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The Politics of International Relations Building Bridges and the Quest for Relevance¹

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The 21st Century sadly is proving to be a volatile and violent one where the hopes of the immediate years of the post-Cold War era have proven to be ephemeral. International Relations, (IR) at first blush, appears to be ideally positioned as a discipline to help us understand or even cope with the extreme dissonance of the international system. A discreet academic field for a century now, but in fact one of the oldest approaches, IR seems to brim with promise to offer explanation, identify causality and enable cogent prediction.

After all, in an era where we emphasize interdisciplinary studies and across-the-board approaches IR appears to be a compelling intellectual ecosystem. It has and continues to borrow, incorporate, expropriate and integrate from the widest range of fields. Employing multiple levels of analysis IR roams from anthropology to technology, from cultural analysis to gender studies. Nothing seems to be beyond its scope and includes in its analytic realm almost everything from human rights to terrorism and even a new scourge, cyber-warfare. It is, in short, a field that seems to be all about “bridges” that would help unity or at least transcend differences.

The above appearance, or aspiration, unfortunately turns out to be deceptive, just as do the hopes of explanation, causality identification and prediction that are so crucial to relevance. A more thorough and forthright examination of the field reveals considerable segmentation, misunderstanding, mis-reading and internecine battles that at times speak more of walls than bridges. The centrifugal forces in the field too often turn out to be stronger than the centripetal ones, all to the considerable detriment of IR’s need to be both illuminating and relevant.

What I wish to address here, using a broad brush, is not so much the state-of-the-field but rather to identify some of the crucial questions that we need to ask (perhaps even more than answers) in order to do a kind of stress test of the field to gauge which approach or approaches offer the best possibilities for efficacy and relevance. Further I wish to look to the possibility of “bridges”

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with a particular emphasis on classical realism. Within this context, I wish to note, a suggestion for “bridges” is not an open ended call for unexamined amalgamation but rather bridge building that does not abandon standards or forego skepticism and one that recognizes the imperative of relevance. In order to address at least part of this task I will look at several issue areas.

Plus ça change...

In academic terms, IR again is perhaps the oldest profession. We can certainly go back two and a half millennia and read with great benefit the writings of Thucydides (5th Century), Chanakya (4th Century), or Sun Tzu (6th Century). There is understandably though a desire to progress, to formulate new ideas and to introduce novel methodologies. This is both natural and desirable. The problem is that there is a risk of just trying to reinvent the basic wheel, even if in some altered form. Are we looking for a truly new and more effective approach then, or a mere “a cult of the new” which leaves us with little understanding of the crucial underpinning principles that give a field the necessary efficacy and relevance? The latter quest, even if inadvertent or unconscious, also creates risks of unhinged abstraction and methodological obsession among students and scholars of IR alike.

We have seen through history the development of IR theories that range from meta to mere islands. Realism, and variants competing, with liberalism/idealism/liberal internationalism, in the late 20th Century came to be joined by social constructivism and a variety of existing and evolving post-modernist and critical theories. It would take too long to enumerate everything that confronts students and scholars, including Marxist dependence theory, the Core-Periphery model, various leadership theories (including the inherent “bad faith” model), all in addition to concepts of IR that naturally incorporate power, national interest, sovereignty, polarity, interdependence, dependency and so forth, at times in a mind-numbing plethora that, wrongly I contend, might suggest that anything goes as long as it armed with an appropriate scholarly verbiage and/or incorporates seemingly rigorous/scientific methodology.

The above is precisely why we need to take stock and why it is so instructive to go back, at least at times, to the “ancients”. As I noted earlier, contributions to the development of IR during the last two and a half millennia have come from all the major cultures and it would be a mistake to think of it as just Western or Eurocentric. My concentration here on the Western canon is not to suggest superiority but rather I do so because that is the one with which I am most familiar.

Let me start by inviting students and specialists in IR, alike to go back (as Simon Critchley rightly has done) to Thucydides and his *The History of the*

Peloponnesian War. In particular the Melian Dialogue is central to an understanding of IR. It is about the play of power and its intersection with discursive practice – in this case an extended and ultimately, (certainly from the outcome for the Melians), a tragically failed exercise. In his direct and unsentimental historian's role, Thucydides lays bare the realities of power and the dangers of false hope. This does not mean that Thucydides had no normative interest but in his acuity in starkly laying out actions, thoughts and discourse he is as modern, and frankly more eloquent, than much of the discussion or debate on "soft" and "hard" power or on the assessment of how and why power is exercised, or the didactic debates on what is "meant" by power

When we move a couple of millennia forward, we still benefit from the thoughts of the "new ancients", Machiavelli and Hobbes who vividly address the issues of power and conflict. Hugo Grotius spoke to the need for peace and preventing or at least regulating wars in a strikingly modern legal lexicon. Locke, Montesquieu, Clausewitz, Kant and Nietzsche among many others remain profoundly relevant, if only we have the drive, patience and the humility to read them carefully and receptively. Sadly instead, too often we spend far too much time in internecine debates that too easily dismiss, misunderstand or misperceive, and different approaches become scholarly solitudes. In all of this we lose extremely valuable knowledge and ways of understanding that are currently in such urgent need.

Internecine Debates

It may be perhaps instructive thus to touch briefly on what I would characterize as a rather fruitless epistemological dance between the "positivists" and "post-positivists". It has been ripe with misreading and misunderstanding. The allegation, if not outright accusation, that positivist theories are intent on replicating the methods of the natural sciences is both an overstatement and misreading. It tends to lump together political realism, neo-realism and liberalism when in fact even realism and neo-realism are starkly different. Realism attempts a grand theory while at the same time it recognizes its grave inherent limitations. Certainly the best proponents such as Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron made this abundantly clear. Neo-realism, by contrast, places an extraordinary emphasis on structure (hence also known as structural realism) where, perhaps its most prominent proponent, the late Kenneth Waltz would bizarrely argue, based on such structural determinism, that the genocidal regime in Tehran, which is driven by a messianic theology of after-world salvation, should get nuclear weapons and that this would be a stabilizing factor.

It is key neo-realists (and not the political realists) who have tried to mimic the naturalist conception of science just as it should be increasingly evident, that in physics, for instance, certain key physical concepts and theories that insisted on exactness have been abandoned or at least modified. Let me offer a small example of the perils of the scientific approach in some of the work of a respected and well-intentioned scholar, the late J. David Singer, author of *Quantitative International Politics*. In co-founding the Correlates of War Project (COW) he attempted to devise a scientific means of finding an overarching definition of war. In brief, the definition of war he offered was “sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of one thousand battle-related fatalities... within a twelve month period”. Compare that to movie star John Wayne’s definition: “War is hell”. In an informal survey among my students in the past couple of years, over ninety percent favoured the John Wayne definition.

Contrast such an attempt to mimic the “exact” sciences by some key neo-realists and others with the approach of the most influential 20th Century realist, Hans Morgenthau. A thorough reading of his works, (that in so many universities are now out of fashion), reveals not just a humanistic wish for international law to succeed while recognizing the current realities of power but also the rejection of the fetishism of a “scientific” approach. In particular in his essay “Science Man vs Power Politics” Morgenthau strongly rejects the idea that politics and power can be studied scientifically. He insists on nuance, the art of analysis and that in no way obviate his normative concerns.

Further, realists such as Morgenthau employed a holistic approach where concepts such as responsiveness open vast possibilities for analysis of the role of ideas and diplomacy (before constructivists ever talked about ideational drives and discursive practices). And the most forthright realists will also quickly acknowledge the limits of political realism. Realism is uncertain, it is inadequate and it is in certain ways “unreal”. Consequently, what I have offered above is not a defense of political realism but rather an invitation to relevance. In crucial ways a focused quest for relevance in IR helps theory becomes compelling and enduring.

In order to gauge both the limitations and the potential of political realism, particularly in building bridges, we need to have a more accurate understanding than the frequent caricature that “progressive” literature in IR portrays realism to be. Let us start with Machiavelli. It is true that he replaces the traditional *virtue* which related to certain moral qualities including justice and self-restraint, with *virtù*, which alluded to ability or vigour. At one level it may be said that Machiavelli rejected the use of morality in internal and external politics. This however, de-contextualizes the thrust of his approach to politics. First, even though he justified amoral actions in politics for key purposes he did not suggest that such actions were not evil. That recognition of

the potential for evil is a crucial identification as well as possible restraint on policy makers. Second, and consequently, it is seminal to appreciate that Machiavelli offered prudential advice to leaders and he avidly defended the republican form of government. For Machiavelli, the suspension of moral consideration in politics consequently was not to be a matter of mere expediency. Moreover, he never retreated to the extreme forms of what the French call *raison d'état*, and certainly he needs to be distinguished from the Hegelian state-worship that led to such extremes, particularly in the 20th Century.

As for Morgenthau, for the second half of the 20th Century and for the current millennium, he, again, remains in key respects the most important realist. Though again, it has been unfashionable for some time at many departments of political science and of IR to teach Morgenthau's writings he is in many quarters becoming relevant again. Yet misunderstandings of what Morgenthau advocated, persists. First, we need to appreciate that normativity for Morgenthau and likeminded realists was an intrinsic part of political realism. Second, for Morgenthau specifically the normative reached for rationality. Third, Morgenthau did not suggest some simple separation between politics and ethics. It is vital to understand that ethics were not discarded in Morgenthau's principles of realism. Witness his sixth principle of realism where in Hillel-like fashion he wrote, "a man who was nothing but 'political man' would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints. A man who was nothing but 'moral man' would be a fool, for he would be completely lacking in prudence". Fourth, Morgenthau makes it clear that international peace is not to be achieved at the cost of eliminating any of the units in the international system. And fifth, Morgenthau also insisted that the quest for power was to be driven by an intelligent approach that understood that the pursuit of national self-interest, far from being incompatible with that of an international interest in peace, worked best in fact in tandem.

Consequently, even though Morgenthau is viewed as someone who was influenced by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and of course Hobbes, his approach is not incompatible with that of Kant who generally is put in the column of the liberal/idealist approach. And this is indeed where there are important possibilities for bridges. Kant wrote about perpetual peace and in the late 20th Century the best articulated modern iteration of this came from Michael Doyle who in many ways is the father of the democratic peace theory that retains considerable relevance. In an international system of *enlightened* national self-interest and one committed to the preservation of each unit as a prerequisite for peace, balancing is naturally best achieved through the creation of a community of democracies (not unlike the way balancing is achieved in the domestic systems of democracies). Doyle's contention that democracies do not go to war against other democracies (this is not to suggest that democracies do

not go to war with non-democracies) has the potential to open a road to effectively meld both realism and hope.

The realism of Morgenthau in fact can also be seen in the interplay between domestic and foreign policy and in certain respects foreshadows democratic peace theory. The notion of balancing power as a way to achieve crucial goals is evident in democratic politics and Morgenthau was not only keenly aware of the central significance of the balancing in the creation of the first modern democracy, that of the United States, but wrote glowingly about the Framers, particularly James Madison. In fact, modern democracies, if one goes back to the *Federalist Papers* and particularly James Madison's *Federalist No. 51* and *No. 10*, are not about the pursuit of virtue but about *the protection of rights*. The Framers recognized contradictory human instincts and frailties and the consequent potential for abusing power, and therefore they limited power through a system of checks and balances. That goal and mechanism are, in essence, at the heart of every modern democracy. The system of checks and balances is transferred to the international level in realism and in a sense also in democratic peace theory which looks to international balance, at least until the entire international system becomes composed of democratic states, at which point the balancing mechanism would be endogenous.

Historically, vast numbers of policy makers have found a balance of power system compelling, even if they did not refer to a theory. I can think of no better example of a practitioner of classical political realism than the great Romanian statesman and diplomat Nicolae Titulescu – even though he might be viewed by some as an idealist. Titulescu who, as we know, was Foreign Minister of Romania from 1927 to 1928 and beginning in 1921 acted as Romania's permanent representative to the League of Nations (and as the League's president in 1930 and 1931) was a keen observer and practitioner of both power and diplomacy. Through skillful use of diplomacy he greatly raised the power and prestige of a relatively small country while keenly aware of international limitations. He fought for good relations and respect among all states and recognized the dangers of aggression early. Though a realist when it came to power, he courageously expressed his normative concerns. In 1936, at the League, when Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie addressed the organization following the brutal invasion of his country by fascist Italy, attending Italian "journalists" demonstrated racist disrespect for the Ethiopian leader. Titulescu, who enjoyed enormous respect in the hall, without hesitation shouted out "*a la porte les sauvages*" (to the door with the savages or, more colloquially, throw out the savages). He also understood the intersection of soft and hard power better than Western democracies like Britain and France who refused to stand up to Mussolini and Titulescu's warnings proved prophetic.

Realism nonetheless is usually deemed to be *entirely* separate from liberalism. Is this, however, correct? There are, in fact, congruencies of interest

between realists and liberalists (as some of the above would suggest) and there is no doubt that realists prefer democracy and value human rights. Realism was never about amorality but rather about the limits of what can be achieved in an actual world situation. It was not opposed to ideology; rather it rejected and feared ideological dogmatism. It is ironic then that some would suggest that constructivism is a replacement for realism or even liberalism. Some of the advocates of replacement such as Alexander Wendt, possibly the most sophisticated constructivist, nonetheless, as Samuel Barkin has noted, concedes that at least to the extent that realism is about power, he also considers himself a realist. It would then be quite unwise to try to “wall off” realism (and liberalism) and no theories can be static and remain relevant.

Exaggerated Hopes

The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union (and Eastern Europe) gave way to uncharacteristic and premature optimism. Francis Fukuyama, in an ironic if not triumphalist fashion, wrote about “the end of history”. He meant by this the triumph of the liberal democratic idea but his assessment was also imbued with a kind of Hegelian sense of history where the dialectic as a motor of development (through counter-posing opposites and reaching synthesis), ended. The persistence or at the very least the full blown return of geopolitics as Walter Russell Mead has contended recently, belies Fukuyama’s assessment.

The problem in IR, however is not optimism. After all, the implosion of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the demise of the Soviet state represented a tectonic shift brimming with possibilities. The problem was the acuity of the analysis and the difficulty of prediction. Realism and liberalism had not adequately predicted or explained this monumental change. A “scientific theory” like neo-realism was not up to the task. Scientific methodology did not resolve the dilemmas or conundrums.

There is, in fact, much to be sceptical about regarding the scientific approach and the frequent obsession with methodology rather than relevance. This is by no means a suggestion that one should not employ rigorous methodology. Students of IR should have strong preparation in quantitative as well as qualitative techniques. The problem has been overconfidence or de-contextualization of methodology that leads at times to a kind of academic abstraction that is unhelpful. Some of the quantitative methodologies have reached a level of seeming elegance without meaningfulness. They are, to put it colloquially, like watching a dog walking on its hind legs. It may look impressive but it is quite unnatural.

Partly as reaction and partly as a natural development in any discipline to seek new or better theories and concepts the “reflectivist” critique of the

scientific approach has offered different dimensions of understanding and analysis and emanates from a variety of directions. These can range from Habermas to Derrida and Foucault. As part of this trend, constructivists, at one level, (who hold that the international system is socially constructed where the interests and identities of the actors derive from "... inter-subjective social structures") brought a new optimism to IR theory in no small measure through their efforts to address the problem of normativity. It is always helpful to try to fill lacunae. Is it not essential though that in addressing the issues of normativity an approach needs to move not only on the level of meta theory but also in terms of substantive claims about international politics? Helpfully, constructivism does so in certain respects, especially by looking at identity. Constructivists such as Ted Hopf even examined the way in which states find their identities "in others" when he looked at Russian foreign policy. Substantive theoretical claims, however, need to do more than that and cannot afford to be unidimensional. True, constructivism did address certain substantive problems of wealth and security but there are major questions as to how successful it did so, particularly in terms of causality.

Some constructivists, such as Emanuel Adler have attempted to suggest that constructivism is occupying a kind of middle ground between rationalist theories – whether realism, neorealism or neoliberal institutionalism – and interpretative approaches (such as postmodernism, Frankfurt school-oriented critical theories and feminism). At least this appears an attempt at bridging. Alexander Wendt, again possibly the most perceptive and sophisticated among the constructivist scholars, has sought to pursue an explicit theoretical bridge between nation state identity and structural theories of international relation. Further, Wendt does not entirely exclude building on realism (though, unfortunately, and I would contend mistakenly, at one point he does suggest that realism and constructivism are logically incompatible). In particular, I believe that he is mistaken in characterizing realist theory as one that sees politics having "a material rather than social basis", thus implying logical incompatibility. Morgenthau among other realists, for instance, has forcefully contended that nonmaterial factors are vital if we are to fully comprehend power. By contrast, some of the more restrictive constructivists again contend that constructivism is an alternative to or transcends realism (including, it appears, Adler).

A constructivism that rests on and makes more modest claims can indeed be useful and help with bridging rather than building walls. First, however, it should not confuse its argument with neo-realism, which is about structure, with realism, that is classical realism, which is far more encompassing and nuanced. Second, constructivism's insistence that IR structures are socially constructed and that in a kind of interaction these structures shape actors and identities and interests rather than just their behaviour is problematic in terms of

causality. The latter tends to be far more complex and even in the case of Wendt there has been a problem with *the direction* of causality, I would suggest, especially when he looks at the issues of identity formation which he contends is based on both natural and cultural selection. Third, by claiming that IR structures are socially constructed, constructivism discards a whole range of other causal factors which classical realists or others may not be able to readily identify, but such an inability is no proof of nonexistence. Fourth, constructivism may not adequately appreciate or explain the difference between an international system that is *anarchic*, as illuminated by realists from Hobbes to Hedley Bull, where they look at a system that is characterized by self-help rather than one which some constructivists view as defined by *anarchy*, in the sense of chaos and confusion. Wendt's catchy contention that "anarchy is what states make of it" unfortunately may not be particularly helpful. Fifth, constructivism's insistence on the *ideational* has a degree of attractiveness because realism definitely does not reject the power of ideas nor does realism underplay the role of diplomacy which in modern iterations could certainly fit in with the notion of discursive practices.

Constructivism's remarkable optimism, however, in its explanatory powers and in the justice of its normative goals threatens a break with realist (and liberal for that matter) scholarly traditions and easily dismisses realism (at least among many of the constructivist scholars) as foundational. Yet current developments in the international system raise major questions about the efficacy of constructivism, especially if it posits itself as an alternative to realism. Constructivism for example has not resolved the problem of dealing with what is known as the "security dilemma". Further, it certainly does not sufficiently explicate the problem of identity formation or characterization in current crises. Let's look at a specific example. Here in Bucharest at the NATO summit in 2008 Vladimir Putin, the Russian President forebodingly told American President George Bush that Ukraine is not even a state. This relates to the "other" as identity formation, and may be tangentially ideational, but when one looks at the practical implications, namely the current Russian attempt to dismantle or entirely absorb Ukraine and deny its identity through a process of delegitimization, constructivism's insistence on the ideational and discursive practices doesn't quite measure up – particularly in comparison to the Kremlin's geopolitical considerations. Does anyone seriously believe that better discursive practices would have prevented or would reverse Russian aggression in Ukraine?

Again, there are certain developments that we may not be able to explain in terms of causality or form a theoretical explanation that immediately explicates both cause and effect. But that does not mean that we should just cling to any explanation. It is at times necessary to reduce over-complexity via a kind of Ockham's razor that gets back to first principles and this is where realism and what has been *logically* constructed on top of it seems compelling.

This is where we also perhaps need to display a degree of modesty in terms of our claims and recognize the limitations of our capacity at theory formulation, be sceptical of various explanations without becoming cynical and try to separate that which we know from that which we do not. We need to look at issues and crises the way they are and the international system the way it is rather than the way we wish them to be. Critchley is right to refer to Nietzsche's cogent advice that in looking at hard factuality we need to have "courage in the face of reality".

The history of prediction in IR, (at best an art, and certainly not a science), is hardly a glorious one. Nonetheless, there are achievements and there remains enormous potential. We, however, as scholars, practitioners or statesmen, need to display a certain degree of modesty in our claims of what we know and what we can achieve. The approach should be holistic and dynamic but is not about perfection. Rather IR theorizing is a continuing struggle, where we have to ask the right kind of questions before we can hope to attain answers. It would also behoove us to have a sense of humour about our field for we have witnessed too many miscues, misunderstandings and premature claims of success. But possibilities for building bridges remain. Much of what was done certainly was done in good faith and it is worth remembering that we haven't always been wrong.