

IR Fourth Debate: Pluralistic or Hegemonic? Limitations to “Bridging the Gap”

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ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى مساءلة الإدعاء، حديثاً، بأن حقل التنظير في العلاقات الدولية أصبح أكثر تعددية مما كان عليه من قبل. يستند هذا الادعاء إلى الاعتقاد بأن الحقل يكون، خلال فترة ما بعد النقاش الثالث، قد تمكن من التملص من التوضع الثنائي للمواقف النظرية ضمن ما يعرف بـ "النقاشات الكبرى" المتعاقبة. يجادل أصحاب هذا الاعتقاد بأن المشروع البحثي للبنائية، الهادف إلى جسر الهوة بين العقلانية والتأملية، يكون قد دفع بالحقل نحو حقبة جديدة من التعددية النظرية تتسم بتموقع غير ثنائي للمواقف النظرية، أصبحت تعرف بالنقاش الرابع بين البنائية، التأملية والعقلانية. ويجادل المقال بأن الانقسام الاستمولوجي بين البنائيين أنفسهم، وهو نفس الانقسام الذي عرفه النقاش الثالث، أدى إلى فرض حدود أمام تطلع الحقل نحو مزيد من التعددية خلال النقاش الرابع، وكأن الحقل يقوم بإعادة إنتاج نفس المظاهر التي عرفها الانقسام بين الوضعية وما بعد الوضعية خلال النقاش الثالث. لذلك، يبدو أن البنائية أصبحت حبيسة نفس الانقسام الاستمولوجي غير القابل للجسر بين فريقين غير قابلين للمقايسة، البنائيين والعقلانيين والبنائيين التأمليين. بعبارة أخرى، يبدو أن نمط النقاش الجديد لا يتعدى أن يكون إعادة إنتاج لنقاش ثالث آخر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقاش الرابع، نظرية العلاقات الدولية، التعددية، الهيمنة، جسر الهوة.

Abstract:

This article* aims at questioning the claim, recently, that IR discipline has become more pluralistic than ever. This claim is grounded in the belief that IR, during the *post*-third-debate area, has managed to get rid of the grip of the binary positioning within the subsequent “great debates.” It is argued that the constructivist research project, attempting at bridging the reflectivist-rationalist gap through a middle grounded theory, has pushed the field into a non-hegemonic/pluralistic area characterized by an unusual non-binary positioning, labeled as a fourth debate between constructivism, reflectivism and rationalism. The article argues that the epistemological division among constructivists, inherited from the third debate itself, has posed some very limitations to the field’s ambition towards pluralism during the fourth debate, as if the field has been reproducing the same features of the positivist-*post*-positivist divide during the third debate. In other words, constructivism has become stereotypically trapped by the same unbridgeable divide between two epistemologically incommensurables, rationalist-constructivists and reflectivist-constructivists. This debating pattern has reproduced “another” third debate.

Keywords: Fourth debate, IR theory, plurality, hegemony, gap-bridging.

Introduction

Recently, International Relations (IR) scholars have established a “fashionable” way of narrating the intellectual history of the field. Wæver once said, “ask an IR scholar to present the discipline in fifteen minutes, and most likely you will get a story of three great debates.”¹ The “great debates” conception is the cornerstone of IR well-established history. It is constantly said that the field has evolved through a chronological series of theoretical approaches engaged in another sequence of great debates, beginning with a first disciplinary defining debate between idealists and realists during the inter-war period; a second debate between behaviouralists and historicists during the very beginnings of the second half of the last century; an “unnumbered” inter-paradigm debate during the eighties between realists, liberalists and structuralists, followed by a third debate between positivists and post-positivists; and, not finally, a fourth debate between rationalists, reflectivists and constructivists. This depiction not only *self-images* the field, it also legitimizes the mainstream narrative of its intellectual history.

However, many historiographers have, more recently, challenged this self-image and have sustained an ambitious tendency towards engaging in a revisionary endeavour to reconstruct the field’s intellectual history. The skepticism towards this self-image, expressed here and elsewhere, seems justifiably acceptable, since there is still no agreement about the number of the “great debates” itself.

While Kratochwil (2006) tends not to reckon at a specific number and prefers to consider “many” debates, Lapid (1989) on one hand considers three; Wæver (2006; 2007), Vasquez (1997), Friedrichs (2004) and Wiener (2006) on the other hand count four; even so, when it comes to labelling the *debaters*, literatures seem very far from any consensus about a widely acceptable typology. The disagreement swells up as far as the fourth debate is concerned.

The article begins by briefly re-examining how much theoretical hegemony or pluralism existed during each of the subsequent (*great*) debates. Next, it argues that examining *pluralism* vs. *hegemony* is to problematize *diversity* in the field, claiming that the field, by the rise of the third debate, has become more *diverse* than ever; yet acknowledging it has developed any theoretical pluralism is still

questionable. After that, the article casts some light on the fourth debate's typologies. This multiplicity of typologies in the case of the fourth debate, unlike the previous ones where only one typology is imposed for each (an idealism–realism typology for the first, a traditionalism–behaviouralism typology for the second and a positivism–post-positivism typology for the third debate), makes it becoming more relevant to theoretical pluralism claims in the field, particularly when it is represented through constructivism's promising project of bridging the rationalist–reflectivist gap. Finally, the article attempts at bringing into question the constructivist gap–bridging project in search of its limitations and how it may foster IR scholars to rethink their field's state during the fourth debate, pluralistic or hegemonic.

Theoretical hegemony, theoretical pluralism and IR (*great*) debates

The first great debate

As I will argue below, there has been hegemony not only concerning the theoretical approaches contending in the field, but also concerning what *type* of theoretical debates they are engaged in. In his revisionist history of the idealist–realist great debate, Ashworth argued that reading the works on international affairs during the interwar years does not sustain the story of *one* realist–idealist debate, it may rather demonstrate that three other debates had taken place, a debate over whether capitalism causes war, a debate over collective security in Britain, and another debate over US interventionism (Ashworth, 2002).

This obviously means that instead of depicting a pluralistic image, in which many debates were supposed to contribute to writing the field's history during the interwar period, only one great debate between idealists and realists has been constructed as a hegemonic *self*-image; whereas, the other *non*-great debates has been neglected.

The second great debate

The same diagnosis can be used in order to think differently about the second great debate. Although many other approaches had developed during the second half of the twentieth century (dependency theory, (neo) functionalism, interdependence theory, systems theory...), only

classical realism and the so-called behavioralism has been introduced as the second-great-debaters. Undoubtedly, while labels vary (historicism vs. scientificism; traditionalism vs. behaviouralism or history vs. science), there seems to be many corresponding conclusions that are worthy re-examining.

Firstly, the so-called behavioralists worked rigorously within the realist tradition. They merely aimed at refining classical realism, bringing methodological rigidity in the field. This claim is sustained by the findings of Alker and Biersteker who defined about 72 per cent of behavioural citations as neorealist (Alker and Biersteker, 1984). Needless to say that neorealism was a refined version of classical realism. Following Schmidt (2002), I would argue that the so-called historicist-scientificist/traditionalist-behaviouralist second great debate, as introduced by mainstream literatures, had never happened but within realism itself, between traditional realists and neorealists.

Secondly, disagreeing with Lijphart (1974), behaviouralism can never be considered as an International Relations theory or paradigm, but it is merely a methodological position nevertheless. For Vasquez, "If the scientific method [the cornerstone of behaviouralism] was the paradigm, then astronomy and physics would never have had the kinds of paradigm shifts Kuhn discussed. Methods of analysis and special techniques could be part of a paradigm, but a paradigm also needed theoretical content."² Behaviouralism obviously lacked any "theoretical content." Holsti endorses this claim, arguing that the "behavioural revolution did not inaugurate a new way of looking at the world, a new paradigm, or a new set of normative problems."³

If we, admittedly, accept the claim that behaviouralism is not, and cannot be, a paradigmatic/theoretical *debater*, how should we reframe the second great debate? In their study about history and International Relations, Hobson and Lawson endeavoured to draw attention to an underestimated trans-Atlantic opposition between neorealism and the English School, between American and British academics (Hobson and Lawson, 2008). The significance of bringing this opposition out may help to re-read the very debate between scientificists, such as Singer and Kaplan, proponents of theory testing and quantification on one hand, and traditionalists, such as Bull and Wight, advocates of historical and normative theorizing forms on the other hand. Such an opposition has never been imaginary; however, it

evidently reflects an intellectual interaction among the academic discourse in the very beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. Hobson and Lawson, for instance, argued that “Fred Northedge’s original goal in setting up *Millennium* was to provide a (British) counterweight to the ‘ahistorical positivist project’ that had engulfed mainstream American IR,” and that “Northedge’s thinking reflected a now commonly held assumption that there is a transatlantic divide that separates a historically informed British IR from a historyless US mainstream.”⁴

Rethinking the second great debate, not as a narrow methodological opposition between traditional realists and neo behaviouralism–inspired realists but as a broader intellectual exchange between neorealists and the English School advocates, seems to be more relevant to an early challenge to the mainstreamed discipline’s intellectual identity. This debate, of course, does not occupy a significant space in the discipline’s self–consciousness, due mainly to the distorted way of how the great debates history is told. The English School had challenged the realist perception of IR disciplinary identity as the study of international relations in an anarchical system, a perception that had been posed as a reaction to the interdisciplinary character of the field and its seemingly lack of an independent subject matter that was not studied within other fields. Perhaps, this may account for the mainstream’s overwhelming tendency to tell glorious stories about the realists’ mythical victories, once through defeating idealism and disengaging IR field from law, ethics and philosophy during the first great debate, and once more through defeating historicism and disengaging it from history during the second great debate.

Interestingly, despite all the approaches that had developed simultaneously with the alleged second great debate, dependency theory, (neo) functionalism, interdependence theory, systems theory and others, only classical realism and the so–called behavioralism has been introduced as hegemonic *debaters*. As if there had been no diversity as such, just two approaches, and just one great debate.

The inter–paradigm debate

Moreover, the 1980’s inter–paradigm debate doesn’t prove any exception despite the fact that it is believed to be characterized by a

non-binary debating pattern, unlike the first two debates. It is argued that IR field, during the 1980's, had moved from two hegemonic debates towards a non-hegemonic one; referring to Wæver, it was a debate of which there seemed to be "no winner."⁵ However, Smith argues that the conception of an inter-paradigm debate, itself, is "misleading,"⁶ since the three paradigms cannot compete, "simply because the proponents of each paradigm literally do not see the same world."⁷ Banks notes that these contrasting images serve as the foundation for the erection of theoretical structures that while internally coherent, contradict one another in terms of major theoretical categories including actors, dynamics, dependent variables, subject boundaries, and specific concepts. (Banks, 1985)

More interestingly, Smith notes that "the idea of an inter-paradigm debate involves hidden complications over the question of whether the paradigms are three different aspects of the same world or whether they are three views of the different worlds."⁸ The mainstream's notion of the 1980's debate, actually, depicts the first, not the second, image which leaves us with three "*comparable*" *objective explainings* of the world. "Yet, if these are the terms of the debate, this is a debate that realism seems certain to win."⁹ However, if this was not the case, and each paradigm of the three sees a quite different world which leaves us with three "*incommensurable*" *intersubjective understandings* of the world, the mainstream's hegemonic discourse would not be of that firmness. The field's self-image depicted on the inter-paradigm debate tends to dogmatise the discourse on realist hegemony over the 1980's debate.

Seeking some degree of analytical consistency, I will refer to Friedrichs as well as to Rengger. Friedrichs, exceptionally, claims that the 1950s–1960s debate, considered here as the second debate, was between traditionalism and positivism, and the era that followed was dominated by positivism. (Friedrichs, 2004) Similarly, Rengger argues that the late 1980's three paradigms were "derived from the same paradigm, *i.e.*, traditional Western epistemology and its methodological correlates," rationalism, positivism and pragmatism.¹⁰ This reference is made, here, to say that no pluralism had been reached during the 1980's, for IR was still epistemologically dominated by positivism, if some scholars find it hard to acknowledge that it was still paradigmatically dominated by realism.

The third debate

Realism's hegemony had not been questioned until the late 1980's. Surprisingly, the questioning endeavour was not self-conscious since the field until recently had lacked any sense of theoretical "self-reflection", whether defined as reflecting on "the process of theorising" itself¹¹ or as reflecting on the field's disciplinary history. It had been rather inspired by a broader epistemological, ontological and, more importantly, axiological meta-theoretical reflection the social knowledge had been undergoing then. Lapid wrote in 1989 claiming that the late 1980's discipline was standing in the midst of a third disciplinary defining debate. (Lapid, 1989)

Indeed, many other less important debates fuelled considerably the so-called third great debate, understanding *vs.* explaining (Hollis and Smith, 1990), agents *vs.* structures (Wendt, 1987; Wight, 2006), unit-of-analysis *vs.* level-of-analysis (Singer, 1961; Onuf, 1995), theory *vs.* history (Buzan and Little, 1994)... However, all the contrasting interventions had positioned into two stands whatever the labels might be, post-positivists *vs.* positivists, reflectivists *vs.* rationalists or anti-foundationalists *vs.* foundationalists.

From within the context of the third debate, many critical theories, Smith and Owens call them alternative (Smith and Owens, 2001), have emerged and gained momentum throughout, endeavouring optimistically to mature the field and "reassess theoretical options in a post-positivist area."¹² This development prompted Der Derian to portend "a new pluralism as the cutting – rather than the polemical – edge of international theory."¹³ For many IR scholars, other than Der Derian, the prophecy has come true, since *uncountable* theoretical *debaters* has contributed and still contribute to enriching the current theoretical debate... feminists, constructivists, Critical theorists, post-modernists, post-structuralists, the English School theorists, post-colonialists, historical sociologists, international political economists, Green theorists and others, just to name some non-mainstreamers. Needless to say that many approaches that have been just named consist of their own theoretical variants.

Nonetheless, the third debate was no exception. It was still "much more marked by antilogy and by mutual misunderstanding than by argument exchange."¹⁴ Wiener argues, too, that "the discipline has

been characterised by a culture of consecutive debates, which reached their high point of non-communication, disinterest and misunderstanding with the third debate.”¹⁵ It seems that those who hopefully looked forward to seeing the field getting rid of “binary thinking” and making “a shift from oppositional to relational thinking,”¹⁶ may feel disappointed to see at least two worth-mentioning examples of such a persistent failure.

The first example, to be considered, is Keohan’s dismissal of reflectivism as a research program. He argued that reflectivism, despite its legitimate criticism to rationalism, lacks “a clear reflective research program... [therefore] until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program, ... they will remain on the margins of the field.”¹⁷ Still, Keohan’s scepticism towards reflectivism is very strangely grounded in a rationalist criterion, *i.e.*, to develop “testable theories” without which their research program cannot be evaluated, regardless of the reflectivist-rationalist rift over how to epistemologically appraise the contending research programs. The second example is Walt’s reference to reflectivists as scholars who “focused initially on criticizing the mainstream paradigms but did not offer positive alternatives to them,” and “they remained a self-consciously dissident minority for most of the 1980s.”¹⁸

Intellectual non-communication, that is believed to govern the third debate, comes from the incommensurability of its two contrasting parts as well as from their own internally consistency to the extent that no constructive debate might be possible to take place between them. The only kind of debate that remained obtainable was some kind of *monologue* within each part. We should bear in mind, following Kubálková, that incommensurability is bonded with the anti-foundationalist belief in the existence of “no foundations outside any individual theory which could serve as a neutral arbiter between competing theoretical accounts.”¹⁹

The fourth debate

By the beginning of the 1990’s, the third debate had begun losing its momentous appeal as it could not self-update on the new theoretical developments the field had been undergoing; the rationalist paradigm’s emergence, based on the neorealist-neoliberal institutionalist (neo-neo) synthesis, and much more importantly the emergence and the swift

expansion of constructivism just after the end of the cold war. Constructivism's fascination, then, came from its alleged endeavour to be seizing a middle ground between the mutually exclusive third-debaters, positivist rationalism and post-positivist reflectivism, an endeavour to be bridging the rationalist-reflectivism

After constructivism had joined the field in a promising attempt to break with the traditional binary debating pattern, many IR scholars became more interested in constructing a new fourth debate. There were, at least, two reasons for delegitimizing the third debate and taking the fourth one's ground seriously. First, positioning in non-binary stands for the first time in the field's history (rationalism-constructivism-reflectivism) and second, the constructivist promise to push the field forward with getting rid of *communicationless* hegemonic practices that used to characterize the previous three debates, particularly the third one.

Before I critically engage the constructivist promise of bridging the epistemological gap inherited from the third debate, I cast some light on the way how IR scholars understand theoretical pluralism and hegemony problematic in their field.

Pluralism and hegemony in IR: two understandings

There has been a wide agreement about the idea that the fourth debate IR has become more *diverse* than ever. Emphasis is put on "diverse" to argue that diversity as a conception should not be perceived in the same way as pluralism; the first one implies quantitiveness, whereas the second one entails qualitiveness. Thus, the two expressions, "*diverse* field" and "*pluralistic* field", are not interchangeable.

If it is unchallengeable to say that the field, recently, has become more diverse due to what Smith called "theoretical proliferation" (Smith, 2007), admitting that all the theories contribute effectively to the theoretical debate in the field does not seem as unchallengeable as the first claim. When a specific theory/theories dominate(s) the debate (the case of realism in the first debate and the neo-neo synthesis in the 1980's inter-paradigm debate), *pluralism* becomes questionable and *hegemony* becomes more likely to characterise the field's state. In other words, examining *pluralism* vs. *hegemony* is to problematize *diversity* in the field.

Skimming through some relevant IR literatures may refer us to the existence of two main understandings of the pluralism/hegemony problematique in the field. The first one focuses on an institutional dimension. *i.e.*, whether there is (still) an American hegemony over International Relations theories. From 1977 to 2004, at least four published works have been entitled “International Relations: still an American social science?” echoing the famous title of Stanley Hoffman’s 1977 article, “An American social science: International Relations.” (Hoffmann, 1977; Kahler, 1993; Smith, 2000; Crawford and Jarvis, 2001; Friedrichs, 2004). Analytically, they have been reproducing one another, since they examine the same hypothesis, the American hegemony over the discipline, using the same variables whether tested statistically or analytically. Friedrichs, for instance, refers to Holsti’s analysis that demarcated an obvious “distinction between an international community of scholars and a discipline organized on hierarchical communication”²⁰, concluding that global IR is characterised by some kind of centre–periphery relationship. The interesting part in Friedrichs’ thesis is what can be suggested as third semi–peripheries trying to challenge the discipline’s mainstreaming by the American centre. The still–growing European approaches can be genuinely considered as promising semi–peripheries.

The second understanding has started to form following an E.H. Carr Memorial Lecture delivered by John J. Mearsheimer at Aberystwyth on Oct. 14th, 2004. He claimed that “British IR is essentially dominated by idealism” to the extent that “it is not possible to identify a single significant theorist of realism in British academe,” because the “idealists’ emphasis on creating hegemonic ideas [...] cannot help but foster intolerance towards competing worldviews, especially realism.”²¹ *International Relations* invited five chairs of the British International Studies Association (BISA), Paul Rogers, Richard Little, Christopher Hill, Chris Brown and Ken Booth, to debate Mearsheimer’s claim. Their replies were published in *International Relations* Vol. 19 N° 3 (2005), followed by a final word by Mearsheimer.

Three years later, this contention has been resurrected following the publication of Dunne, Kurki, and Smith’s edited textbook, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (2007). In his critical review, followed by a reply by Steve Smith (Smith, 2008), Brian Schmidt wondered whether pluralism is “good or bad for the

discipline” and “how much pluralism we actually have in the discipline.”²² What seems debatable in the textbook is the way in which the editors tried to present the discipline’s state-of-art. They devoted two entire chapters to realism, one to classical realism and another one to structural realism, and other two separate chapters to liberalism and neoliberalism; whereas, the other *non*-mainstream theories, the English School, Marxism and critical theory, feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, Green theory, were each discussed in separate chapters. Certainly, favouring realism and liberalism by two chapters each was not due to a lack of *non*-mainstream theories literatures, still there has been an erroneous tendency to present realism, liberalism and some constructivisms, as it will be discussed below, as more relevant to the discipline’s theoretical debate. The textbook’s structure, in this way, has brought pluralism claims again into disrepute.

Smith-Schmidt’s exchange demonstrates the maturity the discipline’s self-reflection on pluralism and hegemony problematique has achieved. It skips over the conventional understanding of the way in which pluralism in the field should be approached and examined. Instead of defending or refuting the American hegemony which seems self-evident rather than a matter for conjecture, there is another hypothesis that is worth examining. It aims at questioning whether the American hegemony over the discipline, *as an academic institution*, produces any kind of hegemony over the discipline, *as a theoretical debate*.

What makes the fourth debate more relevant to the last hypothesis is the fact that many fourth *debaters* are mainstream dissenters who tend to delegitimize American hegemony over the discipline. Next, I examine what can be considered as multiplicity of fourth debate typology.

Unlike the previous debates, the fourth one can be exceptionally introduced through many typologies that suggest different engaged parts. Previously, only one typology is imposed for each debate (an idealism-realism typology for the first, a traditionalism-behaviouralism typology for the second and a positivism-post-positivism typology for the third debate). However, as far the fourth debate is concerned; typologies widely vary.

Typologies of the fourth debate

The first typology to start with is the one suggested by Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner. (Katzenstein *et al.*, 1998) They argue that debates between rationalism and constructivism are becoming more important. The second typology is Waever's. (2007) He adopts an exceptional view of great debates' successiveness over the field's intellectual history. He thinks that they happened according to the following course, first debate—second debate—third debate—third debate.

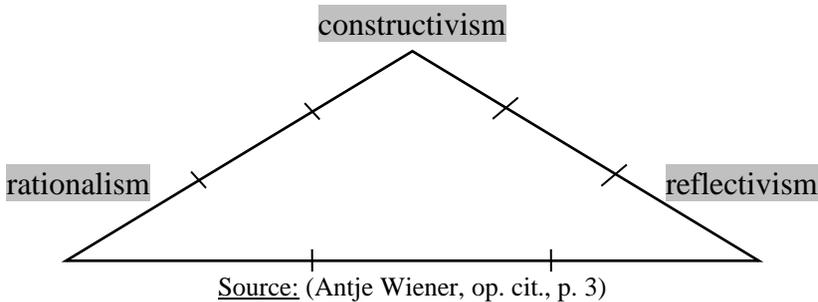
The two typologies are largely justifiable. For Katzenstein *et al.*, the increasing contentious controversy about the limitations of the constructivist gap bridging project might be possibly settled through a belief that the fourth debate is no longer trilateral, as depicted by Wiener and Friedrichs, but it has *degeneratively* get back to binary practices; whereas, Waever's typology is much more reciprocally influenced by the very idea that the reflectivist as well as post-positivist origins of constructivism refrain it from doing anything significant as to bring incommensurable completely-different-languages speakers together.

The typology, I argue for, gains legitimacy from Friedrichs' debates and areas periodization and from Wiener's work on the fourth debate positioning pattern as well.

1920s–1930s	era	liberal internationalism
1930s–1940s	great debate	realism ↔ liberalism
1940s–1950s	era	victorious realism
1950s–1960s	great debate	traditionalism ↔ positivism
1960s–1970s	era	positivism
mid–1970s	great debate	realism ↔ liberalism ↔ Marxism
1980s	era	paradigmatic pluralism
1990s	great debate	rationalism ↔ constructivism reflectivism

“Eras” and “Great Debates” in IR

Source: (Jörg Friedrichs, op. cit., p. 11)



This typology introduces constructivism not as a rigorous theory or research program, but as a theoretical position. This stand allows scholars who feel dissatisfied with their achievements within the positivist tradition to get on constructivism’s *bandwagon* as an epistemological shift. Moreover, it gives many “conservative” constructivists, across the spectrum, a chance to offer their work as a *sequel* that continues the earlier reflectivist research project and, therefore, to engage constructivism to systematize reflectivism not to revolutionize it.

I use Friedrichs’ metaphor to make this typology more obvious. According to Friedrichs, “post-positivists were the barbarians *ante portas*. When it came to making inroads into the Empire of positive science, there was no operational separation between different barbarian hordes such as postmodernists, critical theorists, and feminists. Accordingly, social constructivists were seen, and saw themselves, as just one among many other post-positivist squadrons. Later on, however, one faction of the constructivist horde (let’s say, the Visigoths) applied for Roman citizenship. They were assigned a good piece of land at the frontier of the Empire, while the other faction (let’s say, the Ostrogoths) persisted in their relentless assault on the capital. [...] The rapprochement of the Visigoth settlers towards the Roman Empire led to an increasing estrangement of the ‘Visigoth’ middle-ground constructivists from their ‘Ostrogoth’ tribesmen.”²³

Limitations to “bridging the gap”

Constructivism’s claim to bring rationalists and reflectivists together around one table of debate has been always its major source of

fascination; however, focusing on this part of the scene has cast dark shadows on its substantial contributions that transcend gap-bridging.

Over the last two decades, as noted by Guzzini, “*the social construction of...* [has been] littering the title pages of books, articles and student assignments as did *the political economy of...* in the 1980s,”²⁴ perhaps to the extent that constructivism has become the middle ground’s *unneighbouring* resident.

Constructivist middle ground theorizing echoes Wendt’s famous statement, “epistemologically I have sided with positivists... however, since on ontology, which is the more important issue, I will side with post-positivists.”²⁵ Constructivism, accordingly, do not reject “science” for its quarrel with positivist rationalists is ontological, not epistemological.

Two achievements have been expected from middle-grounded constructivists to fulfill so as to make the third debate’s gap bridgeable. The first one is to challenge positivism inside its epistemological boundaries, that is to employ the same epistemological premises of rationalism to demonstrate the limitations of positivistic materialist ontology through constructing an empirical research program that takes ideas, norms and values seriously. The second one is to rescue reflectivists from the charge that accuses them of not doing any empirical work and of developing no testable theories.

Kratochwil and Ruggie’s valuable work on regimes theory serves as a good example to illustrate an immanent contradiction between epistemology and ontology. “They have argued that unless the constructed nature of norms was theoretically addressed, regime analysis would continuously face the problem of contradictions between (positivist) epistemology and a social ontology (norms).” That seems very expected since “positivism posits a radical separation of subject and object. It then focuses on the ‘objective’ forces that move actors in their social interactions. Finally, intersubjective meaning, where it is considered at all, is inferred from behavior. Here, then, we have the most debilitating problem of all: epistemology fundamentally contradicts ontology!”²⁶

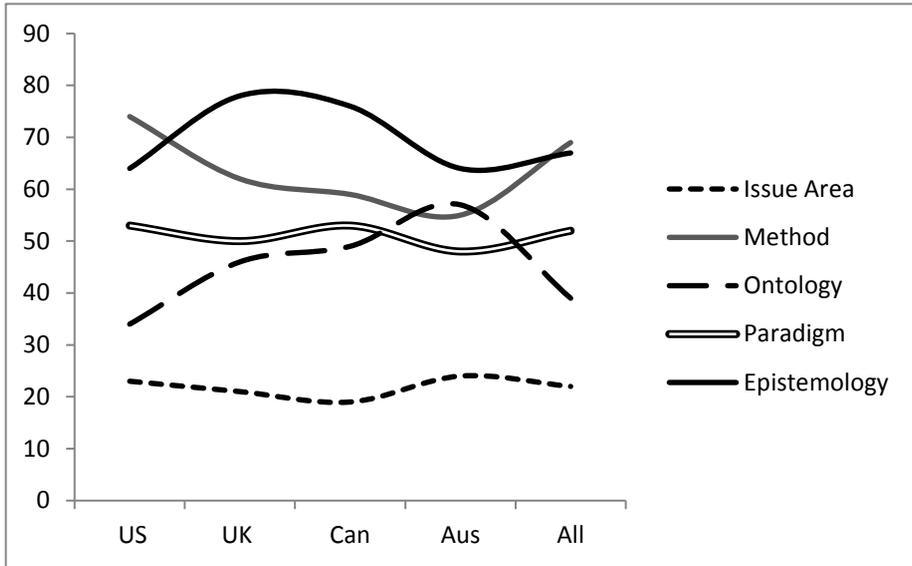
How could constructivism, then, bridge neorealism’s bank since it lacks any intersubjective dimension within its theoretical framework?

In order to manage this problematic situation, two solutions, according to Wiener, were on offer. “One option was to adopt an *intersubjective ontology* that would be compatible with a positivist epistemology. The other was to *open epistemology* towards more interpretative strains.”²⁷ It seems obviously that constructivists have preferred the second option through a continuous endeavour to bring positivist epistemology and intersubjective/post-positivist ontology together. However, this forcefully *marriage* has remained theoretically inconsistent. Wendt, for instance, seems to be still-committed to the very idea of constructing an international theory positivist-epistemologically inspired which makes his critics to Waltz of a limited value.

The question raised, here, is to what extent scholars can agree over the importance of ontology *vis à vis* epistemology as claimed by Wendt. The problem does not lie only in which one is more important than the other, but also in whether they could be separable or not. What constructivists claim as epistemological as well as ontological tenets should not be considered in isolation to the third debate’s philosophical developments. Moreover, it is not only about the immanent opposition between positivism and post-positivism, it is also about the difficulty of bringing them together, *i. e.*, how could positivist epistemology contain post-positivist ontological hypotheses and *vice versa*?

I argue that only constructivists, themselves, can cross the bridge, because it initiates a debate among some constructivist currents that are divided on the same epistemological lines which are inherited from the third debate. Since the alleged middle ground is based on a positivist epistemology, it seems too hard for pos-positivist reflectivists to be brought within. It has been epistemology “all the way down” and no way to assume that ontology is more important than epistemology.

The line graph below represents the findings of a survey in which IR Scholars from different countries were asked about the most divisive issues in IR research, *i.e.*, the issues which generate the most division among IR scholars. The survey is annually published by the Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations (William and Mary College, Virginia), known as the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project. Only four states (USA, UK, Canada and Australia) are represented in the graph. Yet, the full report includes six further states.



Source: Richard Jordan et al., *One Discipline or Many?* (Williamsburg, VA: Wendy and Emery Reves Center for International Studies, February 2009), p. 69. [Question, 57]

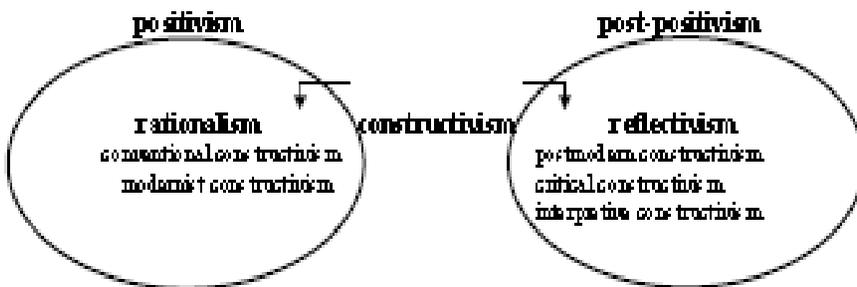
The findings show that scholars in almost all countries considered epistemology as the most divisive issues in IR research.

Following Reus-Smit, “constructivism takes modernist and postmodernist forms. The shift away from high epistemological, methodological, and normative debate toward greater analytical engagement has, however, shelved, if not entirely defused, some of the more contentious differences between the two orientations.”²⁸ The difference between modernist and postmodernist constructivists lies in the types of questions they tend to focus on. Postmodernists tend to focus on *how* questions, while modernists tend to focus on conventional *why* questions. Therefore, it seems very legitimate to suggest some kind of epistemological rapprochement between the modernist version of constructivism and positivist rationalism from one hand, and between its postmodernist version and post-positivist reflectivism from another hand.

Correspondingly, following Katzenstein et al., constructivist work “falls into three broad clusters: conventional, critical and postmodern.”²⁹ Having examined the differences between them, the conclusion that can be drawn is that critical and postmodern

constructivisms together diverge from conventional constructivism due to epistemological opposition. Conventional constructivists' major goal "is to take the impact of social factors such as ideas and, more specifically, norms seriously. This view maintains that while symbolic interaction constructs meaning, it is assumed that social reality does exist beyond the theorists' view. Following this logic, [they] stress the importance of empirical work in order to approach the world *out there*;" whereas, critical and postmodern constructivists tend to "consider the world *out there* as constructed in itself, thus employing a view that seeks to understand the ways in which the world is constructed."³⁰

Interestingly, it seems very legitimate, again, to suggest some kind of epistemological rapprochement between the conventional constructivism and positivist rationalism from one hand, and between postmodern as well as critical constructivism and post-positivist reflectivism from another hand.



Epistemological division among constructivists along the lines of the third debate

In this way, quoting Checkel, "the bridges being built nearly all have just one lane, going from conventional constructivists to rationalists;"³¹ while another lane has been supposed to be built between conventional constructivists and their postmodern and critical colleagues. In other words, constructivism has increasingly become in need to bridge its internal gaps before engaging to bridging any external ones.

Conclusion: Constructivist–rationalist hegemony over the fourth debate

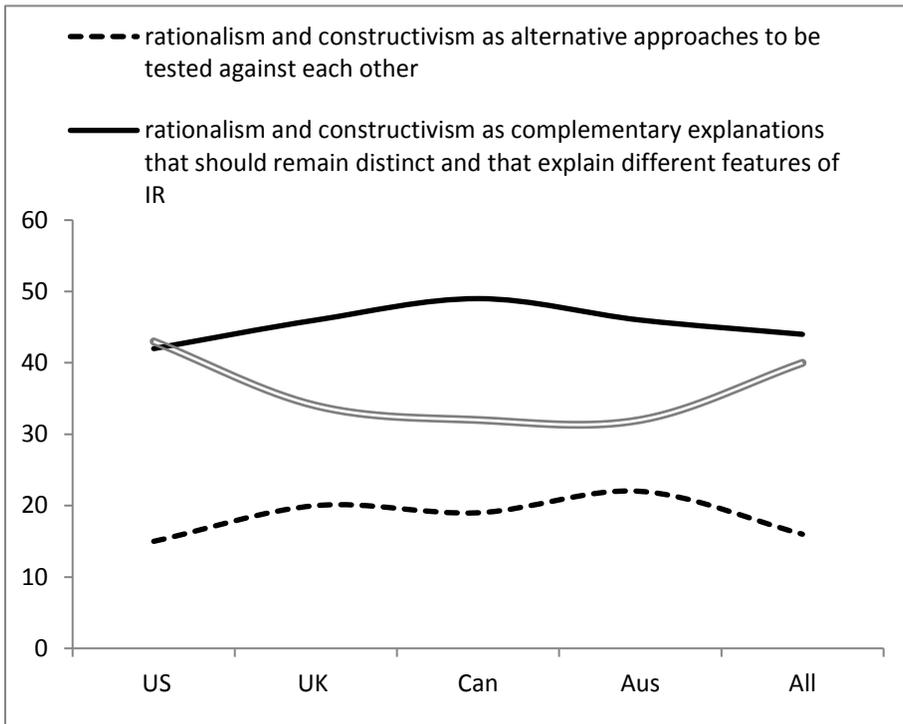
Referring back to Waever's typology, I would argue for the very claim that the fourth debate reproduces the same binary hegemonic pattern of the third debate, of course, with much more diversity aspects inside

each debating part. Yet, no worth mentioning pluralism has been achieved as far as the entire field is concerned. Unsurprisingly, the rationalist–constructivist rapprochement, demonstrated above, has been accompanied with a relentless exclusion of reflectivists; such an unpromising tradition has left the pluralism claim unsustainable.

Having been divided along the same epistemological lines of the third debate, constructivists have, so far, failed to reconstruct the theoretical debate in *the aftermath* of the third debate era so that the field can get rid of the grip of binary positioning and its consequent mutual exclusion. However, while there seems much more diversity in the field than ever, different theoretical positions seem unable to engage in a pluralistic debate yet. Adler’s conclusions are still of good relevance. He depicted the field’s state as a triadic constellation of positions, containing rationalism–constructivism–postmodernism, in which rationalists and constructivists are engaged in a debate while constructivists and postmodernists tend to be characterized by “an attitude of mutual disengagement and benign neglect.”³²

It would never been surprising some mainstream scholars (Fearon and Wendt, 2002) have tended to argue that the rationalist–constructivist encounter may be seen as a “conversation” not as a debate. This claim is hardly disagreeable to since rationalists and *mainstream* constructivists avoid any epistemological encounter. TRIP’s survey findings, again, may affirm the conclusion.

When asked how they should conceive of the explanations developed within both rationalism and constructivism, an overwhelming majority of the IR scholars questioned believed that they are either complementary approaches or paradigms that can be usefully synthesized. Whereas, a few of them believed they are alternative approaches to be tested against each other.



Source: Jordan et al., op. cit., p. 42. [Question, 38]

Finally, and again, I refer to Friedrichs' metaphor to conclude... "Post-positivists were the barbarians *ante portas*. When it came to making inroads into the Empire of positive science, there was no operational separation between different barbarian hordes such as postmodernists, critical theorists, and feminists. Accordingly, social constructivists were seen, and saw themselves, as just one among many other post-positivist squadrons. Later on, however, one faction of the constructivist horde (let's say, the Visigoths) applied for Roman citizenship. They were assigned a good piece of land at the frontier of the Empire, while the other faction (let's say, the Ostrogoths) persisted in their relentless assault on the capital. [...] The rapprochement of the Visigoth settlers towards the Roman Empire led to an increasing estrangement of the 'Visigoth' middle-ground constructivists from their 'Ostrogoth' tribesmen."³³

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