

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #27

CHRISTIAN REUS-SMIT ON IR CULTURES, RE-THINKING IR AND BRIDGING THE NORMATIVE-EMPIRICAL DIVIDE

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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CHRISTIAN REUS-SMIT ON IR CULTURES, RE-THINKING IR AND BRIDGING THE NORMATIVE-EMPIRICAL DIVIDE



The big debates in IR theory are over, but the big questions that drive our work remain challenges. In order to address these challenges, scholars now work from their different cultures. However, if we want to develop scholarship that answers to the need to make political sense out of our changing world, Christian Reus-Smit argues, we need to bridge the divide between normative and empirical scholarship. In this *Talk*, Reus-Smit addresses not only this issue but amongst others also probes into what makes IR IR, into sound social constructivist method, and into the necessity to partially rethink IR theory.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

As some previous contributors have argued, we are beyond the period of great debates, where lively discussions between for instance realism, liberalism and Marxism were a core part of the IR theory agenda. We have now arrived at a situation in which different cultures of IR scholarship coexist. You can make a very broad distinction between two different kinds of cultures: the rationalist/positivist approaches, on the one hand, and more social/interpretivist approaches on the other. Talking about those different approaches as cultures is quite useful in my opinion, as they each have their own distinctive social ontologies, norms of scholarly practice, rituals of engagement, modes of inclusion and exclusion, and more or less profound prejudices. There are, however, no hard and fast boundaries between them: they tend to interweave at the margins, research is being done at their boundaries, and communication and learning occurs between them at multiple levels. One could say that there is a geographical divide between the US and the rest, with scholars in the US engaging in the more rationalist/positivist-oriented approaches, while in Europe and Great Britain, for instance, the social approach is stronger, but then again, the whole postmodern and constructivist movement originated in the US as well.

In terms of challenges to the field, we should see this less as a matter of focusing on specific problems such as terrorism or the financial crisis (important is it is for us to address these), but rather the deeper challenge is bringing together two areas of scholarship that have not spoken to each other very well, and those are empirical theories of IR and normative theories of IR. I've focused on this issue in a number of my publications, but it figures most prominently in the Introduction Duncan Snidal and I wrote for the *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, which came out last year. The reason we bridge this divide is because many of the issues we face today in IR are issues of political action: How *should* we respond to terrorism? How *should* we deal with

the global financial crisis? How *should* we treat poverty or global environmental change? These are all crucial questions for IR, but we cannot answer them from either solely a normative-theoretic or empirical-theoretic perspective. We need to bring these things together. So the critical challenge for IR theory is to systematically engage these two forms of theoretical reflection.

An example of a concrete issue on which both approaches diverge quite radically is that of humanitarian intervention. There is a body of work on the subject clearly written from a normative perspective, by scholars that worry away about the principles that should govern humanitarian intervention and when it is legitimate to intervene for humanitarian reasons and so forth. Then there is another body of work studying the politics of humanitarian intervention. This literature is concerned with when interventions do or do not take place, with whether interventions are shaped by the material self-interest of powerful actors or by other factors such as changing international norms of sovereignty. To really contribute substantially to an action-oriented understanding of 'humanitarian intervention', we need both types of knowledge. We are still in an academic world characterized by a division of labor, between philosophers or political theorists who tackle the normative-theoretic questions and political scientists who grapple with empirical-theoretic questions.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR (people who inspired you, books, events, how did you conceive your ideas)?

First of all, my general interest in world politics comes from my very unconventional high school education: I spent the two years between my 14th and 16th birthdays in a car with my family travelling overland from England to India. This was in 1975-77, so we were in Iran before the revolution, in Afghanistan before the Russian invasion, etc. This extraordinary trip gave me direct experience of the complexities and inequities of global politics. Because of this experience, I went on to study international politics at university, and it probably lies behind my enduring interest in issues of international justice.

During my PhD, I worked a lot on philosophical approaches to international justice, but I was at the same time very frustrated by the limitations of this kind of scholarship. I was intellectually convinced by the logics of the arguments they put forth for international justice, but at the same time asked myself why these ideas were having so little purchase on international politics. So my interest turned to the politics of ethics. It was clear to me that ethical principles are deeply implicated in politics, and not just within the state, but which principles hold sway, and how they come to affect world politics, is far from straightforward. What has since been a theme in my work is the historical and societal contingency and distinctiveness of the ideas that shape political action. Contrary to what many scholars believe, IR is not a realm of recurrence and repetition; rather, the nature of international politics has varied considerably overtime, deeply conditioned by prevailing cultural and social contexts. Understanding this varied nature of international politics is crucial, as it brings to the fore the creative nature of human agency, though always framed and constituted by structural contexts. Once we understand this quality of human agency, it becomes much easier to talk about change, perhaps positive change, in international politics.

Developments in 'real world' politics have affected my scholarship profoundly, but there are also thinker's whose work I return to time and again, whose work I find particularly illuminating:

Quentin Skinner, the philosopher of history; Jurgen Habermas on communicative action; and historians such as Michael Adas (especially his 1989 book *Machines as the Measure of Men*, read a review [here](#)) and Euan Cameron ([The European Reformation](#)). There are also thinkers whose work I find intellectually challenging and conceptually frustrating yet difficult to escape. Hedley Bull's 1977 book *The Anarchical Society* is a good example. It's a book I disagree with in many ways, but, like others, I have found its conceptual architecture difficult to shake free.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

There's a whole range of qualities and activities that can form or inform a good student of the field. It goes without saying that keeping informed on contemporary developments through the media is important, as are having a basic sense of the history of the international system and an understanding of fundamental theories that condition how we see world politics.

But for me, the overwhelming characteristic of a good student is a critical and questioning state of mind. Students have to realize that we see and understand the world through frameworks of ideas, and that these ideas are always partial. This is hardly a controversial claim: Kenneth Waltz could agree with this as much as a critical theorist or constructivist. What it means, however, is that we have to be very self-reflective about the ideas we are employing; we have to be sensitive to the notion that these ideas are always limited, our assumptions are always merely assumptions. The fundamental attitude of the good IR scholar is, therefore, to be self-reflective about the ideas we invoke, and to always question the taken-for-granted, in our field.

This can be very empowering for students, as many of the 'givens' in the field are built upon weak foundations. A lot of very fruitful scholarship over the last 15 years has come from showing that these foundations are fragile. Take for example the whole literature on the nature of sovereignty: when I was an undergraduate student in the late 1970s and early 1980s, sovereignty was a taken for granted. We simply learnt that it referred to the supreme and absolute authority of the state---to the idea that there is a single authority within the boundaries of the state, and that the state acknowledges no higher authority beyond---and on this basis we went on to theorize and analyze international politics. But now, due to the work of a wide variety of scholars, from Jens Bartelson to Stephen Krasner ([Theory Talk #21](#)), we know that in fact sovereignty is variable, that it is a practice, and that in reality most states represent deviations from what we have learnt sovereignty to be rather than examples. And this leaves us with a very different view of international politics.

Governance-wise, we're going through interesting times in IR: everything in 2009 points towards a reshuffle of the deck of IR cards. Democracies fight wars; multipolarity is back; the financial crisis provokes intervention but of a new kind, and resource scarcity leads to panic politics. The whole globalization discourse seems curbed. Should we re-think big parts of IR theory or do we still have the theoretical tools to account for all this change?

The short answer is that we *do* need to rethink IR theory – and that goes both for more conventional theory and recent innovations. For me, this moment in international history includes very complicated mixtures of the traditional and the new. It is clear, for instance, that the

system of sovereign states persists, albeit in evolving form. It is also clear that globalization proceeds apace – it would, for instance, be impossible for us to explain the global financial crisis without the language of global economic integration. So these two things coexist, and they're overlaid with a whole series of other phenomena that we have barely got a handle on. One example of such a phenomenon is transnational agency. Yes, there has been a lot of good work done on analyzing such things as transnational advocacy networks. Yet far less work has been done on the darker sides of the same processes, for which we even lack a suitable vocabulary.

Does that mean we have to throw everything out and start again? I think the answer is clearly no – many of the theories we have developed give us a good handle on aspects of what is happening. Realism with its developed knowledge of security dilemmas, for instance, gives us a good handle on one dynamic within the system of sovereign states. But there are big areas for which we haven't developed useful frameworks of analysis. I think terrorism is a good example of this. During the 1980s, many of us focused on arms control; in the 1990s it was the environment and people re-tooled themselves as environment specialists; and since 2001 many scholars have re-tooled as terrorism experts. Good work has been done, but what we're really missing is a way of talking about where this kind of violence fits in the context of the broader international system.

For me the key question is: What kind of international system produces this kind of violence? One of the most dramatic things to have occurred since the end of the Second World War, is the decrease in the incidence of interstate warfare: it's not just a decrease in the absolute number of interstate wars, but if you look at the ratio between the number of states in the system (which has quadrupled since 1945) to the number of interstate wars, then you have a dramatic decline. At the same time, however, we are witnessing an increase in other forms of organized violence. What kind of system produces these trends in patterns of violence? As a field, I think we haven't come far at all in being able to answer such questions. So I'd say: we absolutely need innovation because we are living in a historically unique world right now. But we shouldn't throw out what we have achieved, and we should continue to import from other disciplines, like we have always done in IR.

What happened to the big debates in IR? And is their disappearance an indicator of maturity of the field or rather of an identity crisis?

Well, an underlying question here is: What exactly is IR? I'm the Head of a Department of International Relations, quite separate from the ANU's departments of political science. Yet I find myself insisting that IR becomes impoverished to the extent that it becomes isolated from the broader study of politics. I also find myself arguing that we, in my Department, study not only international relations but global politics, which means we study not just interstate relations but political phenomena that transcend and constitute state boundaries. Staying in the old box of exterior relations between states would prevent us addressing the may of the most pressing issues of contemporary world politics. This means, however, that we must live with a field that is inherently ambiguous and constantly evolving. This should not be seen as problematic, though: it's merely a reflection of the changing world that we seek to understand. For me, the field is defined by debates about the key questions we should be addressing, and as these debates shift

the parameters of the field inevitably move around, which is a healthy sign of life in my opinion.

The age of great debates between paradigms is, however, over. It is still fruitful to place the big theories in debate with each other concerning a specific issue or in teaching, it helps us understand different possible ways to tackle any issue as a heuristic device. But the problem is when such thinking becomes dominant, like it did 15 years ago: that led to a 'Cinderella syndrome', where you try and squeeze an ugly and oversized world into a beautiful theoretical glass shoe. That leaves us blind to the complexities of the world.

The last major work that attempted grand theorizing was Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* ([Theory Talk #3](#)). But the fact that so few other scholars seem inclined to engage in such theorizing reflects, I believe, a general lack of confidence about the parameters of the international/global world in which we live. When Waltz wrote his book on the structure of the international system, that system appeared much more parsimonious: a politically and even economically bipolar world is much easier to theorize in a structural kind of way than a somewhat globalized, somewhat multipolar world characterized by a host of seemingly new phenomena. It has become far more difficult for us to confidently distill the essential dynamics of this system, and this has pushed us away from grand theorizing toward middle range theorizing within a number of distinct cultures of scholarship. For better or for worse, the work of high theory is now in realm of formulating concepts and vocabularies to help us understand complexity.

As a social constructivist, perhaps you could explain me how we can demonstrate that certain 'logics' pervade the international system at different times, such as arguably liberalism at the present time. How does one demonstrate that ideas have explanatory power and yet are constituted by the practices of 'concrete' actors?

There are a number of rules of thumb that one should apply in the decision to make a constructivist argument. The *first* thing is that process tracing is incredibly important for scholars who want to make an argument of the role of ideas or values. How is it that particular ideas have come to shape the interests of the actor? How do they shape arguments between actors? And how have those ideas become more important than other ideas in shaping interests and arguments for actors? The *second* thing is dealing with alternative arguments. Part of making an argument on ideas is not only about showing that and how norms or ideas work, but it's equally fundamental to think about alternative explanations and show either how they relate to the role ideas play (ideas and material explanations do not have to conflict per definition), or how they can explain something other factors or explanations can't explain. And *thirdly*, it is important to work with counterfactuals: what would happen in the absence of the structure of argument, ideas or norms you hold to be responsible for a certain action or event? If you have an argument where you can tick those three boxes, you probably have a pretty sound argument.

Final question. You've written a piece on history through constructivist eyes. Is there anything particular about the relationship between history and constructivism in IR?

Well, actually, yes. There has been a quite radical return to the study of history in IR recently, and constructivists have been at the forefront of that tendency. In the article, I argue that the constructivist emphasis on contingency and change led them, almost inevitably, to the study of

history. The dominance of structural realist and rationalist approaches during the 1970s and 1980s tended to marginalize the study of history. Structural realists were interested in formulating law-like propositions to explain continuity in international relations, and rationalists sought to explain relations between states with reference to universal, means-ends forms of rationality. Both of these tendencies were blind to the particularity and contingency of international history, the very things that interest constructivists.

Chris Reus-Smit is Professor of International Politics and Head of the Department of International Relations. He received his PhD from Cornell University in 1995, and has been awarded fellowships and grants by the MacArthur Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the Australian Research Council, and the Social Science Research Council in New York, the Rockefeller Foundation, the European University Institute in Florence, and the British Academy. He is the author of *American Power and World Order* (Polity 2004) and *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton 1999), co-author of *Theories of International Relations* (Macmillan/Palgrave 2001, 2005, 2008), editor of *The Politics of International Law* (Cambridge 2004), and co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford 2008); *Resolving International Crises of Legitimacy* (Special Issue International Politics 2007), and *Between Sovereignty and Global Governance* (Macmillan 1998). His articles have appeared in a wide range of journals, including *International Organization*, *Review of International Studies*, *Millennium*, and *The European Journal of International Relations*. His work has been awarded both the BISA Prize (2001) and the Northedge Prize (1992) He is currently co-editor (with Nicholas Wheeler) of the Cambridge Studies in International Relations books series.

Related links

- [Faculty profile at the Australian National University](#)
- Read Reus-Smit's *The Constructivist Turn: Critical Theory after the Cold War* (1996) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Reus-Smit's *Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty* (Review of International Studies, 2001) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the Introduction of Reus-Smit's book *The Politics of International Law* (2004) [here](#) (pdf)