

# Mind the gap: IR and the challenge of international politics†

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The discipline of International Relations (IR) for a long time of its history has developed in the form of Great Debates that involved competing paradigms and schools. More recently, it has been described as a cacophony of voices unable to communicate among themselves, but also incapable to provide keys to understand an ever more complex reality. This collection aims at evaluating the heuristic value of a selection of traditional paradigms (realism and liberalism), schools (constructivism), and subdisciplines (security studies and international political economy) so as to assess the challenges before IR theory today and the ability of the discipline to provide tools to make the changed world still intelligible.

**Keywords:** Realism; liberalism; constructivism; security studies; international political economy

## Introduction

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has been put under severe strain owing to its failure to foresee the end of the Cold War, explain it, and describe the world afterward. Since the shock of the early 1990s, IR has been able to regain ground, overcome some years of inner-looking epistemological debate (mainly occurring in the 1990s with the so-called rationalist–reflectivist debate and the postmodern and constructivist turns), and relaunch some of its traditional paradigms (realism and liberalism in particular), as well as develop branches of literature on specific domains (security and international political economy being probably the most significant ones) so as to integrate ontological and epistemological innovations.

However, the debate on the ‘end of IR’ is not over and has seen the involvement of eminent scholars in the discipline (Dunne *et al.*, 2013). IR is frequently presented as a cacophony, an intellectual framework in which there are no more juxtaposed paradigms (as in the well-known traditional Great Debates) and where middle-range theories appear more promising than Grand Theory. Moreover, traditional schools of thought have been exposed to challenges of both an ontological and

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epistemological nature not only by other theories, but also by the very subjects of their observation.

The pieces contained here precisely emphasize on these challenges. The contributors, in a sort of roundtable, assess the heuristic strengths and weaknesses of theoretical traditions and main branches of literature (if not subdisciplines). The main objective, therefore, is to assess the main challenges posed to IR theory by theoretical or socio-political developments, and *not* to provide an exhaustive overview of IR schools of thought. In addition, owing to space constraints, the debate is focused on a limited range of traditions (realism, liberalism), approaches (constructivism), and subdisciplines (security studies and international political economy).

### **Realism is dead, long live realism?**

Author: Francesco N. Moro

Realism, which for a long time was the mainstream approach in IR, and its progeny have come under fire since the end of the Cold War (Lebow, 1994). Attacks came initially as critiques of realism's inability to predict that watershed, and then for its relative lack of tools to understand the 'new world order'. Realism also seemed to be unable to provide appropriate tools to grasp a world characterized by the primacy of the economy over (power) politics as the key factor in explaining both foreign policies and international outcomes, the emergence of non-state actors, an unprecedented extent of international cooperation, and interventions of the international 'community'. State sovereignty, power, and national interests (security to begin with) as key drivers of action often seemed relics of the past.

Nonetheless, the past 20 years have also been a period of great renewal in realism. At least two major 'revisions', neorealism and neoclassical realism, occurred, giving new life to realist thinking. The emergence of China as a great power also seems to create new incentives for realism's recovery at the center stage of IR. However, a few important challenges – epistemological as well as ontological – persist: realist scholars should address them if they want their paradigm to regain and maintain its mainstream status in IR.

#### *A near death?*

Realism could have perhaps withstood its own failure in predicting the end of the Cold War and the rhetoric of the 'world's policeman' used by George Bush in the 1991 Gulf War, but the age of humanitarian intervention, from Somalia to Kosovo, seemed to prove too much of a burden. Realism was challenged on its preferred field and military issues, and realist scholars were at odds with the activist American approach to domestic conflicts, often dissenting with the positioning of the Clinton Administration in the Balkans. Realism seemed often unable to explain major foreign and defense policy decisions of the period, such as the expansion of NATO,

the Iraq War of 2003, and the transformation of armed forces and military doctrines in Western countries (Monten, 2005; Coticchia and Moro, 2014).

The debate on globalization has also contributed to a shift in attention from how states interact (the fighting ground of realism) to how state boundaries were actually beginning to blur because of the eroding power of the economic forces that were making the world 'flat'. Academics and influential columnists joined forces in declaring the obsolescence of major wars (Mueller, 1989; Friedman, 2005). Paradigms that recognized pluralism in IR were better able to grasp the impact of economic interdependence among major powers and the significant role of vast transnational interests of big private companies in securing a 'capitalist peace' (Schneider and Gleditsch, 2010).

More broadly, non-state actors traditionally are not subject of much scrutiny by realism. The emergence of al-Qaeda and relevance of insurgent groups in intra-state conflicts created incentives for security studies to move from the analysis of conventional and nuclear issues (that fitted realism very well) to the onset and dynamics of violence in civil wars. If realist scholars made important contributions (Posen, 1993), the literature in the rest of the field burgeoned and assumed its own features, very different from those of the traditional IR debate. In addition, debates on 'identity' left realism off-balance. Books that sparked debates, such as *The Clash of Civilizations* focused on a world where states were less important and religious identity was a prime driver of action and the best explanation of cooperation and conflict in global politics.

### *Realism lives. Is China its savior?*

Nonetheless, realism showed a persistent vitality. Realist scholars were involved in public debate and were critical of several aspects of US policies, particularly in advocating abstention from the intervention in Iraq (Art *et al.*, 2002). Often, realism was able to play a role in challenging conventional wisdom, unveiling the risks and unintended consequences of action, and deflating the rhetorical exaggerations of policy makers and pundits. It also continued to shape academic debate and was responsible with refined views on key topics in IR, such as alliances and the origins of major wars (Copeland, 2000; Cesa, 2010).

In the new century, at least two attempts to renew realism deserve specific attention. The first is John Mearsheimer's (2001) forceful revision of the neorealist paradigm, culminating with the publication of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. According to Mearsheimer, great powers not only aim to maximize their own security by adopting mostly defensive postures but also attempt to concentrate as much power as possible in order to try to prevent the emergence of global and regional challengers. Only the reach of hegemony would then guarantee great powers. Insurmountable collective action problems and mistrust hinder cooperation (and alliances as well) and shape the world of 'offensive neorealism', with war always in the background as a tool to solve controversies on who the hegemon is and how it shapes its regional arena and its global positioning.

Further, the theory of neoclassical realism emerged; first, as a result of the heterogeneous work of a group of scholars and then as a more coherent attempt to provide a revised realist approach (Lobell *et al.*, 2009). Neoclassical realist scholars investigate more thoroughly the way in which national interests are defined and foreign policy decisions take place by focusing on domestic sources and processes. States, in other words, can differ greatly in terms of their preferences and strategies according to different configurations of domestic politics. Neoclassical theories then aim to offer insights on foreign policy formation – relegated to second-order analysis in Waltzian Neorealism – showing when and how different strategies (such as internal vs. external balancing or bandwagoning vs. balancing) can emerge (Schweller, 2009).

Realism's return to centrality in the debate was also owing to ongoing developments in international politics. The first mention is China's emergence as a potential challenger to US primacy, initially at least in the Pacific region. Irrespective of the outcome, this is a classic issue for realist analysis, as it involves considerations related to regional security, the determinants of military strategy, and the dynamics of ascent and decline of powers. The second mention is the 'fatigue' accompanying US participation in military adventures, particularly in complex wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These developments led policy makers – particularly in the United States – to adopt a more prudent stance on military interventions that risk involving 'boots on the ground' with no vital interests at stake. The terrorist threat is still perceived as an enduring one, but American strategy is also refocusing on conventional (Russia's regional ambitions) or nuclear-related (Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs) issues that fit into the realist horizon more easily than prolonged military campaigns for the stabilization of countries.

### *Current challenges to realism*

Notwithstanding these vital signs, realism still faces relevant challenges. The first challenge is epistemological: can realism withstand the challenge of increasingly fragmented knowledge in the social sciences and maintain unity? Several scholars have pointed out the indeterminacy of realism: this is both a problem for this paradigm as a guide toward formulating foreign policy and for making it 'often possible for realism to avoid falsification by coming up with a variety of explanations none of which is more apt to fit the evidence than another' (Vasquez, 1999: 380). Guzzini (2004) argues that realism has to come to terms with irreconcilable changes in the practice of diplomacy that make its timeless assumptions on how the work of international politics is actually outdated. Nonetheless, it pretends that no justification for these assumptions (centering on *realpolitik*) is needed, thus, avoiding the thorough confrontations that are typical of scientific debates.

More broadly, the fragmentation of knowledge has deeply affected realism, and one might wonder how much is left of old realism; for instance, once the assumption of states being unitary actors is relaxed by scholars. In addition, some of the most

interesting attempts to offer a realist view of the process of European integration have accepted that such a phenomenon is outside the (traditional) realist perspective. For instance, Grieco's (1995) take on European monetary integration provides useful insights on power dynamics in international integration, but nonetheless recognizes that very deep integration has actually taken place. Although this pertains to most, if not all, schools or paradigms in IR, it is not a challenge to be underestimated. To a large extent, instead of one concept of *realism*, there are several *realisms*.

Other tenets of realism have been challenged as well. The rational choice paradigm that often (though only in certain aspects) characterized this tradition of thought has increasingly been coming under fire in recent decades. For instance, sociological neo-institutionalism has deeply shaped recent debates in Political Science and IR. Organizational interests and organizational myopias have been recognized to play an important role in shaping foreign and defense policy decisions, such as the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons, and notably complicate the calculations in the offensive/defensive balance, a trademark of realist strategic analysis. Moreover, cultural approaches have been gaining ground: concepts such as that of 'security culture' are not necessarily antithetic to realist views (Johnston, 1998) but require realism to further expand its reach outside its traditional borders.

Finally, modernization processes pose possibly the most enduring empirical challenges. According to Gat, the technological-industrial revolution '[...] made all the countries that experienced the revolution [...] far less belligerent in comparison with pre-industrial times, with the interdemocratic peace representing only the most striking manifestation of that development' (Gat, 2005: 73). Coming to terms with the decline or absence of major wars, linked to the emergence of more open societies populated by (much) wealthier citizens than ever before, is the main challenge that realist scholars have to face to avoid being relegated to being doomsayers in the academic and policy debate.

## Liberalism under challenge

Author: Sonia Lucarelli

A long paradigm of Kantian inspiration, the liberal tradition is broad and complex and internally probably even more variegated than the realist one. Yet, within it we can trace elements of continuity that identify it as a coherent line of thought. Among these, let us remember the concept of international politics as consisting of a *plurality* of actors; the profound trust in the institutions – above all of *democracy* and *institutional multilateralism* – and in international economic relations as tools of peaceful interaction; the trust in the Enlightenment concept of *progress*; and its intrinsically *normative*, as well as explicative and descriptive posture.

Today, we can ask ourselves if this vision of international politics, with roots reaching far back into 18th-century Enlightenment thought, is still useful to understand contemporary international politics. The end of the Cold War seemed to

have decreed the victory of the liberal paradigm over its antagonists. The ratification of the Helsinki Agreement, with its attention to human rights, had played a fundamental role in the end of bipolarism, and the forms of the expansion of democracy and the free market were the tools used to stabilize the former Soviet bloc; however, trust in a more democratic and peaceful world was soon to clash with the return of fierce wars (Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, etc.), the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’. Hence, what is the heuristic capacity of the liberal paradigm today? We will focus on this question by analyzing some of the strengths of the liberal paradigm, but most of all looking at some of its greatest challenges.

### *The strength of pluralism*

Probably ranking top among liberalism’s strengths in describing and understanding contemporary international politics is its *pluralism*. The world is less characterized by the sole significant presence of states and instead by the increasing affirmation of non-state actors. The number of intergovernmental organizations has multiplied by a factor of 25 between 1977 and 2009; the influence of multinationals has been increasing constantly since the 1970s, and the number of non-governmental organizations has also been rising; transnational civil society has become more lively and the number of ‘global protest events’ (social fora and international civil society manifestations) increased by almost seven times between 1990 and 2005 (Istituto per l’Enciclopedia Italiana, 2012: 219). Megacities produce 60% of the world’s GDP (McKinsey Global Institute, 2011) and some of them have much larger populations than the majority of countries in the world. Liberalism, precisely because of its attention to a plurality of actors, seems to be particularly well equipped to study an ever more plural world.

Moreover, the intrinsically normative dimension of liberalism makes it suitable for dealing in a non-ideological manner with a topic such as that of the legitimacy of (and responsibility in) global governance (from the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine to the debate on the legitimacy foundations of global financial institutions, to mention only two examples) (cf. Keohane, 2006).

### *The challenges*

Alongside these strengths, nevertheless, liberalism has to face some undisputable challenges.

Pluralism and security: The first challenge concerns pluralism itself: liberalism’s attention to non-state actors risks being highly biased (by its very conformation) toward those actors creating greater cooperation and lowly biased toward those non-state actors that might make international politics more conflict prone (terrorist groups, failed states, private security agencies, etc.). The risk of adopting a selectively pluralistic perspective combines a second risk that concerns the study of security: traditionally less inclined than other traditions of thought toward

analyzing security issues other than those regarding the institutional construction of long-term security, liberalism risks an inability to provide instruments to understand a reality that is ever more dense with perceived threats to security. Therefore, the challenge facing liberalism is to give a less sectorial and less presumptively cooperative reading of international reality, whereas seeking tools to create areas of peace that can take greater account of the complexity of the actors and security dynamics at play.

The crisis of democracy: For the liberals, ever since Kant's treatise *Perpetual Peace*, internal democracy has been a guarantee of peaceful conduct toward other democracies. Yet, today, democracy is experiencing significant transformations that may reduce its irenic capacity. The following two transformations will be mentioned here: the transformation of citizen participation and the illiberal drift. Decreasing citizen participation in public life and a corresponding reduction in the legitimacy that they attribute to institutions might have important repercussions to their ability to provide an obstacle to war, which they are assumed to have provided in the liberal tradition of thought. Moreover, the separation in democracy between the 'liberal' and the 'procedural' components (visible in particular in newly democratized countries) is another concern. Even consolidated democracies, particularly since 11 September 2001, have tended to reduce individual guarantees in the name of the fight of terrorism. This has severe implications as only if there exists a liberal ideology alongside democratically elected institutions can there be democratic peace.

Finally, if democratic peace theory is being challenged by the transformation of democracy at a state level, the topic of democratization is appearing ever more emphatically at a global level. The issue is subject to intense debate; nevertheless, to date the proposals put forward by liberal theorists are not very satisfying.

The transformation of multilateralism: Another pillar of liberal thought, multilateralism, is also undergoing significant transformations. The multilateralism characterized by international organizations and codified regimes is leaving extensive room for *ad hoc* agreements. Furthermore, the inefficiencies of traditional multilateral institutions pose problems of legitimacy and credibility that contribute to their difficulties. Finally, emerging powers are challenging the old multilateral settings, advocating for their transformation, and new non-governmental actors are aspiring to play an increasingly important role, sometimes undermining the traditional multilateral framework. This new global governance has had such an impact on multilateralism that some authors have envisaged a new era of multilateralism, labeling it 'multilateralism 2.0' (Van Langenhove, 2010): a system in which non-state actors have gained importance, there is an enhanced link between policy domains, and there has been a diversification of multilateral organizations. Hence, the following question can be asked: Is multilateralism 2.0 still capable of creating peace, as the more formal multilateralism did in the 20th century? If it is true that it is the presence of *generalized principles of conduct* (stable principle beyond the contingency) that produces peaceful effects (Ruggie, 1992), the new multilateralism might not have irenic consequences: neither the mere coordination of a group of 'willing states', nor an informal multilateralism made of relations between different

actors are based on generalized principles of conduct. The challenge put before the liberal paradigm, therefore, is a conceptual one that combines – as is typically the case in this tradition – with substantive problems relating to building a more peaceful international order.

**Methodology and ontology:** A further challenge is a methodological one. Liberalism has remained largely linked to a positivistic mindset. Yet, the greatest methodological challenge comes precisely from an approach, constructivism, which has created a research program centered around concepts dear to liberalism (values, norms) in a subjectivist ontological key, revising liberal concepts, such as that of security communities, democratic peace, and norms diffusion (see section on constructivism below). Now the capacity to develop a line of research that assumes a constructivist methodology and ontology to deal with topics dear to liberalism will be a litmus test of the paradigm's continuing vitality and its ability to maintain a constructive relationship with the discipline as it evolves.

**Epistemology:** The most radical epistemological challenge that liberalism has to face, nevertheless, is of a more profound nature and can be summed up in the following question: Can liberalism continue to provide key aspects in understanding an 'ever less modern' international politics, it being a tradition imbued with Enlightenment and modernity? Modernity is, above all, trust in progress, in the possibility of control (in addition, social control through institutions such as the state); it is trust in instrumental rationality, in science, and technology. The modern man is the citizen-individual, who may be controlled by an oppressive and totalitarian system (such as in the case of Bentham's *Panopticon* or George Orwell's *1984*), but who can also aspire to his own emancipation. Many elements continue to remain of this modernity; however, many others are experiencing a crisis, upto an extent that some authors speak of 'postmodernity' (Jean-François Lyotard) and others of a significant transformation of modernity (Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens). As far as liberalism is concerned, what is under pressure is the trust, intrinsically of the Enlightenment and modern mold, in the possibility of progress governed by man and the trust in the capacity of analysis and rational collective response to the challenges.

**Beyond Western IR:** Moreover, in the world of late modernity, the non-Western component is emerging in its complexity. We might wonder what a highly oriented Western (centric) discipline such as IR has to offer to this world in heuristic and normative terms. A growing literature is addressing this issue (Tickner and Wæver, 2009); however, there still remains a significant amount of work to be done to make the discipline truly more global. Liberalism is no exception to this.

### **Testing constructivism in the context of contemporary IR**

Author: Daniela Sicurelli

Established during the 1980s, constructivism is the youngest approach that can be included in the mainstream of IR theories. Its main contribution is the assumption of



the constitutive role of ideational factors in IR. From this perspective, material factors cannot be categorized *per se*, and inter-subjective understandings contribute to their interpretation and classification.

After the Cold War, anarchy, theorized by neo-realists as the structure of IR, still appeared relevant to the understanding of the former rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union; however, it emerged as a social construction rather than as a given. This innovative perspective enabled constructivist scholars to provide a new reading of the Soviet Union's dissolution as the result of identity redefinition. The implications of these claims also appeared evident in studies on the post-Cold War era. Constructivist contributions to security studies in the 1990s demonstrated that military intervention cannot be understood without paying attention to ideational factors. Moreover, dissolution of the Soviet Union strengthened the capacity of international organizations, social movements, and epistemic communities to foster norm diffusion at the global level.

Today, this approach has found wide support both in Europe and in the United States and is increasingly attracting the attention of scholars in non-Western academia as well. This approach has also influenced the development of a broadly positivist branch of Political Science, namely comparative politics. Even without referring explicitly to it, scholars of political institutions and the government have increasingly focused on the role of ideas and collective understandings (Peters, 2011).

Yet, constructivism is constantly subject to criticism from both the positivist and post-positivist sides of the political theory debate. Moreover, recent changes in the international system, including the weakening of international organizations, the emerging role of non-liberal ideas, and the shift of the global center of power beyond the Western hemisphere, have raised new problems for scholars belonging to this school of thought.

### *Constructivist insights on contemporary world politics*

Major constructivist contributions to the study of current global politics include the analysis of socialization dynamics, the concept of the security community, and the role of identity factors as triggers of change in the global distribution of power.

Studies on socialization processes have shed light on the deep impact of international institutions, defined as formal and informal sets of rules, in the shaping of states' interests and identities. For instance, they have contributed to understanding of the emergence and consolidation of neoliberal ideas within international organizations and accounted for mechanisms that make those ideas resilient over time.

Moreover, a significant contribution by constructivism can be found in the field of security studies, as remarked by Lucarelli and Monteleone in this issue. The assumption that security threats are constructed has enabled constructivists to trace the processes of securitization of foreign policy issues that have taken place since the 1990s in multiple fields, such as development cooperation, migrations, climate

change, and energy (Guzzini, 2011). Studies on security communities have provided insights for the interpretation of emerging regional security organizations in Africa, Asia, and South America. The reading of changes in the material distribution of power as a constructed concept has also laid the foundations for understanding the ideational factors shaping the global role currently played by emerging powers. From this perspective, these changes matter insofar as great powers either advocate or oppose the development of new international norms (Drezner, 2007; Zürn and Stephen, 2010).

On these bases, constructivism has had a significant impact on the current theoretical and methodological debate about international politics. Major achievements by this approach include bringing ideational variables back to the attention of all mainstream theories of IR and contributing to progress in discourse analysis research.

### *Theoretical and empirical challenges*

**Middle-ground position and internal fragmentation:** The position of constructivism in the middle ground between rationalism and postmodernism raises questions concerning its boundaries, triggers criticisms by both camps, and has also created the conditions for broad internal diversification and fragmentation.

Positivists point to the weak explanatory and predictive potential of constructivist assumptions. They claim that because constructivists assume that the social structure constitutes the nation states and the international system, they are vague about what contributes toward building these structures, where state identities come from, and how they are expected to evolve (Kaufman, 2013). Post-positivist scholars, in turn, criticize the very explanatory ambition of these scholars. From this point of view, Zehfuss (2001: 338) highlights the *dangerous liaison* between constructivism and identity, stressing the limits of identity-based explanations of IR proposed by constructivists.

A multitude of constructivisms have originated from attempts to contribute to this debate. However, over the past decade, rather than engaging in meta-theoretical debates and addressing criticisms of internal fragmentation, constructivist scholars have mainly focused on empirical research (Adler, 2012). One might even argue that these recent studies have further increased the internal differentiation of this approach to IR. Indeed, hybrid approaches merging constructivist assumptions with rationalist, postmodernist, and critical theory insights have proliferated in the past decade. Pragmatist scholars have welcomed the merging of constructivism with other schools (Friedrick and Kratochwil, 2009), whereas others have concluded that attempts at building bridges between opposing theoretical schools end up watering down the original contribution of the constructivist agenda (Wiener, 2003).

**Regression of established norms and diffusion of non-liberal ideas:** Recent developments in contemporary world politics seem to reinforce criticisms of the explanatory and predictive potential of constructivist research and challenge its optimistic view in regard to international cooperation.

Constructivists share with liberal theorists the assumption that ‘international institutions can transform state identities and interests’ (Wendt, 1992: 394), a value commitment toward international cooperation, and an optimistic attitude toward change (Reus-Smit and Snidal, 2008). More specifically, studies on norm diffusion assume that this process occurs through gradual steps from norm emergence to norm spread and interiorization (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; K. Stiles, 2008). In this regard, recent cases of the degeneration of established liberal norms and the diffusion of non-liberal ideas represent challenges for constructivist studies of norm diffusion.

An example of norm regression is the weak definition of torture provided by the United States after 11 September 2001, concerning the interrogation methods used against alleged al-Qaeda members. This definition appears to contrast with the UN Convention on Torture and with established domestic norms concerning the ban on torture. Similarly, the proliferation of agreements between EU member states on the forced repatriation of migrants, despite the principle of non-refoulement established by the UNHCR, which has become a consuetudinary norm within international law, raises questions about factors explaining norm erosion. On the bases of these cases, questions remain open for further research: Why do embedded norms sometimes lose their prescriptive potential and disappear? What factors are needed to erode dominant global norms and create the conditions for acceptance of alternative ones (McKeown, 2009; Panke and Petersohn, 2012)? Can constructivism address these questions without giving explanatory potential to the interests of powerful actors and greater attention to domestic politics?

Moreover, constructivism generally suffers from a ‘nice norm’ bias (McKeown, 2009). Constructivist studies on the influence of epistemic communities, social movements, and international organizations on world politics have proliferated (Snow, 2004; Goodman and Jinks, 2013), but there is a gap in this literature concerning issues, such as the spread of political Islam or the use of violence by ideologically motivated actors in IR (Adamson, 2005). These actors challenge the optimistic orientation of many constructivists toward norm diffusion as a driver of international cooperation.

Questions also arise with respect to the ability of constructivist studies to predict change. There is a gap in the constructivist literature concerning the conditions necessary to reach the ultimate stage of the socialization process, which is that of norm internalization. An emblematic case in this regard is the approach of the Chinese government to human rights. The government has recently ratified core international treaties and engaged in gradual ‘discursive enmeshment’ in the global human rights regime (Foot, 2000). Nevertheless, one might wonder whether these developments represent one of the early stages of the country’s socialization into international human rights law or merely a cosmetic change made by the central government in order to improve its international image while domestically preserving the *status quo*. Most constructivist empirical research seems to avoid this question and focuses on international norm creation rather than implementation.

Finally, till date, constructivism has overestimated the role of international norms and downplayed the agency of local actors (Acharya, 2011). The emergence of non-Western powers sharing a common developmental discourse and political culture in opposition to the discourse dominating international organizations, and the role of regional leaders in shaping security communities in Asia and Africa provide new challenges to the interpretative schemes used by constructivists (Haacke, 2013; Dembinski and Schott, 2014).

These emerging trends and power dynamics call into question some of the generalizations provided by constructivist research. At the same time, they confirm the importance of ideas and norms in IR, thereby furnishing opportunities to further test and develop the constructivist research agenda.

### **Security studies and the challenge of adaptation**

Author: Carla Monteleone

Security studies emerged as a distinct field in the mid-to-late 1940s and soon adopted a military focus to address policy problems arising from nuclear weapons and the Soviet threat (Buzan and Hansen, 2009). Deterrence, the security dilemma, and theories of balancing became essential to the understanding and management of bipolar dynamics. In reaction to specific events over time, the field widened its scope. The 1973 Middle East crisis put economic security and terrorism onto the agenda. The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident led to greater attention being paid to environmental issues. Overpopulation, underdevelopment, and political violence came to the fore following the political revolutions and migratory flows of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Since the end of the Cold War, the field has encompassed new dimensions and diversified its ontological and methodological approaches toward the study of security. This has allowed a better grasp of long neglected objects, actors, and practices. The attention paid to securitization processes, in particular, allowed understanding of how security threats are constructed, the inter-subjective dimension of security, inclusion and exclusion processes, and how security threats could be deconstructed (Balzaq, 2011). The new focus on the until then underdeveloped concept of security revealed how much the Cold War had influenced the identification of security with the military sector and how important cultural and normative factors were as drivers of change, next to material factors.

The end of the Cold War also brought renewed attention toward world-system security and long-term changes in the security field. Scholars analyzed world-level institutional changes, and, in particular, the evolution toward systems of cooperative security. Among security regimes, the effectiveness of the nuclear non-proliferation regime was carefully scrutinized (the journal *The Nonproliferation Review* hosted many empirical analyses on this issue; among others, see the two special issues on nuclear non-proliferation policy in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* in 2009

and 2014). Analyses also focused on the decline of state death since the end of World War II and the evolution of security from a private to a public good. Significant attention was paid to the creation and evolution of global public policies and their policy cycle in the security sector. This was particularly evident in the empirical analyses of peace operations (the journal *International Peacekeeping* reflected the greater attention toward this issue; among others, see also Fazal, 2007; Attinà, 2011; Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012).

Nevertheless, changes particularly evident after the end of the Cold War have challenged security studies, exposing its reactive and conservative attitude.

### *Challenges to security studies*

**Contemporary armed conflicts:** Changes in the nature, characteristics, and goals of contemporary armed conflicts are among the biggest challenges to security studies. State-centric and employing military power as the most important independent variable, traditionalist approaches have focused on interstate wars and dynamics between states (mostly in terms of balance of power and deterrence). Interstate wars, however, have become rare, whereas intra-state wars have increased in number and relevance, and have strongly been associated with state failure or weakness. Contemporary armed conflicts reveal how irrelevant deterrence can be when conflicts are fought to obtain non-territorial gains, by actors (both rebels and governmental forces) adopting criminal methods to finance their war activities. This deeply affects the duration and intensity of war and underlines the importance of intervening not just militarily – as traditionalists would suggest – nor with development instruments that risk injecting new resources into the cycle of war financing, as proposed by scholars closer to human security, peace studies, or post-Marxist approaches.

Security studies scholars have had difficulty agreeing on the factors explaining change in one of their core research interests and suggesting effective solutions. The described changes have highlighted that institutional, technological, and normative modifications deserving further exploration have altered the perceived costs and benefits of armed conflicts. They also reveal that it is no longer useful to look at states as monolithic entities: looking inside states may be more important.

**Democratization:** The relationship between democratization and security has been only partially explored. Democratic peace theory has highlighted some regularity in the way democracies manage their conflicts in dyadic relations, and has influenced the adoption of democracy promotion as a security policy. Nevertheless, certain types of democratic transitions markedly increase the risk of military disputes (Mansfield and Snyder, 2005). The democratization processes beginning from the so-called third wave have introduced a high number of new democracies and hybrid regimes whose behavior and performance affect regional stability. However, while democracy promotion has increasingly been used as a security policy, the implications of democratization processes and democratic state building have not been fully explored by security studies (among the exceptions, Miller, 2012).

Democratization can be a challenge for security studies also in another respect. The growth of multilateralism since the second half of the 19th century reflects the diffusion of democratic practices (Attinà, 2011). As the number of democratic countries has reached a critical mass, a normative change has taken place, leading to expectations of an organizational change of existing security institutions. Expectations are that the decision-making process of an institution like the Security Council should be democratic, and issues are framed as if it were democratic already. However, opportunities to influence this decision-making process are still limited. This is problematic because multilateral security and peace operations in particular have become more and more intrusive. The adoption of the so-called third-generation peace operations and of the concept of responsibility to protect has signaled a willingness to go beyond national sovereignty. However, scanty results (Libya) and inconsistent application (Syria) are challenging existing forms of multilateralism, now under the control neither of the only remaining superpower nor a fully democratic body. This means that more attention should be devoted to how decisions on security issues are made within security institutions and, more importantly, by whom. It also means that, if unsolved, the contradiction between input and output legitimacy in multilateral security risks bringing military alliances and pacts to new life.

**Risk management:** Risk management is increasingly important in contemporary security policies and agendas. Although this trend challenges traditionalist approaches and confirms the relevance of constructivist and critical approaches, in that they promote an enquiry into how security threats emerge, it ultimately challenges them too. The discovery of risk as a source of insecurity represents a move away from an existential threat and a state of exception, traditionally managed by states, toward a ‘routinization’ of the exception that transforms a public good into a private one, which can be produced by private companies as long as they possess the right technical solutions. It is also a shift from an objectively existing immediate known threat, finite, and intentional, to a subjectively existing long-term unknown one, infinite, and unintentional, whose consequences, although serious, need not be existential (Kessler, 2010).

Faced with less and less-controllable global risks, states adopt a preventive and proactive stance. The role of those who contribute to defining risk and how to manage it (the risk communities) becomes particularly important, because they define who and what deserves to be included and protected by the political community or not, as well as what goals the political community should achieve. Current efforts at analyzing the (in)securitization process have provided valuable methodological insights. However, so far, they have failed to identify in a systematic way: securitizing actors and practices, the conditions allowing the same securitizing actor to be successful or not under different circumstances, whether the actors and practices identified by the different schools are compatible or not, and what instruments can be used for security purposes.

**Theoretical challenges:** The many approaches that have sprung up over time have revealed a field capable of moving beyond its limits to inquire into new phenomena,

and of borrowing from other fields to increase its heuristic capacities. Nevertheless, the many approaches have had a hard time creating a fruitful dialogue with one another. Moreover, the emergence of non-Western powers and security cultures and the concentration of conflicts and security-relevant phenomena in non-Western areas highlight new limits to existing approaches. So far, security studies has very much been a Western discipline, focused mostly on the European and American experience. This makes its results applicable to specific contexts only, or in need of testing in other contexts.

Adapting to ongoing changes rather than just reacting to specific events may require a redefinition of its focus, attitude, and identity and a greater willingness to engage in a real dialogue among its schools. It is also a crucial effort for the relevance of security studies in the 21st century.

### **Understanding global economic crises: International Political Economy approaches under exceptional circumstances**

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Over the past two centuries, the occurrence of global crises in the world economy has offered countless occasions for social scientists to focus on the interplay between politics and economics. Major milestones in the discipline have been published during – or in the aftermath of – global crises, witness Keynes' *Theory* and Polanyi's *Great Transformation*. It did not come as a surprise that International Political Economy (IPE) as a subject matter originated in the midst of a major systemic crisis (Strange, 1970; Cohen, 2008). Thanks to the entrepreneurship of a few (among whom were Susan Strange, Robert Keohane, and Joseph Nye), a debate was launched in the relatively closed milieu of IR transatlantic environment in the late 1960s, on the need to develop inter-disciplinary lenses to account for major political and economic disorders that would periodically hit the international system.

Compared with other IR approaches, IPE appears better suited to study systemic crises that involve interactions between economic and political elements. An essentially inter-disciplinary vocation allows IPE scholars to examine complex sequences of events under multiple angles, simultaneously. Profit-maximizing and welfare-seeking logics may inform actors' choices as much as security-enhancing and value-oriented behaviors do. The issue, of direct interest to IPE research, is under which conditions, how and to what effect does this occur.

#### *Varieties of rationalism and systemic crises: highlights and lowlights*

Insights from both comparative politics and political economy of endogenous decisions have shed light on the role played by specific domestic political processes in exacerbating global crises such as in the case of widespread protectionism in the 1930s (Gourevitch, 1986), or in influencing the 'global' regulation of international financial markets, through the interactions among national systems of regulation

(Farrell and Newman, 2010). Market dynamics are thus connected with policy decisions at different governance levels. Studying crises through a prism combining multiple lenses, however, increases complexity to levels that are difficult to manage analytically, with the result that ‘white noise’ impairs both methodological and empirical clarity. Then, again, an exclusive emphasis on inside–out causation and the narrow focus of some quantitative analyses, have at times spelled an extremely high level of sectoralization, particularly in American IPE, biasing focus away from the theorization of broad changes in the global political economy (Wade, 2009: 117).

A further risk, inherent in treating systemic crises as springboards for ‘foundational’ re-definitions of the discipline, is the prominence of ‘here and now’ arguments in many studies of critical international turns. ‘This time is different’ has not been an uncommon interpretation of the complexity of systemic crises. Both political and economic analyses have provided a guard against the perils of ‘exceptionalizing’ exceptionality, as proven by Reinhart and Rogoff (2014), in the vein of seminal research in the institutionalist tradition (North and Weingast, 1989). Although relevant for its focus on the role of institutional reforms in facilitating political responses to global crises, Rogoff and Reinhart’s subsequent elaboration has been significantly debated, owing to the disputable accuracy of some key findings, and regressive policy implications (Herndon *et al.*, 2014).

### *The constructivist counterpoint: new and old ideas*

Furthermore, institutional innovation, and institutional change at large, has at times depended on extra-institutional factors. As substantiated by constructivist IPE, its dynamics do not systematically follow a logic of consequentiality (Blyth, 2002). Provocatively asserting that ‘economics are too important to leave it to economists’ (Widmaier, 2009), constructivist IPE has somewhat tended to downplay previous economic analyses on the role of non-material factors in systemic crises (Kindleberger, 1978; Akerlof and Shiller, 2009).

Yet, IPE constructivists have innovatively studied the sociological dynamics through which ideas originate and diffuse across governance levels, contributing to systemic shocks, as argued by Hobson and Seabrooke (2007) about the outburst of the subprime bubble. Partially contradicting the rationalist camp, sociologically oriented IPE has investigated how bottom-up dynamics influence mid-level outcomes, including US consumerism, through the role of unprivileged consensus-seeking groups (Jacobs, 2005). These studies further prove the importance of two-way frameworks (top-down and bottom-up) in the understanding of systemic (exceptional) change. Reflectivist analyses have significantly contributed to the IPE literature on the crisis, exploring the often-unacknowledged ‘everyday and emotional’ influences (Widmaier, 2009) that shape state interests and market trends, to highlight a key process through which material and ideational factors interact via non-rational logics.



*IPE and systemic crises: learning from the past and challenges ahead*

Apart from their significant merits, rationalist and constructivist IPE studies have displayed unambiguous limitations in the analysis of global changes. Rationalist (American) IPE – in its strongest and predictive vein – failed to anticipate the crisis of 2008 (Cohen, 2009; Helleiner and Pagliari, 2011). In fact, on the eastern shore of the Atlantic, British IPE had questioned the premises on which risk creation and propagation were conceptualized in contemporary financial models, policies, and practices (Langley, 2002; Watson, 2007). Yet, such warnings fell on deaf ears, before the subprime mortgage bubble burst. A major change has occurred since then, and critical voices have even cautioned against the collapse of a still poorly reformed – *status quo* – system (Helleiner, 2014). Although the question whether social sciences should be in the business of prediction at all may not be a misplaced one (Mosley and Singer, 2009), there is little doubt that IPE scholarship has learnt its lesson the hard way.

Relative to other areas in the social sciences, the inter-disciplinary nature of IPE offers several benefits. Relaxing some of the assumptions of Open Economy Politics paradigm and expanding its tools to model outside-in dynamics seems a promising way to make sense of crises without losing analytical rigor and lowering explanatory ambitions too much (Lake, 2009; Oatley, 2011). Openness to accepting that both rationally altruistic and non-rational dynamics may be at play has become a necessity, even in the rationalist camp (Keohane, 2009: 38; Leblang and Pandya, 2009). Unlike IR, IPE has an ontological vocation to look beyond high (security) politics. Unlike economics, it carries a foundational interest in the analysis of the political origins of economic decisions, and an equally constitutive drive to look at the political consequences of economic shocks. Such disposition appears crucial to derive meaningful insights into the dynamics of global financial regulation, capital rules, and macroeconomic policy making that are on top of leaders' and citizens' priorities these days.

On the empirical front, looking at past interactions in monetary and financial relations has been one natural path to beat. A major topic of interest has been the (likely) requirements for international cooperation to be effective in solving the problems of the current system. The analytical challenge would be – no less – an effort in singling out the specificities of cooperation before crisis, from those relative to cooperation during and after a crisis. Studies in the political economy of monetary relations that have explored the long-run record of international cooperation under critical turns have found that, compared with the past, a few elements in the current system concur in indicating a positive prognosis (Eichengreen, 2011). Differently from the inter-war period, countries are not divided along rooted ideological divides. The increased technicality of financial matters may diminish the politicization of negotiations. Moreover, the greater institutionalization of monetary and financial cooperation at the international level, through the reform of the IMF governance and the Basel III agreement on banking supervision, reduces

uncertainty and ensures the reiteration of negotiations, which in turn increases the likelihood of cooperation. On the other hand, however, a higher number of systemically important actors have heightened transaction costs associated with cooperation. The absence of a Bretton Woods-like institutional compact to coordinate global liquidity and exchange rate fluctuations has encouraged instability and propelled uncertainty. In addition, the fragmentation of epistemic communities, each lobbying for its own technical agenda, has more than compensated the lower politicization of the current system. Finally, the general comity among G-20 members cannot be equated to the security ties that existed in the transatlantic compact during the Bretton Woods era.

More particularly, and relative to the evolution of the sovereign debt crises in Europe, liberal institutionalists have exposed the failure of the EU institutional anchoring in preventing the deterioration of the Greek and Spanish economies, questioning whether – and how – the euro area will be able to effectively lead the adjustment of its members out of the crisis (Carlin, 2011). According to some, the solutions will depend, *inter alia*, on which narratives of the Eurocrisis prevail in policy circles. Yet, the intra-European divide between Ordoliberal and neo-Keynesians interacts with the cleavage between leaderships in mature systems, on the one hand, and elites in emerging market countries, on the other, over the effects of unconventional monetary policies. An ineludible step of IPE analyses of the crisis is thus to factor in the relations among the United States, China, and other key emerging market economies, to explore how European dynamics are being played out in global processes and fora. Diverging geo-political priorities and an intellectual disagreement on how to restore growth make the task of cooperating even more daunting. IPE approaches in both the reflectivist and rationalist traditions should become engaged in deriving testable implications on the consequences of normative dissent and heterogeneous interests across different governance levels in uncertain times.

Although accounting for mixes of rational and non-rational logics makes it even more complicated to investigate the type and likelihood of the upcoming evolutions in the global financial system, this is not a reason that is valid enough for international studies to do away with such complexity. Born in dire times and grown up in the midst of a systemic crisis, IPE research has been strengthened by criticisms from economists and political scientists alike. There is evidence to argue that such training has started to bear some fruits.

### **Concluding remarks: a transformed IR for a changed international system**

The evaluation of the heuristic value of IR schools of thought with respect to the current world politics has pointed to a set of challenges that are common to all IR approaches as well as others that concern only specific Schools.

The most important challenges to IR's heuristic value are the transformation of the main actors of world politics and its de-Westernization. If some schools are

equipped to provide useful cognitive tools for an ever less state-centric world, no IR approach has yet been able to overcome the Western-centric nature of the discipline.

Another common challenge is concerning the gradual postmodernization of world politics, both in the sense of the transformation of the Westphalian modern state system (and the emergence of non-state actors) and in the more profound sense of the (partial) overcoming of the first modernity with its trust in rationality, progress, and modern institutions. IR (although with exceptions) is still predominantly embedded in a modern mindset.

As for the challenges to specific IR Schools of thought, Moro's recollection of realism points to the persistence of the paradigm despite the 'pluralization' of world politics. However, he claims, the academic and policy relevance of realism will largely depend on realist scholars' ability to integrate in a coherent framework insights on agency that have emerged from institutional analyses in the past decades. At the same time, realist scholars will have to redefine research questions that can be effectively addressed coherently with the need to provide testable theories.

Lucarelli underlines how liberalism captures better than other approaches the main features of the current international system (particularly its pluralism), but at the same time it is challenged by the transformation of core elements of international politics (e.g. democracy, multilateralism, the role of non-Western actors), by the methodological challenge of constructivism and by the 'postmodernization' of international politics. Inherently modern and faithful in progress and rationality, liberalism risks being ill-suited to cope with an ever more postmodern world.

Sicarelli's reading of constructivism stresses the capacity of the approach to explain current events in international relations such as the spread of international norms beyond the West. Nevertheless, it points to its difficulties in responding to criticisms made by the opposite theoretical fronts of rationalism and postmodernism and to the empirical challenges raised by contemporary phenomena such as the weakening of established norms and the diffusion of non-liberal ideas.

Evaluating security studies after the Cold War, Monteleone finds that, despite several transformations in security studies (e.g. the Copenhagen turning point, the return to world-system level analyses, and analyses of global public policies), the field is challenged by the changing nature of armed conflicts, democratization processes, the shift from threat to risk, the rise of non-Western powers and security cultures, and the limited dialogue among the existing approaches. This may require a painful redefinition of its focus, identity, and, most of all, attitude.

Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of international political economy on the basis of its ability to understand the economic crisis of 2008, Eugenia Baroncelli reaches the conclusion that in spite of its weaknesses and some faux pas, IPE scholars have learnt their post-crisis lesson. True to its inclusive and interdisciplinary origins, since 2008, IPE has attributed a heightened relevance to the study of systemic changes under exceptional circumstances. Approaches in both rationalist and reflectivist IPE paradigms have developed analytical tools that can be

valuably employed to refine our understanding of the dynamics of diffusion, competition, and cooperation in global financial regulation. Recent studies have indeed contributed to orient scholars and policy makers in the politics and practice of global cooperation in macroeconomic policy making.

On the whole, the picture that emerges is one of a discipline that faces indisputable challenges, emerging mainly from the transformation of its subject of study – international politics – and from its own ontological limits as a discipline developed during the Cold War and deeply grounded in the West. At the same time, however, the analyses here undertaken confirm that in today's world politics there is a desperate need for more and better theorization in IR, rather than for a passive acceptance of the discipline's weaknesses. IR might develop beyond paradigms and schools or with intertwined ones, but the theoretical toolkits provided by the discipline are still necessary and urgently needed to make a challenging world more intelligible.

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