kacowicz base their diagnoses on experiential and experimental evidence, whereas Wallace and Halliday comment on the issue in passing and by way of generalisation.

Besides these practical issues, (which are by no means minor), there are other problems related to the pedagogy of metatheory in political science and IR. The pitfall is not merely didactic, as some point out, but also emancipatory. Drawing on critical theories of education, McGowan and Nel (2002, p.255), editors of a theory textbook aimed at instruction in IR from an African perspective (NEL; MCGOWAN, 1999), defend a “student-centered” approach. Ideally, “it starts with what the student knows and tries to develop both a deeper understanding of that prior knowledge, and a broader application of this deeper understanding.” While some complain about the dominance of a ‘logocentric’ or ‘Western’ agenda in the debates taught in textbooks (ŠABIĆ, 2002, p.250), others explicitly refer to negative educational externalities in the teaching of metatheory when they further distance IR from emancipatory, ‘student-centred,’ education (DALY, 2008). Bates and Jenkins (2007, p.55-7), for instance, denounce a number of standard political analysis textbooks that present issues of ontology and epistemology in a tone that presses for ‘closure’ on these topics. Such presentation, they find, “pedagogically problematic” (BATES; JENKINS, 2007b, p.208) because metatheory is, in the first place, supposed to provide students with tools of critical engagement in the discipline. However, as Guzzini (2001, p.110) points out, if taught in a top-down manner, “instead of opening up for thinking, it closes down the path to debate.” Due to both practical and critical elements, in sum, one could refer to negative externalities of metatheory in IR with reference to the relationship between the discipline and the broader public – in this specific case, students.

Another point related to the nexus between disciplinary IR and those outside this community of scholars deals with the politics of metatheory. There is, first of all, a belief that the ‘philosophisation’ and resulting ‘complication’ of social and political science serves as a strategy “which is devoted not only to the internal justification of certain claims and approaches but to justifying itself to an external audience that is often its object of inquiry” (GUNNELL, 1998, p.26). This ‘face-saving’ strategy, if I may put it this way, is deemed responsible for turning IR into a “bureaucratic social science” whereby the political “commitment to ideals of freedom and reason” is lost in scholarship (ROSENBERG, 1994, p.94, cf. 101). The ‘internal justification’ is portrayed in James Kurth’s (1998, p.33) sermonising words against abstract research in IR. “In truth,” he says, “Most academics are only concerned about the good opinion of about a dozen other academic specialists in their particular sub-sub-field.” (Meta) Theorising runs the risk of becoming an end in itself (FRANKEL, 1981, p.538). The justification sought for an ‘external audience,’ in turn, is not very often explicit, apart from Chernoff’s (2007) study of policy-related implications of IR metatheory, where he actually suggests that policy-makers would be better off by drawing on the philosophy of science literature to choose between different courses of action based on distinct theories. This means, perhaps, an effort to immunise IR against external critique by requiring it to conform to accepted metatheoretical standards (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.43). For “without establishing their enterprise as ‘scientific,’ how can IR scholars expect policymakers to take the intellectual fruits of the field seriously?” (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.16).

There is more to it, though. The increasing metatheorisation of IR has been treated as a departure from our responsibility to address important and concrete political issues. In its early years, IR was explicitly committed to nothing less than the eradication of warfare, the promotion of civic and democratic virtues, and the general improvement of the human condition (KNUTSEN, 1997, p.211-223; SCHMIDT, 1998, p.43-76). In fact, civic virtuosity was a core principle of Manning’s (1954, p.84) report to UNESCO on the university teaching of IR when the discipline was still incipient as a separate field: “The better the world is understood by the better people in it, the better for the world will it be.” One can see how this could provide grounds for protest against metatheory, or at least too much of it. Are metatheorists trying to avoid the pressing issues of real-world politics and concealing the fact behind irrelevance (HERZ, 1971)? Perhaps this explains, as Monteiro and Ruby (2009, p.43 note 37) suggest, the amount of attention devoted to foundational issues:

The real-world stakes of academic IR debates can be very high, up to and including questions of life and death, or war and peace. So IR scholars may succumb to the temptation to settle political debates on big issues of international relations by invoking the status of an unquestionable discourse – that of a science with unshakable foundations.

Whether or not this is the right diagnosis is open to discussion. In any case, the notion of ‘vocation’ still underlies much of the critical attitude toward metatheory in IR. We are urged to be accountable because we “risk straying into parasitic disutility.” According to some, we have “an implicit

contract with society,” which is broken if IR “drifts into complete irrelevance, as much of it has” (VAN EVERA, 1997, p.5; 118). “We owe a duty of constructive and open criticism: to speak truth to power, and not [...] to speak truth in secret only to each other” (WALLACE, 1996, p.304-5). The problem is that IR “has become too detached from the world of practice, too fond of theory (and meta-theory) [...], too self-indulgent, and in some cases too self-righteous.” Besides the ‘gap’ between scholars and practitioners (WALT, 2005), increased by what is perceived as excessive metatheorisation in the discipline, there is also the risk of losing sight of the proverbial ‘forest’ for the ‘trees.’

Finally, and to make things worse, metatheoretical activity may also result in attempts to ignore the politics of the disciplinary dynamics of IR scholarship (GEORGE, 1989). The point is most often made by poststructuralists and other critical theorists, who will stress the violence of ‘closure’ and the reflexive political power of theoretical discourse with deep impacts on society (GEORGE, 1994). Knowledge that postulates the absence of much change in social reality, for example, runs the risk of helping to reify the status quo with all its injustices (ASHLEY, 1984). Knowledge predicated on concepts and assumptions of male domination helps shape and perpetuate inequality not only in academic IR (PETERSON, 1992) but also in lives of women (and men) who have no deliberate involvement it (ENLOE, 2000). Despite all the effort “to engage in a curious pretence of apoliticality” in metatheoretical IR, the political origin and destination of metatheory should not be ignored. Theoretical thought is certainly political in its basic assumptions and in its effects on society. Therefore, clothing a cross-theoretical clash in a robe of scientific and metatheoretical neutrality may not only perpetuate the harm often caused by our production of knowledge, but also lead us into ignorance of the “constraining and enabling” roles of political worldviews in the discipline (KURKI, 2009, p.442; 444). In short: “There is no way to strip the relation between IR and international relations from its political dimensions. There is no cookie cutter way to deal conclusively with this complex issue in an apolitical way – a questionable goal in itself” (MONTEIRO; RUBY, 2009, p.43).

Synthesis and analysis

I have presented the ‘strong’ and ‘mild’ arguments against metatheory in IR separately. However, there are different ways of integrating them. The picture that emerges from this is one of a coherent series of negative claims on metatheoretical IR. However, some of them, especially of the ‘mild’ quality, are disjointed, or at least paradoxical if taken together. Before I proceed to an analysis of the positive arguments and add to those my own analytic defence of metatheory, I go quickly through these possibilities of cohesion and tension that are internal to the set of negative views.

Synthesis and tension between the negative views of metatheory in IR

The ‘strong’ and analytic complaint against metatheoretical IR, presented in terms of an intrinsic distinction between the ‘orders of discourse’

in social practice, discourages us to try and look for higher-order criteria (e.g., the philosophy of science) to assess lower-order practice (e.g., IR theorising). It brings to the field several negative consequences, such as a neglect of theory evaluation in its own terms or an ‘inflation’ of the assumed role of theory in political practice. Particularly relevant is the connection between the increased complexities of a discipline fragmented in metatheoretical lines and one of the ‘mild’ externalities – that of complexity. Metatheory is said to be at least partly responsible for the current lack of cross-theoretical understanding and communication. By insisting on judging theories according to their metatheoretical leanings, IR scholars reproduce and amplify divides to such an extent that it becomes very hard to bring IR theory back to synthesis and ‘eclecticism.’ Moreover, metatheory often ‘imports’ knowledge from philosophy and other disciplines, usually with much delay, misinterpretation and de-contextualisation. It is not hard to see why students in general would be uninterested in these issues, if even IR scholars themselves perpetuate the distinction between metatheorists and non-metatheorists in the way they operate. Besides, over-simplification runs the risk of shrinking the space and possibilities for metatheoretical debate, a move that also affects teaching.

However, despite the fact that these negative arguments may work together in this way and strengthen the case against metatheory in IR, if we look at them critically, we can also detect an internal tension across the claims. Some of them are internally problematic, while others cannot be taken in conjunction. The discursive-order thesis, for example, which is crucial for establishing a strong opposition to metatheory in social science, depends on a falsely characterised situation. It may be the case that theories should not be judged *solely* on the basis of metatheoretical criteria, but we would go too far in denying metatheory any relevant normative role based on the incorrect premise that one discursive order does not have an impact on or claims to authority over the other. A great many of the complaints against the irrelevance of IR is based exactly on the contrary proposition, that the higher-order discourse of IR theory should have *more* impact on the political arena. By the same token, as suggested in the case of Constructivism, there is indeed an impact of metatheory in the generation of new theoretical knowledge, although I am not claiming that the relation is of a deterministic nature (see FREIRE, 2006 for a detailed study in the case of Neorealism). Finally, it is simply the case that, historically, IR theories and international political theory have had a practical impact on social reality, a fact that has been pointed out by all sorts of ‘interpretivist’ theorists (WENDT, 1992; WIGHT, 1946). This, actually, is the main point of having the discipline in the first place:

The purpose of doing International Relations, like all social science, is to influence people, sometime, somewhere in a context which will make a difference to their actions. Thus, at some stage, possibly distant, a course of action will be taken, or abandoned, as a result of our efforts. The world will then look slightly or even significantly different because of our activities (NICHOLSON, 2000, p.183).

From this point of view, besides the fact that it does exist, an impact across discursive orders is even seen as desirable, contrary claims notwithstanding.

In addition to these internal problems in the ‘strong’ claim against metatheory, there are also points of tension between some of the ‘externality’ claims. Take, for example, the connection between politics and metatheory, where two mutually exclusive theses have been advanced. One is that metatheory isolates IR from politics, thus leading to a decrease in the field’s relevance. The other is that metatheory actually brings politics to IR in particularly damaging ways by serving, for example, as a kind of ‘Trojan horse’ for the clash of political ideologies even at the scholarship level. One claim ignores disciplinary politics, and the other is very interested in it. If we are to take issue with metatheory, a choice must be made between one side and the other. A similar tension occurs between claims about the disciplinary fragmentation and complexity allegedly brought about by metatheory and the diagnoses that are provided against it. For example, if insulation of different ‘cultures’ or research communities is really negative in the way it is portrayed, why should we do as Halliday suggests and drag metatheory out of the IR departments? Or why should there be an increasing animosity towards metatheoretical research in IR because some of these highly contingent claims are amplified into absolute negative arguments? A final tension that can be detected has to do with the issue of intelligibility and communication. It seems that one ‘pole’ of the argument denounces the lack of dialogue in the discipline, whereas the other ‘pole’ requires metatheoretical scholarship to be deflated or isolated from the rest of IR. How can the latter make metatheory more attractive, or intelligible to non-metatheorists if it is ostracised because of these negative externalities?

Possible replies from the positive views of metatheory in IR

Besides being in tension with each other and despite some of their internal problems, some of these critiques of metatheory in IR still face the challenges that may be inferred from the defences of metatheoretical scholarship discussed above. The ‘strong’ critique, for example, is countered not only by the inevitable conflation of ‘discursive orders,’ but also by the fact that we want to test and improve our theoretical knowledge. When it comes to theory appraisal and adjustment, the portrait of a clear-cut distinction between theoretical and metatheoretical discourses (with no influence from the higher-order to the lower) does not hold water. Theory may exist without metatheory, but by its own structure, an argument in theory appraisal and theory adjustment entails ‘systematic discourse about theory,’ that is, metatheoretical discourse (FREIRE, 2010). We also need metatheory if we want to *address* the issue of disciplinary fragmentation, as indicated by the reintroduction of ‘analytical eclecticism’ to IR. The point is that whether metatheory has led to more or to less theoretical fragmentation in the discipline depends on specific cases. In a good number of instances it has contributed to fragmentation, but we can also find examples of theoretical syntheses and indicate the constructive role played by metatheory. Notice that this is not an analytic claim. Analytically, what is clear is the *positive* use of metatheory in theoretical integration, as a bridge-builder and synthesiser from one context to the other.

Metatheory can also help address the minor externalities related to the quality and intelligibility of IR scholarship. While I find it fair to say that the most recent metatheoretical debates have actually contributed to clarifying or at least popularising some of the intricate philosophical issues that were only implicit in the discipline's past, I grant that it may also have generated further confusion, especially related to the 'importation' and misrepresentation of knowledge from other disciplines. However, the way of detecting and correcting these problems is precisely the way of metatheory, of 'systematic discourse about theory.'

As for language, a certain use of jargon is unavoidable and even welcomed as part of the process of *clarification* in a specialised field such as IR (LIEBER, 1973, p.147). In terms of the poor quality of scholarship, this is a highly contingent critique, depending on the sample, and some of it is also unfair. Of course there will be a 'time lag' when external theories are brought into IR. But, then, again: how do we detect the problems with the 'time lag'? Isn't it by looking at the re-configuration of the discipline in light of the introduction and development of new theoretical material? Isn't it by the use of 'systematic discourse about theory,' either in disciplinary historiography or in the sociology of IR knowledge?

Finally, in the politics of metatheory, this kind of scholarship has been contested as something that distances IR scholarship from political practice, or perhaps as something that 'masks' the actual political character of the disciplinary debates. It is quite obvious that, due to its very nature, metatheory will speak more to theorists than to practitioners on the ground. Turning this triviality into a claim against metatheory is pointless, because it is supposed to deal with theory *by design*. Besides, how can we make scholarly claims about the politics of scholarship and metatheory-making if we do not argue systematically 'about theory?' All these considerations point back to what we have seen before about metatheory being the appropriate domain for discussing itself, which takes me to my own *a priori* argument.

An a priori argument on why metatheory cannot be completely eliminated from IR

I started with a definition of 'metatheory' as 'theory of theory' and then discussed whether it would be desirable to employ the term 'theory' in a very strict sense, implying full axiomatisation and strict formalisation of a hypothetical-deductive system. Following this discussion, I opted for a similar, but less technical, definition of 'metatheory' that corresponds to 'systematic discourse about theory.' Two implications were derived. Metatheory is a kind of theory, or a subset thereof. In addition to, and following from this, metatheory can also be an object of metatheoretical inquiry. I put these two implications on hold, and now I return to them. In the analysis of the negative and positive roles played by metatheory in the academic discipline of IR, it becomes clear that the arguments themselves fall into the category of 'systematic discourse' about a specific kind of 'theory,' namely, metatheory. In other words, the claims analysed here (apart, perhaps, from 'metatheory is boring') are of a metatheoreti-

cal nature. Having reviewed the main topics in this literature in detail, I pointed out that, inductively, one-by-one, the negative claims possess such metatheoretical character. I now strengthen the case for metatheory with an *a priori* argument.

Metatheory cannot, and will not, be excluded from the discipline of IR with the use of logical argumentation: Metatheoretical discourse is a condition of possibility for well-articulated, systematic and scholarly relevant critique of metatheory. For a relevant critique of metatheory (as opposed to ‘metatheory is boring’) draws on a certain systematic perspective on metatheoretical discourse. Therefore, regardless of specifics, the systematic perspective employed in critique of metatheory is, by definition, of a metatheoretical quality. It follows that, not only the ‘discursive-order’ argument, but any other ‘strong’ attempt to fully eliminate metatheory from an academic discipline is doomed to failure, because it incurs performative contradiction. The very process of arguing systematically against metatheory relies on it to be able to function, just like a small child needs her father to pick her up if she wants to slap him in the face. *Metatheorising is a transcendental condition for a critique of metatheory.*

Another (and less abstract) way of putting it is by invoking a specific key role of metatheory: that of discussing what IR as a discipline should be theoretically addressing. Now, a claim against metatheory goes like: “Instead of studying theories theoretically, IR should be studying...” But, then, the proposition does perfectly reflect the metatheoretical role of object-delineation for an academic discipline. Therefore, also for this concrete reason, it is a claim of a metatheoretical nature and thus reveals a performative contradiction if taken in the ‘strong’ sense. In fact, every academic discipline predicated on the use of theories has an actual or potential metatheoretical discursive layer in it. As a thought-experiment, suppose that some sort of publishing ‘dictatorship’ had efficiently managed to silence metatheory in IR (which, albeit impossible through logical means, is a political possibility). At any given attempt to re-introduce it, the same claim format would be employed: “Instead of studying theories theoretically, IR should be studying...” Metatheory would be potentially there on both sides: the attempted re-introduction to the field and the counter-argument.

Back to the point: metatheory cannot be fully eliminated from IR by logical means, nor from any other discipline containing theoretical argument in its usual functioning. In some of these disciplines, it has actually been crystallised into a sub-field (e.g., Economic Methodology and History of Economic Thought in Economics; Philosophy of Social Science in Sociology; Philosophy of Mathematics in Mathematics; Philosophy of Physics in Physics; Philosophy of Biology in Biology; Prolegomena in Theology; and so on). It is indeed the case that much of this ‘bridging’ between philosophy and specific theory can be executed externally from a field (such as, for example, some studies in the philosophy of science focusing on Physics). However, we have to ask ourselves whether, for instance, historians of science would have any interest in IR. I think we can all agree that the chance is very small and, therefore, if someone wants to metatheoretically discuss the formation of our discipline, this will have to be done from inside.

In response to Halliday's argument for pushing metatheory into philosophy departments, it is fair to say, even from the practical point of view, that, although much metatheory is an application of philosophy, it still has to be done from within a specialised discipline. One final note: I am not in any way defending the status quo of metatheoretical IR. Changes may occur, for better or for worse. For example, I think that 'the discipline' (which in several cases means a group of Anglo-American scholars), as an instance of what is known as 'spontaneous order,' (FERGUSON, 1782, p.205) will eventually have to decide whether or not we should proceed to an institutionalisation of metatheoretical IR. Moreover, I have already expressed some agreement with the fact that much metatheory in IR is actually not very good and needs to be improved. The answer, though, is not to avoid metatheory, but rather to do it properly. And this includes being critical of bad metatheory.

Final remarks

In this paper, I provided a definition of 'metatheory,' analysed some of its implications and then proceeded to a detailed review of the perceptions of IR scholars on the potential and pitfalls of metatheoretical scholarship in the discipline. Counted in favour of metatheory are positive roles related to the clarification and formal reconstruction of theoretical material, the evaluation and improvement of theories, and the critical introduction of new research programmes. Other constructive steps that can be taken in metatheoretical research involve relating theories to other theories or perhaps to an 'external' context. Metatheory helps adjust theoretical material from one domain to another and perhaps builds 'bridges' across distinct approaches in IR and other fields. Moreover, it provides a 'self-image' and a critical view of alternative readings of the discipline with clear reference to its theories. It also operates as a space for discussion of which objects IR scholarship should be addressing. In addition to this, metatheory is employed as a critical tool denoting the limitations of IR scholarship and perhaps opening up space for non-mainstream approaches that challenge some of the shortcomings of the field. A final positive role played by metatheory in some cases is its use as a tool of 'interpretivist' theories, whether 'constitutive' or 'critical.' These theories assume that ideas, including theories, are part of the social world and that, therefore, we do well in analysing them theoretically as a way of analysing the social world itself.

On the negative side, there is a 'strong' argument against metatheory in IR. This 'radical' critique of metatheory points out that metatheoretical discourse is intrinsically unable to address social practice at the same level of either practical or theoretical discourses. I have shown that, taken as an attempt to eradicate metatheory from IR (and perhaps social science as a whole), this claim does not hold water for logical, *a priori*, reasons. However, in the 'mild' sense, we may cede some ground to it. Clearly, metatheory was never designed to play the role of theory, and therefore not everyone should be focusing solely on metatheory in IR. The 'mild' claims against metatheory often find it valuable within lim-

its. However, ultimately, metatheory has brought a number of negative externalities to the discipline, and therefore (so go the claims) its status should be reconsidered. One pitfall of metatheoretical IR has to do with the way it complicates any reading of the field, due to an escalation in the process of fragmentation. Moreover, there are complaints about the bad quality of metatheoretical research, especially when it involves interdisciplinary efforts. Other minor externalities have to do with a ‘time-lag’ when theoretical and metatheoretical debates are ‘imported’ from other fields, the complicated and abstract language employed in the discussions and the lack of attractiveness of metatheory. Two more important points refer to practical and critical problems in the pedagogy, or teaching of metatheory, and the politics of metatheory, or rather the fact that this kind of debate, on the one hand, distances the field from its ‘vocation,’ and, on the other, helps to ‘mask’ the role of politics in scholarship.

In light of my discussion, I suggested that some of the negative claims are self-defeating, and some of them are disjointed from each other. I also provided an analytic proposition to counter any ‘strong’ claims for the elimination of metatheory from IR, based on the fact that such attempt would incur performative contradiction. This was suggested not only in abstract terms, but also in a concrete way by briefly looking at the inherently metatheoretical character of each of the main negative arguments. In conclusion, I say that metatheory is here to stay, as it is logically impossible to eliminate it from the field. We might as well improve its quality and take it more seriously. However, I also want to make Holsti’s (interviewed by JONES, 2002, p.623) words my own:

I am somewhat concerned that too many people may be spending time discussing great issues of epistemology and metaphysics. I am interested in international relations more than philosophy. We are here because we are interested in a field of human activity. We must be sensitive to the ways we approach its study and raise questions about the whys and hows of knowledge. But beyond a certain point – and I cannot define exactly where it is located – concern with epistemology may lead us to lose sight of the subject matter.

Metatheory may play several negative roles, but none of them provides a compelling case for its elimination from IR. It should not be everyone’s focus of attention, but it should not be dismissed as trivial either. A critical space for self-reflection in a discipline “is common to all social sciences” (HOLLIS; SMITH, 1990, p.42). The problem with metatheory in IR is not that it exists as such. The problem is that, in general terms, our engagement with it so far has a poor record.

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