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Theoretical Synthesis in IR: Possibilities and Limits

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Theoretical Synthesis in IR: Possibilities and Limits

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Abstract:

This draft chapter for the *Sage Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd Edition, offers a critical assessment of bridge building and pluralism in contemporary international-relations (IR) theory. I begin by placing recent moves towards theoretical synthesis in context, asking why one saw an upsurge of interest in bridge-building only beginning in the mid-1990s. Then I assess these efforts in three areas – international institutions, normative theory, and studies of civil war – in each case, detailing how and to what extent theoretical pluralism has come to define a particular subfield. I argue that contemporary IR does look different, and better, thanks to synthesis and bridge building. In conclusion I note two challenges – theoretical cumulation and meta-theory. These, I argue, should be at the heart of a reinvigorated research program on synthesis, one where theory is taken seriously and epistemological divides are transgressed.

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Theoretical Synthesis in IR: Possibilities and Limits

The other chapters in Part 1 of this volume outline and review particular approaches to or issues within international relations – postmodernism, historiography, rational choice, normative theory, and the like. This essay takes a different tack, instead asking what happens when we combine them. Indeed, combining separate things to produce a more complete, better whole has become an IR cottage industry over the past decade. The things combined range from social theories (rational choice and constructivism), to research programs (the management and enforcements schools in compliance), to different types of theory (problem-solving and critical/normative).

More formally, many IR scholars now talk of their efforts at bridge building or synthesis, or of their eclectic approaches. Such work has reached a certain critical mass, as evidence by numerous panels at meetings of professional associations, entire books devoted to the topic (Katzenstein and Sil, 2010b) and – not least – the endless ways in which the central metaphor of bridge building has by now been deconstructed. (What is the bridge spanning? A [theoretical] divide? A [meta-theoretical] chasm? Does it have just one lane, or is ‘traffic’ possible in both directions? Do we build a bridge to understand better what’s on the other side? Or is the goal simply to meet somewhere in midstream?)

Metaphorical deconstructions aside, this chapter argues that the bridge builders have largely done their job well. The landscape of contemporary IR looks different thanks to their efforts. We understand more fully the effects of international institutions, the workings of various international regimes (human rights, environmental), the concept of rationality, the relations between norms and interests, between the material and social worlds – to give just a few examples. At the same time, efforts at synthesis have lost steam in recent years, while criticism of it has increased.

To capture this mixed picture, the chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by placing recent moves towards theoretical synthesis in context, asking why one saw an upsurge of interest in bridge-building only beginning in the mid-1990s. The chapter then offers a net assessment of

these efforts in three areas – international institutions, normative theory, and studies of civil war. In each case, the analysis details the ways in which and the extent to which theoretical pluralism has come to define a particular subfield. I argue that contemporary IR does look different – and better – due to synthesis and bridge building; yet, at the same time, it faces challenges that were not there in the early 1990s and are a direct consequence of the turn to pluralism. In the conclusion, I highlight two such challenges – theoretical cumulation and meta-theory – and argue they should be at the heart of a reinvigorated research program on synthesis, one where theory is taken seriously and epistemological divides are transgressed.

From Monism to (Semi-) Pluralism

Why the explosion of interest in bridge-building only beginning in the mid-1990s? The answer is partly external events (see also Schmidt, in this volume). The end of the Cold War, intensified globalization and deepening integration in Europe placed a premium on capturing – theoretically – complexity. However, equally important were dynamics internal to the discipline, where more and more favoured an end to paradigm wars and embraced an attitude of let's just get on with it.

To appreciate these changes, one needs first to set the stage, by considering IR theory circa 1990. It would not be much of a caricature to say IR was characterised by a world of 'isms' that did not much talk to each other. Partly this was a function of national traditions and geography (Wæver, 1998); however, theoretically monist paradigms played an even more important role.

For sure, this state of affairs had advantages, with one seeing theoretical advance within paradigms. Consider the debate between neorealists and neoliberals. What began as a shouting match became – over time – a nuanced and increasingly rigorous discussion of key issues separating these scholars – for example, the specific role and scope conditions of relative and absolute gains in world politics (Baldwin, 1993). Within constructivism, one saw a healthy debate over the relation between critical and substantive theory – in particular, the extent to which empirical findings needed to be accommodated within critical/normative approaches (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998).

Yet, such achievements came at a price. Conversation across paradigms was limited, and closed citation cartels dominated. For example, the degree of exchange between constructivists and neorealists/neoliberals could be captured in set-theoretic notation – the null set. Instead, meta-debates and a dialogue of the deaf too often were the norm (Schmidt, in this volume; Wight, in this volume). Moreover, some theorists favoured a gladiator approach, where – like a Roman warrior on his chariot – one perspective went forth and slayed all others, with the latter presented in highly simplified form.¹

This theoretical monism had real world costs, undercutting efforts to explain better key features of international politics (see also Katzenstein and Sil, 2010a: 412-13). Language is a case in point. It is ubiquitous and in many ways the foundational fabric and medium through which politics works. In the early and mid-1990s, two exciting research programs addressed its role. One viewed language as an act of information exchange or signalling, where social agents stand outside of and manipulate it (Fearon, 1997); the other theorized language as deep structures of discourse and meaning that make agency possible in the first place (Doty, 1993). From a practical perspective, the problem was that such research – by not combining insights – missed a very large part of how language actually did and does work in the international realm, be it through deliberation, persuasion, arguments, rhetoric and the like.

The Change

By the late 1990s, change was afoot, with important publication outlets and key theorists signalling a turn to pluralism. In 1997, the premier journal of European IR, the *European Journal of International Relations*, published a conceptual essay by a leading international relations theorist (Adler, 1997). It advocated a bridgeable mid-point between typically opposed paradigms; indeed, the article's title – 'Seizing the Middle Ground' – captured well its pluralist instincts.

A little over a year later, *International Organization* – arguably the most prestigious IR journal in North America – published a special issue dedicated to its 50th anniversary. After internal deliberation and debate, it was agreed not to structure the issue around particular

¹ Thanks to Michael Barnett for suggesting the gladiator metaphor.

substantive theories (realism, say), but around the social theories – rationalism and constructivism – underlying them. Furthermore, it was decided that the special issue would cautiously raise the topic of theoretical pluralism.² It was thus briefly addressed in the introduction by Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner (1998: 678-82), and in two of the remaining eleven essays (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; March and Olsen, 1998). However, the synthesis on offer had clear epistemological limits. In particular, building connections to more radical forms of constructivism was deemed a bridge too far (Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998: 677-78).

Taken together, the Adler article and the *International Organization* fiftieth-anniversary issue heralded an important change. A new set of paradigms – rationalism and constructivism – had been legitimated. More important for my purposes, a window was now ajar for those in favour of promoting theoretical pluralism. Indeed, in 2002, two prominent IR theorists returned to and elaborated on the theme of pluralism. Writing in the first edition of this *Handbook*, James Fearon and Alexander Wendt (2002) analyzed a number of concepts and issues – logics of action, norms, preference formation – where both rationalism and constructivism could be applied. Their conclusion is worth quoting at length, as it nicely captures the gist of bridge building and synthesis.

This prompts a concluding suggestion: that the rationalism-constructivism issue be seen not as a debate but as a conversation ... Rather than a dialogue of the deaf in which each side tries to marginalize or subsume the other in the name of methodological fundamentalism, the challenge now should be to combine insights, cross boundaries and, if possible, synthesize specific arguments in hope of gaining more compelling answers and a better picture of reality (Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 68).

Due to both the quality of their arguments and positions within the field, the theorists surveyed above largely set the parameters for how IR would tackle the issue of pluralism. In this regard, it is worth highlighting two points. First and perhaps understandable given the agenda-setting nature of these early commentaries, most attention was on legitimating the idea of pluralism. An empirically oriented bridge builder could read Fearon and Wendt's inspiring words on synthesis, but at the same time get precious little advice on how actually to do it. What

² Personal Communication, Peter Katzenstein, June 2010.

exactly would be the result when one ‘combines insights’ and ‘crosses boundaries’? To do synthesis well, were particular methods or research designs necessary?

Second, questions of epistemology received little attention. More carefully put, epistemology was controlled for in that most of these early proponents of synthesis subscribed to some form of positivism. While this shared starting point allowed scholars to develop ideas about theoretical synthesis without having to worry about meta-theory, it also had unfortunate side effects. For one, it means the ‘conversation’ proposed by Fearon and Wendt has overwhelmingly been between proponents of rational choice and one particular form of constructivism – the conventional type – that subscribes to positivism; missing are the interpretive variants (Adler, in this volume). And given the dominance of conventional constructivism in the US, efforts at synthesis have taken on a decidedly American flavour (Checkel, 2007a).³

More important, this bracketing of meta-theory has led bridge builders to neglect foundational issues. Are there philosophical limits to the exercise? If the goal is to gain more analytic leverage on the world around us, is there any obvious stopping point in an epistemological sense? On the one hand, all would agree that efforts at theoretical synthesis combining a deeply anti-foundational perspective with game theory make little sense (see also Zehfuss, in this volume). Yet, short of this extreme, what guidance or rules do we have to structure a bridge-building exercise that might transcend epistemological divides?

Summary

Since the mid-1990s, one has seen an increase in the theory and practice of synthesis. Bridge building submissions to key publications have grown – for example, from zero to 10% at *International Organization* – while journals have devoted entire special issues to the topic (Caporaso, Checkel, Jupille, 2003a; Checkel, 2007b).⁴ A further testimony to this interest is a growing literature that explicitly criticizes bridge building along a number of dimensions –

³ Decidedly but not entirely. Several German IR scholars – Gunther Hellmann, Harald Mueller and Thomas Risse – have played important roles in the debate over pluralism.

⁴ Personal Communication, Emanuel Adler, Co-Editor, *International Organization*, June 2010. Checkel, 2007b was originally published as a special issue of *International Organization* 59 (4) (Fall 2005).

disciplinary, practical and meta-theoretical (Guzzini, 2000; Roundtable, 2009; Smith, 2003; Zehfuss 2002).

Yet, such trends must be kept in perspective. The heading for this section, after all, was ‘From Monism to (Semi-) Pluralism,’ and that semi- needs to be stressed. Entire IR research programs have shown little interest in building theoretically synthetic arguments (see below), and it is not at all clear to what extent such topics are covered in graduate seminars or upper-level undergraduate courses.

The TRIPS survey – Teaching and Research in International Politics – developed and conducted by the College of William and Mary offers additional evidence in support of this mixed picture. In its 2008 edition, 44% of the respondents – 2,700 IR scholars from 10 different countries – felt that rationalism and constructivism should remain distinct explanations, while 40% thought they could be ‘usefully synthesized to create a more complete IR theory.’ Moreover, in their ranking of the most influential IR theorists of the past 20 years, only one bridge builder – Peter Katzenstein of Cornell University – made it into the top ten, and then only in ninth place (Jordan, *et al*, 2009: 42-44).

Bridge Building in Practice

Whatever inroads it has made in the field, has bridge building delivered? The current section addresses this issue and does so by first conducting a net assessment of efforts at synthesis in two subfields – international institutions and normative theory – detailing the ways in which and the extent to which theoretical pluralism has come to define them. Success – or its lack – is measured against three metrics – explanatory richness, theoretical cumulation and meta-theoretical consistency.

The issue is value added: Would we be worse off if there had been no such efforts? In counterfactual terms, would contemporary IR theory look any different absent this turn to synthesis? To avoid oversampling on my ‘dependent variable,’ the section also considers a vibrant contemporary research program – on civil war – where bridge building has not been the norm. What has it gained – and lost – in comparison to the bridge builders?

I set the stage for my assessment by first discussing several generic templates and strategies for bridge building.

How to Build Bridges

To begin, a definition for bridge building is in order: to connect different theories in a middle-range sense to make better sense of some analytic puzzle. This is consistent with Fearon and Wendt's understanding – to 'synthesize specific arguments in hope of gaining more compelling answers and a better picture of reality' (Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 68) – while clarifying what bridge building is not. It is not about subsumption, where one theory is parasitic on and a special case of another; nor is it about creating some type of grand unified theory. Instead, it specifies an intermediate theoretical goal – to develop middle-range frameworks. Such frameworks capture causal complexity – usually invoking several independent variables – over a spatially or temporally delimited frame (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Katzenstein and Sil, 2010a: 415).

What, though, does it mean to connect different theories? Proponents of synthesis and pluralism have suggested two strategies: domain of application and temporal sequencing (Caporaso, Checkel, Jupille, 2003b). The domain of application approach strives for a minimal synthesis in the sense that, while two theories might appeal to completely independent explanatory factors, when combined they could increase our ability to explain the empirical world. Any theory has scope conditions – when and under what conditions do we expect it to be applicable. The domain strategy works by identifying the respective turfs and 'home domains' of each theory, by specifying how each explanation works, and finally by bringing together each home turf in some larger picture. Each theory is specified independently and the result, if successful, is an additive theory that is more comprehensive than the separate theories.

Scholars have advanced a number of domain-of-application propositions. For example, we might imagine that high substantive stakes invite rational calculation, while relatively low stakes allow for non-calculative decision making (March and Olsen, 1998: 952-53). Or we might postulate that the more routine the behaviour, the more easily it is institutionalized (backgrounded). In organizational theory and general systems theory, for example, those parts of the environment that can be mapped in some stable sense are hardwired into the organization and

become part of its lower (administrative) functions. Less stable, less easily mapped aspects of the environment remain on the strategic agenda.

The key to this model of synthesis is properly to specify the scope conditions of each theory, what its domain is, and how it relates to other theories. If one theory provides some value-added to the other, we can improve our efforts by this approach. Admittedly, this works best when multiple theories focus on similar explananda, when explanatory variables have little overlap, and when these variables do not interact in their influence on outcomes.

A second bridge building strategy relates closely to the first, but adds a time dimension, suggesting that each theory depends on the other temporally to explain a given outcome. Where domain-of-application approaches posit different empirical domains within one frame of time, sequencing means that variables from both approaches work together over time to explain a given domain. Legro's (1996) cooperation two-step, in which a culturalist account of preference formation precedes a rationalist account of conflict and cooperation, provides a clear example (see also Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998: 680-81; March and Olsen, 1998: 953).

One problem with such division-of-labour arguments is that the synthesis on offer is even weaker than in the domain-of-application strategy. Each theory works in isolation from the other, at a particular point in time. The possibilities of intellectual-theoretical cross fertilization are minimal if not nil; each theory and scholar does what he/she does, and then passes things on to the next (see also Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 64).

International Institutions

The study of international institutions and organizations (IO's) has been a central IR concern since the early years after World War II (Martin and Simmons, 1998). The literature here is rich and deep, ranging from sociological/organizational studies of IO learning (Haas, 1990), to the rational-choice/contractualist approach of neo-liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984), to contemporary studies that apply credible commitment theory to the International Criminal Court (Danner and Simmons, 2010). Much of this research is excellent and has provided the IR community with a trove of insights on the multiple roles institutions and IO's can play in world politics (Acharya and Johnston, 2007; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004, for

example). Neo-liberal institutionalism in particular is a model of a progressive research program, with scholars coherently and cumulably building upon earlier work (Martin, 2000).

At the same time, work in this subfield made few efforts to build plural, synthetic arguments on IO's. Instead, scholars might speculate on dynamics not captured by their theories, such as state interests changing over the long term (Keohane, 1984), or report un-theorized empirical findings inconsistent with their approach. On the latter, Wallander's book (1999) on institutions and Russian/German security cooperation is exemplary, reporting results (changing interests, non-strategic behaviour) inconsistent with her rational-choice framework. In neither case, however, is there any effort to build a plural framework that captures this causal complexity.

Since the start of the new millennium, this state of affairs has changed. Several theorists and research projects – taking a problem-driven approach to the study of international institutions – have sought to capture their multiple roles through bridge-building efforts. Far from an afterthought, synthesis has been a guiding principle from the start. In this case, synthesis meant capturing both rationalist understandings (institutions as strategic environments where self-interested, instrumentally rational actors bargain in defence of existing interests) and constructivist views (institutions as social environments where communicatively rational actors argue and learn new interests).

The role institutions can play in changing core properties of states and state agents – specifically through socialization – has been a theme in the literature for over 30 years. In 1979, Kenneth Waltz invoked socialization as a mechanism via which states responded to system imperatives (Waltz, 1979); the English School often spoke of the socializing power of international society (Alderson, 2001); more recently, constructivists accorded socialization a central role in their studies (Price, 1998).

Building upon this work, Checkel (2007b) and collaborators sought to build synthetic arguments on socialization. Using international institutions in Europe as their laboratory and a domain of application bridge-building strategy, they theorized the mechanisms of institutional socialization, from both rational-choice and constructivist perspectives. Contributors theorized scope conditions for particular socialization mechanisms – when and under what conditions they

expected them to be applicable. Thus, Alexandra Gheciu, in a study of NATO, deduced conditions (noviceness, insulation, teacher-pupil relation) when persuasion ought to be successful; their absence then indicated when rationalist mechanisms such as cost-benefit calculations would be at work (Gheciu, 2005; see also Checkel, 2003; Johnston, 2008).

The end result was a study that captured causal complexity and provided more complete explanations of how international institutions could socialize states and individuals (see also Kelley, 2004). Theoretical synthesis was achieved via a strategy that stressed the development of scope conditions. Compared to either a pure rationalist or constructivist argument, explanatory richness had been increased. Using Fearon and Wendt's criteria, Checkel and collaborators had delivered, providing 'more compelling answers and a better picture of reality' (Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 68).

What kind of theory emerges from such an exercise, however? How do others build upon these findings in a cumulative way to advance the theoretical frontier? To ask – and begin to answer – such questions, alerts one to a trade-off. Acquiring a 'better picture of reality' complicates the development and refinement of theory. At issue here is not that old warhorse parsimony. Rather, it is what body of theory emerges from mid-range bridge building work? Checkel and collaborators (2007b) theorized three causal mechanisms with certain scope conditions. Others might then follow by theorizing additional causal mechanisms, or by testing our mechanisms on different empirical material (outside Europe), or by refining the scope conditions. These are all plausible ways to proceed, but it is not clear how the parts add up to a whole – a point to which I return in the concluding section.

A second example of an explicit bridge-building effort in the area of international institutions is a project on human rights led by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (1999). It sought to develop a generalizable model explaining the process through which international norms have effects at the national level. More important for my purposes, the model was conceived from the beginning as a plural one integrating insights from both rational choice and social constructivism.

To accomplish the latter, Risse, *et al*, employed a temporal-sequencing bridge building strategy, with the common domain being the domestic impact of international norms. Their five-stage model works as follows. Its starting point is a situation where elites in rights-violating states are entrapped by a vise of transnational and domestic pressure generated by a broad array of agents. In phase 2, norms further mobilize such actors, who engage in processes of shaming and moral consciousness-raising. During the early parts of phase 3, compliance with human-rights standards occurs – if at all – through tactical concessions, that is, shifts in the behaviours and strategies of state elites; their preferences do not change. Towards the end of this third phase, however, the interaction between state officials and social actors shifts. The former now rethink their core preferences as they engage (phase 4) in argumentation and dialogue with the latter. Finally, during phase 5, these newly learned preferences become internalized.

Put differently, it is the integration of different theories, working at different times, that explains the outcome. Instrumental adaptation predominates during phases 1, 2 and part of 3; argumentative discourse comes to the fore during phases 3 and, especially, 4; and institutionalization dominates Phase 5. In more formal terms, a change occurs from the instrumental rationality preferred by rational choice, to the Habermasian argumentative rationality of constructivists, and then, finally, to the rule-governed behaviour of institutional theory.

Using this synthetic theoretical frame, the volume's empirical studies provide structured and rich evidence that compliance with international prescriptions is not just about learning new appropriate behaviour, as many constructivists might argue. Nor, however, is it all about calculating international or domestic costs. Rather, by combining these schools, Risse and collaborators provide scholars with a richer picture of the multiple causal pathways through which norms may matter. The resulting explanation is causally complex, while at the same time not degenerating into a 'kitchen sink' argument where everything matters (see also Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Whether this five-stage model is generalizable is another matter. Large and economically powerful states with poor human-rights records such as China and Russia seem immune to the dynamics sketched by Risse, *et al* (Mendelson, 2002). In the first decade after its publication,

few studies sought to replicate the volume's approach. Moreover, recent work hailed as the cutting-edge on international institutions and human rights avoids complicated, synthetic theoretical models, instead offering an intelligent and largely rationalist take on the subject matter (Simmons, 2009). None of this is to diminish the accomplishments of Risse and collaborators; rather, it is again to point to an apparent trade-off between analytic synthesis and theoretical cumulation.

Two final comments are in order regarding these examples of bridge building. First, meta-theoretical consistency – one of my three measures for evaluating synthesis – is not an issue. There may be some bridge building at the level of social theory – between rational choice and conventional constructivism – but at the more foundational level of epistemology, no bridges are crossed. Positivism or its close relation scientific realism (Wight, in this volume; Wight, 2006) is the philosophical starting point for all involved.

Second, I noted in the first section that IR had not done a good job theorizing the multifaceted ways in which language shapes international politics. We had one group of scholars talking about signalling and another about discourse. Now, however, and as a direct consequence of the synthetic theory building efforts outlined above, IR has a vastly richer set of tools for studying language's multiple roles, including work on persuasion (Johnston, 2008), arguing (Risse, 2000), rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig, 2003), social learning (Checkel, 2001) and social influence (Johnston, 2001).

Normative Theory

Normative theory is about ought and not necessarily the why of substantive, problem-solving approaches. Bridge building means to 'synthesize specific arguments in hope of gaining more compelling answers and a better picture of reality' (Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 68). Yet, normative theory is not always about reality. Moreover, as previously noted, bridge building has gained its most forceful advocates in the US, while normative theory has deeper roots in Europe (Hurrell and Macdonald, in this volume; Waever, 1998).

At first glance, then, arguments about synthesis and normative theory might seem misplaced. By and large, this view is correct, with one seeing relatively little discussion of

synthesis and pluralism. However, some normative theorists have long made a case for bridging the ethical and empirical (Frost, 1996). Moreover, the rise of an empirically oriented constructivism since the mid-1990s has led to a situation where the interests of a growing number of scholars – with substantive research foci – intersect with the concerns of normative/ethical/critical theory (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998; Reus-Smit, 2008). If – above – the bridge building was between scholars with shared research interests – the role of international institutions in global politics, say – here it is between different types of theory: normative/critical and problem solving.

In this latter case, bridge building has not resulted in specific strategies for synthesis – such as temporal sequencing. Rather, the argument is that empirical theory – especially that by constructivists – ‘offers a way to think through the normative-empirical gap, thereby offering an avenue for grounding ethical claims in an additionally rigorous way’ (Price, 2008a: 199; see also Price, 2008b: *passim*). Such a bridge building exercise would have benefits in both directions – also alerting some substantive, empirical theorists of their underspecified use of insights from normative-ethical theory.

As an example, consider Habermas’ work on deliberation and discourse ethics and its influence in contemporary IR. In a conceptual and normative sense, this impact has been wide ranging, from the role of deliberation in global and European governance (Eriksen and Fossum, 2000), to new normative criteria for identity and democracy in a globalized/Europeanized world (Eriksen, 2009), to the power of arguments in global politics (Mueller, 2004; Risse, 2000) and international negotiations (Risse and Kleine, 2010). Yet, to paraphrase Price, ‘an empirical-normative gap’ has appeared in the more operational applications of Habermasian insights.

This gap is seen in numerous ways. Some scholars worry that – empirically – it is almost impossible to measure the role that arguments play in the real-world of diplomacy (Deitelhoff and Mueller, 2005). Others suggest that Habermas’ proposals on post-national citizenship and democracy simply fall short when integrated with a world where politics still (often) works via conflict and tough, self-interested negotiation (Castiglione, 2009). Still others claim that when one studies deliberation empirically, it is not – contra Habermas – arguments that play a central

role; rather, arguing is an underspecified concept that is parasitic on deeper, underlying social mechanisms such as persuasion (Checkel, 2001, 2003; Johnston, 2001).⁵

The response to such concerns should not be a collective IR dismissal of Habermasian theory and concepts. Rather, it should be to engage in bridge building, in two different senses. From a normative-ethical-critical perspective, such gaps demand greater attention to ‘what additional ethically justifiable strategies might be available’ to augment ‘the elusive ideal speech situation’ (Price, 2008a: 202). For empirical scholars, the bridge to be built involves integrating the social theory of Habermas with research methodologies (process tracing, discourse analysis, agent-based modeling) and substantive, empirical theory (social-psychological work on persuasion; constructivist work on identity). This will allow them to offer operational arguments that, while no longer susceptible to the label ‘utopian’ (Price, 2008a: 200-203), deliver far more than standard strategic choice accounts.

In sum, with normative theory, one sees less concern with or efforts at bridge building and synthesis. Indeed, if it were not for Richard Price and his collaborators (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998; Price, 2008b, *passim*), these pages might be quite brief. It is worth briefly addressing possible reasons for this state of affairs. Earlier, I argued that bridge building in this area means to integrate insights from normative theory and problem-solving theory. This is correct, but it actually understates what is occurring, as these two types of theory rest on differing philosophical foundations. The former is interpretive in a critical sense, while the latter has long been associated with positivism (on these distinctions, see Wight, in this volume).

Bridge building then means not just developing scope conditions for when, say, rationalist or constructivist mechanisms prevail, but translating across very different philosophical commitments. Consider again the case of Habermasian theory. It is really any surprise that his insights are not amenable to easy empirical operationalization? After all, this is Juergen Habermas, a founder of the Frankfurt School of critical social theory. Further complicating efforts at bridge building, many scholars who draw upon his insights, although they

⁵ This problem is pervasive in the IR literature seeking to apply Habermas empirically. An all too typical pattern is to start the analysis with a reference to Habermas and his discourse theory, and then to operationalize the argument by turning not to Habermas, but to the concept of persuasion. Deitelhoff, 2009: 35, *passim*, for example.

occasionally make reference to the empirical, are at heart deeply committed to a critical project that promotes progressive change in global politics (Eriksen, 2006; Sjørnsen, 2006, for example). There is nothing wrong with such engagement; however, it does severely circumscribe the possibility of or interest in bridge building.

For all these reasons, my three metrics for evaluating bridge building – explanatory richness, theoretical cumulation and meta-theoretical consistency – are less helpful here. The first two are not relevant, while the third raises potential concerns. Indeed, those in favour of bridging normative and empirical theory, hint at a very real problem of meta-theoretical inconsistency without indicating how it might be resolved (Reus-Smit, 2008: 70-81).

Civil War

Civil war has become the dominant mode of organized violence in the post-Cold War international system (see also Walter, in this volume). If one did nothing more than read newspaper coverage of such conflicts, the possibilities for theoretical synthesis would seem limitless. The casual reader would quickly discover that civil wars are: caused by the strategic calculations of manipulative political elites; the result of deeply embedded social and cultural norms; all about greed and looting; all about emotions; driven by senses of community that transcend state borders; inflamed by external actors seeking materially to weaken one side in the conflict; and dominated by rebel groups who maintain their cohesion by socializing recruits, or by terrorizing them, or through the exercise of charismatic leadership.

Despite such headlines, this is an academic subfield where synthetic theoretical arguments are notable mainly by their absence. Leading proponents of bridge building in the abstract adopt – for reasons unclear – a position of theoretical monism when writing on civil war (compare Fearon and Wendt, 2002, with Fearon and Laitin, 2003). In addition, the constructivist turn that has opened possibilities for bridge building in other IR subfields has received little play among students of civil war.

Contemporary studies of civil war are thus an interesting case for contextualizing my arguments on synthesis. What have these scholars gained and what have they lost by being more the gladiator than the bridge builder? I begin the analysis with a brief review of this literature,

and then focus on a particular aspect of civil war – its transnational and international dimensions; in both instances, my concern is the presence or absence of efforts at synthesis and pluralism.

By contemporary, I refer to the vibrant research program on civil conflict that emerged in the mid-1990s, after the end of the Cold War. Scholars working in this area have researched all phases of civil wars, the various factors and actors that influence their conduct, and the role of the international community in post-conflict peace building (Blattman and Miguel, 2010; Tarrow, 2007, for overviews). The research has been progressive and cumulative, with later work building upon earlier findings, methods, or data.

For example, after realizing that early data collection efforts were cast at too aggregate a level – thus missing the key role of many sub-state variables – scholars devoted considerable effort to developing new, disaggregated and geo-referenced datasets (Buhaug and Gates, 2002; Buhaug and Rød, 2006). In another instance, a leading scholar criticized work on civil war for its excessive reliance on quantitative methods (Sambanis, 2004); researchers responded by adding a rich qualitative, case-study component to subsequent work (Autesserre, 2010; Weinstein, 2007; see also Wood, 2003).

A book by Stathis Kalyvas (2006) is emblematic of the progressive nature of this research program. In a literature that too often measured cause via correlation and statistical techniques, Kalyvas sought to capture the causal mechanisms of violence and their (varying) roles in civil war. He theorized them at a micro-level, and then tested the argument on a wealth of data drawn from the Greek civil war. The book has rightly been praised as a major advance in our understanding of the dynamics of civil war (Tarrow, 2007).

At the same time, Kalyvas makes no pretence that his book is a work of synthesis or theoretical pluralism. Instead, it is solidly anchored in a rational-choice framework, one that at best makes a weak nod to the role of social factors. As Kalyvas notes, because his ‘theory uses a rationalist baseline, its predictive failures may be a way to grasp the work of noninstrumental factors, such as norms and emotions’ (Kalyvas, 2006: 13).

In later work, Kalyvas again turns to the role of socially constructed factors in civil war, in this case, identities. Despite a passing reference to constructivism, there is no real engagement

with it, and the overall analysis is limited by its theoretical monism (Kalyvas, 2008). On the one hand, Kalyvas should be commended for making identity a variable, one that is endogenous to civil conflict – moves that had long been resisted by most others working on civil war. On the other, his failure to theorize synthetically results in a very truncated understanding of exactly how identity is constructed.⁶ To be fair, Kalyvas is in good company, as researchers across the civil war literature have shown little interest in developing plural frameworks to explain its dynamics (Annan, *et al*, 2009; Blattman, 2007; Fortna, 2004; Gates, 2002; Gleditsch and Salehyan, 2006; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2007; Toft, 2007; Weinstein, 2007).

Exploring the transnational aspects of civil war is another area where one sees progress and value added. In early work, there was an inclination ‘to treat civil wars as purely domestic phenomena’ and a consequent neglect of ‘transborder linkages and processes’ (Cederman, Girardin and Gleditsch, 2009: 404). More generally, the analytic starting point was a closed polity approach, where individual states were treated as independent entities (Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan, 2009: 8).

Cognizant of this limitation, several scholars spearheaded a move to develop more disaggregated databases, for example, by coding the attributes of non-state conflict actors (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, 2006). This has allowed them to document the impact of new actors and interactions across state boundaries in a wide array of cases. Work of this sort is important, not only advancing the civil-war research program, but – by adopting an open polity perspective – aligning itself with the bulk of IR scholarship. It has allowed scholars to offer a more nuanced picture of civil conflict, including its transnational dimensions (Salehyan, 2009).

Yet, like the broader civil-war literature, this work on its transnational dimensions shows little interest in developing theoretically plural frameworks. The social theory on offer is rational choice, with transnationalism typically only viewed through the lens of cost/benefit calculations, bargaining games or strategic interaction (Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan, 2009: *passim*). Moreover, very few connections are made to the rich and varied literature on transnational relations in world politics (Cederman, Girardin and Gleditsch, 2009; Gleditsch and Salehyan, 2006; see also

⁶ For excellent and pluralist overviews of the multiple ways identity can be theorized, see Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, McDermott, 2009; and – specifically in the context of civil war – Wood, 2008.

Risse, in this volume). This matters because it deprives the civil-war transnationalists of a ready made roster of causal mechanisms – both instrumental and noninstrumental – for theorizing the transnational-local nexus (Bob, 2005; Cooley and Ron, 2002; Price, 1998; Shain and Barth, 2003; see also Checkel, forthcoming). As Cederman, *et al*, argue ‘additional research is needed on the details of the border-transgressing bond, especially as regards the nature of the actor-specific mechanism’ (Cederman, Girardin, Gleditsch, 2009: 433).

In sum, students of civil war have not been bridge builders. As for my three evaluatory metrics, meta-theoretical consistency is a non issue. Nearly all these scholars build their arguments from the same underlying philosophical foundation; the issue of how to do science is simply not relevant. Cumulation – theoretical and otherwise – is clearly evident, with scholars building upon each other’s insights in nontrivial ways to advance the knowledge frontier.

The trade off comes at the level of explanatory richness. As seen, work on international institutions – because of a focus on bridge building – has offered increasingly rich, multi-causal explanations that advance scope conditions for the multiple roles they play in global politics. The same is not evident in studies of civil war. Above, I used examples that demonstrated what this research lost by failing to theorize non-instrumental dynamics. In fact, a smaller group of scholars theorizes the latter, but then fails to build bridges to instrumental dynamics.

Consider the work of Autesserre (2009, 2010), which advances an intriguing argument on how discursive frames shape the way in which international actors intervene in the wake of civil wars. While she briefly addresses instrumental and materialist variables (Autesserre, 2009: 272-75), these are treated as alternative explanations that are shown to come up short in her case. There is nothing wrong with this strategy, and it is quite the norm for the journal – *International Organization* – where she published. However, more ambitiously, she could have theorized the scope conditions for her argument, as a part of a domain-of-application bridge building exercise. Are there locales, settings and times when frames do not matter and instrumental dynamics come to the fore?⁷

⁷ Wood, 2003, is another carefully argued study of the role played by non-instrumental factors in civil war. Similar to Autesserre, she views instrumental dynamics as alternative explanations that fail to explain fully the outcome at

Summary

The answer to the counterfactual posed at the beginning of this section is thus a cautious ‘yes, contemporary IR does look different due to synthesis and bridge building.’ We have more nuanced and richer explanations for a number of actors and factors in global politics – from the role of international institutions and organizations, to the relation between critical-normative and substantive theory. In quite a change from the early 1990s, one now sees a good bit of productive discussion and exchange between rationalists and (conventional) constructivists (Zuern and Checkel, 2005, for example). Scholars have thus risen to the challenge posed by early proponents of bridge building; we do now have a better picture of reality.

At the same time, it is clear that the move to synthesis is endorsed – at best – by a healthy minority of IR scholars. Moreover, its practice and execution over the past 15 years have created a new set of challenges and dilemmas, ones that are a direct consequence of the turn to pluralism.

Building Better Bridges

If bridge building is not to become another IR fad whose time has passed – and if this chapter is not to vanish in the third edition of *The Handbook* – then two issues need further attention: theoretical cumulation and meta-theory. The first points to limitations in the current practice of synthesis, while the second highlights the potential of a future, bolder form of it.

Taking Theory Seriously

To begin, it is useful to recall Fearon and Wendt’s rallying cry for bridge building: ‘to combine insights, cross boundaries and, if possible, synthesize specific arguments in hope of gaining more compelling answers and a better picture of reality (Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 68). Here, theory – those ‘specific arguments’ – is clearly at the service of empirics, giving us better

answers that map closer into the world as it really is.⁸ This rank ordering makes sense, given the context and disciplinary history to which bridge builders were responding.

Yet, as my review indicates, it is not clear what kind of theory results from efforts at synthesis. At best, one gets a middle-range argument, where several variables, in combination, explain an outcome. In principle, there is nothing wrong with such theory; it has long had influential advocates, from Robert Merton in the early years after World War II to Alexander George in recent decades (George, 1993). However, middle-range theory has two potential drawbacks about which bridge builders should be aware. I illuminate these by returning to work on international institutions, an area where we have seen considerable efforts at synthesis.

First, middle-range theory – of international institutions, in this case – will often be over-determined. That is, with several independent variables in play, it is not possible to isolate the causal impact of any single factor. For example, in their work on international institutions and socialization, Checkel and collaborators theorized and convincingly documented three different causal variables producing socializing outcomes at the state-individual levels (Checkel, 2007b). However, as critics noted (Zuern and Checkel, 2005), they had much more difficulty parsing out the independent causal role of each one.

One way to address and minimize this problem is by emphasizing research design at early stages of a project (Johnston, 2005). This may sound like ‘Grad Seminar 101’ advice, but it needs nonetheless to be stressed. Many of those interested in bridge building are scholars seeking to understand better a particular problem by synthesizing various analytic tools. Yet, to combine theories and causal variables quite clearly puts a premium on carefully crafted research designs. Absent this effort, there is a danger that the aspiring bridge builder will produce eclectic mush.

Second, when large parts of a research program are characterized by bridge building, the production of cumulative theoretical knowledge may be hindered. Again consider work on international institutions, where the various middle-range efforts described above are not coalescing into a broader theoretical whole. Instead, we have proliferating lists of variables and

⁸ That these two scholars would advocate such a view is somewhat ironic given their well-earned reputations for developing theoretical accounts that abstract away from and simplify the real world.

causal mechanisms. One possible response to this diversity is to embrace it, arguing it is precisely what IR scholarship needs if it is ever to ‘speak to concrete issues of policy and practice’ (Katzenstein and Sil, 2010a: 412, *passim*).

A different response is to embrace such diversity, but *also* to argue that we can do better theoretically. Here, one promising possibility is typological theory, or ‘theories about how combinations of mechanisms interact in shaping outcomes for specified populations’ (Bennett, forthcoming: 11). Compared to middle-range approaches, this form of theorizing has several advantages. It provides a way to address interactions effects and other forms of complexity (missed, for example, in Checkel, 2007b); stimulates fruitful iteration between cases, the specification of populations, and theories; and creates a framework for cumulative progress. On the latter, subsequent researchers can add or change variables and re-code or add cases while still building on earlier attempts at typological theorizing on the phenomenon (Bennett, forthcoming: 14-15; see also Bennett and George, 2005: chapter 11).

Taking Philosophy Seriously

My analysis confirms Ole Wæver’s (1998) finding, but now at the level of bridge building: There is no global community of IR bridge builders. Rather, with a few important exceptions in Canada and Germany, the debate over synthesis and pluralism has largely been an American one.⁹ Consistent with this fact, my review has emphasized questions at the core of American social science – causation, causal mechanisms, and theory development. Put differently, the divide being bridged is theoretical – and not meta-theoretical. The latter, it would seem, is a bridge too far.

This state of affairs leads to three observations. First, it means we build bridges where we can control for epistemology, which, in turn, means they have only one lane, running between rationalism and conventional constructivism. Thus, one unintended consequence of bridge-building may be theoretical closure (Zehfuss, 2002: chapters 1, 6), as interpretive IR theory is effectively placed outside the debate and conversation over synthesis.

⁹ See also the TRIPS survey, which shows – for the 10 countries surveyed – that IR theorists in the US are the most enthusiastic about efforts at synthesis. Jordan, *et al*, 2009: 42.

Second, despite the imbalance seen in this essay, it *is* possible to build theoretical bridges over meta-theoretical divides. Earlier, I reviewed Price's tentative efforts to do so in the realm of ethical/normative theory (Price, 2008a, b); here, I provide one other example. In a masterful work on Soviet and Russian foreign policy, Hopf (2002) combines interpretive textual analysis – to recover inductively Soviet/Russian identities – with case studies employing causal process tracing – to show how those identities influence the choice of foreign allies. Essentially, he adopts a temporal sequencing bridge building strategy, where factors from different approaches work together over time to explain a given domain – Soviet/Russian foreign policy in his case. Hopf is clearly 'synthesiz[ing] specific arguments in hope of gaining more compelling answers and a better picture of reality (Fearon and Wendt, 2002: 68).

Why then is a book like this the exception that proves the rule, with bridge building across the positivist-interpretive divide so rare? This leads to a third and final observation: Bridge builders need to get real about philosophy, developing a meta-theoretical foundation for their plural and synthetic research efforts. Indeed, such efforts typically lack 'the kinds of epistemic norms and uniform standards that enable research traditions to evaluate individual contributions and proclaim some degree of internal progress.' And developing 'cross-epistemic judgments' to address this problem is surely the best way forward (Katzenstein and Sil, 2010a: 425). Yet, the magnitude of the latter task should not be underestimated, especially given the often narrow nature of graduate training in philosophy of science and methods (Bennett, *et al*, 2003) and professional incentive structures that, at early career stages, militate against pluralism (Lohmann, 2007).

In arguing that students of IR pluralism need to return to questions of meta-theory, my purpose is not to reinforce and reify (antagonistic) philosophical positions that are in principle not bridgeable. Rather, to develop 'cross-epistemic judgments' requires operational knowledge of both positivism and interpretivism, and of alternative philosophical positions more amenable to the pluralist enterprise.¹⁰ The good news is that developments in the philosophy of social science offer bridge builders a revitalized conceptual platform for synthesis that does bridge

¹⁰ The point here is identical to that about theory. Mantra-like repetition of key phrases – such as 'middle range theory' – is no substitute for operational, practical knowledge on their use.

epistemological divides. Here, I have in mind the renewed interest in scientific realism with its mandate of epistemological pluralism (Chernoff, 2002; Wight, 2006) and efforts to revitalize a pragmatist ethos that minimizes reliance upon rigid foundational principles (Hellmann, 2003; Johnson, 2006; Katzenstein and Sil, 2008).

At a practical level, this exercise in meta-theoretical pluralism will not be easy and will require familiarity with and training in theories and methods from diverse traditions. Yet, the payoff – that ‘better picture of reality’ – would be high. It would reinvigorate efforts at pluralism, spurring IR scholars to link interpretive practice and causal process in security policy (Pouliot, 2010); to theorize how ethnography and causality can be linked to produce better theories of conflict and power (Wood, 2003; Schatz, 2009); to connect process tracing, discourse analysis and counterfactuals through common evaluative criteria (Lupovici, 2009); and more generally to explore the interface between interpretive and positivist IR (Hopf, 2007).

* * *

At heart, bridge builders are theorists with a healthy attitude of ‘let’s just get on with it,’ which they have exploited to push IR in important new directions over the past decade. Their bridges may need some new theoretical and meta-theoretical ‘trusses,’ but thanks to these scholars paradigm wars and dialogues of the deaf are less dominant forces in the discipline. And that is very good news indeed.

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