

From the Outside In: International Relations and the "Obsolescence" of Comparative Politics

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Nothing demonstrates the enduring relevance of comparative politics more clearly than a sustained effort to get rid of it. This is precisely what postwar international relations (IR) has sought to do. From the era of Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr to the present, leading IR scholars have grounded their sub-discipline in what appears at first a plausible assumption: where nations interact strategically with one another in an essentially anarchic, high-risk environment, differences among countries do not matter much. The resulting fifty-year subdisciplinary experiment constitutes a "critical" empirical case study of the proposition that comparative politics is obsolete. If the tools of comparative politics remain essential to explain world politics—and I shall argue that today more than ever they do—surely they also remain essential to explain the domestic processes for which they were originally developed.

Mainstream theories of international relations are tied together by their rejection of intentionalist explanation and, therefore, of comparative politics. Realism and institutionalism, often viewed as polar opposites in paradigmatic debates, are both "systemic" theories on the microeconomic analogy. That is, both assume unitary rational states with fixed preferences and attribute patterns of outcomes to variation in the political structure of the international system—for realists the structure of capabilities, for institutionalists the structure of information. To be sure, there are differences in assumptions among systemic theories: Realists believe states are constrained to pursue sub-optimal "relative gains" strategies (e.g. alliances, armament, war) even where a real interest in cooperation exists, while institutionalists maintain that they can achieve some Pareto-improving improvement by institutionalizing their environment. Yet in both cases the denial of the importance of variation in the preferences states bring to strategic interaction implies that comparative politics—variation in the preferences states have—does not matter.¹

At their most extreme, such IR theories go so far as to treat the rejection of comparative politics as a positive virtue, even a necessary precondition for

social science. Waltz is characteristically blunt: "If the aims, policies, and actions of states become matters of central concern, then we are forced back to...simple descriptions [from which] no valid generalizations can logically be drawn."² Though most systemic theorists, including Waltz and Keohane, concede that "domestic" considerations do sometimes influence foreign policy, they maintain that explanations that stress such factors should be strictly subordinated, as a matter of principle, to systemic ones.³

Yet the claim that "systemic" explanations deserve priority lacks any firm basis. Such a basis cannot be found in philosophy of science, for there is no *a priori* reason to believe that such theories are necessarily more parsimonious, nor to privilege them per se even if they were. (One need only consult the literature on the democratic peace or tariff protection.) Nor can a basis be found in method, since the practice unjustifiably biases research in favor of systemic explanations.

Nor, finally and most importantly, can a basis for the priority of systemic analysis be found in the assumptions of the social science theories in question. Indeed, it implies the opposite. The rationality assumption that underlies systemic theories itself implies that variation in state preferences—and, therefore, the analysis of the domestic and transnational state-society relations that underlie them—is analytically prior to variation in environmental constraints. The reason for the priority of preferences is simple: preferences dictate which systemic theories are appropriate to explain interstate strategic interaction. A simple "Dahlian" example from the study of a core realist concept, power, makes this clear: We cannot know whether "A influenced B to do something" (power) unless we know "what B would otherwise do" (preferences). Kenneth Oye has advanced a similar argument concerning theories of international cooperation: "When you observe conflict, think Deadlock—the absence of mutual interest—before puzzling over why a mutual interest was not realized."⁴

This is not to say that explanations that stress variation in state preferences

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is for foreigners to know the extent of commitment. Thus dictators may be more credible in the short run, but in the long run they are less reliable allies than a democracy.

This line of reasoning leads to a research agenda that squarely integrates domestic and international politics. The interaction between countries (the traditional agenda of international relations) lies in the domestic institutional and political arrangements of each (the traditional agenda of comparative politics).

Interest in democracy is another realm that integrates comparative and international relations. Comparativists have long been interested in why countries do or don't become democracies, and in what makes for stable or unstable ones. That topic has acquired central importance in arguments over the question of whether democracies are more peaceful than dictatorships. A number of researchers argue that democracies are less likely to fight each other than are dyads where at least one side is not a democracy. Researchers give different reasons for this but for all of them the character of domestic political systems is a key explanatory variable for understanding international relations.

A related line of reasoning looks to domestic systems to explain the capacity of countries in the international arena as well as the content of their policies. In a historical case, Weingast notes that the triumph of the English parliament over the royal absolutism in 1688 gave credibility that the government could pay its debts. This allowed England to pay lower interest rates, attract capital and levy taxes in order to sustain a strong state capacity in the international arena. Constitutional government had more capacity, thus was stronger, than its absolutist counterparts on the continent — seeing it this way reverses a traditional classification of strong and weak states, where the authoritarian bureaucracies are seen as stronger than constitutional systems, because the former are presumed to be more "autonomous" than the latter. They may in some sense be more autonomous, but they may also have a lower capacity to mobilize resources and credibly to commit, precisely because they are less

well-rooted in society.

Another important arena for the connection between strategic interaction, international relations and domestic institutions has to do with trade. After WW II, the U.S. shifted to free trade. Is this because the Presidency became more powerful, and Presidents in the U.S., having a larger constituency than Congressmen, are able to represent the broader interests of trade than the more particularistic Congress? Or is it that Congress shifted toward free trade reflecting preferences that expressed changed relationship of U.S. producers to the world economy, and thereby authorized the President to conduct reciprocal trade discussions? The failure of the Republican Congress of 1994 to reauthorize fast track gives credence to the second position. The argument nicely shows the linkage of the politics of domestic preferences and institutions to the international context.

Recent writings on culture, identity, institutions and rationality blur even further the boundaries between international and domestic politics. Unit and system so interact as to render quite difficult the autonomy of each. What do nations want out of the international arena? This turns in part on their sense of self definition, on identity and culture. The construct of a national project defining a relation to the world outside is one of the items of conflict or political discussion in any country. It is shaped by experiences with the world outside and by experiences within. The two are often hard to separate. The study of any modern nationalism will show this—the United States transformed itself in a short period of time from an isolationist country to a tradition of world leadership; Germany and Japan wrestled with the catastrophes of their militarisms and developed new identities in the world arena; Russia is in the process of struggling over its identity in the world; the successor states of Yugoslavia struggle internally over who they are and how they relate to each other; China and other countries of East Asia struggle over democracy, modernity and economic development and how to integrate them into politics and policy. The projection of the units into the world blends with their character inside. Constructivists push farthest on the

autonomy and power of "constructed identities" to shape behavior. Others locate "construction" in institutions and bounded rationality.

So international and comparative politics have always intertwined, still do and always will. Is nothing new? There is always something new. We have not always had the long bow, stirrups and saddles, gunpowder, airplanes, nuclear weapons, refrigeration, railroads, airplanes, telephones, and faxes. So there are always new developments, which affect the speed and intensity of economic growth and so on. International production networks are creating new patterns in the economic division of labor around the world; trade is growing; security neighborhoods interact substantially. Nations have always adapted to the influences of market pressures, be it in the economic market or the security market.

So there are always current elements of the interaction between international and domestic politics to be studied, but the fact of the interaction nor even its importance is not particularly new. What we need are better ways of studying it and thinking about the interaction, more than we need debate about the degree of amplitude of newness.

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are better or worse than traditional systemic explanations. That is an empirical question. It is to say that, once we accept a rationalist foundation for studying international politics, preference-based explanations are analytically prior to systemic explanations. In short, IR is only as good as the comparative politics it is based on.

IR scholars can now foresee the end of the artificial divide between sub-fields. The most exciting trend in IR theory today is its reconstruction from the bottom up on the basis of generic concepts and theories drawn from comparative politics. The foundation of such analyses are theories focusing on the sources of state preferences in domestic and transnational state-society relations. (I have elsewhere termed these "Liberal" approaches to IR, but one could equally well call them "preference-based" approaches. Needlessly misleading, however, is the term "domestic," since the sources of state *(continued on next page)*

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preferences may be transnational, as in theories of economic interdependence.) One implication is that IR scholars are ceasing to engage in debates conceptually and semantically isolated from the rest of political science, but instead are redefining those debates in light of conceptual tools designed to explain the relation between the state and domestic and transnational society: the various new institutionalisms, historical sociology, open-market political economy, interest group analysis, game theory and theories of legislative process and delegation. In short, they are doing comparative politics.

Examples of this trend toward the use of generalizable theories stressing variation of state preferences abound.⁵ The logic of domestic rent-seeking underlying institutional theories of the democratic peace—which Bruce Russett terms “the closest thing we have to a law in international relations”—is also found in studies of imperialism by Jack Snyder and tariff policy by Helen Milner. Lisa Martin has explored the role of executives and legislatures in foreign policy-making using theories drawn from the study of the U.S. Congress. James Fearon has shown that deterrence must be understood as a selection process that separates governments with varying preferences; an analysis of those preferences is thus a precondition for understanding the outbreak of war. Studies of the conduct of war and the design of foreign aid programs by Jeffrey Legro and David Lumsdaine illustrate the importance of domestic ideas and values. Peter Haas, Robert Keohane and Marc Levy have reconceived international institutions as mechanisms to muster domestic political support.

Note that such studies are by no means limited to the sort of economic or game-theoretic approaches that lead some to despair for traditional comparative politics. Even the most enthusiastic advocates of economic theories in tariff policy, perhaps the area in which economic theory has enjoyed its greatest empirical success, claim only to explain cleavages, not outcomes—an appropriately modest claim, empirical studies reassure us.⁶ In examining European integration, I found that the position of sectors and countries in international

markets is indeed the most important determinant of national preferences for economic integration. Yet this tells us little about the form and scope of the enterprise. Without the critical role of ideologies carried by specific parties and politicians, Europe would most likely have evolved into a loose free trade area, not the complex quasi-constitutional transnational polity we see today.⁷

At a methodological level, the rediscovery of comparative politics has other important implications for the way we study IR—again bringing the two closer together. IR scholars are learning to define their dependent variables more precisely. Broad “systemic” variables such as the level of cooperation or incidence of war are giving way to the study of fine-grained variation in national preferences, bargaining outcomes and interaction with international institutions, which can then be combined to offer an explanation of systemic outcomes. With greater attention to domestic processes, IR scholars must also learn to conduct research with greater depth and rigor, in particular command of foreign languages, primary sources and institutional particularity, not to mention to intricacies of quantitative and formal methods.

Like many of my colleagues in both comparative politics and IR, I foresee a not-so-distant future when fundamental distinctions in training, substantive interest and methodology between the sub-disciplines will fade away. In the resulting synthesis, comparative politics is emerging as the critical sub-discipline. Unlike traditional IR, it elaborates the domestic microfoundations required for other theories, and, unlike traditional American politics, it is not arbitrarily restricted to a single country. Hence I close by reformulating our common question as a paradox: Why are scholars of comparative politics questioning their vocation just when—viewed from the outside in—it is establishing its hegemony?

Notes

¹Formal analyses have demonstrated the underlying coherence of these theories. See the contributions by Joseph Grieco, Stephen Krasner, Robert Powell and Duncan Snidal in

David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 65 and 108-109.

³Keohane endorses the practice, arguing that there is “something particularly satisfying about systemic explanations...” Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond,” in Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 193.

⁴Kenneth A. Oye, “Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies,” Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 6.

⁵For a summary of this argument and full citations for the works below, see Andrew Moravcsik, *Liberalism and International Relations Theory* (Harvard University: CFIA Working Paper No. 92-6, 51 pp, 1992, revised 1993).

⁶E.g. Ronald Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions: How Trade Affects Domestic Political Alignments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Jeffrey A. Frieden, “Invested Interests: The Politics of National Economic Policies in a World of Global Finance,” *International Organization*, 45:4 (Autumn 1991), pp. 425-452, 1991; Robert O. Keohane and Helen V. Milner, eds., *Internationalization and Domestic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power in European Integration from Rome to Maastricht* (Cambridge, MA: book manuscript, 1996). See also Anne-Marie Burley and Walter Mattli, “Europe before the Court: A Political Theory of Legal Integration,” *International Organization*, 47:1 (Winter 1993), pp. 41-77.