

POLI 367B: International Relations Theory and the International System

Sep 12-14 (week 2) Stories of origin: the *isms* and *ologies* of a contested academic subject

Assigned Reading


Dunne text: Steve Smith, "Introduction, "Diversity and Disciplinarity in IR Theory"; and Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, chapter 1, "IR and Social Science."

Suggested further reading

Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1990) "The growth of a discipline," *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Robert M. A. Crawford (2001) "Introduction," *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline*. London: Routledge.

Arlene Tickner and David Blaney eds. (2012) *Thinking IR Differently* (London: Routledge).

 Justin Rosenberg (2007) "International Relations — The 'Higher Bullshit': A Reply to the Globalization Theory Debate," *International Politics* 44: 450–482 [Rosenberg](#)

Barry Buzan and George Lawson (2013) "The Global Transformation," *International Studies Quarterly* 57(3): 620-634.

Brian Schmidt (2002) "Anarchy, World Politics and the Birth of a Discipline," *International Relations* 16(1): 9-31.

...isms and ologies in IR

isms refer generally to schools/paradigms/ideologies

ologies refer generally to theories of knowledge and methods

discipline refers to idea of clearly demarcated academic subjects

e.g IR (as subject) versus ir (as subject matter)

a discipline has a “core” paradigm (according to “normal” science view—Kuhn, 1962)

so: is IR a “normal science”?

One of the most complicated questions we can ask

Paradigm Proliferation only part of the story

- until 1980s much IR theory rested on an unspoken assumption centring on what Steve Smith calls *rationalism*
- derives from “a notion of *foundationalism*, whereby there are secure grounds for making knowledge claims about a world that is separate from the theories commenting on it”
- this is an epistemological commitment (e.g. it resides in a particular theory of knowledge)
- but because it feels right and objective there is little internal pressure to reflect on theory itself
- the world is just “out there”
- most state-of-the-art reflection suggests that this view has weakened substantially

What exactly is this view?

Positivism

1. empiricist theory that regards sensory experience as the only legitimate source of knowledge
2. an assumption of *naturalism*
3. belief in the possibility of fact-value distinctions

(see glossary of course text for definition)

“Breakdown” of positivist hegemony needs to be situated in “great debates”

first debate: Idealism v. Realism

second debate: Traditionalists v. behavioralists
(Idealism v. Realism take two)

third debate: inter paradigm or post-positivist

fourth debate?: theories about theories

.... and now?????

Is Positivism *really* in decline?

one of the findings from above survey:

published IR scholarship is almost entirely
positivist

BUT

those who produce non and post-positivist research, as well as those whose work is largely qualitative, may find it difficult to get published, since their work is significantly under-represented in the major journals

The Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Survey, College of William and Marie, 2014

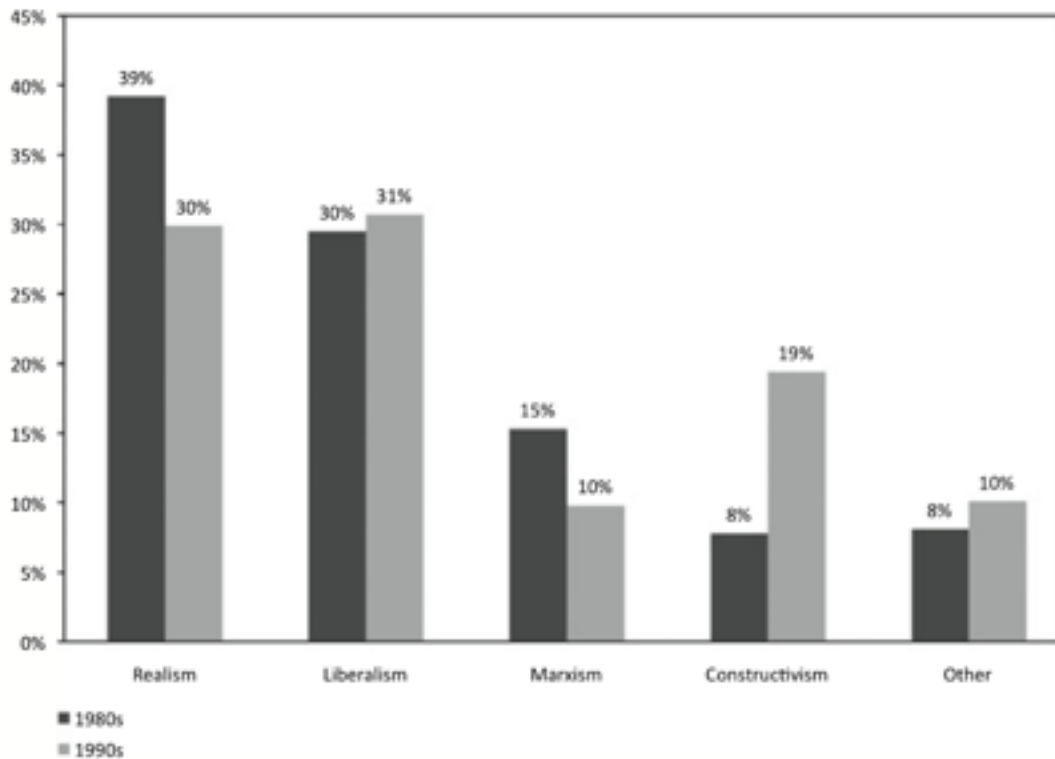


FIG 1. 2004 Survey Respondents' Perception of Literature Devoted to Each Paradigm in 1980s and 1990s

IR scholars continue to show a preoccupation with unity/ conformity & corresponding fear of division (a longing for “normal science”)

Kal Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline*: 1985 a lamentation

Took a long view of IR as a classical tradition with a core problématique: war & peace

Similar to notion of a “core paradigm” consistent with Kuhnian view of normal science

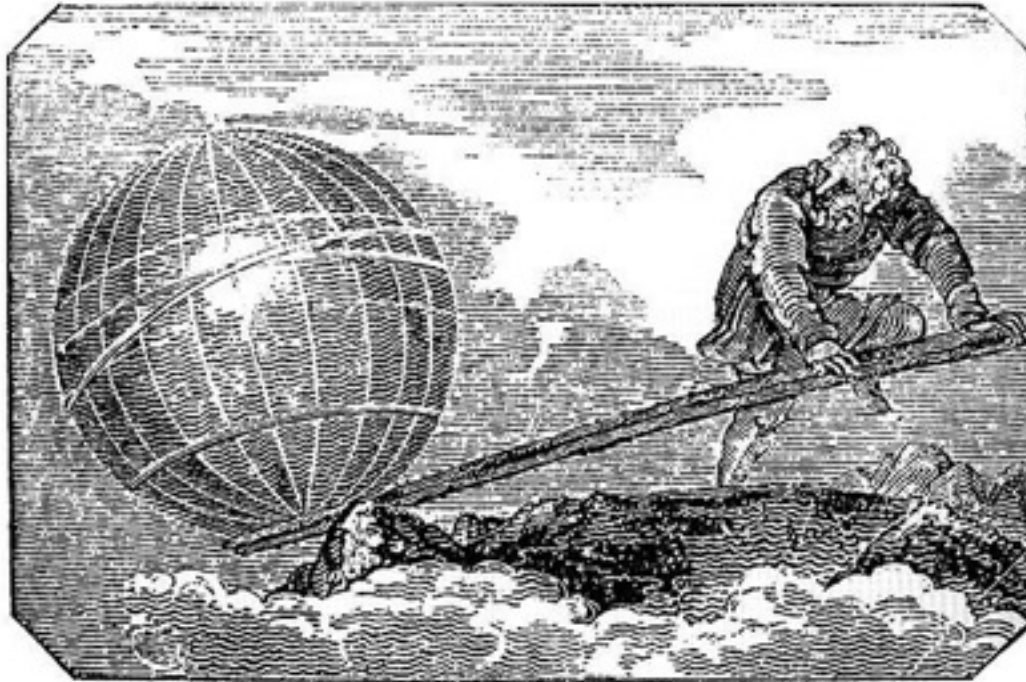
But can IR have a core? a single great question?

Basic Reality: IR notoriously event-driven

where you sit determines what you think matters

“Theory is always for someone” Robert Cox, 1986

In the social world “there is always more than one story to tell” (Smith p. 3)



- 3rd century BCE inventor Archimedes: “give me a lever long enough and I can move the world”
- but a lever needs a fulcrum (a point on which to pivot)
- Archimedean point has come to mean a point external to the world described; a vantage point from which an objective or ‘true’ picture of something can be had

Science rests on the notion of such an Archimedean point

- any **system** of knowledge that is concerned with the physical world and its phenomena and that entails unbiased observations and systematic **experimentation**. In general, a science involves a pursuit of knowledge covering general truths or the operations of fundamental laws

www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/528756/science

- does that sound like politics (IR)?
- or Political Science?
- or any social “science” familiar to you?

IR as a Political Science

- “political science” a late bloomer as a field (1930s)
- Needed to break free from other activities (e.g. political thought/philosophy/economics)
- Finds itself on a distinction between political “theory” & political “thought” (fact versus value; is versus ought; realism versus idealism.... etc)
- a political science casts itself as unsentimental

Don't shoot the messenger?

- Just telling it like it is
- Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Hobbes (1588-1679) the usual suspects
- The world as it is: realpolitik
- Especially influential view in modern international politics

Nothing is ever simply “the way things are”

- all claims are ideological (even, maybe especially, anti-ideological claims)
- All theories are normative (express some understanding of *what and where political life should be*)
- this is especially true of theories and disciplines that claim to be non-normative (scientific)

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.... (Oscar Wilde)

- “Political science” more dangerous than a simple oxymoron?
- Treating the world of politics as unchanging appears to make it theorizable, but may justify & legitimize existing practices
- If politics is to be understood as the “art of the possible” this would leave us with a strange outcome: an anti-political political science