

## REDISCOVERING COMPLEXITY AND SYNTHESIS

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International relations scholarship has benefited in many ways from having adopted the epistemologic orientation of the hard sciences, with its focus on theorizing and the derivation and testing of hypotheses. Even if that orientation were to be supplanted tomorrow—by, say, a more descriptive model, or one that rejects rigid hypothesis-testing—its emphases on careful measurement, rules of inference, and replicability would surely live on.

From the point of view of theorizing, however, the hard-science model has had at least one deleterious effect: it has embedded in the minds of international relations (IR) practitioners the *prima facie* assumption that theories are made to be tested against one another, period. Whether embedded in the titanic “paradigm wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, the long-simmering rational choice controversy, or the more recent constructivist challenge to orthodox IR theory, this bedrock premise has closed off avenues of thought that had previously been both fruitful and fascinating. The main avenues of thought that I have in mind are the complementary ones of theoretical complexity (elaborating scope conditions and interactions within theories) and theoretical synthesis (merging two or more theories to form a unified and more comprehensive whole).

The dialogue among paradigms provides a nice illustration of this point. Originally, theoretical paradigms such as realism and liberalism were adopted in an attempt to make the unmanageable complexity of international politics more tractable. By “bracketing” (or ignoring) other variables, IR scholars could better focus on the internal logic of theories that implicated power or preferences (or meaning) in the study of human behavior. In a discipline that increasingly emphasized theory-testing, however, this temporary theoretical convenience was transformed into ossified ontology. Realists argued that the world was made of units that

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were usefully differentiated *only* by their relative capabilities, and testing a realist explanation against an X-ist explanation became standard, even expected, in dissertations and journal articles.

What, then, was to become of John Herz's *Political Realism and Political Idealism*, a book that attempted to understand how the reality of power politics could be reconciled with the human desire to transcend it? Or Arnold Wolfers' essay, "The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference," which offered a different answer to much the same question? Both are thought-provoking, learned, and insightful. Neither is standard fare, or anything like it, in graduate orals reading lists. Their insights seem nearly forgotten. As it happens, I found both on the shelves of used-book stores, and the price of the two combined would just cover a latte at my local coffee shop.

To be sure, there are occasional recrudescences of this sort of contextual, synthetic thinking. William Zimmerman's essay on "Issue Area and Foreign-Policy Process," Brian Pollins and Randall Schweller's article on "Linking the Levels: The Long Wave and Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy," and Emerson Niou and Peter Ordeshook's "Less Filling, Tastes Great': The Realist-Neoliberal Debate" surely deserve mention. And to give credit where it is due, Robert Keohane's earlier paradigmatic work in particular seeks to build on realism, and Alexander Wendt's constructivism admits a necessary "rump materialism" (though the anatomical analogy hardly gives it pride of place). But the inexorable pull of the theory-testing premise has led subsequent developments in both paradigms toward differentiation and away from synthesis. Socialization also tends to work against synthesis: scholars working primarily within one paradigm who attempt it are likely to be chastised for theoretical impurity (see e.g., Andrew Moravcsik and Jeffrey Legro, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?").

At the same time, advances in statistical methodology are opening a back door to thinking about synthesis and complexity. What are hierarchical models, Boolean models, and simple multiplicative interactions, if not models of context? What are endogeneity biases and selection effects, if not an indicator that another theory must be incorporated? (And what, if we face up to our darkest fears, *isn't* at least potentially endogenous in the study of IR?) Still, these issues tend, like heteroskedasticity, to be treated as a nuisance to be eliminated, rather than an opportunity to formulate a richer and more satisfying description of social reality.

A broader epistemological orientation, one that encompasses synthesis and complexity as well as theory-testing (and, I would add, descriptive inference and interpretation, but that's for another essay) would sooner or later raise a host of questions that merit discussion. When, for example, are theories so poorly specified that synthesis would be counterproductive? Which kinds of theories should be tested against each other, and which are better candidates for synthesis? (Is ontological incommensurability, in other

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words, an obstacle or an opportunity?) How severe is the tradeoff between our desire for parsimony and the greater demands of understanding more complex theories? Or, to put the question in its broadest form: how do we best incorporate synthesis and complexity into our understanding of IR?

Admittedly, my assessment of the importance of this research agenda deserves a disclaimer: my research on the methodology of causal complexity, and my substantive work synthesizing dyadic theories of conflict with a systemic theory of politics (itself a synthesis of structural and domestic theories), clearly make me a less than unbiased observer. While my work in those areas has been quite rewarding, it has also increased my appreciation of the number and difficulty of the questions that must be answered if complexity and synthesis are to be addressed in a serious way.

Of possible related interest: Chapters 77, 83, 94, 96.