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International Relations Theory

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International Relations (IR) is defined by some as a discipline of its own, not merely a sub-discipline of Political Science. In large part this is due to the fact that particular understandings of “theory” have shaped the (sub-) discipline in ways which set it more strongly apart from other sub-disciplines of Political Science. The mere fact that *International Relations Theory* (IRT) and *International Political Theory* (IPT) merit separate articles in this Handbook (and rightly so for most scholars in IR and Political Theory) underlines this special status (see Lebow in this handbook). However, a strong distinction between “empirical” or “causal” questions, dealt with mainly under the heading of IRT, and “normative” questions, tackled in IPT, has always been and continues to be seen as problematic opposition, if only by a minority of scholars in the field. While this view is shared here, it is respected at the same time that a survey of the “state of the art” of IR theorizing should reflect these divisions of labor. In what follows a survey of IRT is offered which locates it both historically and systematically.

A History of International Relations Theory

IR is widely considered to be a rather young academic discipline – and it is also very much a “Western” product in the sense that many of its self-descriptions in disciplinary histories mostly refer to authors and sites of scholarly production located in Europe and North America. This has started to change during the last two decades as non-Western voices have made themselves heard. However, even though the historiography of IR has become a more contested subject – which, in itself, is the best indicator for increasing diversity – the beginnings of the discipline are still often located in the early 20th century and in Europe: The endowment of a professorial chair in “International Politics” at the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth in 1919 is often being taken as the birth of the field (Schmidt 1998, 155). Alternative readings are offered by scholars locating the origins in medieval times (Knutsen 1992; Ashworth 2014), not to mention scholars

formulating a more radical critique from a postcolonial perspective that the very framing of “international relations” from a Eurocentric point of view has sidelined alternative interpretations from the very beginning of engaging with it (Seth 2013). In any case, writing a history of the discipline has become more of a contested issue in the last two decades. One of the key questions remains whether (and to what extent) such a history can be written in terms of the so-called “great debates” (Schmidt 2013, 13-21) or “waves” (Bull 1972: 184) – not to mention whether it can be written by ignoring those “non-Western” contributions which are sometimes characterized as “soft theory” in contrast to (Western) “hard theory” (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 10).

This contribution is based on the pragmatic choice that a rough orientation along the theme of “great debates” (in addition to references to non-Western contributions) is useful in terms of identifying dominating understandings of and shifts in “theory” over time. It is not a defense of the “great debates” perspective but a recognition that this perspective has shaped the discipline’s view of itself – including the fact that sophisticated attempts at “demystifying” the “great debates” theme have not abated (de Carvalho et.al. 2011; Schmidt 2013; Ashworth 2018). It also includes the acknowledgement – to refer to a provocative thought experiment by Ken Booth – that such a history would obviously have to be written differently had the discipline’s first chair not been tasked with the concerns driving “a wealthy Liberal MP in Wales” in the light of WW I but had it been “derived from the life and work of the admirable black, feminist, medic, she-chief of the Zulus, Dr. Zungu” (Booth 1996, 330; Booth 1995, 124-126) and had its agenda been shaped in the cultural context of South African “ubuntu” (K. Smith 2012; Ngcoya 2015). Yet, there are obvious reasons (e.g. structures of power and knowledge production) why particular agendas prevailed and some narratives stuck while others didn’t.

To start off, then, in a perspective dominated by European concerns from the first half of 20th century “theory” did not play as central a role in IR scholarship as it did after World War II. The assessment by Arend Lijphart that “like the realists, the idealists were traditional in their methodology” (Lijphart 1974, 19) was an expression of this marginal status where “theory” did not play much of a role conceptually. Debate centered on substantive issues such as “the relative merits of the national interest, legal institutions, and moral precepts as criteria for guiding and evaluating international behavior” (Knorr and Rosenau 1969, 12), not “theory”. Still three aspects stand out which were

characteristic of this early phase. First, the distinction made in this Handbook between “international relations theory” and “international political theory” would have been an odd one to draw for IR scholars in the 1920s or 1930s because their understanding of “theory” differed markedly from what one might consider its usual understanding in the discipline today. As Martin Wight put in 1960: “If political theory is the tradition of speculation about the State, then international theory may be supposed to be a tradition of speculation about the society of States, or the family of nations, or the international community” (Wight 1960, 36). Self-styled international relations “realists” concurred in emphasizing that “the realist regards political theory as a sort of codification of political practice” (Carr 1946, 12). In other words, well into the 1950s the “theory” of international relations was closely related to the theory of politics.

Secondly, and related, theory in this understanding was very much a *practical* thing which also meant that a strong distinction between the “normative” and the “empirical” was not made. This was already expressed in the endowment of the Aberystwyth chair which defined “International Politics” as “political science in its application to international relations, with special reference to the best means of promoting peace between nations” (quoted in Schmidt 1998, 155). Although the explicitly normative (or “idealists”) appeal to study international relations in order to promote peace was harshly criticized by “realists” they nevertheless acknowledged the internal link between theory and practice and the need to “recognise that theory, as it develops out of practice and develops into practice, plays its own transforming role in the process” (Carr 1946, 13).

Third, to the extent that the concept of “theory” was actually used it did not carry the positive connotations of epistemic superiority that the notion conveys in IR today. To the contrary, realists like E.H. Carr often used it interchangeably with “utopianism” (“The utopian makes political theory a norm to which political practice ought to conform” (Carr 1946, 12)). Realism in this sense was not a “theory” but an expression of (superior) “thought” more in line with the realities of international politics (see also Wight 1987; Bull 1976, 103-104).

In what is usually taken to be the second “great debate”, “theory” becomes somewhat more prominent although the main focus in this phase displayed a strong emphasis on methodological dimensions. In terms of a fixation on scholarly products Hedley Bull’s

plea for a “classical approach” to theory is usually seen as a key publication because it chastised supposedly novel “scientific” approaches for pushing an understanding of theory “based either upon logical or mathematical proof, or upon strict, empirical procedures of verification” (Bull 1966, 362). The “classical” understanding which Bull wanted to preserve instead was an “approach to theorizing that derives from philosophy, history, and law, and that is characterized above all by explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgment” (Bull 1966, 362). Sympathizers with the “behavioral revolution” did grant this a roughly adequate description of a fundamentally different conception of scholarship and the status of “theory” and “method”. However, in defending the “delayed” advent of the “behavioral revolution” as a progressive move they also highlighted that their emphasis on “the scientific method” was not based on a rejection of judgement but on a different understanding of how “judgement-judgements” ought to figure in the “ideal scientist’s” scholarly practices who “is self-conscious and explicit about both his methods for acquiring data and the intellectual steps by which he arrives at his conclusions” and who uses “quantitative procedures whenever possible because such procedures can be precisely described and duplicated by others” (Knorr and Rosenau 1969, 14, 16). Although non-Anglo-Saxon scholarship did not figure prominently in this “debate” many strands of Continental European IR were either exhibiting a “classical” or more traditionally European approach to theory, with different versions of Marxism playing some role (Jørgensen 2000, 15-16).

The substantive issues of contention discussed thus far disguise, however, how much the new focus on “theory” in Anglo-Saxon scholarship was the result of a concerted and strategic effort by an influential American foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and recognized international relations scholars in the late 1940s and early 1950s to shape the field of IR in a particular fashion. In a series of surveys and reports the field of IR was mapped in order to find out what concrete steps needed to be taken in order to “encourage ‘theoretical scholarship in international politics’” (Guilhot 2011, 7). In part this was the result of frustrations with an expanding behavioral social science which did not sit well with the understanding of classical scholarship of many European trained emigres (Guilhot 2011, 16-21). These moves culminated in a conference of well-known intellectuals of mostly European descent (such as Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Nitze, William T. R. Fox, Walter Lippmann, Arnold Wolfers) in May 1954 where the President of Rockefeller, Dean Rusk, summarized the task of the get-together in terms of

his “anxious(ness) to learn what the state of the field is intellectually and if we can do anything about it”, especially as far as “the state of theory in international politics” was concerned (Rockefeller Foundation 1954, 240). Although very different understandings of “theory” were articulated in two days of free-wheeling discussions, the meeting itself and the efforts undertaken by the Rockefeller Foundation in its aftermaths can be taken as a conscious “institutional decision to generate an autonomous disciplinary subspace” (Guilhot 2011, 12). One effect of the new emphasis on theory was that whole new “scientific” vocabularies were introduced into the field via the behavioral revolution on the one hand and a new interest in “systemic” approaches on the other (Waltz 2001[1954], ix; Kaplan 1961, 463). Moreover, these developments also significantly increased the impact of broadly “positivist” influences in the field. They also accentuated an increasing separation between international relations theory and political theory, further marginalizing normative concerns (Schmidt 2013, 18-20). This, of course, also affected the links with adjacent fields of international scholarship, such as international law, which had more thoroughly engaged with the effects of colonialism on (the study of) interstate relations, if often from a Western perspective (Grovoqui 1996; Anghie 2005, esp. chpts. 2-4; Koskenniemi 2001, 413-509; Hellmann 2017).

In what is sometimes (if not uniformly) called the “third” or “interparadigm debate” (Banks 1985) “theory” moved center stage for the first time in US-dominated IR. Some even say theory “‘exploded’ into IR” in the form of “metatheory” (Hamilton 2017, 136) because the very concept of theory became problematized in more thorough fashion. At the surface three “general explanations” or “paradigms” of international relations were identified (although they were not always named in the same fashion) – in Michael Banks’ version “realism”, “pluralism” and “structuralism” (Banks 1985, 9). With some historical distance many IR scholars considered this to be a counterproductive move or even “a block to scientific progress” (Waeber 1996, 150; see also Schmidt 2013, 15, 20). However, in many ways the new framing was “a unique conceptual event” because the very problematization of “theory-building” (Banks 1985, 8) “transformed what IR had always hitherto theorized as a dynamic and singular ‘real world’ of competitive IR theories, into a sui generis and atemporal plurality of static and coterminous ‘metaphysical worlds’ of theory” (Hamilton 2017, 139). The key here was the introduction of a distinction between two types of “theory” – specific or substantive theories about concrete international phenomena (e.g. “war” or “foreign policy decision-

making”) and “general theory” or “meta-theory”, i.e. the theorization of theory itself (Banks 1985, 11-13; Wæver 1996, 150-154).

The importation of Thomas Kuhn’s vocabulary of “paradigms”, “paradigm shifts” and “incommensurability” was quite significant in this context. Kuhn had argued that “normal science” is usually organized within established conceptual frameworks or paradigms and that theories are a reflection of these overarching frameworks and will, therefore, also be affected as a result of revolutionary “paradigm shifts” because basic concepts usually shift as a result (Kuhn, 1996[1962]; Kuhn 2000, 90-104). Starting to read Kuhn in the 1980s sensitized IR scholarship for the historicity of scientific development (or “progress”) and the fact that the meanings of concepts may shift if overarching paradigmatic frameworks shift. Moreover Kuhn’s thesis that “the early stages of most sciences have been characterized by continual competition between a number of distinct views” (Kuhn 1996[1962], 3; 16-17) also helped explain and – in connection with the notion of “incommensurability” – justify “why IR had become an oligopoly of paradigms” (Ashworth 2018, 534-536) or, more positively, why it might be an expression of “a pluralism to live with” (Wæver, 1996, 155).

By the end of the 1980s and early 1990s two development in the theorization of IR had brought about a state of affairs which ushered in what one might call a final “fourth debate” ending all “great debates” (for the time being). For one, the 1990s saw the beginnings of more systematic historical and sociological inquiries into the history and sociology of IR theorization which, if they did not target the “mythical” nature of the “great debates”, contributed more thoroughly scholarly articles based on reflective historiographical and/ or sociological approaches to the study of disciplinary history (Schmidt 1998, 2013; Knutsen 1992, 184-239; 2018; Wæver 1996, 1998; Ashworth 2014, 2018). More importantly, though, the significant new marker of this phase of IR’s theoretical development (which in part resulted from the “inter-paradigm debate”) was a much broader acknowledgment of “the impossibility of finding a single winning theory” (Guzzini 2013, 532) in the discipline due to the insight that *all* our theories may potentially be underdetermined by evidence or, more dramatically still, that the very notion of “evidence” verifying or falsifying theories might be misleading in the first place. In any case, the discipline for the first time more thoroughly engaged fundamental philosophical issues underlying all forms of theorization. None of these engagements could be regarded as sufficiently sophisticated without positioning themselves vis-à-vis

“ontology” – a philosophical concept (which up until then had been a foreign word in the vocabulary of IR) relating to the “nature” of things and “second-order” or “foundational” questions such as “what is there?” which needed to be addressed first before one turned to empirical questions such as “what causes what?” (Wendt 1999, 5). This “ontological turn” (Onuf 1989, 43; Michel 2009, 398) included a broader realization that dominant strands of IR research had thus far remained too heavily “wedded to a rationalist orthodoxy” (Schmidt 2013, 20). “Post-positivism” became the catch-all label to position approaches such as critical theory, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and different versions of constructivism and feminism as alternative forms of theorizing which – in the light of “the demise of the empiricist-positivist promise for cumulative behavioral science” – all challenged IR scholars “to reexamine the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of their scientific endeavors” (Lapid 1989, 236). In this reading they also realized one of the key lessons of “paradigmatism”, i.e. that “meta-scientific constructs” in the form of broader conjunctures of interrelated concepts, vocabularies and theories (including foundational assumptions about the connections between thoughts and wor(l)ds) had to be conceived as evolving wholes. As a result the inclusion of “meta-theoretical” reflection was widely seen to have elevated theoretical discussion in IR to a level of “increasing reflexivity which cannot be undone” (Guzzini 2013, 522; Lapid 2014). At the same time what some had perceived as a phase of “paradigm wars” earlier appeared to have been “settled into a period of ‘theoretical peace’ with the dominant logic now that of considering the prospects for various forms of pluralism” (Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013, 406).

Forms of Theorization in International Relations

The historical overview provided in the previous section about shifting understandings of “theory” in IR since the early 20th century already indicate a broad variety of ways of theorizing the subject matter of the discipline. In this section these variations will be surveyed with an eye at prevalent strands of theory and theorization in contemporary disciplinary debates around the globe. But before this is done the underlying concepts of “theory” and “theorization” need to be clarified as they are usually understood in IR because, as with all academic disciplines, one cannot fail to detect a few idiosyncrasies. In order to do so it will help to look at three distinctions or oppositions that are usually juxtaposed with “theory”.

The Greek origins of the word “*theoria*” resonate in IR until this day in many ways. At the bottom lies a fundamental distinction between *theory* and *practice*. This distinction highlights the difference between what we as scholars do when we observe and explain international politics/ relations mostly from within the academy and political practitioners of international relations reaching from the highest echelons of governmental power to broader segments of societies and “non-governmental” organizations interacting “above” and “below” governments. The distinction between theory and practice refers back to the original meaning of “*theoria*” as “seeing what is” (Gadamer 1998, 31) and “practice” in the Aristotelian sense of “action” or “doing” (Kratochwil 2018, 429-433). Theory in this sense is not “a mere ‘seeing’ that establishes what is present or stores up information” (Gadamer 1998, 31). Rather, it is an active form of observation or interpretation that tries to make sense as to how things may hang together. To theorize thus refers to basic forms of *sense-making* and the theories we build and/or use become the “nets cast to catch what we call ‘the world’” (Popper 1992[1959], 37). In other words, a “*theory*” of international relations *provides answers to two questions: what things or phenomena constitute (make up) the world of international relations and how do these things hang together.*

However, in order to understand what “theory” means one should not only look at the usual distinction between theory and practice (or, as it is sometimes put casually, “mere” observation versus “real” action). A second distinction between *thought* and *world* is similarly important to understand what “theory” means. This refers to ways of sense-making *about* the things which lie beyond our minds – and which are not necessarily limited to *action*. In IR, for instance, the so-called “structure-agency debate” (Vadrot 2017, 63-67) problematized that there may be significant “structural” or material things in the world (beyond human agency) which influence actions in the international sphere in some way.

A third distinction which helps to better grasp the meaning of theory in IR is the opposition between *theory* and *history* (Koliopoulos 2017). To be sure, the fact that IR is a *social* science necessarily implies that the social processes it studies are historical processes unfolding in time. Yet, even though there are IR theories which try to systematically relate to history (MacKay and LaRoche 2017), some influential notions of “theory” in IR carry a strong undercurrent of static ahistoricism. This charge is raised in particular vis-à-vis neorealism in general and Kenneth Waltz’s highly influential “Theory

of International Politics” in particular (Waltz 1979, esp. pp. 26, 44, 61-63; T. Smith 1999, 89-113). Thus, the production of “theory” and the writing of “history” seem to be different, if not opposed, ways of sense-making – at least for some IR scholars.

Differences with regard to such distinctions and oppositions notwithstanding, one of the widely accepted premises about “theory” among all IR scholars is that all forms of sense-making about “the world” are very much “‘theory-laden’ undertaking(s)” in themselves (Hanson 1958, 19) – or, as Karl Popper put it: “our ordinary language is full of theories: (...) observation is always *observation in the light of theories*” (Popper (1992[1959], 37, emphasis in original; see also Waltz 1979, 913-914 and Wendt 1999, 58-63). Yet not everybody in IR would be willing to go one step further in emphasizing equally strongly that the theory-ladenness of observation necessarily depends, in turn, on the variability and “contingency” of language – where language is taken to be the result of *human invention* rather than being a mere “mirror of nature” (Rorty 1989, 3-22).

Differences at this basic (some say “ontological”) level are reflected when we examine different notions of “theory” among IR scholars more closely. Patrick Jackson (2017) has suggested that we should first distinguish such understandings on the basis of how the relationship between “mind” and “world” is conceived, i.e. whether a “monist” or a “dualist” conception prevails. For monists world and mind are constitutively linked – or to put it differently, “the understandings of the actors constitute the social world” which is why “the causal arrows run from ‘understanding’ to the world, and not from ‘the world’ to our understanding or to our theory” (Kratochwil 2018, 325). Dualists, in contrast, conceive of mind and world as linked, but also separate entities with the “causal arrow” running at least to some extent also from ‘the world’ to the mind -- or as Alexander Wendt put it: “Mind and language help determine meaning, but meaning is also regulated by a mind-independent, extra-linguistic world” (Wendt 1999, 57).

These differences play out differently depending on the “types” or “conceptions” of theory subscribed to by IR scholars. Dunne, Hansen and Wight (2013, 407-412) differentiate among four such types: “explanatory theory” (ie. theory which offers an account of how causes relate to effects) most often subscribes to a dualist understanding whereas the three other types distinguished by Dunne, Hansen and Wight most often tend to a monist conception: “critical theory” (ie. theory “with the avowed intent of criticizing particular social arrangements and/or outcomes”); “constitutive theory” (ie.

theories about how things are constituted or how concepts are conceived) and theory defined in terms of “a lens through which we look at the world”.

Importantly, “theory” here covers two basic types of sense-making which are sometimes strictly separated: causal analysis (“explanatory theory”) and concept formation (“constitutive theory”). With regard to *explanatory theory* language is problematic only to the extent that the meaning of words and concepts has to be regulated *via definition*. What is more, the meaning of words and concepts is not only fairly unproblematic but has to be taken as such because the focus on causation “invokes an original act of baptism or dubbing as an essential determinant of reference” (Kuhn 1990: 309). Causal theory is about the nexus between some *definite* thing taken as cause and some *definite* thing taken as effect. Therefore, in this view concepts are taken to be “the component parts of a theory”, largely synonymous with “variables”. In this understanding, a theory also “says how these key concepts are defined” and “how independent, intervening, and dependent variables fit together” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 431-432).

In contrast, for *constitutive theory* language and concept formation lie at the very bottom of our ways of making sense of the world. Constitutive theorizing is seen to be “a form of life, something we all do, every day, all the time” in one way or another (Zalewski 1996, 346). It may not always be at a level of *systematic* reflection, but drawing distinctions and learning how different words and concepts may be used and linked to form meaningful sentences about how things in the world may hang (or be hung) together is fundamental to human coping. In this understanding concepts are not merely *references* to clearly *defined* “things” in the world that are causally connected. Rather, they are symbolic forms of differing meaning which shape the very “realities” we are trying to grasp. They are at the same time “instruments” to cope with reality as they “delimit the empirical” (Wittgenstein 2009(1958), §569; 1978, 29). They necessarily precede (and fundamentally shape) whatever type of causal analysis we may choose to conduct in addition. For instance, fundamental distinctions in IR between different “levels of analysis” in international relations (Singer 1961; Buzan 1995) are not only important in organizing the subject matter. They also have significant consequences for causal analysis (Wendt 1999, 11-15). In this sense “‘levels’ thinking” (Wendt 1999, 13) is a form of conceptual (and non-causal) theorizing which is consequential for causal analysis.

Types of Theory in International Relations

The distinction between explanatory and constitutive theory is not synonymous with cognate distinctions in the discipline – such as the one between “positivist” and “post-positivist” types of theory (Hollis 1996; Griffith 2007, 5-7) or between “explaining and understanding” (Hollis and Smith 1991). However, if such distinctions are taken as rough guides (rather than binary oppositions) as to how one may start to think about how the discipline thinks about theory and theorization, drawing out such differences may indeed be helpful in grounding and justifying what will eventually, and inevitably, manifest itself in our respective theoretical perspectivity. In the following IR paradigms are discussed at some length because they have played (and continue to play) a major role in structuring theoretical debates (and, thus, the discipline). In a second step this disciplinary fixation is balanced out with a discussion of other ways of theorizing international relations.

IR Paradigms

Constitutive and explanatory forms of theorization need not be mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, one way of looking at the discipline, its history and its sociology of science is to focus on the “paradigms”, “(meta)theories”, “research programs” or “world views” (such as “realism” or “constructivism”) which have been shaping its “great debates” as a very significant expression of the discipline’s constitutive theorizing. Such paradigms still mark the core (or at least one of the cores) of disciplinary identity. Some argue that focusing on “isms” is “evil” (Lake 2011). Other believe that “great debates” among overarching theories (or paradigms) contribute to disciplinary coherence (Wæver 2013, 315). Be that as it may, when Chris Reus-Smit (2013b, 592) points out that “we can stop talking about metatheory (...) but we cannot escape it” he is justifiably making the case that we ought to be able to give reasons why we practice IR scholarship in a certain fashion – and not otherwise; and that such reason-giving necessitates a sufficient familiarity with epistemology. This need not be expressed or framed in classical IR-“isms”, but the typical functions which such “isms” serve in terms of *constitutive conceptual frameworks* certainly have an inescapable quality.

Three such functions of constitutive conceptual frameworks or paradigms in IR can be distinguished:

(a) They provide a basic vocabulary with key concepts which acquire their respective meaning, within the context of the respective vocabulary, based on specific connections being drawn. For example, → realism and → post-colonialism (see below) operate with quite different key concepts (e.g. “power” and “state” in realism or “empire” and “colonization” in post-colonialism). Even where both use the same concepts, those concepts have different meanings and connect differently with other key concepts in the respective vocabulary.

(b) Constitutive conceptual frameworks usually function like a *doctrine* in the sense of being taken as obviously true and, therefore, not being in need of further proof or critical engagement. This does not mean that vocabularies may not change or paradigms not shift. For instance, realism’s vocabulary has changed significantly from Morgenthau (1948) via Waltz (1979) to Mearsheimer (2001). A significant paradigm shift has also replaced “idealist”/“liberal” theorizing in favor of varied forms of “constructivist” theorizing. However, if such changes occur they are normally akin to a “conversion” rather than being the result of a learning process based on reasoning (Wittgenstein 1969, §§94-105, 612; Kuhn 1996[1962]; 2000, 13-32).

(c) Constitutive conceptual frameworks function as simplifying and orienting tools. They sort out what is (taken to be) important and what not. They usually also include (if sometimes only implicitly) general guidelines as to how the subject matters we are interested in ought to be studied. This includes issues addressed at the “ontological” and at the “epistemological” level. *Ontology* refers to those things or phenomena in the social world that are taken to be real, irrespective of whether they are “empirically observable” or “unobservable”. *Epistemology* refers to beliefs about whether and, if so, how we can gain knowledge about these things (see the discussion above about monism/ dualism, the theory-ladenness of observation and the attitude towards language). Moreover, constitutive conceptual frameworks also carry implications as to a certain range of *methodologies* that are conducive in conducting proper scholarly research.

Depending on where one looks today (or starts historically) one could come up with very different lists of constitutive conceptual frameworks or paradigms of this sort. Felix Berenskoetter who has recently reviewed 22 contemporary IR textbooks came up with a list of thirteen. Most come in the form of an “ism” (“realism”, “liberalism”, “Marxism”, “constructivism”, “post-structuralism”, “feminism” and “post-colonialism”), but many are

also simply labeled “theory” (“rational choice theory”, “critical theory”, “international political theory”, “international political economy theory”, “theory of the environment” or “green theory”) or just “English School” (Berenskoetter 2018, 450-452). Yet, as mentioned above, it needs to be emphasized that the landscape of paradigms or constitutive conceptual frameworks is a moving target. The very fact that only two “isms” figured similarly prominently in the “first debate” (“realism” and “idealism”) and that three differently labeled “isms” did in the “third debate” (“realism”, “pluralism” and “structuralism”; Banks 1985 in itself relativizes the (more or less explicit) claims about the foundational insights into international politics contained in competing paradigms. The same applies if one takes into account that one and same term for an “ism” (e.g. “realism”) may come to mean different things in different periods given certain shifts in how the respective constitutive conceptual framework is specified by its respective adherents. One of the most prominent modifications of this type has been the shift from understandings of “realism” between the 1930s and 1940s (Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1948) to the 1970s and 1990s (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). In contrast, there are also differently labeled “isms” which share many commonalities. This applies to “idealism” on the one hand which figured in the so-called “first debate” with “realism” (Osiander 1998) and, on the other hand, versions of both “liberalism” and “constructivism” which only began to play a role under these labels as “paradigms” alongside with, and at the same meta-theoretical level of, realism in the 1980s/1990s. More generally, some of the (often implicitly) suggested “incommensurabilities” between paradigms can be (and often have been) construed as papering over the many commonalities which supposedly distinct paradigms share (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 2-10, 31-34).

Another characteristic one should keep in mind when one looks at IR theory in terms of the disciplinary organization along such constitutive conceptual frameworks is that one and the same “ism” may mean different things to different scholars. Just compare the different presentations of such paradigms in some of the more recent textbooks – e.g. (classical/structural) realism (Wohlforth 2010; Donnelly 2013, 32-56; Lebow 2013; Mearsheimer 2013); (neo-) liberalism (Moravcsik 2010; Steans et.al. 2010; 23-51; Russett 2013; Sterling-Folker 2013); constructivism (Hurd 2010; Adler 2013; Reus-Smit 2013a; Fierke 2013); critical theory/ (post-)structuralism/ postmodernism (Steans et.al. 2010, 75-102 and 130-154; Zehfuss 2013; Campbell 2013; Devetak 2013); feminism

(Jackson and Sørensen 2013, 241-145; Sjöberg and Tickner 2013; Tickner and Sjöberg 2013; True 2013); or post-colonialism (Grovgui 2013; Jackson and Sørensen 2013, 65-98; Seth 2013, 15-31).

These differences in summarizing one and the same paradigm may not be huge overall. However, given that they are real even a cursory view at disciplinary history refutes a particular type of paradigmaticism cherished by some IR scholars (*paradigmatism* here standing for the view that IR research can and should be guided by a set of “logically coherent” and “distinct” core assumptions of a paradigm; Legro and Moravcsik 1999, 9-10, 25; critically Hellmann 2000, 170-174). Yet the history of IR in general, and the evolution of IR paradigms in particular, shatter the belief that a common understanding about “rigorously defined” paradigms can actually be reached. Instead paradigms or constitutive conceptual frameworks should be understood as *evolving meta-theoretical traditions* in the sense of “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined” via two kinds of conflict – those with critics external to the tradition and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements is constituted (MacIntyre 1988, 12).

With these caveats the following major paradigms or constitutive conceptual frameworks (in alphabetical order) usually show up in contemporary disciplinary introductions. No attempt is made here to present a comprehensive list of such frameworks, though, given the enormous “paradigm proliferation” and the related “fragmentation” of the discipline deplored by many (Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013, 412-417; Smith, Dunne and Kurki 2013, 7-10; Kristensen 2016).

Constructivism is one of the more unusual paradigms in IR because its distinctive characteristics relate less to concrete subject matters in international politics than to underlying assumptions about social relations, especially that “agents are meaningfully oriented toward each other” (Kratochwil 2010, 447) and how we make sense of the world (of international politics) (see also Ayukawa in this handbook). Key works by Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) and Nicholas Onuf (1989) have more systematically introduced major constructivist themes in IR building on classical philosophy in general and Ludwig Wittgenstein in particular, yet the concept was popularized mainly (and with quite different emphases) by Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999). Both lines emphasize

the importance of “ideas” and “norms” (which places it in the lineage of “idealism”) in shaping social processes, but they diverge in terms of ontological and epistemological claims and how mind and world relate to one another.

Critical theory shows up as a label in IR often referring to quite different constitutive conceptual frameworks. Popularized in the social sciences more broadly under the label of “Frankfurt School” (Arnold 2015), it has gained prominence in IR mostly via the work of Robert Cox (1981) who has been drawing also in the work of the Italian writer Antonio Gramsci. While being inspired by classical → Marxist analysis, critical theorists rejected its orthodox fixation on class and economic relations in favor of a broader perspective on the social, cultural and psychological conditions of human existence. Decidedly normative in the sense of questioning prevailing relations of social injustice and power critical theory strongly argues in favor of enlightenment ideas of human emancipation and “post-positivist” scholarly practices which do not satisfy themselves with (merely) explaining existing international relations (“problem-solving theory”) but to actually change them.

The **English School** tradition shares certain fundamental assumptions with → realism, → liberalism and → constructivism but the distinct mix of core assumptions and the sustained effort in building a tradition has secured it a special place in the canon of IR paradigms (Ahrens and Diez 2019). Mostly British IR scholars have developed it since the 1960s focusing on the concept of “international society” as an “anarchical society” (Bull 1977) of sovereign states. In this view anarchy – in the classical → realist sense of an absence of supreme authority above the state – can be mitigated analogous to “domestic” societal relations if governments succeed in establishing mutually recognized norms and institutions. A more explicitly normative strand of “pluralist” English School scholarship focuses on the primacy of state sovereignty and political and cultural diversity in promoting order and justice in contrast to “solidarist” scholarship emphasizing global humanitarian duties, including intervention to counter human rights violations elsewhere.

Feminism spread in IR in parallel to many other social sciences starting in the late 1980s (see Sawyer in this handbook). Inspired by feminist political activism which expanded in the 1960 and 1970 its distinct characteristic was and remains a critique of the blindness about gendered relations in society in general and international politics

(and IR as a discipline) in particular. Gender is the key concept, referring to the socially and culturally constructed characteristics stereotypically associated with “masculinities” (such as power, autonomy, rationality or activity) and with “femininities” (such as weakness, dependency, emotionality or passivity). Accordingly one of the key concerns is to explain and change women’s subordination throughout society and around the globe as well as the accompanying asymmetries in social and economic position. Depending on particular strands of feminist IR affinities with → liberalism, → Marxism, → constructivism, → post-structuralism, and → postcolonial theory can be detected.

Green theory ranks among the most recent paradigmatic inventions in IR, especially in light of the expanding discussion in IR about the effects of the Anthropocene on international and global politics (Eckersley 2013, Young 2016). Climate change is only the most prominent expression of the increasingly destructive human impact on the natural world. Given the inbuilt biases of a methodologically nationalist perspective in much of the discipline of IR (i.e. a perspective which takes the nation state to be the most basic, and even natural, organizing principle of social and political relations), many adherents of Green theory call for a fundamental revision of IR’s conceptual apparatus (e.g. humankind, nature, ecology, security, society etc.) and the mechanisms and instruments of global governance beyond the classical fixation on interstate relations, conflict resolution and cooperation (Harrington 2016).

Liberalism ranks among the classical IR traditions alongside → realism although it did not figure under this label (or at least gain prominence) until the 1970s. Instead of emphasizing the conflictual nature of international relations, liberal theorists have always highlighted the potential benefits from economic exchange or free trade (Adam Smith), international juridification (Grotius) or pacification via institutionalized cooperation (John Locke, Immanuel Kant). Reason, law, and morality are accordingly ranked higher as drivers of international agency compared to → realism. Modern variants of liberal theorizing, such as “neo-liberal institutionalism”, have focused in particular on the conditions of successful inter-state cooperation and the causes and effects of international regime building. Different versions of “democratic peace theory” have followed leads by Kantian republicanism in either arguing that democracies are by their very nature less prone to go to war or, alternatively, at least more hesitant to wage war on other democracies.

Marxist IR theory takes over from classical Marxist political theory a thoroughly materialist and structuralist perspective which emphasizes the state-transcending and state-transforming power of economic modes of production and exchange, especially as far as capitalism is concerned (Rupert 2013) (see Guo in this handbook). In contrast to the traditional focus of IR theory on the state and military power, Marxist approaches mostly explain social relations, including relations among states, in terms of class interests shaping a capitalist “world-system” (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989; Teschke 2010, 169-173). The domestic and international distribution of wealth and poverty is seen to be primarily the result of relations of exploitation which stand in the way of human emancipation. Some modern paradigmatic variations in IR, such as critical realism, continue to emphasize the causal independence of a material world (in contrast to some → constructivists). However, in contrast to traditional Marxist IR theory critical realists at the same time emphasize the causal weight of ideational factors in shaping “structures” and “agents” as mutually constitutive (Joseph 2007).

Postcolonial theory has gained increasing recognition in IR during the last two decades. In part this is as much a reflection on the globalization of the discipline as it is a realization among IR scholars that there is more to IR than what is taught and published in the so-called “West” or “Global North” in contrast to the “Global South” (although one should add that quite a lot of postcolonial theory is actually taught and published there). At its core, it is a comparatively young tradition sharing a specific perspective on how to conceptualize intersocietal relations on the globe with a particular interest in the political, economic, and cultural legacies of imperialism and the experience of colonization. Due to its origination in multiple locations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, some strands emphasize local ways of knowing and thinking different from European “enlightenment” (e.g. rationalism or humanism). At a minimum, it also articulates a clear aspiration to “participate in the creation of ‘truths’” (Grovoogui 2013, 248) at eye level with knowledge producers and theories originating in the “West”.

Post-structuralism/postmodernism are sometimes discussed together because they refer to a variety of strands of thought in social theory with major reference points in French philosophy and linguistics (see Beardsworth in this handbook). Key reference authors include Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida or Judith Butler in the US (see also → feminism). They share a critical perspective on (largely “Western” understandings and practices of) “modernity” and accompanying views about the status and certainty of

knowledge. In particular, this tradition has highlighted the need to “deconstruct” modernist notions such as “universal” truths and “progress”. IR theorists in this tradition have, in addition, problematized how “the international” has been construed based on “the principle of sovereign identity in space and time as an unquestioned assumption about the way the world is” (Walker 1993, 8) or an “anarchy problematique” gaining discursive dominance (Ashley 1988). Genealogy as a particular type of theorizing the lineage and origins of ideas and concepts has been particularly prominent in tracing relations of power and dominant discourses.

Rationalism like → constructivism is distinctive compared to more typical IR paradigms in that its key propositions relate less to concrete subject matters in international politics than to underlying epistemological assumptions as to how we should study international relations. To the extent that → realism and → liberalism emphasize rational actor assumptions – i.e. the expectation that states and other international actors aim at maximizing utility – they are sometimes classified as “rationalist”. More commonly, however, rationalism is associated with rational choice theory, i.e. a set of theoretical propositions about the strategic calculations of international actors in a variety of situations of interaction with diverging incentives to cooperate. In such situations actors weigh the costs and benefits of a given cooperative or conflictual move while taking the likely rational reactions of the other side into account. The key assumption here is that actors will make rational choices based on the highest net “pay-off”.

Realism counts as the oldest tradition in IR. It is often associated with a lineage of classical political theorists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. As with other IR paradigms realism has come in different variants, emerging and disappearing over time. One of the commonly shared assumptions of all realist variations is the essentially conflictual nature of international relations due to the “self-help” character of an anarchical states system. States (often conceptualized as “unitary actors”) compete in a never-ending struggle for power which renders conflict, and sometimes even war, into a constant possibility, albeit not an inevitability. Realists often describe themselves as taking the world “as it is” in contrast to liberals, constructivists and others who are said to be preoccupied with a world “as it ought to be”. Variants of realism emphasize different degrees of conflict-proneness – as in Waltz’s more defensively oriented “structural realism” (Waltz 1979) or Mearsheimer’s “offensive realism” (Mearsheimer

2001) – or diverge in terms of whether to concentrate on the systemic level or “open the black box” of the state in terms of its unitary actor status, as in “neoclassical realism” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016).

Non-Paradigmatic Forms of Theorization

The paradigms discussed in the previous section certainly do not cover the whole spectrum of theorizing international relations. As a matter of fact huge fields of research or even sub-disciplines – such as international political economy (IPE; Marlin-Bennett 2017) or historical sociology (Hobson et. al. 2018) – are not covered by a paradigmatic perspective on the discipline because they define themselves less in IR paradigmatic terms than in terms of a particular subject matter belonging to the world of international relations (e.g. IPE) or a particular ontological, epistemological or methodological approach (such as historical sociology). The same applies to conceptual approaches which organize their way of theorizing of international relations around key concepts such as “transnational relations” (Risse 2013; Gilardi 2013), “global governance” (Zürn 2013; Domínguez and Velázquez Flores 2018) or “democratic peace” (Chan 2017).

Practices of IR Theorization about International and Global Politics

A quick look at textbooks in IR conveys a clear sense that the IR paradigms discussed in the previous section are foundational in defining the discipline’s identity. At the same time it is widely agreed across paradigms that elaborations on constitutive frameworks of that sort are a means to an end, not an end in itself. Engaging in “pure” (IR) meta-theory is not really what doing IR theory should actually be all about. “Pure” IR meta-theory here would mean to do some sort of “philosophy” (Wight 2013; Hamati-Ataya 2018; Fuller 2018). In contrast, “real” IR theory in this understanding would necessarily have to somehow relate to the *world of international relations practice* and in this sense aim at producing “practical knowledge” (Reus-Smit 2013b). For this type of “practical” IR theory the subject matter (i.e. international relations, lower case) and not the discipline (IR and its paradigms) would be at the center. IRT would become *irt* – and for *irt* the distinction between empirics *and* theory would be constitutive in the mutually conditioning sense that all international relations empirics are necessarily theory-laden as all international relations theory is necessarily empirics-informed. This is another of saying that the selection and description of the things or phenomena that realism, for

example, would posit to constitute the world of international relations are, of course, as much as informed by theoretical predispositions as the (re-) construction of the theory could not be severed from “real things” (such as states or power) in the world.

Thus, to the extent that IR practices “real” *ir* there is no such thing as “pure” (non-empirics-informed) theory, nor is there “pure” (non-theory-laden) empirics. This is not to say that, at least implicitly, some disciplinary practices of IRT can sometimes be read as construing the relationship in terms of a *dichotomy* of empirics *versus* theory. As a matter of fact, much of positivist, hypothesis-testing IR practices theory in this fashion since it is based on a conception of the mind-world connection which sees concepts referring to things in the world as being “regulated” at least in part by “a mind-independent, extra-linguistic world” (to use Wendt’s formulation from above). However, if the link between theory and empirics is construed in Popper’s sense of “nets cast to catch what we call ‘the world’” it is difficult to see how such a dichotomous construal can be sustained.

Against this background the *purposes of practical ir theorizing* can be distinguished in terms of a threefold (ideal-type) typology as to how the relationship between the scholarly observer and the observed practices and/ or structures of international relations may be construed. Two relate to international relations practices or structures outside the academy which we, as scholars, might (a) want to describe, explain, deconstruct or reconstruct *in order to better understand* them. In contrast to such a more detached observer position, scholarship could also aim (b) at critiquing international relations practices or structures *in order to change* them. The former is more widespread in IR and encompasses all paradigmatic orientations. The latter is not limited to “critical” postures since even many liberals or realists pursue critical political agendas beyond “merely explaining” what they observe. A third ideal-type of practical *ir* theorizing (c) is more self-centered. It engages the *practices of practical ir theorizing* via critique and reconstruction because these theories are seen to be deficient in actually accomplishing the claimed descriptive, explanatory, deconstructivist, reconstructivist or critical aims. The purpose of theorizing is practical because it targets practical theories considered to be deficient but it only engages international relations practices and structures indirectly via existing theories.

No survey can be provided here as to how these orientations play out in global IR today. The very notion of what “global IR” could mean is contested (Acharya 2017; Deciancio 2016; Hellmann and Valbørn 2017). Just consider the fact that the “Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies”, an online project of the International Studies Association surveying the field, by now encompasses almost 500, mostly theory-based articles and more than 12.000 pages of text (OREIS 2019). What should be kept in mind, though, is that in terms of sheer volume of output (a) and (c) are certainly dominant – if only for the following reasons: (i) that irt output, if measured in journal articles widely circulated, continues to be dominated by the quantitatively large production sites in the Global North in general and the US in particular (Wemheuer-Vogelaar 2018, 5-6); (ii) that globally available textbooks highlight paradigmatic framings originating almost exclusively in the Global North (Berenskoetter 2018, 459-463); (iii) that even more than half of non-Western IR scholars subscribe to the statement that IR is a Western/American-dominated discipline (Wemheuer-Vogelaar et. al. 2016, 21); (iv) the fact that almost two thirds of US IR scholars describe themselves as “positivists” (Maliniak et. al. 2018, 475); and (v) that prevailing disciplinary incentive structures (at least in the Global North) clearly reward “theory building” and, thus, either (a) or (c) or some combination of it. Moreover, practicing irt in line with type (a) and (c) is still very much in line with dominating classical Western paradigms (Kristensen 2018), in spite of complaints about increasing disciplinary fragmentation and diversity.

Although variations and combinations of (a) and (c) shape the discipline globally, the last decades have seen an increase in a certain type of critiquing international relations practices or structures (b) that should at least briefly be highlighted in a survey of *global* IR theorizing today. Postcolonial studies and segments of Chinese IR stand out here because they bring not only many new voices from outside the Global North to the conversation in IR but also because they offer new theoretical vocabularies which, at a minimum, broaden the spectrum of how one might theorize international relations. What is more, many of these articulations of distinctly non-Western ways of theorizing international relations are exemplary in showing a depth of familiarity with European thought (and diverse understandings of “theory” therein) which would, if Northerners would only start reciprocating somewhat, more truly render IR into a global discipline. In any case, understandings of “theory” in these new segments of irt reach far beyond the –ism fixations in Western IR and also beyond a rather narrowly conceived notion of

“theory” which emphasizes “a *systematic* attempt to *generalize*” about international relations. Only if such a narrow definition is taken as a reference point can one be “intrigued by the *absence of theory* in the non-West” in the first place (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 6 and 1, emphases added).

If theory is taken to refer to all processes of sense-making about what constitutes the world of international relations and how things therein may hang together, or, differently phrased, if Western notions of systematicity and generality are *de-emphasized* works by authors such Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Spivak (1988) Ashis Nandy (1994), Siba Grovogui (1996), Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Gurminder Bhambra (2014) or Lily Ling (2014), just to cite a few examples, certainly count as ways of theorizing. These works have left a major impact in IR scholarship of type (c) because they have not only successfully asserted the right to describe different global and local experiences in alternative vocabularies, but also because these alternative ways of theorizing have become resonating exemplars in ever larger communities of IR scholarship around the globe (e. g. Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Shilliam 2011; Jabri 2013; Seth 2013; Bilgin 2016; Epstein 2017; Shih et. al. 2019; Trowsell et. al. 2019).

Conclusion

If one takes 1919 as a historical reference point (if not as “the” birth date) of modern IR, International Relations theory has tremendously expanded and diversified over the past century. What is more, theoretical sophistication and reflexivity have significantly improved as the necessity to justify how and why one theorizes in a particular fashion has steadily increased. Expansion and diversification have also rendered IR into a more truly “global” discipline in the sense that ever more voices have succeeded in making themselves heard. Yet all too often expansion and diversification also leave an impression of increasing fragmentation. In large part this is due to the fact that theory multilingualism has never been prized in a discipline which trains its students more to look at the world through paradigmatic lenses than to approach it in terms of problems to be solved. Although the structure of the discipline renders it difficult to change these habits, it at least seems to be a worthy regulative idea to intensify practicing a type of theoretical pluralism which moves beyond the mere toleration of “alternative perspectives” and more actively engages in a form of dialogical multi-perspectivity which pays tribute to different ways of sense-making about international relations.

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