The End of IR Theory?

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Abstract

With a view to providing contextual background for the Special Issue, this opening essay analyses several dimensions of the 'end of IR theory?' It opens with a consideration of the status of different types of theory. Thereafter, we look at the proliferation of theories that has taken place since the emergence of the third/fourth debate. The coexistence and competition between ever greater number of theories begs the question what kind of theoretical pluralism should IR scholars embrace? We offer a particular account of theoretical engagement that is preferable to the alternatives currently being practiced: integrative pluralism. The article ends on a cautiously optimistic note: given the disciplinary competition that now exists in relation to explaining and understanding global social forces, IR may find resilience because it has become theory-led, theory-literate, and theory-concerned.

Keywords: great debates, IR theory, meta theory, paradigms, pluralism

Introduction

All academic disciplines undergo periods of stasis and change. Like any social system, fields of study are products-in-process; never quite completed; perhaps never fully started; but always permanently susceptible to major upheavals. Within International Relations (IR)[2] periods of change have largely been

understood through the prism of the 'great debates'. Irrespective of whether this narrative accurately captures the specifics of the discipline's development, it is clear the perception of the debates continues to shape the field in important ways. And in many respects the role, place and function of theory has been an integral part of all of the 'great debates'.

In an academic discipline as wide-ranging as IR it is no surprise that the definition, role and function of theory is one of the most highly contested issues. The sheer diversity and complexity of what is studied ensures that there will be multiple perspectives on what the most important factors are and how inquiry should proceed. In many respects, some of the most fundamental divisions that separate the various theoretical approaches covered in this Special Issue are embedded within competing accounts of what theory is, and what theory can and should do. As the classical social theorist Robert Merton argued: '[l]ike so many words that are bandied about, the word theory threatens to become meaningless. Because its referents are so diverse - including everything from minor working hypotheses, through comprehensive but vague and unordered speculations, to axiomatic systems of thought - use of the word often obscures rather than creates understanding' (Merton, 1967: 39). In this sense, it is correct to say that there is no such thing as theory, but that there are many types of theory, a diversity that is brought out in the contributions to this Special Issue.

The lack of consensus surrounding a precise definition of theory might form part of the explanation for the current status of theory in the field. Irrespective of whether one views it in negative or positive terms, it is clear that the intense theoretical debates that followed the publication of Kenneth Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics* and led to the 'third debate' (Lapid, 1989), or the 'fourth debate' if one follows Ole Wæver in including the inter-paradigm debate (Wæver, 1996), have now subsided and that the discipline has moved into what might be described as a period of 'theory testing'. The paradigm wars, if that is the correct term, are now over, and the discipline seems to have settled into a period of 'theoretical peace' with the dominant logic now that of considering the prospects for various forms of pluralism.

What is our evidence for this inference? Our experience as editors of the *European Journal of International Relations* (EJIR) from 2008 to 2013 suggests two patterns that together support the 'theoretical peace' thesis. First, we saw less and less inter-theoretic debate across paradigms (or isms). Second, pieces engaging solely in theoretical development are now largely non-existent. Of course, theory still plays a role in almost all the articles published in the journal in the last five years, but it is (with a few exceptions) very much in terms of 'theory testing' as opposed to 'theory development'. How far does this pattern suggest a retreat from theory and are these developments in terms of the EJIR reflective of a general trend across the discipline? We think that this is a discipline-wide phenomenon and that it represents a change in attitudes towards theory. The question is, what to make of it? It could be considered to be a natural development, or a form of intellectual maturity, with the discipline moving towards acceptance of greater theoretical diversity and no longer in need of heated debate aimed at achieving theoretical hegemony. The 'paradigm wars' have played their role but it is now time to deploy the insights gained and move towards the production of 'substantive', rather than purely theoretical, knowledge. Alternatively, one might consider, as does David Lake (2013; 2011), that the period of forceful theoretical debate that engulfed the field during the 1980s and 1990s was a distractive detour in which the discipline organized itself around a series of barely useful, indeed sometimes harmful, theoretical positions that impeded the development of an integrated body of knowledge. Others, however, (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013) view the current situation with concern. For them, the lack of grand theoretical debate represents a regrettable move towards a form of research that privileges hypothesis testing over theory.

This opening article in the Special Issue examines four important dimensions of 'The End of IR Theory?' that have already been touched upon in the paragraphs above. First, we provide an account of the types of theory that are engaged in IR as this underpins more specific debates over all aspects of the components of the framing question: 'the end', 'IR' and 'theory'. Since the emergence of the 3rd (or 4th) debate we have seen more and more theories emerge. In response to this

theoretical proliferation came a discussion of the extent and kind of theoretical pluralism IR scholars should embrace. The second section examines those dissenting voices that believe that pluralism is a label that hides a multitude of complexities and exclusions – for example, over whether the US heartland of IR is the protector of pluralism or its biggest threat? The new constellations of pluralism, such as 'analytical eclecticism' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010) take us back to questions about the relationship between theoretical ideas and hegemonic forms of institutional power. The third section relates the debates on theoretical proliferation in IR to more principled views of pluralism: the idea that unity can arise through pluralism versus the belief that pluralism protects an inherently incompatible field of theories that cannot truly engage with each other. We suggest a third route, 'integrative pluralism', that allows for more diversity than 'unity through pluralism' and more interaction than 'disengaged pluralism'. The fourth and final section reflects on what could be invoked by the term 'end'; here the analysis resists both sides of the yes/no divide.

Types of Theory

Theory comes in different types and each different type can have different aims. Often, concerns about pluralism in the discipline are derived from an unfounded belief that one or more theories are failing to engage with each other, when, in fact, the theories are doing very different kinds of things, even though they seem to be covering the same object domain (Jackson and Nexon, 2013).

At a very basic level, the different theoretical schools in IR are at least in agreement that theories should be understood as abstractions from a complex reality and that they attempt to provide generalizations about the phenomena under study. This raises the difficult issue of the relationship between the theory as an abstraction and the object under study. All of the contributors to this Special Issue have to deal with this issue, but they do so in very different ways. Moreover, there is also the vexed question of whether we derive theory from the real world or whether the real world is derived from some or other theory (Zalewski, 1996; Walt, 2005). Our answer is that there is interplay between the two and that the best kind of theory both helps us see the world in particular

kinds of ways, and hence constructs the world we see (and make), but that we should take care to avoid the kind of dogmatism that leads us to believe our theory is immune from revision when it interacts with that world. This is difficult, because theories are often linked to our identities as scholars. In order for IR to fulfil its promise as a discipline that 'makes a difference' to the world we have to bring theory and the world together; to use the world as the raw material of theory; and to use theory to help us formulate our study and to help us explain, understand and potentially change the varied practices of international relations.

A major problem we face when attempting to understand theory is that theory is wholly conceptual and is not a concrete object. This means that when we want to learn theory we must start with theory, but we do so in the absence of a well-grounded understanding of what theory is. The problem here is that our general understanding of what theory is stems from the IR theories we study; hence if the theories we study are limited in scope and form, then our account of theory itself will suffer from the same problem. Put more positively, the broader the range of IR theories we study, the broader will be our conception of theory.

There have been very few attempts in the discipline to systematically discuss the process of theorising itself or to consider what 'theory' is and does. Kenneth Waltz (1979) is a notable exception as is James Rosenau (1980). Patrick Jackson (2010) provides a recent attempt but rather than discussing theory per se, his account discusses some of the cleavages that emerge when we think about theory. The alternative approach is simply to state upfront what one thinks a theory is, and then to carry on as if the issue has been settled. This, in effect, was Waltz's solution to the problem (Waltz, 1979). Waltz adopted a very narrow account of theory. According to Waltz, theories are not mere collections of laws, they 'are statements that explain them' (Waltz, 1979: 5). Equally, James Dougherty and Robert Pfaltzgraff define theory as 'systematic reflection on phenomena, designed to explain them and to show how they are related to each other in a meaningful, intelligent pattern, instead of being merely random items in an incoherent universe' (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1997: 15). Similarly, Paul

Viotti and Mark Kauppi define the aim of theory 'as a way of making the world or some part of it more intelligible or better understood' and this is to be achieved by going 'beyond mere description of phenomenon observed and engag[ing] in causal explanation or prediction based on certain prior occurrences or conditions' (Viotti and Kauppi, 1987: 3).

In all of these definitions there is an assumption that there are patterns to international events and that IR theory is about revealing those patterns. Thus according to James Rosenau (1980: 24), to 'think theoretically one must be predisposed to ask about every event, every situation, or every observed phenomenon, '[o]f what is it an instance?'; we can call this the 'Rosenau test'. For Rosenau, this generalizing aspect of theory arises out of his belief that to 'think theoretically one must be able to assume that human affairs are founded on an underlying order' (Rosenau, 1980: 24). Again, whilst prima facie correct in many instances, this view is predicated on a particular account of theory and does not apply to all types of theory that one can find in the discipline and hence it is important to consider the varied way in which that term theory is used and deployed in the field.

Karl Popper suggested that theories can be understood as 'nets cast to catch what we call "the world": to rationalize, to explain, and to master it' (Popper, 1959: 59). This suggests that theory is something we do all of the time as we attempt to deal with the various problems we face in our everyday lives. Every person, as they go about their daily lives, is affected in some way by events over which they have no control and the causes of which are not immediately obvious to them. This can happen on a personal level, or in terms of their understanding of global, local, or regional events. When faced with an event that does not make immediate sense we begin to theorize as to possible explanations. In this sense, we theorise in the attempt to explain our experience of the world in terms of something which may not have been experienced, and which may not even be a possible object of experience. It is in this way that theory begins to tell us something new about the world.

An academic understanding of theory, however, has to go beyond this common sense understanding to provide a much more systematic account of what theorising involves. First, theoretical ideas should follow logically from one another and, in general, they should not contradict each other, or at the very least they should have some clearly defined relationships to one another, and when contradictions do occur they are seen as potential problems for the theory. Second, when we begin to reflect systematically on our theories 'second order' problems arise; such problems concern the best way to be systematic and disputes about what is meant by an 'explanation', 'causation' and so on. Third, the academic process of theorizing can often provide explanations that run counter to what experience might suggest.

The dominant view of theory held by most people outside the discipline is probably what we call 'explanatory theory'. As the name suggests, explanatory theory attempts to explain events by providing an account of causes in a temporal sequence. Explanatory theories typically emerge in response to 'why' questions. Hence, the question 'why did the global financial crisis occur?' will typically be answered by a reference to a series of causal factors that explain the financial crisis. However, if the commitment to generalisability is to be realised then this kind of explanatory theory is insufficient. For whilst an account of the causes that led to the global financial crisis helps explain 'that' financial crisis, there is no necessary relationship between this explanation and a set of laws derived from it that could be generalised across similar cases. Indeed, a causal account of the events that led to the financial crisis might well be couched in terms of a set of events so unique that nothing from the explanation is generalisable. In which case, this explanation fails the 'Rosenau test' insofar as it does not tell us 'of what is this an instance'. As such, the assumption that there is a close link between generalisability and theory, is, in fact, mistaken. Many events in international relations can be considered to be so unique that the idea that we can generalise from them to seemingly similar phenomena is misguided.

Nonetheless, the idea that theories should be generalisable seems tenacious. Waltz provides a good example, arguing that, '[l]aws establish relations between

variables...If a then b, where a stands for one or more independent variables and b stands for the dependent variable: In form, this is the statement of a law' (Waltz, 1979: 1). Note, that for Waltz, this statement of a relationship between variables is a statement of a law, not a theory. For Waltz, theories explain laws; we note this regularity between events of type A and events of type B, but we need a theory to explain why it occurs.

Theory, then, according to Waltz, can be considered as a simplifying device that abstracts from the world in order to locate and identify key factors of interest:

> A theory is a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity. A theory is a depiction of the organization of a domain and of the connections among its parts... The infinite materials of any realm can be organized in endlessly different ways. A theory indicates that some factors are more important than others and specifies relations among them. In reality, everything is related to everything else, and one domain cannot be separated from others. Theory isolates one realm from all others in order to deal with it intellectually. To isolate a realm is a precondition to developing a theory that will explain what goes on within it. If the precondition cannot be met, and that of course is a possibility, then the construction of theory for the matters at hand is impossible. The question, as ever with theories, is not whether the isolation of a realm is realistic, but whether it is useful. And usefulness is judged by the explanatory and predictive powers of the theory that may be fashioned (Waltz, 1979: 8).

From this we can see some important ways in which Waltz thinks about theory. First, the relationship between theory and reality is of little consequence in determining the validity of a theory. The real test of the theory is not the extent to which it realistically captures a realm, but rather, the extent to which it may be said to be useful; with usefulness in this context defined in terms of the explanatory and predictive capacity of the theory. Second, theory precedes reality, since reality emerges out of the materials we collect and how we organize them. Third, since the empirical realm is potentially infinite, the role of theory is to provide an organisational device that allows us to identify what is important and what is not, and to specify what the relations are between the factors we deem to be important. Fourth, all theory is abstraction in that it is a

process conducted in thought that attempts to isolate the realm of activity from its connections with other realms.

An alternative view of theory foregrounds its critical potential. By 'critical theory'[3] we mean that type of theory that begins with the avowed intent of criticising particular social arrangements and/or outcomes. Hence a theory might be considered critical in this sense if it explicitly sets out to identify and criticise a particular set of social circumstances and to demonstrate how they came to exist. As should be clear, critical theory in this sense cannot be contrasted with explanatory theory since this type of critical theory builds its analysis on the basis of an examination of the causal factors that brought a particular state of affairs about. Hence, in this account of critical theory there is no necessary conflict between the identification of an unjust state of affairs and a consideration of the causes of that state of affairs. Thus, it is possible for a theory to be both explanatory and critical and many theories fit this model. This view of theory echoes the Marxian exhortation that the point of theory is not to idly interpret the world 'but to *change* it'.

If explanatory theory and critical theory are both, potentially at least, compatible in some respects, then the third type of theory we wish to discuss is in many ways an integral aspect of all types of theorising in the social world. As Chris Brown puts it, normative theory is 'that body of work which addresses the moral dimensions of international relations' (Brown, 1992: 3). Normative statements typically address how things should be, or ought to be, whether or not we should value them, which things are good or bad, and, which actions are right or wrong. Normative theory is often contrasted with positive theory - i.e. descriptive, explanatory, or factual - when describing types of theories, beliefs, or propositions. Yet, as should be clear, even that that purports to deal with just the facts can be shown to contain normative commitments. Hence, when realists claim that states are self-interested, this is not just a descriptive claim, but also a normative one, since if it is indeed the case that all states act in terms of 'interests defined in terms of power' (Morgenthau, 1978) then it follows that this is also a normative claim about how states ought to act. In this sense then, critical

theory, normative theory and explanatory theory, are all, potentially at least, integral to all types of social theory, even if particular theorists concentrate their attention on one aspect rather than the others.

Another important type of theory – constitutive theory - does not attempt to generate, or track, causal patterns in time, but asks, 'how is this thing constituted?' State theory, for example, does not always ask how the modern state came to be, but can focus solely on questions, such as, 'What is a State?', 'How is a state constituted?', 'Which functions does the state play in society?' However, the term constitutive theory is also used in the discipline in another sense; to refer to those authors who examine the ways in which rules, norms, and ideas constitute social objects (Onuf, 1989). For these theorists, the social world (and perhaps the natural world) is constituted through the ideas, or theories, that we hold. For this type of constitutive theory, it becomes important to theorise the act of theorising, since theories are not simply neutral observations of a given world, but are complicit in the construction of that world (Smith and Owens, 2008: 176-177).

This type of theory can take many forms. For example, some theorists examine how meanings and interpretations construct discourses surrounding particular phenomena, and consider how these discourses are not simply descriptive of the objects they study but actually constitute them. Feminist scholarship provides one example of such theorising. This implies that academic theories of international relations may be directly complicit in the practice of international relations (Smith, 2004). This needs handling with care, academic theories of international relations may certainly influence how foreign policy makers, international institutions, transnational movements and others act in 'the real world' but such sets of actions – in war for instance - were certainly happening prior to the emergence of the academic discipline of IR, and the related development of IR theory. What is often missing in accounts of constitutive theory that claims 'we construct the social world' is any analysis, or specification, of who the 'we' is? Does it refer to, 'we' actors engaged in the practice, or 'we' academics that attempt to study the practice?

The final type of theory we wish to discuss is theory considered as a 'lens' through which we look at the world. Many positivists would be unhappy at labelling this theory. It is certainly not theory in the sense of a coherent and systematic set of logical propositions that have a well formulated and specified set of relationships. However, many theorists do not think that the complex ontology of international relations permits a view of theory that allows such clearly defined set of relationships (Walker, 1993). International relations is a dynamic and inherently complex environment that does not display the systematic and logical set of relations demanded by some approaches to theory. Instead, when considered as a lens through which to examine the world then theory simply attempts to explore how social actors navigate their way through social events and processes. In order to make sense of this we need to comprehend what these social processes mean to them and we do this by understanding the various ways they make sense of the world. All social actors view the world in particular ways, and these views of the world do not always display as much coherence, or logic, as one might expect of a systematic and well-defined theory. Yet, if the theorists are to grasp how social actors understand the world, they need to be aware of the lens through which those actors view, and act in, the world.

Moreover, the metaphor of theory as lens might be a useful way to think of how we use theories. If we use one lens we will see the world in one particular way, perhaps with certain elements highlighted and others hidden from view, or placed on the margins. Change the lens and the world may look very different. There is, however, a problem here, tempting as this image might sound, is it really possible to adopt one particular way of looking at the world at one moment and then put on another lens to look at the world in a different way? Are our theoretical commitments so ephemeral? In fact, most scholars adopt a theory early on in their career and defend it to the bitter end. Or, as David Marsh and Paul Furlong put it, theories 'should not be treated like a sweater that can be "put on" when we are addressing such philosophical issues and "taken off" when we are doing research... researchers cannot adopt one position at one time for one

project and another on another occasion for a different project. These positions are not interchangeable because they reflect fundamentally different approaches to what social science is and how we do it' (Marsh and Furlong, 2002: 21). But this also raises the question of how far – to stay with the sweater analogy – a theoretical commitment can be stretched before it is unfit for purpose.

There are no definite answers here, but it is clear the discipline works with multiple accounts of theory and understanding this might help clarify the problematic issue of pluralism.

Pluralism, What Pluralism?

An undeniable fact about the first 95 years of IR[4] is that there are now many more recognised theoretical orientations than was the case in the earliest decades. If we take the first great debate, for example, few doubt the fact that there was a debate between two distinct positions even if the identity of the individual protagonists and the character (and timing) of the exchange has been brought into question. How many identifiable theoretical positions are there today? There is no easy way to answer this question; but if we take the leading US theory textbook the answer is eight, and if we take the leading theory textbook in the rest-of-the-world market, the answer is eleven.[5] Yet this begs the question Waltz (1981) posed – albeit about nuclear proliferation rather than paradigm proliferation – 'more may be better?' An initial way to answer it is to reflect on how and why theoretical proliferation comes about?

One driver of theoretical proliferation is the invention of new theories in light of a general perception on the part of the academic community that a new historical context requires new conceptual tools of analysis. Although post-positivists theories had begun to emerge before the end of the Cold War, it seems likely that the discipline was forced to seriously consider these new theories in the context of major, and unexpected, changes in the international system. More concretely, Frieden and Lake (2005) provide us with a good illustration of how changes in lethal technologies generated new theories of strategic stability. Between 1952 and 1966 the theory of nuclear deterrence evolved as a response

to the threat that nuclear weapons posed to the survival of the planet. Once both superpowers had developed a second-strike capability, there was nothing to deter their opponents from striking first – and the logic of deterrence would then collapse. Thomas Schelling (1960) redefined 'threat' as leaving 'something to chance'. In other words, 'even if retaliation was irrational, the *possibility* of retaliation… would prevent an attack in the first place' (Frieden and Lake, 2005: 140). This application of rational modelling informed strategic decisions and policies during the Cold War.

A second driver that explains theoretical proliferation is the practice of 'importing' a theory from a cognate discipline. Importing theories from other disciplines into IR was a marked feature of self-styled critical theorising – with feminism coming from political theory; post-structuralism from literary theory and philosophy; constructivism from sociology. One specific example of such 'theory importation' has been the introduction of linguistic classics in Karin Fierke's theorization of foreign policy as language games building on Wittgenstein (Fierke, 2013; Fierke, 1996) or in Ole Wæver's securitization theory influenced by Austin's speech act theory (Wæver, 1995). Alexander Wendt's constructivism provides another influential example, drawing inspiration from the social theory of Anthony Giddens (1984) and the scientific realism (philosophy) of Roy Bhaskar (1975; 1989).

A third driver of theoretical proliferation can be located in the developments within the discipline itself. There is no doubt that the publication of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* led to the emergence of a diverse range of alternative theories that situated themselves in relation to Waltz's stark vision of international politics. In fact, it could be argued that, such was the influence of Waltz on theoretical development in the field that, to paraphrase Whitehead's pithy comment on Plato, all theoretical development since 1979 has been a series of footnotes on Waltz.[6] Equally, some of these developments have led to alternative theories that are embedded within the basic assumptions of a particular approach, but which claim to articulate differences so substantial that

a new label is required to delineate the variations within that theory; neoclassical realism being a good example here.

It is important to note that these drivers of theoretical proliferation are not mutually exclusive. Waltz's neorealism, for example was embedded within assumptions drawn from micro-economics. Likewise, many of the responses to Waltz were keen to reject his account, but did so on the basis of theoretical developments imported from cognate fields.

Important consequences follow from these different pathways to the emergence of new and distinct theoretical perspectives. Adapting an existing mainstream theory to a new (neo-) era is rarely subjected to challenge by the scholarly community: to claim, for example, that 'neo-liberal institutionalism' was illegitimate would require critics to tear down the entire edifice of political liberalism, and in doing so bury the contributions of those associated with the 'canon' – from J. S. Mill to John Rawls - who have contributed to the theory. By comparison, importing theories from other disciplines is vulnerable, by comparison, to questions of relevance. Perceptions of relevance, however, very much depend on where the imported theory originates from, and it is often the case that theories imported from the 'hard sciences' face an easier reception than those imported from the humanities. Here considerations of what constitutes good science can be seen to be behind many of the theoretical debates in the field, although this is not an issue we can unpack here.

Scepticism towards new theoretical approaches was taken up by Robert Keohane in his widely cited 1988 International Studies Association (ISA) Presidential Address. In the lecture he argued that critical theorists 'will remain on the margins of the field', unless they adopt the 'rationalistic premises' of mainstream IR (Keohane, 1989: 173). Using the same occasion of an ISA Presidential Address more than a decade later, Steve Smith forcefully made the opposing argument. For Smith, the theoretical proliferation should be valued by the academy (Smith, 2004). Moreover, many of the most important questions that we should be asking do not, in Smith's view, lend themselves to theory

testing. What Smith was calling for was a shift in our frame of reference from the inter-state to the world political system as a whole; a reorientation that would enable an entirely different understanding of violence than the state-centric rational actor model that underpinned rationalist approaches to security.

In other writings, Smith strongly defends the development of new theories. Part of his defence rests on the view that diversity is a good thing *per se*; he sees the array of non-positivist theories that evolved after 1979 as 'opening up space for much more debate' (Dunne et al., 2013: 7) in a manner not too dissimilar to John Stuart Mill who believed that ideas and theories compete in a 'marketplace'. And just as firms become stronger and more efficient when they compete in functioning markets, so do theories.[7] Yet just as markets are not free in the real world, neither do theories compete in a manner that is neutral or objective. As academics we make choices about which theories are legitimate partners to be engaged, that is, which are allowed entry into the market place and which are to be excluded? In other words, like firms in a *real* marketplace, sellers of theory try to shape and control what is available to the consumers of theory in terms of access and comments on the products on offer. Scholars might thus acknowledge the diversity of IR theories while at the same time diminishing newer and more radical theories on the grounds that have little or no 'relevance' to the real world. An example here is Walt's article 'one world, many theories' in which he makes a strong case for limited pluralism through the inclusion, alongside realism, of liberalism and constructivism. However, his case for pluralism is tempered with the claim that the realism is likely to remain 'the most useful instrument' in 'tomorrow's conceptual toolbox' (Walt, 1998: 42-43). Or, take the example of the CASE Collective's Manifesto for a critical security studies agenda in Europe which opened with a footnote stating that 'hard-core postmodernists' and 'feminists' would not be part of the exercise that followed (CASE Collective, 2006; Sylvester, 2007).

Powerful voices in the profession intervene in the theoretical marketplace in other ways too, such as when theoretical proliferation is thought to have gone too far – at a cost of scientific progress (Holsti, 1998). In his attack of the 'evil

"isms"', David Lake (2011) advances several reasons why the current textbook configuration of multiple 'isms' has pathological implications. He suggests, as an alternative, a lexicon that is grounded in questions/concerns 'in the world' – which he formulates in terms of interests, institutions, and interactions. 'There is', he argues, 'nothing inherently rationalist or constructivist, realist or Marxist, English or North American about this set of categories' (2011: 473).

There is a curious twist in the politics of theoretical proliferation. Not only are mainstream rationalists calling for a turn away from the 'isms; a post-structuralist inspired textbook on IR recommends that theories be set aside in favour of twenty salient questions about world politics (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2009: xxxii). It is almost as though theory has gone into hibernation in the aftermath of the third/fourth debate such that it is again possible to imply that IR academics can have unmediated access to a real world that exists independently of ideas, values, behaviours, and experiences.

One immediate problem with this move is the argument, widely shared in the philosophy of science, that theory precedes observation.[8] Without theory there can be no research. Without theory there can be no specification of the object under study (ontology) or the standards of evidence on which claims about the world might be judged (epistemology).[9] For example, without a theory of what security is, there can be no claims about who – states, women, humans, the environment and so on – are being threatened. Hence the move beyond 'isms' can only be yet another 'ism' by another name (Reus-Smit, 2013).

What is clear from this discussion is that the attempt to come to terms with theoretical proliferations through 'pluralism' is deeply contested – some viewing it as a proxy of cultural or intellectual diversity, while others seeing it as a veil over which disciplinary hegemony is exercised. Yet it is interesting to observe that nobody, it seems, is arguing against pluralism per se, in fact, everyone agrees that it is a desirable position (albeit, under certain conditions, such as 'relevance' or 'science'). This leads us to consider the question what kind of pluralism can, and should, IR embrace?

Pluralism and the Terms of Engagement

Theoretical diversity is often assumed to be integral to the practice of science. The growth of scientific knowledge requires the operation of an open-ended market in ideas. Science is a competitive environment and many social scientists are concerned that an open-ended commitment to pluralism may lead to a debilitating relativism and the loss of all critical standards. An alternative view presents theoretical proliferation in an altogether differing light. According to this view, theoretical diversity is tolerated only because it represents a temporary phenomenon. Eventually, the social sciences will mature and develop a consistent scientific methodology such that theoretical disputes can be settled. Theoretical proliferation can be tolerated, but only on the basis of methodological unity. What the social sciences need is a rigorous, and clearly defined, set of scientific methods that constitute the framework through which theoretical disputes can be settled. The unity of method, it is hoped, will eventually lead to theoretical convergence. As Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba quoting Karl Pearson (1892: 16) put it, the 'unity of all science consists alone in its method' (King et al., 1994: 9). The steady accumulation of knowledge generated through the application of scientific methods will eventually place the social sciences on as secure an epistemological footing as the natural sciences. This position is still committed to pluralism, but pluralism is now a means not an end. Theoretical diversity is tolerated because it exists within a horizon of unity.

We can, however, contrast the 'unity through pluralism' position to an alternative view, which sees little or no prospect of any type of theoretical unification. According to advocates of this view, we should embrace a strategy of letting 'a thousand theoretical flowers bloom'. Given the limited prospects of settling theoretical disputes at the epistemological level, the social sciences should embrace an open-ended commitment to all theoretical approaches. Since theoretical diversity is itself a necessary component in the growth of knowledge, we should embrace a plurality of differing perspectives (Feyerabend, 1988). For the committed pluralist, unity is neither possible nor desirable; but rather, it is

the intrinsic good of pluralism itself which is to be defended. Pluralism here is an end, not a means. Only pluralism can deal with a multi-faceted and complex reality and only pluralism can deliver substantial progress in terms of knowledge. Given the lack of agreed epistemological standards for assessing competing knowledge claims, we should embrace all perspectives.

Neither the 'unity' viewpoint nor an untrammelled commitment to theoretical diversity seems to be attractive positions for any science to adopt. Given the history of scientific progress it would seem inappropriate for any science to adopt theoretical unity as a goal. Epistemologically, how would we know when we had reached a point where multiple theoretical perspectives are no longer required? Competing visions of science mean that there are no agreed standards for arriving at a unity of method. The alternative position of letting a 'thousand theoretical flowers bloom' has its own problems. Such an approach could lead to an incapacitating relativism, or what Yosef Lapid calls a 'flabby pluralism' (Lapid, 2003). A better term to capture the logic of this position might be disengaged pluralism. No claim or viewpoint would seem to be invalid and theorists are free to pursue their own agenda with little or no contact with alternative views. This is a disengaged pluralism because there is no attempt to specify the relationships between theories, or to examine one's own theoretical position in the light of alternative views. The absence of an agreed unity of method would also entail that the standards by which the various theories are to be judged would be internal to the theory (Smith, 2003). This would be a disengaged form of pluralism with each theoretical perspective legitimating its claims solely on its own terms and with little reason to engage in conversations with alternative approaches.

Despite the intense theoretical debate that followed the third debate, IR now seems to have settled into an uneasy truce on the question of theoretical pluralism/fragmentation. The question remains as to whether we simply embrace this fragmentation or attempt to work towards a more coherent view of global processes. Our view is that we should attempt to move towards a position we will term 'integrative pluralism'.[10] Integrative pluralism is not an attempt to

forge competing knowledge claims into one overarching position that subsumes them all. It is not a form of theoretical synthesis (Kratochwil, 2003); nor is it a middle ground that eclectically claims to take the best of various theories to forge them into a 'grand theory of everything' (Wendt, 1999). Integrative pluralism accepts and preserves the validity of a wide range of theoretical perspectives and embraces theoretical diversity as a means of providing more comprehensive and multi-dimensional accounts of complex phenomena. This is not a suggestion that a summation of the various theoretical claims will produce a complete account; we simply could not know when any account was complete. Moreover, engaging in integrative pluralism carries risks and some theories may not survive. In the course of engagement some theories may ultimately be rejected, and others may undergo substantial change and modification; hence it is not a form of relativism. Which theories contribute to our overall stock of knowledge and which fall by the wayside, however, is not an issue that can be resolved solely through metatheoretical debate.

The ultimate test of integrative pluralism will be researchers from multiple perspectives engaging in the practice of pluralism through engagement with alternative positions where their concerns and research interests overlap. But this is a practice that cannot even begin unless we have some sense of its problems, possibilities and practicality. Current theoretical debate in the discipline does not seem conducive to this discussion and the move to embrace pluralism without due consideration of what it entails might be premature.

Getting around this impasse will require an explanation of how it arises and an account of the limits, problems and potentials of theorizing in IR. In section two, we addressed some of the drivers that contribute towards theoretical proliferation, but the impact of those drivers is dependent upon the disciplinary context in which they emerge. In terms of IR we suggest there are three main structural factors that help explain theoretical fragmentation in the discipline. First, the contemporary international political system is best understood as a complex open system, which displays 'emergent properties' and degrees of 'organized complexity'. Because all human systems have this form they require a

plurality of explanations to deal with phenomena at differing levels, and the complex differentiation of causal mechanisms within levels. Since theory is a process of abstraction, and since we cannot isolate particular mechanism in the manner of some of the natural sciences, then some form of theoretical pluralism is necessary and to be expected. Yet some of the natural sciences face a similar situation and have not regressed into a state of rampant theoretical fragmentation. So complexity is not a sufficient explanation.

Second, is the academic division of labour, which compartmentalises knowledge into zones of expertise, which in turn impedes the development of the kind of interdisciplinary research that is needed to explain complex systems. If IR truly is a discipline that (potentially) encompasses all of human activity, then politics, economics, culture, history, art, language and identity all intersect and form a complex whole. Much of the theoretical debate over the last three decades can be considered as an attempt to address this issue and broaden the agenda of IR beyond the traditional concerns of state security and a narrowly defined foreign policy agenda. Third, is the structure of IR as an academic discipline, which having embraced theoretical diversity, reproduces that diversity by teaching new entrants into the field the parameters and histories of that diversity and socialises them into adopting it as part of their identities. In such an intellectual structure, the potential for integrative pluralism is low. As such, a fragmented discipline reproduces a fragmented discipline. Or to put it another way, the 'discipline is what we make of it'. Structurally there are strong incentives for the discipline to continue to reproduce itself in ways that support the dominant theories and it is difficult, but not impossible, to bring about change. However, change is possible, but how it unfolds is dependent on how the discipline comes to terms with the issue of theoretical fragmentation, and which form of pluralism is adopted as a response to that issue.

Back to 'The End'
Recognizing the different types of theory that are present in contemporary IR tells us that there might be more theory in the discipline than observers sometimes believe. In that sense the question we posed to our contributors to

this Special Issue – 'The End of IR Theory?' – can be answered with a 'no' at least as far as the 'Theory' part goes. But the importance of acknowledging the variety of types of theories goes beyond a simple yes/no response.

One clear inference from this discussion is that there remains no agreement on what constitutes proper theory in IR. The typology that we set out in the opening section is not exhaustive, nor is it likely to settle these debates over what theory is and should be, but we think it might provide those working in the field with a wider sense of what theorizing entails. It should also be noted that this account of types of theory in IR is also not neutral insofar as it seeks to encompass and thus reserve a legitimate space for all forms of theories currently engaged in IR.

It is also apparent to us that the character of IR theorising has been modified during the last three decades or so. David Lake (2013) is correct in his assertion that much work in IR has not risen to the level of meta-level theory, neither has it generated passionate debates. But to some extent this is because such mid-range theory has taken certain ontological and epistemological assumptions for granted. Put differently, when working within an established tradition, there is often no need to explicitly comment in detail on one's choice of paradigm, 'ism', or type of theorisation, but this does not mean that deeper unquestioned theoretical assumptions are not playing a role. Yet, understanding how academic disciplines develop is not simply a question of textual quantity, but of which particular texts matter sociologically, that is in terms of being read, cited, and thus building scholarly communities. Thus the question becomes not whether there is an end to theory in IR, but if there is an end to the kinds of works that engage in 'meta' debate?

One way forward is to consider how far IR's key assumptions can also be brought out by work that start with events in 'the real world' (recognizing that its shapes and forms are mediated through our theoretical assumptions). Asking, for example, questions about the financial crisis raises further questions about rationality and agency. The issue here is less what might explain the financial crisis than how 'we' inevitably make assumptions when trying to understand 'it'.

There will always events that rely upon and question our key ontological assumptions about humans, states, politics, war and order.

The question of theory also has implications for 'communication' (cast widely as ranging from dialogue to war) and the broader sociology of the field, including how IR is taught and what kinds of work receives funding. Without an understanding of the 'work' that theories do to form analysis, we cannot have a proper conversation on how to understand empirical phenomena. Or, put more positively, analyses of the same event or 'real world object/process' that use different IR theories allow us to identify theoretical differences and similarities. Theories work, in short, as communicative conduits. For those concerned that IR theory might be ending – more precisely, that theory explicit work as well as work that engage in debate across paradigms, 'isms' and 'camps' are declining – the concern is thus also one of impoverished inter-disciplinary communication. The way that IR, and in particular the 'isms' are taught plays an important role in such concerns as this will have consequences for the way in which the discipline is (re)produced by future generations (Hagmann and Biersteker, 2012).[11] The 'isms' themselves are neither good nor bad, it is what we do with them that matters. A particular concern is that methodological specialisation takes the place not only of theory development, but of communication through theory. Reliance on 'esoteric terminology and arcane techniques' (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013) make it difficult for those not working in the tradition of statistical analysis and large-N quantitative methodologies to understand what substantial knowledge is being produced.[12] Much the same can be said about the specialist language deployed by poststructuralists or any of the other less mainstream theoretical positions and meta-theoretical debate is a necessary precursor to understanding the specifics of the terms employed in various approaches.

Mearsheimer and Walt (2013) focus the object of their critique on quantitative research, but one might also turn in the other direction and ask whether those working with qualitative methodologies are always sufficiently concerned to communicate their results to outsiders? Although that might sound naïve, the most important way to counter this communication breakdown, we think, is to

ensure that hiring committees, supervisors, editors, reviewers and funders value work that communicates theoretical and analytical results, not just methodological 'robustness' and that we recognize the variation in publication structure between (much of) quantitative and qualitative research.

'The End of IR Theory?' also raises the question whether what we are witnessing is not only the end of theory *but the end of IR*. As noted above, while the discipline as an institution with departments, chairs, publications and scholars is an early 20th century phenomenon, many of the objects and themes that concern IR are much older. While IR may seem firmly institutionalised as a field of study – whether as a discipline or as sub-discipline – there is nothing inevitable about this status, nor about the strength of IR *vis a vis* other academic disciplines. As observers of IR's history and sociology have pointed out, IR is at a disadvantage as far as import-export is concerned: it is a field that historically has imported theories from other fields, that is from the humanities (social and political theory, philosophy and history); other social sciences (including economics, sociology and law; and the natural sciences (maths, physics, statistics). It is also a field that has produced very few scholars with an ability to make an impact on other disciplines or be recognized as public intellectuals (Lebow, 2007). Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2001: 38) have argued that what sets IR aside is that its object of study is the international system, more specifically that 'reversing the failure of IR lies in the attitude towards history and theory embodied by the English School'. More sociological accounts, like Ole Wæver's (Wæver, 2007: 297) stress the 'great debates', the concern with 'isms', and the emphasis placed on theory as significant compared to other academic disciplines.

Clearly, the relationship between IR and other fields of study is a complex one and we will not attempt to compile a complete inventory of its comparative advantages or bet on its future. What we will suggest however is that there are two questions that should concern 'us' as we think of IR's theory-driven future. One is that while 'the real world' always comes to us imprinted by the theoretical lens through which we view 'it', we also need to keep asking whether there are process, objects, 'things' that are not caught by the lens we are currently using.

IR has for example been slow to acknowledge the importance of new media technologies for how central phenomena like war and the global economy are developing (Williams, 2003; Derian, 2005). IR scholars should also continue their tradition of being concerned with theories in other fields. A recent example of such 'importation' is that of scientific developments in fields such as evolutionary biology and neuroscience migrating to IR, in part as a result of their adoption by psychologists and economists (McDermott et al., 2011; Zak and Kugler, 2011; Hudson et al., 2009). The point here is not (necessarily) to draw uncritically on theorists or theories from other fields (Brown, 2013) but to ensure that IR scholars know enough of what is in vogue in adjacent fields not to be left behind or outmanoeuvred. It is also the case that IR should be cognizant of developments in other fields when those developments have a direct relevance to our subject matter. Academic disciplines are artificial constructs and there is no requirement that those artificially produced borders should become subjects of policing. In addition, the field can be strengthened when developments in other disciplines lend support to some of IR's theoretical claims.

The other question that is also not a recent one is where the 'international' begins or ends, if it does indeed have an ending? Events like the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the uprisings of the Arab Spring showed 'the power of ordinary people in international relations' matter (Sylvester, 2013). So is there a place where 'the international' ends? Adherents to different 'isms' and paradigms will answer this question differently, and again, we are not going to provide our (non-authoritative) answer, but simply to underscore the legitimacy of the question itself.

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What, then, is our answer to the 'the end of IR theory?' As will be clear by now, we do not seek to align ourselves either with a view that celebrates the 'theoretical peace' and neither do we want to return to a paradigmatic 'war of all against all'. Instead we close the discussion with the observation that disciplinary 'turning points' and 'great debates' are seen more clearly when the

moment has passed and not in the midst of the debate itself. Put differently, one only knows in hindsight whether a debate was 'great' when waves of interest begin to rise in the years ahead. Until that point, amidst all the contention in the field, we close with the thought that one of IR's comparative advantages over other disciplines might just be its strong sense of being a theory-led and theory-concerned field.

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[1] Authors have been cited in alphabetical order, but the writing of this piece, like that of our editorship, has been one of genuine teamwork.

[2] We use the capitalised form of International Relations to refer to the discipline and the uncapitalised form to refer to the practices.

[3] It is important to distinguish between critical theory understood in this broad sense, and the specific form of Critical Theory embedded within the work of the Frankfurt School (Geuss, 1981; Wiggershaus, 1994).

[4] 1919 is significant if we take the endowment of the Woodrow Wilson Chair at Aberystwyth as a marker of the origin of the discipline – even if it is only one of several contending narratives of the beginnings of the academic study of IR. See, for example, Bull (in Porter ed., 1972); for one particular influential account which challenges this view see Schmidt (1998).

[5] The standard US IR theory textbook is Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi (2012). In the latest edition, the theoretical spectrum includes: realism; liberalism; imperialism/post-colonialism; the English school; constructivism; critical theory/postmodernism; feminism; normative theory. Outside of the US, an equivalent IR theory textbook (Dunne et al, 2013) includes: normative theory; classical realism; structural realism; liberalism; neoliberalism; the English school; Marxism; critical theory; constructivism; feminism; poststructuralism; postcolonialism; green theory.

[6] Equally, however, theoretical development in a field of study can lead to reduction in the number of theories. The conjunction of neo-realism and neo-liberalism in the neo-neo debate, is a good example here, and two seemingly opposed theories begin to merge into one (Baldwin, 1993).

[7] It is not clear, however, how Smith sees this 'debate' unfolding since at times he also seems to suggest that theories should be judged only by their own standards (Smith, 2003: 141-153).

[8] For an overview of these arguments see, (Godfrey-Smith, 2003).

[9] It is worth noting that on this view the 'isms' themselves are not, strictly speaking, epistemologies. The 'isms' produce claims about the world, but these claims require clear epistemological support that enable proponents to declare some claims to be knowledge, whilst others remain at the level of conjecture. Thus not all claims emanating from a particular 'ism' can be said to be knowledge. In general, and simplifying in the extreme, positivists gravitate towards empirical support for all knowledge claims, whereas postpositivists, to varying degrees, tend to insist on a broader set of epistemological criteria. Rarely, however, if ever, do any postpositivists reject the importance of empirical support for knowledge claims.

[10] This notion is developed more fully in Colin Wight's forthcoming book on theoretical fragmentation to be published by Sage in 2014.

[11] That this is not a recent theme is illustrated by the concern with the 'two cultures problem' in Peace Research and Conflict Resolution in the 1970s. As John A. Vasquez (1976: 710-711) put it

'Students who are not competent in scientific approaches to social analysis will be unable to read, let alone critically assess, a number of socially important pieces of quantitative research that will be published in their lifetime... Student who are not competent in humanist approaches will not have a very sophisticated understanding of normative evaluation and may even be insensitive to the suffering that can occur from the violation of ethical norms'. For a recent discussion see Chris Reus-Smit (2012: 536-538).

[12] Whether quantitative scholarship is particularly prone to esoteric, internal communication is not a question to be settled here. But that communication across the full range of IR is difficult to achieve might be illustrated by Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot's edited book *International Practices* which is set up to 'open[s] the door to much-needed interdisciplinary research in International Relations', but which includes no quantitative contributions (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; back cover).