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A Teaching Roundtable

Teaching IR's Paradigms

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INTRODUCTION BY JEFFREY W. TALIAFERRO, TUFTS UNIVERSITY

As a graduate student in the Department of Government at Harvard University in the early 1990s, I was taught that part of what differentiated International Relations (IR) from the other subfields of political science (which in that department were American politics, comparative politics, political theory or philosophy, and political methodology) and perhaps from the other social sciences (e.g., economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology) as well, was its self-definition in terms of various theoretical traditions. As one of the contributors to this roundtable, Jennifer Sterling-Folker, observes, over time “the ontological, epistemological, and methodological preferences that IR scholars adhere to and replicate in their analyses” coalesced into different theoretical traditions.

To be sure, IR also differs from the other political science subfields and social sciences in terms of the main agents (autonomous political communities, generally although not exclusively territorial states), the principal structures (material and ideational) and the social phenomena of interest (most fundamentally, the causes of interstate war and peace). But it is the centrality of these theoretical traditions, alternatively called schools, metatheories, research programs, paradigms, or more colloquially, the “isms,” that really sets IR apart from the rest.¹

The list of IR traditions always begins with realism and liberalism. As the Cold War drew to a close in the late 1980s, constructivism supplanted Marxism (or neo-Marxism) as the third major “ism,” at least in the political science departments at major research universities on the east coast of the United States. In addition to the “big three”—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—there are the English School, feminism, world systems theories, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, analytic eclecticism, and many others.

My scholarship has been exclusively in one of the “big three” IR traditions, realism (or more specifically, neoclassical realism). In one book, my co-authors and I characterize our ontology as “environment-based,” our epistemology as “soft” positivism, and our methodology as qualitative.² Nonetheless, I have come to appreciate the necessity of self-reflective engagement with the various traditions and the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that underlie them. As another contributor, Carsten-Andreas Schultz, aptly observes, “It is not only that IR theories provide different answers to the same question,” but also “the main difference often is that they lead to different questions in the first place.”

Since the late 1990s, I have been a full-time faculty member in the Department of Political Science at Tufts University. Tufts is a doctoral research-extensive university enrolling approximately 11,900 full-time students (half of whom are undergraduates) in nine schools located on four campuses in the cities of Boston (in the Chinatown and Fenway neighborhoods), Medford and Somerville, and Grafton, Massachusetts. The Political Science Department, which is in the School of Arts and Sciences (A&S) on the Medford/Somerville campus, consists of 18 full-time faculty members who teach in four subfields: American politics, comparative politics, political theory, and IR. The department does not have a masters or Ph.D. program. Political science (PS) is routinely among the top three largest disciplinary majors in A&S, alongside economics and computer science.

¹ Although the title of this roundtable is “Teaching the IR Paradigms,” I prefer to use the terms “tradition,” “metatheory,” and occasionally, even the colloquial “isms.” This is because none of the IR theoretical traditions, whether orthodox or heterodox, really adhere to Kuhn’s conception of a paradigm, let alone Lakatos’ methodology of scientific research programs. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

² Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 105-106. For a discussion of realism (both structural and classical) as an environment-based ontology and liberalism (especially institutionalist theory) as a process-based ontology see Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic-Level Variables,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41:1 (1997): 1-25.

All full-time department faculty, except those in the American politics subfield, also teach and advise students in the separately administered International Relations Program.³ The IR Program is the largest interdisciplinary major in A&S, drawing faculty and courses from the departments of Economics, History, Anthropology, Sociology, Religion, Music, History of Art and Architecture, the foreign languages, and few others. However, my department is responsible for teaching *Introduction to International Relations*, one of the two “core” courses required of all IR majors.⁴ In fact, the majority of students who take my upper-level courses on *Intelligence and US National Security*, *Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare*, *Force, Strategy, and Arms Control*, as well my seminar on *Nuclear Weapons in International Politics*, tend to be IR majors (and increasing number of them double major in computer science). These are topic-based courses, but the readings are grounded in the major IR traditions, as well as in mid-level theories of coercion, deterrence, nuclear proliferation, and intelligence analysis.

I have a secondary affiliation with The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the graduate school of global affairs at Tufts. The Fletcher School faculty (35 full-time and 31 part-time) include scholars and practitioners who hold advanced degrees in economics, law, history, political science, chemistry, engineering, computer science, and several other disciplines. I teach the *Global Politics* course in the Global Master of Arts Program (GMAP), a one-year hybrid master’s program for mid-career and senior level professionals.⁵ While this course is primarily topic-based, it does introduce students to the “big three” IR traditions and uses relative power, international institutions, and norms as overlapping lenses to analyze contemporary issues. Finally, at Fletcher, I occasionally serve as a third reader for Ph.D. dissertations on international security topics.⁶

I share this information about Tufts and my teaching responsibilities there as a way framing this H-Diplo Roundtable on Teaching IR’s Paradigms. In this wide-ranging and erudite collection of essays, Gregorio Bettiza, Sarah McLaughlin Mitchell, Carsten-Andres Schulz, and Jennifer Sterling-Folker grapple with a series of questions about teaching the various theoretical traditions in IR at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The four contributors have different substantive areas of expertise within IR ranging from the complex interactions between liberal and non-liberal ideas, actors, and practices in world politics; to the historical evolution of world order and hierarchies and the dynamics of international politics in Latin America; to the study of civil wars and states’ compliance with the rulings of international courts and criminal tribunals; to U.S. foreign policy, international organization, international political

³ On the undergraduate IR Program in the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University see <https://ase.tufts.edu/ir/>. For the Political Science Department at Tufts University see <https://as.tufts.edu/politicalscience>, both accessed 6 January 2021.

⁴ The fact that IR is both the name of the popular interdisciplinary major in A&S and one of the subfields in the Political Science Department invariably causes confusion among some students, their parents, and even some faculty. Over the years, it has occasionally led to curricular “turf wars” with other participating A&S departments, especially when the faculty director of the IR Program is not a political scientist. A few years ago, I proposed rechristening the subfield “international politics” or IP to alleviate the confusion, but the proposal garnered little enthusiasm within the department.

⁵ On The Fletcher School’s Global Master of Arts Program (GMAP), see <https://fletcher.tufts.edu/academics/masters-programs-online-hybrid/gmap>, accessed 6 January 2021).

⁶ The Fletcher School has long had an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in IR and its current major fields are comparative regional studies, sustainable development, gender and international affairs, human security and international affairs, global business and international finance, and international security. See <https://fletcher.tufts.edu/academics/phd-programs/international-relations>, accessed 6 January 2021. Yet, two years ago, *Foreign Policy* magazine, in collaboration with the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) project at the College of William & Mary, ranked “Tufts University” as number 22 among “top PhD programs for academic careers in international relations.” See “The Best International Relations Schools in the World,” *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/20/top-fifty-schools-international-relations-foreign-policy/>, accessed 6 January 2021. Invariably, I receive unsolicited email queries from prospective students inquiring about the Ph.D. program in the Political Science Department and asking if I might supervise their proposed theses.

economy, philosophy of science and disciplinary history. The theoretical traditions in which these scholars work run the gamut from the “big three” (realism, liberalism, and constructivism), to more heterodox traditions (e.g., the English School and post-structuralism), to mid-range approaches (e.g., the scientific study of international conflict).

Two of the contributors, Bettiza and Schulz, earned their doctorates in the United Kingdom and the other two, Mitchell and Sterling-Folker, earned their doctorates in the United States. They teach at research universities on three continents: Bettiza in the Department of Politics at the University of Exeter in the UK; Mitchell and Sterling-Folker in the political science departments at the University of Iowa and the University of Connecticut, respectively, in the U.S.; and Schultz in the Political Science Department at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

Should we continue to teach the theoretical traditions of IR? All four contributors argue we should. In fact, Sterling-Folker and Mitchell pointedly reject calls by David Lake to abandon the “isms” in favor of mid-range theorizing.⁷ But other thorny questions soon arise: What are our *objectives* in teaching the IR traditions in the first place? Is the teaching of IR theory only useful in as much as it has some relevance for public policy? Alternatively, is the teaching of IR theory valuable in its own right?

All four contributors see continued merit to teaching the IR traditions regardless of their perceived policy relevance. Indeed, Sterling-Folker bemoans “an epistemological shallowness to how IR theory is taught in America,” resulting from “a general refusal by American scholars to confront their own analytical assumptions about the world.” Metatheorizing is essential for basic research and teaching in IR, rather than a “distraction from the disciplinary goal of policymaking relevance.”

Bettiza writes that failing to expose our students to the theoretical traditions “would... limit their understanding of IR theory, hinder their comprehension of the theoretical scaffolding supporting much empirical research, and undermine their capacity to discern and critique theoretical-ideological arguments when they spot them in public debates.” But he also admits, “Teaching the ‘isms’ laundry-list might... be the best way to beat out any initial excitement undergraduate students may have had for studying global politics.” That is an observation with which the other roundtable contributors would agree. I think that many other IR scholars who teach introductory courses would agree as well.

Sterling-Folker insists that instructors “absolutely *must* teach meta-theory, not just at the graduate level but the undergraduate level as well, and particularly in America where it is needed most.” “Teaching IR theory,” she continues “is about exposing students to the different ways in which we, as human beings in the contemporary moment, have constructed and are acted upon by all of these structures, often simultaneously.” Similarly, Bettiza notes that he and his colleagues in the Politics Department at Exeter “do not treat the different traditions uncritically,” but instead seek to “contextualize and historicize them” and approach theory as a far broader enterprise than the “great debates” among different IR paradigms. And Mitchell observes, “Grand theories help us see the assumptions about human behavior that drive our perspectives and identify connections between bodies of research, while mid-level theories illuminate the causal pathways and contexts for IR phenomena.”

What are some more *effective strategies* for teaching IR theory? In particular, how might we teach undergraduates, and masters and doctoral students, to engage more deeply and self-reflectively with the “isms” and the ontological, epistemological, and methodological choices that underpin them? None of the four essayists explicitly discusses new strategies for teaching IR theory in introductory courses. In the United States, such introductory courses typically enroll anywhere from several dozen to several hundred undergraduates (most of whom are in their first or second years), depending

⁷ David A. Lake, “Why ‘Isms’ Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 465-480; 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 (2013): 567-587.

on the type and size of institution (e.g., small liberal arts college, medium-size private research university, or large public university).⁸

The contributors, however, do suggest various strategies for teaching IR theory in upper level undergraduate and graduate courses. For example, Sterling-Folker writes about utilizing the approach taken in her edited volume, *Making Sense of International Relations Theory*, which applies different theoretical perspectives to the study of the same event (e.g., the 1999 Kosovo War in the first edition and the 2003 Iraq War in the second) in her writing-intensive upper-level undergraduate courses. At the beginning of the semester, she asks students to choose a particular event (or events) and then over the subsequent weeks the students apply different theoretical lenses—both orthodox and heterodox—to explain, analyze, and interpret the chosen event.⁹ Mitchell’s graduate course on institutions and cooperation draws on the “big three” traditions, which posit power, institutions, and norms as sources of international order and cooperation, “to develop students’ understanding about these concepts and paradigmatic perspectives. In a new masters’ level course on *World Orders: Past, Present, and Future*, Bettiza plans to “adopt a more structural, than agent-based, perspective treating theories (including the ‘isms’) as distinct ontologies of world order.”

What is the *right balance* between teaching the major “isms” and teaching mid-level theories, such as those from the scientific study of international conflict or foreign policy analysis (FPA)? Mitchell notes her undergraduate course on international courts presents students with realist, institutionalist, and constructivist perspectives on why states create and/or join international courts and comply with court rulings. The course adopts a hybrid approach blending grand and mid-level theorizing. She observes that “Students think about international courts through grand theory lenses, but they also leave the class knowing specific details about a variety of courts and how they influence states that recognize their jurisdiction.”

Which of the IR traditions should we teach? These traditions not only differ in their ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, but are also reflective of the political, historical, sociological, and cultural contexts in which they originated and in which they are replicated. More pointedly, why should the teaching of IR continue to privilege realism, liberalism, and constructivism, whose canonical works are almost exclusively written by White male scholars from the U.S., the UK, and a few other Western European states? On this point, Bettiza notes *Globalization of World Politics*, a required course for first-year undergraduates in Exeter’s Politics Department seeks to “cultivate criticality and plurality the course goes beyond the ‘big three’ canonical ones – Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism – to include the English School, Feminism and Post-colonialism.” Writing in a Latin American context, Schultz observes “The ‘great debates’ have little meaning for the development of IR theory outside the ‘Anglosphere,’ and IR theory should be taught in a way that reflects these different trajectories.”

Finally, what exactly *is* IR? Is IR merely a subfield of political science? Or is IR a discipline or even a multi-discipline in its own right? Is the very conception of IR and the role of theory within it largely context dependent?¹⁰ For example, Shultz

⁸ Bettiza and Schultz do not mention the typical enrollments for the introductory IR courses in their respective departments.

⁹ In the interest of full disclosure, I contributed chapters to both editions of the book: Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Robert W. Wishart, “Neoclassical Realism: Domestic Opportunities and Great Power Intervention,” in Jennifer Sterling-Folker, ed., *Making Sense of International Relations Theory*, second edition (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2013); Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Neoclassical Realism: Prestige, Loss Aversion, and Great Power Intervention,” in Jennifer Sterling-Folker, ed., *Making Sense of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2005)

¹⁰ For example, the International Studies Association (ISA) explicitly defines itself as an interdisciplinary association “dedicated to understanding international, transnational, and global affairs,” <https://www.isanet.org>, accessed 6 January 2020. The ISA has a global membership comprising practitioners and scholars from multiple disciplines including (but not limited to) political science, history, geography, sociology, anthropology, and many more.

observes that the while Latin American IR scholars largely agree with their North American and British counterparts on the major traditions, there are major divergences over the uses of theory, the disciplinary identity of IR, and the relationship between theory and practice. So, while IR theory is widely taught at Latin American universities, he notes it is often not the main focus of scholarship. Instead, “IR in Latin America has traditionally prioritized foreign policy analysis and the formulation of policy frames that should guide practice.” In the UK, where Bettiza teaches, the boundaries between IR, politics, economics, geography, and history are different from what they are in North America.¹¹ Last, Sterling Folker writes that while “ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments vary depending on location and nationality,” U.S. scholars continue to have a disproportionate impact on “what is taught as IR theory.”

Participants:

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Gregorio Bettiza is Sr. Lecturer (Associate Professor) in International Relations at the University of Exeter. His research interests include the role of ideology, religion, and civilizational identities in international relations and world order. He is the author of *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy: Religion and American Diplomacy in a Postsecular World* (Oxford University Press: 2019). Gregorio’s research has appeared in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Theory*, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, *International Studies Review*, *Review of International Studies*, and other outlets.

Sara McLaughlin Mitchell is the F. Wendell Miller Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa. She is the author of five books and more than fifty journal articles and chapters. She has received over 1.1 million dollars in grants. Her areas of expertise include international conflict, political methodology, and gender issues in academia. Professor Mitchell is co-founder of the Journeys in World Politics workshop, a mentoring workshop for junior IR women. She received the ISA Quincy Wright Distinguished Scholar Award, a distinguished alumni award from Iowa State University, and she served as President of the Peace Science Society.

Jennifer Sterling-Folker is a Professor Political Science and International Relations at the University of Connecticut. She has served as the Alan R. Bennett Honors Professor, a Vice-President of the International Studies Association, an editor of *International Studies Review*, and an editor of *Review of International Studies*.

Carsten-Andreas Schulz is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford. His research focuses on Latin America’s relationship with and contribution to international order. It has appeared in journals such as *European Journal of International Relations* and *International Studies Quarterly*.

¹¹ For example, the Politics Department at the University of Exeter lists some of the following undergraduate degree (or programs): International Relations, BA; Politics, BA; Politics, Philosophy, and Economics, BA; Politics and International Relations, BA; Economics and Politics, BA; and Politics and Sociology, BA. See Department of Politics, University of Exeter, <https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/politics/studyingexeter/undergraduate/>, accessed 6 January 2021.

REVIEW BY GREGORIO BETTIZA, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

To “ism” or not to “ism?”¹² There are certainly a number of very good reasons why we should be teaching the *isms* to our IR undergraduates. Like it or not, the *isms* constitute the theoretical canon of the discipline and most introductory textbooks to IR religiously go through a (growing) range of them.¹³ Moreover, despite some important exceptions, much IR research continues to be structured along paradigmatic lines, whether the more orthodox ones – Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism – or heterodox ones – English School, Marxism, Post-structuralism, and Post-Colonialism.¹⁴ Finally, even if we take a more critical perspective on the “isms” and view them akin to ideologies rather than theories,¹⁵ they nonetheless remain powerful systems of meaning that shape how practitioners – from policymakers to civil society actors – think and justify their actions in world politics. Not exposing our students to the “isms” would therefore limit their understanding of IR theory, hinder their comprehension of the theoretical scaffolding supporting much empirical research, and undermine their capacity to discern and critique theoretical-ideological arguments when they spot them in public debates.

Yet there are also very good reasons for not teaching the “isms” or, at least, treating them with a great deal of suspicion and caution. Critical scholarship – Marxian, Post-colonial and Feminist – has ever more persuasively argued and shown that the “isms,” along with the narrative of the great debates which underpins the IR canon, are deeply problematic. Not only do they mis-represent the historical development of the discipline,¹⁶ but they also marginalize particular voices, thus contributing to sustaining class, gender, racial, and spatial inequalities in the field.¹⁷ Furthermore, restricting our view of theory to the “isms” can be rather parochial. There is certainly more to *international theory*, broadly understood, than paradigmatic IR. This ranges from non-paradigmatic, but not necessarily a-theoretical, scholarship on inter- and intra-state conflicts; to globalization studies; normative and international political theory; the (geographically situated) ‘schools’; international political sociology, and, along with it, a host of new cross-disciplinary developments which have broadly gone

¹² Many thanks to Stephane Baele, Katie McCabe Bettiza, Beverley Loke, and Alex Prichard for comments and corrections.

¹³ Among many textbooks, see the following which is widely adopted throughout the UK: John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 8th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Peter Marcus Kristensen, “International Relations at the End: A Sociological Autopsy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62:2 (2018): 245–259. This is confirmed by the 2017 TIP survey. To the question “Which of the following best describes your approach to the study of IR?”, roughly 25% say they do not use a paradigmatic approach, while the remaining 75% identify their research as taking place within a particular *ism*. The survey can be accessed at: <https://trip.wm.edu/data/dashboard/faculty-survey>

¹⁵ On IR theories as ideologies, see for example: Duncan S. A. Bell, “Anarchy, Power and Death: Contemporary Political Realism as Ideology,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 7:2 (2002): 221-239; Beate Jahn, “Liberal Internationalism: From Ideology to Empirical Theory-and Back Again,” *International Theory* 1:3 (2009): 409-438; Alex Prichard, “The ‘Isms’ Are Evil. All Hail the ‘Isms’! A Reflection on Ir Theory,” *E-IR* (2018): <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/13/irs-isms-are-evil-all-hail-the-isms/>.

¹⁶ Lucian M. Ashworth, “Did the Realist-Idealist Great Debate Really Happen? A Revisionist History of International Relations,” *International Relations* 16:1 (2002): 33-51; Peter Wilson, “The Myth of the ‘First Great Debate,’” *Review of International Studies* 24:5 (1998): 1-16.

¹⁷ Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (Ir) and Regional Worlds,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58:4 (2014): 647-569; Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10:2 (1981): 126-155; J. Ann Tickner, “You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and Ir Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41:4 (1997): 611-632; Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, “Race Is Critical to the Field of International Relations,” *Foreign Policy* (2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/why-race-matters-international-relations-ir>.

under the label of ‘turns’ (practice, aesthetic, new materialist, historical, and so on).¹⁸ Last, but not least, let’s be honest ... the whole exercise of going through the list of “isms” can be a rather mind-numbing one. Not only for us, but it is likely – unless the teacher is particularly inspired and inspiring – to be mind-numbing for our students too. Teaching the “isms” laundry-list might therefore be the best way to beat out any initial excitement undergraduate students may have had for studying global politics.

These are some of the debates we regularly have in the Politics Department at the University of Exeter¹⁹ when reflecting upon how to teach IR and its theories. To illustrate what comes out of these discussions, I’ll highlight four courses. Three are compulsory for all our IR undergraduates during their first two years, while the fourth is elective: *The Globalization of World Politics (Globalization)*, 1st year, Term 1, compulsory; *The Challenges of World Politics in the 21st Century (Challenges)*, 1st year, Term 2, compulsory; *Contemporary Theories of World Politics (Theories)*, 2nd year, Term 1, compulsory; and *From Climate Change to Quantum Theory: The Future of International Relations (Future)*, 2nd year, Term 2, optional.

Globalization introduces 1st year students to the field of IR. It is divided in two parts. The first presents the “isms,” but in an effort to cultivate criticality and plurality the course goes beyond the ‘big three’ canonical ones – Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism – to include the English School, Feminism and Post-colonialism. The second part familiarizes students with a number of key, but also deeply contested, concepts: power, security, empire, etc. The course, taught by Beverley Loke, a China and East Asia regional order expert, has a strong Global IR ethos which informs the treatment of the different “ism” as well as the key concepts from the very first week.

Challenges is largely an issues-based course, not strictly a theoretical one. When I was assigned to teach it, I chose to structure it – and the multiple ‘challenges’ we address – around a particular theme: the post-Cold War globalization and more recent crisis of the liberal international order. The different issues we tackle – including, among others, global governance, human rights, capitalism, the environment, terrorism, rising powers, and populism – are never presented as purely factual, but interpreted through the lenses of different theories. In the context of the liberal order, the voice of the mainstream is often exemplified by positivist hypothesis-testing, Liberal and Constructivist scholarship, while critical perspectives are offered by engaging with Realist, Marxist, Post-structuralist, and Post-colonial theories.²⁰

It is in the 2nd year that students are required to engage in a more substantive way with theory. Stephane Baele, who works on language in political violence and (in)security, teaches *Theories* in a distinctive way. First, the course is not organized explicitly around paradigms, but around *factors* said to play a decisive role in shaping world politics. For some it may be the balance of power, for others the structure of global economics, for others still leaders’ (mis)perceptions, social and group identities, colonial legacies, gender biases, and so on. Second, theories are not treated as abstract sets of ideas, but as living

¹⁸ For a recent sociological interpretation of the ‘turns,’ see: Stephane J. Baele and Gregorio Bettiza, “‘Turning’ everywhere in IR: On the Sociological Underpinnings of the Field’s Proliferating Turns,” *International Theory* Online first (2020): 1-27.

¹⁹ Politics at Exeter generally ranks within the top 10 departments in its subject area in the UK.

²⁰ It may come as a surprise to some that Realism is approached as a critical perspective rather than a mainstream one. Realists have been vocal critics of the liberal order, see for instance: John J. Mearsheimer, *Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). From a more meta-theoretical perspective, others have noted the critical potential of Realism itself, see here: Seán Molloy, “Realism and Reflexivity: Morgenthau, Academic Freedom and Dissent,” *European Journal of International Relations* 26:2 (2020): 321-43; Brent J. Steele, “Eavesdropping on Honored Ghosts’: From Classical to Reflexive Realism,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10:3 (2007): 272-300.

traditions. The course highlights how the attention paid to this or that factor is often the reflection of a particular social and historical context or influenced by theorists' life story and circumstances.

Future is a highly original course which goes well beyond conventional IR theory and the "isms." Alex Prichard, an international political theorist and expert in anarchism, delves into the most cutting edge theories being developed to understand a number of major world historical transformations currently underway. Themes addressed include for instance: the Anthropocene, the digital revolution, postcapitalism, new medievalism, outer space exploration/colonization, and quantum politics. In sum, at Exeter we certainly teach the "isms," but do so in a particular way. We make sure to go far beyond the 'big three,' we do not treat the different paradigms uncritically, we contextualize and historicize them, and we approach international theory as a much wider enterprise than paradigmatic IR.

I want to end with a personal note. Even though, thus far, my research has largely focused on religion and civilizational imaginaries in IR, I have a longstanding interest in the concept – and theories – of world order. I'm in the process of designing a new – final year or MA – course tentatively titled *World Orders: Past, Present and Future*. The "isms" will be a key part of the course, but I plan on teaching them without really teaching *about* them. My intent is to approach the paradigms through the notion of 'deep theorizing,' along the lines suggested by Felix Berenskötter.²¹ In Berenskötter's words, deep theorizing "is about developing a picture of political (inter)action and order through conceptions of drives (primary motivations) and the ontology of its carrier (the political actor), which are grounded in an account of the human condition."²² I will adopt a more structural, than agent-based, perspective treating theories (including the "isms") as distinct ontologies of world order.²³

In the course, students will be encouraged to think in the broadest macro terms possible about the kind of international system we inhabit. Who are its main political actors and forms of authority (individuals, cities, corporations, states, complex governance arrangements, regions, races, civilizations)? What are the key processes, social forces, and power relations that underpin and shape world order? Is the current system anarchical or hierarchical, chaotic or orderly, social or asocial, homogenizing, plural(izing), or hybrid(izing)? Is it built around a set of core logics that remain constant over time or does it evolve across history? If it is the former, what are these core logics and why are they understood to be immutable? If it is the latter, where have we come from and where are we heading (for better or worse)? Different theories and "isms" will give very different answers to these questions. In some cases, they will not even ask the same questions to begin with.

Students will be invited to freely make up their minds. So often, students claim they want to 'make the world a better place.' This is a just aspiration. However, before seeking to better the world – I believe – they ought to critically reflect and come to grips with what that world they inhabit, and are constituted by, looks like first.

²¹ Felix Berenskötter, "Deep Theorizing in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 24:4 (2018): 814-40.

²² Berenskötter, "Deep Theorizing in International Relations," 816

²³ The implicit philosophical premise and drive here, like Berenskötter's, is a reaction to two intellectual currents in the discipline which discourage thinking in 'deep' and, I would add, 'macro' terms. One more mainstream trend, which is especially present in the US context, includes perspectives calling either for the analytically eclectic qualitative study of causal mechanisms or for quantitative-focused hypothesis testing. The other intellectual current, which is especially strong in the European context, is exemplified by various critical approaches that are concerned with deconstructing grand narratives and concepts, highlighting the contingency and indeterminacy of things, and zooming in on the micro and the local. For similar reactions to the former trend, see also: John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 427-57; Christian Reus-Smit, "Beyond Metatheory?," *ibid.*: 589-608. For similar reactions to the latter trend, see: Kai Jonas Koddenbrock, "Strategies of Critique in International Relations: From Foucault and Latour Towards Marx," *European Journal of International Relations* 21:2 (2015): 243-266.

REVIEW BY SARA MCLAUGHLIN MITCHELL, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

We often ask a question on our comprehensive exams at the University of Iowa about grand theories (or “isms”) vs. mid-level theories and how students think we should organize and teach International Relations (IR) theory. Doctoral students grasp the “isms” well in terms of their assumptions, units of analysis, key hypotheses, and policy implications. Yet they struggle to define mid-range theories and provide examples and they struggle to defend the advantages of a focus on mid-level theory over grand theory. This is surprising because much of what we teach in the IR classroom goes beyond the “isms” and covers a variety of topics and methodological approaches. The debate about the value of the “isms” for the IR discipline has been articulated by many authors who argue in favor of organizational schemes that focus on general paradigms²⁴ or call for a greater focus on mid-level theories instead.²⁵ These differences play out in introductory textbooks that present IR through the “isms”²⁶ or through specific lenses such as rationalism.²⁷ My own view is that we need both grand theories and mid-level theories to understand international relations. Grand theories help us see the assumptions about human behavior that drive our perspectives and identify connections between bodies of research, while mid-level theories illuminate the causal pathways and contexts for IR phenomena. Many of my classes focus on the “isms” because I think students should be exposed to various perspectives in the field rather than simply focusing on the approach that I take in my own research. But in other classes, taking a narrower mid-level theory approach to a topic that is closer to my wheelhouse can be more effective. In this essay, I describe how I adopt both approaches in my teaching.

Some of my classes focus on the “isms” to give students an overview of theoretical perspectives in international relations. Power, institutions, and norms serve as the central organizing device for many of these classes which corresponds roughly to coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy mechanisms for cooperation and compliance.²⁸ I map major paradigmatic approaches in international relations to these three categories including (neo) realism, (neo) liberalism, rationalism, constructivism, English School, Marxism, feminism, and post-structuralism. I use this approach when teaching the core seminar for international relations and undergraduate/graduate classes on international institutions and cooperation/world order.

My graduate institutions and cooperation course²⁹ focuses on power, institutions, and norms as sources of order and draws from several “isms” to develop students’ understanding about these concepts and paradigmatic perspective. For example, for power perspectives we read about hegemonic stability theory and the creation of order following large wars. On institutions, we learn about neoliberal institutionalist theory and the importance of institutional and rational design for cooperation. To

²⁴ Henry R. Nau, “No Alternative to ‘Isms’,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 487–491; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Leaving Theory behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 427–457.

²⁵ David A. Lake, “Why ‘isms’ are evil: Theory, epistemology, and academic sects as impediments to understanding and progress,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 465–480; 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 (2013): 567–587.

²⁶ Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steven Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 4th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); James Scott, Ralph Carter and A. Cooper Drury, *IR: International, Economic, and Human Security in a Changing World*, 3rd Edition (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press/Sage, 2018).

²⁷ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics*, 5th Edition (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press/Sage, 2014); Jeffrey A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, and Institutions*, 4th Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

²⁸ Ian Hurd, “Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics,” *International Organization* 53:2 (1999): 379–408.

²⁹ For the syllabus that details the assigned readings for each topic, see <http://saramitchell.org/Institutionssyllabusfall19.pdf>.

learn about norms, we read general theoretical perspectives about shared ideas in international structures and discuss how norms evolve over time. Readings in the first half of class help students understand how different IR paradigms view the creation and dissolution of order. In the second half of the class, we read articles and books that apply these ideas to mid-level theories and topics. For power, we examine how alliances can deter the onset of militarized disputes, especially if they have defensive provisions. For institutions, we look at how shared international organization (IO) memberships improve cooperation or how human rights treaties influence states' human rights practices. For norms, we examine how shared IO memberships can transform states' foreign policy preferences or how international court rulings can change states' practices.³⁰

Some of my classes eschew the paradigmatic approach and instead focus more on mid-level theories. My international conflict class emphasizes the scientific study of conflict with a focus on theories and analyses that 1) analyze many cases over space and time and 2) draw generalizations from these large-N studies to 3) help predict future conflict onsets. In my textbook with John Vasquez,³¹ we use Stuart Bremer's "Dangerous Dyads" article³² as a framing device to identify factors that make pairs of states (or dyads) more dangerous (e.g. contiguity, territorial disputes, arms races, power parity, rivalry) or more peaceful (e.g. joint democracy, trade interdependence, shared IGO memberships, nuclear weapons, power preponderance). Some factors like relative capabilities or alliances are shown to have mixed effects in the literature such that they can be conflict inducing or conflict deterring.

This class teaches students about interstate war from a mid-level theoretical perspective which has the advantage of introducing students to a specific way of studying a topic and then giving them the tools to apply it to real world cases. For example, my students complete a group project where each group (8-10 students) is assigned a 'fictitious' dyad with 20 years' of data on capabilities (military and economic), territorial disputes, history of militarized conflicts, alliances, regime type, nuclear weapons, and leader approval. Half of the groups are assigned dyads that went to war, while the other groups have dyads that maintained peace. The data are taken from historical cases, but the years are altered to reflect more recent decades (e.g. Fillory-Loria³³, 2000-2019 representing Russia-China, 1949-1968). The information students receive on their dyad is taken from IR datasets unless this is not possible (for example, in the case of leader approval for authoritarian states). Students write a group paper assessing the likelihood of war based on the data for each factor and then they make an overall prediction about whether the dyad will fight a war. They draw upon the mid-level theories they have learned for each factor such as studies on the democratic peace, territorial conflict, or arms races and war. Because students read scientific studies of warfare all semester, they get used to examining data and they are able to make predictions for their cases by comparing the patterns for their case to the quantitative findings in the assigned readings. The overall success rate for groups in making correct predictions is over 90%! By focusing on mid-level theories for a topic from a particular perspective, students can learn the tools of that approach in more detail.

My civil war class³⁴ also takes a more mid-range theory approach, identifying factors such as income, natural resources, regime type, ethnicity, and geography that explain variance in conflict risks across countries. The greed vs. grievance

³⁰ I also teach an undergraduate class with these same themes. For the syllabus, see <http://saramitchell.org/IOSyllabusSpring11.pdf>.

³¹ Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and John A. Vasquez, *Conflict, War, and Peace: An Introduction to Scientific Research* (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press/Sage, 2013).

³² Stuart A. Bremer, "Dangerous Dyads: Conditions Affecting the Likelihood of Interstate War, 1816-1965," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36:2 (1992): 309-341.

³³ Fillory and Loria are place names taken from Lev Grossman, *The Magicians* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

³⁴ For the syllabus that details the assigned readings for each topic, see <http://saramitchell.org/civilwarsyllabusfall2019.pdf>.

perspective³⁵ is used as a general organizing theme for understanding civil wars, but students also read chapters summarizing what we know from mid-range theoretical studies.³⁶ We also apply the mid-level theories to civil war cases so that students can grasp how specific events either fit or do not fit the general approach. I use case studies from two volumes where authors are asked whether the case fits a well-known model of civil war onset.³⁷ This helps students see how specific cases may or may not fit with mid-level theories about civil war onset. Discussion forums also involve students looking up more recent news stories about these countries to see how the conflict dynamics have evolved. Students write a research paper on a specific civil war case where they write about the events and history for the case and apply three mid-level theories to explain the case. Through these activities, students learn how to take specific arguments (e.g. oil-producing or semi-democratic countries have more civil wars) and apply them to historical cases. They also identify factors that are germane to understanding their case that mid-level theories have missed.

Some of my classes are more hybrid in the approach to grand theory versus mid-level theory. I teach a class on international courts³⁸ that presents students with different “isms” perspectives on why countries create and join international courts and comply with courts’ judgments. This includes realist viewpoints that see major powers as the main architects of international courts and international law, institutionalist perspectives that focus on why and when states delegate authority to international courts, and constructivist ideas about how court decisions can change foreign and domestic policy behavior. Students also learn about the nuts and bolts of how courts work (for example, the number of judges, terms, sources of jurisdiction, ability of courts to set their own rules). We read mid-level theory pieces that test hypotheses in the context of specific courts such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the International Criminal Court, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Students think about international courts through grand theory lenses, but they also leave the class knowing specific details about a variety of courts and how they influence states that recognize their jurisdiction. The perspective from my own work suggests that courts are effective because states can bargain more efficiently in their shadow (a rationalist and institutionalist perspective). But I also expose students to grand theory and mid-level theory pieces that question my argument. One article on judicial bias in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), for example, takes a realist approach and suggests that judges are biased in favor of countries like their home state and that the institutional selection process for ICJ judges privileges wealthier and Western states.³⁹ Essay exam questions are designed to get students to integrate the grand level IR and international law theories with what they have learned from mid-level theories and case studies about international courts. Focusing on the “isms” in this course helps students integrate research across courts into an overarching IR theoretical perspective.

Like the responses of many graduate students who answer our comprehensive exam question on grand theory versus mid-level theory and conclude that both perspectives are important for understanding international relations, my approach to teaching IR draws upon both. Even though my conflict class focuses on the scientific study of war, I spend one week connecting back to the broader paradigms in IR. While my graduate class on institutions is heavily grounded in the “isms,” it

³⁵ James D. Fearon and David Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97:1 (2003): 75-90; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004): 563-595.

³⁶ T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, *What Do We Know about Civil Wars?* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

³⁷ Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis, Volume 1. Africa* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005); Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, *Understanding Civil War, Volume 2: Europe, Central Asia, and Other Regions* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005).

³⁸ For the syllabus that details the assigned readings for each topic, see <http://saramitchell.org/courtsyllabuspring2020.pdf>.

³⁹ Eric A. Posner and Miguel F.P. de Figueiredo, “Is the International Court of Justice Biased?,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 34:2 (2005): 599-630.

also exposes students to recent, mid-level research on international treaties and cooperation. Although we might lean more heavily towards “isms” or towards mid-level theory in our classes, students benefit when we make connections between them. My teaching experiences suggest that both approaches can be very effective but that the objectives that can be achieved in a class depend on the balance of focus on “isms” versus mid-level theories.

REVIEW BY JENNIFER STERLING-FOLKER, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

How to best teach international relations (IR) theory inevitably leads to the thornier question of whether to teach it at all. By IR theory I mean the meta-theories of the discipline – the ontological, epistemological and methodological preferences that IR scholars adhere to and replicate in their analyses. Over time these have coalesced into schools of thought, or more colloquially, “the isms” and “Great Debates” between them. The 2014 Teaching, Research and International Policy (TRIP) survey found that 73.25 percent of IR scholars think IR theory should be a required subject, and yet quite a few scholars continue to voice skepticism over the need or desire to teach it.⁴⁰ David Lake, for example, heaps considerable scorn on meta-theorizing, choosing instead to celebrate midrange theories which “focus on parts of the political process, rather than the whole, and study the effects of one or more variables on policy choice and outcomes.”⁴¹ While acknowledging the disciplinary contributions of the inter-paradigmatic debates, Andrew Bennett similarly finds them to be “distracting and even counterproductive,” preferring instead “theorizing around the idea of explanation via reference to hypothesized causal mechanisms.”⁴²

Others see metatheorizing as a distraction from the disciplinary goal of policymaking relevance. Stephen Walt notes that while “the need for powerful theories that could help policy makers design effective solutions would seem to be apparent,” most policymakers have a “low regard for theory.”⁴³ Indeed Thierry Balzacq found that in French military school settings, abstract theoretical material “is treated with scorn.”⁴⁴ A veritable chorus of disciplinary voices concerned with policy-relevance appear to share this scorn, on the (erroneous) assumption that meta-theory has little relevance for policy-makers. We are told instead that we should incentivize policy-making relevance and “boil down complex intellectual arguments and conclusions not just into ‘lessons’ but into clear policy prescriptions that are feasible and desirable.”⁴⁵ If we must teach meta-theory, then, it should be with eye to what can be gleaned for policy-making purposes, not because it is valuable or useful in its own right.

Yet here we must evoke Robert Cox’s oft-quoted question and ask, for whom and for what purpose should we reject teaching metatheory in favor of teaching mid-range theorizing and/or for policy-making relevance?⁴⁶ The obvious answer in both cases is the American state and its interests at home and abroad, which is precisely how American hegemony gets

⁴⁰ Aaron Ettinger, “Scattered and Unsystematic: The Taught Discipline in the Intellectual Life of International Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives* (2020): 15.

⁴¹ 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 (2013): 572.

⁴² Andrew Bennett, “The Mother of All Isms: Causal Mechanisms and Structured Pluralism in International Relations Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 460, 459.

⁴³ Stephen M. Walt, “The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 23-24.

⁴⁴ Thierry Balzacq, “Pragmatism and Educational Philosophy in IR,” *International Studies Review* 18:2 (2016): 345-349.

⁴⁵ Catherine Weaver, “Minding the Gap: Defining and Measuring Policy Engagement in IR,” in Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson (eds.), *What’s the point of International Relations?* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge 2017): 179. See also Joseph Leggold and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Johan Eriksson and Bengt Sundelius, “Molding Minds that Form Policy: How to Make Research Useful,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6:1 (2005): 51-71.

⁴⁶ Robert W. Cox. “Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory.” *Millennium* 10:2 (1981): 129

naturalized and reproduced by the American academy. That is, these kinds of denunciations are reflective of a general refusal by American scholars to confront their own analytical assumptions about the world. Theories produced by American scholars are often implicitly grounded in particular “isms,” but by refusing to examine this and its implications, American “national” interests (in capitalism, democracies, policymaking and so on) are promoted under the guise of practicing “objective” social science.⁴⁷ In trying to analytically recreate the world according to America’s own epistemological preferences, American scholars often fail miserably to understand it.

There is, as a result, an epistemological shallowness to how IR theory is taught in America. While the burgeoning sociology of the discipline literature has rightly documented how ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments vary depending on location and nationality, the United States continues to have an outsized impact on what is taught as IR theory. According to a study by Jonas Hagmann and Thomas Biersteker of IR theory course syllabi collected from top graduate programs in the US and Europe, European graduate programs tend to have an equal mix of positivism and critical perspectives, while top American graduate programs teach positivism and rationalism almost exclusively.⁴⁸ Thus IR’s mental horizons remain trapped in the positivist prison of American Political Science just as Justin Rosenberg has argued.⁴⁹ To compound the problem, in both locations the texts assigned are almost exclusively by white, male, Western authors.⁵⁰ Thus while “teaching is a more influential and political site of scholarly action than commonly acknowledged,” Hagman and Biersteker note that “it is also often taught in a more parochial manner than presumed.”⁵¹ Inanna Hamati-Ataya sums the problem up succinctly: Western IR “programs mostly tend to reproduce conservative and mainstream views rather than ‘reflexive’ ones and are more likely to privilege orientations that are in line with their institutions’ geocultural positions in

⁴⁷ For example, Lake’s choice of exemplar mid-range theories are open economy politics and democratic peace theories (thereby reflecting a liberal bias), while both Walt’s and Weaver’s dissatisfaction examples revolve primarily around US policymakers and scholars (thereby reflecting methodological nationalism). The issue of policy-relevance and positivism in the American context are explored more fully in Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Be Careful What You Wish For: Positivism and the Desire for Relevance in the American Study of IR,” in Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson eds., *What’s the Point of International Relations?* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017): 121-134.

⁴⁸ Jonas Hagmann, and Thomas J. Biersteker. “Beyond the Published Discipline: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of International Studies,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20:2 (2014): 291-315. See also Daniel Maliniak, et al., “International Relations in the US Academy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 437-464.

⁴⁹ Justin Rosenberg, “International Relations in the Prison of Political Science,” *International Relations* 30:2 (2016): 127-153. See also Yong-Soo Eun, “To What Extent is Post-positivism ‘Practised’ in International Relations? Evidence from China and the USA,” *International Political Science Review* 38:5 (2017): 593-607

⁵⁰ Numerous additional studies support this finding, including: Julia Lau Bertrand, and Ji-Young Lee, “Teaching International Relations to a Multicultural Classroom,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 24:1 (2012): 128-133; Geeta Chowdhry, and Shirin M. Rai, “The Geographies of Exclusion and the Politics of Inclusion: Race-based Exclusions in the Teaching of International Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives* 10:1 (2009): 84-91; Sarah Cleeland Knight, “Even Today, a Western and Gendered Social Science: Persistent Geographic and Gender Biases in Undergraduate IR Teaching,” *International Studies Perspectives* 20:3 (2019): 203-225; and Arlene B. Tickner, “Core, Periphery and (Neo) Imperialist International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 627-646 .

⁵¹ Hagmann, and Biersteker, “Counter-mapping the Discipline: The Archipelago of Western International Relations Teaching,” *The Sage Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations*: 2(2018).

the world.”⁵² There is little about the way most American graduate students are taught which actually prepares them to teach IR theory with any degree of competency.

These same biases are endemic to American undergraduates as well, which makes it relatively difficult to teach IR meta-theory to them. Here I speak from my own anecdotal experiences as an instructor for over 25 years at the University of Connecticut (UConn), a Research I university situated in a rural area of a relatively wealthy and liberal/Democratic state in the region of New England. UConn is a chronically underfunded, public state university with a student population of approximately 32,000+, of which almost 24,000 are undergraduates and the rest graduate students. Demographically the student body is 63% white and 77% of its undergraduates come from Connecticut.⁵³ I teach in the Political Science Department in which IR is one of 5 subfields, with 37 full-time faculty (many of whom have joint appointments in other majors) and roughly 400-600 undergraduate majors in any given year.

Before attending UConn most of its undergraduates have never been exposed to Continental philosophy, the history of thought, or the simple idea that their beliefs and assumptions are historical constructions specific to a time and place. Capitalism, democracy, and America itself appear to most of our students as immutable goods and those who major in Political Science typically want to serve that public good in some capacity, whether in government, as a legal public defender, or for an NGO. Thus when encountering metatheory for the first time, our undergraduates are primed to think of theory as potential recipes for policy-making. And to the extent that the “isms” are presented as competing frameworks for these recipes, students often feel the need to choose sides, driven in part by what Stefano Guzzini notes is the peculiar American trait of erroneously conflating national, ideological debate over conservatism, liberalism and radicalism with IR meta-theoretical assumptions.⁵⁴

The affective side of education itself also promotes a desire to choose because young adults are often looking for affirmation and formative identities within the ideas they encounter. Martin Müller notes that there is a “mixing of affective ‘gut feelings’ that operate below the threshold of reflection into perception, analytical thinking, and judgment” which makes the classroom an “affective laboratory.”⁵⁵ Enter the “isms” as “great debates” and students inevitably see these as potential identities to try on and choose among. In doing so they internalize the “isms” as categories of self and then act to ontologically secure them, which, as Guzzini observes, effectively “closes down the path to debate” and “if diverging values are all there is, then the debate can easily turn into a show of verbal fists” in which “everybody feels entitled to stick to what they think anyway.”⁵⁶

These pedagogical problems can be compounded by class size and delivery method. Enrollment and budgetary pressures at UConn mean that upper-level undergraduate course sizes in our major rarely fall below 35 students. Many of these upper-level courses involve some theoretical component depending on the preferences of the instructor and, with the right active-learning techniques (small group discussion, role-playing and simulation, current event analysis, and so on), the instructor

⁵² Inanna Hamati-Ataya, “IR, the University, and the (Re)-Production of Order: Between Perversions of Agency and Duties of Subversion,” *International Studies Review* 18:2 (2016): 337.

⁵³ University of Connecticut, “2020 Fact Sheet.” Available at: <https://communications.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2196/2020/01/INS-008-Fact-Sheet-011620-FY20.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Stefano Guzzini, “The Significance and Roles of Teaching Theory in International Relations,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 4:2 (2001): 101, 110.

⁵⁵ Martin Müller, “An Ethnographic Perspective on Educating State Subjects in Russia,” *International Studies Review* 18:2 (2016): 360.

⁵⁶ Guzzini, “The Significance and Roles,” 101.

may be able to counter-act the tendency to think of IR theories as competing recipes for foreign policy choices and identities. It is more typical, however, that the undergraduate student's initial and often only exposure to IR theory at UConn will be in the large introductory lecture courses of 200+ students where they are spoon-fed simplistic versions to regurgitate on tests. The "isms" become caricatures of the worst kind in these circumstances and little critical thinking about one's own assumptions is promoted. No wonder, then, that even among critical theorists there is a hesitancy to teach the "isms" as metatheory, and a recommendation to, in Roland Bleiker's words, "Forget IR Theory."⁵⁷

Yet it is precisely because of these issues that we absolutely *must* teach meta-theory, not just at the graduate level but the undergraduate level as well, and *particularly* in America where it is needed most. And the "isms" remain a useful pedagogical tool for doing so *if* we start with positivism and post-positivism as the primary framework for understanding all the rest. The "isms" are, as Guzzini points out, both explanatory and constitutive frameworks, by which he means they serve as "coherent explanation for a variety of specified cases" and they are also "the condition for the very possibility of knowledge" and so "theories are not just the result but also the precondition for the possibility of empirical knowledge."⁵⁸ This latter aspect of theory is often the element most foreign to American audiences and yet it means that in order to teach IR theory, we as instructors need to be both positivist and post-positivist, logically analytical while also practicing critical self-reflexivity.

To put this another way, and despite American preferences, IR theory is not just about explaining. It is also about how human beings see, construct and act upon the world and how the world, in turn, sees, constructs and acts upon them. This is the classic agent-structure dilemma in which we create the very structures that constrain and shape us. Recast in these terms, each "ism" is a different conception of agents, structures and the relationship between them. Realists see nation-states as agents who are constrained by anarchic structures. Many liberals share this vision but differ over whether anarchy is the only structure or nation-states the only agents that matter. Marxists also see a variety of agents but see capitalism as the dominant structure. Critical theorists and Gender scholars see discourse as a structure responsible for the relationships flagged by other "isms" and important others they miss, like race and gender. Post-colonial scholars see settler colonialism as, in Patrick Wolfe's famous formulation, "a structure not an event" with colonizers and the colonized as agents.⁵⁹ While these may seem like competing frameworks, it is more appropriate to think of each as capturing important but alternative slices of the modern condition. After all, human experiences vary across the planet so why shouldn't our theoretical frameworks?

Teaching IR theory, then, is about exposing students to the different ways in which we, as human beings in the contemporary moment, have constructed and are acted upon by all of these structures, often simultaneously. It involves student revelation that the preconditions and the assumptions for their action now and in the future are by no means obvious, natural or common sense but have been socially constructed in particular ways to make them appear so and to reproduce behavioral patterns and outcome. It involves thinking about how these frameworks are useful ways to organize, articulate and explain actions, thoughts and experiences, but also how, in learning and teaching them, the discipline is "reproducing global structures of order and hegemony through its own educational practices."⁶⁰ Hence the "isms" must be approached with a high degree of critical self-reflection, which is precisely what we must also impart to students. As Guzzini notes, "future observers and practitioners in international affairs (who might not necessarily be public servants) need to acquire the skill of intellectual self-distance, reflexivity" because the "ability and the related capacity to reflect on

⁵⁷ Roland Bleiker, "Forget IR Theory," *The Zen of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001): 37-66.

⁵⁸ Guzzini, "The Significance and Roles," 99.

⁵⁹ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4 (2006): 388.

⁶⁰ Hamati-Ataya, "IR, the University, and the (Re)-Production of Order," 338.

one's own and another's assumptions are crucial for the tasks of understanding and negotiating across national boundaries."⁶¹

This requires that we, as IR theory instructors, must be self-reflexive and pluralistic in our theoretical teaching while avoiding being "complicit in populating world politics with distinct, and indeed often highly parochial, analytical perspectives today."⁶² In its critical permutations, meta-theory throws into serious question the ideological frameworks and agendas on which American positivist arguments have been constructed. No wonder, then, that the American social scientific heartland feels the need to disparage metatheory, teach as if only explanation counted, and stop at Wendtian constructivism (as if the latter were critical enough).⁶³ American scholars need to push past this positivist boundary and embrace post-positivism in equal measure, even if they do not practice post-positivism themselves. As Aaron Ettinger puts it, "IR teachers should have full command of some IR theories while being conversant in nearly all" otherwise they put blinders on their students.⁶⁴ To this I would add that it also makes students Luddites, incapable of conversing with many theorists outside of the American core, with the latter being a relatively small and parochial universe, as anyone who regularly attends the International Studies Association Annual Meeting can attest. Teaching IR theory means you must be a theorist first, an "isms" practitioner second, and you must love theory in all its epistemological permutations. And frankly, if you cannot do this, then you have no business teaching IR theory, a charge I would level at the vast majority of my colleagues on this side of the Atlantic.

With all of this in mind, how best to teach the subject matter so that your students become critically self-aware of the theoretical frameworks that shape the world around them? There is no single formula for doing so and my own experimentations with teaching IR theory over the years have led me to adopt two different approaches. This first approach is to rely on the "isms" and "Great Debate" framework with two important caveats. First, positivism and post-positivism always serve as the larger conceptual framework for understanding the rest of the "isms." Students cannot learn to think critically about their own assumptions in the absence of a vocabulary for discussing the epistemological differences between positivism and post-positivism. As Thomas Biersteker has noted, it "takes a conscious effort first to recognize and subsequently to divorce oneself from dominant (hegemonic) modes of inquiry," and that effort requires exposure to the tremendous epistemological variety adopted by scholars throughout the discipline, not just from within America.⁶⁵ Second, the "Great Debates" are problematized from the start so that students are both acquainted with the idea of them (since they continue to be invoked in some disciplinary literature) while also reading scholarship skeptical of this version of disciplinary history.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Guzzini, "The Significance and Roles," 99.

⁶² Hagmann and Biersteker, "Counter-mapping the Discipline," 21.

⁶³ Numerous studies of American IR theoretical curriculum have noted that it typically includes only realism, liberalism and positivist forms of constructivism, for example: Yong-Soo Eun, "To what extent," Maliniak, et al., "International relations in the US academy," and Peter Marcus Kristensen, "International relations at the end: a sociological autopsy," *International Studies Quarterly* 62:2 (2018): 245-259.

⁶⁴ Ettinger, "Scattered and Unsystematic," 17.

⁶⁵ Thomas Biersteker, "Self-Assessment, Reviews, and External Evaluation Exercises in International Relations Education," *International Studies Review* 18:2 (2016): 342.

⁶⁶ For example, Ole Waever, "Still a Discipline After All These Debates?," in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Markus Kornprobst, "International Relations as Rhetorical Discipline: Toward (Re-)Newing Horizons," *International Studies Review* 11:1 (March, 2009): 87-

Here at UConn all first-year Ph.D. students who want to study IR are required to take the IR Theory Seminar which starts with disciplinary history as noted above and then covers a different “ism” each week (realism, liberalism, constructivism, English School, world systems, historical materialism, historical sociology, critical theory, post-structuralism, philosophy of science, feminism and gender, post-colonialism, critical race theory, and non-Western/Global theory). Weekly readings are meant to reflect epistemological and methodological depth and variety within each ism. One can mix the sequence of “isms” up as they like but moving from mainstream positivist (realism, liberalism constructivism) to post-positivist approaches allows one to increasingly problematize what has come earlier in the course. In so doing, the course structure aligns with Ettinger’s articulation of Global IR: “The purpose here is not to displace Western-dominated IR knowledge but to situate it within the global context.”⁶⁷ This sort of non-denominational, top-down, smorgasbord way of teaching IR theory has a number of advantages for graduate students. It encourages them to become critical consumers of IR theories, it demonstrates that there are real epistemological choices to make in their own scholarship (ie: they are not confined to positivism regardless of what other Political Science faculty might claim), and it provides them with an analytical lay of the disciplinary landscape which makes it more likely they will successfully navigate job, publishing and tenure demands.

I have used the “isms” approach at the undergraduate level as well, within smaller, discussion-driven, writing-intensive courses whose cap size is less than 20 here at UConn. To structure the course, I have utilized my edited volumes, *Making Sense of IR Theory*, which compare different theoretical explanations and perspectives on the same event or topic in order to demonstrate how IR theories might be applied.⁶⁸ At the start of the semester students are asked to collectively choose a single event or topic to which we will apply IR theories that semester. Students are assigned some aspect of the event or topic to factually research and share with the class as the basis for common empirical knowledge. Each week thereafter students write a short paper applying that weeks’ “isms” to our chosen topic or event. This avoids the problem of self-identification and political ideological confusion as discussed above, and these papers serve as the basis for our class discussion of the “isms” each week. The final course assignment asks them to consider how several positivist and post-positivist theories might be applied to an entirely different topic or event. In this way, students are encouraged to become critical consumers of IR theories, to consider how theories both explain and construct the world, and to see an event or topic from alternative frameworks simultaneously.

The second method for teaching IR theory at the undergraduate level is one that I have adopted more recently. Again within the context of smaller writing-intensive courses, I have begun to teach IR theory from a bottom-up, everyday practice perspective centering on daily objects – the banana, cell phone, the American flag for example. I begin the course by asking students to initially consider in writing what these objects mean to them, which typically produces banal observations (something to eat, a way to interact virtually with my friends, an object one hangs on the porch on July 4th). This is followed by short research and writing projects on different aspects of these objects which then serve as the basis for class presentations and discussions. Such research inevitably reveals both the historical and contemporary politics, economics and culture of the objects, i.e.,: that these objects have been underwritten by power politics, capitalist interests, nationalism, racism, gender and so on. As we progress through these objects, the “isms” begin to emerge organically as students begin to see patterns of relative power and violence, capitalism and exploitation, gender constructions, and ongoing racism across these objects both historically and in the contemporary moment. These patterns crop up regardless of the object and allow

108; Mariam Georgis and Nicole Lugosi, “(Re)inserting Race and Indigeneity in International Relations Theory: A Post-colonial Approach,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 26:1 (2013): 1-13; Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ed., *Decolonizing International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

⁶⁷ Ettinger, “Scattered and Unsystematic,” 17.

⁶⁸ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, ed., *Making Sense of International Relations Theory* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006). The first edition focused on the 1999 NATO bombings of Serbia; the second edition (2013) focused on the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

one to introduce relevant “isms” readings as alternative theoretical frameworks that seek to capture the patterns the students are seeing.

This method of teaching IR theory puts the students’ focus on the patterns rather than the theories themselves and it is only after the students have seen these dynamics at work that they are named as a particular “ism” (if at all). The advantage of this pedagogical approach is that it allows the students to see how the different theoretical frameworks are not just theory in an abstract sense or in competition with one another, but how they capture and reflect daily practices and often operate in simultaneous and reinforcing ways to naturalize what is, at second glance, quite unnatural and strange. In this sense it concurs with Balzacq, that “learning begins with practice and then, if necessary, moves up to higher levels of abstraction, not the other way around. The fact that a pragmatic philosophy of education emphasizes practice is different from holding that it denigrates ideas, concepts, and logic.”⁶⁹ At the end of the course, students return to their initial, banal observations and revise them in light of their newly acquired, critical understanding of the processes that shape our daily lives. In teaching IR theory this way -- ground-up, rather than as if “isms” were a pre-established menu from which to pick and choose – not only does one avoid the problems of self-identification and political ideological confusion but, more importantly, students develop a more acute understanding of how theory matters to their own lives, not only in how to explain the world around them but also in how *they* have been taught to see and understand the world.

In closing, I would like to stress that these approaches are just my personal preferences, that there are many ways to teach IR theory as critical self-reflection, and that, assuming you are serious about going beyond positivism, how exactly you teach it should depend on your own personal teaching style and preferences. For example, Guzzini discusses the pros and cons of at least four different ways to teach IR theory, Cynthia Weber suggests we could use popular film and critique techniques, Rosemary Shinko describes a collaboratively-oriented learning environment approach, and Justin Rosenberg suggests starting with the concept of societal multiplicity and international imagination.⁷⁰ All of these are perfectly appropriate ways of getting students to think about alternative ways of seeing and being in the world and certainly within the classroom we as instructors of IR have the agency to do so, as Hagmann and Biersteker have pointed out.

Choosing not to teach IR theory or to teach only its positivist manifestations, on the other hand, is, as Christian Reus-Smit has put it succinctly, “simply a decision not to talk about or debate one’s choices and presuppositions.”⁷¹ If American scholars want to be more than mere advocates of American interests and ideological agendas, we need to talk about and debate our choices and presuppositions. We need to stand outside them as best we can and ask for whom and what they service and why. We should, as Biersteker argues, “ask questions about how our research and teaching either reinforces or transcends dominant scholarly research programs, doctrines, foreign policy practices, and ideologies.”⁷² In so doing we need to think more critically about our current world order and the fact that it does not serve everyone well, even in the core and, yes, even in America.

⁶⁹ Balzacq, “Pragmatism and Educational Philosophy in IR,” 348.

⁷⁰ Guzzini, “The Significance and Roles;” Cynthia Weber, “The Highs and Lows of Teaching IR Theory: Using Popular Films for Theoretical Critique,” *International Studies Perspectives* 2:3 (2001): 281-287; Rosemary E. Shinko, “Thinking, Doing, and Writing International Relations Theory,” *International Studies Perspectives* 7:1 (2006): 43-50; Justin Rosenberg, “IR 101,” *International Relations* 32:2 (2018): 250-251.

⁷¹ Christian Reus-Smit, “Beyond Metatheory?,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 605.

⁷² Biersteker, “Self-Assessment, Reviews, and External Evaluation Exercises,” 342.

Introduction

International Relations (IR) deals with the connections and relationships between political communities, most commonly sovereign states. Yet its disciplinary identity is largely defined in relation to a set of theoretical traditions. IR's continuing fixation with grand theory is quite unique in the social sciences. It is also a constant source of frustration in the classroom: while some students enjoy debating realism, liberalism and constructivism—the holy trinity of disciplinary IR theory—for others, IR's obsession with its “paradigms” renders the field self-referential and disconnected from real-world concerns. So why should we keep organizing our teaching this way?⁷³

In this essay, I reflect on this question as someone who has received his formative training in Europe and teaches IR theory at a Political Science department in Chile. I make the case for the continuing relevance and utility of teaching the “isms” in IR through an approach that fosters analytical pluralism. This approach aims at raising students' awareness of the sheer diversity that characterizes the field, especially outside the United States. As Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein emphasize, research traditions in IR differ in their ontological, epistemological and substantive assumptions.⁷⁴ IR theories rest on different priors and tend to advance different types of knowledge claims. Despite many downsides, structuring IR theory along broad theoretical traditions continues to be useful because it better (if imperfectly) captures these differences than alternative approaches that prioritize one mode of theorizing over another.

The Problem(s)

The conventional approach to teaching IR is structured around a number of major theoretical traditions. The number varies, but at a minimum usually includes realism, liberalism and, as a more recent addition, constructivism. Other approaches, such as the English School or the many critical theories in IR, such as feminism and poststructuralism, are less commonly covered, especially in the United States, whose academy dominates the field.⁷⁵ A common didactic device is the “great debates” narrative, according to which, IR progressed (or cycled) through a series of “paradigmatic clashes” that pitted one theory against another. This, of course, is a stylized view—if not a caricature—of theoretical debates in the field that has been extensively criticized.

Most of the criticism centers around three points. First, according to David Lake, the focus on grand theory has hampered progress in the field because it fosters scholastic navel-gazing and the emergence of self-contained theoretical camps.⁷⁶ In this view, progress has been achieved through eclectic mid-level theorizing geared towards the specification and testing of causal claims. Others have pushed back against this idea: for Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, the hypothesis-testing

⁷³ See Peter Henne, “Do We Need to Teach the IR Paradigms at All?,” *The Duck of Minerva*, 15 October 2018, <https://duckofminerva.com/2018/10/do-we-need-to-teach-the-ir-paradigms-at-all.html>.

⁷⁴ Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁷⁵ Jelena Subotic, “Constructivism as Professional Practice in the US Academy,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50:1 (2017): 84-88; Joseph M. Grieco, “The Schools of Thought Problem in International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 21:3 (2018): 424-446 at 426; Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, Ryan Powers and Michael J. Tierney, “Is International Relations a Global Discipline? Hegemony, Insularity, and Diversity in the Field,” *Security Studies* 27:3 (2018): 448-484.

⁷⁶ Lake, David A, “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 (2013): 567-587.

approach undermines theoretical coherence impedes knowledge accumulation and sacrifices policy relevance for methodological rigor.⁷⁷ Both positions, however, presuppose the existence of a common criteria of what “progress” actually means. It is not my intention to discuss this question here or to come down on one side or another. My point is that such consensus does not exist outside the United States. I will come back to this below

A second, and related, argument holds that paradigm-centered debates are outdated and disconnected from research. Stephen Saideman, for example, shows that the focus on competing grand theories peaked in the mid-1990s; the idea that IR theory consists of competing and incommensurable “paradigms” does not accurately reflect the research that is being published which has become increasingly “non-paradigmatic.”⁷⁸ In much the same line, consecutive Teaching, Research and International Policy (TRIP) faculty surveys, which collect behavioral and perceptual information about teaching and research in IR, support this view: although scholars continue to value the “isms,” the percentage of those who identify with a particular school of thought has declined.⁷⁹ I suspect that teaching and the way in which teaching is conventionally organized might have something do to with this. Jeff Colgan, for example, identifies a mismatch between teaching and research at the graduate level, which, in his view, leaves graduate students poorly equipped to pursue an academic career in the United States.⁸⁰ Although the problem does not apply to the same extent to undergraduate teaching, it does pose the question of whether students benefit from a university education where teaching content no longer reflects the state-of-the-art in a field.

Third, and lastly, according to its critics, the focus on grand theory contributes to the marginalization of women, people of color, and scholars from the Global South. Grand theories are usually taught through a number canonical texts, whose authors are predominantly white men connected to the U.S. (or European) academy.⁸¹ As a result, teaching that centers on the “isms” reflects their views and at least implicitly prioritizes European history, as viewed from the perspective of the United States; it only exceptionally (although perhaps increasingly) ventures out to engage with non-Western history or international thought. Perceptions of importance can be strikingly biased. When asked which scholar produced the most interesting work in the past five years, all ten scholars listed in the 2017 TRIP survey work in the United States, and only two are women (the survey heavily concentrates on the United States: 1,541 out of 3,784 respondents).⁸² Of course, it does

⁷⁷ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M Walt, “Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 427-445; Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁷⁸ Stephen M. Saideman, “The Apparent Decline of the IR Paradigms: Examining Patterns of Publications, Perceptions, and Citations,” *International Studies Review* 20:4 (2018): 685-703.

⁷⁹ Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson and Michael J. Tierney, “International Relations in the US Academy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 437-464.

⁸⁰ Jeff D. Colgan, “Where Is International Relations Going? Evidence from Graduate Training,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60:3 (2016): 486-498.

⁸¹ See Arlene B. Tickner, “Core, Periphery and (Neo)Imperialist International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19:3 (2013): 627-646; Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58:4 (2014): 647-659; Patricia Owens, “Women and the History of International Thought,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62:3 (2018): 467-481.

⁸² Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, Ryan Powers, and Michael J. Tierney, “TRIP 2017 Faculty Survey,” *Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project* (Williamsburg, VA: Global Research Institute, 2017): <https://trip.wm.edu/>. The survey also shows a worrying gender gap in terms of how scholars evaluate theorists differently. For example, 9.4% of men but only 2.4% of interviewed women named John Mearsheimer in this category; the pattern flips when considering the two women on the list: 7.1% of men and 14.4% of women named Martha Finnemore; 2.6 of men and 10.8% of women listed Kathryn Sikkink.

not have to be this way. Teaching theoretical traditions is not necessarily a defense of canonical thought, and once the canon is no longer regarded as sacrosanct, more diverse contributions can be easily incorporated.

Still, given these issues, it is reasonable to wonder: why should we continue to organize teaching around the grand theories at all? One obvious alternative would be to focus on substantive questions, discussing, for example, the role of international organizations or the origins of major power war from different theoretical angles. I'm not sure that such an approach actually solves these issues, as it often ends up replicating the clashes-of-schools frame. In doing so, it sidelines questions of ontological and epistemological difference that cut across schools, for example, between realists who adopt an instrumentalist approach, according to which theories do not accurately depict the empirical world (as in rational choice), and realists who believe that theories are scaled-down abstractions of reality; or consider the difference between neopositivist and postpositivist constructivism that cannot be simply reduced to the argument that norms have causal effects, too.⁸³ Rather than reducing theoretical traditions into stylized and internally coherent paradigms, each with its own distinct substantive contribution (à la power, interest, ideas), students should understand these differences.

IR Theory in Latin America

These issues come to the fore when teaching IR outside the United States, where IR is often practiced differently. Latin American IR scholars largely agree with their colleagues in the United States and the UK on the major schools of thoughts. However, this does not mean that they are understood and used in the same way.

First, IR in Latin America is heterogeneous and fragmented. Although debates on the globalization of IR have focused on differences between the Global North and South, in Latin America the more significant fault lines often run between schools within the same country.⁸⁴ Unlike in the United States, IR is not widely considered to be a subfield of Political Science. Instead, the influence of the “traditional approach” that sees international politics as an interdisciplinary field closely connected with international law and diplomatic history weighs heavily.⁸⁵ While this interdisciplinary orientation may be a strength, in practice, the emphasis on scholars' professional credentials in Latin America's higher education often impedes truly interdisciplinary exchanges. It also means that epistemological debates within Political Science do not travel easily to Latin American IR. In the past, IR scholars in the region received their formative training predominantly in law. Hence, it is unsurprising that the meaning and use of theory in Latin American IR closely resembles its application in law as a “framework for understanding and justifying practice” that often blurs the line between thinking about and doing international politics.⁸⁶

Second, the so-called theory-practice divide is either absent or attenuated in most countries. In Chile, for example, academics with extensive experience in government and/or diplomacy have traditionally dominated international relations

⁸³ See Ian Hurd, “Constructivism,” in Christan Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 298–316.

⁸⁴ This is nicely documented in Peter Marcus Kristensen, “The South in “Global IR”: Worlding Beyond the ‘Non-West’ in the Case of Brazil,” *International Studies Perspectives* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz029>.

⁸⁵ Luciano Tomassini, “Los Estudios Internacionales en América Latina: algunas contribuciones,” *Estudios Internacionales* 13:2 (1980): 545-552; Modesto Seara Vázquez, “Relaciones Internacionales: variaciones sobre un tema,” en Alberto Lozano Vázquez, David J. Sarquís Ramírez, José Ricardo Villanueva Lira y Jorge Lira (eds.), *¿Cien años de las Relaciones Internacionales? Disciplinariedad y revisionismo* (Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI): 31-44.

⁸⁶ Andrea Bianchi, *International Law Theories: An Inquiry into Different Ways of Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 7.

scholarship. This close proximity to policy-making is an advantage.⁸⁷ However, not all of this is by choice, as job insecurity and the casualization of research undercut the professionalization of the field.⁸⁸ In addition, and similar to what Amitav Acharya describes as the problem of “entrapment” in Asian IR, weak institutionalization and the need for access to the close-knit network of practitioner-scholars stifles (junior) academics’ autonomy to scrutinize policy-making (and/or their peers).⁸⁹

I cannot fully develop these points in detail here, and, of course, the diversity within the region makes generalizations difficult. However, how IR is practiced has important ramifications for how the theoretical traditions are understood and used. First, Latin American IR largely follows the schools-of-thought approach to teaching. This is evident in the TRIP survey. While the results should be taken with a grain of salt due to the small number of respondents in individual countries, it nevertheless suggests that few scholars in Latin America consider their work as “non-paradigmatic,” certainly fewer than in either the U.S. or the UK (see Fig 1).⁹⁰ In much the same vein, IR textbooks available in Spanish tend to organize theory along established “paradigms.”⁹¹

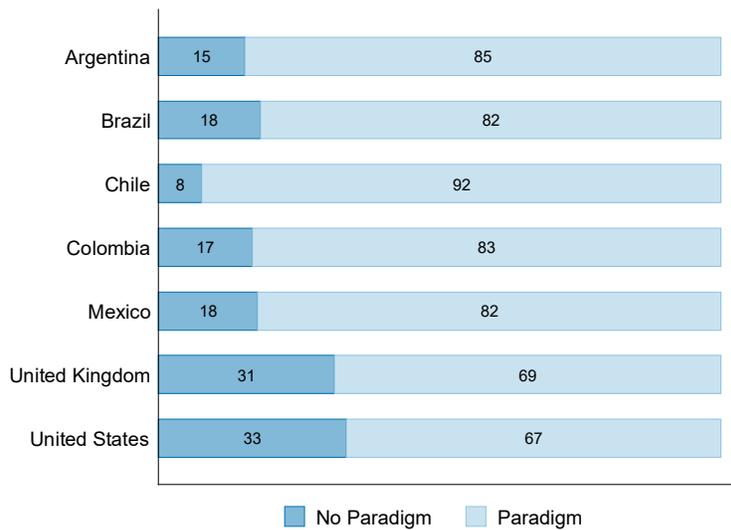
⁸⁷ See Arlene B. Tickner, “Latin American IR and the Primacy of Lo Práctico,” *International Studies Review* 10:4 (2008): 735-748; Jorge Heine Lorenzen and Daniel Aguirre Azócar, “La Escuela Chilena de Relaciones Internacionales ¿Práctica sin Teoría o Teoría de la Práctica?” *Estudios Internacionales* 51:194 (2019): 167-194.

⁸⁸ This sets IR further apart from Political Science, which has become increasingly disciplinary, see David Altman, “La institucionalización de la ciencia política en Chile y América Latina: una mirada desde el sur,” *Revista de Ciencia Política* 25:1 (2005): 3-15; Claudia Heiss, “Ciencia política en Chile: ¿Una disciplina consolidada?,” *Revista de Ciencia Política*, 35:1 (2015): 47-70.

⁸⁹ Amitav Acharya, “Engagement or Entrapment? Scholarship and Policymaking on Asian Regionalism,” *International Studies Review* 13:1 (2011): 12-17.

⁹⁰ I thank Arlene Tickner for facilitating access to the data on Latin America.

⁹¹ This is not an exhaustive list but examples include: Elsa Esther Llenderroz, *Relaciones Internacionales: teorías y debates* (Ciudad de Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2013); Thomas Legler, Arturo Santa Cruz, and Laura Zamudio González (eds.), *Introducción a las Relaciones Internacionales: América Latina y las política global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); while foregrounding epistemological questions, the widely-used textbook by (Spain-based) Celestino del Arenal and José Antonio Sanahuja, *Teorías de las Relaciones Internacionales* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2015) also follows the school-of-thought organization. An exception is the now-dated Eduardo Ortiz, *El Estudio de las Relaciones Internacionales* (Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000).

Figure 1: TRIP survey 2017 (“Which of the following best describes your approach to the study of IR?”)⁹²

Second, it also means that IR theory, although widely taught, is not the principle focus of IR research. IR in Latin America has traditionally prioritized foreign policy analysis and the formulation of policy frames that should guide practice (hence the prominence of concepts, such as “autonomy,” “international insertion,” and so forth).⁹³ As a result, there is little explicit theory development within the region, a phenomenon that has received much commentary.⁹⁴ Unlike debates in Comparative Politics, where the disciplinary standards of Political Science are pretty much aligned with those in the Global North, Latin American IR often appears disconnected from debates in the wider (English-speaking) field. Although language barriers play an important role—they are also a constant challenge in devising and revising theory syllabi—the disconnect is not just a matter of translation. In the end, the difference in focus leads to a lack of theoretical pieces suitable for teaching in Spanish; it also contributes to the paradoxical situation whereby IR’s “paradigms” are considered canonical, yet, at the same time, “external” and somewhat ill-suited for understanding the regions dynamics and concerns.⁹⁵

All this not to suggest that there is no theory in Latin American IR. In fact, there is a rich tradition of international thought in Latin America. The point is that IR is differently practiced, which contributes to its disconnect from the “Anglosphere.” Rather than ignoring these differences, this calls for an approach that takes into consideration the diversity in the field, especially outside the United States.

⁹² Maliniak et al. *TRIP 2017 Faculty Survey*.

⁹³ Jose Briceño Ruiz and Alejandro Simonoff, “La Escuela de la Autonomía, América Latina y la teoría de las relaciones internacionales,” *Estudios Internacionales* 186 (2017): 39-89; Fabricio H. Chagas-Bastos, “La invención de la inserción internacional: fundaciones intelectuales y evolución histórica del concepto,” *Análisis Político*, 31:94 (2018): 10-30.

⁹⁴ Tickner, “Latin American IR and the Primacy of Lo Práctico;” Javier Garay and Miguel Martínez, “Nada nuevo qué contar: la irrelevancia de los aportes a la teoría relaciones internacionales en América Latina,” *OASIS*, 23: enero-junio (2016), 31-51.

⁹⁵ On the debate on Global IR in the region, see Melisa Deciancio, “International Relations from the South: A Regional Research Agenda for Global IR,” *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016): 106-119; Maiken Gelardi, “Moving Global IR Forward—A Road Map,” *International Studies Review* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz049>.

Concluding Thoughts

There are many ways in which IR theory can be taught. It is not my intention to argue that focusing on grand theory is necessarily the best approach. However, I do believe it provides a framework for dealing with the diversity that characterizes the field. This requires a revision of the conventional canon to include authors and perspectives from outside the United States and Europe.

The theoretical traditions allow for a discussion of epistemological differences between and within schools. These are not internally coherent “paradigms,” but have fuzzy boundaries and inconsistencies. It is not only that IR theories provide different answers to the same question. In fact, the main difference often is that they lead to different questions in the first place. These traditions are neither belief systems nor doctrines, and they should not be taught as if they were. Although I do not address IR theory’s practical relevance in this note, I believe that a pluralist approach to teaching contributes to clarifying IR’s substantive contributions to understanding international politics.

Finally, teaching the “isms” allows for a discussion of different historical trajectories. The “great debates” have little meaning for the development of IR theory outside the “Anglosphere,” and IR theory should be taught in a way that reflects these different trajectories. In the end, students should understand what each theory seeks to elucidate (and what not); the type of knowledge claims they make; and what aspects of international politics necessarily escapes their grasp. Again, this also requires situating IR theories in their intellectual and historical context, which is particularly important for teaching outside the “Anglosphere.”