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**IR at 100: Centenary Reflections on the Theoretical and
Meta-theoretical Challenges for the Field of International Relations.**

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IR at 100: Centenary Reflections on the Theoretical and Meta-theoretical Challenges for the Field of International Relations.

Andreas Gofas*

Abstract

The year 2019 marked the centenary of the academic field of International Relations (IR) and called for a serious and thorough assessment of its past achievements and failures, as well as the challenges that lay ahead. IR seems to be experiencing an existential crisis quite unlike anything else in its hundred-year history and it is in an ongoing search for its very “soul”. This paper is trying to offer some reflections on the theoretical and meta-theoretical challenges that lay ahead for the field. In so doing, it first discusses three theoretical challenges: a) the question of policy relevance and of the socio-political utility of IR, b) the quest for a science with predictive power, and c) the widespread epistemic fatigue with grand-theories and the rise of analytical eclecticism. It then proceeds by offering reflections on three categories among the meta-theoretical challenges: a) the historiographical challenges, which refer to distortions of the conventional historiographical narrative for the evolution of the field and consequently to the distorted prevailing disciplinary self-image, b) philosophical challenges referring to the turn of IR to philosophy of science in an attempt to seek scientific credentials and philosophical legitimization for its knowledge claims, and c) to sociological challenges referring to the power-knowledge nexus and associated geographical and gender disparities in the global production of IR knowledge.

Introduction

The year 2019 marked the centenary of the academic field of International Relations (IR) and called for a serious and thorough assessment of its past achievements and failures, and of its responsibilities in delivering a clear vision and critical perspective

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on the present and future of our globalised and yet profoundly divided world. Born in the aftermath of a devastating World War, and imbued with a sense of ethical and existential concern for humanity's moral destiny, security, and societal progress, IR emerged as a historical promise that an understanding of the world and its peoples, guided by both reason and conscience, was the key to its preservation and betterment. This is, of course, a tall order that the present paper does not aspire to address – it would be pretentious to do so. In the spirit of the “2019” centenary logic, it will attempt to offer some brief, and inevitably incomplete, reflections on some of the theoretical and meta-theoretical challenges that the field of IR is facing.¹

First, we analyse three theoretical challenges: a) the question of policy relevance and of the socio-political utility of IR, b) the quest for a science with predictive power, and c) the widespread epistemic fatigue with grand-theories and the rise of analytical eclecticism. We then proceed, with distinguishing three categories among the meta-theoretical challenges. First, the historiographical challenges, which refer to distortions of the conventional historiographical narrative for the evolution of the field and consequently to the distorted prevailing disciplinary self-image. Second, philosophical challenges referring to the turn of IR to philosophy of science in an attempt to seek scientific credentials and philosophical legitimization for its knowledge claims. Third, to sociological challenges referring to the power-knowledge nexus and associated geographical and gender disparities in the global production of IR knowledge.

As the above hints, we are adopting an inward-looking and reflexive standpoint on the evolution of the discipline. Therefore, we only partially, namely through the discussion of the socio-political usefulness of the discipline, tackle the issue of the degree to which IR research responds to the amount and the complexity of the problems and challenges posed by the reality of international politics in the hundred years between 1919 and 2019.

¹ For a systematic overview of the theoretical and meta-theoretical challenges, see ANDREAS GOFAS, INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA, NICHOLAS ONUF (EDS.), *SAGE HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, (London, SAGE 2018), and KEN BOOTH, TONI ERSKINE (EDS.) *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY TODAY*, (Cambridge: POLITY PRESS, 2016).

I. Theoretical Challenges

a) The theory-practice gap and the challenge of socio-political utility.

In recent years, concerns surrounding the widening of the gap between IR theory and political practice has intensified.² As Waever notes³, the concern is such, that as it becomes evident from the TRIP Survey for 2011 and 2015, 90% of the respondents IR academics hold that stronger ties must be developed between the IR academic community and the community of those developing relevant policies.⁴ The alleged gap is attributed to the tendency of theory to function at a level of high abstraction and to be formulated in increasingly incomprehensible terms, losing thus, not only its touch with the reality of politics, but also with its initial orientation as it was determined by the founders of the field.

The relevant critique is summarised powerfully by Paul Nitze, a man of politics and intellect, who reflecting on his life-long rich experience noted that:

“most of what has been written and taught under the heading of ‘political science’ by Americans since World War II has been contrary to experience and to common sense. It has also been of limited value, if not counterproductive, as a guide to the actual conduct of policy.”⁵

One could quote the by now famous excerpt from the last page of John Maynard Keynes’ *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* as a counterpoint to Nitze’s observation:

² See for instance, Stephen Walt, *The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations*, ANNUAL REVIEW OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, (8), 23-48, (2005); William Wallace, *Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations*, REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 22(3), 301-321, (1996); ALEXANDER L. GEORGE, BRIDGING THE GAP: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN FOREIGN POLICY (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press 1993); CHRISTOPHER HILL AND PAMELA BESHOFF (EDS.), TWO WORLDS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: ACADEMICS, PRACTICIONERS AND THE TRADE IN IDEAS, (London and New York Routledge 1994); JOSEPH LEPGOLD AND MIROSLAV NINCIC (EDS.), BEING USEFUL: POLICY RELEVANCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2002)

³ Ole Waever, *Mind the Gap: Defining and measuring policy engagement in IR in WHAT’S THE POINT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS?* (Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, Rorden Wilkinson eds. 2017).

⁴ The TRIP Survey (Teaching, Research and International Policy) periodically conducts surveys of the disciplinary trends on a global scale and is based at the Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations of the William and Mary College, in the USA.

⁵ Quoted in: Joseph S. Nye, *International Relations: The Relevance of Theory to Practice in THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS* (Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal eds. 2008).

“The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back...But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.”⁶

What are we to conclude from such opposing opinions as the above two? First, that recent arguments about the end of theory are exaggerated.⁷ No matter whether “[o]ne might want to dismiss the great debates in the study of international relations as intellectual diversions, describe them as ‘games that professors play’, deconstruct them as Foucaultian genealogies or dignify them as Kuhnian paradigm shifts”⁸ the implications of theoretical debate can hardly be exaggerated. This is so for two reasons. First, this is the case because scientific power extends well beyond the walls of the auditorium and the conversations of the academic circles. As Keynes emphatically suggests in the aforementioned passage, the political and economic worlds are governed by ideas, which in turn are generated by theory. This relationship between political and economic practice on the one hand, and ideas on the other, is often complex and requires a fine-grained analysis of the mechanisms at play. Recently, Isaac Kamola has focused on US academic institutions as knowledge-production sites that have given rise to the ubiquitous imaginary of a globalised world in the place of the old Cold-War image of a world of nation-states. He demonstrates that the perception of globalization as a force permeating world politics is not merely the result of end of the Cold War, but crucially (partially at least) it has been actively crafted in US universities and other institutions since the 1980s.⁹

⁶ JOHN M. KEYNES, *THE GENERAL THEORY OF EMPLOYMENT, INTEREST AND MONEY* 383-384, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷ For instance, David A. Lake, *Theory is dead, long live theory: The end of the Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations*, *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, 19(3), 465-480, (2013).

⁸ DONALD D. PUCHALA, *THEORY AND HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS* 216, (London Routledge 2003).

⁹ ISAAC KAMOLA, *MAKING THE WORLD GLOBAL: U.S. UNIVERSITIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE GLOBAL IMAGINARY*, (Durham, Duke University Press 2019).

Second, because theory is also an issue of disciplinary power. Eventually, “to the victor go the hearts and minds of the academy, the right to define the direction of scholarship and with it, the parameters, function, and purpose for which theory is pursued in the discipline”.¹⁰ Indeed, Puchala in his assessment of his career-long search for patterns in IR, outlines the disciplining power of theory by reminding us that “[s]cholarly careers have been (and are today being) established, challenged, and in some cases ruined depending upon academic partisanship. Journals have been turned into ramparts, book reviews into cannonades, academic meetings into gatherings of cults, academic departments into cathedrals, tenure and promotion processes into inquisitions, graduate students into foot soldiers or pawns, and idealists into cynics”.¹¹

b) The challenge of a predictive science of IR

When asked in 1991 about the crucial lesson derived from the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union, Stuart Conquest – one of the leading experts on the history of the Soviet Union – gave a laconic and emphatic answer: “If you are a student, switch from political science to history”.¹² His suggestion summarises acutely the widespread at the time spirit of subversion in regards to the dominant theories of international politics. The critique targeting the inability to predict -and respond to the challenge of- such a monumental change in the international system was not exaggerated. As John Lewis Gaddis, another prominent historian, establishes convincingly, until then all theories in the field, were geared at developing, among other things, some type of predictive power.¹³

Debates around predictive power or weakness to predict, start often, perhaps even in a clichéd manner, with the phrase “It’s difficult to make predictions, particularly about the future”. The phrase is often attributed to the Nobel laureate, Danish natural scientist Niels Bohr, however, many question its association with him. Irrespectively of who coined the phrase, we must not forget that “God gave physics the easy

¹⁰ DARRYL S. L. JARVIS, *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM: DEFENDING THE DISCIPLINE* 179 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 2000).

¹¹ PUCHALA, 217-7.

¹² Quoted in: John L. Gaddis, *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, *INTERNATIONAL SECURITY*, 17(3), 53, (1992-93).

¹³ *Id.*

problems”.¹⁴ Without meaning to underestimate the complexities of physics, “matter cannot decide to disobey the law of gravity”.¹⁵ In contrast to the natural world, international politics is shaped, reproduced and changed through the (inter)action of reflective actors who are capable of deciding against following the “laws” of the international system (assuming that these “laws” exist, and if they do, that our current analytical tools can uncover them).¹⁶

For the advocates of a predictive science of IR, this might be an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous point to make – one that leads to the slippery slope of relativism and the “black hole” of contingency. But for those who are sceptical about the prospect of a predictive science of IR, the “black hole” of contingency has – whatever physicists may say of black holes – light on the other side.¹⁷ Even though the prospect of a predictive science of IR might be attractive, the quest for such an endeavour depoliticises politics. This is so because at the core of its analytical rationale it strips the actors off their capacity of political action and grants this to the structure of the system. This does not mean that we cannot make predictions regarding objective material factors. It means however, that no matter how crucial these objective factors are, future developments will always be co-determined by subjective and agentic factors. While the supporters of a predictive science of IR may find this approach rather disappointing, other academics consider it to be liberating, because it signals that political developments are not structurally pre-determined and, therefore, they could evolve via different paths.¹⁸

c) The end of “-isms” and the challenge of analytical eclecticism

As the above may serve to indicate, the problem of theory is neither its alleged distance from political practice, nor the lack of predictive power. The problem lays in the explanatory ‘monism’ that it often adopts. A ‘monism’ expressed in terms of an

¹⁴ Steven Bernstein, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, Cynthia Weber, *God Gave Physics the Easy Problems: Adapting Social Science to an Unpredictable World*, EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 6(1) 43-67 (2000).

¹⁵ COLIN HAY, POLITICAL ANALYSIS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION 251, (Basingstoke, Palgrave 2002).

¹⁶ This analytical challenge was described by the eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens, as the “double hermeneutic” challenge, in the sense that the social sciences are called upon to interpret and to point out the interpretations given by the (always) reflexive actors in the context of the environment in which they make decisions and act [ANTHONY GIDDENS, THE CONSTITUTION OF SOCIETY: OUTLINE OF THE THEORY OF STRUCTURATION, (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984)].

¹⁷ HAY, *id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*, 271.

analytical bias (if not a mono-causal fixation) that privileges the explanatory value of only one level of analysis (macro or micro) and of only one type of variables (material, institutional or ideational). This analytical bias permeating IR grand-theories, serves the purpose to craft a general theory whose explanatory power will not only transcend historical specificities, socio-political contingencies, and the distinctiveness of each case, but because of these very characteristics, it will also deliver the 'holy grail' of predictive power.

Nevertheless, the price of such an analytical mono-causal bias is a sterile zero-sum theoretical confrontation. Additionally, the acceptance of only one among the IR theoretical "-isms" (realism, liberal, constructivism, etc) as an exclusive explanatory prism, is also problematic. David Lake describes IR theoretical "-isms" as "academic sects" that are preoccupied with internal self-referential discussions and "theological wars" with rival "sects".¹⁹ This widespread and deeply embedded epistemic culture troubles increasingly more analysts, who believe that it puts obstacles in the path of disciplinary progress.

Against this backdrop of heated theoretical polemics and growing fatigue with the mono-causal fixation of IR theoretical "-isms", Katzenstein and Sil propose the adoption of "analytical eclecticism".²⁰ Analytical eclecticism is neither a new theory, nor a new "-ism" that strives to replace the existing ones. Besides, as Craig Parsons observes "there is no solid middle ground without poles, no useful eclecticism without distinct things to mix".²¹ In other words, "analytical eclecticism" is simply an invitation to reexamine the rigidity of theoretical dividing lines and a new way of conceptualising, in more complementary, rather than contentious, terms the relationship between theories. In reality, Katzenstein's and Sil's suggestion leads us back to the intellectual challenge set by Waltz, sixty years ago.

"The prescriptions directly derived from a single image [level of analysis] are incomplete because they are based upon partial analyses. The partial quality of

¹⁹ David A. Lake, *Why "isms" Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress*, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY 465, 55(2), (2011).

²⁰ KATZENSTEIN PETER AND RUDRA SIL, THE END OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY? BEYOND PARADIGMS: ANALYTIC ECLECTICISM IN THE STUDY OF WORLD POLITICS, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2010).

²¹ Quoted in: Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein, *De-Centering, Not Discarding, the "Isms": Some Friendly Amendments*, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLEY 484, 55(2) (2011).

each image sets up a tension that drives one toward inclusion of the others. [...]. One is led to a search for the more inclusive nexus of causes [...].²²

Of course, the constitution of an “inclusive nexus of causes” cannot, and should not, be identified with an “explanatory blender”, in which we arbitrarily put all variables and levels of analysis. What matters is locating in each individual case the interconnection between distinct mechanisms and variables that each theoretical tradition examines individually. Paraphrasing slightly a remark by Hans Morgenthau, the mastery in the analysis of international politics does not require the rationality of the engineer, but the wisdom and the moral strength of a genuine intellectual.²³

II. Meta theoretical challenges

a) Historiographical challenges and the distortions of the conventional narrative

The rather mythical dimension of the conventional IR historiographical narrative in terms of “Great Debates” has been long established. Yet, we continue to habitually draw on this dominant self-image even though we know that it bears little relation to how the discipline actually came into existence and evolved. Why is this so?

Conventional IR historiography has served a double purpose: First, it is a mechanism of disciplinary identity building. Indeed, an indispensable element of every process of identity building is (as is typically the case with national identities) the acceptance of a common history that is presented in heroic terms. The organizing device of “Great Debates” does exactly that. Second, it is a vehicle via which we project the image of scientific progress. In other words, conventional IR historiography is an exercise in disciplinary nationalism. Up to a point, this is understandable and legitimate. Every new field needs to somewhat glorify its history, define its territory and defend it from potential intruders. The fact that these practices are understandable (especially for a new field that has been traditionally insecure about its identity and scientific status), it doesn’t make them any less problematic.

²² KENNETH WALTZ, *MAN, STATE AND THE WAR: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS* 230, (New York: Columbia University Press 1959).

²³ HANS J. MORGENTHAU, *SCIENTIFIC MAN VS. POWER POLITICS* 16, (London: Latimer House Ltd. 1947).

Since the mid-1990s there has been a dramatic surge in work on the disciplinary history of IR.²⁴ If we wanted to summarise the critique that has been applied to the conventional narrative by the constantly expanding program of revisionist IR historiography, we could identify four broad themes. First, the conventional narrative of “Great Debates” does not correspond directly to the historical developments, thus nurturing a series of oversimplifications.²⁵ Even the foundational rivalry between realists and utopians is questioned as historically misleading.²⁶

Second, the conventional narrative commits a fallacy by establishing the “1919” myth. The celebratory focus on the year in which the first Chair in International Relations was established at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales overshadows previous contributions to IR thought.²⁷ While the establishment of “1919” as some kind of “epistemic big bang” favours those wishing to give a Kuhnian flair to the evolution of the discipline, highlighting the pre-1919 period as a pre-paradigmatic and the post-1919 period as paradigmatic/scientific, it remains an artificial dichotomy that hampers the development of a reflexive historical self-awareness of the discipline.

Third, the conventional narrative reproduces a gendered bias that silences the female contributions to the field’s development by restricting the “canon” of international thought and its intellectual protagonists to a male-dominated set of “founding fathers”. This loud silence overlooks that feminism was actually one of the original founding theories in the early development of IR, rather than a recent addition.²⁸ It also erases from the collective disciplinary memory that women are an important part

²⁴ For an overview of the research agenda of IR historiography and its findings, see Brian C. Schmidt, *The History of International Studies*, OXFORD RESEARCH ENCYCLOPEDIA, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (2010), and Lucian M. Ashworth, *A Historiographer’s View: Rewriting the History of International Thought*, in HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ANDREAS GOFAS, INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA, NICKOLAS ONUF (EDS.) 529-541, (London: SAGE 2018).

²⁵ See for instance, BRIAN C. SCHMIDT, *THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF ANARCHY: A DISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, (Albany: SUNY Press 1997).

²⁶ Christopher Hill, *1939: the origins of liberal realism*, REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 15(4), 319-328 (1989); Peter Wilson, *The Myth of the ‘First Great Debate’*, REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 24(5), 1-16 (1998); Brian C. Schmidt, *Anarchy, World Politics and the Birth of a Discipline: American International Relations, Pluralist Theory and the Myth of Interwar Idealism*, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 16 (1), 9-31 (2002);

²⁷ See for instance, Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, John Hobson, *The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths that Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919*, MILLENIUM: JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 39(3), 735-758, (2011)

²⁸ Lucian M. Ashworth, *Feminism, war and the prospects for peace: Helena Swanwick (1864–1939) and the lost feminists of inter-war International Relations*, INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST JOURNAL OF POLITICS, 13(1), 25-43, (2011).

of the discipline's institutional and intellectual development.²⁹ Finally, because of a myopic self-referential tendency, the conventional narrative limits the intellectual protagonists to the scientific community, thus obscuring the intellectual contributions of merchants, military and governmental officers to the field's evolution.³⁰

Fourth, the conventional narrative reproduces a Western-centric bias³¹. Indicative of this bias is the persistence of an orthodox set of benchmark dates by which much IR research and teaching is organized: 1648, the emergence of the modern international system as institutionalized in the Treat of Westphalia; 1919, the end of World War I and the establishment of IR as an autonomous field; 1945, World War II and the rise of a bipolar system; 1989, the end of the Cold War and intensification of globalization.³² Such a blinkered focus reinforces a narrow disciplinary imagination by marginalizing developments in the non-Western world. Another corollary of this Western-centric bias is that it obscures the colonial/racist intellectual roots of the field.³³ Through a process of conveniently selective amnesia and selective recollection of the discipline's 'origins', the conventional IR narrative constructed a mythical and glorified disciplinary self-image that eradicated from the collective memory the fact that the field's first journal was *The Journal of Race Development* and elevated Woodrow Wilson and his vision for peace and the self-determination of (some) states to the status of founding icon.³⁴

B) Philosophical challenges and the quest for scientific credentials

In the context of demythologizing the iconic historiographical status of "1919", Guilhot presents the process through which IR became autonomous from the "epistemic womb" of political science, as a strategic move in the intellectual chessboard of post-War America, at the initiative of Morgenthau, in order to form a new discipline that would resist the assault of behavioralism, which had already been established as the

²⁹ Patricia Owens, *Women and the history of international thought*, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY, 62(3), 467-481, (2018).

³⁰ See for instance, TORBJØRN L. KNUTSEN, A HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY (3rd edition), (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2016).

³¹ See for instance, JOHN HOBSON, THE EUROCENTRIC CONCEPTION OF WORLD POLITICS: WESTERN INTERNATIONAL THEORY, 1760–2010, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012).

³² Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *Rethinking benchmark dates in international relations*, EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 20(2), 437-462, (2014).

³³ See for instance, ROBERT VITALIS, *WHITE WORLD ORDER, BLACK POWER POLITICS: THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2015).

³⁴ Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, John Hobson, *The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths that Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919*, MILLENIUM: JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 39(3), 735-758, (2011)

canon in American political science.³⁵ With time, the resulting autonomy of the discipline in the USA, for whichever reasons it occurred and whichever purposes it served, signalled simultaneously IR's disengagement with political theory and philosophy. This disengagement carried heavy consequences for the field, since it stripped it off a rich tradition in political theory. This development led Martin Wight, in 1996, in his classic by now article, to the disappointing conclusion that there is no integrated and systematic body of international political theory.³⁶

However, in the context of the present paper and the meta-theoretical take it has adopted what is of direct interest is the discipline's relationship with philosophy of science. Here we should point out that the historical development and scientific identity of IR have, to a large extent, been determined through a series of debates about what constitutes science and the potential of IR to emerge as an exact science of international politics with a methodology similar to that of the natural sciences.³⁷ Because IR has been traditionally uneasy about its status as a social "science", there has been a long history of attempts to legitimate the field as "scientific".³⁸ To this effect, the field has turned either to "the scientific method", in search of scientific credentials, or to "the philosophy of science", in search of philosophical legitimization and a broadened notion of science.³⁹

The turn to the scientific method, especially in the USA, found its first systematic articulation during the behaviorist revolution in IR and reached its peak with Waltz's neorealism, in his *Theory of International Politics*⁴⁰, and the widespread employment of rational choice, mathematical models and quantitative analysis that followed suit. The Waltzian intervention ushered in, during the 1980s, the so-called third "Great Debate" between neorealism and neoliberalism. During its course, the dominant IR

³⁵ Nicolas Guilhot, *The Realist Gambit: Postwar American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory*, INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY, 2(4), 281-304, (2008).

³⁶ Martin Wight, *Why is there no International Theory?* In DIPLOMATIC INVESTIGATIONS, HERBERT BUTTERFIELD, MARTIN WIGHT (EDS.) 17-34, (London: Allen and Upwin 1966).

³⁷ Colin Wight, *Philosophy of Social Science and International Relations* in HANDBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, WALTER CARLSNAES, THOMAS RISSE, BETH A. SIMMONS (EDS.) 23-51, (London: SAGE 2002).

³⁸ Nuno P. Monteiro, Keven G. Ruby, *IR and the False Promise of Philosophical Foundations*, INTERNATIONAL THEORY 1(1), 15-48, (2009).

³⁹ PATRICK THADDEUS JACKSON, THE CONDUCT OF INQUIRY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD POLITICS (Abingdon: Routledge 2011).

⁴⁰ KENNETH WALTZ, THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, (New York: MacGraw-Hill Inc. 1979).

theories continued their disagreements over first-order issues but developed a consensus on second-order meta-theoretical issues by jointly following positivism and the accompanying methodological choices.⁴¹ This positivist convergence and so-called “neo-neo osmosis” determined the subsequent assault on mainstream theories with the rise of a series of post-positivist perspectives.

The post-positivist critique introduced the fourth, and current, “Great Debate” and the systematic turn to the philosophy of science in search of a broadened and more inclusive account of science. As the epistemological divide was widening and the polemics intensified, no less of a gate-keeper than Bob Keohane, in his 1988 International Studies Association address, proposed the adoption of the Lakatosian platform as the most adequate for dialogue between the opposing perspectives and bridge-building between a Popperian-like positivism and a Kuhnian-like post-positivism.⁴²

The aspiration to transcend epistemological divides will eventually find its most systematic advocate in the work of Alexander Wendt. About a decade after Keohane’s call, Wendt, in his seminal 1999 *Social Theory of International Politics*, proposes an “epistemological Westphalia” by developing a thin version of constructivism – one aimed at causing the minimal possible disturbance to the largely positivist mainstream.⁴³ In this respect, it is no accident that Keohane himself declared that Wendt “has shown convincingly that one does not have to swallow the contaminated epistemological water of postmodernism in order to enjoy the heady ontological wine of constructivism”⁴⁴.

Successful though Wendt’s strategy might have been in convincing the mainstream, his effort has been criticized for being more of a rhetorical gesture to marriage inconsistent premises, rather than a synthesis. Indeed, on the one hand, he does align himself ontologically with the post-positivists and epistemologically with the

⁴¹ Ole Wæver, *The rise and fall of the inter-paradigm debate*, in INTERNATIONAL THEORY: POSITIVISM AND BEYOND, STEVE SMITH, KEN BOOTH, MARYSIA ZALEWSKI (EDS.) 149-185, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴² Robert O. Keohane, *International institutions: Two approaches*, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY, 32(4), 381-386 (1988).

⁴³ ALEXANDER WENDT, SOCIAL THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999).

⁴⁴ Robert Keohane, *Ideas Part-Way Down*, REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 26(1), 129 (2000).

positivists, while on the other, he joins forces with critical realists. Given that critical realism is a ferocious critique of positivism, Wight is right to argue that this is “an impossible position to hold”.⁴⁵ Be that as it may, it would be somewhat churlish not to recognise that Wendt’s intervention was a major one. That is so because it illustrated that IR scholarship cannot proceed without systematic reflection on its ontological and epistemological premises and contributed to the popularisation of the view that social theory is an indispensable element of IR theorising. In so doing, it broke a long-standing tradition of disciplinary insularity that had kept the field agnostic to developments in the philosophy of science and wider field of the social sciences.

For the advocates of this turn, this is a welcome and long overdue opening of the horizons of IR theorizing. For the critics, it is eventually a pointless exercise in philosophical navel-gazing that lies outside the confines of IR theory proper. As Moravcsik, one of the most vociferous critics of this alleged philosophical navel-gazing, claims in his critique of constructivism, published in a state of the art volume on constructivism in EU studies:

[despite the deployment of a] panoply of arguments drawn from ontology, social theory, epistemology, and philosophy of science⁴⁶..., ...constructivists...have contributed far less to our empirical and theoretical understanding of European integration than their meta-theoretical assertions might suggest.⁴⁷ Perhaps, then, an opposite view is worth considering, namely that *meta-theory is not the solution but the problem*.⁴⁸

Moravcsik is right to point out that systematic reflection on the philosophical premises of our theories cannot provide ready-made answers to IR first-order questions. Yet, ontological and epistemological positions shape our approach – “they are like a skin not a sweater; they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit”⁴⁹. Hence, one of the positive outcomes of this turn towards the philosophy of science was taking the field out of its “ontological lethargy”.

⁴⁵ WIGHT, id. 36

⁴⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, *Constructivism and European Integration: A Critique*, in THOMAS CHRISTIANSEN, KNUD-ERIK JORGENSEN, ANTJE WIENER (EDS.), 185; (London: Sage 2001).

⁴⁷ Id. 177.

⁴⁸ Id. 185-6.

⁴⁹ David March, Selen A. Ercan and Paul Furlong, A skin not a sweater: Ontology and epistemology in political science, in THEORY AND METHODS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE, 4TH ed, VIVIEN LOWNDES, DAVID MARSH, & GERRY STOKERS (EDS.) 177, (London: Palgrave 2018).

C) Sociological challenges and the power-knowledge nexus.

In comparison to the two previous meta-theoretical reflective axes, that of the sociology of knowledge is the most recent in IR literature and, as a result, the less developed. This surely constitutes a paradox. Two of the most iconic IR founding figure, Edward H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau had emphatically pointed out the strong interconnection between power/interests and knowledge production. In the case of Carr, the classic text *Ideology and Utopia* by Karl Manheim, one of the pioneers of the sociology of knowledge, had exercised a strong influence in his seminal *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*. In the case of Morgenthau, suffice it to direct to his powerful (yet mostly forgotten) *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* and quote Jervis's telling observation: "Those who believe that all realists conceive knowledge as independent from experience and self-interest, who think that they have made a significant discovery when they argue that people's sense of their world is in significant measure socially constructed, and who think that they are the first to grasp the close interconnections between power and knowledge have never read *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*".⁵⁰

However, the post war "scientification" of the field obscured, if not eradicated, any account that questioned the "objectivity" and "purity" of science. The often-cited 1977 essay by Stanley Hoffman, "An American Social Science: International Relations", did bring again to the surface the importance of studying the sociological mechanisms of knowledge production.⁵¹ Yet, despite the essay's contribution, it took more than twenty years since then and the publication of another landmark essay, "The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline", by Ole Wæver, in the golden anniversary special issue of the discipline's flagship journal *International Organization*, for a robust research program in the sociology of knowledge to emerge.⁵²

Since then, the program of the sociology of IR knowledge has concentrated on the global and domestic factors that affect knowledge production and relations of power

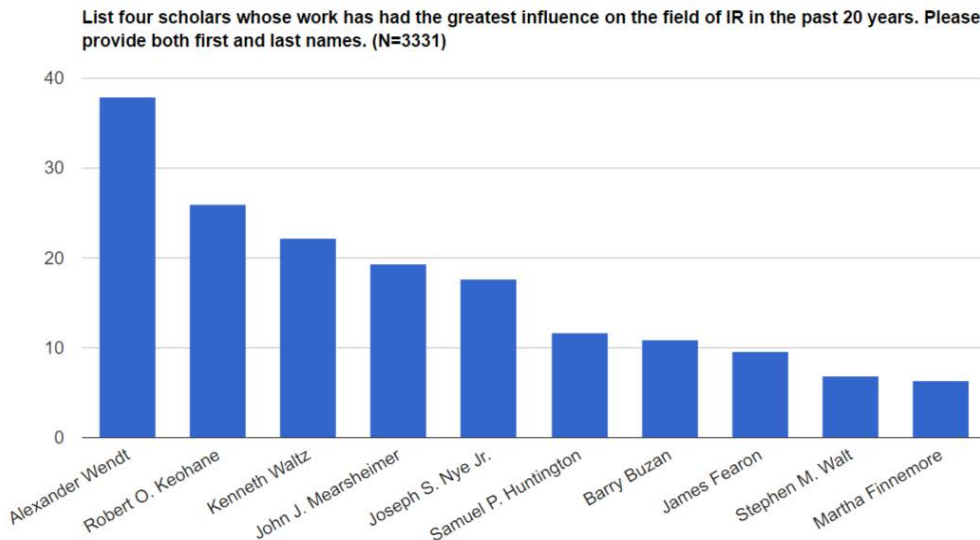
⁵⁰ Robert Jervis, *Hans Morgenthau, Realism and the Scientific Study of International Politics*, SOCIAL RESEARCH, 61(4), 863 (1994).

⁵¹ Stanley Hoffman, *An American Social Science: International Relations*, DAEDALUS, 106(3), 46-60 (1977).

⁵² Ole Wæver, *The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations*, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION, 52(Special Issue), 687-727 (1998).

and dominance that permeate our scholarly world.⁵³ Let's look briefly at some of them. According to the 2014 TRIP (Teaching, Research, and International Policy) Survey, when the respondents were asked to point out four thinkers with the greatest impact on the discipline of IR during the past 20 years, their responses gave the results that are depicted on Graph 1.

Graph 1: IR scholars whose work is considered to the greatest influence



Source: TRIP 2014 Faculty Survey, <https://trip.wm.edu/charts/#/bargraph/38/5045>

The list that emerged from the answers is revealing of at least two imbalances in the global distribution of knowledge production. First, with the exception of Barry Buzan, professor Emeritus at the LSE, the remaining nine authors that were thought to have the greatest impact on the field during the past 20 years, are Americans, supporting thus Hoffman's classic essay on IR as an "American social science". Apart from the American dominance in global knowledge production, research has also focused on the rise of non-Western IR theories⁵⁴ and the sociological factors driving

⁵³ For an overview of the research agenda of the sociology of IR knowledge and its findings, see Ole Wæver, *Keeping It Worldly: A Sociologist's View*, in HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ANDREAS GOFAS, INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA, NICKOLAS ONUF (EDS.) 556-572, (London: SAGE 2018).

⁵⁴ ARLENE B. TICKNER & OLE WAEVER (EDS.), GLOBAL SCHOLARSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, Abingdon: Routledge 2009, and AMITAV ACHARYA & BARRY BUZAN (EDS.), NON-WESTERN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY: PERSPECTIVES ON AND BEYOND. Abingdon: Routledge 2010.

geopolitical/geocultural epistemic variations and the formation of geographical-national schools of IR.⁵⁵

Second, with the exception of Martha Finnemore, the remaining nine thinkers in the list of Graph 1 are men, supporting thus the claims of many feminist scholars about the gendered imbalance in the global distribution of knowledge-production.⁵⁶ These geographical and gender biases are reinforced through their reproduction in introductory textbooks, the main vehicle of socializing newcomers into the field.⁵⁷

Every social science reflects in its distribution of knowledge production wider relations of power and dominance while the systematic silencing of marginalized voices is neither innocent, nor without consequences. As we asserted above, referring to Jarvis, “to the victor goes the hearts and minds of the academy, the right to define the direction of scholarship and with it, the parameters, function, and purpose for which theory is pursued in the discipline”.⁵⁸

As Gofas, Hamati-Ataya & Onuf argue, the field of IR is “experiencing an existential crisis quite unlike anything else in its hundred-year history” and it is in an ongoing search for its very “soul”.⁵⁹ The history, philosophy and sociology of IR knowledge constitute a triangle of reflective disciplinary meta-discourses that can pluralize the field and address many of the challenges discussed. However, even though many scholars work on philosophical, historical or sociological issues, there seems to be little interest in the wider picture, as constituted by the overlapping, reciprocally constituted territories of the three. Indeed, “[a]lthough there are signs that the field’s theoretical and methodological logic is moving towards the transcendence of

⁵⁵ Peter Markus Kristensen and Yongjin Zhang, *Identity and Theory: Towards Sociological Explanations of Schools’ in International Relations*, in HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ANDREAS GOFAS, INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA, NICKOLAS ONUF (EDS.), 236-251, (London: SAGE 2018).

⁵⁶ See for instance, Daniel Maliniak, Ryan Powers, Barbara Walter, *The Gender Citation Gap in International Relations*, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION, 67(4), 889-922 (2013); see also Brooke A. Ackerly, Jacqui True, *An Intersectional Analysis of International Relations: Recasting the Discipline*, POLITICS AND GENDER, 4(1), 176-193 (2008).

⁵⁷ Felix Berenskoetter, *E pluribus unum? How Textbooks Cover Theories*, in HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ANDREAS GOFAS, INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA, NICKOLAS ONUF (EDS.), 446 - 468, (London: SAGE 2018).

⁵⁸ JARVIS, 179.

⁵⁹ Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, and Nicholas Onuf, *The Struggle for the Soul of International Relations: Fragments of a Collective Journey*, in HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ANDREAS GOFAS, INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA, NICKOLAS ONUF (EDS.), 3, (London: SAGE 2018).

dichotomies and the consideration of various forms of pluralism, heated polemics too often prevail when it comes to the relationship between the field's meta-discourses".⁶⁰ This is so because even though there are, as the preceding brief overview has hopefully illustrated, several overlapping issues between the history and sociology of knowledge, philosophy of science tends, according to its critics, to operate in a socio-political vacuum, while functioning as a self-appointed arbiter of scientific validity. This need not be so. If the field's three meta-discourses recognize that their common denominator and concern is organized and systematic disciplinary reflexivity, then they will realize that one of the main challenges for the field, as it enters its second century, is to craft a holistic framework among them – one that will shed further light and give direction to our ongoing search for the "soul of IR".

⁶⁰ Id., 5.