

Liberalism in a Realist World: International Relations as an American Scholarly Tradition

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The study of international relations (IR) is a worldwide pursuit with each country having its own theoretical orientations, preoccupations and debates. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the US created its own scholarly traditions of IR. Eventually, IR became an American social science with the US becoming the epicentre for a worldwide IR community engaged in a set of research programmes and theoretical debates. The discipline of IR emerged in the US at a time when it was the world's most powerful state and a liberal great power caught in a struggle with illiberal rivals. This context ensured that the American theoretical debates would be built around both power and liberal ideals. Over the decades, the two grand projects of realism and liberalism struggled to define the agenda of IR in the US. These traditions have evolved as they attempted to make sense of contemporary developments, speak to strategic position of the US and its foreign policy, as well as deal with the changing fashions and standards of social science. The rationalist formulations of realism and liberalism sparked reactions and constructivism has arisen to offer counterpoints to the rational choice theory.

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The study of International Relations (IR) is a worldwide pursuit but every country has its own theoretical orientations, preoccupations and debates. This is true for the American experience—and deeply so. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the US created its own scholarly traditions of IR. Eventually, IR became, as Hoffmann (1977) famously argued, an American social science. The US became a sort of epicentre for the intellectual community around the world engaged in an evolving set of research programmes and theoretical debates. America's rise to

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global preeminence, its liberal democratic ideals, the world wars, the post-war growth of the liberal capitalist world system and the ongoing transformations of the post-war social sciences and policy institutions—all these developments helped in giving shape to the intellectual foundations and scholarly pathways of the American field of IR.

Of course, the ideas that form the core of American-style international relations are not home grown. Liberal international ideas can be traced to Britain and nineteenth century Anglo-American liberals, and realist theory can be traced to the European experience and German academic refugees of the 1930s. The philosophical roots of realism and liberalism are sunk deep in the ancient and Enlightenment West. Likewise, the problems—or ‘enduring issues’—of IR are really universal. These issues include the sources of war and the conditions of peace; the rise of the nation-state and Westphalian sovereignty; the changing character of anarchy and power; the rise and decline of major states; the various logics of order and governance; the relationship between international politics and international economics; the role of law and institutions in managing conflict and interdependence and the emerging significance of non-state actors and transitional civil society. These issues are manifest on a global scale, and so they are issues that studied in any country or region—should grapple with. Nonetheless, differences in orientations and foci remain.

This article seeks to provide a portrait of the American scholarly field of IR as it has unfolded over the last century. There are many ways to characterize and define American-style IR. And it is possible to argue that a singular portrait or intellectual account of the field is impossible to render. The areas of research, theories and methods have all proliferated in recent decades to the point that it is hard to see a ‘centre’ or ‘core’. As William Butler Yeats might say, with the widening gyre of work on IR, the centre has not held. Many of the sub-fields—and even sub-sub-fields—of the discipline are almost intellectually self-contained. They have their own landmark works, debates and journals. In turn, some of these sub-fields are now organized as transnational networks of scholars that are largely disconnected with something that might be called the American IR tradition (Crawford and Jarvis 2001; Holsti 1985).¹

Nonetheless, my thesis is that the American academic field of IR has been defined by an ongoing ‘grand debate’ between realism and liberalism. In the most general sense, these two sprawling intellectual traditions provide the bulwark for wider and specific debates and research programmes. This is true because these traditions provide large, alternative world-historical perspectives on IR. One focuses on power, anarchy and order. The other on society, interdependence and

¹ For surveys of the American discipline of IR, see Holsti (1985). See also the debate in Crawford and Jarvis (2001).

progressive change. They are also adaptable to changing substantive and methodological tastes. Indeed, the debates themselves within and between these two grand traditions have evolved a great deal since the early- and mid-twentieth century. In the twentieth century, the US has found itself to be the world's most powerful and with most opportunities for shaping the global system—the American academic field of IR has grown in the shadow of these basic historical circumstances.

Indeed, in accounting for the character and evolution of the American scholarly discipline of IR, four factors are most important.

1. The emergence of the US as the world's most powerful state in the early decades of the twentieth century set the initial terms and launching point for the field as well as its substantive theoretical orientation. This meant that scholars in the US would address the most basic questions of IR—the causes of great power war and the sources and conditions of international order. Even more so after World War II, the theories and debates in the expanding field of IR were focused on how the US should wield power and manage the global system. The subsequent debates about institutions, hegemony, globalization and the rise and decline of the US were academic debates driven by the evolving American position as global superpower.
2. The US is a liberal democratic state—with a society that celebrates liberal ideals and aspirations—and this has also helped shape the theories and debates that form the core of the field of IR. The US has given special voice to liberal theories of IR. Theories of IR can never stray very far from issues about power—what it is and how it is exercised. But in the American context, theory also cannot stray too far from liberal issues about democracy, markets and international institutions.
3. Theories and debates in the American discipline of IR have also been shaped by the great historical dramas of the twentieth century—in particular, the world wars, the great depression, the Cold War and the end of the Cold War. In all these phases and sequences of world history, the specific debates between realism and liberalism have shifted and evolved. The origins of World War I and the failure of the Versailles peace treaty provided the initial terms for the emerging discipline.
4. Along the way, the intellectual and institutional shifts in the social sciences also shaped and directed the American discipline of IR. This has involved the gradual rise in social science methods—formal, quantitative and qualitative. This has meant that in addition to the evolving substantive debates, American IR has moved as well as along other pathways. It has become more methodologically rigorous and focused on measuring and testing. At the same time, parts of the field have also been driven by the 'demand' for policy-relevant ideas in Washington. Think tanks and foundations have fostered the growth of policy research that is meant for wider public debate

and the conduct of foreign policy. These two tendencies—towards method and abstract theory, on the one hand, and policy relevance, on the other—have created a growing divide in the field.

Overall, the American IR tradition has emerged as a sort of debate between realism and liberalism. Realism and liberalism as theories and strategies of foreign policy occupy centrestage together. Realism provides the core intellectual parameters and scholarly questions focused on the anarchy, power and statecraft. But liberalism provides the modernizing vision. Indeed, American foreign policy and American IR scholarship have travelled a similar century-long arc. In both cases—foreign policy and academic study—America in the twentieth century is defined by the repeated encounter of American liberal ideas with the tough and often unyielding realities of the wider world.

After a century of growth, the American discipline of IR is much more fragmented and far flung as an intellectual community. Journals and specialities have proliferated. It is harder to find—and define—the core of the field. But the world historical context of American IR—and the enduring problems of power and interdependence, order and change—remain an orienting force even in the new century.

The Founding Debate

The most frequently invoked narrative of the rise of American IR suggests that it has been marked by a series of ‘great debates’. The first occurred in the late 1930s between ‘realist’ and ‘idealist’ positions—fighting over the dreams and failures of the world that followed the World War I. The second occurred between traditional approaches (primarily realism) and behavioural approaches (with more scientific pretensions) in the 1960s. The next great debate occurred in the 1970s between state-centred theories (again realism) and transnational perspectives (mostly liberalism). In the 1980s, the debate was between neo-realism and neo-liberalism over the possibilities of co-operation, resulting in a sort of synthesis in views. The last great debate occurred in the 1990s, between the so-called rationalist and constructivist orientations. In this narrative, it is not altogether clear what the current or ‘next’ great debate is (Holsti 1985; Kahler 1997; Lijphart 1974a, 1974b).²

These ‘great debates’ do capture the unfolding intellectual story of the American discipline of IR. Yet, at the same time, in one way or another they are all simply phases in the ongoing clash between realism and liberalism, as well as the efforts of both the scholarly traditions to make sense of world historical events and transformations.

² For characterizations of these great debates, see Holsti (1985); Kahler (1997); Lijphart (1974a, 1974b).

The first 'great debate' was triggered by the World War I and its aftermath. And this debate was given voice in the ideas of the first great realist of this era—the British historian, E.H. Carr and the first great liberal visionary of this era—President Woodrow Wilson. The upheaval of the World War I was really the historical event that put the professional study of IR on its path.

For liberals, the war exposed the utter bankruptcy of the 'old order' in IR. The power politics and militaristic states of Europe had inflicted themselves on the wider world. The American liberal tradition was presented with a world event that allowed it to summon up its own views about war and the possibilities of peace. It was at this juncture that Woodrow Wilson articulated a set of liberal ideas that would be debated and handed down to later liberal international scholars and practitioners. The world war brought liberal ideas about IR into full view. The American tradition was activated. No less than Henry Kissinger—an icon of the realist alternative to liberalism—concedes that Wilsonian liberalism is the dominant tradition in American foreign policy:

Though Wilson could not convince his own country of its merit, the idea lived on. It is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency and continues to march to this day. (Kissinger 1994: 30)

The Wilsonian vision contained most of the ideas that liberals would continue to articulate throughout the twentieth century. Some ideas were most important.

One was that the foundation for a peaceful world must be built around a community of democratic states. War was the product of militaristic societies that had not fully made transition to liberal democracy. The second idea was that free trade and social and economic exchange would facilitate the modernization of societies and create incentives for them to compose their differences. Economic interdependence would provide the basis for prosperity and undercut tyranny and geopolitical revisionism. A third idea was that international law and multilateral institutions would provide a co-operative infrastructure for the stable management of IR. In the Wilsonian version, international law was not a binding, sovereignty-yielding legal mechanism. It was a set of legal norms that states were to embrace out of self-interest and mutual regard for other democracies. The liberal anticipation was that—over time, states would come to act according to the norms of law by internalizing their moral and political imperatives. The fourth idea was that the global system would come to be a 'community of power'. That is, power politics and the balance of power would give way to a system of collective security where power itself would be less consequential to the stable functioning of IR. Power could be made less salient as a reality in world politics.³

³ The Wilsonian vision is summarized in Ikenberry et al. (2009).

Taken together, these aspects of the Wilsonian vision suggested that progress is possible in IR. Democracy, trade and collective security could provide a basis for a 'new order of things'. The world could be made anew. The old world of autocracy, militarism and despotism could be overturned and a new world of democracy and rule of law was possible. The US itself was at the vanguard of this world historical transformation. It is this vision that led Wilson to peacemaking at Versailles—and it was the failure of this liberal agenda that set the stage for the realist critique and for rethinking and rejoinders from later generations of liberals.

E.H. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis*, published on the eve of the World War II, is really the first modern text on IR. And it was aimed most directly as a critique of Wilsonian liberalism. But Carr's first contribution was to articulate the problem of power transitions and orderly change in IR. One of the great dramas of IR is the long-term historical dynamics of the rise and decline of states. Germany rose up in the late nineteenth century to challenge Great Britain, and the world war followed. International change results when technological innovations and uneven economic growth lead to shifts in the relative power positions of states. Realists argue that these power transition moments—when a rising state comes to equal or surpass an older powerful state—are fraught with danger. Carr called this the problem of 'peaceful change'—it is the problem of how the international system copes with the transition from order based on the domination of one state, to order based on the domination of another state (Carr 1939). Conflict is possible at these moments because as the rising state grows more powerful, it will become dissatisfied with the existing international order presided over by a dominant but declining state. It has more power and it wants the international system to accommodate its interests and to accord it the status and rights that are due to it as a rising state. On the other hand, the older and declining state will be threatened by the rising state and seek to preserve its declining dominance.

So starting with the World War I, realists articulated questions that they would bring to the emerging field of IR. How can power and anarchy be reconciled with stability? How did the European and worldwide balance of power fail? What are the sources of stable order? These are questions that had preoccupied historians and political theorists in earlier centuries. But the World War I revealed a troubled world where the stakes had grown. Modern industrial societies with increasingly lethal weapons and mass armies were now capable of 'total war'. These questions would be asked again, and in new ways, after the World War II.

But it is Carr's critique of Wilson, and what he called liberal 'idealists', that famously joined the debate with liberals and laid the foundation of disciplinary debates. In effect, Carr's argument was that liberals were in fact utopians; they were caught up in pursuing dreams of a transformed world, ignoring the realities of power politics, anarchy and security competition. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* has been read for generations as a great defence of realist thinking. Indeed, as

Michael Cox notes, its purpose was to 'attack all those liberals who thought they could build a new international system after 1919 without changing the basis of world politics' (Cox 2000).

The great debate was initiated. Liberals argued that the World War I and the upheavals of the inter-war era were ratifications of their view that the 'old order' was unsustainable in the modern world. The failures at Versailles did sober many liberals. And later generations of liberal internationalists offered updated ideas about how the world system might be reformed. Realists saw the timeless verities of power and conflict reaffirmed. Each of these two grand traditions had a set of ideas, theories and historical narratives. The debate was joined.

The Post-war Professionalization of IR

In the first decades after the World War II, the American field of IR began to take intellectual shape. In many ways, it was Hans Morgenthau's *Power among Nations* that signalled the coming professionalization of the field. This book was extraordinarily successful in setting the terms of scholarly debate for several generations after the war. Morgenthau was one of the many academic refugees from war-torn Europe who brought with him to the US a world-weary skepticism about the possibilities of peace and co-operation. Power and the struggle for power are constant, and understanding this reality allows the observer to see grand uniformities and patterns across historical eras (Morgenthau 1948).

The significance of Morgenthau's work as a disciplinary influence was in the way he depicted the study of IR: it is an enterprise seeking to establish political laws and regularities, and doing so in ways that could be studied empirically. As Stanley Hoffmann argues, Morgenthau was useful to the emerging discipline in multiple ways. First, his work suggested that IR could be studied as a 'science' in which law-like regularities could be identified and explored. He was arguing that IR was in effect a separate and coherent field of study, and not a branch of history or law. It was affiliated with political science but had its own theoretical agenda. IR was a field of study, organized around concepts of power and national interest. The other way that Morgenthau was useful to the emerging field was the great scope of his realist vision. It was a big argument, but it was also full of ambiguities and uncertainties. So, it was a book that could be engaged. It provoked debate and offered a sprawling research agenda. As Hoffmann says, 'all of this incited readers to react and, by reacting, criticizing, correcting, refuting, to build on Morgenthau's foundations. He was a goad and a foil' (Hoffman 1977). With the coming of the Cold War, this realist conception of IR thrived.

The post-war tradition of liberal international theory did not produce a singular iconic text. Rather, liberals pursued a set of scattered and evolving areas. One of the first waves of writing focused on functionalism. David Mitrany's *A Working Peace System*, written in 1943, was an early effort to provide a theory of how and

why states would build collaborative security institutions (Mitrany 1966). The functional theory entailed an argument about how modern states increasingly found themselves bound to other states in functional working relationships. This work offered a rationalist argument about the basis for post-war international co-operation. It was both a work of explanation and prescription. It argued that states could no longer operate as autonomous units. Modern societies were increasingly complex and interdependent. And so, new forms of institutionalized co-operation were needed. Mitrany also argued that functional forms of co-operation would not only be the most efficient way to organize IR but that—once so organized—these complex co-operative structures would reinforce and encourage peaceful relations (Mitrany 1966).

This functional perspective provided one of the lines of scholarship in post-war American IR. While realists were exploring the logic of deterrence and balancing in the context of the Cold War, the liberal tradition was directed at emerging realms of functional co-operation. Leading the way, Ernst Haas developed what is called a 'neofunctionalist' account of European integration (Haas 1958). Unlike Mitrany's work, neofunctionalism was explicitly non-normative. It simply attempted to provide an account of actual efforts at integration, and in the first instance this meant European initiatives such as the Coal and Steel Community, European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. The argument was that as advanced societies modernized, they would be driven by functional necessity to integrate with other societies. This would occur in incremental steps, pushed forward in non-political ways by technocrats and specialists. As this process unfolded, there would eventually be 'spillover' effects within political realms. Nationalism was giving way to more inclusive forms of regional organization. As technocrat integration creates functional and economic gains for societies, political allegiances would also transfer to wider political groupings. Europe, of course, was the leading case.

The study of regional integration in the late 1950s and the 1960s became a leading research area. Scholars such as Donald Puchala and Philippe Schmitter developed sophisticated functional theories and models of regional integration. Joseph Nye's *Peace in Parts* is an important statement of neofunctional theory as it was elaborated to explain alternative regional experiences in Europe, Asia and Africa (Nye 1971; Puchala 1975; Schmitter 1969). As the European regional experiment itself slowed down, the theories and debates also evolved, and by the 1970s, a wider debate emerged on economic interdependence and political integration.

If functionalism became one strand of the liberal research agenda, other scholars were trying to provide an account of the wider forms of co-operation among the Western democracies. In the mid-1950s, Karl Deutsch and his colleagues published a landmark study of what they called the North Atlantic security community (Deutsch 1957, 1966). They argued that a form of political community had taken

shape among the Western countries that fundamentally altered the logic of IR. Power and security competition had given way to a 'pluralistic security community' in which the use of force (or the threat of the use of force) was understood to be out of the question. Deutsch pointed to various processes of economic and social exchange and interaction that produced shifts in incentives and sentiments within countries to affiliate with and bond to other states. Communication and cognitive theories were explored as parts of the logic that explained these seeming transformations in older forms of inter-state relations. This line of research lost momentum at about the same time that regional integration studies waned, although it was revived in later decades (Adler and Barnett 1998).

The other lines of work on the liberal side during the 1950s and 1960s focused on the United Nations and other formal organizations. After all, the US after the World War II led in the creation of a wide range of international organizations, including the United Nations and Bretton Woods. Theorists such as Inis Claude provided theoretical accounts of the logic of collective security and the ways in which the League of Nations and the United Nations differed as collective security institutions (Claude 1959). The post-war research on international institutions began with an interest in their formal processes and politics. The United Nations itself was studied as an institution where influence was projected and power exercised (Alker and Russett 1965).

On the realist side, the Cold War decades saw the emergence of the sub-field of security studies. Some of this work focused on how the US should be organized for national security. Scholars such as Samuel Huntington (1957) and Morris Janowitz (1960) explored the role of civilian and military leadership. This line of work has continued into the post-Cold War decades with scholars such as Eliot Cohen (2003), exploring how modern democratic states integrate civilian leadership with military command, and with others such as Aaron Friedberg (2000), exploring the ways in which liberal states aggregate power without transforming themselves into 'garrison states'. Others focused on the strategic relations between the US and the former Soviet Union, exploring the nature and logic of nuclear deterrence, arms control and the meaning of the nuclear revolution. The most important contribution was Thomas Schelling's (1960) *Strategy of Conflict*, which laid down the theoretical foundations for strategic studies in the nuclear age.

By the 1960s, the realist and liberal wings of the American discipline of IR were established, each pursuing its own research agendas. Liberal international theory was focused primarily on relations within the West—regional integration, formal organizations and security communities. Liberals were essentially looking at IR 'inside' the bipolar Cold War system. Realists focused on the emerging logic of Cold War security relations.

Transnationalism and Interdependence

The next great debate in the field emerged in the 1970s with the rise of the politics of the world economy. Liberals were now looking less at Europe and regional integration and more at the general phenomenon of transnational relations and interdependence. This new focus was triggered by dramatic shifts in the world economy—namely, the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, the rise of multinational corporations and the oil price upheavals in the mid- and late-1970s. This grand debate centred on the changing logic of power in the modern system, the relative importance of economic relations in world politics and the capacities of the modern state.

The initial works that set the terms of this new debate offered striking portraits of a disaggregated and interdependent Western world. Richard Cooper's (1968) *The Economics of Interdependence* was one of the first efforts to theorize how the post-war growth of trade among the advanced countries was altering the logic of co-operation. Soon after this, the edited volume by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1971) on *Transnational Relations* provided a framework for exploring the role and significance of non-state actors in the global system. The liberal agenda of IR was expanding, driven by efforts to make sense of the growing density and complexity of post-war political and economic relations.

There were several sets of issues that occupied these liberal theorists. One was the question of state power as it was manifest under conditions of increasing economic interdependence (Baldwin 1980). As states find themselves in growing mutual dependence, how does this change the way they approach the exercise of power? Does power, as an aggregate distribution of capabilities among states, still matter in explaining what states do and how they bargain and settle disputes? A second issue relates to non-state actors. Do states still dominate the global system? As transnational corporations and activist groups become more prominent, how does this alter the logic of inter-state relations? A third issue relates to the resulting shifts in the rules and institutions of inter-state relations? The formal institutions of world politics—most notably the United Nations—no longer appeared to be the critical mechanisms for the problems of interdependence. Less formal and more issue-specific institutions appeared to be more critical.

At this juncture, some scholars made efforts to articulate an integrated liberal theoretical framework that would capture these perceived shifts in world politics. Keohane and Nye's (1977) *Power and Interdependence* was the most prominent work. The debate with realism was joined by distinguishing a realist power model, with a vision of 'complex interdependence'. This landmark study sought to explain bargaining outcomes between states. The traditional realist account was captured in a model in which unified states bargained over policy settlements, wielding aggregate power capabilities. In such a world, it is the distribution of power between

states that determines who wins and who loses. In contrast, the complex interdependence model disaggregated the power capabilities of states into specific issue areas. States did not bargain—government officials did. So, the resources and power advantages that governments brought to international negotiations were quite specific. These two models provided alternative analytical tools for exploring the modern international system. The contest between realism and liberalism was seen as one between the old or traditional system of world politics and the contemporary modernizing system in which the advanced Western capitalist countries were the vanguard.

The most lasting legacy of this work was not a unified liberal research agenda or the notion of complex interdependence but the idea of ‘regimes’. Liberals were seeking to find some way to capture the fact that modern IR was in fact infused with rules and institutions even when formal institutions were not present. This re-focusing of the study of institutions was crystallized in the collaborative volume on international regimes, edited by Stephen Krasner (1982). The contributions to this volume reflected a diversity of theoretical and methodological tastes. It included rational choice, sociological and constructivist essays. In this sense, the volume placed the scholarly study of international institutions on a new footing, providing concepts and alternative approaches. The debate about whether and in what way international rules and institutions ‘mattered’ was put at the forefront on the American study of IR.

The Neo-Liberal and Neo-Realist Synthesis

Realists, however, did not fully accept this reformulation of the debate. By the early 1980s, the Cold War had made a reappearance and realism was updating its own theoretical underpinnings. Kenneth Waltz’s (1979) *Theory of International Relations* was the book that reoriented realism—and for the next decade it overshadowed the field. The book was important in the first instance as a restatement of realism. It offered a ‘structural’ version of realist theory in which the organizing logic of the international system—*anarchy*—did the explanatory work. The realism of Morgenthau focused on a variety of forces—historical, geopolitical, personal, cultural, psychological—that shaped the foreign policy of states and activated the struggle for power. Waltz provided a simpler account. The anarchic nature of the system yielded pressures and insecurities that shaped the choices and incentives of states. This anarchy-generated set of pressures and insecurities were sufficiently intense and consistent across historical eras to produce similar and reoccurring patterns of state behaviour. Indeed, states found themselves in a decentralized system, not unlike firms in a semi-competitive market. In this way, the system tended towards an equilibrium—defined as the balance of power.

With this important realist theoretical move, the ‘problem of anarchy’ was put at the centre of the field. Realists recaptured the theoretical high ground. This was

partly because liberal theory remained fragmented and focused on specific aspects of world politics. There were liberals working on transnational actors, international institutions and other specific features of the global system. Moreover, liberal research was focused on the process and politics of inter-state relationships, particularly within the Western capitalist system. It tended to be concerned more with political-economic relationships than security relations. Realism looked to deeper global structures that produced the great forces and pressures.

The move that brought the two traditions together—on realist terms—was the liberal shift to exploring institutions in terms of the anarchy problematic. Robert Keohane (1984) led this move with his ‘functional’ theory of international institutions. This liberal institutionalist work began with the assumption of rational states operating under conditions of anarchy. But under conditions of ‘repeated play’, states did have incentives to construct rules and institutions that facilitated co-operation and joint gain. Keohane argued that rational states had a functional incentive to construct international institutions. Institutions would provide a variety of tools for states. They would help establish the credibility and commitment of states, overcoming uncertainties about whether co-operative steps would be reciprocated by other states. They would also provide vehicles for states to negotiate specific agreements, reducing the transaction costs that would otherwise inhibit agreement. In effect, states can use institutions to alter the environment in which they interact with other states, reducing the anarchy effects and facilitating the flow of information and, ultimately, improving the possibilities for mutually beneficial co-operation.

The realist and liberal debate moved at several levels. One was focused on the degree to which the ‘effects’ of anarchy could be mitigated by institutions. Realists argued that the insecurity generated by anarchy was deeply-rooted and drove states to pursue relative gains competition. After all, institutions were not in themselves sufficiently durable and credible to overcome the power-driven exploitation and opportunism of states. Liberals argued that when states find themselves in ‘repeated play’ situations, they have both the incentives and opportunities to signal restraint and commitment through institutions that can reduce anarchy-induced insecurity.⁴ The upshot of this debate was that liberals conceded theoretical ground to realists by building their models on assumptions about anarchy and rational states. On the other hand, liberals were able to make headway in establishing the conditions under which states might co-operate and build institutionalized relationships. Anarchy was not an absolute and unchanging environmental condition within which states operated. It could be manipulated.

The other debate that unfolded in the wake of Waltz’s neo-realist theory was focused on the explanatory power of structure. Waltz’s structural theory argued that anarchy and the distribution of power had the most critical impact on the

⁴ For a summary of these debates, see Baldwin (1993).

long-term patterns of world politics. These factors weighed heavily on the incentives and constraints that shaped the choices of states. Other factors, such as economic interdependence or the internal politics and culture of a state, mattered little, at least as explanations of long-term patterns. In reaction to this strong structural claim, both realism and liberalism defined their next theoretical agendas.

Classical Realism and the Democratic Peace

Waltz's structural theory of realism set American IR studies on a twenty-year cycle of debate and theoretical innovation. On the realist side, scholars who were unconvinced by the explanatory primacy of anarchy returned to older versions of realism that emphasized a mix of variables. 'Classical realism'—referring to the old realism that gave weight to history, strategic culture and even ideas—came back into fashion. The varieties of realism were reemphasized. At the same time, liberalism found ways to integrate its various threads of work into a more comprehensive—and even structural—theoretical position. The rise of the debate on the 'democratic peace' provided the cutting edge for this liberal thinking. The two grand theoretical traditions seemed to be moving in opposite directions. In the wake of Waltzian realism, realists retreated from neo-realism's structural ambitions, while liberalism attempted to strengthen its structural theoretical foundations.

The growing heterogeneity of realist theory was partly a response to the perceived problems that neo-realism had in explaining major aspects of the post-Cold War world and indeed problems in explaining the end of the Cold War. The rise of American unipolarity, and the absence of realist-style balancing against it, provided one of the most important puzzles. If the great powers do not balance against the most powerful state the world has ever seen, what can realism really explain? Some realist scholars were exploring intriguing historical patterns related to the balance of power, seeking to account for 'under' and 'over' balancing (Schweller 2008). In this work, domestic variables matter a great deal in explaining when and how states balance against power and threats. Realists also began to focus on the rise of China, invigorating the debate on 'power transitions'. Generally speaking, realists offered relatively contingent theoretical accounts of the rise of China. The rise of China would generate problems—manifest in various sorts of competition and conflict—but both the US and China have ways to manage and shape the terms of the transition.⁵

Liberals moved in a different direction—focusing on the democratic peace. This Kantian liberal argument was given new prominence in the 1980s by Michael Doyle. The end of the Cold War and the spread of liberal democracy further encouraged the spread of this liberal argument. In the 1990s, the scholarly study of

⁵ See essays in Ross and Feng (2008).

the theory and evidence for the democratic peace took centrestage. Liberals debated the specific causes and mechanisms of the democratic peace and realists offered qualifications and refutations.⁶

Just as Waltzian realism was given an impetus by the early Reagan-era Cold War, so did the end of the Cold War reinvigorate the liberal research agenda. The democratic peace was to liberal theory what the balance of power was to realism. It provided a foundation upon which multifaceted scholarly research could proceed. The original claim of the democratic peace was about how democracies tend not to go to war against each other. The larger set of arguments and hypotheses that followed dealt with the various ways that democracies can establish credible commitments, exercise restraint and engage in sustained co-operation (Lipson 2003).

Liberal scholars also sought to give liberalism a more structural, theoretical foundation. One version of this was offered by Andrew Moravcsik who grounded liberal international theory in domestic societal preferences. The character of states—and the internal societal groups and their preferences—are what drive states, shaping their willingness to co-operate. In this light, ‘structural liberalism’ was clearly demarcated from ‘structural realism’—liberalism was rooted in domestic societies and realism in the distribution of power within an anarchic system. The other effort to provide a ‘structural’ liberal perspective turned not to domestic sources of preferences but to an array of organizational logics and institutional practices that together produced ‘liberal order’ (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Moravcsik 1997). In this formulation, liberal order had an organizing logic that directly contrasted with realist order. Liberal hegemonic features of the system altered the anarchic character of international order, creating opportunities for more open and rule-based relations. States have incentives and opportunities to overcome security dilemmas by ‘binding’ together in co-operative security pacts. In addition to these logics of order, the incentives for co-operation built into economic interdependence and democratic community, reinforce the liberal character of the system.

Out of these debates, liberals were able to step back and provide relatively comprehensive theories of the liberal international order. The three major pillars of liberal theory—democratic peace, economic interdependence and international institutions—work together to reinforce and perpetuate stable peace (Russett and Oneal 2001). The US itself has seen within this liberal international literature a state that has used its commanding power to organize the system in ways that have allowed trade and exchange to proliferate. Realists offer important insights into the grand shifts in international power and the rise and decline of major states. But liberals have shown that liberal states have opportunities and incentives to build non-realist sorts of international order (Ikenberry 2001).

⁶ The literature on the democratic peace is vast. For an overview of the debate, see Brown (1996).

Conclusion

The discipline of IR emerged in the US at a time when it was the world's most powerful state, a liberal great power caught in geopolitical struggle with illiberal rivals. This basic context ensured that the American theoretical debates would be built around both power and liberal ideals. These twin features of the IR field found theoretical grounding in the old traditions of realism and liberalism. Across the decades, these two grand theoretical projects have struggled to define the agenda for disciplinary research and speak to the great issues of the day. In the twenty-first century, they continue to do so.

The two traditions have evolved over the decades as they attempt to make sense of contemporary events—war and upheavals in the international system—and speak to the grand strategic position in which the US finds itself. The Cold War drove realism to define the terms of strategic studies, creating useable knowledge for the nuclear age. The end of the Cold War and the spread of democracy and globalization forces liberalism to think more broadly about the underlying logic of the world political economy.

The two traditions have also evolved along with the changing fashions and standards of social science. Waltzian realism was articulated in a way that was consistent with the rising use of rational choice methods in theory development. So too were the neo-liberal theories of institutions and theories of international political economy. These rationalist formulations of realism and liberalism sparked reactions, and constructivist theory has arisen to offer counterpoints to rational choice theory. The changing demands of the American foreign policy establishment—and a growing think tank world in Washington—have also pushed and pulled IR debates. The disciplinary movement towards quantitative and formal theory is matched by efforts of some scholars to speak to policy makers. Abstract formal work is largely cut off from policy debates. At the same time, think tank scholars are themselves largely cut off from disciplinary debates. This widening gyre of scholarly works on IR has made it increasingly hard to define the 'core'. But despite this, behind the scene, realism and liberalism remain vibrant traditions. This is because each of these old traditions identifies some classic and enduring principles to explain the way the international politics operates. Power matters even if it is not manifest in a balance of power. Liberal theory offers a way of making sense of the expanding world of liberal democracy and economic interdependence.

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