

The state of the art in German IR

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Gunther Hellmann, Klaus Dieter Wolf, and Michael Zürn (eds.), *Die neuen Internationalen Beziehungen. Forschungsstand und Perspektiven in Deutschland* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003), pp. 614.

The intensification in recent years of interest in the history and sociology of IR (as a discipline) has been manifested in a growing number of publications dealing with aspects of different IR communities. The appearance of a weighty and semi-official volume summarising the state of the art in German IR is therefore a noteworthy development, and one that merits attention beyond the German-speaking world where it will find its main audience. I refer to this volume as ‘semi-official’ because it has been published under the auspices of the Section for International Politics of the German Political Science Association (*Deutsche Vereinigung für Politische Wissenschaft*, DVPW). The book does not attempt to speak for IR scholars in Austria or Switzerland and so represents a national rather than a linguistic community, though not all the contributors teach at universities in Germany.¹

This review article has two main purposes. Firstly, it provides a summary of the book’s contents designed primarily for the benefit of non-German readers. This summary attempts to be fairly neutral, though it inevitably involves evaluations and judgments to the effect that some contributions deserve more detailed discussion than others. Secondly, it assesses the conclusions reached by the editors in their introduction (written by Michael Zürn) and conclusion (co-written by Klaus Dieter Wolf and Gunther Hellmann); these contributions offer more sustained reflection on the state of German IR than the bulk of the chapters dealing with substantive issues within the field. In this part of the article I express disagreement with some of the editors’ specific conclusions and challenge some more general aspects of their approach to disciplinary sociology. To anticipate my conclusions: the volume does some things very well, others less well, and some rather poorly.

In order to set the scene, it is worth recalling that this volume is the successor to a survey published (also under DVPW auspices) in 1990.² German IR has been conscious of itself as an entity within a largely anglophone field or discipline for some time. The most important development in the community between 1990 and 2003 was the first appearance in 1994 of the *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* (*ZIB, Journal of International Relations*), a biannual theoretical journal in which

¹ The title of the volume translates as *The New International Relations: The State of Research and Perspectives in Germany*. I am grateful to Gunther Hellmann for letting me have a review copy.

² Volker Rittberger (ed.), *Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen. Bestandsaufnahme und Forschungsperspektiven, Politische Vierteljahresschrift* (Sonderheft 21, 1990).

most of the contributors to this volume have published. In fact, and here I come to my first cautionary observation in relation to the book, external observers should be aware that German IR is a small world. All three of this volume's editors are present or past (co-)editors of *ZIB*, and anyone of a suspicious cast of mind might be forgiven for concluding that the German IR community has a small group of leading figures and a fairly strict hierarchy.

Having said that, there can be little doubt that this community does (to adapt a *bon mot* of Douglas Hurd's) discourse above its weight within global IR. The recent *Handbook of International Relations*, co-edited by another contributor to this volume (Thomas Risse), contains chapters by Zürn, by Harald Müller (another of Hellmann *et al.*'s contributors), and by Risse himself.³ Readers of the *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Security*, and *International Studies Review* have had opportunities to read work by one or more of the editors. The names of several other contributors will be familiar to English-speaking readers, and Germany also exports IR scholars: two contributors teach at British universities, and one in the Netherlands. This is, therefore, a significant IR community.

A brief summary

Zürn explains in his introduction that the editors asked their contributors to do three things: to provide an overview of a specific sub-field, to incorporate the author's own perspective, and to assess the place of German-language contributions in the international research landscape. In the interests of comprehensiveness, I shall start by providing a brief chapter-by-chapter summary of the book. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book contains 15 chapters divided into three sections.

1. *Theoretical and conceptual developments*: Peter Mayer on epistemology and the Third Debate; Thomas Risse on constructivism and rationalism; Antje Wiener on the dialogical turn and constructivism.
2. *Classical issues in IR*: Christopher Daase on war and political violence; Harald Müller on concepts of peace; Detlef F. Sprinz on international regimes and institutions; Joachim Betz on development theory; Sebastian Harnisch on foreign policy analysis.
3. *New issues in IR*: Martin List and Bernhard Zangl on juridification; Frank Schimmelfennig on international socialisation; Philipp Genschel on globalisation; Christoph Scherrer on critical international political economy; Markus Jachtenfuchs on governance beyond the state; Andreas Nölke on transnationalism and inter-disciplinary issues; and Mathias Albert on the debordering of IR and of its subject matter. The editors have thoughtfully provided abstracts in English; one hopes these will not be misused by possibly unscrupulous anglophones trying to give the impression they have read the book when they have not in fact done so.

³ Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002).

Where to start? It is obviously impossible to do justice to all these contributions. Few readers will read the volume from cover to cover, but it should take its place on all German-speaking IR scholars' shelves. It will also, as the editors intend, be very valuable for (advanced) students, though it is the sort of work that should really be kept out of students' hands for fear that they will use individual chapters as short cuts. Although one or two contributions (Müller on peace, Betz on development) concentrate on material published in German, the majority bring together German and English-language sources and treat them as a single field of debate. Daase's chapter on war and Sprinz's on regimes strike me as very successful pieces in this respect, as they integrate the different literatures so well that the reader scarcely notices the joins. Those unfamiliar with the teaching of IR in Germany should note that most students (who will almost certainly be studying Political Science rather than IR as such) will, at least after their first couple of semesters, be expected as a matter of course to read English-language literature. Another particularly impressive contribution – concise, clearly written, and with some interesting remarks on German specificities – is Jachtenfuchs's piece on governance.

Also worthy of special mention is Mathias Albert's chapter, which instead of reviewing a sub-field develops an argument about the way in which both the subject-matter of IR and the range of intellectual tools used have been diversified and 'debordered', so that an opportunity to turn IR into a 'science of the global' (*Wissenschaft vom Globalen*) has arisen. Albert is probably the most original thinker in contemporary German IR, and is also one of the most prolific. He has moved from a perspective sympathetic to some aspects of postmodernism to advocacy of cross-fertilisation between IR and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory.⁴ Although Albert does not say much about Luhmann in this contribution, he argues that German IR scholars' publications on juridification, European integration, world society, and global governance mean that the community is well positioned to help turn the field into such a science of the global. He argues further that this field would be distinguished from a sociology of the global system in the sense that IR would retain responsibility for areas in which borders still play a role, even if their nature and functions have changed, while any area where borders are no longer of any significance would fall outside IR's remit.

It will be well worth keeping an eye on Albert's development of this argument in years to come, not least because of his extensive presence in English-language publications and British IR journals. Albert's position could be interestingly compared and contrasted with, for example, Justin Rosenberg's fairly classically Marxist defence of the concept of the international against the claims of globalisation theorists.⁵ One obvious objection to Albert's disciplinary argument springs to mind. Even though it may be possible to mark out a boundary between IR and sociology in this way, borders elsewhere – between IR and cultural or literary studies, for example – remain porous and resistant to similar cartographic measures. Much of

⁴ Mathias Albert, *Zur Politik der Weltgesellschaft. Identität und Recht im Kontext internationaler Vergesellschaftung* (Weilerswist: Velbrueck Wissenschaft, 2002). In English: 'Observing World Politics: Luhmann's Systems Theory of Society and International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2 (1999), pp. 239–65.

⁵ Justin Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalisation Theory: Polemical Essays* (London & New York: Verso, 2000).

the time, it is journal editors who decide what counts as part of IR and what does not. Some of them will be happy to publish an article on, say, the politics of science fiction films, while others are likely to think this is all stuff and nonsense. There is no satisfactory way to legislate on these matters.

My summary has shown, I hope, that there is much of interest in this volume. In some other respects, reservations are in order. Because of the contributors' involvement in the selected sub-fields the level of expertise is consistently high, but the other side of this coin is that some of the authors (Risse, Schimmelfennig, perhaps Daase) have been more active participants in the debates they are reviewing than is appropriate for this kind of volume. Although the 'ZIB debate', which used Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action as a tool for the analysis of regimes and other agreements, was an important factor in giving German IR a kind of corporate identity in the late 1990s, it should surely have been commented on here by someone who, unlike Risse, was not directly involved. Risse remarks that this debate led to an 'independent German-language contribution to the international debate about constructivism' (p. 99, my translation). The claim is probably justified, but one must question whether it is altogether seemly for Risse himself to make it or for the editors to have encouraged him to do so. Genschel's chapter treats the globalisation debate as a purely economic one, though neither he nor the editors comment on this or ask whether this is a specifically German way of looking at the topic (I don't think it is, but the question should have been raised). The longest single chapter, Mayer's opener on the Third Debate, is thorough and impressive but rather an oddity. As Mayer himself notes, hardly anyone in Germany has been much exercised by the epistemological aspects of this debate, even though there have been exchanges between rationalists and constructivists. Mayer does make some interesting suggestions as to why this should have been the case (many in Anglo-Saxon IR, he says, were trying to escape from the stifling embrace of neorealism and positivism, which were never dominant in Germany), but the reader is left wondering why this chapter needed to be included. Wiener's chapter on constructivism is also very thorough, but actually cites more English-language than German literature. In other words, there is some uncertainty in the book's basic design: is it reviewing global (largely anglophone) debates even when they have had little impact in Germany, singling out specifically German debates on certain topics (but why on these topics rather than others?), or reviewing an amalgam of the two – and, one might add, taking the opportunity to give the German discipline a pat on the back?

As far as theoretical approaches are concerned, most contributions revolve around a broadly neoinstitutionalist and more or less constructivist centre of gravity. The one clear exception is Scherrer's chapter, which takes its inspiration from Marxist political economy and, to some extent, gender theoretical approaches. This reflects the fact that the use of the term 'critical' in Germany is more likely to signal a Marxist approach than post-structuralist tendencies, though most of the time Marxist IPE and IR do not have much to do with each other. In a nice touch, Zürn speaks of the 'Venetianisation of German-language International Relations' (p. 28, my translation), which – he suggests – involves a disinclination to get involved in fundamental confrontations and a preparedness to build bridges. Zürn has a point here. The German IR landscape emerges as a gently undulating neoinstitutionalist-*cum*-constructivist plateau; there are no lofty neorealist peaks, and no subterranean caverns where the turbulent waters of postmodernism flow. However, this is not

really the whole story. There are some realists in German IR, even though they do not get much of a word in here.⁶ Nor have postmodernism or feminism been quite as thin on the ground as this volume suggests, though it is fair to say that their respective influences have not been great (it might have been interesting to read some reflections by Albert on his move from a kind of postmodernism to systems theory). In addition, the book as a whole seems to imply that German IR scholars never disagree about anything much, though the reader notices some quite heated controversies emerging in those chapters (on peace and on development, see above) which do concentrate on German debates. An academic community is, among other things, a place where people disagree with one another. There are also signs of this in Risse's contribution. He writes: 'The community of researchers – in Germany and elsewhere – must realise that theoretical discussions are senseless if they remain unconnected with concrete empirical questions' (p. 123, my translation). However, there is no evidence in this volume to suggest that anyone in German IR thinks any differently, so the target of Risse's remark remains a mystery. The idea of German IR as *la serenissima* among IR communities, a place where no-one ever says a sharp word to anyone else, will certainly come as a surprise to those who have experienced German academia at first hand.

German and global IR

The editors draw six main conclusions in their respective chapters. According to Zürn, there were three major developments in the period between 1990 and 2003:

1. Theory-based, pluralist research established itself firmly in German IR.
2. IR improved its position in the landscape of German-language social-scientific research (the role of *ZIB* is seen to have been particularly important).
3. The position of German-language IR in the international marketplace improved.

Wolf and Hellmann's conclusions are based in part on their own comparison of this volume with Carlsnaes *et al.*'s *Handbook* and Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner's *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*:

1. The state and state action are not as important in German IR as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, especially in American IR.
2. There is no central opposition between constructivism and rationalism in German IR, largely because the rationalist side of this debate has been fairly weak.
3. There is little interest in Germany in questions related to the sociology of science or epistemology, or in the history of the field itself.

Zürn presents some statistical data on contributions by German-speaking scholars to *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *European Journal*

⁶ See Andreas Jacobs, 'Realismus', and Niklas Schörnig, 'Neorealismus', in Siegfried Schieder and Manuela Spindler (eds.), *Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2003), pp. 35–59, 61–87.

of *International Relations* and on German membership of the editorial boards. He argues, convincingly, that German IR is no longer passive in its reception of anglophone debates. Wolf and Hellmann argue further that German IR has fulfilled the expectations placed in it in Ole Wæver's influential 1998 *International Organization* article, to the effect that the German segment of the discipline was well placed to develop an independent dynamic while keeping up with the centre of the global field in the USA.⁷

A fair case can be made for most of these conclusions. I am not sure whether the claim about the low level of German IR's interest in the state is altogether accurate. Although a number of contributions here (Jachtenfuchs, Nölke, Albert) do indicate a strong interest in non-state actors, the significant and community-shaping 'ZIB debate', while anti-realist and largely anti-rational choice, was quite centrally concerned with states as actors. In addition, parts of German peace research have been becoming more state-centric by adopting the investigation of Democratic Peace theories as a major research programme.⁸ On the other hand, Wolf and Hellmann are right to acknowledge the low level of interest in disciplinary history and sociology. Only Nölke's chapter makes a sustained attempt to apply the available self-reflexive IR literature to its own subject matter, but Nölke repeats a widespread misunderstanding (widespread within IR, that is) when he states that contextualism in the history of ideas means accepting that external events determine the development of academic fields. Wolf and Hellmann suggest, right at the end of the volume, that a broad cultural-institutional context provides a better explanation for the state of German IR than the Lakatosian concept of research programmes or changes in world politics. I suspect that they are right about this, but there is no indication of how they reached their conclusion – nowhere in the book are these different approaches compared, and it looks as though Wolf and Hellmann too may have misunderstood contextualism. They note the presence of certain home-grown intellectual traditions and the absence of others in the German discipline (Kant, Habermas, and Luhmann are there, but where is Nietzsche?), but also say that no-one expressed any interest in writing a contribution to the volume on the history of German IR itself. As Mayer observes, many of the controversies present in the Third Debate have their roots in German intellectual history, which makes German IR's apparent indifference to historical self-reflection all the more surprising.

Zürn's claim about German-language IR's global position is incorrect. It is not German-language IR that has improved its market share, but the English-language publications of some German-speaking authors (Carlsnaes *et al.*'s *Handbook* provides plenty of evidence of this). Indeed, it may be that the majority of Hellmann *et al.*'s own contributors belong to this category. The editors of and contributors to the volume know this, because a number of them refer rather indignantly to the fact that the anglophone world hardly ever reads material in German. This is quite correct, and the indignation is in a way understandable. German IR has a high level of competence in English, and this is seldom reciprocated. However, German IR scholars also perceive the external world selectively. American debates are seen as

⁷ Ole Wæver, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations', *International Organization*, 4 (1998), pp. 687–727.

⁸ Harald Müller, 'Antinomien des demokratischen Friedens', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 1 (2002), pp. 46–81. Müller was the initiator of the 'ZIB debate' in 1994.

most significant, and less attention is paid to British IR. Hardly anyone in Germany is interested in French IR (Wolf and Hellmann themselves note this), let alone IR writing from outside North America and Europe. Zürn's misreading of this aspect of the question is, like Risse's contribution, accompanied by an off-puttingly self-congratulatory tone.

To their credit, the editors are slightly uncomfortable about the high degree of homogeneity revealed in their volume. Zürn acknowledges that real-world events, in the shape of the apparently more realist approach of the current US administration, may put German IR's non-state-centrism to the test in years to come. Wolf and Hellmann say that younger scholars in Germany appear to be much more interested in the 'new' than in the 'classical' issues, and go on to ask: 'Can the segment of our profession represented in the Section for International Politics afford in the near future to pursue exclusively social-constructivist research on aspects of the privatisation of world politics?' (p. 597, my translation). These are good questions, and the publication of the volume will probably ensure that they are widely debated. From what I have myself been able to observe, there does seem to be some impatience among German doctoral students with what one might describe as the *ZIB* consensus, and a preparedness to look at more traditionally state-centric approaches. On the other hand, Hellmann *et al.*'s volume may, as I have suggested, overstate the extent of existing non-statism. (I have also heard it said that there are some Nietzscheans out there somewhere, but have not myself encountered any of these fabled creatures.)

Summing up

In offering some concluding remarks on this volume, I would like to suggest that it suffers from a central uncertainty. The editors want to demonstrate that German IR now has its own autonomous profile, but in order to do so they rely on figures detailing contributions by German-speaking scholars to major American, or at least anglophone, publications. As Ole Wæver has argued in the most recent elaboration of his sociology of IR, national communities do exist, but US IR is simultaneously American *and* global.⁹ Wæver has hit the nail on the head here, and the volume under review should be read with this insight in mind. Furthermore, there is another aspect of the cultural-institutional context that Hellmann *et al.* do not mention. German IR has fewer mechanisms providing for the formation of a disciplinary elite than comparable communities. The German academic system has no elite universities (I think this is on balance quite a good thing, though there is currently a debate about this issue), and there are no departments of political science which have either the aura that goes with a longer tradition or advantages deriving from significantly greater size. The European University Institute in Florence has begun to serve as such a mechanism within Europe as a whole, but one of the most

⁹ Ole Wæver, 'The Structure of the IR Discipline: A Proto-Comparative Analysis', Paper prepared for the annual convention of ISA, Portland, February-March 2003, panel on 'Knowledge About IR Knowledge: The Discipline According to the Sociology of Science'.

important ways in which German IR sorts the sheep from the goats remains an individual's ability to intervene in one way or another in anglophone and especially American debates, his/her personal contacts with US IR, and publications in English – especially, as we have seen, in the American journals. I would even argue that in this respect German IR relies more heavily on the American discipline than its British or French counterparts. (This does not mean that it is not the best people who rise to the top; the question is how they get there.)

An appreciation of these points helps to explain some paradoxical and initially puzzling aspects of Hellmann, Wolf, and Zürn's volume. It explains why the editors decided to include a chapter on the supposedly largely irrelevant Third Debate (to emphasise their global integration); it explains why they get themselves at times into a self-congratulatory tangle in dealing with their own relationship to the US/global discipline; and it might explain why they appear to make the German discipline sound more non-state-centric than it actually is (to strengthen the claim to autonomy). This is a volume which surveys German IR's sub-fields at an impressive level of expertise, has not quite sorted out its attitude to American/global IR, and is disappointing as an exercise in self-reflection. In sum: the volume provides a good survey of the state of German IR and reflects many of its strengths, but readers themselves will have to do most of the historiographical and sociological work required to assess that community.