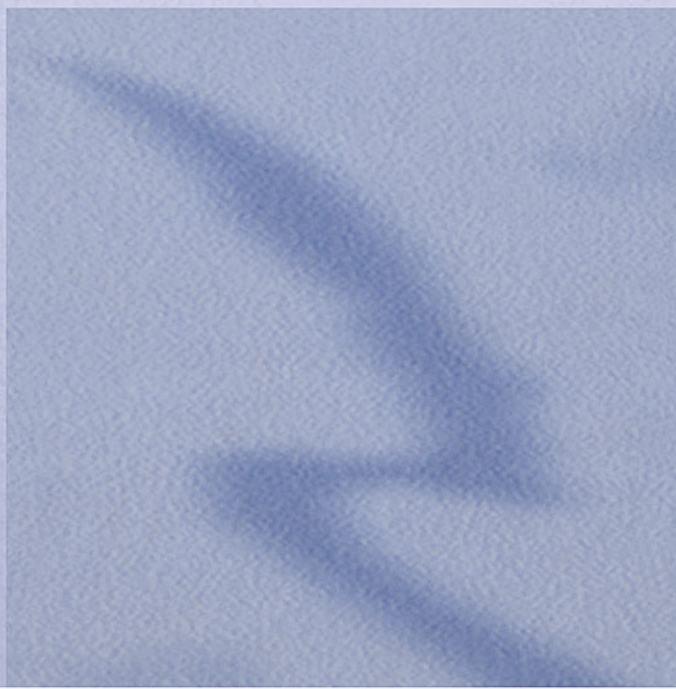


Idealism and Realism in International Relations

Beyond the discipline

Robert M.A. Crawford

Routledge Advances in International Relations
and Politics



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Idealism and Realism in International Relations

The essential contestability of the theories of International Relations has remained a constant aspect of its study. Conventional accounts, however, render debates about theory more manageable by their tendency to roam within the boundaries established by the allegedly timeless discourse between idealist and realist conceptualizations.

Idealism and Realism in International Relations accepts the premise that idealism and realism form the fundamental axis of contention in the subject. It rejects as mistaken, however, the tendency to treat these visions as “paradigms.” Robert Crawford instead conceives them as philosophical faultlines that do not merely divide the field but militate against its depiction as a consolidated academic discipline. The author argues for a revised conception of International Relations, that takes heed of the fundamental irreconcilability of its theories while continuing its concern with important substantive issues.

Robert M.A. Crawford is Lecturer of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His previous publications include *Regime Theory in the Post-Cold War World: Rethinking Neoliberal Approaches to International Relations* and *International Relations—Still an American Social Science? Towards Diversity in International Thought* (co-edited with D.S.L. Jarvis).

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Robert M.A. Crawford



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For my daughter, Amelia Bea Crawford

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Preface

It is customary to begin with an apology when presenting a “second-order inquiry” of International Relations (IR) (an investigation of the investigators and their techniques, as opposed to the actual subject matter, in world politics).¹ This book makes no such apology. On the contrary, it seeks to demonstrate that the essentially contested and ambiguous nature of international relations as an academic subject is in large measure disguised by the innate sense of vocation exhibited by the majority of its modern practitioners and students. There is a thriving industry of theoretical surveys, and state-of-the-art assessments, in IR, to which I have no desire to contribute. Nor do I wish to indulge the equally fashionable and myopic practice of declaring the discipline “dead” (and Western, and modernist, versions of reason, truth, and knowledge into the bargain). Rather, this book argues that we cannot begin to make sense of the mood of crisis and uncertainty that has defined IR as a modern subject until we recognize the utter futility of adopting evaluative standards of disciplinary well-being developed in (and for) other fields. Like social and political theory in general, IR contains deep, irresolvable ambiguities, making its theories inherently contestable, something clearly understood and accepted by some of the very figures who are now counted among the discipline’s “founding fathers.” Once this intellectual reality is accepted, or rediscovered, it is not the discipline of IR that goes out the window, but every attempt to conceive it as a unitary science. Consensus is neither a necessary nor desirable ingredient for intellectual progress, nor do disagreements about which substantive aspects of international politics to study, or why we should study them, preclude talking about IR as a coherent subject. Despite their evident complexity, theoretical accounts of international political life have always tended to bifurcate along a simple idealist-realist axis of contention.

In the modern discipline of IR, however, idealism and realism have been severed from normal usage and transformed into “paradigms” *within* a unitary science, the explicit goal of which is steadily to replace the utopian fancies of the former with the dispassionate observations of the latter, as determined from the purportedly archimedean vantage point of scientific method. Yet idealism and realism are not competing perspectives within *the* discipline, so much as fundamental, ineradicable faultlines that run under it; since the time of Thucydides at least, these philosophical divisions have rendered up competing conceptions of the subject, its theorization, and what (if anything) constitutes theoretical and substantive progress. This division is a constant feature of IR that, like the “wu” and “wei” of Taoism, constitutes an irreconcilable, but mutually necessary, philosophical tension that makes a virtue of division, and a unity of opposites.

Such a disposition typified IR scholarship in the formative literature of the 1930s to 1950s but was quickly overshadowed by an uncontested ideology of science and “progress” with which it was clearly incommensurable. This era, characterized by its recognition of the need to balance theoretical and practical ambitions for world politics against its seemingly immutable realities, could not have been better attuned to the requirements of the debutante discipline of IR. By the 1960s, however, the story of disciplinary origin in IR had become a retrospective and linear ideology of scientific progress, and the “Idealist-Realist” debate—as it came to be known after its intussusception into *the* discipline—was a mark of intellectual primitivism, its key figures applauded for their scientific instincts but castigated for their failure to live up to the theoretical standards allegedly implicit in their work. This still pervasive but mistaken view betrays the genuine misgiving characteristic of this age, and particularly pronounced in the works of Hans Morgenthau and E.H.Carr, key figures typically cast in the role of disciplinary “pioneers.” Why, then, does the modern discipline of IR continue to misunderstand itself?

Since the 1980s IR debate has been preoccupied with the issue of theoretical pluralism but, still partly blinded by the failing light of positivist mono-science, its participants have been more inclined to peer nervously toward a distant and unknown future than able properly to apprehend a more familiar, less threatening, past. The eruption of “new” concerns is impressive, but the disjuncture between past and present debate is greatly exaggerated by the artificial orthodoxy of the modern discipline, and many of these concerns, even those of the most

acrimonious variety, can be traced to the perennial division of idealism and realism.

A number of people contributed directly or indirectly to this book and I take pleasure in thanking them. I would like to begin by thanking the anonymous reviewers for their advice and criticism, and the very helpful and patient editorial staff at Routledge. My particular thanks to Ceri McNicol, Liz Brown, and Simon Whitmore. It is not every project, I suspect, that manages to involve three editorial assistants. I regret having taken so long, but could not have wished for three more understanding, professional assistants along the way. Special thanks to Helen Skelton, whose preparation of the proofs could not have been better, or more professionally, done. A big thanks also to my colleague Darryl Jarvis, whose feedback, insight and conversation over the past several years has been invaluable. Thanks as well to Chris Brown for his thoughtful comments on an early version of [chapter five](#), and to Kal Holsti for encouraging me to seek out a publisher for the views expressed here, many of which were formed under his guidance at the University of British Columbia. I am glad to acknowledge the advice and assistance of these individuals, but hasten to add that any remaining errors or weaknesses are entirely my own.

I would also like to thank my Arts One colleagues at UBC for encouraging me to see this project through despite the many demands and distractions of our shared vocation. Special thanks to Mark Glouberman whose humor and conversation is infinitely better than his instant coffee.

Finally, I take great pleasure in thanking my best friend Marie for her patience, unconditional support, technical advice and assistance, and for putting up with a partner whose attention and time over the past several years has been distracted at best. This book is dedicated to our dearest little Amelia Bea, whose arrival during its formation posed special challenges, but could not have been more welcome.

1

Introduction

Idealism and realism in International Relations

The absence of consensus in social theory may simply reflect the essential ambiguity of human existence, the inherent contestability of the theories we generate in the real world of political action.

Chris Brown

No intellectual field today suffers more from the ambiguity of its subject matter, or the contestability of its theories, than International Relations. By most accounts, this malaise is of recent outset, coming on the heels of many decades (even centuries) of intellectual well-being. Long before its modern exponents proclaimed IR a distinct and self-standing discipline, its essential actors, patterns, elements, and issues had been identified, and its key precepts enshrined. As K.J. Holsti observes, “today, we can read clay tablets dating from the third millennium B.C. or review relations between Sumerian cities and find in them many characteristics and aspects of statecraft that are commonly still observed today” (Holsti 2000, 71).

Paradoxically, however, the seemingly timeless characteristics of international relations can be taken as evidence for two almost wholly contradictory views about the subject. The first view, typified by Holsti, is that IR is/was a distinct discipline with a well-defined set of problems around which policy and scholarly oriented analyses can/could converge, with a view to diagnosing and resolving dilemmas, or at least muddling through in spite of them. But the seemingly timeless nature of the generalizations yielded by the study of international relations is a double-edged sword, since for others these elements—by dint of their very repetitiveness—are identified as “never-resolved dilemmas and paradoxes” (Yost 1994, 264). To the extent that international relations are impervious to human intervention, they are impervious to social and

political theory in any traditional sense, since inquiry becomes a pointless exercise if we are left merely to describe phenomena largely beyond the power of amendment. Such is the paradoxical depiction of IR generated by Realist commentators who, despite a precipitous falling off in their official membership, continue strongly to influence thinking about the subject, particularly in North America.

Because this impasse is a product of assumptions about the subject (and how best to study it), getting beyond it means getting beyond the self-limiting terms of the debates that to date have exercised a virtual monopoly on how to think about IR. But the conventional wisdom that IR exists as an autonomous discipline is so firmly entrenched that any attempt to question its status as a social science constitutes a form of theoretical heresy. Even while Realist assumptions are decried as morally repugnant or anachronistic, the largely Realist attempt to found a discipline on a search for patterns of behavior among states in a condition of anarchy is treated widely as the benchmark of the discipline. That IR no longer reflects its once impressive level of consensus about the basic criteria and procedures for theorizing obviously matters but, in an important sense, it is also irrelevant. What matters most is that the evaluative standard for measuring and assessing the state of the discipline remains rooted in conventional perceptions. Thus, assessments of the current state of the art tend to convey a sense of “disarray” or crisis precisely because traditional expectations for maturation, growth, and progress have been disappointed (Holsti 1985; Ferguson and Mansbach 1988). Virtually everyone now acknowledges that IR is in a state of turmoil, but how and why it came about, and its implications for the study of international relations, are matters of intense dispute. From the conventional standpoint, IR is in a state of turmoil because a crisis exists “when a field threatens to disappear, become redundant, or fly apart into a maelstrom of intellectual individualism devoid of common purpose or interest” (Holsti 2000, 72). This view is premised on the sensible proviso that there is nothing intrinsically valuable about the intellectual diversity so much in evidence in contemporary discourse about international relations. On the other hand, however, it must be asked whether there is anything intrinsically valuable about consensus or conformity? Is it not evident, for example, that conventional views about IR (precisely because they are conventional) derive their intellectual authority merely from established practices and expectations? If IR is a science, it is certainly no more rooted in fact than pre-Galilean astronomy. History is rich with

examples of rehabilitated heretics, and we may one day need to add some of the contemporary “enemies” of IR to its archives.

Despite a burgeoning stock of theoretically inclined works in, and about, the field in recent years, there has been surprisingly little consideration of what actually constitutes “the discipline.” That discipline and theory are question-begging terms is a reality that has only recently been acknowledged, thanks largely to the efforts of thinkers ranging outside the official boundaries of IR and into the wider realm of social theory. But, because this long overdue bout of “meta-theoretical” activity has occurred in the context of a previously unassailable (if unspoken) disciplinary orthodoxy, it has occasioned more confusion than clarity, more intellectual heat than light, and more theoretical declension than renewal. Of particular concern is a marked tendency towards two mutually exclusive, and equally lamentable, dispositions about the subject: (1) that IR can only be called a discipline if it develops in the same progressive fashion as the natural sciences, and; (2) that IR is a thing best forgotten entirely in favor of myriad concerns that bear no resemblance to international politics as traditionally conceived.¹ Neither of these dispositions are especially realistic or useful ways of proceeding and, despite their profound differences, are simply mirror images of a single tendency to reify a particular conception of science and discipline that must be either utterly embraced, or utterly rejected.

The modern attempt to mold the study of IR into an organized academic field modeled exclusively on natural scientific methods has created a truncated, self-validating conception of discipline that has itself been closed to scrutiny. This development has not merely amplified the sense of crisis engendered by the belated arrival of the postmodern assault on Enlightenment-inspired versions of science, but robbed an already beleaguered body of students of a full and accurate understanding of their intellectual heritage. The study of international relations, like social-political theory in general, is inherently dependent on multiple intellectual traditions. This basic reality cannot be ignored or wished away without serious distortion. And yet the conception of international relations dominant in the modern discipline—indeed, the very idea of IR as a discipline—is based on “a deep commitment to a monistic metaphysics to the effect that there is one world and only one conception of it that can be true” (Spegele 1996, 49). This mono-mania flies in the face of the pluralistic bent typical of pre- and (assuming the “dividing discipline”² motif is apt) postdisciplinary theorizing in international relations. Since there is no way to adjudicate between the

conflicting truth claims of monistic and pluralistic versions of international relations, a fundamental and ineradicable dualism must result. The dualistic character of international thought is well documented and most consistently captured and described via reference to the competing traditions of idealism and realism. What is not adequately understood or demonstrated in the usual deployment of these labels, however, is the unbridgeable width of the philosophical gulf that separates their underlying constructions of international politics. On the contrary, swayed again by their penchant for one-worldism at both the political and methodological level, modern adherents of IR have tended to view the idealist-realist dichotomy as a serious axis of contention, but one easily reconciled to a unitary conception of discipline.

This book challenges the wisdom and utility of the modern disciplinary construction of the idealism-realism debate in international relations. It argues for a return to the classical idea, popularized by E.H. Carr, and other important contributors to the earliest development of the modern discipline, that idealism and realism are fundamentally at odds with one another, and cannot be reconciled in theory or practice. It argues that the clash between idealists and realists is an ontological foundation predicated on conflicting assessments of human nature and the possibilities for, and appropriate conceptions of, progress in international relations. While the academic study of international relations is unavoidably sustained by these two philosophical strands it has, in its modern and hegemonic guise as “the discipline,” been forced largely to make do without an adequate understanding of either of them, or a full appreciation of their implications for scientific renderings of the subject. The idealist-realist debate is generally regarded as the most central and long-standing feature of the international relations discourse. But the modern discipline’s perceived need for a shared scientific vocabulary has transformed these competing, energetic conceptions of the subject into tepid “paradigms” within a largely artificial consensus.

As Roger Spegele suggests, the idealist-realist debate revolves around a *what-question*: “what is international relations?” (Spegele 1996, xv-xvi). This is a philosophical question involving a critical evaluation not merely of the nature of international relations, but of what constitutes reliable knowledge about it. A question of this sort cannot be definitively answered—it can only be asked, endlessly if need be. The contingency of a theory of international relations is no argument against its necessity, but does militate against the sort of consensus required for a discipline modeled on the natural sciences. It is a simple and obvious

reality that the analysis of international relations has always posed insuperable obstacles to agreement. Yet commentators have continually disagreed over the same, or similar, points, placing themselves into one of two broad camps, idealist or realist. The former tends to look past the seemingly permanent realities of international politics in order to emphasize volition and imagination as necessary and potential forces for progress, normatively defined. The latter generally purports to analyze the world of international politics for what it “truly is,” untainted by idealization, sentimentality or other allegedly extraneous considerations. These competing orientations create a lively and fertile tension on which international relations theorizing, outside the straightjacket of discipline at least, has always flourished. It is to a conception of idealism and realism in this customary sense that this book returns.

This book differs from other theoretically inclined works in its identification of two, rather than the usual three or more, dominant discourses in IR. This is because its emphasis is not on science in the usual sense (and thus not on paradigms *within* IR) but on what it means to conceive of international relations as a coherent academic subject. The persistent identification of competing idealist and realist constructions of international politics throughout its practice and study suggests that it is neither a science or a non-science in any conventional sense, but a subject with a character unique to itself.³ Since the birth of IR as a modern scientific discipline, idealism and realism are usually depicted as conflicting traditions or “paradigms” within a single, integrated discipline of IR. It is common practice to capitalize these and other perceived paradigms within the discipline, a practice continued here for the sake of disentangling approaches within IR from conceptions of the subject *per se*. Thus, large-I-idealism and large-R-realism refers always to idealist and realist thought in their self-limiting guise as IR paradigms. These paradigmatic constructions are familiar enough, but bear repeating here, since exposing the limitations of this form of taxonomy is one of the primary objectives of this book. For Realists, the state is a unitary and rational actor, whose interactions with other states are of primary interest, and tend to be conflictual because they occur under anarchic conditions. For Idealists, a desire and commitment to overcome the conditions of real conflicts, or perceived injustices, in world politics is a possibly sufficient condition for change. That these “competing” perspectives reflect a deeply rooted, and irresolvable, debate over the possibility of human progress is obscured by the modern discipline’s incessant drive towards a monistic

metaphysics, a preoccupation that forces students and practitioners to choose between the equally compelling and necessary positions attached to realist and liberal understandings broadly construed. Idealism and realism are thus transformed from deep, mutually constitutive, philosophical currents which inhabit every attempt to conceive international relations (and predate and render problematic its namesake discipline) into crude and lusterless caricatures. IR theorists are forced to be *either* Realists *or* Idealists, and to cloak themselves in the drab apparel of their respective school. Though other paradigms may, of course, be identified, the important point is the exclusionary, and conflictual, nature of IR debates. This nicely accounts for the discipline's tendency to manifest a sort of "acceptance-rejection" personality, embracing and rejecting paradigms with more or less equal degrees of ardor. The matter is further complicated by the discipline's dominant myth of origin: the triumph of a hard-headed Realist pragmatism over an earlier and disastrous Idealist-utopian sentimentality. While the pattern of professionalization in the discipline has essentially followed this pattern, it marks an intellectual false step in its departure from the traditional tendency to conceive of international politics in genuinely competing ways. In the case of Idealism and Realism, the politicization of these ostensibly heuristic categories leaves us less with an appreciation for the philosophical duality of the subject, than crude distortions largely divorced from intellectual reality.

Before proceeding to a more detailed statement of the aims, method, and organization of this study it is useful in this period of rapid change in international relations and its theories to make some effort at situating this book, and defending it from possible objections or misunderstandings. First, what follows is only incidentally a commentary on the present state of the field and, as such, makes no pretense to furnish a comprehensive overview of its various theories. Because other disciplinary overviews have tended to define IR tautologically (as pretty much synonymous with what most of its principally Realist practitioners and theorists have had to say), and because the primary aim of this work is to help locate the criteria via which the status of the subject can more accurately be assessed, state of the art thinking in IR is in an important sense premature. Second, I am well aware that the attempt to found, or refound, anything in these anti-foundational times may strike many as a curiously outdated practice. To the extent that these potential critics are also prone to regard the increasingly relativistic nature of IR theory as something worth celebrating for its own sake, I am unperturbed by these anticipated

objections, since anything short of universal deconstruction is not likely to win their approval, or even attract their attention. To those who share my belief that it is possible, and desirable, to think harder about IR without throwing it out the window, but who might nevertheless regard much of what follows as arcane and outdated, I can only reply that much of what follows reflects issues of concern to a sizable chunk of the IR community. That many of the more mainstream commentators discussed in this study are likely vigorously to reject its conclusions (and might in any case regard it as a digressive rumination) is support enough for its broad aims. While it is not my intention to disconcert IR traditionalists and their critics alike, I would be content to interpret such an outcome as evidence of the book's successful negotiation of a viable middle point between two equally fruitless conceptions of the subject. Third, if I focus more on how best to understand the world of international relations rather than its increasingly contested set of realities *per se*, I do so out of the conviction that I am not consciously promoting a preferred conception of the subject in order to further a particular political aim, but a conception of the subject that I think best reflects its composition. While I share the apprehension that something is amiss in a field when there is more investigation of its investigators than its actual subject matter, that something is amiss in IR as presently conceived is precisely my point. Under such conditions there is little to be gained by denial, cognitive dissonance, or indifference. The absence of agreement over what to study (or how to study it) does not make the multiple realities of international relations any less compelling, but surely a reasonably clear and explicit articulation of what constitutes a discipline of IR is logically prior to any intelligible discussion of its subject matter.

Another possible objection to this study is that IR is over. After all, if Francis Fukuyama can proclaim nothing less momentous than the end of history, is it not possible that the central issues of international relations (and thus its theories) will simply evaporate, or become less and less connected to traditional security problems (Fukuyama 1992; Mueller 1988)? What is bad news for IR is good news for the planet, however, since it implies that the problem of war (at least on a large international scale) will have been solved (Holsti 2000, 77). There are two basic and compelling reasons why this potential objection should not be taken seriously. First, the perceived disutility of war between advanced industrial states may not reflect an increasingly global ideology, so much as the increasingly global spread of Western, and predominantly Anglo-American, consumer values. That conflicts of

interest among the great powers will be of diminished importance is, of course, good for the world as a whole, but represents a possibly temporary retreat from the problem of interstate conflict, at least in terms of its usual fault lines. Second, the classical insistence that the discipline of IR needs to be conceived in terms of the single, core, Tolstoyan *problematique* of “war and peace” is far too narrow, and has merely exaggerated the mood of crisis in the field, and the novelty of problems only obliquely connected to security in the traditional sense. It is not IR that is (or should be) perceived as over, but a self-limiting conception of the subject that defines so many of its legitimate concerns as outside our purview. While it is true that great powers past and present have not directly, or explicitly, spent much of their time addressing issues of “quality of life and equity issues,” this need not disqualify these as issues of direct concern to international theory (Holsti 2000, 77–8). None of this is to suggest that IR should be conceived as comprising whatever issues we feel are personally compelling. This is an obvious recipe for chaos and self-indulgence and antithetic to anything resembling a community of scholars. But the need for boundaries should not be used as a mechanism for guarding the disciplinary gate; taxonomic rigor should be accompanied by an open mind. Is it reasonable, for example, that transnational corporations should be treated as theoretically uninteresting when they have the power to improve, disrupt, or destroy the lives of so many people, and on a global scale, simply on the grounds that none to date have achieved territorial sovereignty or mustered armies? The point, then, is that there continues to be a valid ontological distinction between what we can broadly term the international and domestic spheres, but that many of the more compelling international issues can be found in what were once regarded as areas peripheral to the field. International theory is not fated to disappear, though it is fated to be more inclusive.

It is possible, of course, to get hung up on issues of disciplinary status. Whether or not, to what extent, and on what conditions, IR can be said to exist as an autonomous subject is ultimately secondary to the problem that things of tremendous significance are going on in the world around us. But if drawing boundaries around a subject can create disciplinary straightjackets, the failure to do so is a recipe for chaos, self-gratification, faddism, reinvention, and a complete rejection of everything we ever thought we knew about knowledge. But it is possible to reject this radical skepticism without falling back on the equally extreme claim that every answer to our problems will be delivered by science and rationality. Indeed getting past the idea that all

problems have answers, and that we can all agree on what these problems are, is the first step on the road to rethinking IR. The decline of the positivist-empiricist orthodoxy in IR has opened the field to new (or rather previously alien) ways of conceiving of social and political thought; it would be a shame if this old orthodoxy were merely replaced by a new exclusionary dogma.

This book is conceived as a search for a plausible alternative conception of IR to anything presently on offer. It is a self-conscious effort to steer a middle course between the sirens of “the discipline,” on the one hand, and the sirens of deconstruction on the other. An obvious implicit premise in any reconstructive exercise is that modernist conceptions of philosophical reasoning, argument, and truth continue to be relevant, exposing this work to the charge that it presupposes that which appears to be contested. In response I can only express my conviction that deconstruction depends obviously, and logically, on the foundational precepts through which it is defined, and is bound up intimately in what its proponents purport utterly to reject. The term postmodernism, for example, conveys a sense of disenchantment with, and a desire to transcend, the empiricist philosophy of science, but every claim about truth—including the claim that it must be continually evaluated—is in a sense foundational. The point, in any case, is that there is nothing new, and certainly nothing peculiarly post-modern, about the unresolved perspectivism of contemporary social thought. Rather, the extraordinary diversity of the present is more like an echo of the past, since “virtually every important element of the Western intellectual past is now present and active in one form or another” (Tarnas 1991, 402). When a new, even profoundly different, intellectual vision emerges it cannot be built on air, and many of the elements at play in this allegedly postmodern intellectual condition are either modernist, or altogether predate the tradition of Western civilization. Thus, that which is “new” is new only in the sense that it constitutes a synthesis, or rejection, of these elements or—in the case of IR in particular—has been previously ignored.

The key to understanding the disciplinary parameters and potential of IR lies not in its uncertain future, nor its increasingly chaotic present, but in its recent past and, much more remotely, the essential ambiguity of social theory in general. Though organized theoretical investigation of international relations is much older than its modern namesake field, it is from the late 1930s to mid-1950s that the truest articulation of its purpose, possibilities, and limits can be found. The emergence of IR as an autonomous subject came somewhat earlier, largely as a response to

the grim and pressing realities of the First World War. It was at the midpoint of the twentieth century, however, that IR came into its own, striking an essential balance between the well-intentioned, but excessive, optimism of its founders, and the equally well-intentioned, and excessive, pragmatism of their self-appointed heirs and critics. This idealist-realist counterbalance was largely unintended, yet salutary, since each vision of IR undermined the propensity of the other to congeal into dogma. But the notion that a coherent academic field could be founded on largely antithetical principles could not easily resist the pressures for consensus, unity, and conformity characteristic of the now prevalent, positivistic, conception of science and discipline. That IR fails miserably to meet this standard in the 1990s is no surprise to anyone acquainted with its earlier development.

The significance of the new way of thinking about IR ushered in by the Realist critique of Idealism cannot properly be understood in the afterglow of a positivist conception of the subject to which none of the early figures in the field's modern development aspired. It is usually with the benefit of a particular scientific hindsight that the most important architects of the discipline are singled out, and who makes this list is frequently less interesting and telling than why they are there. Most IR textbooks pay homage to the self-defined "pioneers" of the modern discipline, many of whom are Realists, and all of whom deserve to be acknowledged for their contributions. While the index varies from text to text, it is a safe bet that figures like E.H.Carr, Raymond Aron, Hans Morgenthau, John Herz, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Arnold Wolfers will pop up. Implicit in the concept of "the pioneer," however, is the idea that subsequent intellectual development has put some aspect of his/her thought in question, transcending the error and confusion born of an early (and thus imperfect) apprehension of an evolving science. It is characteristic of the hubris of every self-conceived science to attribute the more "valuable" insights of its earliest progenitors to crude intuition or luck, and IR is no exception. Many of these early IR figures, for example, are applauded for their efforts to think systematically about their subject, but chided for failing to "go beyond" merely impressionistic, conjectural argument (Kegley 1995, 27; Waltz 1995, 70–6).

The arguments advanced below challenge the conventional story of the growth of the discipline through progressive stages of science. Focusing on the works of Carr and Morgenthau, and several thinkers past and present who share a similar conception of the subject, I argue that IR achieved its healthiest state as an organized academic field from

roughly the late 1930s to the mid-1960s, after which point IR theorists came increasingly to accept the intellectually destructive belief that theoretical activity should be concerned only with “facts” and “values,” and the corresponding activities of “diagnosing” and “prescribing.” My approach, however, should not be interpreted as an exercise in historiography or nostalgia, so much as an attempt to recover a conception of IR largely uncontaminated by today’s exaggerated claims of unity or heterogeneity; it is less a return to the discipline’s recent past than a turn towards its only possible present. While I regard this largely forgotten and/or neglected conception of the subject as classical, it is only classical in the sense that it is difficult to imagine IR in any other way. It is not my contention that we should return to (or can even lay claim to have enjoyed) a “golden age” of IR theory. On the contrary, it is my contention that we must follow the sensible example of our supposed pioneers and relax, and rethink, our desire for disciplinary utopia.

If it strikes the reader as odd that IR can, on the one hand, consist of more than one sort of intellectual activity and, on the other hand, still be conceived as a distinct field, it is probably due to the unchallenged (since largely unacknowledged) presupposition that a “discipline” can only be founded on consensus. Despite being a rather loosely specified thing, the word “discipline” has become so bound up with methodological unity that it does not lend itself well to my purposes here and, where I use it, I do so with qualification. Though various versions of IR exist, it is generally conceived as a monoscience. For the positivists any truth claims about IR must be verified by the methods of empirical science. For the “postpositivists” any truth claims about IR must meet the test of “rational consensus” (Brown 1994, 219). Even some of the self-identified opponents of the rationalist “project” in IR unwittingly legitimize a unitary conception of the field when they insist that it stand or fall as a whole, and when they offer deconstruction and intertextuality as the only viable method of glimpsing whatever fleeting and unstable truth is out there. What each of these disparate, and internally diverse, conceptions of social-political thought have in common is an unwillingness to recognize that it is possible (indeed necessary) to accept the legitimacy of more than one intellectual activity in an ambiguous field like IR. But, while the general utility of various cognitive faculties might be championed, it is typically in the service of a particular, overarching, methodological framework. In positivist conceptions of the subject, for example, intuitive or impressionistic

insight is often welcomed, but regarded as a sort of conceptual understudy to the lead role played by empirical science.

In an ironic inversion of the usual propensity to assume that IR must take its cue from other social sciences, I would suggest that the difficulties experienced by this fledgling field merely illuminate similar problems in social theory generally. There is an element of artificial and contrived consensus in any self-conceived science to which IR is particularly resistant, a product of its inception at the confluence of multiple cognate fields. It is also less the case that IR is an especially confused intellectual territory, and more the case that the issues raised are of a peculiar pitch, with the perceived stakes often higher, and the conflicts more intractable, than other branches of social science. The essential contestability of IR can be cold comfort to the victims of war, terrorism, “ethnic cleansing,” ecocide, bad corporate citizens, and so forth, but its absence of methodological and normative consensus is an intellectual reality that cannot be wished away. If this reality is perceived as a problem or crisis, it is only because the chimerical vision of “normal science” is held out as the only available or appropriate standard of discipline. The point is not simply to demonstrate that, “by the standards set by our vision, our progress has been dismal,” but to acknowledge that our progress has been dismal largely because the standards set by our vision are too fantastically improbable (Ashley as cited in Ferguson and Mansbach 1988, 23).

What, then, does it mean for IR theorists to “concede that theirs may be less a discipline than a limited convergence of scholarly interests” or, as Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach put it dolefully, a “field” (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988, 23–4)? It means nothing more dramatic, or surprising, than recognizing that IR—and social science generally—is sustained by more than one intellectual tradition. Acceptance of this reality has been slow to occur not through willful blindness, but through fear of an open-ended relativism culminating in intellectual anarchy and disciplinary annihilation, a misgiving hardly dispelled by the establishment of a postmodernist foothold in the previously unassailable positivist fortress of IR. But if diversity is the bugbear of IR, it is because it can be invoked and celebrated as a mask for the almost complete abandonment of anything resembling intellectual standards. It is sometimes unclear, for example, when, where, or if we can draw a line between IR scholarship and performance art, especially when it is the attempt to frame such distinctions that is itself brought into question. “Art for arts sake” may be an appropriate motto for poets, painters, and sculptors, but is it a sufficient creed for social scientists? It

seems that a reasonable minimal expectation for IR theorists is that they concern themselves with describing, understanding, and possibly resolving some real-life international problems. That our perception of “reality” may be flawed, socially constructed, or just plain wrong is irrelevant, since this cannot be known in advance of investigation, and may raise issues of a permanently contestable nature. But it is also difficult to say definitively which of the items on the expanding menu of IR research have a genuine international dimension, since the criteria via which this is established can change over time, and the relevance of some approaches may not be immediately clear (Brown 1994, 236). None of this means, however, that diversity should be celebrated as an end in itself. It simply entails a more cautious judgment about what should, or should not, be left at the conceptual curbside when we clean house.

It is also important to recognize that the diversity of IR has been exaggerated by a proliferation of unfamiliar approaches, investigative techniques, and previously unexamined thematic concerns. IR theorists have long been notorious for reinventing concepts, and much of what is “new” fits this pattern. Undoubtedly, however, there is in this latest burst of activity an unprecedented concern with reinventing, or deconstructing, the subject *per se*. But whether or not the bulk of this activity should count as “doing IR” remains very much an open question. It is not, therefore, diversity in this largely inconsequential sense that concerns this study. Rather, IR is diverse in the sense that it houses a profound inner tension that is epistemological in origin and implications, insofar as it is founded on irreconcilable, though often implicit, views about the nature, grounds, and limits of knowledge.

The most familiar, many would say only legitimate, contender for the status of science in IR is positivistic in conception, linking the requirements of knowledge closely to verifiability, system, and generality. While virtually every approach deemed worthy of the label “theory” in mainstream IR textbooks is positivist, this conception of science is so closely allied to Realism and its cognate approaches that distinctions can become almost meaningless. Given the field’s propensity to collapse important distinctions between the many-sided entities of positivism and Realism into a monolithic (and monopolist) Realist science, what is merely one contestable epistemological orientation to the subject is presented in the guise of necessary truth. In an ironic parody of the traditional positivist disdain for the merely analytic statements of the political philosophy they seek to transcend, IR achieves its scientific credentials more by definition than by

demonstration. Indeed, the attempt to establish a science of IR, like the attempt to establish a science of politics in general, has tended to come at the expense of the traditional normative and moral questions of political philosophy. To the extent that IR has come under the grip of the positivist attempt to eliminate values from social science, and to reduce the discovery of truth to empirical regularities, philosophy in this sense (and thus a second sort of attempt to understand international politics) has been almost entirely pushed aside. If it retains any perceived usefulness it is an ability to clarify and hone the concepts of positivist science. That philosophy contains an attempt to achieve a general understanding of reality that long predates that of the positivists is of little interest to those among them who seek to disqualify it from the status of “true” science on the grounds that its methods are largely speculative, not observational. But the triumph of positivism rests on the flawed assumption that values are simply a matter of philosophical preference and taste. Values instead have a rational makeup of their own that simply transcends the limits of the positivist scientist and is better suited to the exploration of the political philosopher.

While there is a danger in making the story too pat, matters in the study of IR have played out in essentially this way. In the usual story about the growth of the discipline the rationalist-empiricist epistemology of Realism puts paid to the merely speculative, and dangerously inapplicable, aspirations of the Idealists. If speculation, intuition, imagination, or moral sentiment were to have a place in IR after the triumph of Realism, it would be as subordinate elements in, and correctives to, a distinctly positivist system of thought. This notion of philosophy as a “second-order” study one step removed from the “first-order,” “real life,” concerns of IR constitutes an unrealistic attempt to impose closure on an old and irresolvable quarrel (Spegele 1996, xiii). As Anthony De Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue suggest,

it has long been disputed whether...philosophy (is) the highest form of understanding to whose conclusions all other inquiries must conform (as Plato thought); or whether it is (as John Locke thought) a conceptual underlabourer only useful in keeping in sharp logical repair the concepts employed in other businesses. Philosophers become, on this unassuming view, the caretakers of the conceptual toolshed, but they are never allowed actually to use the tools on a proper job of understanding.

(De Crespigny and Minogue 1975, x)

This nicely describes the modern scientific attitude to philosophy in IR.

Properly understood, the inherent epistemological diversity of IR threatens the tautological notion that it is a scientific discipline because its subject matter can be studied scientifically. But it need not preclude the attempt to amass usable knowledge about the real world of international politics, the over-riding purpose behind any disciplinary conception of the subject. Simply put, there is more than one path to knowledge in IR. For the sake of simplicity, the many investigative modalities of IR thought (and social philosophy generally) can be reduced to two broad, internally rich and competing conceptions of the subject: idealism and realism. In IR at least, this is a very common practice; virtually every commentary on the conceptual and ideological contours of the subject regards idealism-realism as a fundamental axis of contention. The following claim by Charles Kegley is typical: “since its [IR’s] advent as a discipline, theoretical debate has ranged primarily within the boundaries defined by the discourse between the realist and liberal visions” (Kegley 1995, 1). Kegley here treats liberal IR as a subset of idealism, a pervasive, but often misleading, practice the further exploration of which is a major part of this study.⁴ Nevertheless, the essential duality of thought in international relations seems indisputable. And yet, the architects of the modern discipline have exhibited a distinct mono-mania that, in mainstream quarters, persists even in the face of unprecedented and far-reaching theoretical division and diversity. The idealist-realist legacy is ritually invoked but treated less as a wellspring of intellectual dynamism than an obstacle to theoretical unity, and less as an ineradicable and deeply seated antinomy than a minor difference in normative emphasis. This view is reflected strongly in the literature, but nowhere more than in Holsti’s *The Dividing Discipline*, where consensus over *the* major normative concern (the problem of war and the conditions of peace) is the master criterion “for a taxonomy of approaches to the field,” rendering all other disputes relatively trivial (Holsti 1985, 10). Idealism and realism, on this reading, constitute respectively more and less optimistic assessments for international political development *within* a single, overarching framework or “classical tradition.” But this view is defensible only to the extent that other international issues can be viewed as less pressing than, and clearly distinguishable from, the problem of war, and only if the states system can be viewed as both a permanent ontological feature of world politics, and inherently prone to war. The first of these propositions is increasingly tenuous and the second has never gone unchallenged.

There is a disparate and long-standing discourse of international relations theory that is premised on the transformation of international relations in terms of practice and, increasingly, in terms of theory. Many of these approaches are rooted in Marxist visions of systemic change, a set of approaches that Holsti, like so many disciplinary “insiders,” sees as marginal to IR. But Marxist international political theories are merely the most influential modern expression of a discontinuous but recurrent intellectual tradition that seeks to “deny its past, to try to start from scratch, to jump out of history and begin again” (Wight as cited in Yost 1994, 267). Wight calls this tradition “revolutionist” and suggests that, despite its ambiguity and uncertainty, it enjoys a genuine continuity of thought in international politics. Roger Spegele deploys the general rubric of “emancipatory IR” to describe essentially the same tradition as Wight, suggesting that this “potentially infinite” set of perspectives is held together by the common adoption of “some liberationist modality as an explanation for why we should focus our attention and interest on international relations” (Spegele 1996, 8). Spegele is focused squarely on the present and future state of IR theory, and sees the resurgence of emancipatory IR as one of several consequences of the subsidence of positivist methodologies. Thus, while Holsti’s attempt to soft-pedal the revolutionist/emancipatory stream in international relations accords with (previously?) dominant perceptions of IR, it contains a serious distortion of intellectual reality.

For Holsti, the problem with Marxist approaches and (by implication) “revolutionist” theories in general, is their perceived lack of a sustained and coherent analysis of the problems of peace and war. But if Holsti is correct to observe that the names of “Marx, Engels, Lenin, or other prominent figures...seldom appear in the literature of the field,” this is surely more an indication of the incompleteness of IR as an academic discipline than an indictment of Marxist-inspired theories of international relations (Holsti 1985, 61). It is less the case that classical Marxism and its derivative offshoots—like dependencia and world systems theory—are unconcerned with the central problems of IR than the case that the central problems of IR, as determined by the dominant discourse, are drawn too rigidly around the supposedly permanent reality of the primacy of the state to accommodate critical, emancipatory perspectives. Moreover, even under the most restrictive tenets of the self-proclaimed discipline of IR the relevance of Marxist theory to the central concepts of international relations seemed obvious (see Halliday 1987). Ultimately, however, the reluctance to view Marxist accounts as a *bona fide* part of the discipline of IR seems to

derive from the willingness of most of these perspectives to visualize the end of international relations as a practice. Thus, if revolutionist/emancipatory theories do not seem manifestly concerned with war, it is precisely because many of them visualize the transcendence of the historical-material forces that are thought to bring it about. That this may be based more on wishful thinking than “hard-headed science” is exactly the point that lies behind, and confirms the utility of, the idealist-realist distinction so central to the evaluation of international relations.

Idealism, if it is to have any real currency in IR, must clearly be more than a synonym for liberalism, a set of approaches that, however ambitious their prognostication of global change, typically fall far short of Marxist, critical, poststructural and feminist visions of international relations, to name only a few liberationist perspectives. As Michael Banks has suggested, “the key to the understanding of international relations consists of ideas, not facts” (Banks 1984, 2). Yet IR theorists and practitioners have been drawn ineluctably to the here and now, usually through the conviction that mishandling the problems at hand threatens to forestall all possible futures. The sense of urgency endemic to modern international relations, prior to the end of the Cold War at least, created a less than hospitable atmosphere for seeming flights of romantic fancy. It is a reasonable requirement that attention ought always to be paid to the facts of international relations but in a realm peculiarly susceptible to change theory cannot be allowed to remain static, unless we are content to let its realities shape our ideas, instead of the other way around. Today’s “utopian fantasy” may tomorrow be part of somebody’s foreign policy. As recently as the mid-1980s few would have predicted the willingness of today’s great powers to ignore the claims of state sovereignty in order to protect the rights and welfare of national and/or ethnic minorities in places like Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, or Kosovo. It is a perversity to be marveled that international relations seem infinitely more capable of creative adaptation than those who purport to study it.

Again, there has never been a shortage of creative thinking about international relations. But the dominance of Realist approaches, buttressed by their perceived conformity to the dominant positivist methodology of the social sciences, has been so complete that some have called it a form of “intellectual totalitarianism” which, by implication and design, pushes other conceptualizations beyond accepted standards for inclusion in *the* discipline. These banished approaches, argue Banks, included an “entire set of liberal-progressive-idealist ideas,” making the

repeated appeals of IR scholars to the idealist-realist debate ring rather hollow (Banks as cited in Kegley 1995, 2). The declining fortunes of realism and positivism alike have done much to restore the prominence of idealist thought in the study of international relations. It might be stretching the point, however, to suggest that the discipline of IR *per se* is any healthier as a result—quite the opposite—since the impressive consensus that was alleged to form the basis for its disciplinary autonomy and wellbeing was purchased largely through the marginalization or exclusion of these very progressivist ideas. As Chris Brown suggests, “if we truly wish to promote diversity in international thought, it may be that a crucial first step will be to contribute to the work of dismantling ‘International Relations’ as an academic discipline” (Brown 2000, 214). The point emphasized here is that, whether or not we wish to promote it, and with or without the dubious advantage of a discipline, diversity is a fact of international political theory. But it is a diversity of far more manageable proportions, and richer ancestry, than is generally assumed.

Despite the common depiction of IR as the culmination of a series of defining debates, what constitutes a discipline has never been seriously or consistently examined (Wallerstein 1992). Holsti would take issue with this claim. “In the two decades following World War I,” he writes, “serious debates about the appropriate forms of a discipline took place, and there was a growing awareness that the purpose of study should be to develop generalizations about patterns of behavior and recurring phenomena...” (Holsti 1985, 16). The idea that International Relations should aim to model itself on a search for the systematic, law-like generalizations characteristic of the natural sciences rests on the presupposition that international relations is an essentially unchanging realm, the key phenomena of which are amenable to empirical verification. But there is a long established tradition of idealist thinking in international relations, and socialpolitical theory in general, which suggests that the naturalism of any prevailing order not be taken for granted. This sort of thinking is stopped dead in its tracks when the idea of science is not itself open to critical investigation (Ashley 1986, 255). Given the richly normative, contextual, and ambiguous nature of both the theory and practice of international relations, neither the permanence of its problems, nor key normative concerns, can be taken for granted in perpetuity. In the currently fashionable vernacular, IR might best be conceived as a “meta-discipline.” Yet, prior to its seemingly incipient collapse, IR has demonstrated little of the reflexive potential with which it began. Despite its rich intellectual heritage, and

the frank acknowledgment by early disciplinary shapers of the perpetual need to balance the world as it appears against progressivist visions of how it could be, the erstwhile interdiscipline of IR was soon enslaved by an unremitting and monopolistic real-worldism. Any suggestion that loosing the disciplinary yoke is an invitation to relativism should be treated as disingenuous since, the excesses of some variants of critical theory aside, the analysis of international relations has always been a pluralistic business that, in its broadest and simplest terms, can be reduced to the dualism of idealism and realism. These terms, while a familiar, ritually invoked part of the IR vocabulary, must now be disentangled from a discipline whose devotees have managed to reduce them to the status of paradigms within a unitary science, the existence of which is precisely the thing that the enduring dispute between idealists and realists precludes. A more precise specification of these differences is offered below. The main point is that, far from threatening the intellectual basis of IR, the constant interaction of the two largely antithetical visions of idealist and realist knowledge provides a counterbalance that undermines the authority claims of each position, and a creative inner tension that has only recently reemerged from the stifling strictures of the once unrivaled positivist conception of “the discipline,” only now to be overshadowed by the potentially open-ended concerns of “meta-theory.” But it is only when we recognize that the self-contradictory tendencies of IR are inevitable that we can begin to make sense of its perennial mood of crisis, put its on-again-off-again interest in meta-theory in perspective, and—most significantly—become better acquainted with the nature of its subject matter.

The plan of the book

The book is comprised of six chapters, each of which addresses some aspect of the idealist-realist antinomy in international theory. Chapters [two](#) and [three](#) avoid summarizing the growth or present state of the field, a practice that seems obligatory in theoretically inclined work. They focus instead on recapturing the dual intellectual legacy obliterated by the perceived triumph of a particular brand of science. The essential outline of how the field has unfolded is not disputed. What is contested is the notion that IR has developed through a series of progressive stages, culminating in an intellectual pinnacle called “the discipline.” The purpose of these chapters is to demonstrate that what constitutes progress in IR theory and practice is precisely the central issue at stake, and cannot be resolved satisfactorily by defining it away. [Chapter two](#) is

devoted largely to a discussion of the problem of progress in political and social theory with some preliminary discussion of how the competing views this reveals play out in IR theory. There is also some attention paid to clarifying this book's use of the key terms idealism and realism, since they are deployed more in the traditional philosophical, than paradigmatic, sense.

Chapter three assesses the implications of the tendency of modern IR theory to be confined to its own self-imposed ghetto. Based on a false sense of intellectual self-sufficiency, IR is cut off from its antecedents in political philosophy, and wider debates in social theory, yielding a distorted, unassailable, and misleadingly linear model of theoretical progress. Of particular note is the modern discipline's departure from the core idealist-realist debate in international relations theorizing, substituting a relatively minor methodological dispute between liberals broadly construed for an age-old, and irresolvable, antithesis rooted in competing conceptions of human nature and progress. This practice is particularly pronounced in the dominant debates among Realists, neorealists, liberals and neoliberals, but a peculiarly one-sided story of progress characterizes all mainstream approaches to science and theory in IR.

Chapters **four** and **five** examine the paradoxical persistence of national perspectives in what is assumed to be an "international" subject. These chapters explore a remarkable tendency for IR scholars to admit, on the one hand, that their ostensibly international discipline is founded largely on Anglo-American and European historical experiences and policy issues while, on the other hand, they retain an almost unquestioned faith in the virtue, and possibility, of universally applicable theories. Every attempt to engage in global legislation is destined to collide with the fundamental ontological feature of the field: the political division of its constituent matter into independent, authoritative, nationally based territorial units (Griffiths and O'Callaghan 2000). How can the search for intellectual authority in such a realm fail to generate parochialism? We would not expect epidemiologists in Canada to engage in substantially different activities than epidemiologists in Finland, Kenya, or Guatemala, yet IR theorists—in countries as similar as the US and Great Britain—go about their business in quite distinctive ways. While the ultimate barrier to a unified science of IR is its dual epistemological legacy, the most immediately evident symptom of this condition is the tendency of theoretical accounts to reflect different values and attitudes in the different national and cultural settings that continue to divide both the subject and its

students. It is because of the popular assumption that IR was first a British, and then an American, specialty, that these chapters focus on the development of theory in these countries. Both chapters argue for the existence of clear differences in national style between American and British IR, differences that both confound the idea of a globally acceptable definition of the discipline, and roughly approximate the epistemological divide identified in the first two chapters.

Chapters [four](#) and [five](#) are based on case studies of distinct bodies of theory within American and British IR respectively. For some, the “American school of IR” is more than a simply national perspective on international relations, since it tends to be treated as synonymous with the subject as a whole (Hoffmann 1977; Kahler 1993; Crawford and Jarvis 2000). The philosophical incompleteness of American IR, therefore, is of more than anthropological interest, and [Chapter four](#) undertakes an examination of the implications of this situation for IR scholarship generally. It is framed in terms of an American propensity (defined methodologically rather than culturally) to continually try to reconcile non-cognitive elements of research and theory to the overarching requisites of an unquestioned scientific orthodoxy. While traditionally allied closely to Realism, this orthodoxy is increasingly founded on cognate approaches like neorealism and neoliberalism, the virtues of which is their perceived ability to transcend many of the conjectural (and thus non-scientific) elements of classical Realism. The chapter is based largely on a case study of international regime theory, a literature dominated by neorealist and neoliberal ideas and, thus, the methodological assumptions, and political values, of American IR. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the intellectually damaging consequences of trying to ensure that all intellectual activity in IR conform to a single evaluative standard. Regime theory is of particular interest because it is the nearest thing to a dominant concern in contemporary IR scholarship, and because its substantive interest in intersubjective elements like “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures” pushes even the most subtle investigative techniques of positivistically defined science to their epistemological limit.

In [Chapter five](#), discussion turns to an examination of British IR, a diverse set of approaches united by a general disdain for scientific procedure in the narrow positivist sense, and some level of commitment to the idealist precept that the ultimate reality of IR lies beyond the empirical methods of science. British IR, which comprises, but is larger than, the so-called “English school”, is juxtaposed to American IR in

order to demonstrate the existence of a philosophically inspired alternative version of the field and, in the particular case of regime theory, a viable rival interpretation of the problem of institutionalized patterns of cooperation. Discussion of these matters highlights the authoritarian intellectual tendencies of regime theory, and American IR generally, by demonstrating the propensity of its practitioners to ignore the work of their English counterparts, or to synthesize the contributions of the latter to the existing corpus of regime theory. The point of this chapter, however, is not to demonstrate the intellectual superiority of British IR over American IR, so much as to show the impossibility of combining research traditions that derive their distinctiveness from largely antithetical conceptions of the discipline. The distinctiveness of British and American IR, in other words, is traceable to much more than a dispute over methods.

Because a key premise in this work is that the future of IR scholarship can be found in its past, it begins not with the present state of IR theory, but with its classical conception at the midpoint of the twentieth century. With this preliminary discussion under its belt, [Chapter six](#), the final chapter, is better equipped to turn to an examination of IR theory at the start of the new millennium. It focuses in particular on the perceived challenges of postpositivist, and postmodernist, conceptions of theory. While there are important distinctions to be made among and between these approaches, and a seeming abundance of epistemological viewpoints, I argue that: (1) much of this work is based on the same mistaken premise on which the mainstream conception of the discipline is built: namely, that the debate between neoliberal idealists and neorealists represents two versions of the same rationalist/positivist story, and; (2) the seeming potpourri of critical approaches that claims to transcend, supersede, or eradicate IR can be perceived in terms of the same simple dichotomy of idealism-realism buried beneath all social-political discourse.

This chapter also summarizes and pulls together the main arguments of the book, and addresses the real implications of the idealist-realist legacy in IR for its status as a discipline. It argues that, for all of its emphasis on intellectual community and universality, the modern conception of IR as a particular sort of science has crystallized into a dogma that can comprehend and tolerate only one methodological language, and one version of theory. That this epistemological authoritarianism has been largely American based is more an accident of history than the stuff of conspiracy theory. In a realm where states must rely upon their own devices to ensure survival and prosperity, it is

hardly surprising that the powers with the most to gain and lose would feel compelled to try better to control their political environment. But, because American IR is wedded to the idea of an objective universal science, it cannot accept that particular national viewpoints can have any intellectual legitimacy, an anti-ethnocentrism that springs, paradoxically, from an American ethnocentrism disguised by its cosmopolitan interests and ambitions (Brown 2000). The upshot, then, is that IR cannot be said, negatively, to be “breaking up” into national parochialisms or, positively, to be “opening up” into a plurality of national perspectives. Rather, as popularly conceived, it must always remain hostage to the very “international” division that constitutes its *raison d’être*. As such, there is no intrinsic value in either cosmopolitan or multicultural IR, just competing conceptions of the subject that mirror competing conceptions of state interest. But it is only when we stand outside the long shadow of the American conception of the discipline that it is possible to draw this conclusion. It may be that the political division of the globe into territorially defined, nationally based, and authoritative entities is only an historically specific phase in our evolution as a species that consistently impedes our ability to center our lives around human interests and values. This study concludes, however, that whether or not the states system, and modernity in general, are on their way to being finished, the epistemologically grounded clash between what is real, and what is possible, for humanity cannot disappear. That these conflicts tend, in an anarchic world, to be expressed in terms of state power and interest (dressed up as universal concerns) is merely a function of how human political life is organized. While military and economic conflicts may be endemic to the states system, philosophical conflict pervades every mode of human association. It is thus a mistake to assume that the rise of transnational, universal values is the only possible, or genuine, expression of our essence as a species being, especially when these values may be merely the global expression and transmission of a particular, liberal-rationalist, conception of human interest.

The currently popular idea that IR lies beyond the scope of classical political theory is thus flawed in two important ways: (1) the states system as presently constituted cannot be considered permanent; (2) theories of the “good life” are not concerned exclusively with what goes on within the polity, an entity that in any case is just a corporate expression of individual human interests. That people are motivated by different things is at least partly a function of contingent factors like living in different countries or regions, being on different ends of

distributional conflicts, or having less than perfect information (if any) about how the “other half” lives. Whether or not some, or all, of these contingent factors can be eliminated misses the point that it is the existence of different kinds of intellectual activity, as much as different modes of social organization, that ensures the permanent existence of different human values and interests. At the risk of oversimplification (but for the sake of expediency) this book reduces this epistemologically based division to a basic idealist-realist antinomy that virtually every IR textbook observes, but manages to get wrong. The conception of science that has dominated international relations in the modern era forces students of the subject to identify the labels of idealism and realism with conflicting paradigms *within* a unitary vision (and version) of theory. This is partly a function of a hidden, even unconscious, ideology of scientific progress, and partly a product of a corresponding fear of theoretical and epistemological diversity. But there is *real* epistemological diversity in IR theory, and social theory generally, that does not necessitate or allow unity of thought and purpose, any more than it entails an open-ended antifoundationalism. It is not so much that social-political theory is without foundations, as that it is permanently blessed with more than one foundation. Far from threatening the ultimate goal of collective and cumulative knowledge, recognition of this dual epistemological structure is essential to any reasonable and complete understanding of IR as an academic subject.

2

The roots of diversity in political and social theory

Competing visions of progress

The history of modern political thought is the story of a contest between two schools that differ fundamentally in their conceptions of the nature of man, society, and politics.

Hans Morgenthau

What constitutes progress in the theorization and practice of international politics? Until recently, few would have thought it necessary to pose, let alone address, this question. The discipline of International Relations was seen simply as the “international politics” subdivision of a broader endeavor to bring the self-evidently desirable commodities of reason and science to bear on all aspects of human social relations. In keeping with the prevailing intellectual disposition of the twentieth century, international relationists have seldom felt compelled to define progress, holding it more as an article of faith than an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1955–6). Implicit in this unarticulated view is the idea that the methods and evaluative standards of natural science can and should be applied to the organization and study of human society, increasing both the stock of knowledge about, and ability to control, all facets of social-political behavior. Nowhere has this faith been more misplaced, but more fervently held, than in the modern study of international politics. Despite repeated references to its “never-resolved dilemmas” (Yost 1994, 264)—indeed, because of them—the modern discipline of IR has bought into a version of scientific progress utterly at odds with the actual practices of the realm its adherents seek to comprehend and change, its conspicuous failure to progress leaving them struggling to accomplish either of these theoretical aims. It is not that international relationists have been quick to overlook the obvious calamities of world politics, and the all-consuming events of the present in particular. On the contrary, the

appalling destruction of the First World War, the dislocation and crisis of the inter-war period, the devastation of the Second World War, the Cold War and its attendant nuclear rivalry, are among the primary normative catalysts for the construction and maintenance of an academic discipline of IR. Yet these events, originating in the very European cradle of “reason,” “rationality,” and “Enlightenment,” have done surprisingly little to darken the “dazzling light of industrial and technological progress” in which modern IR has sought to bathe (Robinson 1998, 6). Modern IR scholarship has been largely unwilling or unable to acknowledge the dark underside of the twentieth century, with its subcultures of “angst and despair,” its weapons of mass destruction and the horrific, chilling realities of the Holocaust and “ethnic cleansing.” The two world wars might be explained away as “throwbacks from a more primitive past” that merely reinforced a sense of progressive mission within the institutions of world politics, and the scholars who sought to study, and offer practical guidance in, their construction (Robinson 1998, 6). The Holocaust is much more troubling and, given its emphasis on rational, industrial “solutions” advanced by “bureaucratic machinery,” may well be a “legitimate resident in the house of modernity” (Zygmunt Bauman as cited in Steve Smith 1995, 2). But the discipline of IR has been slow to react to troubling contradictions in the modernist story of progress and, among its mainstream adherents at least, even the open practice of genocide on the very threshold of Europe and the new millennium has done little to shake fundamental assumptions. This has helped to open the door to searching criticism from outside the disciplinary center and, for the first time in some forty years, the contestability of progress in IR is re-emerging, as is explicit recognition of the possibility that IR “theory” may simply buttress and inform the realities it innocently purports to describe (Smith 1996, 13; Wallace 1996, 301).

For some of the proponents of newer, critical approaches to theory, both the discipline of IR, and modernist thought in general, is conceived as part of a Eurocentered, totalitarian project rooted in the historically peculiar discourses of “the Enlightenment,” and designed to achieve intellectual and cultural conformity on a global scale. Those who continue to defend the viability of IR as a scientific discipline, however, believe their guilt does not extend beyond a commitment to what they see as the highest possible standards of knowledge, something that contrasts starkly to the reckless and irrational word games of their critics. These mutual recriminations, sometimes dignified as a “debate,” are part of a general struggle to define the purpose and meaning of

intellectual activity in colleges and universities throughout the Western world. Abstracting from the sorts of distinctions and debates that normally define activity within the academy and its disciplines, it is useful to divide this battle over fundamentals between “essentialists” and “deconstructionists.”¹ Essentialists argue that “to dilute the core with new works for the sake of including previously unheard voices would be to forsake the values of Western civilization for the standardlessness of relativism...lightweight trendiness, and a host of related...evils.” Deconstructionists argue that “to preserve the core by excluding contributions... [from outside the normal channels of the Western tradition] as if the classical canon were sacred, unchanging, and unchangeable would be to denigrate the identities of members of these previously excluded groups...” (Gutmann 1994, 13). Despite their history of serious disputes, disagreement of this sort could not be further removed from the usual activities of IR theorists. While the human sciences as a whole are under siege, no discipline is more threatened than IR, and nowhere have debates been more antagonistic. Amy Gutmann’s description of the essentialist-deconstructionist struggle in political life writ large is paralleled exactly by the state of the discourse in IR, where and when there is discourse.

Intellectual life is deconstructed into a political battlefield of class, gender, and racial interests.... [I]n an equal and opposite reaction, essentialists and deconstructionists express mutual disdain rather than respect for their differences. And so they create two mutually exclusive and disrespecting cultures in academic life, evincing an attitude of unwillingness to learn anything from the other or recognize any value in the other.

(Gutmann 1994, 21)

Why, however, has the shock wave of deconstructionism rattled IR with peculiar force and energy? Part of the answer resides in the nature of the subject matter. Given its traditional interest in “the causes of war and the conditions of peace/security,” the high stakes of IR can lead to high passions (Holsti 1985, 8). But there is no simple answer and many factors at play. Yet the peculiar intensity of the deconstructionist tremor in IR can be explained largely by its relatively late arrival and the weak foundations of the disciplinary edifice into which it eventually rolled. More than any of their counterparts in other human sciences the students of IR had developed a fixation for disciplinary autonomy bordering on intellectual autarky, cutting themselves off not merely

from the broader realm of social theory, but from their own antecedents in political theory, history and philosophy. Ironically, it was a seemingly inexhaustible endeavor to secure their debutante discipline on the bedrock of positive science that left it most susceptible to the fractures, schisms, and fissures spreading quietly along the subduction zone of critical social theory.

The estrangement of IR from social and political thought is one of the more peculiar features of the modern discipline. While every academic field is envisioned as a distinct realm of activity, its boundaries are ultimately artificial, and employed to separate the seamless and limitless totality of the world into analytical compartments. But, dizzied by their apparent success as “policy scientists,” the architects of IR in what has become its American heartland quickly forgot, or had little incentive to remember, the multidisciplinary character of both their subject and the wider enterprise to which it belongs. Though other social sciences have also taken their autonomy too literally, nowhere have boundaries been more zealously guarded than in IR, and no discipline has seemed as cut off from outside influences. This is not to suggest that theoretical innovations do not originate outside the discipline. On the contrary, IR has been very much a net importer of ideas, concepts, methods, and models. But these innovations, while externally generated, have been less likely to influence the dominant conception of the study of IR than the dominant conception of the study of IR has been likely to mold these innovations to its purposes and methods. Thus, like a sort of disciplinary Albania, IR has languished for most of its brief history in a “self-imposed ghetto,” its inhabitants largely unaware of their impoverishment until the recent, inevitable erosion of their unduly restrictive borders (Brown 1994, 214).

It is strange that a discipline born at the juncture of several cognate fields, explicitly global in focus and international in scope, should have developed so marked a preference for intellectual autonomy, and so distinctly American an identity, agenda, and membership.² Though the circumstances thought to lie behind these developments are well chronicled, their implications have not been well understood, and they are summarized below. This chapter, however, is more concerned with the consequences than causes of the discipline’s peculiar evolution, and how these are playing out in its long overdue reunion with political and social thought. Assessed in this light, the crumbling disciplinary foundations of IR might help to expose the older, broader, more yielding substratum of political theory underlying the fractured bedrock of positive science, and afford opportunities for new disciplinary footings in the wider

terrain of social theory. In stark contrast to the currently popular view that IR is in a state of irredeemable collapse, the emphasis of this study is on disciplinary renewal and intellectual continuity. That IR cannot be a science like biology does not mean that some looser, reformulated, and possibly retitled version of the subject should be abandoned. Contrary to its conventional depiction as the latest in a series of great debates, the tumultuous events occasioned by the rise of anti-foundational challenges to IR constitute its first serious and sustained evaluation of the problem of what it means to be a discipline. Properly understood, these challenges represent not a “philosophical turn,” as many mainstream analysts of IR will have it, but a philosophical (re)turn. If this is not generally accepted as true it is because so many “inside” the discipline can accept only what they know, and so many “outside” IR seem less intent on making it “inclusive” than utterly bent on its destruction.

The present crisis in IR is thus largely, though not entirely, self-generated. The main objective of this chapter, however, is to demonstrate how the unrealistic, unrivaled, and underexamined evaluative standards of theory and discipline on which IR was erected have left it especially vulnerable to anti-foundational challenges. These challenges are made no less real or profound by their delayed arrival. But the diverse cluster of critical theoretical challenges now arrayed against the entire body of modernist thought is less novel, less exotic, and less apocalyptic than the general philosophical poverty of post-Enlightenment science makes it seem. While there is much in critical theory that seems superfluous, fatuous, and reckless, the same can be said of every internally diverse set of approaches, and it is important not to confuse the extremities of the discourse for its body. This is a lesson from which many critical theorists would also profit, given their proclivity entirely to condemn modernist thought on the basis of its occasional excesses. Once we recognize that “antiquity,” “modernity,” and “postmodernity” are simply labels given to particular, usually excessively partisan, phases in the timeless contest of ideas, the real continuity of intellectual activity becomes apparent. What is continuous is a basic human need to reconcile what is desirable in the realm of ideas with what is feasible in the world of action. Because the former seems limitless, and the latter is subject to continual change, the only thing constant is the argument itself.

For the sake of simplicity, this permanent argument can be reduced to the essential contestability of the idea of progress, a concept that is wrongly depicted in IR and other modern “sciences” as

exclusively modern. Once this myth is dispelled, the timeless irreconcilability of the conflict between idealist and realist thought becomes obvious, as does the futility of trying to transcend it—a major objective of modern IR theorists. It is only by rejecting the discipline’s narrow depiction of science, and its obsession with autonomy, that its practitioners can become better acquainted with their real intellectual heritage and limitations, and better prepared to meet the onslaught of critical theory, a more detailed discussion of which is offered in [chapter six](#). Whether the more pliant conception of the subject that this entails is enough to satisfy IR theorists is irrelevant—it is all there is. It does not, however, condemn them and their enterprise to a standardless relativism, but to a permanent open-mindedness, something from which both the advocates of the mainstream conception of IR, and their most strident critics, so far seem determined to escape.

Life in the ghetto

Until the recent recrudescence of normative theory, it was commonly assumed that political philosophy and social theory had nothing to teach students of IR. The latter is concerned explicitly with issues like justice, order, the “good life,” and other moral, ethical, or value judgments that seem singularly out of place in IR. Such, at least, was the determination of Martin Wight whose suggestion that international theory can offer only a “theory of survival” has helped to reinforce the still powerful view that international politics take place in a special realm governed less by ideas than by necessary laws of nature (Butterfield and Wight 1966, 17–34). Since IR seemed inevitably to be a realm of repetition and recurrence, it was a logical and natural next step to seek empirically to divine whatever powers and compulsions were at work, if only to assist policy makers to understand the sorts of forces with which their foreign rivals might already be acting in accordance. In short, the workings of IR seemed like a part of the natural order, making it an obvious candidate for the application of scientific method. Thus, while it was the aftermath of the First World War that gave birth to IR as a free-standing academic discipline, the scientific method was its midwife.

The first allegedly scientific rendering of the subject, however, tended to overlook the persistence of power politics and other basic forces in favor of the view that the human will was sufficient to bring about progressive change. But it was a peculiar sort of science that ignored or downplayed the very elements that had led to the application of the scientific method in the first place, and it was not long before the

pitfalls of “utopian science” were exposed, first by the disastrously bad policies it encouraged, and later by the advocates of a more “realistic,” empirically oriented, approach to IR and its investigative methods. The pre-eminent figures in the latter camp were E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, both of whom expressed profound doubts about the naturalism of the utopians (Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1962; Morgenthau 1993). For Morgenthau, the idea of a “unity of science” between the social and natural world had to be rejected. Politics was an “art,” not a science in any strict sense: “what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and moral strength of the statesman” (Morgenthau 1993, 41–2). Despite these and other admonitions on its behalf, however, the “realist” view which they purported to represent would soon itself be the subject of a more sustained attempt to found IR on positive science.

The 1960s were dominated by the behaviorist view that only behavior could be observed and measured, and that only this sort of data could lay the foundation for a science of IR. The “unity of science” view was back with a vengeance and anything that could not be quantified into variables and causally modeled was rejected as “unscientific.” This extreme view did not merely banish the role of human volition so central to the utopians, but many things traditionally of concern to students of international politics, including political and moral philosophy, diplomatic history, and international law. Fortunately, the attempt to reduce IR theorists to white-coated lab technicians foundered on the obvious reality that quantitative analyses do not come close to capturing the range of investigative techniques appropriate to IR. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a human science less amenable to behavioral methods. In hindsight, the whole behavioral episode might seem strangely disconnected from any real attempt to theorize or understand IR, guided as it was by methods rather than any internally generated view of how to put these allegedly quantifiable variables together. It was not behavioralism *per se*, however, that captured the scientific imagination of IR students, but its almost natural affinity with the increasingly stringent Realist conception of science. While the behaviorist turn caused great consternation among more traditionally minded scholars, “debate” centered around methods rather than core assumptions about world politics since the former was all that the behaviorists had to offer, and the latter was something that the Realists already had.

If the behaviorist turn could be used to remedy some of the perceived defects of existing theories, IR remained without a

systematic, unifying theory capable of emphasizing and explaining the structure of the system of states itself, and its impact on individual units. The behavioralists had put IR squarely on the path to scientific analysis but, in the hands of the traditional Realists, even the most rigorous causal modeling could not transcend the problem that individual states operated in what appeared to be a constantly changing environment. In the late 1970s Kenneth Waltz set out to build a theory of international politics which he claimed could remedy “the defects of present theories,” and thus bring to fruition the scientific aspirations of the more behaviorally inclined Realists (Waltz 1979, 1). For Waltz, existing Realist science was deficient because the laws and regularities necessary to its foundation were systemic properties that, by definition, could not be observed in state behavior, so much as deduced from a mentally formed picture of the states system as a whole. Simply put, the Realists were right to conceptualize international relations as a set of adversarial relations among states, but wrong to attribute this outcome to the failings of particular individuals or states. Rather, it is the anarchical structure of the system as a whole that Waltz (and his followers) see as *the* determinant of state behavior. This structural emphasis is intended to help students of IR “transform older forms of realism into acceptable scientific structures and ward off anti-realist challenges” (Spegele 1996, 15). With structural or “neo” realism, then, we are returned to the old Idealist claim that theories of IR are “structurally homomorphic to natural scientific theories,” but with new, allegedly better and more “realist”(ic) reasons for accepting its validity (Spegele 1996, 15).

But Waltz’s scientific “redemption” of Realism can be described in paradoxical terms, since it seems simultaneously to represent the apotheosis and ultimate undoing of the positivist method in IR. The point is not that Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* has been poorly received. Though treated skeptically in some circles, and with hostility in others, criticism has focused more on what he leaves out of his deliberately “parsimonious” framework than the validity of his scientific aspirations and assumptions (Keohane 1986b). Like the earlier reaction to behavioralism, debates among the principally Realist audience that constitutes the official disciplinary membership of IR have gravitated to disputes over method, suggesting yet again that the priest of science in IR enjoys the distinct advantage of preaching to the converted or, at the very least, a broadly sympathetic congregation. But whatever sense of scientific fulfillment Waltz’s contribution occasioned

within the discipline was soon dampened by objections of a heretical, hitherto unknown, nature.

The timing of this scientific revolution—or revelation?—in IR theory could not have been more ironic, coming at precisely the moment that positivist methodology in the social sciences was under withering attack. For some commentators, the devotees of the now indisputably dominant scientific conception of the subject had so removed themselves from the traditional concerns of political theory that the subject resembled an “anti-political apology for brute force and cynicism” (Walker 1987, 66). This paradoxical development seemed a direct result of the field’s increasing detachment from its intellectual antecedents in political philosophy, and almost total isolation from the general milieu and debates of social theory. The disciplinary crisis this helped to occasion is a major subject of this study, and dealt with more fully below. For the present, it is enough to point out that much of this turmoil was self-inflicted. Though the objective now must be to point the way forward for IR, the inhabitants of this disciplinary ghetto in transition must first confront the past they have all but ignored, and the present from which so many of them seem determined to shrink. First, however, the relationship between IR and political and social theory to date needs to be clear.

Conjuring up the dead: International Relations and political philosophy

As a modern academic discipline IR has inevitably taken its epistemological cues from the post-Enlightenment notion that the purpose of social inquiry is to expose the empirical regularities which govern the natural and social world. This explicitly positivist view is sometimes softened by a rationalist tradition of political-philosophical analysis that predated and survived the consolidation of the discipline. The rationalist conception of IR shares with positivism a number of assumptions about knowledge and progress, but seeks to found its search for timeless patterns not on empirically demonstrable laws or “facts,” but on properties of human nature assumed for the sake of argument to be true and unchanging. Even in this guise, however, analyses have been directed toward the broadly positivist goal of eliminating values from social science. While IR is not alone among the aspiring social sciences in trying to control or eliminate normative preferences in analysis it, more than any other field, has managed to confuse this explicitly methodological technique with science *per se*. This accounts for the dominance of “Realist” accounts of international

politics which, despite a tendency to link them to a continuing tradition *within* the field, become virtually synonymous with the science of IR itself, since science (like the new structurally reinforced Realism) purports to deal exclusively with how things *are* in the real world of political action. One apparent rival to the exceptional status of IR is economics, where the predominant view is that analysis can be as “value-free” as it is in the natural sciences. But this exception is mitigated by the increasing and explicit reliance of mainstream IR theorists on micro-economic methods and assumptions.³ Quite apart from the suspect claim that economics and IR are directed at the investigation of structurally similar realms, it is far from clear that either field should be considered a “value-free” science. This is particularly so for IR, since all genuinely political analysis involves making, and evaluating, fundamentally normative preferences and claims. A science of IR, or any branch of politics, that concentrates only on how things *are* (or how they appear to be) is not merely one-sided, but misses the whole point of political analysis. It is precisely because liberty, equality, justice, and other political concepts are “essentially contested” that political theory, and the broader realm of social thought to which it belongs, remains an essentially ambiguous, and open-ended, activity. The estrangement of IR is thus more marked than that of the other human sciences, but also nicely representative of what goes wrong when the rich realities of socio-political life are forced through the crude sieve of positivist categories and distinctions.

Yet many are prepared to acknowledge and defend a conception of IR that sees it as part of a long-standing tradition of political investigation that extends back to antiquity (for examples see Waltz 1959; Holsti 1985; Gilpin 1986). While this can do much to take the starch out of claims which tend to exaggerate the novelty of the “modern” discipline and its concerns, an awareness of the past has done little to alleviate, and much to enhance, the sense of turmoil and crisis that now dominates discussion. This is not because the intellectual historians of IR are wrong to suggest that it is possible to extract a tradition of international theory from the larger corpus of political thought, but because a sort of selective memory syndrome tends to accompany their history. Informed as it is by the ill-suited model of natural science, the conventional history of international political theory seems destined to begin its narrative at the end. Having uncritically absorbed the post-Enlightenment view that the present must be better than the past, the historians of IR are unable to regard their largely scientific conception of the subject as anything other than self-evidently superior to every other

conception, past or present. Historiography in IR is thus little more than a process of tracing the evolution of international theory through primitive to more advanced scientific stages. The problem with this approach extends beyond its thoroughly anachronistic conception of theory and progress to include the reality that there is no demonstrable, continuous scientific tradition in international political theory. On the contrary, those thinkers who, with benefit of hindsight, are tentatively labeled “scientific” constitute exceptions from the typically normative business of political analysis, and cannot be said to represent links in a continuous intergenerational dialogue.

There is in fact a real continuity in political theory, but of a sort not valued or recognized by linear, progressive models of science. While political theorists often claim to be anchored to an external world of facts, the inherently speculative nature of their enterprise and its concepts gives no lasting assurance that knowledge of the political world can be cumulative. Political theory is a continuous intellectual tradition only in the sense that the same, or similarly defined, normative problems are endlessly debated, and always within a historically unique construction of problems and solutions. This is because, whatever its aspiration and connection to science, political theory is intimately bound up with philosophy, and thus cannot fail “to be preoccupied with its own [argumentative] character” (De Crespigny and Minogue 1976, x). Though this gives political theory a speculative freedom unknown to narrowly scientific fields, investigative energy is invariably directed toward addressing basic problems like *who are we?* and *how should we live?* which, despite (and because of) their irresolvable character, form the basis of a continuous dialogue. Because the intellectual and material circumstances of political theory are subject to constant change, so too are its problems and solutions. At its most general level, debate moves along a timeless continuum framed at opposite ends by more and less sanguine assessments of the possibility for political change or movement in a desirable direction. To put it ironically, it is the very discontinuity and incertitude of political thought that forms the basis for its continuity, though it be of a sort more often remarked, and better appreciated, by poets, sages and philosophers than aspiring scientists. “What is important,” writes Sheldon Wolin, “is the continuity of preoccupations, not the unanimity of response” (Wolin 1960, 3). Political theory might thus be described in the same terms that stoic philosophers viewed the world as a whole: “there may be progress here and there, for a time, but in the long run there is only recurrence” (Russell 1979, 263). This is not to deny the desirability of progress. After all, the so-called starry-eyed

dreamer is no less interested in improving the world than the hard-headed realist. It is simply to suggest that who wears these labels at any given time depends not on any universally valid or external standard, but on the ever-shifting sands of social and intellectual convention. It is to this sort of intellectual tradition that international political theory belongs, and from which it has been severed by the modern discipline of IR.

This suggestion might seem odd in light of the modern literature's numerous references to figures like Thucydides, St Augustine, Grotius, Spinoza, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant, de Tocqueville, Bentham, and Mill, to name only a few (for examples see Waltz 1959; Butterfield and Wight 1966; Bull 1977; Gilpin 1986; Holsti 1985). Again, however, such discussion is almost invariably anachronistic, and designed less to demonstrate the perspicacity of the thinker in question than to establish the truthfulness of the contemporary theoretical position he was intuitive enough to grasp, however imperfectly. This practice is particularly evident among Realists and neorealists whose intellectual inventory is extended retroactively to cover just about anyone who ever mused about the persistence of power relations among independent political entities. What follows are representative examples of this pattern, beginning with Thomas Hobbes, one of the more frequently cited figures.

Hobbes is identified routinely with the Realist school, though almost exclusively on the basis of a single passage in which he compares states in a condition of anarchy to "the state and posture of gladiators," a situation he regards as less miserable than the condition of civil war that remained his real focus, and for which International Relations (in the narrow sense of the Realist-dominated discipline) was only an inexact illustration (Hobbes 1962, 101). Thucydides, another IR mainstay, is particularly popular with the neorealists, whose references to the great Greek historian constitute a thriving industry. This phenomenon is chronicled in an essay by Daniel Garst titled, appropriately enough, "Thucydides and Neorealism" (Garst 1989, 3–27). For Waltz, Robert Gilpin, Robert Keohane and the many other contemporary theorists discussed by Garst, the alleged timelessness of Thucydides' insights is seen as a product of his ability to "anticipate" neorealist arguments. That Thucydides' insights are sufficiently compelling on their own terms, without the dubious advantage of the anachronistic label of neorealism, is seldom considered. It is not enough to find Thucydides interesting—he must also be viewed as a proto-scientific pioneer of a latent IR. But, while Thucydides' remarkably dispassionate and comprehensive history

of the Peloponnesian War clearly deserves to be read and admired, it is not obvious that its insights about the persistence of power relations, however profound and persuasive, are any more timeless than the Greek City States system from which they are drawn. And, to consider one of the more famous episodes in his history, the “Melian Dialogue,” why ought the “Realist” principles of the Athenian generals to be treated as more timelessly compelling than the equally persistent, albeit disastrous, idealism of the Melians (Thucydides 1954, 400–8)? As Garst suggests, Karl Marx’s depiction of revisionist historical argument as self-serving ideology applies nicely here:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seemed engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names...in order to present the new scene of world history in...time-honored disguise...

(Marx 1978, 595; Garst 1989, 3)

One further example of “conjuring up the dead” in IR should suffice to demonstrate the prevalence of the practice. In an essay on St Augustine, Michel Loriaux makes the claim that Augustine shares with Realism a profound skepticism over the possibility of moral and political progress (Loriaux 1992, 401–20). This claim is problematic on two counts, the first of which is the categorical depiction of Realism as a form of moral skepticism. Whatever may or may not be so of Augustine, Realism constitutes an exceptionally broad and internally diverse stream of thought that cannot easily be compared with the more homeostatic legacy of an individual thinker. Roger Spegele, for example, makes a compelling case for a softer version of Realist skepticism than the more typically monolithic accounts of this school generally allow (Spegele 2000). This leads to the second problem: Augustine’s thought itself, largely through its modern expositor Reinhold Niebuhr, is but one tributary in this broader Realist stream. Loriaux’s suggestion that Augustine and Realism *share* similar attributes of thought misses the point that Augustine’s theory is one of the constitutive ingredients of Realist thought in the first place.

In what sense, then, can Hobbes, Augustine, Thucydides, and the many other “spirits of the past” to which the modern Realist theorist of IR turns be called part of a disciplinary tradition? The more scientific

Realism aspires to become, the more troublesome is this issue. While the alleged longevity of the Realist tradition is cited as confirming evidence for the power of its insights, it tends to contradict the popular idea that IR is a distinctly modern science. If Realism were a real, continuous historical tradition its modern exponents could be expected to exhibit more confidence in the sufficiency of its interpretive capacity than their preoccupation with scientific status would suggest. The problem, as Terry O'Callaghan points out, is that Realism is not a historical, but a modern analytical, tradition. Following Brian Schmidt, he defines an analytical tradition as "an intellectual construction in which a scholar may stipulate certain ideas, themes, genres, or texts as functionally similar. It is, most essentially, a retrospectively created construct determined by present criteria and concerns" (O'Callaghan 1998, 189). Thus, it was precisely because none of the so-called "founding fathers" of the discipline, from Thucydides to Morgenthau, saw themselves as working within a "recognizably established and specified discursive frame-work," that the modern discipline of IR had to be constructed (O'Callaghan 1998, 189). To the extent that IR theorists see themselves as aspiring scientists, then, they can have little interest in trying to understand political theory as a historical tradition. While the "more scientifically" inclined thinkers like Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli will beckon, political theory as a whole is a primarily normative, ambiguous and protean business.

Conjuring up the living: International Relations and social theory

An exactly analogous pattern emerges with regard to social theory. Students of IR, if and when they have ventured into this realm, have tended to engage in a very selective appropriation of concepts, often with an eye to their perceived fit with pre-existing theories and assumptions. For Chris Brown, however, the revival of normative theory has helped to flatten the conceptual wall that once encircled and protected only scientific conceptions of IR, reconnecting the subject to other human sciences, just in time, it turns out, to join them in a searching and unprecedented reevaluation of the entire modernist conception of social theory (Brown 1994, 214). But if Brown's assessment seems accurate enough in terms of developments within the British IR community, it seems wistful and mistaken with respect to American IR which, for all intents and purposes, remains vastly preponderant in numbers of IR students, and hegemonic in its

conception of what constitutes the core concerns and methods of *the* discipline (see Crawford and Jarvis 2000). Among the most striking aspects of American IR are: its relative equanimity in the face of mounting turmoil within the discipline as traditionally conceived; its continuing antipathy, and growing indifference, to theory in anything but a very restrictive sense barely distinguishable from honing and applying the usual methods and models; and, most importantly for present purposes, a continuing propensity for assimilating concepts from “outside” the field, including those that promise to undermine the very *weltanschauung* on which it is premised!

Robert Keohane, one of the most prominent and influential of mainstream American scholars, consistently exhibits synthesizing tendencies of this sort. Assessing the potential impact of critical social theory in IR generally, Keohane suggests that its adherents would be well advised to focus their efforts on the development of a “research program that could be employed by students of world politics” (Keohane 1988, 392–3). The explicit point of critical reflection on the practice and theorization of international relations, however, is to avoid treating its apparent realities as ontologically fixed. Keohane, like mainstream IR scholars generally, seems too immersed in a “rationalistic” logic to appreciate the significance of the wider debates of social theory.

Anthony Giddens’ conception of structuration theory offers a useful illustration of the general attitude of IR scholars to theoretical innovations that originate “outside” the field. Commenting on the epistemological plurality of social theory in general, Giddens argues that it is always as much about interpretation as nomological explanation (Giddens 1977, 149). With allowance made for his different disciplinary focus and vocabulary, Giddens’ discussion of the need to accommodate subjectivist and positivist accounts of social theory parallels the classical conception of international relations theory exemplified by Carr, for whom “sound thought” was a matter of achieving a proper balance between “free will” and “determinism.” Giddens simply puts this perennial problem in the more technical, social-scientific language of structure and agency:

In seeking to come to grips with problems of action and structure, structuration theory offers a conceptual scheme that allows one to understand both how actors are at the same time the creators of social systems yet created by them. Critics who argue either that structuration theory provides too little space for free action or, alternatively, underestimates the influence of structural

constraint...miss the point. The theory of structuration is not a series of generalizations about how far “free action” is possible in respect of “social constraint.” Rather, it is an attempt to provide the conceptual means of analyzing the often delicate and subtle interlacings of reflexively organized action and institutional constraint.

(As cited in Bryant and Jary 1991, 204)

Structuration theory has not merely found its way into IR debate, but has become associated closely with core debates about international cooperation. The most explicit application of structuration theory in IR is made by Alexander Wendt, who attempts to employ it, in the guise of “constructivism,” to demonstrate the underspecified character of Waltz’s version of structure, and the failure of the latter to recognize the extent to which state identities and interests are constructed by “knowledgeable practice” (Wendt 1992, 391–425). This construct, often applied to correct the deficiencies of regime theorizing, puts considerable emphasis on the possibility of achieving some form of synthesis between neorealist and neoliberal theories, an enterprise known as the “neo-neo debate.” The dubious merits of this project are explored more fully in [chapter four](#), since it marks a major preoccupation in mainstream IR, and its fundamental failure to understand the full and appropriate nature of the relationship between the idealist and realist strands that underlay these debates. For the moment, however, the fate of structuration theory in its encounter with the neo-neo debate provides an excellent example of the discipline’s marked propensity to adopt, adapt, and mainstream externally generated theoretical constructs.

The famous Realist self-help principle is for Waltz a function of anarchy, depicted simply as a structural condition. But anarchy is itself an institution, argues Wendt, and thus a product of the “processlevel” interactions externalized by Waltz. The alleged value of structuration theory is that it can change the way in which the neoneo debate conceives the problem of agency and structure, moving discussion beyond stale and unrewarding conflicts over technical issues. Since neoliberals claim that international institutions can transform state interests, the value of an approach that stresses “the importance of intersubjective meanings and understandings and the interaction between agents and structures” seems obvious (Wendt 1992, 322). But the attempt to draw structuration theory into the neo-neo debate misses the point of a structurationist approach. To restate Giddens: “Critics who argue either that structuration theory provides too little space for

free action or, alternatively, underestimates the influence of structural constraint...miss the point." Since the neo-neo debate is dominated by a positivist logic in which agents and structures are separated into distinct analytical compartments it is difficult to see how structuration theory, based explicitly on a rejection of this sort of decomposition, can be "used" to enhance this discussion. As Justin Rosenberg puts it, once inside the methodological framework of mainstream IR theory "we may produce either system-level or unit-level theories...but "cannot picture what *must* be the case in reality, namely the simultaneity of the individual and collective dimensions of human agency" (Rosenberg 1994, 94; emphasis in original).

The very idea that structuration theory has a "use" suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of its point and purpose. As Giddens puts it, "structuration theory is not intended to be a theory *of* anything" (as cited in Bryant and Jary 1991, 204). While Giddens certainly conceives of structuration theory as "something that can be put to use in concrete social scientific work," he explicitly countenances against its application in "empirical research programs" (Bryant and Jary 1991, 205). Structuration theory, in other words, is not, as Wendt appears to think, a new investigative technique to be added to the methodological arsenal of an unproblematically embraced conception of empirical science, but a reconception of science *per se* that challenges the sufficiency of strictly empirical thinking. It is a distinctly illustrative, not instrumental, concept. Thus, while Wendt correctly identifies liberalism and Realism as the principal "axis of contention" in international politics, he fails, like adherents of the neo-neo project writ large, to recognize that the underlying differences between these approaches are epistemological in character. Like mainstream IR scholars in general, Wendt sees epistemology as a non-issue. "Philosophies of science," he writes dismissively, "are not theories of international relations" (Wendt 1992, 425). But if epistemology seems *passé*, it is only because the neo-neo debate has succeeded in depicting itself as a largely procedural dispute about the relative importance of structure (agency) and process (interaction and learning) in international politics (Wendt 1992, 391). Hence, it is not the inescapable progress of the neo-neo debate that has made "competing views of human nature" in international relations a relic of the past, but the methodological hegemony of what Wendt calls its "neorealist-rationalist alliance" (1992, 425). This clearly shapes his perception of why structuration theory is helpful, and conforms to a pattern of selective appropriation among mainstream IR scholars who, when venturing into the wider realm of social theory, are not unlike the

proverbial ugly tourist in that their assessment of what counts as interesting, valuable, or useful cannot fail to be shaped by unexamined and uncontested assumptions.

The deceptive autonomy of International Relations

IR theory, like social theory generally, is notoriously event driven. Not surprisingly, therefore, the unfolding reunification of IR and social-political theory has been propelled largely by developments in the real world of national and international politics. Among the many aspects of IR said to demarcate it from political theory, none has been more central, more significant or more rigorously defended by theorists and statespersons alike, than the permanence of the state. As Howard Williams *et al.* put it, “since the state is assumed to represent the most perfect form of political association that humankind has thus far devised, the normative order that the state claims to represent... must be secured from outside interference” (Williams, Wright, and Evans 1993, 2). But this presupposition, widely thought to form the foundation for theory in IR, amounts to little more than an intellectual codification of existing practice, since the inviolability of sovereignty has been the legal and normative basis for international politics in the modern era. The elevation of the state to the status of ontological permanence is thus a *folie a deux*, with the Realist practitioners of IR turning the discipline into a sort of intellectual Westphalian temple, enjoying non-intervention in their internal disciplinary affairs, and an absolute monopoly on the legitimate use of theory. It has been suggested that recent events have caused the pillars of the Westphalian temple (i.e. the sanctity and viability of sovereign independence) to decay (Zacher 1992). And as goes the state, so goes the Realist temple built to observe its sacred ordinances. This is a popular but inadequate explanation, in that it fails to understand that the sharp distinction between international theory and political theory has never been valid. The temples of statehood and IR, as it were, are less in decay than up to their gilded domes in quicksand. If this is easy to miss, it is because the presumed sanctity of existing political institutions have made the apparent decline of the state since the 1970s the almost exclusive focus of mainstream IR debate, and the belated arrival of the more fundamental theoretical challenges that these changes served largely to obscure all the more dramatic.

Properly conceived, social and political theory offer no secure terrain for the construction of any permanent theoretical edifice, which helps to account for a relative lack of interest in political philosophy among IR

theorists. This generalization can be extended to include many of the “newer” perspectives whose anti-modernist and anti-foundational rhetorical strategies belie an interest in temple-building of a different sort. The problem now, as always, is that the moral complexity of the humane world ensures that the essential nature of knowledge can be no more certain than the essential nature of the divine. What or who to worship, in what ways and to what ends, is always an open question and the construction of one temple begets the formation of another, and the devotees of each appear to the other in the guise of the “outsider,” “other,” “heretic,” “barbarian,” “heathen,” and so forth. That many have believed knowledge to be certain, absolute, and objective is no assurance that this is so, not least because the political fragmentation of the world ensures that “the legitimate ends of nation-states are many and varied, and that there is no blueprint devised in philosophical reason (or anywhere) which could provide those who gained access to it with knowledge of how people actually living in nation-states should live their communal lives” (Spegele 1996, 74–5). As Roger Spegele suggests, pluralism is another traditional feature of Realist thought in IR though it need not, he argues, collapse into relativism and moral skepticism. But the problem that Spegele acknowledges and tries to clarify is the perpetual existence of differing conceptions of international relations, including a revolutionist or “emancipatory” strand that in some of its guises imagines or prophesies the transcendence of the states system. To be inclined to endorse one conception of the subject over another is an inevitable fate for IR theorists, but a peculiar one, since any purported academic discipline ought to rest on a shared understanding of the essential nature of its subject matter. But international political theory, like the cognate field of philosophy, cannot enjoy the same type of general structure as a natural science. To define philosophy in terms of any single method is to take sides in a philosophical dispute, something that precludes establishing the methodological unity vital to scientific endeavor (Edwards 1967, 218). What drives the current crisis of IR theory and modernist discourses generally, therefore, is not, as Chris Brown puts it, the “disappearance of the grounds of knowledge” so much as the permanent existence of a bewildering variety of investigative procedures (Brown 1994, 215). Philosophy is simultaneously a rational-critical and personal-intuitive enterprise, giving it a speculative freedom that extends to the meaning of philosophy itself. It did not take the arrival of critical social theory to tell us this, but it might take the demolition of the totalizing propensity

of the Enlightenment-inspired version of science and progress to re-establish the inherent plurality of social thought.

The next section of this chapter argues that the myriad intellectual traditions that define political and social theory through the ages can be attributed to a perpetual, ineradicable core dispute over the possibility for sustained intellectual, material, and moral progress. If there is a single, continuous intellectual tradition that unites antiquity, modernity, and postmodernity it is the contingent, unpredictable, and unstable nature of both knowledge and the social world itself. Martin Wight, despite his insistence on the general recalcitrance of international relations to political theory, is one of the few modern commentators on the subject to recognize that the only appropriate cast of mind for the IR theorist is a "cautious agnosticism" (Yost 1994, 274). This tradition of non-traditionalism, as it were, is contrasted by Wight to the Realist view of history as repetitive and cyclical, and the "Revolutionist" view of history as "linear, moving upwards toward an apocalyptic denouement" and "messianic fulfillment." Opting for what he sees as the intellectual *via media* of "Rationalism," Wight suggests that we would do well to be skeptical about attributing any "pattern or ultimate meaning to history," or placing any "confidence in the permanence of...apparent progress in political institutions" (Wight as cited in Yost 1994, 274). But while Wight is correct to see IR as "incompatible with progressivist theory," he is wrong to identify this incompatibility with the ontological distinctiveness of international politics. Rather, as E.H.Carr suggests, neither pessimism nor optimism about the possibility for progress in international relations (or any humane science) can exist to the exclusion of the other. "Sound political thought," argues Carr, "must be based on elements of both utopia and reality," since elements of both utopia and reality are "inextricably blended" in human nature (Carr 1946, 93 and 96). What Carr and, to a lesser extent, Wight describe is not the sort of historical or analytical conception of tradition on which a science of IR might be erected so much as the idea that IR is inherently concerned with different sorts of intellectual activities that cannot be reconciled under a unified theory of science. The point is not that IR is without intellectual continuity, but that it is heir to more than one intellectual tradition, and thus permanently without the sort of consensus cherished and demanded by the social scientist.

As the natural philosophical diversity of international political theory becomes clearer one might expect to see a renewed interest in Wight, Carr, and those other IR theorists who, to date, have been cast largely in the role of early scientific pioneers.⁴ A significant interest in normative

IR theory is already evident, particularly in England where the distinction between IR, philosophy, history and other cognate fields has never been as sharply drawn as it is in America (Smith 1985; Wallace 1996; Crawford and Jarvis 2000). It is important, however, to break free of the old habit of seeing IR as a unified science, and the best hedge against this intellectually enervating practice is an appreciation for the broader context of political philosophy to which the academic study of international relations properly belongs. There is simply no continuous, historical, scientific tradition on which to substantiate the modern presupposition that IR ought to be regarded as a distinct, autonomous discipline. Nor is the famously anarchical structure of international relations convincing evidence of its ontological distinctiveness. The disciplinary issue has become a needless distraction, bogging down in arcane, second-order debates about overly subtle, sometimes meaningless, distinctions between this or that paradigm, research method or framework. Ironically, the obsession with disciplinary unity and consensus characteristic of post-Second World War IR scholarship has been a major obstacle to intellectual progress. This is because international relations, like all subjects of political inquiry, involves inherently normative and prescriptive judgments about a range of substantive concerns, while offering no objective criteria for saying which particular issues should be most compelling, or which technique best suited to its investigation. It is easy to see that this sort of tradition could scarcely satisfy the desire for a continuous, systematized body of knowledge explicit in the modern attempt to turn each of the divisions of political analysis into an independent science. But, in the case of IR at least, systematization and rigor has been largely an internally generated elusion made possible by elevating analytical abstractions to the status of permanent scriptural truths, and by an almost total disregard for, or caricatured distortion of, the traditional works, methods, and presuppositions of political philosophy (see O'Callaghan 1998). Intellectual pluralism, though conceived as an enemy of science, is a fundamental fact of both the study and practice of social-political relations. But, given its traditional interest in "the state," and its appropriate form and conduct, political philosophy is not entirely unsystematic and offers a viable alternative to the forced methodological unity demanded of the more narrowly scientific conception of international relations.

The point is not to demonstrate that this or that great thinker had an interest in what we today call IR. This is a thoroughly anachronistic practice that assumes present-day attitudes and experiences have

universal relevance. International relations is not merely a modern term; the very idea that it can and should be a discipline is distinctly modern and bound up with a particular cosmopolitan conception of the world that does not seem to travel well outside Anglo-Saxon and European circles (see Brown 2000). Rather, the point is to suggest that the form and content of social-political knowledge in international relations is as richly contextual, and inherently contestable, as the body of contending ideologies that comprise political philosophy (Goodwin 1982, 29). This contestability extends to the conception of knowledge itself, including the typically unspoken—since typically unexamined and unassailable—presupposition that science is a cumulative and progressive business. Now that the attempt to treat IR as structurally homomorphic to the natural sciences has been soundly discredited, its relationship and affinities to classical political philosophy are increasingly obvious.

It is to a further consideration of the connections between ancient and modern social-political analysis that the chapter now turns. It must be observed, however, that the following are intended only as broad brush generalizations about social-political theory, and the general consonance of its styles and objectives to modern thought, and to IR theory in particular. The discussion is meant to be illustrative, not comprehensive, and is aimed particularly at elucidating a continuous, irresolvable dispute over the problem of progress. It also suggests that, despite profound differences between the classical and modernist temperaments as a whole, these vast and diverse bodies of discourse harbor similar internal tensions that militate against sweeping characterizations. Modernist thought, for example, while clearly defined by its faith in the “virtues” of reason, rationality, technology, and progress (understood in terms of increasing wealth and industrialization) is also characterized by a more concealed, but no less profound, sense of foreboding. Its discontinuity with the ambivalence of classical thought is thus apt to be exaggerated, as is the sense of disjuncture associated with the postmodern critique.

Inheritances

THE AMBIGUITY OF POLITICAL THEORY

The idea of progress is so integral to post-Enlightenment political and social theory that it seems, more than any other element, to distinguish the discourses of modernity from earlier modes of knowing. Absent in

ancient and medieval thought, for example, is any systematic attempt to articulate the potential for human actors to understand, and control, changes in the world around them. Nor is there much evidence of the quintessentially modern idea that human material and intellectual development moves inexorably from less to more advanced stages:

the more hopeful among the ancients, those with the most robust faith in their own civilization, confined their hopes to maintaining in the future what had been achieved in the past; and the less hopeful expected decay. Some believed in a progress whose highest point was reached already, others in a golden age in a remote past, and still others in a perpetual movement repeated over and over again, through the same stages... In the Middle Ages...there was a destination which the individual might meet, though it was not in this world; for he passed through this world only on his way to something incomparably better or incomparably worse.

(Plamenatz 1963, 409)

The essential details of this characterization are accurate, but it overstates the distinction between past and present intellectual activity. It is difficult to recover and convey what progress means for previous civilizations, when there is a strong tendency to evaluate its meaning via the anachronistic standards of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or the “postmodern condition.” Indeed, the evolutionary models of change and progress integral to the idea of a scientific “age of discovery” demand that all intellectual antecedents to itself be considered lower, simpler, or inferior standards of knowledge, and that all prior modes of social organization be seen as inferior ways of life. Nowhere is this clearer than in the classical conception of liberal moral philosophy articulated in John Stuart Mill’s famous essay *On Liberty*. For Mill, individual liberty is treated as virtually identical to progress, since the former has no practical relevance or moral value in the despotic societies of the ancients, or those “barbarous” peoples outside “the more civilized portions of the species” (Mill 1974, 59). The word progress is thus substituted for liberty in the following quote: “*progress*, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion” (Mill 1974, 69). This idea of progress is so obviously ethnocentric and Eurocentered that we may be in danger of missing its slight on its own intellectual heritage. Present debate over the

conception and validity of the Western Canon aside, it seems unlikely that we will ever stop reading Plato, but it is *how* we read the past and its thinkers that matters most. While it would be mere “intellectual idolatry” to read the ancients as though they “contain the greatest wisdom now available to us on all significant subjects,” it is just as impoverishing to assume that they have nothing to tell us (Gutmann 1994, 15). Yet the modern preoccupation with material betterment and technological advance, raised to extravagant heights in capitalist-industrial societies, has transformed a particular and historically specific conception of progress into a universal, inescapable and desirable “truth.” It is only when this modernist monopoly on the idea of progress is broken that rival conceptions of the idea can be addressed. The upshot, then, is that progress, while outwardly a modern and liberal concept, is neither exclusively modern nor liberal.

The point to be made here is that the possibilities, benefits, and evaluative criteria for progress are viewed in different ways at different times. This is not to suggest that the concept itself is historically variable. The literal meaning of progress—to move towards better, higher, more advanced stages of knowledge or material wellbeing—is not at issue. Approached in this way, it becomes clear that ancient civilizations (perhaps many about which we have little or no knowledge) had a conception of progress not unlike that of the moderns. Every society, after all, is modern in comparison to its own immediate past. While the Greeks stood at the dawn of what we now call the Western civilization they did not know it, and—with a hubris reminiscent of the Enlightenment—had a very generous estimation of their intellectual capabilities, a substantial faith in human progress, and a commitment to universal theoretical constructs. But other, more pessimistic elements, were also present, including the idea, inspired by Hesiod, that the human condition in its present state was in gradual decline from a previous “golden age” (Tarnas 1991, 4). Similarly, the profound emphasis on progress that typifies modernist discourses should not dull us to its dissenting voices. The anti-foundationalist impulses of post- (or rather anti-) modernist thought, for example, are foreshadowed in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky (Brown 1994, 216).⁵ And Rousseau, one of the most important figures of the Enlightenment, could scarcely be called an unqualified champion of progress, when he exhorted the Academy of Dijon with his “theory of regress,” and his essay on the *Origin of Inequality Among Men* (Bury 1932, 177–8). More generally, the contemporary conservative belief that the betterment of humanity should be construed in terms of staving off decline, and/or cautiously

preserving what advances have been made, resonates with Hesiod's sense of a "golden age," with Antigone's heart-rending appeal to traditional values in the Sophoclean play that bears her name, and with Thucydides' lamentation on the erosion of moral standards, and unwritten laws, in his history of the Peloponnesian War (Klosko 1993, 7–9). Thus, while it is useful and necessary to maintain the analytical break between antiquity and modernity, it is important to remember that ideas are less constrained by temporal boundaries than the societies in which they are expressed.

The key distinction between modernist and antiquarian conceptions of progress is not the notion that the stock of knowledge grows over time, since "the idea that knowledge accumulates is much older than the eighteenth century" (Plamenatz 1963, 412). The distinctiveness of the two sets of discourse rests instead on the role that knowledge is thought to play in society. Thus, while our definition of progress is morally neutral—referring to the "gradual betterment of humanity" or to "forward movement"—we are likely to differ profoundly from one era or culture to another over what it is that constitutes human betterment (Wagar 1967, 55). In modernist thought, the idea of progress is usually linked to a conception of knowledge as a means to a steadily increasing good. As the stock of knowledge grows, so too do its uses. This technocratic version of knowledge and progress has come so much to dominate modern thinking about the world that it has tended to push all other conceptions of the uses of reason and rationality aside. The philosophical intolerance of this "project" is objectionable enough but, for postmodernists at least, pales in comparison to the litany of horrors and sins that they are prepared to lay at its door. With the clarity of perception unique to hindsight, virtually all of the exploitative and oppressive elements along the road to the historical development of the modern world are attributed to the Western tradition, including colonialism, imperialism, slavery, genocide, anti-Semitism, misogyny, racism, homophobia, cultural annihilation, ecological destruction, the class system, and animal exploitation. While this many-faceted critical onslaught has been captured by the sponge term postmodernist, it might more accurately be described as post-Western, since the culpability for much of the globe's problems is (again with the benefit of hindsight) traced back to the philosophical presuppositions of the ancient Greeks.⁶ This is one of many areas in which the logic of postmodernism goes badly astray, mistaking one peculiarly tenacious and (in its modern form) virulent strain within the Western intellectual tradition with the Western mind as a whole. That this monolithically (mis)conceived set

of discourses includes the capacity for critical self-reflection, and alternative conceptions of reason, is beyond dispute, as the very advent of postmodernist discourses should suggest.

Far from being technocratic pioneers, the ancients seldom expressed the idea that an accumulation of knowledge *increases* the good. While ancient philosophy tended to view knowledge as a means to “the good”, all aspects of human progress had finite limits. Even Plato’s *Republic*, the most ambitious of Greek political-philosophical projects, balanced the breathtaking audacity of its argument for an eternally true and unchanging reality accessible to the human mind with a deep contempt for the average human intellect. Platonic “enlightenment” was for the few in the service of the many and, despite the customary depiction of the “republic” as a blueprint for his ideal city, Plato had doubts about its feasibility, and (assuming it could be established) its long-term survival. What was true for the imagined communities of the ancients was no less true for the mightiest of their empires. Rome, despite engineering achievements and social-political domination on a modern scale, lacked the motivational resources to sustain its vitality (Tarnas 1991, 88). What Rome, and the political institutions of antiquity in general, lacked was the sort of sustained faith in progress characteristic of the modern world. This is because, whatever the intellectual and cultural aspirations and “achievements” of the ancients, there remained an incalculably open dimension to the universe that threatened to undermine all truths, and helped to balance even the most ambitious intellectual and political objectives with a deep sense of foreboding. It is interesting to note that this sense of apprehension is present in modernist discourse as well, though it has tended since the Enlightenment to be suppressed by the dominance of progressivist thinking. As Brown suggests the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger express grave doubts about the liberating potential of rationality and science, something that prefigures the “deep sense of foreboding” that Brown says “underpins the best” of the anti-foundational works now on offer (Brown 1994, 216–17).

Rather than express their anxiety over the plurality of intellectual life, Greek thinkers, prior to Plato at least, tended to view competing conceptions of knowledge as an irresolvable actuality, a disposition that accounts for the exceptional vitality of their thought. That this disposition continues to be appropriate today is not a function of Western philosophical hegemony; rather, it is an intellectual reality that the Greeks were intuitive enough to grasp, and courageous enough to accept. Indeed, the idea of irreconcilable philosophical differences distinguishes Greek thought sharply from that of their modernist

counterparts, with the latter demonstrating a distinct preference for totalizing conceptions of knowledge. Viewed in the afterglow of the Enlightenment project, Greek thought seems a noble but deficient attempt to impose reason on the unknown, a mission applauded for its primordial scientific instinct but undone by elements of mystery, myth, superstition, and skepticism. Once this anachronistic and philosophically one-sided standard of evaluation is suspended, however, it becomes evident that much that is wrong with contemporary social theory derives from an inability to get the essence of social theory, and thus the essence of the Greek contribution, right. Rather than confounding theoretical endeavor, the idea of irreconcilability and division constitutes the only appropriate basis for trying to know the world. It is because human aspirations, values, and ideals cannot be founded on either the certainty of authoritative transcendental precepts, or absolutely condemned to a permanent unpredictability and contingency, that we are compelled to accept the wisdom and virtue of the intellectual diversity first captured in the West by the Greeks, but innate to human inquiry.

It is commonly suggested that the Greeks “invented” philosophy and, of more direct interest to students of political science, “political philosophy and the demarcation of the political nature” (Wolin 1960, 28). Putting it in these terms implies a constructivist account of social realities well suited to postmodern sensibilities, but “privileges” Greek thought in a manner likely to offend. It seems safer and fairer to suggest that the Greeks were merely the first in the Western tradition to leave a substantial written record of a sustained attempt to satisfy their intellectual curiosity about virtually every aspect of the social and natural world. While there was something peculiarly Greek about the specific problems and investigative techniques at hand, many of the ideas and paradoxes to which these pointed are inherent to intellectual life everywhere, at all times. Thus, while Greek insights about cosmology have long seemed irrelevant, the contradictory blend of foreboding and confidence about the possibilities of human material and intellectual progress that underlay Greek thought as a whole continues to set the broad parameters for all social inquiry. Modern echoes of this fundamental ambiguity are increasingly evident in the discipline of IR where the modern zeal for scientific certainty has never managed fully to transcend the apprehension and doubt that so plainly lurk behind it.

The quest for certainty, however, is also very much a part of the Greek inheritance and for all practical purposes begins with Plato. But if Plato is the greatest of the Greek philosophers it is precisely

because of his failure to reconcile his other-worldly ideals, which he alone regarded as “Real” and meaningful, with the prevailing political and intellectual conditions of the world around him. It might be suggested, with substantial simplification, that, prior to Plato, Greek philosophers saw the world as either permanently in flux, or permanently unchanging. Armed by the pre-Socratic distinction between *nomos* (convention) and *physis* (nature), Plato was able to argue that much of what appeared to be natural was merely a product of undeconstructed opinions, conventions, or traditional practices, while what was natural (or fully real) altogether surpassed the investigative capacity of the merely sensory world. But Plato, in attempting to make his conception of an ultimate reality the foundation for every other science, was engaged in a paradoxical rejection of philosophy itself, since the question of whether there is such a higher reality is itself a philosophical issue (Edwards 1967, 217). His metaphysical doctrine spelled problems for his political theory as well, leaving the architects of his ideal Republic with an agonizing dilemma:

More striking than any other ambiguity was an essentially tragic theme which intruded like an alien visitor to darken a scene made bright by the promise of a saving knowledge. Coupled with the conviction that human reason could aspire to absolute and immutable truth was the conflicting conviction that once men had joined practice and theory, once the pattern of perfection had become embodied in actual arrangements, an inevitable process of deterioration set in. The works of men were powerless to escape the dissolving taint of sensible creations.

(Wolin 1960, 68)

As Matthew Arnold put it, Plato is left “wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born” (as cited in Wolin 1960, 66).

Plato is remarkable as much for the clarity and brilliance of his argument as the stunning arrogance of its ambition. Yet its very failure accentuates the rich ambivalence of Greek thought and the deep inner tension that is the perpetual spark of philosophy. It was not Plato’s attempt to raise fundamental questions about the nature of reality that was ill-conceived, but his endeavor permanently to resolve the issue. Perhaps his theories are better understood as political expedients for the highly conservative agenda of a jittery aristocrat than a disinterested exploration of ultimate knowledge.⁷ Whatever the case, the very thing to which Plato most objected—the fundamentally ambiguous character

of philosophical investigation—was, and is, the characteristic mark of philosophy in its most general sense. Paradoxically, then, Plato's alleged discovery of an archimedean point from which to make the entire world intelligible laid the basis for his claim that philosophers must be rulers while marking the end of philosophy as normally understood. Ultimate knowledge, in other words, would put philosophy out of a job, which cannot be possible since the very attempt to inquire about the ultimate nature of knowledge and reality means that they are not ultimate. To put it in the richly paradoxical language of the Taoists, "if the Way is made clear, it is not the Way" (Watson 1996, 40). While Plato is no Taoist he, like them, is up against the fundamental inscrutability of knowledge and reality, and is forced at the penultimate moment of his overly ambitious rational journey to fall back on the direct intuition of the sage (Edwards 1967, 217).⁸

In pushing philosophy to its limits, Plato introduced into Western thought a hubris from which it has never fully recovered, and which successive generations of thinkers have found hard to resist. The Enlightenment project, for example, is in many respects a reworking of Plato's ambitions, except this time science sits atop the hierarchy of knowledge, and philosophy is relegated to the status of a lower order investigative method, useful perhaps for clarifying concepts but for little else. But the quest for certainty, whether modeled on the Platonic dialectic or Newton's physics, tries to impose closure and boundaries on an invariably open and boundless domain. This, perhaps, is the cardinal failing of the Western mind, and seems to be bound up with, and exacerbated by, an unexamined commitment to a peculiarly modern version of progress. While the idea of progress is much older than often acknowledged, only since the increasing prestige of the natural sciences championed in the "Age of Reason" has it been generally and consistently argued that the present is better than, and preferable to, the past (Plamenatz 1963, 412). The ancients, however, never lost sight of the sometimes pressing reality that progress was unlikely to be lasting, and staving off decline was a major preoccupation. Since the Enlightenment, and prior to the postmodern challenge, by contrast, the notion of progress was so axiomatically accepted that the general novelty of the idea was usually overlooked. Such is the outcome when an "essentially contested" concept is reduced to an article of faith or otherwise sealed off from close scrutiny.⁹

The problem of progress is closely related to the problem of knowledge since, once we know what is true or best, we will arguably feel compelled to move toward it. But the *nomos/physis*

distinction introduced by the Greeks meant that truth was virtually impossible to discover when what was right by the law of one's city conflicted with, but seemed no less compelling than, what was right by the laws of a divinely ordered cosmos. This set severe limits on what could be known about the "real world" and appropriate modes of behavior, as Plato's brilliant but futile attempt to transcend the problem suggests (Klosko 1993, 19).¹⁰

The essential ambiguity of social thought, as evidenced in the nature-convention distinction, can be reduced to two very general and conflicting sets of assumptions about knowledge. These can be variously labeled, and contain numerous strands, but, in keeping with the categories deployed in IR and in this study, can be usefully described as idealist and realist. While they contain distinct, largely antithetical, assumptions, idealist and realist thought are united by a rejection of the complacent acceptance of traditional values as a source of genuine knowledge. In the idealist stream authentic knowledge derives from an understanding of a transcendent, otherworldly reality that gives meaning and order to all activity. Because this realm is super-sensible its exploration demands a wide array of cognitive faculties (Tarnas 1991, 70). But, however difficult to apprehend, this ordered cosmos has an investigable structure, giving the Greek conception of idealism a strongly rational flavor. The paradigm example of Greek idealist philosophy is, again, the rational utopia spelled out in Plato's *Republic*. Because Plato's arguments are richly metaphorical, expressed in the contrapuntal form of dialogue, and typically put in the mouth of the profoundly ambiguous figure of Socrates, it is difficult to say definitively where he really stood on the idealist-realist dimension.¹¹ Suffice it to say, however, that he clearly wants to resolve the ambiguity and uncertainty created by the idea of multiple paths to knowledge.

In contrast to idealism, Greek realist thought derives its moral and intellectual standards from the workings of nature. The hypothesized super-sensible world of the idealists is, by definition, outside the realm of empirical investigation, and beyond the bounds of human reason; as such, it cannot yield genuine, or useful, knowledge. With a desire for rigor that prefigures the strictures of Enlightenment science, this realist conception of reality demands that all superstitious and conjectural elements be rejected, and that knowledge be sought only where it can be found: in the observable realm of nature. Implicit in this realist position is a rejection of all totalizing claims about knowledge, since empirical reality consists not of Platonic universals, but of diverse concrete particulars (Tarnas 1991, 71). Not unlike the postmodern emphasis on

anti-foundationalism, the classical conception of realism entails that knowledge always be considered relative and fallible, since by definition it is always incomplete. Both of these ideas have found their way into modern Realism in IR but not without suffering distortion at the hands of an overweening commitment to science. Despite its intellectual history of pluralism in practice, for example, Realist IR has demonstrated a distinct disdain for pluralism in theory. And, despite its intellectual history of fallibilism, Realist IR has been unwavering in its conviction that the states system is a permanent part of the political landscape.

Probably the most striking example of classical Greek realism is the “Melian Dialogue” in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. As suggested above, this is a set of passages very familiar to IR students, though its presentation in the caricature style of neorealism bears little resemblance to Greek understanding. The moral crux of the work concerns the refusal of the representatives of the city of Melos to submit to the Athenian demand that Melos either join the Athenian confederacy or face destruction. Believing that they have divine right on their side, the Melians are content to trust in the protection of the gods. The following passage nicely conveys the realist assault upon this position as expressed by the Athenians:

Our aims and actions are perfectly consistent with the beliefs men hold about the gods and with the principles that govern their own conduct. Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a necessity of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.

(Thucydides 1954, 105)

It is generally believed that Thucydides was repulsed by the behavior of the Athenians, but compelled to accept the logic of their position. We cannot know precisely how much this sort of thinking influenced actual events in the Greek political world. The point of this discussion, however, is that neither idealism nor realism ever dominated Greek thought to the exclusion of the other and, in the realm of ideas at least, each guarded against excess by the other. Despite its wide-ranging

quest for certainty, the dynamism of Greek thought derived ultimately from its essential ambiguity and skepticism. It was not knowledge that gave the Greek mind its vitality, but the failure to achieve it (see Strauss 1959, 11). Though Greek thought included elements of what we now call a scientific approach it included antithetical elements as well, making the quest for truth a permanently dialectical process. This contrasts sharply with the modern attitude to science carried to the extreme in IR where historically contingent structures are elevated to the status of timeless facts, and deductive premises turned into dogma.

THE HUBRIS OF MODERNITY?

In contrast to the classical propensity simply to accept the irreconcilable duality of intellectual life, modernist discourses exhibit a distinct affinity for totalizing conceptions of knowledge and understanding or (in the case of postmodernism and historicism) totalizing conceptions of truth-relativism. In its most extreme form, the desire for certainty in modernist discourse is expressed through its aspiration to an authoritatively ordered body of empirical sciences encompassing the entire physical and social world. In its most extreme form, the sense of uncertainty characteristic of anti-modernist thought is pushed to the point that all beliefs become relative and fallible. While diametrically opposed conceptions about knowing, the scientific and relativist perspectives attempt to impose a finality on social-political theory (and philosophy in general) alien to the more appropriate ambivalence of the classical conception of progress. In the version of progress that predominates, modern thought is not simply different from that of the ancients, but, in its self-declared attainment (or at least pursuit) of the highest possible standards, methods, and forms of knowledge, implies a devaluation of all pre-modern knowledge. Leo Strauss perfectly captures modernity's often presumed monopoly on progress:

Modern thought is in all its forms, directly or indirectly, determined by the idea of progress. This idea implies that the most elementary questions can be settled once and for all so that future generations can dispense with their further discussion, but can erect on the foundations once laid an ever-growing structure. In this way, the foundations are covered up. The only proof necessary to guarantee their solidity seems to be that the structure stands and grows. Since philosophy demands, however, not merely solidity so understood, but lucidity and truth, a special

kind of inquiry becomes necessary whose purpose it is to keep alive the recollection, and the problem, of the foundations hidden by progress. This philosophic inquiry is the history of philosophy or of science.

(Strauss 1959, 77)

Strauss defends his conception of the history of ideas as a sort of philosophical reclamation project on the grounds that twentieth-century thought “demands that each generation reinterpret the past on the basis of its own experience and with a view to its own future” (Strauss 1959, 59). His main objective is to justify the restoration of the largely neglected, but still relevant, art of political philosophy (the exploration of the “nature of political things”). While this is a worthy objective, however, it is more productive for my purposes to emphasize the different sorts of sweeping generalities, incongruities, and absurdities to which modernist and anti-modernist conceptions of science can lead, a paradigm example of which is contemporary discussion of the disciplinary status of IR.

Typically, as noted above, modernist thinkers link the idea of progress to a conception of knowledge as a means to a steadily increasing good. As the stock of knowledge grows, so too do its uses. In international politics, this version of progress is the driving force behind what Richard Ashley (1986) terms technical realism. In modernist discourses progress is also thought to hinge vitally on the power of human reason which, typically, is thought to be great. Inspired by the “fantastic success” of the natural sciences, modern social theories have had little trouble embracing the “assumption that the world is thoroughly accessible to science and reason...” (Morgenthau 1993, 41). Modern analyses thus tend to collapse the problems of intellectual, moral, and material/political advance into one model of progress; knowledge and praxis is united, as expressed so forcefully in Marx’s famous dictum—“the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (McLellan 1984, 158).¹²

But in modernity, as much as antiquity, progress remains a contested idea, the literal meaning of which is neutral: “a moving forward (in time and space)” (Goodwin 1982, 136; Adler, Crawford, and Donnelly 1991, 2). The advent of science, and its application to social inquiry, has made the contestability of progress easy to overlook. But skeptical voices have always been present, since the midpost of the twentieth century in particular, when the purportedly liberating effects of science, rationality and reason—and its largely uncontested version of progress—were

subjected to searching and sustained criticism by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Jürgen Habermas, the most important exponent of this school, is particularly critical of the positivist version of science and rationality, suggesting that it is simply another of the many ideologies characteristic of the modern age:

the philosophy of science that has emerged since the mid-nineteenth century...is methodology pursued with a scientific self-understanding of the sciences. 'Scientism' means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as *one* form of possible knowledge, but must rather identify knowledge with science.

(Habermas 1971, 4; emphasis in original)¹³

It is not the hubris of modernity, therefore, against which the social theorist must guard, but the exaggerated promise of the scientific method. While the sort of skepticism exhibited by Habermas has become part of the genealogical heritage of the more radical critiques made by some of the postmodernists, its roots lie in a distinctly modern tradition of critical thinking, albeit one overshadowed by the more confident and dominant strains of Enlightenment thought. Taken as a whole, modern social-political theory exhibits the same combination of certainty and skepticism evident throughout the ages, despite its increasing propensity to move in the direction of one or the other of these interdependent elements, and to treat them as mutually exclusive polarities. This unhelpful tendency is particularly evident in IR discourse post-1945, where the increasingly tenacious hold of positivist science created an exaggerated sense of epistemological uniformity that, since its belated encounter with critical theory and other postpositivist perspectives, has created an equally exaggerated sense of crisis. In IR at least, the internal diversity of modernist discourses has been shrouded as much by the positivist-inspired compulsion for uniformity as the postpositivist assault it has engendered, in that both positions tend uncritically to embrace the emerging consensus of the neo-neo debate, the former convinced that scientific IR builds progressively on the 'timeless' qualities of Realism, and the latter buying into the myth that the neo-neo debate represents two versions of the same rationalist/positivist story. Neither party to the growing epistemological dispute in IR seems able to recognize that its distorted, lopsidedly realist, construction as an academic discipline has suppressed rather than eradicated its natural and perennial philosophical diversity.

This is a reality that requires a more pliant conception of the subject, but one that neither necessitates, or encourages, its wholesale deconstruction.

Transcending the myth of “scientific” progress

Despite their predilection for deconstruction and linguistic accuracy, many of the critics of post-Enlightenment thought treat its rich array of discourses as an undeconstructed mass, captured by the unrevealing label of “modernity.” At first blush, it does not seem possible that every species of social-political thought ascendant in the West since the flowering of rationalism in the eighteenth century can be reduced to a single sponge term. But if modernity is at bottom a set of deep, broad currents and discourses suggestive of an intellectual ocean, its subservience to a peculiarly modern version of science as *the* highest form of knowledge has made it seem more like a mighty, unstoppable river.

Once the historically variable idea of human progress got bound up with the rekindled, and redoubled, faith in rationality characteristic of the Enlightenment, its inherent contestability and universality was lost. Progress was now conceived as a uniquely modern idea that could not be pushed back into antiquity, except in the sense that “certain currents of pre-modern thought” exhibited a relatively modern understanding of the concept. If the Greeks and Romans had some inkling of progress it was only in the sense of vague anticipations, and whatever intimations existed had to vie with powerfully anti-progressive myths like the myth of the *golden age* or the myth of *eternal recurrence*. There was even a propensity among the ancients to remark an apparent causal link between the advances of technology and the decline of morals (Strauss 1968). Though hints of progress could be found in Judeo-Christian philosophy as well, and Christianity in particular, the versions of social and spiritual progress proposed by Jesus fixed their vision on another world, a doctrine that—in its medieval presentation—was “quite content to see man’s career on earth end in [his] own time” (Wagar 1967, 59). It was the triumph of the scientific method alone that appeared to make possible a “true idea of progress,” one fully emancipated from “the superstition, pessimism, and tendency to otherworldliness which hampered all premodern thought” (Wagar 1967, 58). Science, which once referred generally to knowledge of all sorts, was now a label reserved for knowledge of a particular kind, modeled on the newly “discovered” natural sciences, and superior to the merely

speculative endeavors of theology, metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy. Thus conceived, the essential modernity of the idea of progress could not be escaped.

It is neither possible nor necessary to recount the many stages and thinkers through which the idea of progress has passed in its journey from the Renaissance, through the Enlightenment, and into the present era. Suffice it to note that much of what is believed and contested about the scientific approach to progress can be found in the work of Auguste Comte. Comte's notion that there were laws of progress that could be developed by the application of positive philosophy to human social relations cemented the modernist distinction between scientific and pre-scientific knowledge. Though positivism has fallen well short of what Comte intended ("a social science modeled on modern natural science... able to overcome the intellectual anarchy of modern society"), and generated numerous revisions and opponents, his pronouncements came so near the mark of the modern spirit of progress, and found so wide an acceptance, that it has seldom seemed necessary to distinguish between positivism and *the* scientific approach (Comte as cited in Strauss 1959, 18). While this is far from an accurate picture, it is more useful for my purposes in this chapter to emphasize broad-brush generalizations about positivism, than to detail its competing philosophical traditions.

The success of positivism's prevailing self-definition of social science has been so complete that the positivist context of any particular subject area is taken for granted unless, or until, there are compelling reasons for thinking otherwise. That challenges to the positivist dogma have been many and varied in no way diminishes, and in fact highlights, the authority of positivist science, at least insofar as it obtains in the methodological self-perception of the social sciences. It is worth noting that positivistic philosophy can no longer be considered an orthodoxy in the philosophy of science, a broader realm from which particular social scientific disciplines have been isolated in varying degrees (Giddens 1977, 57). The debutante discipline of International Relations has been particularly detached from wider developments in social theory, picking up rather late, for example, on the disciplinary implications of postpositivistic or Frankfurt philosophy, a sluggishness that has left the field poorly placed to meet the many-sided onslaught of postmodernism. Despite these broad-ranging attacks, however, a sizable proportion of IR scholars remain committed to an essentially positivistic conception of theory, though a precise accounting of their ranks is not possible since any approach that defines knowledge as theoretically

unproblematic does not require, or invite, attention to philosophical matters.

The positivist rejection of political philosophy, and its preoccupation with scientific proof, leads to a conception of social science that is unassailable not because it is the “true idea of progress,” but because it is tautological. This is because scientific proof is meaningless outside the broader philosophical context of social inquiry to which positivism denies recourse. As Strauss suggests, any emphasis on scientific evidence in social inquiry is meaningless without some level of reflection on logically prior questions like, in the case of IR for example, *what is political?* This question is dialectical, not scientific in the positivist sense, and cannot be resolved by merely declaring the subject of politics or IR a science. Thus, the search for law-like generalizations that guides the positivistic conception of politics presupposes, rather than demonstrates, the appropriateness of the scientific approach:

This goal is taken as a matter of course without a previous investigation as to whether the subject matter with which political science deals admits of an adequate understanding in terms of “laws” or whether the universals through which political things can be understood as what they are must not be conceived in entirely different terms. Scientific concern with political facts, relations of political facts, recurrent relations of political facts, or laws of political behaviour, requires isolation of the phenomena which it is studying. But if this isolation is not to lead to irrelevant or misleading results, one must see the phenomena in question within the whole to which they belong...i.e. the whole political or politico-social order.

(Strauss 1959, 24)

The point that should be emphasized is that the positivist method is fruitful in certain areas, but cannot be conceived as the best method for describing every aspect of the complicated world in which we live. At its very best positivist science is incomplete, since even its frankest acceptance of the supposed distinction between “facts” and “values,” and its most subtle, sophisticated, and sensitive methods of investigation, cannot escape the inherent ambiguity of human existence. It is also one thing to attempt to expunge value and moral judgments from scientific methods, and quite another to expunge them from the logically prior process of reflection on the purposes to which such study

is to be put. There is also in positivism an inherent danger of mistaking historically specific and transient peculiarities in modern Western society with the essential character of humanity *per se*, a weakness that it shares with every attempt to stand outside of history (Strauss 1959, 25). More than anything else, however, positivist philosophy is undone by its insistence on totality, or what Spegele calls its “monistic metaphysics”: “a deep commitment to...the effect that there is one world and only one conception of it that can be true” (Spegele 1996, 49). This commitment, as Spegele points out, is so palpably unrealistic that it is a “breeding ground” for skepticism, something that accounts for the otherwise paradoxical mood of crisis that seems everywhere to dog the confident assertions of the scientific approach.

3

From idealism to realism

The myth of progress in International Relations theory

Now, of all worlds, the world of politics might seem the least amenable to rationalist treatment...

Michael Oakeshott

It is because of the historical discontinuity of international relations as a set of practices that International Relations *qua* social science has been “for the most part a notably unhistorical discipline” (Rosenberg 1994, 94). Once again we are forced to begin our assessment of the modern disciplinary construction of IR by remarking a paradox: that “progress” in IR theory depends directly on the conspicuous absence of progress in international politics. Until recently, few seemed troubled that a discipline which owed its existence to the compulsion to end the dislocating catastrophes of war should owe its scientific status to the “transhistorical continuity of the behaviour of states” (Rosenberg 1994, 94). But it is no longer possible to be complacent about the perverse reality that one of the last things IR theory has been able to teach us anything about is the social and historical reality of the state, its central analytical preoccupation.

The previous chapter addressed the issue of IR as discipline in exile from the usual methods, debates, and concerns of social-political theory. This chapter assesses the implications of this artificial self-sufficiency, focusing in particular on the remarkably consistent, uncontested, and distorted models of theoretical progress it yields. Of particular note is the modern discipline’s departure from, or rather obliteration of, the core idealist-realist debate in international relations theorizing. This position contrasts starkly to the dominant view, crystallized by Charles Kegley, who claims that, “since its advent as a discipline,” theoretical debate in IR “has ranged primarily within the boundaries defined by the discourse between the realist and

liberal [idealist] visions” (Kegley 1995, 1).¹ In fact, it is since the advent of IR as an academic discipline that idealism has been steadily divorced from its traditional usage, not merely in the wider realm of social-political theory, but in the guiding conception of international relations theory during the earliest phase of its disciplinary consolidation. In its classical conceptualization, idealism refers to the visualization and pursuit of political schemes which have no obvious connection to the world as presently constituted, since the world as presently constituted may well be in the process of unfolding change. Expressed in ontological terms, the world for the idealist is never fully “real.” There is almost no inkling of this idea left in mainstream American IR, where the essential realities of world politics are seen as frozen in time, and idealists defined as that dwindling body of scholars and practitioners who are simply unwilling to accept this. Once severed from its traditional usage Idealism (now capitalized in deference to its new status as an IR paradigm) becomes a synonym for gullibility and naiveté—for well-intentioned, but dangerous and starry-eyed, optimism. This is all well and good in a world where things never change, and everyone agrees on the meaning of “reality.” But if such a place exists, it is light years removed from the realm of world politics. The point, as R.Rothstein so eloquently puts it, “is that reality is so complex and ambiguous that the policies which we choose to call ‘realistic’ at any particular moment depend to a significant degree on personal predispositions and perspectives” (Rothstein as cited in O’Callaghan 1998, 153).

It is not sufficient to blame the impoverished philosophical, historical, and political imagination in modern IR on a consciously designed conspiracy. On the contrary, the reification of a unitary epistemological standard of science, with its concomitant treatment of a specifically modern version of the state as a permanent ontological feature of world politics, has resulted largely from a failure to reflect on the always-contested purposes of theoretical inquiry. Many of the most familiar features of positivistically inclined IR (e.g. its separation of “high” and “low” politics, structures and agents, units and systems, international and domestic spheres) begin as deliberate analytical abstractions, only to appear later in the guise of seemingly irrefutable facts. The means of IR theory are thus easily mistaken for its ends, a spiraling process scarcely helped by a guiding compulsion for policy relevance, an occupational demand that pushes aside questions of a philosophical nature.

The primary villain in this process, according to most of the increasingly vocal critics of the discipline, is Kenneth Waltz, whose self-proclaimed scientific overall of political realism is said to reduce international politics “to a self-enclosed, self-affirming joining of statist, utilitarian, positivist, and structuralist commitments” (Ashley 1986, 258; Waltz 1979). Ironically, however, Waltz, more than any of his followers and critics, consistently acknowledges the explicitly analytical, abstracted nature of his neorealist theory of international politics (Waltz 1990, 31; see [chapter four](#) for further discussion). There are many legitimate criticisms that can be leveled against Waltz, but subsequent debate has largely missed the point of his neorealist theory, focusing on whether and how to flesh out its allegedly sparse interpretation of political structure while failing to recognize that its parsimony is precisely what Waltz intends, and is the essence of his contribution. Clearly it is not realistic to reduce the exotically complex reality of international politics to a handful of variables, and to understand state behavior purely in terms of the competitive dynamics created by the anarchical structure of the international system. But being thoroughly unrealistic is exactly what Waltz intends, and exactly what deductive theory requires (Waltz 1990). Post-1979, however, the alpha and omega of mainstream IR theory has involved a quest to make neorealism describe and explain everything, in blithe disregard of its intended function and the intrinsic complexity of international politics. Remarkably, the stunning arrogance of Waltz’s theoretical claims is all but eclipsed by the rush to adopt and adapt them. Conspicuously absent in these debates is any serious attempt to question Waltz’s claim to provide not *a* theory of international politics, but *the* theory of international politics. In one stroke neorealism slams the disciplinary door on all other conceptions of theory, all other conceptions of realism included. Again, the sheer audacity of Waltz’s position is mitigated by his frank acknowledgment of its deliberate abstraction from “the rich variety and wondrous complexity of international life” (Waltz 1990, 32). But, as the debates occasioned by Waltz so richly attest, the realities of international politics can be difficult to distinguish from the assumptions used to investigate or model them.

Paradoxically, Waltz’s deliberate retreat from reality has become the basis for a deep, unquestioned and totalizing metaphysical commitment in the discipline. Waltz, of course, does not create the conditions for the ready acceptance of his theory so much as he panders to them. But the result, in either case, is obvious: the triumph of the view that “there is one world” of international politics, and “only one conception of it that

can be true” (Spegele 1996, 49). Once consolidated, the scientific version of IR is poised to explain the persistence of dissenting views not in terms of the fundamental contestability of the subject, but as evidence of scientific immaturity. This predisposition is already in evidence during the first of the discipline’s allegedly “great” defining debates where, contrary to its depiction as a struggle over fundamental theoretical values between Realists and Idealists, amounted to little more than “the one-sided trumpeting by realist scholars of their superiority over a straw-man alternative” (Cherin 1997, 11). As early as the 1930s and 1940s the idealist half of IR theory has been reduced to a metonym for gullibility. Small wonder then that it is a label seldom willingly embraced. More importantly, however, the scope for genuine idealist thinking in the modern discipline has been dramatically reduced, a process reaching its apotheosis in the emerging consensus fostered by neorealism, the ready acceptance of which attests to the “uncritical, instrumental conception of the role of reason in social life” (Rosenberg 1994, 96). The new labels reflect these new realities, as the clear distinction between idealists and realists is displaced by the less telling labels of neorealism and neoliberalism, signaling the replacement of the innate epistemological pluralism of international relations theory with an emerging structuralist consensus defined by conflicts of a largely methodological nature. The emphasis now is not on visioning worlds beyond the prevailing anarchical system, but, for the purported neoliberal heirs to the idealist tradition, on exploring the extent to which the competitive dynamics of the states system might be mediated or dampened by processes like transnational integration and supranational institutionalism—AKA international regimes (Keohane and Nye 1977; Krasner 1982a and b; Keohane 1984). This is at best a remarkably tame brand of idealism. Hence, though widely depicted as a series of progressive syntheses of Waltzian neorealism and its cognate approaches, the emerging consensus of the neo-neo debate has been instrumental in arresting genuine exploration of the perpetually open-ended problem of progress in international relations theory.

Obviously, the positivist story is now an increasingly hard sell outside the disciplinary mainstream, but this chapter is less concerned with the consequences, than causes, of the recent attention to matters epistemological. At the core of international relations theory is an unresolved and ongoing dispute about the meanings and prospects for progress in international politics that has never gone away, but has been eclipsed by the dark shadow of positivism. This dispute rests on alternately optimistic and pessimistic appraisals of the power of human

reason, conflicting orientations that together form an epistemological debate predating not merely IR as an academic discipline, but modernity itself.

Because the history of ideas is written backwards, we are apt to forget that their historical contingency renders them immune to rigid taxonomic and historiographic schema. This has been a serious impediment to understanding the dualistic heritage of international relations theory, since taxonomic convention tends to portray realism as either an embryonic form of liberal rationalism, or a historically outmoded political doctrine. What begins as a heuristic aid—the analytical separation of the realist and liberal traditions—becomes a retrospective ideology of progress, with liberalism portrayed as more advanced chronologically, intellectually, and morally than realism. The history of ideas in international politics tends to be written backwards, as it were, with a modern, broadly liberal conception of progress as its guidepost. This practice falsely dichotomizes liberal and realist international political theory, defining the former in terms of progress and change, and the latter in terms of stasis or regress. Outside the self-validating reference points of liberal-rationalism, there is no sustainable basis for such a view. Rather, liberalism and realism might more accurately be regarded as “different but equal,” since these internally diverse traditions are premised on, and grounded historically and intellectually in, broadly competing conceptualizations of the problem of progress in social-political relations, and contrasting metaphysical commitments. Realism and liberalism are thus not amenable to synthesis, as the neoliberals suggest, nor do they exist in chronological sequence, since both traditions are indebted to ideas expressed in philosophical antiquity. The explicitly evolutionary logic of liberal-rationalism expressed so forcefully in neorealism is based on a linear conception of history *as* progress that is both flatly at odds with the world it purports to explain, and unable to accommodate, or even acknowledge, the basic irreconcilability of the realist and liberal stories of progress.

Progress in international politics and theory

It is scarcely surprising that defining and conceptualizing progress in IR has been given a low priority. Arguably the least philosophically sensitive of the social scientists, IR theorists, and practitioners, seem determined not to let anything distract them from the “more” pressing matters of the “real” world of international politics. But the policy-

oriented bias of IR, particularly strong in the disciplinary core of the United States, contains an undisclosed ideology of progress all its own, the upshot of which is a discipline founded on a collection of contentious concepts and assumptions that, for allegedly analytical reasons, are seldom treated as contested. Generalization implies exceptions, and numerous international scholars have contributed important empirical and theoretical contributions to the problem of change and progress in world politics (see for example Gilpin 1981; Ruggie 1983; Walker 1987; Adler *et al.* 1991). Yet these scholarly analyses and debates have evolved “within the confines of positivist ... informed frameworks and...under the dominating shadow of political realism” (Hoffman 1991, 169). While debates about progress have arisen, they have tended to do so in relation to the requirements and analytic usefulness of specific theories, paradigms, or “research programs” and not over deeper, unacknowledged, issues of epistemology. Whether liberals, Realists, neorealists, or whatever the designation, only recently have these scholars been challenged to evaluate the view that progress refers axiomatically to the achievement of increasingly higher stages of human achievement. Everybody agrees on what progress is, it seems, but part company over whether it can be achieved. This complacent and patently misleading view is the product of a modern disciplinary obsession with conformity that betrays the real idealist-realist heritage of international political theory. Concerned with increasingly rigid scientific models, the paradigmatic IR Realist can depart so markedly from the realist heritage that any resemblance is largely superficial. This push toward the eradication of the once obvious and fertile dualism of international political theory is aided and abetted by neorealism and, increasingly, neoliberalism. The latter cluster of approaches is particularly explicit and energetic in its efforts to assimilate liberal and realist strands of international political theory (and, for that matter, just about any other approach that looks promising) into its universalized structuralist account. With the rise of neorealism, the commitment to theoretical monism in the modern discipline of IR is simply made more explicit. But the bold claims it entails also make the merits of the assimilationist project more obviously suspect, particularly as it rests on a conception of theory that modern Realists simply do not appear to share.

The study of international politics is characterized by uncertain subject boundaries, differing normative impulses, and rival conceptions of theory. These interrelated problems have conspired to make evaluation of the field difficult. Despite its penchant for analytical black

boxes, IR theory must confront a fundamentally contested realm, with subjects and purposes of inquiry unclear or subject to debate, methods uncertain, concepts—usually imported—vague or ambiguous, and (more recently) epistemological foundations open to challenge. Even taxonomy seems inescapably normative; the state of the art cannot be established, but is a product of conflicting premises about the what international political theory should attempt to do. International political theory, like international politics, seems a world of multiple realities.

It is impossible to speculate fruitfully on where international relations theory is going without reflecting on where it has been. Ideas, innovations, and trends do not arise in a conceptual vacuum. The rediscovery that international political theory may be a world of multiple realities encourages theoretical creativity, diversity, and pluralism, things evident in abundance prior to the advent of IR as a modern academic discipline.

The optimistic inheritance of liberalism

In modernity progress has often been associated with science, and science in turn has tended to be associated with various agendas and ideas that can be characterized broadly as liberal. But science, like liberalism, is a broad term and contains numerous orientations. In social science, for example, ideas and theory may precede factual observation and thus be idealist, relying principally on deductive scientific method. Conversely, explanatory constructs may derive from direct observation of a seemingly external physical reality and thus be materialist, relying principally on empirical and inductive scientific method. Liberalism, and the modernity in which it is embedded, is indebted to both of these versions of science, and to many ideas besides. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, however, empiricism—associated originally with Locke—has been the dominant orientation to science (Goodwin 1982, 5).

Comparison of these general orientations with science reveals a contrast, even a tension, in their foundational precepts about knowledge and its corresponding methods of acquisition. To the empiricist, scientific investigation precedes, or rather induces, theory through the observation of (preferably) large numbers of facts, episodes, instances, or—in modern jargon—problem sets. This orientation engenders a skeptical response from the rationalist, who believes that understanding cannot emerge without theoretical preconceptions or ideas (Goodwin 1982, 5). Though seldom explicitly acknowledged as such, the debate

occasioned by Waltzian neorealism is at base a dispute of this sort with Waltz committed to a thoroughgoing rationalism. Paradigmatically speaking, then, Waltz sees himself (mistakenly I argue below) as a Realist. Epistemologically speaking, he is clearly a liberal.

It is useful to determine what it is that sets the liberal version of intellectual and political progress in international politics apart from other perspectives. First, it is sometimes suggested that liberalism is synonymous with progress, a proposition that accords with popular usage of the term but is clearly tautological. As noted in the previous chapter, liberals do not hold a monopoly on the idea of progress but merely conceptualize it in a manner different from their intellectual rivals. Second, it is suggested liberalism is grounded in a set of modern orientations that view knowledge as potentially unbounded, both in itself and in its practical applications, an approach that contrasts with that of the ancients. This too, however, is problematic. Essentially liberal ideas can be discerned in antiquity, and antiquarian ideas can be discerned in modernity. Ideas, while in an important sense a product of their historical ethos, cannot be dated with the same precision accorded historical events: “political theory, just because it is theory, is never just a photograph of the particular institutions with which it may be dealing” (Havelock 1957, 11).

The search for a liberal theory of progress is further confounded by the difficult, and logically prior, problem of defining the liberal tradition itself. A hallmark of liberalism is its great internal diversity the defining ideas of which cannot be distilled into a single coherent creed. Because in popular usage liberal has become an antonym for conservative, it is tempting to define liberalism negatively—as an intellectual tradition and political movement that stands opposed to the tenets of other traditions. In their attempt to discern the central features of a liberal tradition in international politics, for example, Mark Zacher and Richard Matthew treat liberalism as an essentially residual category of Realism and Marxism (Zacher and Matthew 1995). As the authors also note, however, liberalism does not translate easily into international relations theory,² largely because its key message—that order among peoples and states should be based on discussion and consent, and not on arbitrary power—matches poorly the apparent realities and possibilities of world politics (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 3; Gilpin 1987, 30). An added difficulty peculiar to international politics is that many liberals are also political realists, in the sense that they claim to identify with a liberal version of progress in world politics even while decrying that vision as unrealistic or exaggerated (Gilpin 1987). A similar problem has been

noted in Marxism, a tradition that has had little difficulty in identifying its central elements but—like liberalism—has had difficulty translating into, or generating, international political theory (Berki 1970).

Liberalism cannot be depicted as a unitary philosophical and political platform with a coherent and indisputable core, but as a mighty and broad intellectual river, containing and feeding from numerous streams. These streams, together with numerous smaller tributaries, sometimes meander, but converge ultimately over the belief that progressive change in the human condition is inevitable. In this sense liberalism appears in the guise of a “necessary truth.” It is perceived not as a version of progress—as one political ideology among many—but as the basis of reality itself. The development of liberalism as philosophy in fact seems to parallel, and imitate, its own depiction of real-world progress: “the slow development and accumulation of its principles promotes the view that there is something natural about liberalism” (Goodwin 1982, 33).

In international political theory the liberal stream of thought is described by F.H.Hinsley as the “Anglo-Saxon liberal conception of society and the state,” a tradition predicated on the premise that intergovernmental relations should be, or will be, replaced “by the free play of enlightened public opinion between societies” (Hinsley 1967, 110–11). This premise derives from the prior assumption that a latent “community of interest” unites humankind. It is this belief that leads to liberal doubts that “a state-centred politics, however enlightened, could produce ‘real’ change in the way the world’s affairs are handled—or in its outcomes” (Brenner 1991, 175). The intellectual roots of this tradition are deep and diverse, drawing among others on the Enlightenment-inspired philosophy of Kant, the classical political economy of Adam Smith, the utilitarian philosophy of Bentham, and the postutilitarian philosophy of Mill (Holsti 1985, 27).

Early articulations of liberal optimism about the possibility of human progress relied on little more than intuitive appeal—on an “invisible hand,” or other manifestations of the *deus ex machina*. More “scientific” renderings of liberalism have been attempted but, as Robert Keohane observes, “liberalism is not committed to an ambitious and parsimonious structural theory” (as cited in Zacher and Matthew 1995, 3). But, because of the advent of parsimonious/ scientific theory in neorealism, and an alleged intellectual overlap between realist and liberal descriptions of the world, some international scholars have attempted to place liberal arguments on a firmer scientific basis by wedding them to neorealist concepts (Keohane 1988; Buzan 1993). This

is an ironic outcome, because neorealism is itself indebted deeply to a thoroughly liberal conception of rationality, and to the methods of classical micro-economic analysis in particular.

The predominance of the liberal version of progress derives on the one hand from its message of progress, and on the other from its propensity to recognize, affirm, and tolerate different conceptions of—or paths to—intellectual and material advance. The view that knowledge may progress as a result of the collision of diverse opinions, points of view, and ideas is a core liberal idea but, paradoxically, a value jeopardized by liberalism itself when pushed to its rationalist extreme. As Holsti puts it: “the whole edifice of intellectual activity at least since the fifteenth century has been based on the assumption of progress through the conflict of ideas” (Holsti 1989, 257).³ Liberalism, then, embraces pluralism not for its own sake, but as a means to general intellectual advance (Mill 1974). There are instances, however, in which liberal pluralism has no obvious or consistent utilitarian function, as in the case of Mill’s *On Liberty*. This is because Mill’s over-riding concern is with individual liberty and only incidentally, though ultimately, with the moral/intellectual progress of society writ large. Despite its great internal diversity, then, liberalism is remarkably steadfast in its commitment to the idea of progress, defined typically as steadily increasing wealth, knowledge, and wellbeing for individuals and societies.

The skeptical inheritance of realism

There are many realisms in international political theory, the unifying essence of which is increasingly difficult to specify, but continues to involve their focus on the role of state power and interest, force and diplomacy, national security, and the balance of power. But these very broad guiding concerns demand the attention of the vast bulk of IR scholars. We hear frequently of the “richness of the tradition of political realism” (Gilpin 1986) and one commentator describes no fewer than ten varieties of realist international theory, ranging from the Hobbesian equation of morality with brute power to a “postmodern political realism” emphasizing human agency over structural constraints and oriented toward human freedom (O’Callaghan 1998, 153–78)! The diversity of perspectives subsumed by realism suggests that the term has dubious classificatory value, until we recognize that diversity is itself a defining feature of realist thinking. This is because realism is not defined strictly by its substantive concern for state power and interest,

but also its necessary commitment to a pluralist metaphysics (Spegele 1996). Realism, by dint of its pragmatic concern with the facticity of a complicated and elusive subject, is committed to a thorough philosophical skepticism regarding totalizing conceptions of knowledge, visionary, and emancipatory schemes, excessive rationalism, and *a priori* theory (Loriaux 1992, 405; Morgenthau 1993, 3; Spegele 1996, 72). If liberalism is manifestly a philosophy of political and intellectual progress, political realism is manifestly a doctrine of skepticism. In clear contrast to the Enlightenment-inspired optimism of the liberals, realists are suspicious of the liberating power of rationality. The author Jonathan Swift puts the realist position on rationality as well as any international theorist when he suggests, with deliberate ambiguity, that man is *animal rationes capax*: “an animal *capable* of reason.”⁴

This ambivalent attitude is demonstrated nicely by Thomas Hobbes, a favorite muse of the modern IR Realist. Hobbes invokes a decidedly liberal conception of rationality in *The Leviathan* that leads not to unbounded human emancipation and fulfillment but to potential servitude under an absolute sovereign. This is because Hobbes’ use of science is strictly methodological and, in its ability to lend support to his conclusions, instrumental. Hobbes in fact presents a massively subjective theory of knowledge, the upshot of which, in the natural state, is a full-blown ethical and cognitive relativism (Hobbes 1962). Progress for Hobbes consists in establishing a political solution to the nasty problems that the natural diversity of human life entails, no small feat given his less than promising description of the state of nature, a problem he “resolves” by claiming that “reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace” (Hobbes 1962, 188). The point of course is that his faith in the power of reason is considerably weaker than that of the typical Enlightenment figure. For Hobbes, the possibility of human progress “consists partly in the passions” and “partly in... reason,” (Hobbes 1962, 188) but, ultimately, “the passion to be reckoned upon is fear” (Hobbes 1962, 200).

In retrospectively claiming Hobbes as one of their own, IR Realists too cast a jaundiced eye on the power of human reason. Together they share a broadly liberal or “bourgeois” conception of rationality without embracing the version of progress to which it is often linked (Macpherson 1962). Thus, while the normative liberal argument for human advance contains a conception of progress built on rationality, the realist conception of progress consists in coming to terms with either: (1) the limits of human reason, or; (2) structural impediments to

rational outcomes. Classical realists have tended to stress the former constraint while modern Realists—inspired largely by Waltz— have tended to stress the latter impediment to progress.

Neorealism purports to preserve, but soften, the philosophical pessimism of realism. It transcends realism's reliance on medieval metaphysics and crude empiricism, but ultimately reconceptualizes rather than rejects the grounds for realist skepticism about progress. The theoretical reconstruction of realism is thus portrayed as an essentially methodological exercise; it *simply* systematizes classical realist insights and weds them to a modern deductive science. But whatever continuity exists between these approaches does not extend beyond a shared skepticism regarding the prospects for progress in international politics.⁵ On the related but distinct matter of theoretical progress, neorealism could not depart further from the classical realist attitude. Waltz's attempt to effect what Richard Ashley calls the "progressive scientific redemption of classical realist scholarship" is a project flawed fundamentally in conception, since the realist understanding of science is purposefully less ambitious and certain than that of the neorealist (Ashley 1986, 260). Ashley's characterization of Waltz-the-redeemer is thus deliberately ironic. The key point is that, despite the popular practice of treating realism and neorealism as kindred approaches, neorealism aims explicitly to transcend realism's conception of intellectual progress, replacing the deliberately pluralist metaphysics of the latter with the uncompromising monistic meta-physics of the former.⁶ Simply put, "scientific realism," as neorealism is alternately known, is an oxymoron.

Consider, for example, how Waltz's monopolistic conception of theory and science compares with the much more tentative version of these constructs offered by Hans Morgenthau. Like many of the "founding" figures of the discipline, Morgenthau was imbued with the assumptions and goals of behavioral science but exhibited considerable, and genuine, ambivalence over the appropriate ambitions and uses of science in international relations theory and practice (Morgenthau 1993, 41–9). Indeed, he sought vigorously to "ground realism in a...thorough philosophical skepticism," a mission that in his view required supplanting the pervasive rationalism that had "crippled the ability of statesmen to make political judgments" (Loriaux 1992, 405). Morgenthau, in a manner reminiscent ironically of neorealist critics like Ashley, took issue not with scientific, but with scientistic, analyses of international politics. That is to say, he rejected every narrow conception of science, and the monocausal and naturalistic logic of

rationalism in particular, as singularly ill-adapted to the fundamental matter of trying to understand the requirements for a sound foreign policy. Given its conscious ambivalence toward science it is difficult to accept Waltz's claim progressively to adapt Morgenthau's understanding of Realism, or to see neorealism as the latest, and highest, stage of a steadily maturing Realist science. Waltz's claim is fundamentally misleading. That pre-neorealist theorizing falls well short of the new, single-minded standard of scientific theory articulated by Waltz is hardly surprising—it is true by definition (Ashley 1986, 260). The question to be asked is whether this new standard has anything to do either with realist thought throughout the ages or, more to the point, the scientific aims of its modern Realist disciplinary architects and practitioners. The answer in both cases is no.

Implicit in neorealist science is a *liberal*, rather than realist, conception of rationality that does not permit science to question itself. Its conception of intellectual progress is thus tautological: progress in international relations theory is identified narrowly with positivist science, and positivist science sets standards that are best met by the sort of parsimonious structural theory offered by Waltz. An “unquestioning faith in scientific-technical progress” is the result (Ashley 1986, 282). Paradoxically, then, neorealism's distinctly narrow, regressive, intellectual temper is masked by its preoccupation with technical “progress.” Such a preoccupation is alien to classical realism.

One of the reasons that it is easy to be hoodwinked into accepting the viability of Waltz's project is that Waltz, Morgenthau, and paradigmatic IR Realists generally, appear to be equally committed to a rationalist understanding of science. Again, however, the dominance of neorealism has made its excessive, suffocating version of rationality seem like the only possible meaning. Morgenthau and Waltz use similar language when discussing rationality, and both posit, rather than investigate historically, the existence and interests of a “rational” unitary actor. On the other hand, however, Morgenthau's conception of international politics is a historical one, and nowhere does he suggest that the conditions under which foreign policies evolve and operate are fixed for all time.⁷ Rationalism as understood by Waltz, by comparison, is a doctrine that divorces knowledge from practice; it contains an *a priori* epistemology that promises to yield truth and knowledge independent of empirical investigation and experience. It is rationalism in this self-validating sense to which Morgenthau's preeminently pragmatic theory of political realism stands opposed, but to which Waltz is committed.

There is in Morgenthau an apparent tension over the appropriate role of international political theory though, on balance, his distaste for rationalism seems to impel him more toward the use of science as an investigative method than as the basis for a systematic, comprehensive technical knowledge of statecraft (Ashley 1981). It is this which cues Waltz to attempt the scientific overhaul of Realism, and prompts him to take Morgenthau to task for not teasing out more fully the elements of a “truly” scientific theory already present in Morgenthau’s analysis. Morgenthau’s principal shortcoming, suggests Waltz, is his failure to “take the logical next step” and recognize international politics as a system of states with a precisely defined structure. His alleged oversight is thus chiefly an analytical error of omission: Morgenthau is an otherwise “good scientist” who simply fails to recognize that rational behavior may lead to unwanted outcomes due to structural constraints generated by the independent activities of multiple states pursuing multiple foreign policies (Waltz 1986a, 106). Ultimately, however, Waltz seems to criticize Morgenthau mainly for failing to do what Morgenthau had no intention of doing.

Apart from its suspect claim to have adapted classical realism progressively in intellectual terms, it might be asked whether neorealism does much to modify realism’s skeptical treatment of the problem of political progress. This perhaps sounds odd as realism is viewed widely as having no conception of moral and political progress—how can one build on what is apparently not there? As Martin Wight suggests, international relations theory as a whole has taken little interest in moral and political progress and thus contrasts oddly, and poorly, to the tradition of political theory/philosophy that for generations has been predicated on investigation of the “good life” (Butterfield and Wight 1966). For Wight the primary source of this seeming indifference to human progress is the intergenerational hegemony of problem-solving “realist” theories. In Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, there is no cunning of reason, no hidden hand, and no telos to guide the human journey. Far from an end to history, statespersons and states alike seem destined—if destined for anything—to repeat the mistakes of the past. History is cyclical and repetitive, not linear and progressive. International political theory, to the extent that it sets itself goals, has the distinctly minimalist task of ensuring human/state survival.

It is a mistake to assume that realists have no conception of progress. This charge is rooted not in political experience but in ideology; it rests on a particular conception and standard of human progress that realism is not merely unsuited to meet, but has historically denied as realizable.

Progress for realists consists of a pragmatic assessment and acceptance of the prospects and possibilities for human moral, social, and political development. The pervasive influence of this skeptical tradition is demonstrated by the often uncritical but tautological suggestion that realists are realistic about the problem of progress. But realist skepticism is not built on air; it is grounded in a philosophy of progress that, at best, is cautiously optimistic about the prospects for sustained improvement of the human condition. This tradition is influenced by a conservative distaste for experiment and change, and rooted in a medieval distrust of reason. This version of progress is revealed in its opposition to a more optimistic tradition designated broadly as liberal, and resides in recognizing that progress of the latter variety may not be possible. It is an even bigger mistake, however, to assume that neorealism genuinely extends the skeptical heritage of realism, so far as knowledge is concerned at least. Again, neorealism belongs very much to liberal-rationalism on this score.

Finally, the realist conception of progress, while defined popularly by its opposition to the “optimistic” tradition of liberalism, should not be construed merely as reactive or negative. First, realism clearly waivers in its belief in the power of human reason but is preeminently a doctrine of rational conduct—a kind of philosophical how-to manual for rational states and statespersons. Realism is in this sense very much concerned with political progress, though moral and cognitive progress is admittedly another matter. Second, realists do not deny the possibility for change, but doubt whether change is always desirable and/or progressive in the uncontested liberal sense. To the extent that neorealism remains consistent with these views, it can credibly purport to be part of a realist tradition. But, thanks largely to Waltz, neorealism runs badly afoul of the realist tradition it purports to extend when it reconceptualizes the problem of political progress around structural impediments to progressive change, rather than the classical realist theme of cognitive and moral fallibility. In a sense, neorealism simply turns the liberal story of progress on its head. Methodologically, neorealism begins with (and borrows heavily from) classical liberal-economic premises about individual behavior, but replaces the mysterious and invisible “hidden hand” of the former with the equally invisible workings of system structure. In the liberal version of progress individual passions are transformed almost magically into collective interests. For neorealists, conversely, the same egoistic individuals are undone in their pursuit of rational objectives by the self-generated but invisible obstacle of international anarchy. The only thing wrong with

this clearly skeptical view is that it owes little to, and in fact reverses, the traditional theoretical ambivalence of political realism.

Parochialism: an occupational hazard?

Full appreciation of the realist conception of progress is hampered by the manner in which the intellectual history of international politics has been—and must be—written. Like all histories, the history of ideas is written backwards, and in the disciplinary lore of IR liberalism is portrayed as both a relative newcomer and a distinctly modern intellectual corrective to the antediluvian skepticism of realism. Academic convention and the hubris of modernity combine to form an unspoken, largely unconscious, revisionist ideology of progress.

Long before Ashley exposed neorealism as a prime example of the “self-affirming” character of modern IR theory (Ashley 1986, 258), E.H.Carr warned of the propensity for ideological constructions of the social-political world to masquerade as “simple common sense” (Carr 1946, 24–40). Though Carr’s immediate target was the once dominant and hidden ideology of utopian science, his admonition applies equally well to the ideology concealed behind the beguiling label of scientific realism. Carr identifies the liberal character of inter-national theory in his era with an extreme form of parochialism: “liberal democracy had been a brilliant success...because its presup-positions coincided with the stage of development reached by the countries concerned” (Carr 1946, 27). The tendency of powerful countries to generalize, transplant, and project their experiences, problems, philosophies, and policies to other countries has been evident throughout the ages, but in the modern industrial era the self-serving character of this process is easily masked by *a priori* rational principles, a polite euphemism for ideology.⁸ In modern American IR theory, the distinction between liberalism as a domestic political doctrine and an international political theory is blurred to the point of oblivion by the seemingly natural existence of an international political-economic order molded by explicitly Anglo-American (and increasingly just American) political values (Hoffmann 1977). In the post-Second World War era, American IR has been so obsessed with itself that the subject is “something that cannot be understood unless the United States is at the core” (Nossal 2000, 168). The primary evidence for this self-infatuation is hegemonic stability theory (HST) (Kindleberger 1981; Keohane 1984), a construct that can be applied to any power willing and able to provide the resources for the creation and maintenance of a stable world order, but that has in

practice been applied mainly to the case of American leadership after which it is patterned. HST, in other words, is very much a “made in America” theory for a “made in America discipline.” Developments at the level of American IR theory have merely mirrored, and been inextricably bound up with, an almost evangelical commitment at the political level to the global spread of American economic-cultural values.⁹ That the primary academic and substantive context for modern IR tends to preclude critical evaluation of the meaning and requirements for progress in international theory and practice is an understatement. That the latency of the discipline’s manifestly ideological construction of progress should be so closely bound up with things American is an accident of modern political history. Parochialism, as Carr suggests, is an occupational hazard merely disguised, rather than eradicated, by its expression on a global scale.

“The poverty of theory” in International Relations: common themes, parallel lines

It is instructive, finally, to examine the remarkably consistent developmental trajectory followed by Realist, liberal and Marxist¹⁰ international political theory, the discipline’s traditional triumvirate of approaches. Notwithstanding their profound philosophical differences, each of these approaches develops a broadly similar attitude as regards the perceived requirements of a science of IR, but each must struggle to reconcile these aspirations to an elusive and ambiguous set of realities. Whether manifested as the Marxist yearning for scientific socialism, the neorealist dream of a naturalistic science of international politics, or the liberal vision of an interdependent, peace-prone, democratic international society, each of these perspectives must confront a “recalcitrant political reality” (Berki 1970, 84) or transpose into mere dogma. As suggested, neorealism has already met the latter fate, and modern IR scholarship as a whole has tended to ignore the sort of ordinary realism preached by Berki and practiced with relative frequency prior to the disciplining of international relations theory.

From the general to the specific

A general pattern consisting of the incremental adaptation of “grand theories” in IR is easily demonstrated. Given his clearly grand ambition, it might seem odd to class Waltz’s neorealist reconstruction of classical realism in this group, but he does claim to specify more clearly

and systematically than Morgenthau (and other realists) the key elements of a realist theory of international politics, and to place them on a firmer scientific foundation. Waltz begins this process with the counter-intuitive claim that less is more, emphasizing the value of theoretical parsimony over realistic description. Most of Waltz's critics have been quick to embrace his conception of theory, but quicker still to address its perceived omissions. Despite its failure to understand Waltz's purpose, this response is the single greatest impetus to IR research activity today. The desire "to refine and sharpen the realist research program without relinquishing its static categories," as Peter Katzenstein puts it, has spawned a virtual industry of cognate approaches, the best known of which is neoliberalism (Katzenstein 1990, 5).¹¹

To its sympathetic critics Realism continues to set the broad theoretical parameters of international politics but is increasingly at odds with, or frankly wrong in its expectations for, particular outcomes. Like a topographical map, Realism is said to be useful in surveying the lay of the land but ill-suited to finding particular destinations and features. A general theory, after all, cannot hope to capture or account for every aspect of international politics. Indeed, Waltz suggests with deliberate irony, a "real" theory is defined by its abstraction from the real world of political action. As Waltz is well aware, however, neorealism, and Realist theory generally, continues to be criticized for its omissions (Waltz 1990, 32). Whatever Waltz's advice to the contrary, there is a natural compulsion to make IR theory "fit the facts or correspond with the events it seeks to explain," as the steady development of subordinate theories, concepts, and models attests.

In liberal international political theory a similar pattern of incremental theoretical adaptation can be discerned, often compelled by a sense of unease with its resistance to "canonical" description (Doyle as cited in Zacher and Matthew 1995, 107). What constitutes a liberal theory of IR is partly a function of how this protean term is defined, a problem confounded by its overlap with other approaches, and by the explicit attempt to synthesize Realist and liberal perspectives under the banner of neoliberalism. On the other hand, however, liberal political philosophy as such can be distilled into a number of essential ingredients that together constitute a "common-sense understanding:"

Liberalism...puts a greater stress on liberty than authority; it regards authority as derivative solely from society, and society as spontaneous or automatic rather than as established by man; it

denies the existence of any fixed norms...there is a historical process which is progressive without, however, tending toward an end or peak...liberalism...is historical because it regards the human characteristics as acquired and not as given; it is optimistic and radical...it is democratic and egalitarian...it is in full sympathy with technological society and an international commercial system; it is empirical and pragmatic; last but not least it is naturalistic or scientific, that is, nontheological and nonmetaphysical.

(Strauss 1968, 29)¹²

Each of these constitutive elements of liberal political philosophy is evident in liberal international relations theory. In IR, however, the fate of liberal theory has been tied increasingly to the fate of neorealism. This is because the explicitly normative liberal claim that economic forces *should* shape political outcomes in world politics is a dubious point of departure, especially in light of the pervasive positivist-inspired view that the best theory will be based on observable facts. Its counterfactual logic (e.g. the notion that things would be better if only states did not create obstacles to progress) may thus help to account for the fact that liberalism, on its own, has not been able to muster “an ambitious and parsimonious structural theory” (Zacher and Matthew 1995). But, given a perceived intellectual overlap between Realist and liberal descriptions of the world, the apparent descriptive poverty of neorealism, and the lure of its impressive parsimony, liberal IR theorists have sought increasingly to hitch a ride on Realist-inspired approaches.

Finally, Marxism, perhaps more than any of its intellectual rivals, has been subjected to continuous revision, innovation, and debate. International politics has been particularly tricky for Marxists, and Berki even suggests that “the very existence of international relations poses a serious, perhaps intractable, problem for Marxism” (Berki 1970, 80). This analysis, however, is based on Marx’s original ideas and not meant to refute the proposition that Marxism has had to adapt to the realities of international politics. On the contrary, this is precisely Berki’s point, and his essay nicely documents the development and incremental adaptation of Marxist international theory, emphasizing in particular the clash in its idealist conception of “the unity of man” with the persistent political reality of the horizontal division of the world (Berki 1970, 91).

Marxist and Marxist-inspired analyses of world politics have had either to adapt to the requirements of a state-centric analysis, or to yield

the field (figuratively and literally) to Realists and liberals. But vacating the field does not necessarily signify surrender so much as it may express contempt for international politics as popularly practiced. In this sense world politics *a la* Realism/liberalism—the distinction for Marxists is scarcely important—is a sort of ahistorical sham discipline that cannot recognize real political dynamics because it is predicated eternally on the state, a transitory, historically specific, manifestation of social relations. But if “the very existence of international relations poses a serious problem for Marxism,” it has done little to discourage Marxist analyses. Marxism, like any doctrine, must deal with facts and, more to the point, counterfactuals and has done so by continually adapting its expectations and pronouncements to “a sluggish and recalcitrant political reality” (Berki 1970, 84).¹³ This process is no more novel or disingenuous than the similarly adaptive tendencies of Realist and liberal theory.

It is new facts, or the perception of new facts, that drives theoretical innovation in IR, a distinctly ecumenical problem. But the deep complexity of the issues at play, and interrelated nature of the processes at work, in world politics makes intelligible response as difficult as it is desirable. This is as true for policy makers as it is for theorists. Thus, the scholars and practitioners of international relations must not merely confront the age-old problem of making the complicated more comprehensible, but must also endeavor to make the *increasingly* complex less mysterious (Keohane and Nye 1977; Scott 1982).

For many, and Waltz especially, the “wondrous complexity of international life” makes simple, abstracted theory all the more desirable (Waltz 1990, 32). Clearly, however, most international relations theorists and policy makers would be uncomfortable in beating a strategic retreat from the intractable but pressing realities of world politics, as the tendencies canvassed very briefly here suggest. Complex realities seem to demand *more* complex explanations—more factually inclusive, and less abstract, theories.

From speculation to “science”

In their manifestations within the disciplinary framework of IR at least, Realism, liberalism, and Marxism can be viewed as offspring of the common epistemological parentage of positivism, or so suggests their similar “evolution” (many recent critics would say devolution) from speculative, “commonsensical,” or “subjectivist” philosophies (Ashley 1986) to an increasingly explicit commitment to naturalistically

conceived science. Whether ultimately liberating or enslaving, international relations theorists of all ideological persuasions had, until recently, tended to embrace the allegedly progressive assumption that knowledge is “testable against a non-problematic reality through the application of theory and models of explanation” (Tooze 1988, 289). Though the best example of this orientation to date is neorealism, it is simply the lead paradigm in the modern struggle to dominate the social science of IR, the evaluative criteria for which remain shared and uncontested background assumptions only recently subjected to scrutiny.

How, specifically, does neorealism render Realism “more scientific”? The main claim is that neorealism transcends classical Realism’s appeal to power as an end in itself and argues instead for an understanding of state power based on the seemingly objective criteria of a state’s position relative to other states in the system. Morgenthau, even while recognizing state behavior as a function partly of its position relative to other states, does not break with the methodological individualism characteristic of Hobbesian political theory. State action (political behavior) remains ultimately rooted in—and a function of—the distinctly unscientific category of human nature (Morgenthau 1993, 26). The neorealists argue that states, rendered functionally similar by the structural constraints of anarchy, will act in ways similar to the expectation of more conventional Realists: “at a minimum (states) seek their own preservation, and at a maximum, drive for universal domination” (Waltz 1986b, 172–3 and 191). What is significant, however, is that power for Waltz is not an end sought for its own sake, but a “possibly useful means” to security (Waltz 1986b, 36). But there are good reasons to doubt both the moral and intellectual superiority of neorealism. First, Waltz seems merely to have replaced one set of constraints for another. Neorealism ‘rescues’ Realist theory from its precarious reliance on the “metaphysics of fallen man” only to reconceptualize and reaffirm a realist power politics, rooted this time “securely in the scientifically defensible terrain of objective necessity” (Ashley 1986, 261). Human nature is out, structure is in, but the human predicament is unchanged. Second, Waltz’s structural theory abstracts from—and thus tells us little about—particular events or facts. Neorealism is thereby exposed to the paradoxical charge that its scientific status is purchased at the expense of actual research and empirical analysis (Kratochwil 1993, 67).

The steady emergence of scientific theory is by no means exclusive to Realist scholarship. But the intellectual centrality of Realism generally,

fused with the Waltzian zest for deductive rigor, tends to place Realism squarely at the center of debates over the strengths and limits of scientific analysis in world politics. Nevertheless, the rival traditions of liberalism (commercial or economic liberalism in particular) and Marxism have gone through exactly analogous phases and debates.

Liberal international theory has unfolded in a manner strikingly similar to realism. This is scarcely surprising as these distinct traditions draw from many common intellectual sources. Realism and liberalism also attach varying degrees of importance to the power of human reason, though, as noted above, Realists treat the power of rationality, and the prospects of learning, far more skeptically than some versions of liberalism. There is also considerable crossfertilization between these two traditions. Waltz, for example, borrows extensively from liberal analyses, and constructs his entire theory on micro-economic premises and methods. Liberals—and neoliberals in particular—have in turn borrowed heavily from neorealism.

But liberalism, while naturalistic or scientific in intent, draws on a tradition of speculation about the human condition that is often predicated on little more than articles of faith. That liberalism does not translate easily into international theory has already been noted. Liberals do not deny the “reality” of power politics described by the Realists, but argue—in the tradition inaugurated by Mandeville and Adam Smith—that private vices lead to public virtues, or at least would do so absent policy-induced impediments to the market, a naturally efficient form of social organization (Hirschman 1975, 18–25). Liberalism, of the commercial variety in particular, thus rests strongly on untestable convictions.

But if liberalism has had difficulty in justifying its claims scientifically, it rests on much more than normative assertions, and includes an empirical, pragmatic argument to the effect that order among peoples and states is based increasingly on discussion and consent, and less on arbitrary power. Economic liberalism grew out of the vision of the French physiocrats and, in England, began its career as a science of political economy. As Carr notes, however, this new science contained some distinctly utopian elements, resting on “certain artificial and unverified generalizations about the behaviour of a hypothetical economic man” (Carr 1946, 6–7). From these early observations—and those of Adam Smith in particular—this approach evolved through the more rigorous “science” of Ricardo, to the increasingly narrow and issue-specific models of contemporary writers. Hence, liberalism’s largely intuitive story of social, economic, and

political progress has been subjected increasingly to empirical test, and attached to allegedly objective standards of evidence. Again, however, the fate of liberal international relations theory is linked more and more to the fate of neorealism, a development that threatens to erode, rather than preserve, the distinctiveness of liberal and Realist theory alike.

Until recently, Marxist scholarship had relatively little impact on international politics and theory (Holsti 1985, 61), clearly hampered by its rejection of the states system as an acceptable model of world politics. But Marxism remains a major source of theoretical inspiration and activity in twentieth-century social theory, a realm from which the discipline of IR has been artificially isolated. Marxist and Marxist-inspired approaches have, however, fared better in postcolonial studies, development studies, and the international political economy literature (Gill and Law 1988; Tooze 1988). Heightened interest in the latter field since the 1970s has also helped to raise the Marxist profile within the discipline of IR, just in time, it turns out, to face the double challenge posed by the rout of communism in Eastern Europe and the onslaught of critical theory. But notwithstanding these events or its previous marginality in the discipline, Marxism is a manifestly central part of the modern theoretical analysis of international politics, a reality easy to overlook given the strong disciplinary bias in favor of approaches willing to affirm the paramountcy of the state (Berki 1970; Halliday 1987; Spegele 1996, 9). Whether consciously pursuing a theory of international relations, or the more general social philosophy in which international relations is usually conceived as a transitory phase, Marxist scholarship has followed a pattern of allegedly progressive adaptation comparable with that seen in liberal and Realist perspectives.

In Marxist scholarship, Marx himself seems to undergo an “epistemological break” from his early attachment to nebulous concepts like “species being,” to embrace a more mature, “objectivist” social philosophy (Ashley 1986, 255–6). Marx sought increasingly to give to socialism a scientific basis, though socialism itself was regarded less as a science than a highly progressive social and political movement. For Marx, “empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically and without mystification and speculation the connection of the social and political structure with production” (Reynolds 1973, 96). It is this project on which the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser seeks to build, an adaptive strategy which so exactly parallels Waltz’s proclaimed scientific overhaul of Realism that Ashley patterns his own critique of the latter on E.P.Thompson’s blistering attack on Althusser (Ashley 1986, 256–9). Clearly, then, not everyone agrees that the

superimposition of modern scientific standards on Marxism, liberalism, and Realism constitutes a genuinely progressive shift. Consider, for example, the attitude of the Frankfurt School whose key figures charge Althusser with contributing to the “incipient degeneration of Marxism into positivistic philosophy” (Giddens 1977, 66). Thanks largely to Ashley, however, the sorts of criticisms leveled at scientific Marxism are now applied to neorealism as well, but few seem willing to abandon the unspoken disciplinary presuppositions that tend always to push IR theory of all varieties toward narrow conceptions of science. The point is not that this process is progressive but, in the modern discipline of IR at least, inevitable.

The point of these very general and condensed observations is to demonstrate that the development of international relations theory, while always characterized by “serious theoretical fragmentation and competing paradigms,” is not a wholly random process (Holsti 1985, 8). Theoretical upheaval clearly has challenged traditional approaches to international theory, but has tended more toward an allegedly progressive adaptation of existing theory than its rejection. There is plenty of theoretical innovation in evidence, but an unspoken, widely shared and ecumenical faith in a distinctly narrow version of scientific progress ensures that most of the reconstruction employs existing intellectual materials. Whether the explicitly antipositivist, or “post-” and anti-modernist, discourses now so much in evidence fully escape this process is a question examined in [chapter six](#). Suffice it to note here, however, that the ideology of progress in IR retains much of its latent appeal, and the trend toward greater specialization in international relations theory has a distinctly preservationist flavor, driven as it is by perceived anomalies or ‘gaps’ in hitherto dominant explanatory frameworks.

Knowledge, of course, could not advance without recognizing, confronting and adapting to theoretical anomalies. As such, the process of theoretical adaptation evident within the general perspectives of Realism, liberalism, and Marxism is fully consistent with the logic and expectations of the most prominent models of theoretical progress in the social sciences. Seen in this light the modern tendency for theoretical pluralism, after the “triumph” of paradigmatic Realism and prior to the challenge of critical theory, is actually a reliable barometer of the continuing lure of grand theory, since innovation has largely taken the form of “supplementary” or “auxiliary” hypotheses designed to protect and/or redeem the core assumptions of one of three dominant IR traditions. Guided by a common but uncontested ideology of progress,

much of this scholarship has sought to replace the “speculative,” “impressionistic,” “commonsensical,” “subjectivist,” “non-scientific” foundations of liberalism, Realism and Marxism with more rigorously, and explicitly, scientific structures (Holsti 1985, 11). But if liberal, Marxist and Realist international political theories have had difficulty adapting to, or confronting, the realities of international politics it is because these realities fundamentally evade the sort of observational and explanatory structures devised by their would-be redeemers, few of whom seem inclined to accept the essential ambiguity of international relations, and the theoretical ambivalence this entails. Rather, each of the grand theoretical orientations surveyed here can be called realist in the ordinary (e.g. non-paradigmatic or non-scientific) sense, in that each must attempt to “square certain parts” of its philosophy with a “recalcitrant political reality” (Berki 1970, 84). Realism thus construed is a practical necessity in a world of ever-pressing and dangerous political challenges, but one that must be pursued with due acknowledgment of the inherently elusive character of international relations, and the permanent need to supplement its ultimately futile quest for full representational accuracy with speculative, idealist, and emancipatory constructs. This is clearly what Carr means by realism, and its necessary and appropriate relationship to idealism, despite a revisionist disciplinary history that places him, and just about everything else, in the vanguard of the discipline’s march toward “science.”

4

Idealism, realism and national differences

The American case

One of the things that everyone knows but no one can quite think how to demonstrate is that a country's politics reflect the design of its culture.

Clifford Geertz

While the thematic scope of International Relations as an academic subject is undeniably transnational, most of its modern theoretical literature has been produced by American and, to a lesser extent, British scholars (Holsti 1985, 103). Nobody could pretend that IR comes close to approximating an international discipline in terms of its membership, and few have felt inclined to challenge the notion that it has become an "American specialty" (Hoffmann 1977; Holsti 1985; Hollis and Smith 1990). Too often, however, it is assumed that membership is the only, or most important, barometer of theoretical cosmopolitanism, and that the trick to making IR more international is to foster a genuinely transnational research community. The premise that IR theory ought not to have a national focus is seldom challenged, a complacency fueled by its modern preoccupation with so forth. Yet the "very diversity of the international political system commonality, pattern, structure, systematization, generalization, and implies that the nature of international relations will be perceived differently by different groups," and the "variety of religions, cultures, moral and ethical systems and histories ensures that there can be no universal view of the main issues of international relations" (Smith 1985, ix). Indeed, one of the most significant contributions of IR scholarship is the knowledge that states often differ from each other in profound ways. Does it not seem odd that we should expect something more from their citizens? It is because this suggestion appears to preclude the possibility of thinking about IR as an academic discipline that it is seldom made. This is a mistaken

view. The inherent diversity of the subject does not preclude thinking about international relations as a distinct subject and cannot, in any case, be wished away. It does, however, entail rejection of the monolithic, question-begging notion of “THE Discipline” currently in use.

International relations theories, like the subjects they undertake to study, are always culturally situated. It is impossible to specify the myriad and subtle ways in which ostensibly international and scientific constructs are affected by parochial or national political priorities, agendas, and perspectives. But this problem receives far less attention that it should, despite a modern preoccupation with disciplinary self-examination. The extent of the problem is masked by the paradoxical tendency to proclaim IR an American social science, while still according it the status of a genuinely international discipline. But the depiction of IR as an American discipline is largely devoid of any real reflection on the impact of American diplomatic priorities, or national interests, on IR research. That such interests exist is not denied, of course, but these are more likely to be treated as the stuff of foreign policy analysis than the bane of IR theory. For a superpower with global political reach and ambition, however, the boundary between foreign policy and international politics can often fade into irrelevance, making it is easy to confuse what America wants and needs with what the world wants and needs.

It is not simply the case that there is something distinctively American about IR—there is something distinctively American about the idea that it is, and ought to be, a scientific discipline. Emphasizing the numerical preponderance of American IR scholars thus misses the point, since it fails to address a much deeper, more profound and subtle methodological foundation for American dominance. What counts as “doing IR,” in other words, is pretty much what most of its American scholars do. This is clear in Stanley Hoffmann’s famous essay “An American Social Science: International Relations” (1977), in which he drives home the curiously national flavor of an international discourse but, paradoxically, enshrines in the process a suspiciously parochial standard for evaluating diversity. Subsequent reflection on the issue has done little to transcend, or unmask, the bias inherent in asking a seemingly innocuous question: *who else is doing what we do?* A more pertinent and interesting question is *who is doing what? and how, why, and on whose terms are they doing it?* The notion of diversity as an exclusively spatial category (the global distribution of IR scholars) presupposes agreement on the very thing that a genuinely diverse

scholarship would contest: the meaning, purpose and significance of IR theory.

This chapter begins by exploring briefly the implications of American hegemony in international political theory and suggests that the modern discipline's largely uncritical and increasingly zealous commitment to positivism-empiricism has a peculiarly national, American flavor. That similar sorts of analyses are undertaken elsewhere is not denied but, to the extent that these merely adopt or replicate "American-made" constructs, these tend to reflect, rather than refute, the dominance of American IR. As I argue in [chapter five](#), there is at least one other distinctively national approach to international relations which I call British IR, in order to distinguish it from the more problematic and limiting label of the "English School." Despite the misleading notion of an Anglo-American discipline, international relations theory has tended to develop differently on opposite sides of the Atlantic, with American thinking guided by the unspoken, since unquestioned, view that IR should aim to be a science and ought to be judged by normal scientific standards, and British IR largely unperturbed by the fundamental contestability of the subject. The former has thus tended to define progress in terms of transcending the subject's idealist-realist divide, while the latter has tended to count a healthy pluralism as progress in its own right. This certainly seems to account for British IR's demonstrably warmer reception of critical theory, and its relative calm in the face of theoretical and meta-theoretical challenges that American IR has tended to regard as symptoms of a full-blown disciplinary crisis. If British IR can seem indistinct it is precisely because the idealist-realist divide tends to be viewed as a constitutive, ineradicable part of the subject, the disciplinary status, and scientific credentials, of which have never been a major issue.¹

The present chapter is structured around a case-study illustration of "international regime theory," a purportedly ecumenical, but essentially American, positivist-empiricist, neorealist-neoliberal dominated set of approaches and debates. International regimes, defined in the dominant discourse as "principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue area" (Krasner 1982a, 1), involve intersubjective meaning structures that could not be less amenable to even the most subtle, "meaningoriented" (Neufeld 1993a, 42), techniques of a positivist epistemology. Regime theory is a telling window on American IR and has become the focal point of analysis of institutionalized patterns of cooperation in broader discussion. Born in the USA, and first made prominent by Stephen

Krasner's edited collection in the early 1980s, one of the most important recent collections on the concept is edited by a European scholar, Volker Rittberger (1993). But, like the discipline more generally—and with the limited exception of British IR—regime theory continues to wear the imprimatur of a distinctively American conception of science, and a distinctively American set of political values and assumptions about the purported functions and maintenance systems of particular regimes. The explicitly assimilationist tendencies of American IR are reflected clearly in regime analysis, which attempts to reconcile the age-old idealist-realist divide, and to synthesize and appropriate substantively similar concepts, the most notable of which is the “international society” school (Bull 1977; Wilson and Evans 1992), an older debate in British IR about the existence of institutionalized patterns of cooperation. Discussion of the latter point, however, is deferred until the next chapter.

The unspoken prefix: International Relations as an (American) social science

While hardly subjects of sustained study or interest, the sociology and geography of knowledge in the discipline of IR have periodically engaged its more theoretically inclined students (Holsti 1985; Smith 1985; Waever 1998; Crawford and Jarvis 2000). The consensus to date is that IR is “international” only in subject matter and name, and pretty much a North Atlantic, disproportionately Anglo-American, preoccupation. This anomaly has generated occasional curiosity but generally failed to excite concern. National representation, it might be supposed, ought to play no role in assessing the health or viability of any scientific enterprise. At no point in the human struggle against disease, for example, do we feel compelled to ask whether our epidemiologists are from Bulgaria, Finland, or Tanzania. Why ought our equally pressing, and related, concerns with war, peace, dislocation, famine, wealth, poverty, genocide, environmental degradation, and so on, require the least bit of attention to nationality? Nationality, culture, location and the myriad other constitutive elements of individual and group identities offer no prophylactic assurance against Aids, no hedge against hyper-inflation and no shelter from radioactive fallout. This at least is something like the attitude that tends to dominate the mainstream conception of IR. It is by no means clear, however, that the roster of items on the IR menu, or the means to their investigation, involve choices that transcend ideology. The only thing more remarkable than

the persistent American domination of the modern field is the apparently widespread willingness to ignore or downplay it. That the markedly parochial nature of the subject is candidly acknowledged has done little to moderate its clear pretension to theoretical universalism. It is seldom asked whether the mainstream conception of IR is itself a reflection of values, attitudes, and predispositions forged in the cauldron of particular historical, cultural, and national experiences and circumstances, or whether, indeed, there is something distinctively cultural about the idea that IR can or should be conceived as a discipline in the first place. The compulsion to rise above the fray of contending ideologies, in other words, may itself originate, consciously or unconsciously, in an ideological enterprise that, by definition and design, is rendered invisible by its universalist, homogenizing propensities. While supranational forces today seem everywhere in ascendance, cosmopolitanism can have a peculiarly national flavor. The much-heralded declining fortunes of the state aside, the nation remains, in the words of Hans Morgenthau, “the ultimate point of reference for political loyalties and actions” (Morgenthau 1993, 273). It seems a reasonable conjecture that nationality might also constitute an important, if not ultimate, point of reference for IR theorists. In light of the above considerations, the fact that this often appears not to be the case makes closer investigation all the more interesting and worthwhile.

And yet there is a clear tendency for international relations research to foster different interests, methods, and disciplinary attitudes across the few national settings in which it can be said to constitute a subject of sustained interest. The evidence for parochialism is everywhere and not confined to what Stanley Hoffmann described famously (and parochially!) as its American heartland (Hoffmann 1977). Ironically, such parochialism is only magnified by the ostensibly ecumenical objectives behind the growing attempt to identify non-American centers of discussion. Consider, for example, the practice of describing European international relations theory as “continental,” as though there were no other continent to which this designation could refer, and no distinctions within this category worth noting; or the common depiction of *the* discipline as Anglo-American despite strong evidence of a distinctively British approach; or the usually implicit assumption that settings like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the “anglophone peripheries” (Holsti 1985, 112), have no indigenous theoretical tradition, and merely consume ideas produced in the nationally based centers of the field; in still other countries activity commensurate with international relations theorizing may be noted, but is defined in terms of

its consumption, replication, or imitation of what counts as theoretical activity elsewhere. In short, international relations scholars even seem fated to be parochial about their parochialism.

The lack of disciplinary credentials for the study of international relations in the vast bulk of countries whose interactions collectively form its traditional subject matter suggests a number of possibilities, the implications of which are not yet clear. There are no answers to this problem, and not even any consensus that parochialism is a problem, since it is just as likely to be an unavoidable occupational hazard as the product of a conscious and deliberate practice. Even so, like other occupational hazards, precautions should be taken to minimize its dangers, with examples of the latter including homogeneity in the guise of universalism, mutual antipathy, disdain, and lack of respect, or a general unwillingness to find value in the positions of others. “Better to jaw jaw, than to war war,” said Winston Churchill, and the same applies to intellectual life in general, and in the particular case of what we might call (for the sake of not begging the question) international studies, especially since “war war” is an increasingly common feature of its literary and other sites of exchange (when and where there is exchange).

Parochialism is an occupational hazard in international relations theory, but one that is difficult to spot when it masquerades as science. That the persistence of an assimilationist logic in modern IR may be bound up with a distinctively American conception of disciplinarity, science, and progress is not simply easy to overlook, but impossible to see from *within* the disciplinary matrix. Evidence for diversity is easily mustered, but refers less to epistemological than methodological differences. Diversity, in other words, tends to refer to variations on a central rationalist-empiricist theme that is not itself opened to question. The thrust of much recent activity, by contrast—largely outside the “official” boundaries of IR it must be noted—is aimed at transcending diversity in this self-limiting sense. But to what extent is this possible without altogether rejecting the discipline of IR, since its claims to legitimacy are based on universalized precepts that can allow nothing more than tinkering, assimilation, or the replacement of one planetary dogma with another? Outside its American and Anglo-European cores, IR consists of little more than foreign policy analyses, and what counts as a theory or discipline in all places tends to be measured by the yardstick of what is endorsed officially in the disciplinary heartland of the United States. If it were suggested, for example, that a distinctive British, Canadian, Australian, or Indian approach to international

relations exists, the burden of proof for such a claim would fall squarely on those who make it, and the only admissible standards of evidence are degrees of conformity to the conception of discipline which alone need not authenticate its claims, or bother with a national prefix.

It would require a disdain of monumental proportions to foreclose the possibility that new and important insights might yet come (or might already be awaiting discovery) from beyond the present intellectual, geographical, and cultural boundaries of the field (Taylor 1994, 72–3). The point is not that there is necessarily anything intrinsically valuable in the multiplicity of national, ethnic, cultural, gendered, sexed, linguistic, religious, moral, historical, individual, and countless other viewpoints that comprise international society, but that we may never be in a position to make judgments of worth among them, not least because we fail to take them seriously. This said, however, it is impossible to imagine anything other than chaos if international relations is to be approached as anything we want it to be. Clearly, however, a key reason for the essential contestability of international relations is that it continues to be composed of culturally defined groups which create meaningful lives for large numbers of people, meanings that may clash with those held in other collectivities (Spegele 1996, 79). Suggestions of this sort are bound to ruffle disciplinary feathers, raising the fearful specter of relativism already evident in the more solipsistic excesses of postmodernism. But pluralism need not lead to the relativist extremes that, quite rightly, inspire suspicion. It is not the traditional, problem-solving, substantive orientation of international relations theory that is threatened by a genuine international pluralism, but the discipline's current monopoly on deciding what these problems are. Far from threatening human understanding in world politics, a wider exploration and conception of its problems, and expanded roster of geo-cultural viewpoints, seems vital to any conception of theoretical progress neutral enough for all.

Some of these points have been made before, often by theorists whose works, however unwittingly, have contributed to narrowing the field's conception of scientific endeavor, and fostering its Americanization. Consider, for example, how uneasily Hans Morgenthau's depiction of the inherent ambiguity of international politics, skeptical attitude toward the simplistic "solutions" of science, and keen awareness of the extent to which reality is socially constructed, sits beside his perceived status as "founding father" of the American science of IR (Morgenthau 1993, 19). Stanley Hoffmann's identification of a permanent and reciprocal relationship between scientific/empirical

and philosophical/normative theory also promised to point the new discipline of IR down an admirably broad intellectual pathway, despite his, and its, subsequent tendency to promote an increasingly narrow and American view of science (Hoffmann 1965, 18–21). Nowhere is this regressive tendency more clearly evident than in the nominally international, but essentially American, debate over international regimes.

After Realism? American International Relations and neoliberalism

Despite two decades of crisis and turmoil, a paradigmatic succession of sorts has been underway in international relations theory. As Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach suggest, “the field has not surrendered its disciplinary vision” and from the precipitous falling off of Realism has emerged the new paradigmatic candidate of neo-liberalism (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988, 31). But in light of its explicit foundation on an incremental adaptation of Realist and, more to the point, neorealist theory, neoliberalism casts grave doubts on its purported status as a new, freestanding paradigm. Certainly Thomas Kuhn, whose views on progress in the natural sciences have profoundly influenced a generation of IR scholars, would see neo-liberalism as little more than a pseudo-Realist patch-up job, designed to stave off decline by assimilating new facts and challenges (Kuhn 1970). Advocates of neoliberalism, which consists of a cluster of related concepts and approaches, would have difficulty defending their perspective against this view.

Neoliberalism can be understood as an extension of neorealist theory which can in turn be depicted as an extension of Realism. It is part of an ongoing, conscious adaptation (a sort of scientific overhaul) of classical realist scholarship. Neoliberalism is based on an acceptance of the Realist premise of national interest as a dominant motive in world politics, and an interest in the neorealist conception of system structure, but is more sanguine than Realism/neorealism in its assessment of the prospects and scope for cooperation between states, and seeks to promote international security indirectly through trying to foster interstate cooperation on common concerns, in contrast to the traditional security arrangements based on common fears promoted by Realism/neorealism (e.g. the maintenance of a balance of power).

In shifting the basis of explanation from the foreign policy of the state to the level of the international system, the neorealists claim to

“systematize political Realism into a rigorous, deductive systemic theory of international politics” (Keohane 1986a, 15). Robert Keohane, who eschews the neorealist tag, typifies a burgeoning scholarship that is in sympathy with its theoretical objectives: “I admire the clarity and parsimony of Kenneth Waltz’s systemic theory [neorealism] without subscribing to many of the inferences that he draws from it” (Keohane 1986a, 25–6, n. 7). Remarkably, it is taken largely for granted in mainstream American IR scholarship that neorealism extends, and improves, the classical tradition of realism. It is only natural that, once begun, the unreflective process of Realist adaptation should give way to another set of “improvements,” particularly since the agreed cardinal flaw of neorealism is its excessive parsimony. The “charge,” as Barry Buzan puts it, “is not that Waltz’s theory is wholly wrong (though bits of it are disputed) but that it is incomplete” (Buzan, Jones and Little 1993, 7). But the alleged analytical gaps in neorealism are many and varied, hardly surprising in light of its declared objectives. Nevertheless, neoliberals can be defined by their consistent attempt to draw attention to a couple of allegedly basic analytical gaps in neorealism: (1) the rise of “complex interdependence,” and; (2) the rise, and increasing prominence, of “international regimes.” Like these related concepts neoliberalism defies precise definition, but clearly occupies an intellectual space somewhere between neorealism and liberal institutionalism. Neo-liberals can also be defined by their adherence to the view that there are no insuperable methodological differences between Realist, neo-realist or liberal-institutionalist accounts of IR. Finally, neoliberals claim to retain major neorealist premises about international politics, including the belief “that anarchy constrains the willingness of states to cooperate,” but consciously shift neorealism’s analytical focus from interstate conflict and competition toward more cooperative modes of interaction (Grieco 1988, 486).

The claim to adopt and adapt theories that “draw on Realism’s strengths without partaking fully of its weaknesses” (Keohane 1986a, 191) is the signature feature of the neoliberal perspective. Thus defined, prominent neoliberals include Keohane (1986a and b; 1988), Robert Axelrod (1981; 1984), Buzan (Buzan *et al.* 1993; Buzan 1993), Joseph Nye (1988) and Stephen Krasner (1982a and b). I will focus on Keohane, Axelrod, and Buzan for the sake of brevity, and because they are the most forceful representatives of neoliberalism as defined here. Nobody captures the synthesizing spirit and method of neoliberal scholarship better than Keohane:

structural Realism helps us to understand world politics as in part a systemic phenomenon, and provides us with a logically coherent theory that establishes the context for state action. This theory, because it is relatively simple and clear, can be *modified progressively* to attain closer correspondence with reality.... To do this we need a multidimensional approach to world politics that incorporates several analytical frameworks or research programs.

(Keohane 1986, 191; emphasis mine)

This approach allows neoliberals to embrace the neorealist “virtues of parsimony and clarity” not as ends in themselves but as the theoretical foundation for ultimately richer, and more descriptively precise, accounts of the multiple realities of international politics. Substantively, however, neoliberals are also concerned to demonstrate “the possibilities for international cooperation” under anarchic conditions believed by Realists to preclude all but the most rudimentary forms of collaboration. Keohane thus begins with an unambiguously Realist premise: “states seek power and calculate their interests accordingly” (1986, 155). Keohane views Realism as unduly pessimistic about the prospects for cooperation, largely because it ignores or downplays the institutional context of international politics. Retaining the rationality assumption (though he sometimes “relaxes” it) Keohane suggests that

(u)nder different systemic conditions states will define their self-interests differently...where the environment is relatively benign energies will also be directed to fulfilling other goals.

(1986, 194)

Keohane employs the concept of regime to demonstrate the extent to which states are both linked by mutual interests, and likely to find more scope for cooperation than Realism typically allows, a situation he sees as analogous to game-theoretic models of cooperation under anarchy: “much as iterated prisoner’s dilemma leads to very different results from the single-play version of the game, so does an analysis of a given regime in the context of others produce a different structure of incentives than considering each regime in isolation” (Keohane 1984, 101).

Axelrod, by whom Keohane is strongly influenced, also seeks to demonstrate that Realist analyses may be unduly pessimistic about the prospects for cooperation. For Axelrod, Realism’s

philosophical pessimism generally is warranted but overstated. Employing the familiar logic of the prisoner's dilemma, and retaining the rationalistic assumption of "egoistic" self-interest, Axelrod believes that he can transcend the limits of Realism's "single play" and zero-sum games. Axelrod proposes instead a series of games in which the values are cumulative, thereby making the "future important" and incorporating an institutional dimension into a hitherto ahistorical model (Axelrod 1984, 12).

Buzan, while nowhere embracing the label of neoliberalism, engages in a very similar project to Keohane and Axelrod, and a brief summary of his argument rounds out this deliberately brief and representative sample of neoliberal scholarship. Again, Buzan joins many of the critics of Realism in remaining committed broadly to a Realist conception of theory. Like Keohane, Buzan focuses narrowly on neorealism, believing that he can adapt, broaden, and improve Kenneth Waltz's methodologically sparse framework. There are for Buzan two principal ways in which Waltzian neorealism is incomplete: (1) its analysis is confined to the international political system and; (2) its definition of structure is unduly sparse. Taken together "these two restrictions exclude, or marginalize, a range of factors that others see as being: (1) 'structural', (2) important to outcomes, and/or (3) lying both beyond a strictly Realist domain, and above a strictly unit level of analysis" (Buzan *et al.* 1993, 5). Buzan nicely encapsulates the most common grounds for objection to Waltzian neorealism, but he is in clear sympathy and agreement with Waltz's understanding of the theoretical enterprise in international politics, his largely technical discussion aimed explicitly at reconstructing and enhancing the usefulness of Waltz's theory. He accepts the proposition that the analytical scope of neorealism can and should be broadened, but there is no inkling that Buzan views neorealism's normative message as suspect, wishes to stress fundamentally different or new normative problems, or sees neorealism's alleged philosophical pessimism as linked to its theoretical premises.

Like others before them, Axelrod, Keohane, and Buzan are able persuasively to demonstrate the extent to which Realist premises are compatible with a substantial degree of international cooperation or "society" (Bull 1977). These theorists do not abandon—and in fact embrace—explicitly Realist premises. Oddly, however, it is that which appears to make neorealism attractive to some scholars, its clarity and parsimony, that makes them reluctant ultimately to embrace the label. Neorealism's theoretical vices and virtues appear to be identical, since

its ability to satisfy a perceived need for scientific rigor must be obtained at the expense of “real-world” description. By definition and design, neorealism cannot satisfy the need for contextual subtlety, interpretation, and detail. The paradox of neorealism is that its systematization of classical Realism cements the scientific status of international politics while simultaneously precluding detailed analysis of its substantive political issues (Kratochwil 1993). It is difficult to see how neoliberalism can escape this problem, particularly since it is less a “new” theoretical paradigm than a new manifestation of neorealist international relations theory. Like scientific Realism, it is questionable whether neoliberalism extends, so much as ignores, the classical, deliberately ambivalent and skeptical, realist heritage. Nor does neoliberalism extend a genuinely liberal international political theory. On the contrary, it is in essence a selected pseudo-Realist appropriation of liberal concepts that even fails on its own explicitly neorealist terms. This becomes abundantly clear in regime theory, but first, a brief comment on the idea of complex interdependence.

Related concepts: complex interdependence

Though it is in large measure a product of their own making, interdependence tends to be defined as a process over which states have little or no control—an unintended consequence of policy measures undertaken individually, but that affect the states system as a whole. Though such consequences may consist only of mutual sensitivities, interdependence is employed widely as a way of describing what occurs when rational, self-interested, behavior by individual actors has a destructive collective impact (Scott 1982; Kegley and Wittkopf 1993). It is postulated that the existence of interdependency dynamics in a widening range of functional issue-areas does not merely constrain the policy efficacy of states, but forces them to pursue collective responses to these collective problems. Hence, while the term lacks precise definition, interdependence refers widely to a range of transnational policy problems that are beyond the control of any single actor.

Because interdependence seems severely to challenge the ability of states to exercise meaningful control over their fates, it also tends to undermine Realist explanations of, and expectations for, international relations. Such a conclusion is supported by numerous analyses of the dynamics of interdependence, and is especially strong in the work of Andrew Scott (1982). Scott views states as congenitally unresponsive to the “new” phenomena of interdependence, blinded by their habitual

preoccupation with national interests to the realities of a tightly interconnected world. In what he curiously terms the “pre-interdependent world,” states were more or less free to pursue their national self-interest with little regard for global outcomes: “because global problems were uncommon in earlier centuries, and then usually went unrecognized, analysts had little experience in thinking about them” (1982, ix). Hence, the explosion of technological, scientific, and other changes fueling the dynamics of modern (or postmodern?) interdependence calls for “a rate of adaptation on the part of societies, institutions, and individuals that cannot be satisfied” (1982, 62–3). For Scott, interdependence confronts the states system, and humanity, with a seemingly intractable dilemma: it forces us to come to terms with new global requisites, even while we have little comprehension of their dynamics, and no administrative/policy instruments suitable to such a world.

But interdependence need not be treated as a recipe for systemic crisis and collapse. While Scott offers no way out of the policy dilemmas that interdependence raises for states, it is more commonly argued that “the pressures of interdependence may propel the creation of regimes in widening areas of international conduct to facilitate states’ control over their common fates.”² This neoliberal argument rests on the assumption that the dynamics of interdependence—while they do constrain traditional state behavior—do not inhibit, but rather encourage, new intellectual and institutional responses. Interdependence is also an old international concept that can be traced to Adam Smith, Rousseau, and Machiavelli. In its traditional usage, it tended to refer to “international relationships that would be costly to break” (Baldwin 1980, 471–506). Interdependence in this sense referred to mutual vulnerabilities, and was developed theoretically only as an adjunct to broader perspectives. From the late 1960s onward the meaning and theoretical status of the concept has undergone considerable change, and the traditional notion of vulnerability interdependence has had to vie with that of “sensitivity” interdependence, an orientation that stresses “mutual effects” over vulnerabilities, and is accompanied typically by the assumption that “social transactions...are essentially harmonious and will likely lead to better state relations” (Baldwin 1980, 491). These different usages are consistent with the traditional realist-idealist cleavage that defines international scholarship, demonstrating that interdependence is not the exclusive conceptual property of either perspective.

But by the early 1970s the notion of interdependence was emerging as a distinct analytical perspective on international relations, though adequately defining it continued to be hampered by its vulnerability and sensitivity manifestations, and by wider debates about the status of the discipline (Viotti and Kauppi 1987, 209). Nevertheless, it was now necessary to distinguish interdependence in its ordinary usage from its deployment in a “new” approach to international relations. The principal authors and expositors of “complex interdependence,” Keohane and Nye, employed the concept for identifying and addressing perceived weaknesses in a Realist understanding of international politics (Keohane and Nye 1977). But, like the general orientation of neoliberalism into which it would evolve, complex interdependence was based not on a rejection of Realism, but on an exploration of “the conditions under which [the] assumptions of Realism were sufficient or needed to be supplemented by a more complex model of change” (Keohane and Nye 1977, 32).

Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf argue that interdependence boils down to three primary intellectual contributions and challenges to international relations theory. First, while often accepting implicitly or explicitly that states remain key analytical units, they are subject to “penetration” from a host of processes and developments beyond the scope of foreign-economic policy, and must vie for power and influence with other (non-state) actors. Second, interdependence blurs the conventional Realist distinctions between “high” and “low,” and foreign and domestic, policy issues, casting doubt on the salience of Realism’s security dominant issue-hierarchy. Put glibly, “guns” and “butter” are no longer easily separated or traded. Third, military force is an increasingly “irrelevant or unimportant” policy instrument (Kegley and Wittkopf 1993, 33). So constituted, interdependence has an obvious affinity and intellectual debt to liberal institutionalism, as its increasingly close association with international organizations and regimes attests. It is thus misleading to suggest that interdependence is a neoliberal concept, and more appropriate to view neoliberalism as an elaborated form of complex interdependence.

Complex interdependence, however, has limited paradigmatic potential and amounts to little more than a new set of observations on some old problems. It is only in recent years, and with benefit of hindsight, that interdependence has seemed to find a paradigmatic home in neoliberalism. But interdependence remains a contested concept, or rather its implications continue to be a matter of debate, with the disputants divided now, as always, over whether increased

interdependence can be expected to lead to more or less cooperation. The very asking of this question, however, marks an important thematic shift for international relationists, and complex interdependence has been instrumental in raising issues of cooperation to new theoretical prominence.

Generally speaking, liberalism has strong affinities to the precepts of classical idealism, and interdependence (despite its interparadigmatic character and compatibility with Realism) continues in this idealist vane. If the notion of complex interdependence is taken more to heart by liberal scholars, it is because it “captures much of the essence of their view of world politics” (Viotti and Kauppi 1987, 209). But neoliberal interpretations of international politics have so deliberately obscured the conceptual boundaries of Realism and liberalism that the above point might be disputed. Neoliberalism has not merely embraced the concept of interdependence, but has done much to popularize and shape it. But despite its neoliberal and (some might suggest) corrupted adolescence, interdependence was born of *classical liberal* arguments about comparative advantage, economic specialization, and exchange, and spent its formative years in the distinctively liberal milieu of integration theory (see Burton 1969, 135; Holsti 1985, 27–9). While often connected to “new types of phenomena in international politics” (Holsti 1985, 5), and viewed as a novel fact of international life, interdependence is a relatively old idea, if one whose time may finally have come.

Current concern with interdependence is especially indebted to the earlier attempt of integration theorists to describe and explain political unification among states. Indeed, integration theory has played a decisive role in the development of liberal international theory generally, and traces of it echo clearly in neoliberalism and its cognate approaches. As Donald Puchala puts it: “integration studies were precursors to transnational and transgovernmental relations, to interdependence studies, and to the revitalization of the study of international organization presently so apparent” (Puchala 1981, 150). Again, however, neoliberalism is a corruption of the functionalist, neofunctionalist and world federalist streams that together constitute integration theory. Neoliberalism retains the integrative convictions and logic of the latter approach but, prior to the recent acceleration of integrative forces in Europe at least, has emphasized less dramatic and politically ambitious forms of interstate cooperation.³ But neoliberalism, as the term suggests, has become the chief, self-declared authority on interdependence and other matters liberal in contemporary

IR theory, despite resting on the tenuous conviction that the idealist convictions of both the classical economists and the integrationists—that conflicts of interest between states tend to be reduced by *greater* levels of interaction—can be profitably combined with essentially Realist constructs. The feasibility of this project needs to be explored.

Related concepts: international regimes

The primary, but by no means exclusive, collective response by states to the challenge of interdependence has been the creation of international regimes. As a result, the interdependence and regime literatures have tended strongly to overlap. The creation of regimes is also associated widely with the presence and active encouragement of a hegemonic power, something that neoliberals have tended to play down no doubt, as suggested below, because it casts doubt on the genuinely voluntaristic nature of regime creation they presuppose. Because these interrelated terms remain linked to analytically distinct approaches to international relations, some confusion inevitably attaches to deployment of the neoliberal label. Regime is a purportedly ecumenical concept but, in recent years, has become the theoretical flagship of neoliberalism, with neoliberal, or “modified-structural Realist”, assessments of regime creation, maintenance and dynamics all but eclipsing rival understandings of the concept.⁴ The rise of regimes seems directly to challenge the Realist assumption that “international institutions are unable to mitigate anarchy’s constraining effects on interstate cooperation” (Grieco 1988, 485). Consider, for example, Waltz’s neorealist assessment of the role of international institutions in world politics:

International organizations do exist, and in ever-growing numbers. Supranational agents able to act effectively, however, either themselves acquire some of the attributes and capabilities of states...or they soon reveal their inability to act in important ways except with the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the principal states concerned with the matters at hand.

(Waltz 1986a, 81)

Notably absent in this conception of international institutions is any scope for their ability to act as autonomous or semi-autonomous agents in world politics. The proliferation, and seeming empowerment, of international institutions and regimes in recent years—along with

moderate levels of interstate cooperation—has thus enlivened existing critiques of Realism.

Definitional puzzles

There have been a number of attempts to formulate a definition of regime, but none has been more widely endorsed than that offered by Stephen Krasner: “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor’s expectations converge in a given issue-area” (1982a, 1).⁵ This “new” approach to the old problem of interstate cooperation is justified on the grounds that conventional theories cannot apprehend the increasingly complex and subtle realities of international organization. The institutionalization of world politics is in fact a well-established theme in international relations theory and can be traced to the assumptions, goals, and ideals of both the classical liberal and Grotian traditions (Bull 1977; Holsti 1985, 27–30). Nevertheless, the regime approach is predicated on two basic assumptions: (1) that existing theories (e.g. Realism/neorealism) greatly understate the extent to which international behavior is institutionalized, and; (2) that the prevailing understandings of international organization lack “any systematic conception” of the core problem of international governance (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 759). Realism, in particular, it is argued sets up an exaggerated dichotomy between the competitive zero-sum realm of international anarchy, and the authoritative realm of domestic politics; this model seems “overdrawn in explaining cooperative behavior among the advanced industrial states” and leads to an understanding of international cooperation tied too closely to the study of “formal organizations.” What international theory is missing, and what regime theory purports to supply, is an analysis of state behavior that is “regulated or organized in a broader sense” (Haggard and Simmons 1987, 491–2).

But the regime concept, and thus the neoliberal approach that it so deeply informs, defies precise definition. Clearly it refers to institutionalized patterns or habits of cooperation in given issue-areas, but the term tends to be used very loosely. As Arthur Stein puts it, “scholars have fallen into using the term ‘regime’ so disparately and with such little precision that it ranges from an umbrella for all international relations to little more than a synonym for international organizations” (Stein 1982, 115). Indeed, Krasner’s emphasis on “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures” conflates conceptually and definitionally distinct (and even contested) terms into

a single concept or definition. Regimes have thus been described as “everything from a patterned set of interactions...to any form of multilateral coordination, cooperation, or collaboration...to formal machinery...” (Ochester 1986, 777). The concept, as Susan Strange puts it, “is a fertile source of discussion simply because people mean different things when they use it” (Strange 1982, 342–3). In an important sense, regime identification is less a function of empirical work (though numerous regime studies exist) than a function of definition. The upshot is that regimes are defined vaguely as occupying an “ontological space somewhere between the level of formal institutions ...and systemic factors,” (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 760) and neoliberalism is defined vaguely as occupying an intellectual space somewhere between neorealism and liberal institutionalism.

The relationship between neoliberalism and Realism is ambiguous, and the majority of regime analyses to date have done little to clarify, and much to muddy, the issue. Is regime theory an adjunct of Realism? Many regime proponents embrace a structural theory of international politics (a euphemism for neorealism), but emphasize a range of issues and institutions that fit uneasily into a Realist framework. This leads Krasner to coin the curious and ungainly label of “modified structural Realist regime theory,” which he then applies—with varying degrees of further modification—to the analyses of numerous regime theorists (Krasner 1982, 1–2). Things get murkier still when Krasner employs the label Grotian as a synonym for liberal, and fails adequately to distinguish a Grotian orientation to international politics from a “modified structural” approach (Krasner 1982, viii). Indeed, the former term is misused, and the latter label seems wholly redundant, since Grotianism is a distinctive orientation to international politics which predates neoliberalism and, beyond its common interest in the study of institutionalized patterns of cooperation, shares none of neoliberalism’s scientific zeal, nor its ambition to synthesize Realist, neorealist and liberal institutionalist theories under a single paradigmatic banner. Regime theory does appear to have a strong intellectual affinity to Grotianism, striving as it does to conceptualize the bases for, and to understand the dynamics of, cooperation under anarchic conditions. Realism, likewise, offers little in the way of an explicit theory of regimes, but does provide a means to explain them away. If “interests in a given-issue area” can be deduced consistently from “power and situational constraints,” for example, Realism can get along very well without regime theory (Haggard and Simmons 1987, 512–3). But if this is so only infrequently, Realism is challenged by, and compares poorly with,

a theoretical orientation that stresses cooperation over conflict. What then is the logic or utility of a “modified Realist” theory of regimes?

The “modified Realist” tag derives from an assumption, pervasive in the regime literature, that Realists can explain regime creation, but—once created—cannot account adequately for regime behavior, nor, allegedly, do they anticipate the growth of regimes into autonomous or semi-autonomous actors in international politics. Regimes, it is suggested, may “assume a life of their own,” outlasting and impacting on the national power attributes to which they owe their creation. But, as Krasner observes, most of the authors that exhibit this “modified Realist” approach to regimes are “skeptical of the extent to which regimes can persist in the face of alterations in underlying national power capabilities” (1982, viii). A “modified Realist” apparently views regimes as, at best, one small step removed from what Krasner describes as the basic causal variable of international politics: state power. The term “modified Realist,” therefore, does not appear to add anything of great significance to the understanding of regime theory.

The puzzle of how to define regimes extends beyond linguistic imprecision and multiple labeling. In a more methodological vane, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie argue that regime theorists may be hampered by an inability or unwillingness to recognize the tension that exists between the largely social scientific enterprise of regime identification, and the intersubjective character of regimes. Regime scholars fail to match epistemology with ontology, and regime theory issues in “woolly-ness” (Strange 1982) because it stretches the limits of a positivist methodology (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 764–5). But this critique, like Strange’s, is not indicative of mainstream thinking on regimes. Most regime scholars believe that regimes can be incorporated within a positivist framework and trace its problems to relatively minor disputes over terminology, a natural hazard for deliberately inclusive concepts. Oran Young is thus able to define regimes vaguely as “social institutions” and “patterns of behaviour,”—entities that need not be accompanied by “explicit organizational arrangements”—while others use regime as a synonym for international organization (Young 1982, 93; Stein 1982, 115).

The definitional and epistemological aspects of the regime concept cannot, however, be entirely separated, and many of its problems, like those of neoliberalism generally, can be teased out of its most popular definition. The most striking implication in this regard is that the usability of the well-known Krasner definition seems to be correlated directly to its lack of analytical precision. “Principles, norms, rules, and

decision-making procedures” are conceptually distinct terms conflated, for the sake of expediency, into the umbrella concept or definition of regime. This allows some scholars to interpret regimes narrowly—insisting perhaps on explicit and codified procedures—while others find scope for a conception of regime broad enough “to mean almost any fairly stable distribution of the power to influence outcomes” (Strange 1982, 343). This is because principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures are, in turn, subject to alternately narrow or wide interpretations. A norm, for instance, implies anything from an authoritative standard or model of behavior, to, in its looser sense, a pattern or trait taken to be typical in the behavior of a social group. While Krasner defines norms as “standards of behavior,” it is not clear in much of the regime literature which, if either, notion of norm is being implied (Finlayson and Zacher 1982, 275). It is thus common practice for regime enthusiasts to stress one component of the Krasner equation at the expense of another.

It is not surprising that the Krasner definition is the most frequently endorsed characterization of regime. The concept, forged in 1980 at a Los Angeles conference on international cooperation, was itself the product of the convergent expectations of numerous scholars, guaranteeing from birth a widely acceptable definition. Ironically, therefore, the regime concept suffers from an affliction common in the attempt to foster multilateral agreement and cooperation in international politics: the wider the membership one hopes to attract, the more general must be the proposition one hopes to advance.⁶ Just as the attempt to achieve wide agreement in the pluralistic realm of world politics leads to weak and permissive, or invisibly coercive, institutions, the attempt to achieve wide agreement in the inherently pluralistic realm of international relations theory tends to yield weak and permissive, and deceptively ecumenical, concepts.

The notion of international regimes hammered out in California, promulgated in Krasner’s eponymous volume and still dominant today is not, of course, the only way to conceptualize international collaboration, nor is its definition always embraced without qualification (Bull 1977; Young 1982; Wilson and Evans 1992; Hurrell 1993). But International Regimes has become a sort of intellectual forced collectivization of scholarship related to issues of international cooperation, carried out in the name of consensus and progress of course. Where it has not succeeded in mainstreaming everyone, it has brought much of the literature on international political economy under its influence, not through coercion but seduction—via its seeming

ability to accommodate a variety of intellectual predilections. But the built-in interpretative character of regime renders it a sort of non-definition, and the attempt to make it analytically useful is thwarted by the desire to give it wide appeal.

While there is no unified regime “school,” most regime theorists accept the “basic analytic assumptions of structural Realist approaches, which posit an international system of functionally symmetrical, power-maximizing states acting in an anarchic environment” (Krasner 1982, 1–2). From the perspective of regime theory, however, Realism is no longer a sufficient analytical framework for confronting the new realities of international politics, revealing the natural affinity between neoliberals and regime theorists despite the allegedly ecumenical nature of the regime construct. Hence, rather than merely stressing old things in new ways—the heart of Strange’s critique—regime theorists more typically stress the need to adapt old ways (Realist and neorealist theory) to new things.

Again, however, precise specification of the definitional parameters for regimes is rendered difficult by the deliberate ambiguity of Krasner’s widely invoked construct. That regimes do refer to substantive phenomena in international politics is undeniable, but it remains difficult to establish whether regimes are pervasive, or relatively exceptional, aspects of international relations. On the one hand, the steady emergence of international institutions justifies increased attention to cooperative dynamics, whether narrowly or broadly defined. On the other hand, however, the term regime is employed so widely, and invoked so frequently, in recent scholarship that it threatens to become meaningless. For example, the term has been used to describe individual international organizations, clusters of international organizations, treaties, collections of treaties and/or other agreements, regularized procedures, conventions, stable mutual expectations, “rules of the road,” and virtually any set of explicit or implicit arrangements around which the expectations of states tend to converge. Regimes may also refer to established organizations with codified, formal procedural arrangements, or their “existence” may be purely tacit. At times, regimes are even defined tautologically. For example, the liberal international economic order characteristic of post-war international relations is sometimes described as a regime on the grounds that it contains monetary, trade, and financial regimes (Kegley and Wittkopf 1993, 33).

Ultimately, some measure of imprecision is inevitable. The challenge and advantage of a regime approach is to build a framework within

which the concept of norm-governed behavior in international politics can be developed, rather than to establish a precise and exhaustive inventory of regimes (Cohen 1980, 148–9). The issue of relevance pertains more to the function of a definition than to its exactitude. As Stanley Hoffmann notes, the “function” of a definition is “to indicate proper areas of inquiry, not to reveal the essence of the subject. How could one agree once and for all upon the definition of a field whose scope is in constant flux, indeed a field whose fluctuation is one of its principal characteristics?” (Hoffmann 1960, 5–6). The problem with the Krasner definition, however, is that it does not indicate particular areas of inquiry, so much as it makes it possible to define any and every aspect of international cooperation, coordination, collaboration and convergent expectations as a regime. As numerous scholars have indicated, many of whom are committed generally to the utility of regime analysis, cooperation is a very broad phenomenon, and important distinctions exist with regard to its limits and scope, as well as actor motives, incentives, and disincentives (Cohen 1980; Stein 1982; Haggard and Simmons 1987).

Another problem raised by Strange is that both the term regime, and its definition, is “value-loaded:” “not only does using this word regime distort reality by implying an exaggerated measure of predictability and order in the system as it is, it is also value-loaded in that it takes for granted that what everyone wants is more and better regimes, that greater order and managed interdependence should be the collective goal” (Strange 1982, 345). Regime thinking may thus be ideology masquerading as a necessary truth. This has massive implications for our attempt to construct definitional parameters for regimes because, as James Keeley observes, “the treatment of disputes over definition, character, and legitimacy of regimes” may be “fundamental to the concept itself” (Keeley 1990, 84). Or, as Charles Reynolds puts it with reference to international organization, but with clear relevance for regimes, “it is necessary to examine not only their political antecedents and contexts, but also the ideas which influenced their constitutions, and which are embodied in them; ...in doing this it is difficult to avoid accepting, albeit unconsciously, the values expressed in their foundations, and using them as the criteria for critical analysis” (Reynolds 1973, 268–9).

The upshot is that Krasner’s seemingly neutral definition is in essence the expression of interests derived in reference to a particular intellectual and historical context. Regimes become a rationalization of current policies, and tend to enshrine and codify prevailing practices,

giving both these entities, and the attempt to theorize them, a strong ideological component. Ironically in light of their declared commitment to Realist essentials, regime theorists appear to exhibit what E.H.Carr terms the characteristic weakness of all idealists: a “failure to understand” the way in which “their own standards” are rooted in existing reality (Carr 1946, 14).

As noted above, this sort of parochialism is more an occupational hazard than reflection of an intellectual conspiracy designed consciously to protect vested interests. Theory is a richly contextual enterprise that reflects inevitably the issues relevant to human welfare at any given juncture (for a concise and illuminating discussion see Biersteker 1989, 7–9). And, as Raymond Cohen puts it, advancing human interests is “surely what the study of international relations is all about” (1980, 149). But the human interests are richly varied, despite the temptation to view them as derivative solely of the problem of keeping the peace, or avoiding war, between states. Such issues include wealth, poverty, liberty, oppression, justice (procedural or redistributive), coercion, efficiency, legitimacy, security/insecurity (in its broadest and narrowest manifestations) and an extensive variety of often competing moral values.

These issues are often theorized out of international relations, not for consciously ideological so much as for analytical reasons. K.J. Holsti, for example, while not declaring himself a Realist, consigns issues not related to, or derivative of, the problem of war to the margins of international theory. These “other” approaches include normative problems and constructs like the “compradour bourgeoisie, the global commons, centre and periphery, and international feudal hierarchies” (Holsti 1985, 12). But if these, and the other issues listed above, are not part of the “vocabulary of the classical tradition,” they are legitimately part of the vocabulary and substance of international relations.

Taxonomic convention in international relations theory has tended to side with Holsti, thus funneling scholarship in ostensibly Realist directions. The regime literature is arguably a case in point, as its strong “value-bias” toward order (as opposed to justice for example) attests (Strange 1982, 345–6). This is to say nothing more damning, or surprising, than that international relations theorists are shaped invariably by their social, political, historical, and intellectual backgrounds. The point, however, is that while theory must and should reflect human interests as they tend to be defined at a given juncture, individual theorists may be more or less sensitive and attentive to issues of context. The issue of relevance is not whether regimes exist; clearly

they do, despite doubts about the conceptual utility of the Krasner definition. Rather, it is the tendency to define regimes as benign, genuinely voluntarist, and legitimate entities (Keeley 1990, 84)—and to assume further that everyone wants them—that is contestable.

As Keeley notes, allegations of this sort are bound to offend “liberal sensibilities.” A characteristic feature of liberal thought, for example, is its advocacy of different paths to progress and, in recent years, “a more general commitment to some form of international culture” (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 116). For some commentators, the former is indicative of liberalism’s intellectual multipartisanship, while the latter is evidence of the diminishing relevance of ideology. Yet, far from signaling the end of ideology in world politics, the evolution of a liberal international culture may simply indicate that liberal parochialism now exists on an increasingly global scale.

In contrast to the neoliberals, rationalist or Grotian theorists of international society, institutions, and regimes are relatively unconcerned with theoretical parsimony, and thus have had fewer difficulties in recognizing the moral complexity of international relations (Yost 1994, 269). For Grotians, in contrast to both Realists and neoliberals, the world is infused deeply with norms, and regimes (a term that postdates the idea of an international society and that Grotians tend not to use) constitute both the normal state of international affairs, and an important analytical focus. While the international society perspective predates the advent of neoliberalism and regimes, the synthesizing tendencies evident in the latter approaches have reduced Grotianism to the status of a strand within regime analysis, possibly because Grotian-influenced scholars have proven quite capable of getting on without the regime concept and its more rigorous conception of science. As I argue in the next chapter, there are profound epistemological differences between the largely American concept of regime and the essentially British idea of international society that makes them competing perspectives resistant to the omnipresent assimilationist maneuvers of the neoliberals. In contrast to neoliberal regime theorists, Grotians are also keenly aware of ideological overtones in the formation and maintenance of international institutions. Hedley Bull, for example, was well aware that the main vulnerability of a Grotian position “is that it may be a luxury available only to the strongest and most satisfied powers, which may adopt Rationalist legal and moral positions as instruments to protect acquisitions made through Realist means” (Bull as cited in Yost 1994). This describes precisely the principal vulnerability, and intellectual failing, of neoliberal regime

analysis. The problem is that regimes may not provide order and stability in international politics so much as reflect it. Liberal values in the postwar era, after all, have tended to be achieved through, and embedded in, the construction of regimes: “the United States, in cooperation with its European allies, was putting a clearly liberal stamp on the international institutions of the noncommunist world” (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 136–7). To restate and paraphrase Bull, this characterization describes the acquisition and protection of liberal values through Realist means. Regimes may be encoded in an ecumenical, and thus non-ideological, genre, but neutrality is largely in the eyes of the beholder, and is itself a distinctly liberal intellectual theme.

A Realist theory of regimes?

Hegemonic stability theory

It is ironic that regimes, understood popularly as one of the “new facts” of international politics that has made life for Realists uncomfortable, are linked closely to factors long considered significant by Realists, and more closely still to the concept of international system structure cherished by the neorealists. The most parsimonious, common, and explicitly Realist explanation of regime creation is the theory of hegemonic stability. Proponents of this view argue that the presence of a hegemon or dominant power may be sufficient to explain the degree of order, stability, and security often discernible in an anarchic state system. Regime creation and maintenance is thus linked “to a dominant power’s existence and the weakening of regimes to a waning hegemon” (Haggard and Simmons 1987, 500).

Hegemonic leadership may be coercive and based wholly on a self-interested concern for security, or the hegemon may have “an independent interest in supplying public goods regardless of the contributions of others” (Kindleberger 1981, 1). The Bretton-Woods system of regimes in the post-Second World War era, for instance, is widely acknowledged as the result of US attempts “to mold the international order to suit (its) interest and purpose” (Katzenstein 1990, 15). International regimes, in other words, may be embedded within a structure of state power fully consistent with Realist explanations. This follows even if we accept the proposition that regimes might assume a “life of their own” and, thus, “express only incompletely the interests

and purposes of the hegemonic power”; contrary to Krasner’s suggestion that such a development challenges a Realist or neorealist explanation of regimes, “this internal dynamic of international regimes makes it possible for the static categories of structural Realist analysis to engage the changes that are occurring in different issue areas and geographical arenas in world politics” (Katzenstein 1990, 15).

Hegemonic stability theory does not seem to have taken us much beyond Waltz’s neorealist claim that “supranational agents” matter only when they receive “the support, or...acquiescence, of the principal states concerned with the matters at hand” (Waltz 1986a, 81). Why then has the regime concept become an integral part of what some now define as the neoliberal paradigm? Might interdependence, regime theory, and hegemonic stability be viewed simply as auxiliary *Realist* concepts, brought together under the new banner of neoliberalism? The only thing liberal about this “new” perspective, it seems, is the title. None of the concepts associated with neoliberalism is novel or exclusively liberal nor, for that matter, exclusively Realist. But their almost exclusive association with neoliberalism has tended to eclipse and/or homogenize other connections. Ironically, the primary intellectual casualty of neoliberalism may be a genuinely liberal understanding of international politics, since the term liberalism has all but disappeared from international relations texts, and those aspects of this diverse tradition thought to be most compatible with Realism siphoned off by the neoliberals.

Rules among great powers, or great power rulers?

It is important to differentiate between common interests and rules when discussing order in any social setting (Bull 1977, 54). As the confused conception and application of regime theory suggests, however, the distinction is a very tricky one. That nuclear superpowers have a shared interest in avoiding war is the sound premise at the heart of deterrence theory and practice, but does it imply the existence of a rule? Indeed, because there is a genuine universality of interest in avoiding all-out nuclear conflict, mutual, self-imposed restraints might account for the nuclear peace as well, or better, than joint nuclear rules of the road (Buzan 1987, 140). The latter in any case appear to be rules of expediency—rules to live or stay alive by—rather than regulatory mechanisms in the regime sense. For a system of security cooperation to also be a regime, its rules must be general imperative principles that go beyond automatic self-deterrence.

Since numerous scholars have pointed out that international cooperation is possible in a world characterized by structural anarchy, in what way, and for what reason, is regime theory necessary? Hedley Bull, for example, challenges persuasively the stark Hobbesian duality of international anarchy and national government, without recourse to anything beyond the traditional insights of international political theory. For regime theory to be useful and necessary, it must account for outcomes that cannot be explained via reference to the existing corpus of international theory and, in international security relations at least, it does not appear to meet this test.

Robert Jervis offers the best articulation of the conditions necessary for the formation of a security regime but, in the process, highlights the very conceptual weaknesses that he seeks to redress. While Jervis notes that interstate cooperation must amount to more than the “following of short-run self-interest” to qualify as a regime, his own example of a security regime—the Concert of Europe—is really a form of international governance. Jervis specifies the primary conditions for the creation of a security regime as follows:

- (1) the great powers must want to establish it
- (2) the participants must believe that others share the value they place on mutual security and cooperation
- (3) all actors must believe that security cannot be provided for by expansion
- (4) war and the individual pursuit of security must be seen as costly.

(Jervis 1982, 173–8)

Using these criteria, Jervis describes the Concert of Europe as the nearest historical approximation of a security regime. The question that he fails to answer, however, is that, if and when these conditions do exist, why would a regime—understood as institutional restraints and regulatory checks on behavior—be necessary, unless as an expedient to the transnational policy ambitions of a hegemonic state or, as in his case, a great power condominium? The Concert of Europe, precisely because it contained elements of a security community, cannot be considered a security regime. While clearly it helped to keep the European peace, this system grew out of a common aversion—fear of renewed war with Napoleonic France. This system did not arrest the machinations of *Realpolitik* in world politics so much as it enshrined them and attempted to set them to work in a way that did not undermine the viability of the international system as a whole. The principles,

norms, rules, and procedures that characterized the Concert system did not need to converge, but already existed, and reflected the interests and expectations of the great powers. Unlike “other” regimes, moreover, the Concert of Europe did not purport to escape the competitive dynamics thought to thwart international cooperation. On the contrary, it sought to codify the existing principles of the balance of power system.

Similar observations can be made about the norms of superpower security cooperation that emerged over the Cold War period. As Bull observes, the bipolar balance of power was “not wholly fortuitous” in its salutary effects, and there was an “element of contrivance present in the ‘rational’ pursuit by the United States, the Soviet Union, and China of policies aimed at preventing the preponderance of any of the others” (Bull 1977, 114). This contrivance, suggests Bull, was particularly marked in US-Soviet relations, where a rough balance of nuclear power became something consciously to be preserved, and left considerable scope for the pursuit of transnational political agendas in their respective spheres of influence. Thus, like the Concert of Europe, great power security cooperation in the post-Second World War system came clearly to exhibit mutually beneficial elements of international governance and quasi-authority. Again, the images evoked by these arrangements are suggestive more of domination than of cooperation (Holsti 1992, 30–57).

In most regime analyses the notion that great powers may have an independent interest in creating regimes is openly acknowledged as the single most common explanation for regime creation. But once created, regimes are hypothesized to contain their own causal dynamics, weakening the explanatory capacity of Realism’s rigid assumptions. Simply put, whatever the motives for regime creation, it is suggested, a given regime is unlikely to serve the interests of its architects in perpetuity. Nevertheless, it remains “difficult to distinguish dominance from leadership in international economic relations,” and doubly difficult to make this distinction in international security relations (Kindleberger 1981, 1).⁷ More to the point, however, the empirical stock of most regime theory has been confined to studies of states and issues *embedded within* hegemonic or bipolar structures, often without any explicit reference to this broader political environment. As Geoffrey Garrett observes, “most studies implicitly assume that the institutions associated with international cooperation have little impact on the political structure of the international system and represent little or no challenge to the sovereignty of nation-states” (Garrett 1992, 535). But while this may be true of Realist-inspired analyses of regimes, it is not

true of, and tends to contradict, the transformative logic of regime theory popularized by the neoliberals examined above. When it comes to the neoliberals, Garrett's generalization should be reversed to read as follows: most studies implicitly assume that the political structure of the international system has little impact on the institutions associated with international cooperation. Relatedly, the regime stress on convergent expectations masks less consensual aspects of international cooperation, conflating issues of governance, authority, and domination in the international system as such with pragmatic, and functional, issues of collaboration and coordination between broadly like-minded actors.

Neoliberalism and the idealist-realist divide

There is in neoliberalism an implicit and explicit agenda to reconcile liberal and Realist international theory. This goal is very much in evidence in neoliberal-inspired regime theory, the dubious prospects of which are now clear in general, but particularly suspect when assessed in light of the idealist-realist debate it purports to transcend. Not content to regard idealism, which neoliberals tend, with a stunning parochialism, to collapse into liberalism (and a strongly American version of liberalism at that) as part of an enduring and fertile conversation with realism, the neoliberals seek to bring these perspectives together in a single perspective. But in borrowing heavily from Realist and purportedly Realist (e.g. neorealist) constructs it is clear that this project has more to do with making idealism more scientific than making Realism more like its old skeptical self in the days before it, like idealism, became harnessed to a disciplinary yoke. As one neoliberal expresses the project's sense of mission, "it is time for a new, more rigorous idealist alternative to realism" (Kober 1990). The monomania inherent in this style of thinking is a hallmark of modern, mainstream American IR, and its impact on international political theory can be charitably described as negative.

Neoliberalism all but usurps liberal international theory, dressing it up in Realist garb, and playing down its essential progressivism for the sake of verisimilitude. And neoliberalism, embracing Realism only half-heartedly, does not marshal fully the theoretical powers of Realism to which it is indebted and attracted. The upshot is that the distinctiveness of both perspectives is eviscerated by this "new paradigm," to the general detriment of international political theory. But, because international relations theory is so much more than a battle over paradigms, neoliberalism's greatest damage to the enterprise resides in

its blurring of the field's distinctive traditional perspectives. Realism and liberalism are not merely discrete orientations, but are theoretical approximations of, and grounded ultimately in, the field's foundational antithesis of realism and idealism.

In deference to its twin muses, neoliberalism is a deliberate compound word that brings together the "neo" part of neorealism with the liberal part of liberal institutionalism. But practitioners of this approach have tended to rely more on its "neo" aspects than its "liberal" ones, merely adding normative emphases culled from the latter to the theoretical framework of the former. This is unsurprising given the long-standing theoretical centrality of Realism, the parsimony of neorealism, and an enduring (if shaken) belief in the necessity and power of paradigms. Assuming for the sake of argument that international theory can and should be conceived as a positivist social science, liberalism seems an unpromising place to start and might, in modern parlance, be described as paradigmatically challenged. But this is the point that neoliberals seem most to misunderstand. It is precisely because it is a rich, protean intellectual tradition, and that international relations is a fundamentally ambiguous subject, that liberal international political theory has not received "systematic presentation" in international texts (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 107). Liberal international theory, like Realism prior to its accession to the modern demands of "analytical rigor," cannot be rendered more scientific without being rendered less realistic, or rather less true to *its* perceptions of international political reality. The dubious achievement of the neoliberals, aided and abetted by the neorealists, is that they manage to corrupt the essence of, and the basis of the distinction between, the realist and liberal traditions on which they claim to build.

5

Idealism, realism and national differences

The British case

Theories do not simply explain or predict, they tell us what possibilities exist for human action and intervention; they define not merely our explanatory possibilities but also our ethical and practical horizons. In this Kantian light epistemology matters, and the stakes are far more considerable than at first sight seem to be the case.

Steve Smith

Since its first awakening as an organized academic discipline in the early part of the twentieth century International Relations has been inextricably bound up with national attitudes, priorities, and interests, first British and, from the 1940s onward, American. It has been suggested that the “very idea that one actually needs a discipline of International Relations may be tied up with a particular world view” (Brown 2000, 214), that “the study of international relations is not an innocent profession,” and that its place “in the university curriculum rests upon utility” (Wallace 1996, 301). Small wonder then that IR is a subject of sustained interest only in countries reasonably placed to make some impact on the processes and interactions that constitute its subject matter. While all countries have a direct stake in the events and processes of world politics, only Britain and the US, self-appointed guardians past and present of the modern liberal trading system, have had the right combination of political, economic, intellectual, and ideological resources necessary to comprehend their individual interests in terms of a global discipline of IR. Paradoxically, if IR were *more* parochial, in the sense of multiple, nationally defined, conceptions of the discipline, it would be more diverse. If this seems like a difficult claim to substantiate, it is precisely because indigenous theoretical entrepreneurship in international relations theory tends to be stifled by

the sort of universalist conception of social science that has dominated the field from its beginning, but has been all-consuming since its Americanization, bolstered as it is by a strong presumption in favor of methodological consensus and uniformity.

Only the most powerful and happily situated of countries can afford the luxury of pretending that their most cherished values and ideas will be shared with equal ardor by everyone else, a universalizing form of parochialism that has clearly spilled over into modern international relations theory. But the discipline's depiction as Anglo-American is based on a view that too readily dismisses the possibility of substantial differences between British and American approaches. In the dominant story of origin IR begins life as a British pseudo-science but, unable fully to escape the shadow of history, philosophy, law, and other cognate fields does not blossom into a free-standing scientific discipline until transplanted into more fertile American soil. The theoretical center of the discipline, as it were, moves from Chatham House to the Council on Foreign Relations. This is a grossly distorted image that fails to recognize, or to allow exploration of, the extent to which international relations theory has evolved differently, and separately, on opposite sides of the Atlantic. That these are distinct conceptions of IR, rather than contrasting approaches within a single, American-dominated discipline, is easily overlooked, precisely because "scientific analysis" ought not to vary from one national setting to another. But British IR is distinguished by its refusal to buy wholeheartedly into the scientific vision, despite its tendency at times to be "remarkably derivative" of American thinking (Wallace 1996, 304). While American experiences, values, expectations, and methodological assumptions about world politics have quietly stifled the expression of other nationally derived conceptions of international relations as an academic discipline, British IR at least constitutes a viable, sustained, largely self-contained, and distinctive alternative conception of the subject.¹

While British IR tended to move towards a form of what Hans Morgenthau calls "nationalistic universalism" in the formative years of the interwar period (Morgenthau 1993, 273), it has never come close to the universalizing methodological zeal of its American counterpart, and retains a healthy degree of detachment from directly political agendas, and much of its earlier conviction that IR is best understood as an interdiscipline straddling the artificial boundaries that mark its elusive autonomy from diplomatic history, political philosophy, and other cognate fields. The point is not that British scholars are any less prone than their American counterparts to neglect theoretical contributions

forged in other national intellectual settings, but that the British conception of IR makes its practitioners less prone to the sort of methodological and epistemological monism that tends to mistake a nationally flavored set of concerns for the concerns of the world as a whole. This skeptical attitude toward the sufficiency of science narrowly construed closely parallels that of early figures in the growth of the American discipline as well, suggesting that the latter's penchant for law-like generalization and scientific self-sufficiency were not inevitable outcomes. Like other fields of social inquiry the development of IR is constrained by the "essential ambiguity of human existence," and the "inherent contestability of... [its] theories..." (Brown 1994, 221). Uniquely, however, the contrasting epistemological attitudes this intellectual reality fosters have in IR solidified into contrasting, nationally influenced conceptions of the subject. The almost total embrace of a positivist/naturalist conception of science in American IR has led to a stunted, self-contained and self-replicating conception of theory that denies the basic contestability of its subject matter, encourages us to forget that many of the theories of international relations predate the discipline that purports to explain its activities, strips the field of its ability to theorize theory itself, and reduces the purpose of IR to describing, and coping with, problems rather than imagining, or trying to construct, alternative worlds. This latter idealist, emancipatory, revolutionist, or similarly described impulse is an inescapable part of social theory that has been either rooted out of American IR, or demoted to the status of mere "value-judgment" by the unrelenting requirement that all meaningful distinctions about knowledge be forced through into the crude dichotomy of "facts" and "values." British IR, by comparison, has never yielded fully to the temptations of an exclusively scientific approach to the subject, and has never insisted that all of its claims to knowledge be logically related to prescription. This is not to suggest that British IR is more idealist than American IR, but that the former as a whole is better equipped to preserve the essential balance of realist and idealist thought as traditionally conceived in international political theory. As such, it exists as an alternative conception of discipline that does not merely help to rectify the one-sidedness of American IR but, in an important sense, constitutes the only official disciplinary avenue for genuine, open reflection on the subject and its theories.

In Britain, for example, theoretical and meta-theoretical discussion constitute an essentially normal disciplinary activity that seems decidedly less prone to the acrimony and mutual intolerance generated

in American debates. It is in British-based journals like *Millennium*, *The Review of International Studies*, and, to a lesser extent, *International Affairs* and *Global Society* that probing philosophical questions can be raised, without raising the specter of theoretical anarchy or appearing to threaten disciplinary integrity. In American-based journals like *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Organization*, and *World Politics*, by contrast, its pretty much business as usual when it comes to IR theory and its perceived applications. These mainly intrapositivist debates revolve around issues pertaining to the methodological application of constructs like game-theory and rational choice, and are dominated by the sorts of neo-neo disputes assessed in the previous chapter. These exchanges can be vigorous, but are best viewed as family squabbles that seldom extend to questioning basic clan values. While some argue that the neo-neo debate has begun to run its course in American IR (Wendt 1992; Cochran 2000), its so-called “constructivist turn” has not freed the American discipline from its self-imposed positivist imprisonment (Crawford 1996, 125–7). There are of course many American scholars who do not accept the legitimacy of this intellectual genealogy, some of whom are strident, even vituperative, critics of its scientific pretensions. But, while broad-brush generalizations about American IR tend to sell these rival conceptualizations short, it is their posture *vis-à-vis* American IR that is the real source of their marginality.² It seems reasonable to suggest, moreover, that the anti-positivist invective of a Richard Ashley is itself inexorably a part of American IR, both in the sense that close proximity to the source of one’s perceived alienation tends to magnify its effect, and in the sense that one form of intellectual extremism easily breeds another (Ashley 1986; Ashley and Walker 1990; Ashley 1996).

It is because American and British IR grew out of similar impulses, under similar circumstances, with a virtually identical substantive focus on the international system as a whole, and with similar historical and cultural experiences on which to draw, that the existence of profound differences between them is of more than passing interest. If the only two “*bona fide*” national parochialisms in the field to date can exhibit decidedly different attitudes to the discipline in spite of their remarkably similar experiences and cultures, the diversity of international relations theory should be that much more pronounced if and when it comes finally to approximate the impressive diversity already manifest in its subject matter. The main point, however, is that IR (even in its current state) is neither an exclusively American nor Anglo-American discipline. Rather it is *both* a distinctively American and British subject.

This is not intended to restate the misleading view that there is a distinctively British place in the evolution of IR as an American social science. On the contrary, this book consciously resists the explicitly evolutionary logic inherent in every retrospective on the field that casts the key figures of international relations scholarship—whatever their nationality—in the role of well-meaning pioneers who didn't quite get things right. In disciplinary lore, it is simply taken for granted that a figure like E.H. Carr was trying to found the sort of science that would soon find clearer articulation, and more fertile soil, on the other side of the Atlantic. This chapter argues that Carr was trying to do nothing of the sort and that he, like many British or British-influenced scholars past and present, exhibits a marked aversion to a science of IR narrowly conceived, a skeptical attitude characteristic of British IR as a whole. The point is not simply that IR in the US and Britain is studied in “very different ways” (Smith 1985, xiii), but that the source of this difference is much more profound than is generally acknowledged, and goes much deeper than contrasting national styles or methodological preferences. Rather, these differences are only external manifestations of a pronounced division emanating from conflicting assumptions about the nature and grounds of knowledge in international relations, and its limits and susceptibility to verification. It is in this largely neglected, epistemological sense that the distinctiveness of American and British perspectives on international relations needs to be assessed, not least because the latter manages successfully to keep alive the idealist-realist tension thought by positivistically inclined scholars to threaten disciplinary viability.

British International Relations and *the* American social science: distinct, but different?

For most chroniclers of IR, its emergence as a free-standing academic discipline is dated from the early 1940s, a period during which the allegedly scattered and unsystematic inquiries of historians, international legal experts, and would-be reformers were superseded by a concerted and explicit attempt to examine the basic and persistent forces thought to underlay international politics (Hoffmann 1977). This narrow standard implied that all previous inquiry, however interesting or germane, lacked the theoretical rigor demanded of “true” science, an idea that has been particularly strong in American scholarship. It is a widely held view that systematic study of international relations is desirable, but this notion has no necessary connection to the disciplinary

issue. When thinkers as different and distant as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bentham made their respective contributions to the study of world politics, for example, they did so with neither the dubious advantage of a discipline, nor the intention of founding one. The widespread practice of treating this material as “predisciplinary” is not merely anachronistic, but closed-minded and peremptory, since it fails to acknowledge, explore, or to even leave room for the possibility that meaningful international relations theory can be sustained outside an explicitly social scientific context. On this view, if IR did not exist it would have to be created. The perversity of this position is obvious, since much of international theory predates the official start of the discipline, though “the seemingly natural existence and operation of the discipline today makes it difficult to appreciate that it has only really been possible to study...[IR] since World War I” (Cherin 1997, 9).

If the American or American-influenced account of growth and progress in *the* discipline tends to go unchallenged in British IR, this is more a product of polite indifference to the disciplinary master narrative than an indication of its veracity. Despite the systematizing efforts of the “English School,” British IR has never been especially concerned about the scientific treatment of international relations, or especially committed to the idea of its complete separation from other fields. As Steve Smith suggests, the evidence on this score is mixed and contradictory, with roughly equal numbers of commentators suggesting that “the subject is studied in essentially the same way” in Britain as the US, or that “it is studied in very different ways” (Smith 1985, xiii; see also Hollis and Smith 1990; Jones 1981). But it is this vacillation precisely which supports the point that the scientific status of the field in Britain is not viewed as a crucial issue, and that different assumptions about the subject, and how it should be studied, must be afoot.

To date, exploration of the similarities and differences between American and British IR has focused on conflicting attitudes toward research methods, history, and social science (Hill 1985, 130). Whatever division exists is usually taken as a matter of degree and reduced to differences of national style or methodological preference, neither of which appear to challenge the American version of IR as a social science. As Martin Hollis and Steve Smith point out, “the social sciences thrive on two intellectual traditions”—scientific explanation and historical understanding—both of which is represented in IR by American and British approaches respectively (Hollis and Smith 1990, 1–15). Similarly, the “English School,” despite its national prefix, explores, more or less systematically, the global concept of

international society, though its conception of the states system is decidedly Eurocentered (Epp 2000) and, according to Barry Buzan, the school fails adequately to distinguish between international system and international society (Buzan 1993, 327). All of these attitudes suggest that British IR, and the positions that originate within it, is distinctive enough from American IR to warrant its own national labels, but commensurate enough with the American version of the discipline to be considered a locally adapted extension of its overall development. This is despite the irony that most of what is distinctive and suggestive about the British discipline developed before the supposed birth of IR as an American social science.

If these attitudes cannot be supported, how did they come about in the first place, and why are they so firmly entrenched? Much of the answer can be found in the essentially self-contained nature of American IR and its corresponding failure, or congenital incapacity, to take note of theoretical constructs forged in different national research communities, or to resist the colonizer's instinct to regard all things interesting but different as candidates for inclusion within their own categories of knowledge, theory, and science. Under conditions of this sort, the idea of competing or rival perspectives to American IR, if and when they are acknowledged, becomes a polite fiction. Another part of the problem can be attributed to a marked hesitancy, itself a characteristic feature of British IR, to vigorously assert its difference in the face of American dominance, partly because theorizing in Britain is as susceptible to the lure of trendsetting American research agendas as it is anywhere else, and partly because of a curiously contradictory mix of intellectual self-righteousness and self-deprecation (Wallace 1996, 304). Also, as noted above, state-of-the-art-type reflection is simply not a key part of British IR. Finally, at least part of the British discipline's ambivalent attitude to scientific techniques may be reducible to a simple contingency: a deemphasis of, and dearth of training in, the quantitative methods so central to what counts as an IR education in America.³

Since the main obstacle to grasping fully the distinctiveness and difference of British IR is the American discipline that supposedly has superseded and assimilated it, some consideration of how this hegemonic process works is in order before turning to the issue of what precisely is characteristic about British IR, and separates its conception of the discipline from that of its American counterpart. The example of the English School⁴ (Jones 1981; Buzan 1993), and its encounter with the essentially American enterprise of international regime theory explored in [chapter four](#), nicely illustrates the dynamic at work.

Despite a general propensity to share with their American counterparts the idea that IR is a self-contained and distinct subject matter, members of the English School do not feature prominently in American IR courses, and this school (or its synonyms) seldom makes the index or glossary of major American IR textbooks. Thus, despite being part of the same intellectual tradition, and addressing virtually identical substantive phenomena, these bodies of theory exist largely independently of one another. Buzan, whose declared objective is to bring these bodies of theory together, attributes their separation, vaguely, to the “peculiarities of academic discourse” (Buzan 1993, 328). What Buzan fails to acknowledge is that one of the peculiarities in question is the propensity of American IR to set the standards via which approaches like the English School will be judged worthy of attention. Paradoxically, favorable judgments of worth, like the one made by Buzan (who, incidentally, is not an American) must spell the beginning of the end of the national distinctiveness of the English School since worth is defined in terms of eligibility for assimilation into the American science of regime analysis. The reasons for this are not overtly parochial and nationalistic, but methodological and scientific. The “problem” with the English School is not that it is British, but that it is “better developed as a historical than as a theoretical concept” (Buzan 1993, 329). It is simply assumed that historical understanding is not a sort of theory in its own right, and we are left to admire the “pattern-seeking instincts” of an E.H.Carr or a Martin Wight, but not the “eccentricity” of their expression (Buzan 1993, 329; see also Hoffmann 1977). Seen in this light, Buzan’s suggestion that regime theory and the English School have been detached from one another due to the “peculiarities of academic discourse” seems remarkably understated, since the peculiarities in question appear to have profound implications for the study of international relations, and to arise from the field’s inherent propensity toward national parochialisms.

Buzan’s attempt to progressively change and update the English School, and bring it into the fold of American IR is, like the synthesizing proclivities of regime theorists in general, blithely indifferent to the possibility that those theorists who comprise its membership might actually be content to understand international society as a largely historical phenomenon. This would certainly help to account for the English School’s general antipathy to the investigative techniques of American IR, a dispute trivialized by Roy Jones as “little more than a family squabble” (Jones 1981, 7). Thus, between Jones’ “case for closure” of the English School (the merits of which

seem dubious) and Buzan's case for its assimilation into American IR, the future of the English School (outside of Britain and Australia at least) does not look bright. It also suggests that the growth of non-American scholarship is not likely to have much significance in the discipline as it is presently conceived in American IR. Whether or not this essentially British approach should be characterized as a distinct school misses the point that, despite being a substantial literature, and a supposed part of the first major growth pole of IR in the early part of the twentieth century, it has been of marginal (or largely instrumental) value to the new American stewards of *the* discipline. That so central a body of theory should fair so badly can only make us wonder about the prospects for distinctive approaches fashioned in national settings farther removed from the field's core.

The English School is reflective of, but not synonymous with, a characteristically British attitude to IR. In the face of American IR's universal aspirations, moreover, the prefix "English," and the suffix "school," can amount to a form of self-imposed incarceration within the American discipline since it alone can get by without a national prefix, and with the unspoken presumption that its criteria are alone sufficient to decide what constitutes an IR school. It is less the case that there is a distinctively British place within IR (as the idea of an "English School," perhaps inadvertently, suggests) than there is a distinctively British attitude to the subject—a distinctively British discipline of IR. It now remains only to excavate the British discipline from beneath the crushing, paradoxical cosmopolitanism of the American discipline.

"A British social science: International Relations"

It seems a reasonable minimal requirement that anything purporting to be a theory of international relations should concern itself with the actual practices of the subject. From the beginning, however, the field's investigators have had to grapple with two basic intellectual realities: (1) "the priority of problems *within* the field" (Holsti 1985, 11) may be contested, and; (2) the way in which facts are constructed may be challenged. The first issue pertains to what is typically regarded as the "normal" business of international relations research, while the second raises problems of a philosophical or "meta-theoretical" nature. In the American conception of IR as a social science, the notion of competing theoretical traditions tends exclusively to refer to disputes internal to a discipline that cannot itself be theorized. As Immanuel Wallerstein observes, "for a word so widely used, what constitutes a 'discipline' is

seldom discussed” (Wallerstein 1992, 22). Thus, despite the tendency to understand the field as the culmination of a series of “great debates,” the first serious and sustained discussion of all aspects of the theory question in international relations has only recently emerged. Ironically, with their usual determination to find continuity and meaning in even the most unpromising places, the chroniclers of the field have taken to calling these first inklings of sustained discipline-defining discussion the “third debate” or, in the case of Ole Waever, the “fourth debate” (Waever 1996), despite its marked departure from, and explicit rejection of, the usual disciplinary story.

Prior to the arrival of critical theory, the dominant (American-) inspired view of IR could rest comfortably on unspoken presuppositions. The continuing, almost total, absence of meta-theoretical discussion in the official channels of American IR today suggests that, here at least, disciplinary self-evaluation remains a non-starter. The previously “alien” insights of critical theory have, however, found fertile soil in British IR which now, more than ever, seems almost entirely detached from the American discipline. This is partly because the architects of the British discipline have never been especially clear about the location of the field’s boundaries, committed to their sanctity, or willing to demarcate them with the zeal evident in American IR. But it is also because of a characteristically British view that no scientific schema, however subtle and sensitive its investigative techniques, can adequately explain all of international relations, since it is as much a subject about ideas and ideals as a subject concerned with facts (Carr 1946, 93; Banks 1984, 3; Hollis and Smith 1990, 90). It is this general epistemological attitude that accounts for what Stanley Hoffmann calls the “failure” of British IR to found the scientific treatment of the subject, the intellectual atmosphere for which could only be found in America (Hoffmann 1977). Hoffmann’s remarks are aimed primarily at E.H.Carr, whose alleged effort and failure to pioneer a scientific rendering of IR suggested that British approaches had the necessary “pattern-seeking instincts” (Buzan 1993), but was too imbued with the historian’s sensitivity to the unique. But it is a funny sort of criticism that castigates Carr, and British IR generally, for failing to accomplish what he/it was not trying to accomplish. Hoffmann’s evaluation of British IR is not only tendered with the clear advantage of hindsight, but from the very scientific standpoint that British versions of the discipline have tended actively to resist. The assumption that everything which fails to measure up to the American standard of disciplinarity must be “pre” or “pseudo” scientific, rather than merely different, is the

product of a long-term intellectual domination that has created an academic subject international in methodological scope, but not in national complexion.

The alleged eccentricity, irresolution or scientifically muddled character of British IR is a tired cluster of stereotypes that ought to be put to bed. Since much of this misinformed impression, and much of what is distinctive about British IR, derives from Carr's *The Twenty Years Crisis*, it is useful to explore his position, and analyses of it, in a little more depth. It is generally assumed, *a la* Hoffmann, that Carr was a well-intentioned, but ultimately confused, would-be architect of a science of international politics. Hoffmann's position is well known. Other commentators, however, have made similar claims. Martin Griffiths, for example, alleges that there is in Carr's conception of international thought an implied transcendence of its idealist/utopian and realist streams that is "frustratingly defeated" by Carr himself (Griffiths 1992, 34). In a similar vein, Ken Booth describes *The Twenty Years Crisis* as a "flawed" work that demonstrates Carr's confusion over "where he stood in relation to utopianism and realism" (Booth 1991, 530). As Paul Howe puts it, the general consensus on Carr's defining work is that it "offers occasional glimmers of insight but fails to provide a cogent and comprehensive theory of international relations" (Howe 1994, 277). The main failing of Carr, it is usually alleged, is that he does not give his reader/policy maker much indication of how to combine his two planes of utopianism and realism, nor does he offer a consistent prescription. Criticisms of this sort fail to recognize, however, that Carr's brilliant polemic is offered less as a proto-Realist theory of IR than a deliberately and ineradicably dualistic conception of the subject and its theories *per se*. Carr's critics, in other words, tend to invoke an evaluative standard that is entirely at odds with the view of international theory laid out in *The Twenty Years Crisis*: namely, that the field is composed of dual epistemological impulses—idealism/utopianism and realism—that cannot be eradicated or reconciled. Carr is explicit in his claim that utopia and reality belong to "two different planes which can never meet;" far from regarding these as barriers to theory, as would a positivist, he argues that "sound political thought must be based on elements of both utopia and reality" (Carr 1946, 93). There is nothing muddled or ambiguous here, particularly since Carr gives no indication that he wants to help found a science of IR along positivist lines.

While true that Carr is not precise about the relationship between utopian and realist thought, ideas about theory are never as

exact as the artificially precise paradigms to which they might tend. Since theorists of international relations never consistently adhere to one of these philosophical principles at the expense of the other, Carr's distinction has dubious classificatory value. But the realist-idealist antinomy is not a taxonomic ordering device. Classification, in any case, is a subsidiary aspect of international theory; it is a means to theoretical inquiry, not its end point. As Martin Wight observes:

In all political and historical studies the purpose of building pigeon-holes is to reassure oneself that the raw material does *not* fit into them. Classification becomes valuable, in humane studies, only at the point where it breaks down.

(As cited in Yost 1994, 267–8; emphasis in original)

Ideas, facts, and ideas about facts in international relations cannot be boxed with the precision demanded by so many of its practitioners. This is because international relations theory and research involves much more than the empirical validation of our presuppositions. It also involves a recurring and irresolvable dispute about what is to be done—and what can be done—about the facts of international relations, regardless of how these are isolated, defined, or constructed.

The attitude apparent in Carr's work might be called one of epistemological open-mindedness, a posture that tends to characterize British reflection on theory in general, and accounts for its relatively enthusiastic embrace of critical international theory. Where the American discipline tends to embrace or reject new approaches strictly on the basis of their ability to generate testable research programmes, British IR tends to be open and receptive to anything that helps in the quest for a better theory, or better theory about theories. While there are concerns that such receptivity can go too far (Wallace 1996, 304), Michael Banks' depiction of the debate between critical and traditional theorists as the "richest, most promising and exciting [debate] we have ever had" (Banks 1986, 17) has no analog in American IR where debate is a less relevant term than "uncivil war" (Holsti 2000). The American attitude is perhaps best summed up by Alexander Wendt's claim that "philosophies of science are not theories of international relations" (Wendt 1992, 425).

The idea that philosophy and science—theory and ideas about theory—are entirely separate activities is treated with a justified skepticism in British IR. As Charles Reynolds suggests, it is probably impossible "to write about international politics and, at the same time, to write about

writing about international politics” (Reynolds 1973, vii). The interconnectedness of all intellectual activities can, and probably should, be occasionally ignored for the sake of analysis, but it should never be forgotten. Because the manner in which the problems of world politics are conceptualized depends ultimately, if often implicitly, on philosophical assumptions, it is futile to pretend that issues of epistemology do not concern us. The fact/value, is/ought distinction so sacred to American IR is theoretically useful, but it is easy to forget that it is only an analytical convenience. As the viability and vitality of British IR suggests, acceptance of this reality does not preclude thinking about IR as a coherent field. Rather, British IR demonstrates that world politics can be conceived as a special kind of science that must, on the one hand, remain focused on facts and, on the other hand, be attentive to how these are isolated and constructed.

Ironically, the failure to respond adequately to the issues posed by the epistemological diversity of theory in international relations seems to have done more to isolate and imperil the American-defined discipline than the slings and arrows of the critical theorists. This is because, while many of the issues raised in this controversy are peripheral to the purpose of international theory as traditionally defined, deeper, more basic issues related to knowing inhabit the field and are always relevant. There may be profound philosophical differences at play which may, or may not, be traceable to the numinous workings of culture and nationality. None of this makes a necessary virtue of relativism and skepticism, nor automatically undermines the shared sense of vocation that defines any scholarly community. Not if we remember that the central challenge posed by the clash of differing views over theory in international relations is to try to “transcend diversity without substituting a new orthodoxy for the old one” (Giddens, as cited in Lapid 1989, 236). The idea of genuine and irreconcilable differences in international theory is not compatible with the sort of consensus demanded by IR as an American social science, but it is compatible with a conceptual framework capable of posing basic questions about the subject (Hoffmann 1960, 7–10). Again it is Carr who most convincingly demonstrates that normative and empirical approaches to international theory can and must be connected to a wider prospect if the field is to be properly attuned to the elusive realities it must confront. That this is Carr’s most distinctive contribution to the development of British IR is easy to overlook, not simply because of a tendency to gauge his contribution in the afterlight of a scientific framework to which he did not aspire, but because his most immediate purpose was to deal with a

crisis of world politics. The subsequent, seemingly perpetual, crisis in international relations theory is entirely another matter, but Carr's notion of irreconcilable, mutually necessary and constitutive intellectual impulses, may help here too.

Intimations of the idea that the way to knowledge in IR lays inescapably along multiple paths pervade British IR but are seldom followed to their logical conclusion: that they form the basis of a distinctively British discipline. It is often suggested that there is something characteristic about British IR, but the foundation for this singularity is not generally taken to be epistemological in origin. Again, attention is directed to different methodological preferences which tend to reflect the positivist logic characteristic of American IR, but little of its conviction and fervor (Hollis and Smith 1990; Hill 1985). As Hayward Alker suggests, however, "methodologies" (or methods) are best thought of as "applied epistemologies using particular techniques" (Alker 1992, 350). Despite its failure always openly to acknowledge its debts, British IR's tradition of "historical understanding," philosophical subtlety, and impatience for the quick fixes of positivist science derives from a conception of the subject similar to, and influenced by, that of Carr. British IR, as Carr might have it, is "the science not only of what is, but of what ought to be" (Carr 1946:5); it is not exclusively realist or idealist, but "stands uniquely at the nexus of the great issues of peace and war," "theories of the good life" and "theories of survival," "ethics of responsibility" and "ethics of conviction," and political theory and governmental practice (Carr 1946, 11–21; Butterfield and Wight 1966, 18; Booth 1991, 528). The point of British IR, Carr might add, is not to reconcile utopia and reality, so much as to realize that "sound political thought" about the subject will always endeavor to combine "purpose with observation and analysis" (Carr 1946, 10).

The affirmation of philosophical diversity in international relations theory does not invalidate its aspirations to the status of discipline, but suggests that these should be a good deal more modest than most observers would like. The centrally described antinomy idealism-realism, for example, does not threaten the viability of IR, so much as the pervasive assumption that a discipline requires homogeneity, and convergence of belief threatens to obscure the antinomy of idealism-realism. Full consensus is not a realistic objective, or necessary prerequisite, for international theory. Yet the architects of what was to become a distinctively scientific, aphilosophical, and ahistorical American science of IR shared the idea that there was a constant, permanent interplay between normative and empirical thought

in international politics, and that this derived from two distinct types of theory (Hoffmann 1960; 1965; Morgenthau 1993).⁵ The first type of theory, writes Hoffmann, is “produced by political philosophy,” while the latter is produced by modern science (Hoffmann 1960, 8–10). And Hans Morgenthau, despite his alleged role as midwife to the birth of the American social science of IR, is still criticized by neorealists (the self-proclaimed “real” scientists of IR) for failing to transcend the methodological individualism of political theory and its precarious reliance on the “metaphysics of fallen man” (Ashley 1986, 261; Waltz 1979; 1990, 21–37). But Morgenthau seemed inadvertently to overstate the case for realism, by understating the case for idealism. His attack on utopian science, for example, clearly demonstrated an antipathy for *all* attempts to render the subject scientific in the narrow positivist sense:

our age is forever seeking for the...magic formula, which, mechanically applied, will produce the desired result and... substitute for the uncertainties and risks of political action the certitude of rational calculation. However, what the seekers after the magic formula want is simple, rational, mechanical; what they have to deal with is complicated, irrational, incalculable. As a consequence they are compelled, in order to present at least the semblance of scientific solutions, to simplify the reality of international politics and to rely upon what one might call the “method of the single cause.”

(Morgenthau 1993, 45)

Morgenthau’s skepticism about the “magic formula” applies equally to the “Realist science” that, paradoxically, he is widely believed to have founded. Carr, Morgenthau, and Hoffmann shared broadly similar views of the inherent ambiguity of their subject, but all are now viewed retrospectively as “pioneers” of a “new” mono-science, blinding us to the subtlety and richness of their insights in the process. Why, however, has the epistemological attitude characteristic of this era survived only in British IR?

Part of the reason is that British IR has always managed at least partly to tune out what Christopher Hill calls the “siren song of policy relevance,” a distraction that can threaten the intellectual freedom necessary to the development of an academic field (Hill and Beshoff 1994; Wallace 1996; Brown 2000). As Wallace suggests, the danger inherent in this attitude is that theory can become “*too* detached from the world of practice...too fond of theory (and meta-theory)...too

self-indulgent, and...too self-righteous” (Wallace 1996, 304; emphasis in original). The point, however, is that in British IR at least the appropriate role of theory and the theorist is a practically relevant consideration (i.e. there are no automatic assumptions about what constitutes real theory). Another part of the distinctively British tolerance—or rather simple acceptance—of epistemological diversity can be credited to the discipline’s slow emergence at the juncture of cognate fields like diplomatic history, international law, and political philosophy. In many senses British IR has always remained an inter-discipline in deference to the realization that the field did not spring *ex nihilo* from the imagination of scholars in the 1920s but has, in some form or other, always existed. This has allowed British IR to eschew the progressive, hubristic logic of American IR and its depiction of cognate fields as merely primitive, exploratory paths on the road to the more thorough systematic analyses characteristic of “real” science. In viewing these others fields as constituent elements of a more holistic tradition of international relations theory, British IR has remained more attuned to its intellectual identity, more aware of its theoretical possibilities and limitations and more open to new approaches.

That the distinctiveness of British IR is epistemologically grounded might be easier to appreciate if Carr had not so vigorously exposed and punctured the pretensions of “utopian science.” Despite the perceived legacy of his argument as a sort of running dog for the new “Realist Science” of IR, Carr (and, for that matter, Morgenthau) saw in idealism an historically peculiar manifestation of a generic flaw in international thought *per se*: its persistent “failure to understand” that its standards are always rooted in existing reality (Carr 1946, 14). In the case of utopianism, this failure takes the form of an undue faith in the power of progressive ideals to overcome unpleasant realities. In the case of realism, this failure takes the form on an undue pessimism that the unpleasant realities of world politics are beyond the power of amendment. Carr would have been equally troubled by what Banks describes as the “intellectual totalitarianism” of the Realist school, whose chief casualty has been an “entire set of liberal-progressive ideas... in our own time” (Banks 1986, 11). In their philosophical sense, then, realism and idealism are attributes of thought, or epistemological orientations, that run perpetually through discourses on international relations and transcend the distorted, dogmatic paradigms that have tended to wear these labels in the modern, Americanized version of IR (Griffiths 1992; Crawford 1996, 22–6; Berki 1970, 84). What is distinctive about Carr, and British IR scholars in general, is that they

tend to need no reminder of the richly contextual nature of the enterprise. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this posture of quiet intellectual self-assurance which has helped to keep the really characteristically British aspects of the field largely out of view, thus contributing to the false and intellectually stultifying impression that IR is an exclusively American social science.

Idealism and realism in International Relations: an Atlantic divide?

It is remarkable that a field forged at the intersection of multiple perspectives should develop so marked a preference for intellectual unity. Seen in this light, it is not the recent advent of lively disagreements about theory in IR that is alien and strange, but their relative absence over the past several decades. In the alleged American heartland of IR, however, there is little evidence of the recrudescence of theory or a genuine reevaluation of *the* discipline. It is worth noting, for example, that the most important annual general meeting of IR scholars—the International Studies Association (ISA)—does not even have a standing section dedicated to IR theory.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that to proclaim the inherent diversity of international theory is to utter a heresy; it is to question not merely its implicit purpose (to identify and solve real world problems) but the very idea that it can have any conception of purpose that is stable. Consider, for example, Robert Cox's famous proclamation of 1986:

Theory is always for someone and for some purpose. All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space. The world is seen from a standpoint definable in terms of nation or social class, of dominance or subordination, of rising or declining power, of a sense of immobility or of present crisis, of past experience, and of hopes and expectations for the future.

(Cox 1986, 207)

What ought to be a truism—that theory cannot be divorced from its temporal and spatial context—is automatic disciplinary treason. The prevailing American view of theory in IR is that it must do precisely what Cox says it cannot, and that its disciplinary status hinges vitally on an ability to construct generalizations that abstract from unique events,

particular contexts, or individual/national idiosyncrasies. The subject matter (or “analytical units”) of IR, whether states, or the individuals and groups that compose them, is conceptualized in terms of sameness. The literature abounds with fictitious constructs like the “rational-maximizer,” the “rational-egoist,” and “unit-functional similarity.” This insistence on sameness does not stop at the subject matter, but extends to the individuals engaged in its study. To be a “theorist” of IR is to adopt a particular vocabulary, and to employ a particular set of theoretical tools.

At first, this emphasis on uniformity appears like a necessary prerequisite to the construction of a genuinely international discourse on world politics. But nothing could be further from the truth. Just as Esperanto’s attempt to construct an artificial international language was based chiefly on words common to the major European languages, the attempt to construct a common theoretical language for IR has been based on the concepts and idioms of the “great powers,” whose experiences to date have defined, and comprised, the subject. Just as many would now suggest that there is only one great power (America), so too they tend to accept only one legitimate (American) conception of theory.

It is only in breaking free of consensus-based disciplinary models that the inherent pluralism of international relations theory can reemerge. This is demonstrated by the viability of a British perspective in which idealism and realism retain something of their original meaning, distinct from their distorted paradigmatic representation as more and less naive assessments for the prospects of an unproblematically defined progress. In British IR, the idealist-realist divide remains more or less true to its origins as an ontological foundation, the outward expression of a deep epistemological dualism rooted in competing assessments of human nature and endlessly mirrored in international affairs. Thus, idealism and realism are not traditions of international relations theory, but philosophical currents that run through it, and predate the emergence of its misleading depiction as a methodologically unified discipline.

The inescapably normative and empirical dimensions of international politics can always be counted on to generate conflicting assessments of the purpose, limit, and status of its theories, and to pose deeper questions about the discipline as a whole. Representations of this divide echo throughout British IR, and—with a very keen ear— can be heard faintly in the American heartland as well. While these conflicting epistemological attitudes are manifested differently in different

theoretical locales, they are expressed consistently in terms that stress the empirical versus normative functions of inquiry. Expressed in the nomenclature of positive science, the intellectual preferences of international theorists have tended to bifurcate across a central “dyad.” This theme is evident in virtually every international relations textbook, though differences in labeling are evident. In American IR textbooks, this axis of contention is typically reduced to realist versus idealist insights, but these are treated as paradigmatic expressions of respectively cynical or optimistic assessments of the possibilities for an unproblematic “progress” in international affairs, and not as conflicting philosophical principles about how to study them. Though there is an obvious affinity between realist and idealist principles as meta-theoretical constructs, and the paradigmatic or conventional IR use of the terms, the “connections are not automatic and embraced by all” (Hollis and Smith 1990, 11). The same antinomy can be seen lurking behind other pairings as well (for example, explanatory versus historical, diagnostic versus predictive, rationalist versus reflective, scientific and non-scientific, conceptions of theory, and so on).

It is of obvious pedagogical value to conceive of the dualistic nature of international theory in either/or terms, but this convenient text-book device can also be misleading. While progress in international relations theory is thought widely to be contingent upon the ability of its practitioners to transcend the age-old dichotomy of realism-idealism, it is far from evident that this antinomy can or should be transcended. This philosophical tension clearly impedes the construction of a global theory, and a monistic vision of discipline. But, as Carr observed prior to the scientific fervor that he helped unwittingly to inaugurate, international politics is “the science not only of what is, but of what ought to be” (Carr 1946, 10 and 529–31).

While Carr’s contribution to international relations theory is seldom seen in this meta-theoretical light, British IR continues to take the philosophical diversity of the subject seriously, and not as an inconvenient “dispute” to be transcended (see for example Reynolds 1973; Bull 1977; Smith 1985; Hollis and Smith 1990; Griffiths 1992; Brown 1994). It is in this sense, and in this national research community, that the most authentic and compelling depiction of the subject can be located, but not without the benefit of hindsight. The distinctiveness of British IR does not reside in an explicit acknowledgment of Carr *per se* (whose *The Twenty Years Crisis* is hardly of topical historical interest) but in a conception of the subject broadly similar to his. But Carr’s work, and *The Twenty Years Crisis* in

particular, remains untainted by the intellectual straightjacket into which modern retrospectives on the discipline seek to place it. But, because the usefulness of his observations in guiding the theory and practice of international politics is suspect, his greatest contribution tends to be overlooked. That contribution is a lucid description of international relations as a special kind of subject. Rather than a predisciplinary relic along the road to IR, his conception of theory is based on an enduring and irreconcilable tension that itself sets the intellectual boundaries of the field, and is an especially pointed representation of a distinctively British penchant to view international relations as a study in contrasting ideas.

6

A discipline pas de comme les autres?

International Relations and the “real” problem of theoretical pluralism

A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite,
but it belongs to the same style of politics.

Michael Oakeshott

Not so long ago the modern academic discipline of International Relations was regarded by many as the world politics branch of a broader enterprise guided by empirical, “value-free” investigation of an unchanging external reality, the conviction that only its “facts” were worthy of rational investigation, and the belief that investigation of this sort was alone worthy of the label “science.” It now seems clear, however, that the architects of IR had been blinded by ambition, constructing a social scientific version of the *RMS Titanic* that, like the project conceived by the overzealous builders of the White Star Line, was destined to founder on its own unrealistic aspirations. Conceived in the same era, the impulses behind the construction of both projects were cultivated by a naively optimistic assessment of the prospects for human mastery of the physical and social world. But it was not until the early 1980s that IR sailed unsuspectingly into its iceberg, a diverse concretion of critical social theories aimed squarely at the soft underbelly of positivist-rationalist mono-science. Like the passengers on the *Titanic*, most on board the disciplinary view felt nothing in the first moments of its inevitable encounter with destruction, while some, less distracted by the normal activities of shipboard life, felt the dull thud of impending crisis, and others still, closer to its point of entry, were quick to apprehend the danger posed by the incoming torrent. Unlike the *Titanic*, however, the conventional disciplinary depiction of IR refuses fully to sink from view. While clearly foundering nobody seems able to agree on what best to do, as some plunge headlong into the abyss, others scramble for lifeboats, cling to swamped decks, or try to organize

salvage parties. But slowly, inexorably, the narrowly scientific version of IR is disappearing into the murky, unfathomable depths of theoretical relativism.

The first to signal the coming crisis for IR was Richard Ashley whose now infamous attacks on “scientific realism” can be seen as the opening salvo in what has become a disciplinary “uncivil war” (Holsti 2000). Ashley took issue with the purportedly objective logic of “instrumental” or “technical” rationality characteristic of positivist science, as manifested particularly in the “scientific realism” (or neorealism) championed by Kenneth Waltz, a framework dominant in shaping theoretical discourse throughout the 1980s and still influential today, particularly in American debates (Ashley 1986, 282–6). Ashley’s attack on positivism has been many-sided, but, like the broader dissenting discourse it has helped to foster and shape, tends to emphasize and reject the narrowness of customary attitudes to theory in IR. But the very methodological hegemony against which Ashley has railed, and the pluralism he continues to champion with a seemingly limitless and growing vigor, ensured his immediate and ongoing marginality. Though today swamped by a bewildering array of “new” facts and methodologies, many continue to ignore the increasingly obvious reality that IR is a disciplinary wreck (Brown 1994; Devetak 1996; Jarvis 2000a). Small wonder then that Ashley’s forewarning attracted only scant attention, and bemused reaction, in the relatively calmer currents of the early 1980s.

Largely cut off from (and badly lagging behind) debates and developments in the wider sphere of social theory, IR students have been dependent on expositors like Ashley to navigate a largely alien set of discourses, leaving themselves at the mercy of second-hand interpretation, and prone to the confusion that arises inevitably upon first encountering an exotic language. Consequently, both the disciples and opponents of the “new” thinking may be less than fully enlightened as to its sources, contexts and purposes, or aware of important distinctions (Brown 1994, 214). What matters more, as always it seems, is that every approach arising outside the discipline of IR can be made to fit the agenda of previously defined, partisan positions within it. Almost instantaneously, for example, this initial incursion of extra-disciplinary theorizing was internalized as a disciplinary dispute called the “third debate,”¹ a label that has falsely implied continuity with previous disagreements, and glossed over the explicitly anti-disciplinary character of much of this theorizing. As I argue below, none of this appears to have been done consciously. On the contrary, a universally

conceived science generates automatic, inborn responses that, from within the confines of such a framework, cannot themselves be seen as a necessary or legitimate matter of investigation. But whatever its source, the failure of IR theorists immediately to grasp the nature and depth of the challenges posed by critical social theory has left the discipline badly adrift, and its adherents deeply divided over what to do about it.

The exotic medley of approaches compassed by the term “critical theory” (defined below) offer sufficient grounds to accept, and even welcome, the attempt by much of this literature to scuttle the discipline of IR as narrowly conceived. But the attempt to turn IR into a major battlefield in the larger war between modernist and post-/ anti-modernist discourses creates a sense of disjuncture between past and present international relations theorizing every bit as distorted as the disciplinary caricature it purports to displace. Indeed, many of the discipline’s most vociferous critics do not even manage to break free of the sort of interparadigmatic wrangling characteristic of modern IR scholarship at its worst. Hence, one of the greatest paradoxes of the new thinking in IR is that, for all of its penetrating skepticism and rhetorical commitment to toleration, its adherents have failed largely to distinguish between the traditional, predisciplinary richness of international relations theory, and the narrowed version of the enterprise that has come to subsume, displace, or synthesize all other visions. Ashley at first looks like an exception, citing scientific realism’s betrayal of a more sophisticated, protean heritage of philosophical realism (Ashley 1986, 260). But Ashley, like many of those who have followed him, is more interested in pummeling IR into a seamless web of individualized perspectives on an inherently unstable, and eminently malleable, subject than resuscitating its “classical heritage.” Thus, despite profound differences, the declared adherents and opponents of IR have something important in common: an equally deficient appreciation of the value of predisciplinary thinking, and equally limited capacity to imagine a discipline reconstituted along classical lines.

This final chapter argues that, in its earliest and least extreme forms, the new critical scholarship in IR represents a resurgence of the age-old ideal of human emancipation and autonomy, this time expressed as liberation from the intellectually enervating assumptions that undergird positivist versions of science and rationality, and the political and ethical impoverishment this purportedly natural, scientific, and non-partisan view of the world entails. While the view that social-political theory is itself both a mode of practice and vehicle for human-directed change has an ancient pedigree, it was raised to new prominence in modernist

discourses, thanks largely to the Enlightenment doctrine of rationality and progress, under which it achieved the status of a virtual truism. Yet the supposedly modernist discipline of IR has been anything but progressive and liberationist in this sense, not, at least, since expunging the allegedly utopian excesses of its founding figures, not to mention the fate of classical Marxist theory which, despite its status as the foremost example of emancipatory thinking in the modern age, has been all but excluded from the theoretical literature of IR (Holsti 1985, 62), and is only now finding its way into debate via the international political economy literature (Halliday 1987; 1994; Gill and Law 1988; Tooze 1988; Murphy and Tooze 1991; Rosenberg 1994), and the rich array of Marxist-inspired, but quite distinct, perspectives captured under the umbrella term of critical theory.

The positivist attempt to divorce theory from practice is made in the name of “value-neutrality,” but founders on the reality that every statement about values—including the claim that they can and should be regarded as an impediment to intellectual progress—is an expression of one of many possible partisan points of view, the veracity of which cannot be settled by appeal to any ultimate authority. Hence, any view of the social-political world that pushes too hard in the direction of agency and emancipation on the one hand, or necessity and constraint on the other, is utopian, a label in IR discourse usually reserved strictly for advocates of change. Consider, however, whether E.H.Carr’s depiction of classical political economy as a utopian science does not apply equally well to neorealism: “the new science was based primarily on a negation of existing reality and on certain artificial and unverified generalizations about the behaviour of a hypothetical economic man” (Carr 1946, 6–7). Seen in this light, the advent of the liberationist modalities characteristic of the early stages of the third debate, far from challenging the classical purpose of international relations theorizing, helped to restore the essential idealist-realist balance on which it has always tended to rest.

More recently, however, this scholarship has been dominated by advocates of a more extreme agenda bent less on broadening our conceptions of moral and ethical truth in international relations, than throwing all claims to reason, objectivity, and knowledge out the window. Ashley, who continues to sit in the vanguard of critical scholarship, has been instrumental in orchestrating its conspicuous shift in commitment, from the distinctly modernist idea that theory is a potentially emancipatory instrument to a project animated by a deep suspicion, and rejection, of every aspect of modernist reasoning and

argument. What began as an attempt to restore to international relations theory the critical-evaluative function expunged by neorealism, has become a full frontal assault on all modernist (i.e. foundationalist) theoretical precepts. The discipline of IR, on this view, cannot be reconstituted—it can, and must, be deconstructed. Perversely, however, the best-known advocates of this extreme view publish in IR journals, teach IR courses, engage IR scholars in debate (if that’s an acceptable term for what often amounts to undisclosed mutual hostility and contempt) and are described in mainstream texts as exponents of the “postmodernist school” of IR (see for examples Kegley 1995, 36; Nossal 1998, 17–18). The problem, simply put, is that the self-styled advocates of postmodernist approaches to international politics do not simply reject dominant and orthodox approaches to IR theory, but the very disciplinary framework in which they themselves have clearly chosen to operate, lamenting all the while their marginality. This chapter suggests, however, that they are not marginal enough, since the point of this scholarship must surely be to escape the “establishment,” not to engage and become part of it. This, one of several basic conundrums associated with the third debate, is explored below.

The basic argument of the chapter is that, in its most extreme and increasingly prevalent forms, critical IR theory—with Ashley at its head—demonstrates a deepening commitment to a totalizing conception of cognitive and moral relativism that merely mirrors, and reverses, the sweeping categorical imperatives characteristic of main-stream IR, making this “liberationist” agenda oddly reminiscent of the very project it purports to reject. Thus, despite its initially refreshing change from the narrow strictures of positivist mono-science, there is not much real emancipation to be found in the open-ended pluralism, and unabashed relativism, of postmodern IR, and little reason to believe that the third debate can lead to genuine disciplinary renewal. On the contrary, it merely juxtaposes one set of unpalatable, extreme, and exclusive visions of IR with another, and sometimes looks like little more than a power play between ideological rivals intent on taking command of a slowly sinking vessel, with one group firmly in command of the helm, and the other grasping for a piece of the wheel. In keeping with the argument above, the only viable and desirable intellectual foundation for international relations is one that can accommodate both an understanding of existing reality, and a capacity to envision and enact meaningful change, something that neither the adherents of conventional IR or their most strident critics seem capable of providing.

To be sure, what this book proposes is a very loose disciplinary model, but the alternatives are now painfully clear. There are, however, IR scholars and approaches capable of embracing the essential duality of international relations theory and practice. As argued above, the clearest articulation and defense of fundamental values in the field can be found in the earliest phases of its evolution as a modern academic discipline. As argued below, it is in the earliest stages of what has become the intellectual *cul de sac* of the third debate that something like the classical balance between realist and idealist thought was temporarily restored not—as popularly believed—in the arcane, hermetically sealed intra-positivist debates of the neorealists and neoliberals, but in the confrontation between mainstream IR theory and the newly imported insights of critical theory *a la* the Frankfurt School, whose searching and internally diverse critiques of the purportedly progressive and emancipatory effects of Enlightenment science formed a key turning point in modern social theory, the implications of which are not yet clear, and, some fifty years after their first articulations, are only now attracting the sustained attention of a handful of IR scholars (Brown 1994, 218). But the potential for disciplinary renewal inherent in this version of IR theory has been largely overshadowed by the mutually exclusive, equally unrealistic, and unpalatable postures of positivist and post-modernist IR, with the former precluding any serious consideration of the prospects for the real historical transformation of international relations, and the latter inviting a relativism too extreme to allow for any sort of meaningful critical evaluation. Thus, while the third debate might have taken us back to basics in terms of the appropriate and necessary relationship between theory and practice in international relations, it has led instead to the brink of disciplinary oblivion.

That few are able to recognize genuine theoretical continuity in these debates is hardly surprising in light of the terminological confusion, ideological posturing, and extreme rhetoric that has come to define them. This chapter, therefore, begins by paying some attention to sorting out these approaches, provisionally of course, since the defining feature of modern IR theory is its lack of a common language. It makes no attempt, however, to provide a comprehensive survey of critical IR, something impossible to provide to everyone's satisfaction and well beyond the purpose of this chapter and book. The emphasis instead is on situating the new scholarship in the context of the recurrent dialectic of realist and idealist thought in international relations. The chapter concludes that the best hope for disciplinary resuscitation lies not with the distractions of the third debate, but with a better, more attentive

understanding of the purpose of the field as traditionally conceived, something that the positivist-inspired account of IR precludes, and its opponents have managed only to shroud in the mysteries of a seemingly meaningless lexicon.

The third debate and the problem of taxonomy

If familiarity breeds contempt, unfamiliarity breeds imprecision, and modern IR scholarship has served up plenty of both in response to outside challenges. Only now can IR scholars boast a meager inventory of useful surveys of the myriad positions staked out in the “third debate,” the best of which are offered by Chris Brown (1994), Richard Devetak (1996), and Darryl Jarvis (2000a). There are, however, serious impediments to taxonomic accuracy, including the tremendous and growing diversity of the literature and the inherent resistance of much of it to any sort of classification. Indeed, as Roland Bleiker observes, the “desire to squeeze freely floating ... ideas into surveyable categories” is itself a function of the distinctly modern “attempt to bring order and certainty into a world of chaos and flux,” the very enterprise to which many of these challengers stand opposed (Bleiker 1999, 3). Or, as Brown puts it, much of this work is:

peculiarly resistant to sentences which begin “Post-structuralism (or intertextuality or whatever) is...”: to complete such sentences is to subvert the project. A characteristic feature of this kind of writing is that it involves defamiliarisation—an attempt to turn the familiar into the unfamiliar and vice versa—and this feature is annulled rather than explicated by a narrative that clarifies and familiarises.

(Brown 1994, 223)

Fair enough but, as Brown’s own eminently useful survey suggests, some measure of familiarization is possible for IR scholars, and necessary if they are fully to understand and meet the challenges posed.

It has become customary to collapse these multifaceted challenges into sponge terms, a necessary practice for the sake of generalizing about the state of the discipline, and one adopted here as well. Nevertheless, there are important, necessary, distinctions to be made among these approaches. Following Brown, I use the generic designation of “critical theory” (small ‘c’ and ‘t’), or “critical IR,” to describe all approaches that question the traditional, narrow, usually

positivist, conception of IR as a social science (Brown 1994, 214). The usage is similar to that made by Robert Cox, who describes critical theory as distinct from the “problem-solving theory” characteristic of mainstream IR, in “the sense that it stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about” (Cox 1986, 208). Thus construed, critical theory comprises a diverse and growing literature but operates at a level of generality sufficiently high to avoid doing violence to the often conflicting positions contained within it. Beyond such generalization, however, the diversity of this literature poses substantial taxonomic challenges, especially in a field lulled to a false sense of uniformity by the epistemological and methodological hegemony of positivist science, a fantasy world in which the many realities of international relations masquerade as ahistorical givens. The term critical theory does, however, have one distinct disadvantage: its shared usage with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, whose best known representative (in IR scholarship at least) is Jürgen Habermas (Ashley 1986; Brown 1994; O’Callaghan 1998). This quite distinct literature differs so profoundly from the anti-modernist discourses that have come to symbolize, perhaps even to undermine, critical IR that it is helpful, again following Brown, to distinguish it as Critical Theory (large ‘C’ and ‘T’) (Brown 1994). Lamentably, however, careful distinctions of this sort are more the exception than norm in surveying the theoretical formulations of the third debate, a recipe for confusion further compounded by a total lack of conceptual or linguistic precision, and a seemingly limitless nomenclature that looks more like a free-association factory than the standardized system of terms normally associated with an academic discipline.

Sorting out these distinct, often conflicting perspectives, is a daunting, perhaps impossible, task, not least because there is a potentially infinite range of critical orientations, and no clearly or universally agreed criteria for isolating, or even naming, particular positions. How many approaches are afoot, what to call them, and how, or whether, to assess the bases of their distinctiveness depends on who is doing the asking. It is, as Brown notes, a decidedly stipulatory business (Brown 1994, 214). What is clear is that critical IR is united only in its disdain for the “deadening ahistorical finality” of structural theory (Ashley 1986, 255). Until recently, however, IR scholars— when bothering to respond to the challenge of critical theory—have generally failed to make, or understand, important distinctions, as suggested by the variety of labels deployed, many of which are intended to describe the critical literature as a whole, often in spite of their apparent association with quite

distinctive orientations within it. As Darryl Jarvis suggests, “few, it seems, know what to make of the idioms and idiolects of the ‘post,’ which, at various junctures, transpose from post-modernism to post-structuralism, post-positivism, post-industrialism, post-philosophy, post-marxism, or *posthistoire* to name but a few” (Jarvis 1998, 95). The crux of the problem is the porosity of much of this literature which, added to its exaggerated sense of methodological freedom, merely heightens the disarray of a field already renowned for its taxonomic license. And yet, with their usual penchant for simplicity, many IR scholars seem determined to distill critical theory into a uniform creed, entirely missing the liberating logic of such perspectives, while betraying their own inherent dependence on the intellectual *status quo*.

The most problematic label is postmodernism, a constellation of approaches that “share *only* a rejection of strict science and an emphasis on the subjective and normative dimensions of knowledge” (Ferguson and Mansbach 1998, 1; emphasis in original).² Or, according to Jarvis, postmodernism can be described as:

a curious lexeme of essentially contested concepts, disparate ideas, obtuse meanings and political agendas. Post-modernist writings can only be described as an intellectual maelstrom, and the post-modernist movement a diverse collection of followers who are neither united in intent, similar in focus or method, nor canonized in terms of theoretical precision.

(Jarvis 1998, 100)

Yet there is a marked tendency for mainstream IR scholars to conflate the myriad constitutive elements of postmodern thinking into a monolithic school and, more confusingly, to fail to distinguish its concerns from those of other critical perspectives, many of which have no affinity with, and little sympathy for, some variants of postmodern thought. This is particularly so of Critical Theory, itself a diverse body of scholarship, but one that tends to involve a very different set of attitudes to theory, reason, rationality, truth, knowledge and modernity than many of the postmodernist perspectives with which it is often identified.

Part of the confusion is attributable to lack of familiarity, a product of the general isolation of IR theory from the broader terrain of social and political thought. This intellectual autarky can no longer be sustained, but it has created a discipline full of philosophical novitiates, and fostered an unhealthy reliance on the authority of self-proclaimed

experts. Again, however, much of the new thinking is simply inherently resistant to categorization. Some level of terminological confusion is inescapable, since the taxonomic conventions of mainstream scholarship are too rigid to capture the unsettled, often deliberately fluid, constructs which seem so clearly to demand attention, but so skillfully to defy classification. It is useful by way of example to look at Critical Theory and its usage in IR, a set of approaches much misunderstood and misrepresented in recent debate, notwithstanding the clear attempt of its adherents to rekindle the field's traditional interest in idealistic, emancipatory thinking.

Critical Theory involves an evolving set of discourses that are not easily pinned down and, in some cases, difficult to distinguish from the many critical discourses they have helped to create. In its more Habermasian modes, Critical Theory retains something like the Marxist commitment to the Enlightenment ideals of truth, justice, and emancipation and the use of modernist tools, like rationality, in pursuit of those ends (McCarthy 1978; Bernstein 1985). But in other, typically subsequent discussion, the emphasis often shifts from the dialectics of class struggle to emancipatory schemes more broadly construed, with less stress on the victimization of the working class in state-market relations, and more on the marginality of new (or previously unseen) groups, a shift necessitated by the dislocation of all state-society relations in the wake of the fundamental and evolving transformation of global capitalism (Jameson 1991). Simply put, the marginal and oppressed are not who they used to be, and Critical Theory becomes more attentive to the new dislocations occasioned by changing cultural mediums. It is here that Critical Theory begins to shade into the sorts of accounts characteristic of postmodernism, but without the full-blown commitment to anti-foundationalism and relativism common in the latter perspectives, or their substitution of identity politics for the objective categories of more conventional social analysis (Lyotard 1984; Derrida 1976; Ashley 1996; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989). The key defining aspect of Critical Theory, in contradistinction to the extreme constructivism increasingly prevalent in postmodernist writing, is its treatment of postmodernity as a real historical epoch, a real condition, the defining characteristics and socio-political implications of which cannot be apprehended without a serious, sustained commitment to cultural analysis. It is thus vitally important that Critical Theory not be lumped in with the more relativistic, anti-modernist strains of theory now afoot in IR, except as part of a critical discourse broadly construed.³

In the lexicology of the third debate, however, confusion is the order of the day. A large and burgeoning inventory of labels is in use, some of which seem to describe critical IR as a whole, others of which appear to describe a more proscribed set of concerns, and none of which forms the basis for a universally agreed taxonomy. Charles Kegley (1995, 36), for example, uses the term “postmodernism” to describe what he apparently regards as a unified school of thought, the details of which he leaves entirely out of his more general discussion of IR theory which, for Kegley at least, does not appear to extend beyond the neorealist-neoliberal debate. This oversight is acknowledged without any justification or explanation. Yosef Lapid (1989, 239) prefers the label of “post-positivism” which he describes in vague, rather uninspiring terms: “a...loosely patched-up umbrella for a confusing array of only remotely related philosophical articulations.” Thomas Biersteker (1989) uses the post-positivist rubric as well, but insists, rightly, on making distinctions between the “profoundly different” intellectual traditions that Lapid tends to conflate. Robert Keohane (1988) prefers the term “reflectivism,” an unrevealing label that not only fails to capture the essential challenges posed by critical IR, but seems to be built on the assumption that such approaches should be viewed as adjuncts to, or more subjectively inclined versions of, “rationalistic theory.” Despite the inherently epistemological and normative challenges that they pose, Keohane seems to regard the issues raised by critical theory as matters of methodological refinement. Similarly Mark Neufeld (1993a, 39) invokes the term “interpretivism” as a vaguely defined catch-all to describe any approach that is “qualitatively different and distinct from the traditional positivist-inspired approach to the study of international politics,” even noting that it is meant to be a synonym for Keohane’s reflectivism.

None of these labels do much to help sort out the sometimes very great differences that divide one critical IR theorist, or one body of critical IR, from another. Much of the time it is not even clear that distinctions do exist or, if they do, how many schools are at work, and what they should be called. While IR scholars will never achieve agreement on the latter issues, they ought at least to be more attentive to differences within critical IR and understand the nature of the gulf that separates the Critical Theory of a Robert Cox (1983; 1986), Mark Hoffman (1991), Andrew Linklater (1992; 1996) or Mark Neufeld (1993a; 1993b) from the “intertextuality” of a James Der Derian (1990; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989) or Michael J. Shapiro (1990; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989). Some of this work is now underway and IR scholars

are, as Brown suggests, better placed to understand which of the approaches encompassed by the blanket term of critical theory are likely to prove useful, and which can safely be forgotten (Brown 1994, 236). And yet, Brown appears to presuppose the existence of the very thing that modern IR has proven consistently to lack: a shared understanding of what constitutes a discipline, and what (if anything) constitutes its theoretical progress. Serious, possibly insoluble, impediments to disciplinary renewal thus remain, chief among which is the failure of most disciplinary “insiders” to take any variant of critical IR seriously, and the paradoxical inability of most of their assailants to escape the shadow of the disciplinary construction they purport to reject. The third debate has become no debate, but an irresolvable standoff, the apotheosis of an ill-founded, untenable disciplinary vision founded on unseen contradictions. This continues to be poorly understood despite, and in an important sense because of, the efforts of would-be exponents of a critical IR, and of Ashley in particular, whose relatively infrequent interventions have profoundly shaped and distorted perceptions about this literature and its disciplinary implications. Having introduced mainstream IR theorists to the totalitarian and deterministic character of scientific (neorealist) theory, Ashley might have helped pave the way to the more balanced conception of the interplay between theory and praxis, utopia and reality, idealism and realism lost as a result of the modern “disciplining” of the subject. Such an objective would certainly have meshed with Ashley’s self-perceived status as an IR theorist, an identity card to which, almost bizarrely, he continues to cling in spite of his clearly deepening antipathy for the discipline, and modernist discourses in general (Ashley 1996; George, 1989; George and Campbell 1990). But Ashley’s *volte-face* would be of only passing interest were it not for his extraordinary ability to dictate almost the entire tone and terms of reference for the third debate. As goes Ashley, so goes critical IR, a remarkable feat for a disciplinary “exile,” and a less than flattering testimony to the critical discernment of other IR theorists. It is to the causes and consequences of this phenomenon that the chapter now turns.

Say it again in English: International Relations meets Critical Theory

As if to confirm Ashley’s diagnosis of IR as a “self-blind” discipline committed to the pursuit of “technical reason in the service of unquestioned ends” (1986, 297), the inclination of IR scholars has

consisted of an apparent determination to ignore, dismiss or misunderstand the sort of critical thinking he (re)“introduced” to the field in the early 1980s.⁴ Consider, for example, the reaction to Ashley’s first explicit assault on the dominance of positivist-inspired IR as manifested in Waltzian structural theory, in his now infamous essay “The Poverty of Neorealism” (1986). Ashley’s extremely controversial (if then implicit) suggestion that the framing of the discipline of IR as a policy science is itself responsible for much of the inhumanity and suffering it had been its self-perceived task to address has done little to ensure his arguments a ready hearing. Yet it is the alleged exoticism of his conception of theory and, by implication, its lack of explanatory and policy relevance that seems most to irk his erstwhile colleagues. Keohane’s edited volume *Neorealism and its Critics* (1986), where Ashley’s essay appears, sets the tone for a debate that has lived up to its advance billing as an intellectual dead end. Kenneth Waltz, for example, whose ambitious neorealist theory of international politics has given Ashley an admirable platform from which to attack the poverty of scientific IR, claims to be at a loss to understand or respond to Ashley’s criticism. “Reading his essay is like entering a maze,” writes Waltz, adding that “I never know quite where I am or how to get out” (Waltz, 1986, 337; Ashley 1986). Robert Gilpin, who is also implicated in Ashley’s attack, responds in a similar vein to Waltz. Having restated parts of Ashley’s position, Gilpin describes much of it as “meaningless,” adding that, “if I fail to respond to some of Ashley’s more telling points, it is not that I am deliberately avoiding them but rather that I fail to understand them” (Gilpin 1986, 303). It is difficult to imagine a more inauspicious beginning to a debate, or a more egregious abuse of that term.

The acrimony evident in these and subsequent exchanges seems genuine enough, but there is also an element of the theatrical in the perplexity of Waltz and Gilpin. There is little real mystery in Ashley’s early work except, perhaps, that so many prominent IR theorists could misunderstand its intent, and be so woefully unschooled in the social theory on which it draws. Indeed, Ashley’s earliest essays seem remarkably lucid (especially alongside his later work), and his criticisms of neorealism are trenchant and telling. Ashley is also very well schooled in the subtleties of realist theory (1981), and adept at recognizing the peril in which the field’s traditional concerns are placed by an undue reliance on structural accounts. In declaring their failure to understand him, therefore, Waltz and Gilpin appear to make a conscious symbolic declaration about what can, and cannot, be said to count as a

contribution to IR theory. Whatever the alleged defects of Ashley's writing, it is his theoretical language, not his skills in English, that seem alien, imprecise, and threatening. But in IR theory, what constitutes "meaningless" and "needless jargon" is pretty much a matter of where you stand. The professed inability of Gilpin and Waltz to find meaning in the jargon of Ashley, like the professed inability of Ashley to find meaning in the jargon of neorealism, is more a function of a mutual antipathy for compromise and tolerance than genuine confusion, though these attitudes have helped to create plenty of the latter as well.

The third debate did not, of course, begin with *Neorealism and its Critics*, but that text can usefully be seen as its symbolic point of departure, though theoretical discussion then and now has centered more around the issue of what Waltz should, or should not, have included in his scientific rendering of realism than the more critical enterprise proposed by Ashley. And yet not taking Ashley seriously has become a bit of an industry in its own right, and any sequel to Keohane's volume might easily be called "Ashley and his Critics." With the possible exception of Jim George (himself somewhat of an Ashley follower) no other IR figure has come to so personify critical theory, in the minds of mainstream scholars at least. This is unfortunate since Ashley's work has been eclectic at best and he has thoroughly repudiated his initial, very promising, commitment to exposing the flawed, unexamined metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of orthodox IR theory, in favor of what might charitably be described as a form of intellectual solipsism. Though Ashley's increasingly "subversive" stance is inspired by poststructuralist ideas like intertextuality and deconstruction, these are only the most conspicuously relativistic and scholastic strands of a vast and varied critical literature, much of which retains an interest in theoretical relevance and the actual subject matter of IR.⁵ Why, then, has Ashley been so influential in shaping perceptions, or rather misperceptions, about critical theory in IR?

In the latest of his sporadic interjections Ashley himself does much to clear up this mystery. Introducing his essay on "The Achievements of Post-Structuralism" with an anecdote involving a female colleague and her disdain for the allegedly strategic language of IR theorists, Ashley reports the following remark: "You *boys* in IR...talk as if you're out there on the plains somewhere, on horse-back, galloping alone" (Ashley 1996, 240; emphasis in original). The comment, while amusing, is less interesting than Ashley's reaction in which he never once denies his association with, or the existence of, an elite fraternity of

“IR boys.” On the contrary, he seems quite taken with the idea, uttering “IR boys” repeatedly. “I do not dispute this appraisal,” writes Ashley of his colleague’s comment, “of the way in which *we* ‘IR boys’ talk and write...” (421; emphasis mine). Predictably, Ashley is quick to censure the behavior of his colleagues, but this is far less interesting than his obvious reluctance to “gallop” alone, despite his depiction of political thought and practice as intrinsically nomadic (250) and, one hardly need guess, his autobiographical sketch of the lone, “itinerate condottiere... who gallops across the surfaces of life in search of some locality, any locality, where a strategic art can be performed...” (251). This characteristically Ashleyesque language of estrangement sits oddly with his self-declared “fellow”ship with the IR boys who, to extend the metaphor, might be considered a sort of theoretical posse of “good old boys.” And herein lies the secret to Ashley’s continuing prominence in a discipline that, following the logic of his position, he should simply reject. Far from a marginal scholar, Ashley is one of the key figures in the modern discipline, a role from which he shows no eagerness to shrink and, perversely, seems only to have been augmented by his fall from disciplinary grace. This is because, seen from the vantage point of his disciplinary confreres, Ashley cuts a quasi-tragic figure, a renegade who might have been a lead rider among the IR boys. Were this not so, it is difficult to imagine Ashley achieving a level of influence much beyond that enjoyed by any of the legion of largely anonymous critical theorists now toiling on the fringes, or in the shadow, of mainstream IR, many of whom have considerably more to offer than a “paradoxical strategic posture” that incapacitates all standards of evaluation.

It might be objected that Ashley’s ostensible participation with the IR boys is part of a carefully crafted strategic posture aimed at reshaping the discipline from within, a logic similar to the notion of “constructive engagement” used to support the seemingly hypocritical trade practices of Western democracies whose denunciation of human rights abuses in repressive states does not preclude substantial economic and diplomatic intercourse. But whatever the merits of constructive engagement in international politics, it seems pretty clear, from Ashley himself, that a strategy of constructive engagement—or deconstructive engagement?—has had virtually no impact on IR:

what possible reason is there to think that one more paltry recitation of these arguments on my part, just here, would somehow induce a readiness to hear among those who have repeatedly shown themselves so proficient at doing what it takes

not to hear, not to take these strains seriously, not to follow their implications through?

(Ashley 1996, 248)⁶

His depiction of IR as a “meta-discipline” is compelling, but not to the IR boys who, by definition, cannot see beyond their own self-limiting plains. Ashley’s depiction of IR as a “conversational battlefield” is thus misleading, since none of its intended participants seem willing to listen, let alone respond, to his decidedly monological refrain. Ashley has indeed had a substantial impact in IR, but one he could not have intended. His paradoxical status as an establishment-marginal, and the influence born of his sheer notoriety, has presented the disciplinary mainstream with a distinctly one-sided portrait of the objectives, possibilities, and challenges raised by critical IR. If Ashley were more marginal, the third debate might have stood a better chance of fostering genuine disciplinary renewal though it might, of course, have also stood a better chance of being entirely ignored. Such are the paradoxes generated by the virtual theoretical monopoly of the IR boys. The time appears ripe, in either case, to let the IR boys ride off into the sunset, since much of the theoretically interesting and practically compelling work on international relations is already being done without the dubious advantage of “the discipline,” the realization of which has only been forestalled by the intellectual stalemate of the third debate.

**“Speaking the language of discipline:
dissidence *in* International Relations”**

This subtitle plays on the title of a special issue of the IR journal *International Studies Quarterly* (1990), jointly guest edited by Ashley and R.B.J.Walker at what might be called the high point of the third debate.⁷ Notwithstanding the irony that the vehicle for their message is the flagship journal of the ISA, the editors set out to showcase allegedly exiled, marginalized, and dissident IR perspectives and scholars. But the problem with “the language of exile” is that it originates outside the discipline, and cannot be intelligibly spoken within it unless transposed into mainstream idioms and syntax, undermining both the point of the exercise and the power of the metaphor. Next to simply being ignored, this has been precisely the fate of “dissident” scholarship. Indeed, the “dissidence” label is entirely self-imposed, part of an attention-seeking terminology that is simply not used by mainstream scholars, since not knowing what to make of critical IR has been sufficient grounds for

many not to bother making anything of it. That which is incomprehensible, it might be supposed, can have little theoretical value. Consider for example the reaction of K.J. Holsti, who suggests that much of this scholarship “leads to a dead end, or perhaps more accurately, to a new road with a destination that bears little or no resemblance to international politics...along this route we learn a great deal about the innumerable contested ways of *how to think* about a subject matter, but almost nothing about the subject itself” (Holsti 2000, 79; emphasis in original).

And yet some theoretically inclined mainstream scholars, Holsti included, acknowledge “rich opportunities” in critical IR that the more typical, peremptory dismissal of these approaches *in toto* misses. Among the perceived benefits of critical IR are its “reflexivity, methodological self-consciousness,” and “a willingness to explore concepts and approaches that are and have been too long taken for granted...” (Holsti 2000, 75). Inevitably, however, the criteria used to evaluate the “helpfulness” and “relevance” of the new critical scholarship is established in accordance with the very positivists-inspired accounts of IR theory that this literature rejects. If this were not so, there could be little to which critical IR might be expected to object. Despite complaints about the resistance of mainstream IR to theoretical diversity, one would hardly expect the members of a monopolistic enterprise readily to comprehend the virtues of competition, or eagerly divest themselves of control. For the most part, the adherents and opponents of IR as traditionally conceived simply do not speak the same theoretical language. Absent the *lingua franca* of a shared disciplinary framework, it would be Pollyannaish to expect much more out of the third debate than the high level of confusion it has already produced, especially since the agenda behind critical scholarship is to disrupt the settled order of IR theory and praxis. As argued below there is less rupture in these debates than suggested by the rhetorical maneuvers and excesses of the disputants, many of whom simply gravitate to one of two equally untenable and exclusive versions of IR. First, however, the reasons behind the abject failure of the third debate need to be better understood, if only because it continues, in Ashley’s words, to form part of the “spectacular summitry” of the field (Ashley 1996, 241).

The conspiracy myth

The problem with the dissident-led assault on scientific realism, and mainstream IR more generally, is its insistence that the dominance of

such approaches is a function of some conscious conspiracy. This sort of thinking has proven to be contagious, and the discourse (if discourse is the correct term for a disparate literature in which discussion fails increasingly to be mutually acknowledged or valued) is replete with images of “dissidence,” “exile,” “marginalization,” “delegitimation,” “oppression,” and a litany of other largely imagined crimes. But it is a peculiar sort of doctrine that brands itself a heresy; if there is real marginalization afoot in international relations scholarship, it is generated as much by the self-fulfilling prophecy of “dissident” thought as a genuinely autonomous disciplinary “backlash.” Indeed, the “language of exile” is more likely to be dismissed as a mysterious, impenetrable dialect than forced to conform to the *lingua franca* of the discipline. While evidence of intolerance and hostility abounds, it is fairly evenly distributed and usually ignited by some sort of provocation. These of course are lamentable realities but scarcely attributable to the intrigues of the church fathers, whose depiction as disciplinary keepers of the gate is greatly exaggerated. On the contrary, the hegemony of scientific IR has resulted largely from a failure to reflect adequately on the pitfalls of totalizing science, a shortcoming they share with the utopian idealists of the 1920s and, as I argue later, the postpositivist and postmodernist critics who seek to displace them with their own totalizing conceptions, the first with their “passionate insistence on the self-sufficiency of human reason” (Spegele 1996, 9) and the latter, in their more strident modes, with a uncompromising commitment to the wholesale deconstruction of ordinary philosophical reasoning and argument.

Despite a recent explosion of theoretical activity in international relations, and its high profile in academic debates, the vast majority of IR scholars pay scant attention to theoretical or meta-theoretical quarrels. There is a relatively small number of journals dedicated to, or dominated by, theoretical discussion the most vibrant of which—*Millennium* and *The Review of International Studies*—are British, despite an overwhelming preponderance of American-born, -based and -trained scholars.⁸ In the American heartland of the discipline, what little explicitly theoretical discussion there is revolves around debates *within* a broadly liberal, positivist-rationalist intellectual tradition dominated by neorealists, their critics, and devotees of cognate or spin-off approaches. The primary stage for this controversy, outside purportedly “seminal” texts like *International Regimes* (Krasner 1982), *Neorealism and its Critics* (Keohane 1985), *Neo-realism and the Neoliberal Challenge* (Baldwin 1993), and *Controversies in*

International Relations Theory (Kegley 1995), is journals like *International Organization* (IO), *International Studies Quarterly* (ISQ) and, to a lesser extent, *World Politics*. IO is dedicated primarily to elaboration of mainstream theoretical research programmes and their application to a range of issue areas principally involving problems of international policy collaboration and coordination. ISQ, despite its declared commitment to interdisciplinary and crossnational approaches to international studies, and status as the official journal of the ISA, is, like the ISA itself, seldom more than nominally international. With occasional exceptions that prove the rule,⁹ ISQ readers and contributors tend to share the same background assumption: namely, that what counts as a theoretical contribution must have an obvious practical and empirical application for students of world politics. The meaning and nature of theory, in other words, is taken largely for granted, despite a wide array of thematic concerns. The same might be said of American IR *per se*, and the discipline it dominates, suggesting again that a relative lack of theoretical activity is itself one of the most reliable indicators of epistemological hegemony.

To be clear, the claim is not that IR debate and, if the distinction is necessary, American debate in particular, is lacking in theoretical discussion. Rather there are two basic points to be made. First, such discussion involves only a small percentage of the disciplinary membership (as defined by the sorts of organizations and publishing houses identified above), making it difficult to imagine that a conspiracy of control could be successfully enacted by such a tiny percentage of scholars. Second, and more to the point, discussion seldom or consistently extends to the definition or function of theory itself. This is less a product of conscious design than a function of a lingering, unexamined commitment to the once unassailable idea that IR can be viewed as a cumulative, additive science, the requirements of which are best advanced by increasing the conceptual and thematic inventory of empirical research. As some of the “sentinels of dissidence” (Jarvis 2000a) would have it, this condition merely masks the “policing function” performed by the discipline’s self-appointed guardians, among whom advocates of neorealist and neoliberal approaches loom large. Robert Keohane appears to provide the ammunition for such a view when he suggests that scholars critical of mainstream conceptions of theory in IR would do well to focus their efforts on the development of a “research program that could be employed by students of world politics,” to carry out “systematic empirical investigations,” and to “develop testable theories” (Keohane

1988, 392–3; and as cited in Ashley and Walker 1990, 266). But if it is obvious that Keohane fails to understand the point of what he calls “reflectivist” IR, it is less clear that his intention is to police it out of the discipline. The point of critical reflection on the practice and theorization of international relations is to rise above the ever-present temptation to treat apparent realities as unproblematic givens. Keohane is simply too engrained in a rationalistic modality to grasp the nature of this challenge, failing to recognize that reflectivism is intended to reconceptualize IR theory, not complement the very rationalistic theory it aims to deconstruct. Far from playing the role of disciplinary guardian and gatekeeper, however, Keohane is almost innocent in his desire for a “synthesis between...rationalistic and reflective approaches” (Keohane 1988, 393). There is no reason to suspect that he is engaged in anything more sinister than simply “speaking the language of discipline,” since science (un-“reflectively” understood) is all about maturation, growth, and synthesis. Ironically, then, Keohane actually appears to be more motivated by the spirit of inclusion than a zeal for disciplinary purity. But the practice of labeling such approaches “reflectivist” is the first step on the road to their assimilation into the very disciplinary conception of IR they so markedly oppose. More bizarrely, the evaluative criteria for reflectivist thought envisioned by Keohane is explicitly and exclusively rationalistic and empiricist. This position is simply too muddled to constitute a conscious commitment to exiling disciplinary challengers, and conforms to a pattern of similarly mistaken perceptions among the discipline’s other theoretical commentators.

The marginalization myth

Herbert Marcuse writes that “the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction” (Marcuse 1964, 11). He might have been talking about dissident IR scholarship, the leading exponents of which have achieved remarkable prominence in the discipline they purport to reject, publishing in flagship journals and prestige book series (Ashley 1986; Der Derian 1987; Ashley and Walker 1990; Der Derian 1990; George and Campbell 1990; Shapiro 1990; Walker 1993; Sylvester 1994; Smith, Booth and Zalewski 1996), occupying prominent positions on influential and central editorial boards, holding memberships in, and helping to run, professional associations of IR scholars, attending conferences, teaching IR courses at accredited universities—leading, in

short, ostensibly normal academic lives. Obviously there are many critical IR scholars whose connection to the professional perks of the discipline are far more tenuous, but this is true of many scholars who would not regard themselves as dissident, and largely a function of marketplace dynamics. Real marginals do not have the luxury of proclaiming their peripheral status from disciplinary center stage. Such a practice makes a mockery of the idea of marginalization and must surely offend the growing body of scholars for whom secure, full-time, and fairly compensated employment as a professional academic is an elusive quest. The only thing worse than being marginalized, these scholars might reasonably suppose, is not being marginalized.

There is more to the marginalization story than career ambitions and its does seem clear that many of the new critical approaches have been marginalized, not because they have been ignored in the disciplinary mainstream, but assimilated into it. Even the most antediluvian of academic disciplines could not permanently ignore the challenges posed by critical theory and, by slow and steady degrees, scholars have been forced to acquaint themselves with the “new” thinking. As already noted, however, the point of this scholarship is often entirely lost on key figures who, by virtue of their guru-like status within the discipline, pass their misperceptions on to others. This is a phenomenon that transcends the problem of coping with the post-modern challenge and extends to all concepts, theories, models, and perspectives that originate outside the discipline, which is to say the vast bulk of IR theory. Extra-disciplinary theorizing about IR, however fundamental the *actual* challenges posed, *seems* always to be a matter of incorporating new investigative techniques. Like an intellectual black hole, everything that ventures near the discipline of IR is drawn into *its* intense gravitational “field.” This is because the ideology of scientific IR has become an unquestioned reality to which investigative analysis simply cannot extend, a posture so seemingly natural that the discipline (i.e. its leading figures) are even capable of assimilating explicitly anti-disciplinary agendas! Of course much of this is pointed out by Ashley but, as he freely admits, to no avail.

Contemporary IR discussion is abuzz with talk of theoretical pluralism, but in mainstream circles this usually refers to the existence of competing paradigms/approaches within a largely consolidated and unproblematic discipline. It is in the shaken but lingering Kuhnian conviction that fragmentation and turmoil might yet prove to be progressive (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988, 216) that a distinctly grudging acceptance of diversity exists, and many are determined to see

in each novel perspective new opportunities for theoretical synthesis. This is particularly so of Keohane and that sizable part of the IR community that is willing to accept his depiction of the neorealist-neoliberal merger as a viable and core research program, and eager to test, model, and measure its central variables in blithe defiance of the epistemological, ontological and philosophical challenges posed by critical theory (Waever 1996, 164–8). That the idea of cumulative research and knowledge could persist in the face of such unprecedented anti-disciplinary discussion is remarkable and suggests, yet again, the extent to which IR cannot be regarded as an integrated field of study.

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Keohane and his followers are uninterested in what he calls “reflectivist” IR. On the contrary, he seems to regard much of it as a worthy supplement to “rationalistic” theory, particularly as it pertains to the all-consuming subject of international institutions (regimes), where positivist methods are quickly pushed to their limits by the clearly intersubjective nature of the phenomena in question (Keohane 1988). We have seen this synthesizing logic at work before, of course, particularly as it relates to the neo-neo debates explored above. But never before has anyone suggested that mainstream IR might profitably synthesize (i.e. assimilate) perspectives premised on its demolition. The labels at play mask the sheer unfeasibility of this project. Rather than foundationalists and antifoundationalists we encounter rationalists and reflectivists, and “the emergence of a middle ground where neo-institutionalists from the rationalist side meet constructivists arriving from the reflectivist side” (Weaver 1996, 168). What all this means is a bit of a mystery since the term reflectivism, as used by Keohane and increasingly popular with others (e.g. Neufeld 1993; Rosenau 1998; Holsti 2000, 6), bears little resemblance to the stated objectives of most critical theorists of IR. For Keohane the crux of a reflectivist approach is its emphasis on “socially influenced patterns of learning” and its somewhat less than profound suggestion that “only by understanding how individuals think about their world can we understand changes in how the world is organized” (Keohane 1988, 391). Similarly, but more diffusely, Holsti appears to regard reflectivism as a form of “methodological self-consciousness” (Holsti 2000, 75). But reflectivism thus construed does not come close to capturing the critical thrust of the brand of scholarship launched by Ashley, and seems to transform an explicitly anti-disciplinary agenda into a form of critical self-awareness designed to augment a rationalistic research agenda. No one would deny the desirability of critical self-awareness but the uses attributed to reflectivism by these scholars could

not be further removed from what Ashley actually means by “reflective capacities” (Ashley 1986, 297).

Orthodox theorists are not alone in failing adequately to grasp the challenges posed by critical theorists. Neufeld, for example, while very much influenced by what he calls “interpretivist” approaches (yet another label!) remains strangely committed to the vision of IR as a unified science, preferring to understand interpretivism not as an anti-disciplinary set of perspectives but as part of what appears to be an epistemological supplementation or replacement strategy (Neufeld 1993a). Interpretivism, which Neufeld treats explicitly is a synonym for reflectivism, is, like the latter concept, again seen as a sort of methodological consideration, a useful corrective, perhaps replacement, for the typically behavioralist orientation of IR research. This understanding is difficult to reconcile to the declared purposes of critical scholarship which, despite marked internal differences, remains united by its disdain for every static and totalizing construction of IR as an academic discipline. Once again, the emancipatory spirit of critical IR is violated, perhaps more by its assimilation into the disciplinary framework it seems clearly to stand outside, than by the less than convincing claims to disciplinary exile made by its key exponents.

The myth of “post” modernism?

Postmodernism takes as its point of departure an investigation of truth. Superficially, therefore, it seems not to differ from established philosophies of knowledge. In Enlightenment-inspired versions of modernity, however, philosophical investigation is wedded to a brand of analysis that portrays truth itself as scientific, precluding critical examination of the scientific enterprise itself. But the postmodernist is a “super rationalist” in that he/she believes that taking rationalism seriously means recognizing that it “cannot measure up to its own standards” (Tomlinson 1989, 44). This conviction in turn results in a strategy that attempts to “sketch out the grounds on which science might get its divorce from truth...” Thus, the postmodernist investigation of truth really amounts to an attack on objective claims to truth, and not an attack on truth *per se*.

It is for postmodernists the historically specific and contingent linkage of objectivity and truth characteristic of modernity that makes other conceptions of knowledge *seem* irrelevant or obstructive to intellectual progress.¹⁰ In attacking the foundational premises of modernity, it instigates a response which in turn may be portrayed as

further evidence of modernity's ideological narrowness, or even of backlash. But it is the specter of intellectual nihilism that usually prompts modernists to react. Because nihilism is itself a metaphysical doctrine, it cannot logically be embraced in an orientation that purports to reject all doctrinaire depictions of reality. What then *can* a postmodernist embrace? It is not sufficient to delight in the paradox of embracing nothing, because the basic critique of radical post-modernism does away with "any logical foundation for supporting the critique itself" (Robinson 1998, 9). If nothing matters, everything matters. Absent any standards for epistemological validity and relevance every position is suspect, and no view (including the post-modern view) can be "privileged." Every epistemological thesis—including the rejection of all epistemological theses—is rendered equally important by being rendered equally meaningless. Paradoxically, then, the modernist concern with foundationalism is made more valuable by the postmodern critique. Again, postmodernism comes in many forms and these criticisms cannot be applied to its discourses as a whole. But its more subversive modes are gaining strength in IR, and it would be a shame if the discipline were to throw off one uncontested and retrogressive orthodoxy only to adopt another. In the extreme relativism characteristic of poststructuralism, the post-modernist rejection of all metaphysical doctrines contains the same logical fallacy made by Epimenides the Cretan, who suggested that all Cretans were liars (McLellan 1986, 2). Like any other meta-physical doctrine or philosophical orientation it contains an ideology of its own, even if couched in anti-ideological terms.

It is worth considering, finally, whether more benign forms of post-modernism can be said fully to escape the shadow of modernity. Repelled by the extreme relativism of intertextual and deconstructive approaches, but struck by the futility of foundationalist practices to date, some IR scholars are turning to Richard Rorty's more pragmatic approach (Brown 1994; Cochran 1995). Rorty accepts the proposition that "there is no standpoint outside our own particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary by which to judge... rationality and morality" (Rorty 1989b, 53) but believes it is possible (and necessary) to accept institutional and practical guidance in human affairs, opting in his own case for the familiar trappings of liberalism (Brown 1994, 233; Rorty 1989a). Any way one looks at it, however, Rorty's argument is relativized to the present and to a single essentially modern, American and liberal version of rationality, something he does not deny, describing himself, with deliberate irony, as a "post-modern

bourgeois liberal,” but articulating a distinctly modern sounding version of progress:

‘we’ ought to consider ourselves as forming part of the spectacle of human progress which will progressively include the whole human race, and (be) ready to accept that the vocabulary that ‘we’ use...is the best vocabulary that the race has been able to find.

(Rorty 1989b, 53–4)

There is no doubt that Rorty is pragmatic, liberal and modern, but in what sense is he a “post”modernist? To be sure, he is a relativist but a relativist of the sort frequently seen in liberal philosophy. Rorty’s suggestion that the conflict of ideas is normatively desirable is a notion he also shares with many modernists. As with Rorty, some strands of political theory, and liberal theory in particular, come close to celebrating “fierce competition between alternative theories” (AKA the ‘clash of ideas’) as a desirable end in itself (Rorty 1989b, 14). Rorty puts it like this:

the end of humanity is not rest, but rather richer and better human activity. We should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading toward a place that has been somehow prepared for us in advance.

(1989b, 14)

This ironic (e.g. skeptically optimistic) account of progress is very similar to the view articulated by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* who, despite a purportedly utilitarian argument for the greatest possible individual liberty, tends to treat individuality as something intrinsically valuable and necessary (Mill 1974). Thus, while the intellectual continuity between modernist and post-modernist thinking ought not to be overstated, it ought not to be overlooked, as suggested in both its more subversive and benign modes.

Going down with the ship: critical International Relations and a mutiny gone astray

The more reasoned aspects of critical theory notwithstanding, it is difficult to see how any room for compromise can be found in what remains of academic debate in IR, particularly since moderate discourses

and voices are easily drowned out. How, for example, does one include among the many approaches to the subject perspectives built explicitly on the presumption of its untenability? To assimilate the “new thinking” into the discipline is to fail fundamentally to understand its basic challenge, and to extend the totalizing project so many now find unpalatable. But to accept it at face value would be a form of disciplinary self-abnegation. There is a fundamental irreconcilability here that is only thinly masked by the polite fiction (if impolite conduct) of the third “debate,” and by a continuing fascination with theoretical synthesis. Disciplinary debate is at bottom a euphemism for an ideological power struggle to control a foundering enterprise. This is not a victimless war. Its chief casualties are genuine theoretical pluralism and real accommodation between the recurrent, and mutually constitutive, theoretical elements of realism and idealism. There is, however, a growing number of scholars who recognize the futility of choosing between equally untenable and totalizing visions of IR, preferring to work outside the dominating shadow of “the” discipline (Brown 1994; Rosenberg 1994; Crawford 1996; Frost 1996; O’Callaghan 1998). In scholarship of this sort the fundamental ambiguity of the subject is taken for granted, and the basic irreconcilability of the normative, ontological, and epistemological choices it poses accepted without apprehension. Inside the rhetorically charged arena of intradisciplinary debate, by contrast, the simple, enduring dichotomy of realist-idealist thought in international relations becomes a politico-ideological schism that tends to push analysis toward the exclusive and equally objectionable extremities of narrow science or open-ended deconstruction. Outside this arena nothing is at stake politically, and international relations research can concentrate—as it should and as it once did—on addressing real substantive agendas and engaging in genuine intellectual disputes. Yet only a tiny percentage of scholars have been able or willing to make this break, and the siren songs of “the” discipline remain a substantial impediment to progress.

This is partly because the scientific and deconstructive views of IR are grounded in competing, mutually exclusive ideological programs, and partly because they both mistakenly treat the core disciplinary debate between neorealists and neoliberals as exemplary of the longstanding and irresolvable quarrel between realists and idealists. As argued above, the neo-neo debate actually constitutes a spectacular narrowing of the normative parameters of international political theory and, as demonstrated by its perpetual drift toward some form of neorealist synthesis, is premised on the eradication, not continuation, of

philosophical diversity. This is because the modern version of IR, however distorted, is unassailable from inside the disciplinary context, where the professionalization of the field, in tandem with the codification of a particular brand of theorizing, ensures that “legitimate” research activity must wear the stamp of its imprimatur. Thus, to rail against the discipline is to engage in something other than IR, a situation which ensures that dissenting perspectives are either ignored as outside the field, or treated as mysterious, uninfluential and worrisomely incoherent paradigms within it. The fate of the dissentient international relations theorist, in other words, is either to be ignored as beyond the pale, or dismissed as a false prophet. Under these circumstances, the best way to confront the assimilationist tendencies of IR is to reject or ignore its disciplinary construction.

This is true of much recent work where, regardless of disciplinary associations or labels, scholars are clearly addressing the same substantive menu once claimed as the exclusive preserve of the IR theorist.¹¹ This has led Brown to suggest that the hard polarities of the “third debate” are giving way to a more nuanced, inclusive body of international relations scholarship less constrained by disciplinary boundaries, and more connected to the wider realm of social-political thought (Brown 1994, 213). It is not clear, however, that the latter claim can be substantiated, or that the hold of neorealism in the discipline has been “perceptibly weakened” by its encounters with critical theory (Brown 1994, 227). It is easy to see how somebody trained, and working within, an English tradition more attuned and receptive to normative international relations theory could draw such conclusions, but there is little to indicate that much has changed in the discipline’s much more influential, numerically, and methodologically preponderant American core. As suggested above, it is possible to see IR as two (perhaps more) nationally distinct disciplines, but this is not much different from saying that what counts as IR is defined now, as always, in accordance with American standards. The “English School,” after all, is usually seen as a distinct perspective within a unified discipline, or ignored altogether. As Brown himself acknowledges, disciplinary hegemony involves “methods as well as cadres,” and “whereas the ‘Americanness’ of IR was once a matter of the number of scholars involved in the discipline, it is now, also, a matter of the legitimacy of the methods employed by the discipline” (Brown 2000, 18). Whether American or not, the totalizing, cosmopolitan aspirations of mainstream IR are clear enough, as is the legitimacy function encouraged by the

professionalization, and transnationalization, of this particular disciplinary vision:

IR is an American discipline in the sense in which Coca-cola is an American drink and Macdonald's hamburgers are American food substitutes; although lots of people in the rest of the world "do" IR, it is American IR that, for the most part, they are doing, just as Macdonald's are American burgers, even when ingredients, cooks and consumers are all drawn from another continent. As with a Macdonald's franchise, the relevant standards are set in the US in accordance with prevailing American notions of what constitutes scholarly work in the field.

(Brown 2000, 2)

Nationality here is incidental to the issue of methodological imperialism. The point is not just that IR is the intellectual equivalent of an American chain restaurant, but that there is no other franchise officially licensed for the production and consumption of theoretical foodstuffs, and no discussion of how they should be prepared, or what should be on the menu. Those who purport to offer more healthy alternatives will feel compelled to found their own eateries, but hard-pressed to flourish in the shadow of a giant transnational. But such is their fate if they wish to avoid seeing their spicy samosas transformed into the blandness of a McPocket. Thus, while intellectual sustenance can be found outside the disciplinary establishment, its purveyors and consumers must make do without the considerable advantages of the IR trademark. Brown is right that, intellectually, it makes no sense to ask whether the many scholars who address the substantive agenda of international relations are nominally connected to the discipline which bears that name (Brown 1994, 213). Professionally, however, the disciplinary label matters a great deal, in the United States particularly, and everywhere else in the English-speaking world that the vision of IR as a policy science has taken hold.

Does it really matter if all the really interesting theoretical work is being done outside the official channels of IR theory? Not for Brown, but his sanguinity is based on the mistaken view that the narrowness, and autonomy, of disciplinary IR has largely eroded. Outside of England, and perhaps Australia and Canada, there is very little indication that this is so. The dominant conception of IR may have become more of an intellectual straightjacket than catalyst but, in the largely American debates that continue to shape perceptions about the

subject, and dominate its literary output, an undeconstructed version of IR theory is still the only game in town. There are numerous scholars—many of whom are American—laboring outside the constraints of disciplinary IR while addressing the same substantive agenda, but no assurance, and little indication, that they are taken very seriously outside their own circles. The work of political philosophers and social theorists may catch the attention of those in the disciplinary mainstream, but typically will not do so unless it can be shown to generate or complement preexisting, “testable hypotheses” or “research programs.” This mindset wholly misses the point of such work, since most of it is aimed at constantly questioning every aspect of social analysis, and its propensity toward a slavish adherence to empirical models in particular. Thus, barring the unlikely prospect of a genuine and inclusive disciplinary reevaluation, the choice for meta-theoreticians appears to be clear: accept a perpetually marginal status within the discipline of IR, or labor in relative obscurity outside it. If they truly wish to escape drowning in its disciplinary wreckage, the critics of IR would do well to follow the latter path and, as Roland Bleiker puts it, “forget IR Theory” (as cited in Holsti 2000, 179). While numerous scholars are starting to heed this sort of advice, many of the most vociferous and best-known critics of IR, following Ashley’s example, seem to have been sucked into its disciplinary whirlpool.

Living with differences

The further one rows clear of the foundering *Titanic* of IR, the clearer the folly of its ambition becomes. Only with the perspective gained from distance is it evident that the key disputants in current disciplinary debate have no viable rescue plan to offer, and are engaged in a pointless struggle for control of a crippled, rudderless vessel. The reigning crew are able only to offer a disciplinary *status quo* that has proven to be anything but watertight, an ingenious but flawed construction in which the power of human intervention is limited to the distinctly modest role of trying to cope with the recurring and irresolvable dilemmas of international political life, leaving them with little to do but shuffle the furniture on swamped decks. The would-be rescue party, meantime, has been taken over by advocates of an extreme relativism that promises to leave passengers and crew entirely to their own physical, moral, and cognitive devices celebrating their own unique, subjectively defined spaces—staying in their cabins, plunging overboard, or just being themselves perhaps—even at the very height of their most dire

common emergency. Under the first disciplinary construction, the attempt to change the world of international politics is a largely futile endeavor, while under the second disciplinary (de?)construction, there is no world left to change, since there is “nothing from which to be emancipated,” and “no ‘we’ in whose name the emancipation can be realized” (Spegele 1996, 73). Because the traditional *raison d’être* of IR is the fervent desire to overcome the conditions which lead to war, these disciplinary visions are not just mutually unappealing, but wholly unacceptable. The *status quo* science of IR makes creative change all but impossible, while the more “subversive” (Jarvis 1998, 96) strands of critical IR make it all but meaningless. These extremes are equally far removed from the initial normative point of departure for IR, but have become the primary banners under which the combatants of disciplinary debate assemble. The point now, as always, is to find some way of accommodating the desire to confront and change (or at least muddle through) the pressing problems of international politics with recognition of the possibility that many of them may be impervious to human intervention. Whether or not these “realities” are “constructions” (as some versions of critical IR suggest) makes little difference to the human actors whose desire to understand, control, change, or subvert the various circumstances of international politics is the only possible disciplinary catalyst. Amid the exaggerated rhetoric and conceptual clutter of recent debate, and away from the totalizing visions of positivist science and postmodernist deconstruction, this initial disciplinary impulse can still be found, though not without an adequate appreciation of the inherent objectives and limits of political-social thought.

Informed by the emancipatory interests of Critical Theory, the first waves of critical social theory in IR promised to restore something of what Carr called the essential balance between “utopia and reality.” The viability of a genuinely emancipatory theory of praxis for international politics has been hotly disputed, and some suggest that the removal of one form of oppression in international theory and practice will invariably be replaced by another (Brown 1994; Spegele 1996). There are good reasons to be skeptical about the purposes and prospects of all emancipatory agendas, but whether or not Critical Theorists can avoid falling into the same snare as the positivist-inspired version of IR to which they stand opposed misses Carr’s point. An interest in emancipation from existing political realities—including the sorts of realities envisioned by emancipatory theorists—is an essential, ineradicable aspect of human nature, and international politics. Critical

Theory is thus not the answer to IR's disciplinary woes but a species of the sort of idealist thinking that marks a necessary, invaluable corrective, to the failure of the existing dominant perspective to see beyond its artificially frozen construction of international political life.

While Ashley might reasonably be called one of the first Critical Theorists of IR, his early interest in the possibility for the creative change that it seemed to offer has been eclipsed by his equally enthusiastic adoption of an explicitly anti-foundationalist, post-modernist orientation.¹² Though Critical Theory had put the allegedly progressive story of rationality and science in IR on the defensive, it entailed no necessary rejection of all modernist values. On the contrary Habermas, who features prominently in Ashley's early work and continues to be a central figure for ostensible Critical Theorists of IR like Robert Cox (1983; 1986), Mark Hoffman (1987) and Mark Neufeld (1993a; 1993b), attempts to "produce a modern account of liberation and emancipation that is grounded in ways that are not susceptible to the critiques of foundationalism" (Brown 1994, 222) increasingly prominent in Ashley's work, and the critical literature over which he has always exerted considerable sway. For the reasons enumerated above, however, critical IR has not merely failed to live up to its promise to salvage the disciplinary enterprise, but has left it foundering near the surface of a beckoning abyss.

Back to the future: rethinking the problem of discipline

In the usual rendering of the story, the core theoretical debate of international relations boils down to a dispute between Realists and liberals (a virtual synonym for Idealists) over whether, and to what extent, human intervention can alter the time-tested propensity for conflict in world politics. Since the advent of "scientific realism" (or neorealism) this controversy has centered around the problem of relative versus absolute gains. Neorealists are disposed to regard international politics as prone to competition and conflict, with its actors driven mainly by considerations of relative wealth and power. Liberals are inclined to the view that cooperation and peace can prevail given the development of habits, reforms, and institutional restraints sufficient to convince actors that the benefits accruing to one country also accrue to others. This neo-neo debate, as some call it, has taken center stage in American IR, where it is treated both as a the major axis of contention in contemporary international theory, and the latest manifestation of the

traditional, age-old quarrel between idealists and realists. Not content with this dialectic, however, this scholarship has turned increasingly toward exploration of the possibility of a theoretical synthesis incorporating elements of both neorealist and liberal thought (Kegley 1995), demonstrating yet again the pressures for metaphysical and methodological unity generated by the conception of IR as a form of scientific analysis.

But the depiction of the neo-neo debate as “the hottest topic in international relations theory today” is testament more to the characteristically exaggerated importance of American scholarship than any genuinely profound or deep-seated controversy (Kegley 1995, 1). If liberal or neoliberal international theory constitutes a resurgence of idealist thought, it is an idealism remarkably truncated in conception. What distinguishes this brand of thinking from its realist counterparts is its relatively greater optimism as regards the prospects for progress in international relations, defined, for neorealists and neoliberals alike, in explicitly bourgeois terms. It is the pacifying effects of the global spread of liberal market values and mechanisms that is debated, not the desirability of this largely uncontested version of historical progress. In a striking departure from the realist tradition they purport to extend, neorealists and neoliberals (the line between them is increasingly blurred) fail to recognize the fundamentally contested nature of political and social values generated by the inherently pluralistic character of international relations, as guaranteed by the relative moral autonomy of the state, its key constitutive unit. While virtually everyone would agree that progress is a desirable thing, now, as always, the matter of what constitutes progress in all facets of social-political life is inherently contestable. The neo-neo debate “escapes” the essential contestability of the idea of progress by turning it into a controversy not over progress *per se*, since this issue has already been “settled” to everyone’s satisfaction by the unquestioned supremacy of the Enlightenment version of historical advance, but a relatively minor dispute about how much faith to place in its inevitable triumph.

As Ashley suggests, the dominance of the scientific account of IR represented by neorealism rests on the internalization of a series of myths, beginning with the “triumph” of behavioralism over traditionalism, an echo of the Enlightenment-inspired belief in the prestige, and ultimate unity, of science (Ashley 1986, 260). Once internalized as polarities within a single disciplinary matrix, realist and idealist thought is then transformed into a dispute over the possibilities for progress within, and the appropriate methods for the proper study

of, an essentially “given order of things” (Ashley 1986, 268). Far from extending the field’s enduring legacy of idealist versus realist contention, neorealism sits in the vanguard of a scientific project that has forced all subsequent discussion through the crude sieve of its distinctions, transforming idealism and realism from conflicting appraisals of the nature of international relations as a subject to an in-house debate over the limits and possibilities of a version of science and progress that cannot itself be questioned.

Prior to their disciplinary assimilation, neither realist nor liberal reflections could be said to offer definitive, unified and comprehensive accounts of international relations theory or its subject matter. These internally rich, internally divided, traditions are poorly suited to disciplinary streamlining and scientific overhaul precisely because they bring together centuries of reflection on an ambiguous set of relations involving disparate issues, actors, values, vantage-points, cultures, and historical experiences. The world of international relations is one of moral conflicts and shared values, political dilemmas and surprising compromises, continuities and disruptions, divergent and convergent expectations, parochialism and cosmopolitanism, vertical and horizontal divisions, brutality and humanitarianism, crisis and stability, war and peace, and a host of other contradictory and elusive elements. As Morgenthau suggests, “the most formidable difficulty facing a theoretical inquiry into the nature and ways of international politics is the ambiguity of the material with which the observer has to deal” (Morgenthau 1993, 19). Countless others express the same or similar sentiment, including E.H.Carr: “no science deserves the name until it has acquired sufficient humility not to consider itself omnipotent, and to distinguish the analysis of what is from the aspiration about what should be...in the political sciences this distinction can never be absolute...” (Carr 1946, 9); Stanley Hoffmann: “I do not claim that it is possible to squeeze the whole camel of international relations through the eye of one needle” (Hoffmann 1965, 20); K.J.Holsti: “the problem of *what* kind of theories we use to understand and explain the world of international politics is not divorced from *who* does the theorizing” (Holsti 1985, viii, emphasis in original). This very modest sampling of the skeptical attitude toward an unqualified account of IR as a naturalistic science is based deliberately on authors renowned for their alleged endorsement of such a conception. Thus, despite the advent of the neorealist conception of IR, and its tendency to dominate and shape subsequent discussion, international relationists have long looked askance at the “practice of adopting fully

blown philosophical accounts of... science, knowledge or reason..." (Spegele 1996, 18). Rather, thinking about international relations over the ages, up to and including some of its best-known modern thinkers, has yielded consistently different visions and conceptions of world politics, and a customarily skeptical attitude to universalized theories. Hence, the depiction of realist, liberal or any other predisciplinary strand of international theory as scientifically "immature" could not be more misleading. While predisciplinary thought may or may not have approximated the systematizing efforts prized by the proponent of scientific IR, the art of reflection on world politics runs much deeper than methodology and is guided ultimately, and unavoidably, by normative impulses. Given the inherent ambiguity of the subject matter, the latter cannot fail to be multiple, and bound to conflict.

The absence of a shared axiological framework in international relations theory is one of its most obvious features, and a seemingly insuperable barrier to unified science. Yet a commitment to universalist accounts of science persists in the field's depiction as a unified academic discipline, indeed, in the very idea that it is a discipline. As Carr suggests, this is largely a function of the inherently teleological nature of human thinking, in which "the initial stage of aspiration towards an end is an essential foundation..." (Carr 1946, 8). But, however salutary its effects, and worthy its aspiration, the science of international politics is more an idealized abstraction than achievable objective. The overwhelming sense of purpose guiding the study of international relations toward the discovery of a universal cure for the disease of war is seen by Carr as driven by a genuine and natural compulsion, but comparable nonetheless to the alchemist's futile attempt to turn base metals into gold, a determination made fifty years before Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach were to come, reluctantly, to a similar conclusion (Carr 1946, 9; Ferguson and Mansbach 1988). While Carr's admonitions were directed largely toward the field's overly ambitious idealist architects, the dose of realism he prescribed has itself become the foundation for an equally fanciful and exaggerated set of expectations in neorealism, though Carr himself, and many of the thinkers associated with the realist label, would clearly reject the idea popularized by Waltz and his devotees, that neorealism and its would-be neoliberal cousin is a genuine extension of realist scholarship, or a progressive development.¹³

For some forty years the discipline of IR has been epistemologically self-contained. Recent criticism has focused on the one-sided and exceedingly narrow construction of international political reality that is

the legacy of this state of affairs, celebrating the discipline's incipient decline and seeking to create new epistemological and theoretical openings. This is an understandable response, but one that tends more toward relativism than pluralism and misses the extent to which the modern discipline of IR has also been estranged from itself, cut off from its intellectual antecedents in political theory, wider debates in social theory, and the appropriately pluralist cast of mind typical of its own earliest theorists. Despite the purportedly "spectacular summity of the field's great debates" (Ashley 1996, 241) the terrain has been remarkably flat, its topography seemingly familiar and obvious to all and thus taken largely for granted. While often vigorous, disputes were never explicitly and directly ontological. This has had profound implications for the field's traditional idealist-realist axis of contention, a source of irreducible tension and dynamism over centuries of speculation on international political life.

The pressing nature of the problems germane to international politics creates an understandable compulsion for greater understanding and predictive accuracy, and philosophical reflection can easily seem like a dispensable distraction. If there are ultimate driving forces behind the seeming realities of international relations, however, they must always remain partially hidden, and thus innately controversial. Pluralism and diversity is an unavoidable fact, something that the bulk of IR scholars are simply too busy trying to fix the world to notice, or too grounded in existing assumptions to recognize. None of this entails the rejection of a problem-oriented, policy-relevant approach to the subject. It does, however, demand the more modest, pluralist conception of theory and discipline evident in the earliest phase of the field's modern development, and characteristic of British IR today. But the diversity of international relations and its theories should not be exaggerated, or used as an excuse for a standardless relativism. Indeed, the chief message of the traditional pluralistic view represented by Carr, and advanced in this book, is that intellectual totalitarianism is in all its forms an enemy of genuine theoretical understanding in world politics.

Carr does not offer a theory of IR so much as a conceptual means of analyzing the complex, and always changing, interplay of theory and practice, free will and determinism, ethics and politics, and other variations on the central antithesis of utopia and realism that defines the practice and theorization of world politics. A discipline of IR can find no secure rest in seemingly external realities since these are always partly a matter of interpretation, a practice inextricably bound up with normative attitudes both resistant to objective analysis, and variable

across time, place and culture. A theory of international politics that does not recognize the essential dynamism and plurality of the world it seeks to comprehend can amount to no more than political ideology—to a “concrete expression of particular conditions and interests” (Carr 1946, 14).

Again, IR scholars have had great difficulty with Carr’s approach, and tend very much to see him as a vacillating Realist who could not quite figure out “where he stood in relation to utopianism and realism” (Booth 1991, 530), or specify the precise relationship between utopian and realist thought. But trying to figure out which pigeonhole to put Carr into fundamentally misses his point. Carr is neither a utopian nor a realist, but attempts to move beyond ideological argument by suggesting that the fact/value problem (to use the anachronistic language of the positivist) is based on irreconcilable conceptions of international political reality. He seeks to recognize and accommodate, not resolve, the interdependence of “purpose and analysis” in international theory (Carr 1946, 3–5). A value-free science of international politics sounds like a nice idea, but the effort to construct such an entity is Sisyphean in conception, and apt to obscure and undermine the ever-contested purposes of international relations theory. Carr does not reject the idea of a science of IR but suggests that good sciences, like good people, should know their limitations: “no science deserves the name until it has acquired sufficient humility not to consider itself omnipotent, and to distinguish the analysis of what it is from aspiration about what it should be” (Carr 1946, 1).

It may be a “widely held view” that Carr sounded the “death knell of utopianism as a respectable intellectual tradition,” (Porter as cited in Booth 1991, 527) but widely held views are often mistaken. As Ken Booth admits, in an otherwise critical reading, Carr’s readers have “pounced upon his attack on utopianism but generally have failed to note his uncertainty, his criticism of realism and his positive comments about utopianism” (Booth 1991, 531). What Booth fails to recognize, however, is that Carr, in describing utopian and realist theory as antithetic, explicitly avoids both dichotomous or synthetic forms of logic. International relations theory is both empirical *and* normative (Hoffmann 1960), scientific and historical (Hollis and Smith 1990), rationalist and reflectivist (Keohane 1988), positivist and interpretivist (Neufeld 1993a), realist and utopian (Carr 1946), and so forth. Despite its welter of thematic and normative concerns, methodologically and epistemologically international theory has demonstrated a distinct preference for framing its debates and issues around dualisms. Hence it

is not a study in separate parts, but a study in the balancing of contrasted ideas, a reality difficult to comprehend in light of the discipline's modern commitment to transcend, rather than accept, divisions. There is subtlety in Carr's view, but no confusion, no ambiguity and no "intellectual dilemma." Carr does indeed define politics as "the constant interaction of irreconcilable forces"—as an inherently ideological realm (Carr 1946, 94). But this is precisely his point. It is because international politics is reducible to a fundamental tension between utopia and reality that international relations theory ought to eschew the firm ideological commitments characteristic of particular "paradigms." Rather, it is only by combining and balancing the elements of utopia and reality discernible at all times, in all societies, that international relations theory can become a sound and fruitful tool of analysis (Carr 1946, 93). How this looks in practical terms is difficult to say and Carr offers little in the way of specific, and consistent, guidance. However, the epistemological attitude implicit in his stance is not unlike that of the Critical Theorists, in that Carr is clearly concerned that the quest for a liberating "science" not degenerate into a complacent acceptance of "facts" that is itself connected to a new form of intellectual slavery and oppression. But Carr's position is probably closer to what Roger Spegele terms "evaluative political realism," despite Spegele's conventional depiction of Carr as a "Commonsense realist" (1996, 85). The defining characteristic of evaluative political realism is that it "attempts to tell us how the world is" but without the unrealistic naturalistic models of science characteristic of modern IR; international relations theory is instead conceived as a "set of conceptual capacities we deploy to do things with" while consciously "placing statements of facts within the wider context in which practical judgments have to be made" (Spegele 1996, 93). To quote Spegele at more length,

Theory, on this view, is pragmatic and contextual. On the other hand, theory should not be construed as reducible to practice. When it is, theory loses its critical capacity and veers towards a frictionless world-making anathema to evaluative political realism.
(1996, 93)

Spegele correctly ascribes this view to Morgenthau, but fails to ascribe it to Carr who, as I argue in this book, holds something like this position more consistently than anyone.¹⁴

Now, as always, international thought is shaped by the necessary responses of its practitioners and theorists to the basic antithesis of

utopia and reality. In the modern era, however, international relationists became seriously sidetracked from this irresolvable axis of contention by the debate between the behavioralists and traditionalists in the 1960s. The dichotomous framing of core disputes continued apace, but the point now was to “resolve” dualisms like “facts” and “values” within a unitary objective model of science. Values, it was argued, were just another set of variables that, given the appropriate investigative techniques, could be brought into the realm of observation by the revealing light of science. This fallacious but influential view continues strongly to influence thinking, as attested by the neo-neo debates explored above. The synthesizing maneuvers of the neoliberals notwithstanding, Realist and liberal international political theory remain indebted to distinctive philosophical orientations that continue roughly to approximate the field’s traditional idealist-realist divide. But idealism-realism, as traditionally understood, is not synonymous Realism-liberalism, as the self-referential and parochial character of American IR implies. These are merely paradigmatic approximations of this very basic antinomy, the essence of which pervades international relations discourse as a whole. Even the seemingly dislocating concerns of critical theory can be understood as yet another variation on the theme of idealism and realism, with utopian sentiment expressed in terms of liberation from the intellectual strictures of positivist science, and realism defined by its continued attempt to focus on the world as it is.

International relations theory has by many accounts arrived at an intellectual impasse. This book takes issue with this conclusion, suggesting that the seeming crisis in the discourse is the result of expectations, and the applications of standards of science, wholly at odds with the ontological composition of the subject. The problem of international relations theory has been posed habitually, but erroneously, in terms of epistemologically exclusive orientations. It is construed as either explanatory or historical, rationalist or reflectivist, positivist or interpretivist, scientific or non-scientific. Returning to the insights of Carr, and to other early figures of the field cast mistakenly in the role of scientific pioneers, helps to remind us that the problem of international relations theory can be reduced to a fundamental, age-old, and enduring antithesis between idealism and realism— between what is desirable normatively, and what is feasible politically. The gist of this argument is that international relations theory is inevitably an attempt to accommodate, rather than transcend, the perpetually contrasting ideas about utopia and reality. Such an understanding, far from confounding intellectual progress, is a mark of intellectual maturity, and sets the

stage for a genuinely progressive and pluralistic field. The issue of whether international relations theory is a science or a non-science is a needless, unhelpful and insoluble distraction. If IR is a discipline, it is one "with a character of its own that reflects its subject matter," something obscured equally by the pervasive fallacy of positivism and the scholastic sterility of relativism.

Notes

Preface

- 1 Throughout this book International Relations (upper case) will refer to IR as an academic subject, while international relations (lower case) will refer more generally to the subject matter of world politics, economic and social affairs.

1

Introduction

- 1 There is at least one other disposition about the subject that deserves attention: that it does not exist (and never has existed) as an autonomous field of inquiry. For examples and discussion see Chris Brown (1994).
- 2 This term derives from the title of Holsti's 1985 book, an influential work discussed in greater detail below.
- 3 Here and elsewhere the term science is deliberately eschewed, or used with qualification, since the dominant practice in international relations is to deploy it as a virtual synonym for applied positivist method.
- 4 Idealist thought, as usually understood, is by no means synonymous with—and is often starkly different from—liberal international political theory (see for example Zacher and Matthew 1995, 108–9). This is misleading not simply because of its failure to do justice to the mansidedness of liberal theory, but because of a corresponding failure to recognize a wide range of perspectives that go well beyond the most ambitious of the liberal visions for global change. Indeed, as I argue more fully below, there has been a distinct convergence between liberal and realist thought in recent years, with the former all but assimilated into the latter in the dominant neoliberal discourse (in American discussion at least).

2

The roots of diversity in political and social theory

- 1 These labels are borrowed from Amy Gutmann's discussion of the challenge of multiculturalism to university curricula (Taylor 1994, 13).
- 2 For further discussion see Robert M.A.Crawford and Darryl S.L.Jarvis (2000).
- 3 Waltz represents the most influential and pronounced example of this is common practice (1979).
- 4 For early indications of this renaissance see Roger Epp (2000), R.M.A. Crawford (1996) and Paul Howe (1994).
- 5 It should be noted that I do not regard "postmodernism" as entirely distinct from modernity since, as I suggest in [chapter six](#), it shares and/or merely reverses many of the features of modern modes of thought. I prefer to think of these challenges, therefore, as anti-modernist.
- 6 Given the obvious debt of modernist discourses to classical Greek thought, much of this impressionistic overview deals with Greek political philosophy.
- 7 Plato certainly had doubts about the viability, and potential longevity, of the project spelled out in his *Republic* (Plato 1992, 149).
- 8 What distinguishes the Western and Eastern traditions as a whole is the relative equanimity of the latter in the face of the paradoxical nature of the world.
- 9 The notion of "essentially contested" concepts was first advanced by W. B.Gallie (1955).
- 10 For the poetic construction of this problem see Sophocles, *Antigone*.
- 11 There is at least the possibility, for example, that his ideal republic is meant to be taken ironically.
- 12 Marx, in attempting to anchor the belief in human progress to something more objective than speculation and faith, merely continued a project started by Bacon (Plamenatz 1963, 415). In this respect Marx is very much a part of the liberal tradition broadly understood, though his reliance on science and commitment to the idea of progressive historical stages (Kubálková and Cruickshank 1985, 11) is not accompanied by the same sense of inevitability that sometimes attaches to liberal conceptions of progress: "Marx (does) not hold...that progress is necessary in the sense that it could not conceivably be otherwise; ...rather...it will continue if nothing happens to stop it..." (Plamenatz 1963, 421). In practise, however, Marx does develop an essentially deterministic model of progress because he takes it for granted that nothing will happen to stop it.
- 13 Richard Ashley is among the first IR scholars to apply the Habermasian critique to IR (Ashley 1986). His work contrasts starkly to that of Robert Keohane who offers an excellent demonstration of what Habermas means

by scientific complacency: “to declare an interest in ‘progress... ‘would ...both...expose one’s own naivete and...make one’s work seem less scientific than that of one’s apparently more objective peers” (Keohane 1991, p. xv). Keohane clearly assumes that science is a strictly neutral business involving, and endorsing, no particular version of progress. The point for Habermas, of course, is that science is itself an ideology of progress.

3

From idealism to realism

- 1 It is important to note that Kegley regards liberal theory as a “subset of idealism” (Kegley 1995, 1).
- 2 Of the related field of international political economy it has even been suggested that there is no such thing as a “liberal theory,” since “liberalism separates economics and politics from one another and assumes that each sphere operates according to particular rules and a logic of its own” (Gilpin 1987, 26–7).
- 3 This contrasts starkly with both the progressive but dogmatic message of Marxism, and with the postmodern tendency to regard intellectual conflict as a good in itself.
- 4 As cited in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Author’s Edition* (1975, 916).
- 5 It should be noted that liberals, Realists and neoliberals tend to agree over the desirability and definition of progress, but have very different conceptions of its sustainability in international politics. What constitutes progress in world politics, in other words, comes to be defined and measured differently by liberals and Realists.
- 6 It is worth noting, for example, that Waltz does not even regard the Realist contribution of Hans Morgenthau as a “theory” (Kegley and Wittkopf 1993).
- 7 See for example the third of his famous six principles of political realism (Morgenthau 1993, 10–12).
- 8 That the attempt to transplant the values and theories of liberal democracy to ‘developing’ countries led to failure makes the parochialism identified by Carr no less real or persistent. As Carr puts it, “the characteristic weakness of utopianism is also the characteristic weakness of the political intellectuals,” many of who continue to see international politics/theory as an extension of policies and assumptions born in particular national and historical setting (Carr 1946, 14).
- 9 These values are by definition very familiar and include, very briefly, a perennial rhetorical commitment to human rights, an interest in free trade, and, in post-communist economies especially, an eagerness to encourage market “reforms.”

- 10 Please note that Realism, where capitalized, refers specifically to its status of aspiring scientific paradigm *within* the discipline of IR. When not capitalized, it refers to a broader, less systematic and older tradition of speculation in international relations. Marxism is capitalized because, despite key internal disputes, it can be viewed as a systematic body of thought, the key precepts of which are amenable to canonization. For precisely the opposite reason, liberalism is not capitalized.
- 11 Examples of realism's expanded agenda include a variety of innovations treated under the very general rubric of "complex interdependence" (Keohane and Nye 1977) and include concepts like the "iterated prisoner's dilemma" (Axelrod 1984), hegemonic stability theory (Keohane 1984), and international regimes (Krasner 1982).
- 12 Eric Havelock, as cited in Strauss (1968, 29).
- 13 In the international discourse Marxist thought has been influential in a vast area of issues, and especially prominent in the literature on development.

4

Idealism, realism and national differences: the American case

- 1 As William Wallace suggests, it was not until the 1960s that a "self-conscious British academic discipline" could be said to exist (Wallace 1996, 302–3).
- 2 Kegley and Wittkopf (1993, 33).
- 3 Not surprisingly, the depth and pace of economic integration in Europe, and the prospect for fundamental political integration, has rekindled interest in functionalist and neofunctionalist theories, leading some to suggest that these were never exaggerated in their inferences, but premature in their expectations.
- 4 Regimes can be accommodated within a Realist model of international politics. They can, for example, be imposed by states powerful and determined enough to sustain them, and compliance with regimes may likewise serve the interests of a "lesser" power (Keohane 1984, 71). But the definition of regime popularized by Krasner, while leaving considerable "room for amplification and interpretation," states explicitly that the mere presence of norms in international politics is not sufficient grounds for invoking the regime concept; actor expectations must "converge" if we are to suspect the "presence" of a regime (Finlayson and Zacher 1982, 275).
- 5 For the sake of expediency, I call this the Krasner definition. Properly speaking, however, this definition is not Krasner's, but that of a broad body of scholars whose analyses make up the bulk of the regime literature, the best examples of which are in Krasner's edited volume

- (1982) and, more recently, the collection edited by Volker Rittberger (1993).
- 6 This phenomenon is exemplified nicely in the attempt to discern evidence for an emerging regime in investment and multinational corporations (MNCs). Specific and binding “codes of conduct” for MNCs have proven consistently unrealistic, while vague and non-binding pronouncements about acceptable/unacceptable MNC behaviour have often been endorsed universally, and even enthusiastically. Such “codes” typify, for example, the sorts of arrangements negotiated successfully under the auspices of the United Nations, laying the groundwork for its establishment of the Commission on Transnational Corporations. See for example J.G.Crean (1982, 1–21).
 - 7 Most regime analysts, moreover, are more interested in asking what sustains cooperation more than they are interested in asking, or even acknowledging the question, of “what sustains coercion, exploitation, and injustice” (Keeley 1990, 48).

5

Idealism, realism and national differences: the British case

- 1 It should be noted that the terms American IR and British IR are used to refer to broad theoretical habits, patterns, and modes that are by no means synonymous with the particular American and British scholars who comprise most of the field’s officially recognized membership. Indeed, nationality in this individual sense is largely irrelevant since American, British, Canadian, Australian, Indian, or German IR scholars are as likely as anyone to conform to Americanized or Anglicized versions of the subject, broad styles that do not preclude, so much as limit the scope for, other possibilities.
- 2 With occasional exceptions that prove the rule, critical IR in America is largely confined to its own publishing circles like the journal *Alternatives*, or book series like those of the University of Minnesota Press, Westview Press, and Lynne Rienner.
- 3 I am grateful to Chris Brown for this and other insights in his comments on an earlier manifestation of this chapter.
- 4 Members past and present are generally believed to include Martin Wight, Charles Manning, E.H.Carr, Hedley Bull, Michael Donelan, F.S. Northedge, Adam Watson, John Vincent, and James Mayall. This school is defined broadly by its notion that the international system of states also contains strong elements of society, community, and order.
- 5 It is worth noting that neither of these ostensibly “founding figures” of the American discipline were American born.

6

A discipline pas de comme les autres?

- 1 There is some suggestion that the third debate, preoccupied with issues of ontology and method, has already given way to a “fourth debate” concerned largely with issues of a philosophical and an epistemological nature (see for example Waever 1996, 157). The discipline is so badly divided and adrift at this point, however, that the continuing effort to find continuity in these discourses seems pointless.
- 2 The criterion for inclusion here is remarkably loose and might well, it seems to me, include a substantial number of broadly positivist scholars.
- 3 For Jarvis (1998) *Critical Theory*, or what he calls “epistemological post-modernism,” constitutes a “relatively benign” form of postmodernism that seeks to expose the foundationalist assumptions on which metatheoretical knowledge systems are constructed while retaining an ability to make meaningful evaluative judgments.
- 4 Obviously, this refers only to official disciplinary channels and not to international relations more broadly construed.
- 5 Brown suggests that critical theorists like Michel Foucault, M.M. Bakhtin, and Christine Sylvester, for example, “manage to combine post-modernism with a point of view, a positive theoretical understanding of the world in a way that deconstruction and intertextuality seem to preclude” (Brown 1994, 230).
- 6 This passage also demonstrates nicely Ashley’s paradoxical longing for disciplinary acceptance.
- 7 The actual title is “Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissident Thought in International Studies.”
- 8 Theoretical disputation is not confined to journals, of course, but these provide the best gauge of activity.
- 9 The best example perhaps is the special issue “Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissidence in International Relations,” published under the guest editorship of Richard Ashley and R.B.J. Walker (1990).
- 10 This stance comes close to handling the postmodern argument by definition.
- 11 It is worth adding, moreover, that the vast bulk of international relations theorizing has been done prior to, or outside of, the modern disciplinary context.
- 12 Compare, for example, the explicitly emancipatory commitment of Ashley’s “Political Realism and the Human Interests” (1981) and “The Poverty of Neorealism” (1986) with his later uncritical embrace of post-structuralist theory (1996).
- 13 See Carr (1946, pp. 6–7), where his depiction of the science of political economy would, by implication, apply equally well to neorealist theory.

- 14 Carr's orientation to international theory is mirrored almost exactly in Anthony Giddens' conception of a theory of structuration in contemporary sociology, discussed briefly in [chapter two](#). Like Carr, Giddens rejects the single epistemological stances of utopia and reality—expressed as subjectivism and positivism—and conceives of social science “as a science with a character of its own that reflects its subject matter” (Bryant and Jary 1991, 10–11). While Carr speaks of the problem of balancing “free will” and “determinism,” Giddens deploys the sociological language of structure and agency in confronting the same problem, with allowance of course made for his different disciplinary focus.

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