Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in International Relations Theory: A Possible Synthesis?

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Abstract

Much has been written about the field of International Relations (IR) in both substantive and methodological terms. One of the most contentious aspects of the IR as a scholarly discipline revolves around one deceptively simplistic query: what is IR about? A number of so-called "Great Debates" have played out in the field yet few have assumed as prominent a position as the foundationalism (F)/anti-foundationalism (AF) debate. A considerable point of friction can be identified between competing theories responding to interpretations of the nature of IR. Some assert that common ground enabling academics to critique rival "truth claims" does exist. That same ground facilitates, however, an understanding that there can be none beyond a theory acting as a neutral arbiter between them. This article depicts this what Smith (1995) referred to as a "most exciting debate." It presents a possible solution provided by Monteiro and Ruby (2009), showing the problematique arising from their solution of post-foundationalism.

Keywords: Contestation, traditional, principles, post-foundationalism, interactionism

> *Do not worry if you have built your castles in the air. They are where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.*
> —*Henry David Thoreau*

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory chapter of Ken Booth and Steve Smith's *International Relations Theory Today* (1995), Smith provides readers with a concise overview of how the discipline of International Relations (IR) is described and categorized within its own discourse. The question driving his research revolves around the very nature of IR and precisely what it is about. His response treats the discipline as being shaped and constituted by the various debates (he describes 10 main debates) having played out in the field of IR, such as the so-called "Great Debates." Smith (1995) concludes his overview with the foundationalism (F)/anti-foundationalism (AF) debate, which is as he states, the "[m]ost exciting debate within constitutive theory" (28). For Smith, this intellectual exchange takes place beyond the boundaries of explanatory theories and is, indeed, the most important interaction for the future of the entire discipline. In Smith's (1995) words:

> [f]or too long, under the shadow of positivism, international relations has been on an outdated and fundamentally contested view of both the content of international theory and the nature of social science inquiry (30).

To offer a brief outline of the debate, The dividing line lies between theories claiming there is common (if even relatively little) ground for judging rival "truth claims" and the view that there can be none beyond a theory that could act as a neutral arbiter between them. This implies that the search for an overarching or even all-encompassing social theory is an effort in futility, especially given that no consensus regarding the "reality" of reality can be found. This debate has not been limited to the discipline of IR, but has also permeated a variety of cognate fields.[2] I consider the implications of this debate for the discipline of IR and address the question of what different strands in this debate suggest and what salient issues are contested. I engage it by highlighting the pillar foundationalist approaches, including those of realism, constructivism, and liberalism. Following this, I introduce the anti-foundationalist claim and delineate the contesting approaches. Finally, I present a possible solution provided by Monteiro and Ruby (2009), and show the problematique arising from their solution of post-foundationalism.

Foundations within IR

Realism (Power)

Looking at the most fundamental level of the theory, the interests of states present themselves as rather generic rudiments and lend themselves somewhat easily to definition and observation. Each and every state within the international system strives to meet the preservation of autonomy in a political sense as well as its integrity on a territorial level. These should be taken as mandatory requirements for a state to pursue further its national interests,[3] which may assume a myriad of forms. The achievement of power therefore either cloaks itself or simply turns out to be marred in objectives that become complementary or competing in a system attempting to homogenize them. Some states may seek the acquisition of more land, additional political power, or pursue a heightened level of economic authority by expanding into other regions or undertaking development within its existing territory. Others still may seek to recess or remain in isolation. Thus, power and interests of various states are variable in content (Donnelly, 2000). Power, nonetheless, remains a relative term for realists. Emphasizing relative rather than absolute power is therefore necessary. Unless authority stems from their state, political realists reject centralized authority.[4] Decentralization (as opposed to the notion of empire) is realist preference simply given that it encourages the development of a system of diversity. Decentralization can be achieved through the use of force (that is the application of military power), and the use of force for the realization of decentralization is achieved through a balance of power (Holsti, 1985).

Constructivism (Ideas and Identity)

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[2] Philosophy (Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and W. V. Quine), anthropology (Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner), history (Hayden White), sociology ("by the entire tradition of the sociology of knowledge and more recently by the ethnomethodologists"), hermeneutics (Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida), legal theory (Philip Bobbit and Sanford Levinson), and literary theory (Barbara Hernstein Smith, Walter Michaels, Steven Knapp, John Fekete, Jonathan Culler, Terry Eagleton, Frank Lentricchia, Jane Tompkins, Stanley Fish), etc. (Brint, Weaver, and Garmon, 1995: 225).

[3] National interests are defined in terms of power; the meaning of which can be understood in terms of military, economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural resources.

[4] A distinction should be drawn between different strands of realists. Rather than lumping them together in a single group, one should not the difference between classical realism (such proponents of classical realism include Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau) and extreme realism. Classical realism is undergirded by the concept of national interest, however, it is not driven exclusively by the Machiavellian doctrine that, "anything is justified by reason of the state" (Bull, 1995: 189; see Korab-Karpowicz, 2013).

"The original insight behind constructivism," according to Hurd (2012), is a simple description of meaning as something "'socially constructed'" (300). Concerned with identity, constructivism approaches a constellation of ideas, values, norms, and why they matter, the interaction of agents and actors, the practices that occur as a result of interaction, and the manner in which the formation of ideas and their use can impact the international environment. This is a result of constructivism encompassing "Weberian interpretive sociology, Symbolic Interactionism, variants of Marxism, Veblenian institutionalism, post-structuralism(s), and hermeneutics" (Palan, 2000: 576). Attention to these factors provides healthy breeding ground for "path-breaking perspectives in the study of international politics" (Snyder, 2005: 67). With four types of ideas operating within constructivism (i.e., ideologies, normative or principled/value-based beliefs, causal beliefs, and policy perceptions), constructivism rejects the basic assumption of neorealist theory that the state of anarchy (lack of a higher authority) is a structural condition inherent in the system of states. Rather, in the words of Wendt (1992), it contains within it the argument that, "anarchy is what states make of it" (395). Disorder stands as a condition of the system of states given that states, in select circumstances, "choose" to condition the system in such a way, and heavily reject an overarching leviathan. Empowerment of the state to construct the world around it, in accordance with perceptions and attitudes predicated upon the aforementioned factors, is precisely the product of such an engagement.

Identities are important ingredients in the constructivist approach to the study of international politics and contributions of the constructivist ontology to the field of IR because they present the foundation on which state interests are stacked. "Explanations based primarily on interests and the material distribution of power," according to constructivists:

> cannot fully account for important international phenomena and that analysis of
> the social construction of states identities ought to precede, and may even explain,
> the genesis of state interests (Bukovansky, 1997: 209).

Exploring and attributing value to identity are critical practices within the constructivist research program. Interests presuppose identities since in order for an actor to understand what its primary desires are, it must first have an acute understanding of *who* or *what* it is as an actor within the system it functions (Wendt, 1999). States "do not have a 'portfolio' or interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations" (396). Eminent scholars of constructivism (i.e., Alexander Wendt, Friedrich Kratochwil, Nicholas Onuf, Richard Ashley, John Ruggie, Ted Hopf, and Vincent Pouilot, among others) remain targets of intense criticism for their conceptualizations and operationalizations of reality. Although they hold the view that an external reality exists, rival and harmonizing constructivisms depict the external world as something to be interpreted in multifaceted ways. Because criticisms projected against this particular foundationalist approach often stem from competing and for that reason theories of non-camaraderie, arguments against constructivism come across as strategic moves seeking to fundamentally undermine the potential of constructivism.

Epistemologically, constructivism as an alternative *theory* in IR holds, "the middle ground between 'rationalist' theories—realism, neorealism, and neoliberal institutionalism—and 'interpretive epistemologies'"—post-modernisms, Frankfurt School-oriented critical theories and feminism" (Adler, 2005: 89). It is a general methodological approach and philosophical vantage point from which ontological assessment can be made about the multiple mechanisms of a larger

political machine IR. The true middle ground between rationalist and relativist interpretive approaches," according to Adler (2005):

> is occupied neither by an interpretive version of rationalism, nor by some variety of "reflectivism" as described by Keohane, nor even by all sorts of critical theories as imprecisely portrayed by Mearsheimer, but by constructivism (90).

"The manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction," according to the constructivist point of view, "depends upon dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world" (90). Post-modern constructivism holds that the ultimate power of human interpretations is the intersubjective world. The material world only exists through interpretations. It can express itself and even limit the possibility of interpretation (Nugroho, 2008). The epistemological implication is that understanding, *not* explaining, constitutes the primary activity of social science (Hollis & Smith, 1990).

Liberalism (Interests and Preferences)
"Liberal IR theory," according to Moravscik (1997), "elaborates the insight that state-society relations—the relationship of states to the domestic and transnational social context in which they are embedded—have a fundamental impact upon state behavior in world politics" (513). The definition of interests of actors within society lie at the very core of liberal IR theory, holding that:

> [s]ocietal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behavior by shaping state preferences, that is, the fundamental social purposes underlying the strategic calculations of governments. For liberals, the configuration of state preferences matters most in world politics—not, as realists argue, the configuration of capabilities and not, as institutionalists (that is, functional regime theorists) maintain, the configuration of information and institutions (513).

Underscoring the pillar of ideas and preferences within liberal IR theory, the fundamental belief in progress suggests that (international) institutions, the rise of non-state actors (international organizations [IOs] and interest groups), as well as the concept of interdependence hold a productive side (precluding the appropriation of power), which is strongly opposed by realists. Short of the establishment of a world government, the aforesaid can provide at least marginal degrees of stability, security, and predictability with respect to interstate interaction. These also breed the means for mediating conflict among and between states, building bases for cooperation in any number of ways, and the creation of regional-legalistic codes so that all are better off in the international system.

The Anti-Foundationalism Movement
Logical and historical assailments directed toward foundational concepts in an attempt to eradicate fundamental principle genuinely seek to progress intellectual inquiry. Together with those termed social constructionists (and with members of the academic community calling for a "post-process paradigm") anti-foundationalists made considerable gains during the late 1980s and 1990s (Olson, 2002: 46). But whether this ongoing process can be considered just that (potentially an unfinished success story) or intellectual miscarriage, these attempts have certainly

kept in line with the spirit of process as an essential feature of the IR field. As Karlsson (1993) notes:

> [t]he American discourse on international relations theory has during the end of the 1980s come under the influence of a set of new approaches that criticize and challenge the dominant and traditional empirical-positivist research program (376).

"Post-modernism," "post-positivism," "post-structuralism," and "reflectivism" constitute this research program and the variety of approaches inherent within it. The novel approaches, however, still connect with the traditional chords of IR theory including its "universalist and rationalist claims of idealism, realism, and neo-realism (Karlsson, 1993: 376; Der Derian & Shapiro, 1989; Lapid, 1989). So, while some might insist that the anti-foundationalist approach constitutes an entirely new theoretical program in and of itself, others maintain that it continues to share a critique of F and consequently presents entirely different philosophical articulations.

Proponents of AF scholars within various disciplines observe the existence of an empiricist-positivist promise for a mode of science allegedly missing within the traditional program. The traditional theory, according to anti-foundationalists, cultivates a field of question marks and therefore cannot be considered free of the need to reconsider their ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of social research (Karlsson, 1993: 377; Lapid, 1989: 236). Devoid of chasteness, scholars reason that traditional methods of analysis cannot possibly reach far enough so as to "grasp these new techniques of power and that post-structuralist approach better captures the significance of these new forces in international relations" (Karlsson, 1993: 377). Within the anti-foundationalist research program it is necessary to acknowledge that, "post-modern knowledge is discontinuous, paradoxical and local and consists of an infinite number of independent discourses" (378).

"Anti-foundationalists argue that traditional theorists resist knowledge in the modern sense as a construct of coherent representation" while simultaneously resisting unique representation entrenched within a sovereign identity (378). These interpretations should be taken into consideration with the fact that other areas of humanities within the social sciences have demonstrated a profound level of influence upon theory building. Interaction of post-modern and traditional methods of thought formulation and the illustration of such thought by means of writing can be seen as a long process with a deep history. In view of this, critical questions begin to emerge regarding the existence of a particular nostalgia of narrative within traditional IR theory. Prominent thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard, among others, form the very basis of the anti-foundationalist movement. They imbue the field with a critical pluralistic and relativistic tone with heterogeneous knowledge (378; Lyotard, 1984).

Foundationalists are accused of being monistic, and are criticized for their inability to expand beyond their very limited traditional rationalistic theory. There should be little surprise that separation of these factors is a futile enterprise. As Fish (quoted in Lawson, 1997; Olson, 2002) argues:

> [t]heory is an impossible project which will never succeed. It will never succeed simply because the primary data and formal laws necessary to its success will always be spied or picked out from within the contextual circumstances of which

they are supposedly independent. The objective facts and rules of calculation that are to ground interpretation and render it principled are themselves interpretive products: they are, therefore, always and already contaminated by the interested judgments they claim to transcend (110; 46).

Given the overarching force of the traditional schools that are said to be associated with the "problematic of empiricist-positivist cumulative science" (Karlsson, 1993: 379), there persists the need to consider the role of impersonal social forces, the impact of cultural practices, norms and values, and the issues of identity (alongside other factors) within the erratic field of IR. To what extent will traditional and non-traditional thinkers cumulatively represent these more robustly? The call for reflexivity in the debate shows important questions are not being asked while at the same time fruitful forms of interpretation and analysis are neglected in application. Exposing the need for reflexivity, however, suggests the strong possibility of bridging competing research programs.

The Idea of Post-Foundationalism
Monteiro and Ruby (2009), argue extensively in favor of problem-driven research and pluralism insomuch as they "try to move the discipline beyond its foundational insecurities" (18) and, thus, introduce the notion of post-foundationalism.[5] In portraying the limitations of foundational arguments, they are, nevertheless, *not* rejecting foundations as such. They claim, in essence, that foundations (by their very definition) are not at all arguments that can be proven or disproven. Subsequently, despite the "positive" effect they can have on the expansion of scholarly knowledge and while they provide necessary tools for coherent argumentation, there can be no definitive answer as to who is right and/or wrong. Segregation of the IR discipline along foundational lines has achieved little more than rather unproductive divisions within the field.

IR scholars have utilized philosophies of science in general and foundational arguments to strengthen their arguments vis-à-vis others at the expanse of disciplinary plurality in particular. Monetiro and Ruby (2009) argue that this foundational debate is not only unproductive, but also beyond the scope of IR, and should be left to philosophers. Scholars of IR should, therefore, develop a prudent attitude toward foundations as a whole, and all but abandon any pre-defined positions that would ultimately force scholars to choose one position over the other.[6]

Chernoff (2009) illustrates the logical inconsistencies within their line of argumentation so as to "defend the foundations of IR." He shows that Moneteiro and Ruby (2009) construct a straw man by conflating foundations and foundationalists' epistemology. Moreover, just to "do IR" requires scholars to assert specific foundational principles (Moneteiro and Ruby, 2009: 475), since it requires the endorsement of particular criteria for theory choice. There are foundational positions that avoid imperial claims that denounce and allow for methodological pluralism. Bohman (2009), on the other hand, argues specifically that if anything, Monteiro and Ruby's (2009) work actually strengthens the anti-foundationalist argument since:

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[5] Indeed, they echo a view expressed much earlier by Michael Brint, William Weaver, and Meredith Garmon (1995), claiming that, "we have (successfully climbed the ladder of anti-foundationalism. It is now time that we set it, along with its debate with foundationalism, aside" (236). Their argument, however, refers to the applicability of this debate to concrete political arguments and that that there is genuine anti-foundationalist political thought, but that this strand helps to counter any universal claims by other political theorists.
[6] Monteiro and Ruby (2009) label this post-foundationalism.

the advantage of anti-foundationalism over post-foundationalism is that the anti-foundationalist sees no need for prudence about foundations, as if borrowing foundations might sometimes be fruitful independent of their worth in defining the standards of the discipline (489).

What may intuitively be a compromise and an end to the "most interesting debate in IR," was actually the starting point for a new round of contestation. In fact, Monteiro and Ruby's (2009) article re-sparked the debate and evoked wrangling views from both foundationalists and anti-foundationalists alike.

CONCLUSION

The most notable product of the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist exchange has undoubtedly been a process in which we have seen the proliferation of self-reflection, theoretical pluralism and tolerance, and convergent views of roles of and themes within the social sciences. At the same time, there is reason to be concerned that the anti-foundational movement undermines the very stability "of the foundations on which it began to build its institution" (Fekete, 1984: 238). Moving beyond the schism between these two camps allows academics to avoid deeper divisions in IR even if it undoubtedly invites accusations about anti-scientific practice. If this is the case, then perhaps acknowledging "partial foundations" and looking forward to more accommodating theoretical positions is key. As Blake, Smeyers, Smith, and Standish (1998) tersely assert, "postfoundationalism is not a transient intellectual fashion that can easily be dismissed as 'some kind of radical abrogation of intellectual responsibility'" (25).

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