Critical Debates: Evolution of International Relations Theory
The Birth of IR Discipline

- IR as a subject is both old and young.
  - IR thoughts can be traced back to ancient Greece.
  - The IR discipline was born roughly in the aftermath of the First World War.

- Why?
The Birth of IR Discipline

First, there was no imperative demand for IR studies before World War I.

- IR studies really took off as an answer to the catastrophe of World War I
- E. H. Carr, “International relations took its rise from a great and disastrous war; and the overwhelming purpose which dominated and inspired the pioneers of the new science was to obviate a recurrence of this disease of the international body politic.”
The Birth of IR Discipline

- Second, there was no real supply of IR studies at the previous turn of the century.
The Birth of IR Discipline

- Third, some strong prejudices and biases impeded the emergence of IR theory.
  - Human nature was regarded as unchangeable, international politics was regarded as a subject not apt for systematic study.
  - Diplomacy was regarded as the province of politicians and ambassadors.
  - Woodrow Wilson (idealism), with his “Fourteen Points” (1918) wanted to change that.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

The Emergence of Idealism in the Aftermath of WWI

- Woodrow Wilson
  - Open diplomacy
  - Disarmament
  - Free trade
  - The League of Nations
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

- The Emergence of Idealism in the Aftermath of WWI
  - Woodrow Wilson
  - Two major ideas for a more peaceful world deserve special attention
    - Promotion of democracy and self-determination
    - Importance of international organizations as an alternative for balance of power.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

The Emergence of Idealism in the Aftermath of WWI

- Norman Angell
  *The Great Illusion* (1909)
  - Misperceptions of leaders
  - Unprofitability of wars
  - Modernization
  - Interdependence
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

- **Major arguments of idealism**
  - Human beings are rational, and when they apply reason to international relations they can set up organizations for the benefit of all.
  - National self-determination would lead to democracy and the spread of democracy would lead to peace among democratic states.
  - Liberal conviction: democratic governments do not go to war against each other.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

- Major arguments of idealism
  - Conflicts and wars are not inevitable; international laws, international organizations, economic interdependence, and world public opinion can promote peaceful cooperation among states and build peace in the world; international peace should not rely on the system of balance-of-power, but on the system of collective security.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

- The Challenges of Realism in the Interwar Years and After
  - Edward H. Carr
  - There are profound conflicts of interests between countries.
  - Idealism overlooked importance of power in international politics.
  - Collective security cannot preserve world peace.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

The Challenges of Realism in the Interwar Years and After

- Hans Morgenthau
  - Human nature is plain bad.
  - International politics is a struggle for power.
  - There is no World Government, states are sovereign and armed, provide national defense.
Major arguments of realism

International politics is governed by objective laws; the roots of those laws lie in human nature; and human nature is pure bad and does not change in the course of time.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

- **Major arguments of realism**
  - States are major actors of international politics; there are profound conflicts of interests between countries; national interests and security are primary needs of the state; to protect national interest and security, states need to develop military force; foreign policy of states put emphasis on maintenance, strengthening, and demonstration of power.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

- Major arguments of realism
  - Conflicts and wars are the natural state of international relations; states live in a state of anarchy; there is no world government; international organization cannot bring security to the world; the most effective way to preserve international peace is to rely on the balance of power.
The First Debate: Idealism vs. Realism

The Foci of the First Debate

- Human nature
- Power and interest
- War and peace
- Ontology (nature of international politics)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects of the First Debate (1920s-1950s)</th>
<th>Idealism/Utopianism</th>
<th>Realism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Nature</strong></td>
<td>Rational; shaped by environment; perfectible</td>
<td>pure bad; does not change over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Behavior</strong></td>
<td>self-determination – democracy – peace; harmony of interests</td>
<td>military – national security – peace; conflicts of interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Arrangement</strong></td>
<td>international institutions and collective security promote peace</td>
<td>international peace relies on balance of power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach</strong></td>
<td>ought to be ideal – reality</td>
<td>what is reality – ideal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BOX 2.7  First major debate in IR

**Utopian liberalism**

1920s

*Focus:*

international law
international organization
interdependence
cooporation
peace

**Realist response**

1930s–1940s–1950s

*Focus:*

power politics
security
aggression
conflict
war
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

The Behavioral Revolution

- The behavioral revolution proposed to use scientific methods in the study of social sciences.
- Behavioralism differs from behaviorism, which is a psychological theory of human behavior.
- Behavioralism is an approach in political science, which emerged in the 1930s in the United States. It represents a sharp break from traditional political science.
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

The Behavioral Revolution

- The difference with the traditional approach is that it emphasizes an objective, quantified approach to explain and predict political behavior.

- It is associated with the rise of the behavioral sciences, modeled after the natural sciences. This means that behavioralism claims it can explain political behavior from an unbiased, neutral point of view.
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

- The basic assumptions of behaviouralism
  - Humans behave in patterned ways.
  - These patterns can be used to study human behaviors.
  - By using systematic and empirical data in value-free studies, the patterns of human behavior can be found.
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

The Controversy between Behavioralism and Traditionalism

- The behavioralists criticized both idealists and (classical) realists as arrogant because they did not embrace scientific methodology.
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

The Controversy between Behavioralism and Traditionalism

The behavioralists therefore labeled realism and idealism as traditionalism and behavioralism as scientism, namely the view that empirical science is the only reliable source of knowledge.
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

- The traditionalists insist that understanding IR requires historically based wisdom rather than data-based models.
- They remain convinced that the essence of IR is qualitatively different from the world of nature and are skeptical of efforts at predicting.
- They reject scientism.
The traditionalists criticized the behavioralists for:

- being too confident of generalizing models;
- taking abstract models for realities;
- overlooking crucial qualitative differences;
- placing scientific method over substantive issues of international politics.
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

The Essence of the Second Debate

Behavioralism and traditionalism disagree on:

• Can we have formal, mathematical, explicit theories of international political phenomena?
• Can the study of IR be quantified?
• Is a “value free” scientific approach applicable to the study of IR?
The Second Debate: Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism

- The Essence of the Second Debate
  - The second debate was a debate about methodology, about how IR should be studied.
  - The first debate was over substantial arguments, statements and conclusions about IR. It was a debate about what drives international politics.
BOX 2.10 Second major debate in IR

Traditional approaches

**Focus:**
understanding:
  norms and values
judgement
historical knowledge
Theorist inside subject

Behaviouralist response

**Focus:**
explaining:
hypothesis
collection of data
scientific knowledge
Theorist outside subject
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

- The Advent of Neorealism
  - Kenneth Waltz
  - *Theory of International Politics* (1979)
    - Structural realism or neorealism
    - Structure of international politics
  - The advent of neorealism is innovative on two dimensions: methodology and theory.
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

Methodology:

- Neorealism incorporates the scientific method into the realist paradigm.
- One aim of neorealism is to construct a scientific theory of international politics.
- According to neorealism, both qualitative and quantitative analyses are indispensable.
- Strong emphasis on deduction and importance of theory.
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

• Theory: (differences from traditional realism)
  • First, neorealism defines international politics as a system and stresses the primacy of structure over the units (states).
  →Defining factors of structure are the ordering principle, the functional differentiation of units, and the distribution of capabilities across the units.
The Third Debate:
Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

- Theory: (differences from traditional realism)
  - Second, neorealism pays close attention to the system level, while classical realism concentrates on the state and individual level.
  - Neorealism: only by distinguishing the structural level from the unit level, can causal relations or recurring patterns of behavior in international politics be scientifically explained.
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

Theory: (differences from traditional realism)
• Third, classical realism considers power as the ultimate goal of states and insists that power seeking is rooted in human nature.
  → Neorealism argues that the ultimate goal of states is security (survival), not power.
  → States are concerned about relative power, not absolute power; they are not power maximizers.
  → So power is a means, not the ultimate goal.
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

- Theory: (differences from traditional realism)
  - Fourth, neorealism stresses the impact of structure on actors in shaping policies, in contrast with classical realism’s emphasis on the impact of actors on structure.

→ Neorealism regards interactions among states as shaped by the international structure.
Waltz’s baseline model

Structure

Units (states)
Structure

Anarchy (constant)
Functional differentiation $\rightarrow$ 0 (constant)
Power distribution (variable)

Units (states): recurring patterns of behaviour
- balancing
- sensitivity to relative gains
Waltz’s logic

Anarchy

Self-help

Security dilemma

Balance of power mechanism

Competition

Relative gains

Instability/risk of war/difficulty of international cooperation
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

OPponents’ Criticism and the Advent of Neoliberalism

- Neoliberalism follows from the criticism of neorealism.
  - Nye, “Neorealism and Neoliberalism” (1988)
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism’s criticism of neorealism:
- Neorealism ignores non-state actors and overlooks differences among state actors.
- Neorealism fails to take system processes and interactions among actors into consideration.
- Neorealism spares and sacrifices the interpretive richness of classical realism.
The Third Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism

- Major Points of Contention between Neorealism and Neoliberalism
  - First, the nature and consequences of anarchy.
  - Second, international cooperation.
  - Third, relative versus absolute gains.
  - Fourth, priority of state goals.
  - Fifth, intentions versus capabilities.
  - Sixth, institutions and regimes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anarchy</th>
<th>Neorealism</th>
<th>Neoliberalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not much we can do about as it is the constant ordering principle of the system</td>
<td>A big problem which can be overcome by international institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International cooperation</td>
<td>Cooperation is possible but difficult to sustain.</td>
<td>Cooperation is possible and can be expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative gains vs. absolute gains</td>
<td>Relative gains are the major concern of states, who ask not “will both of us gain?” but “who will gain more?”</td>
<td>States are mainly concerned with absolute gains, which makes cooperation more likely.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Absolute gains**

As long as we do well it doesn't matter if others do even better.

*Example:* The United States economy grows by 25% over the next decade; China grows by 75%.

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**Relative gains**

We will do our best, but number one priority is that the others don't get ahead of us.

*Example:* The United States economy grows by 10% over the next decade; China grows by 10.3%.

The American that chooses the latter scenario over the first is concerned with relative gains.
Absolute vs. relative gains

- Neoliberals stress absolute gains

**Neoliberal** utility function: \( U_1 = V_1 \)

- Neorealists stress relative gains

**Realist** utility function: \( U_1 = V_1 - k(V_2 - V_1) \)

\( k > 0 \)
- small in case of security community, ally
- big in case of conflict of interest; enemy

Gain state 1
Sensitivity to relative gains
Gain state 1
Gain state 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Differences between Neorealism and Neoliberalism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Priority of goals</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neorealism: National security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberalism: National economic prosperity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intentions vs. capabilities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neorealism: The distribution of states’ capabilities is the primary determinant of their behavior and international outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberalism: Intentions, interests, information, and ideals of states are more influential than the distribution of capabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutions and regimes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neorealism: Organizations are arenas where states carry out traditional competition and political rivalry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberalism: Institutions create norms that commit states and that change patterns of international politics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Fourth Debate: Debate among/within Paradigms

- Widening and Deepening of the Debate
  - The debate changed from bilateral to multilateral, not only among paradigms, but also within the realist paradigm.
  - With the end of the cold war, many new theories or variants emerged.
  - Neoliberalism, radicalism, critical theory.
  - Offensive, defensive, and neoclassical realisms.
The Fourth Debate: 
Debate among Paradigms

- Realist Paradigm and Its Rivals
  - The realist paradigm is the major and common critical target of others.
  - The fourth debate is mainly conducted:
    - Between realism and liberalism (neoliberal institutionalism)
    - Between realism and radicalism
    - Between realism and critical theory
The Fourth Debate: 
Debate among Paradigms

- Realism vs. neoliberal institutionalism
  - Institutions becomes the most eminent focus of their debate.
  - On whether institutions affect prospects for international stability, realists say no, neoliberal institutionalists say yes.
  - Realists see institution as intervening variable, institutionalists see it as independent variable.
The Fourth Debate: 
Debate among Paradigms

- Realism vs. radicalism
  - Different perspectives on the international system are the most important point of contention.
  - Realists: international system is anarchical and determined by the distribution of states’ capabilities.
  - Radicals: the structure of international system is hierarchical, stratified, and dominated by the capitalist system.
The Fourth Debate: Debate among Paradigms

- Realism vs. radicalism
  - While realism regards state as the major actor of international politics, radicalism argues that classes are the major actors.
  - Realists attempt to explain state behavior by both international structure and state interest defined as power.
  - Radicals assume that economics is the primary determining factor of state behavior.
The Fourth Debate: 
Debate among Paradigms

- Realism vs. critical theory
  - The role of ideas and identity is the key issue dividing critical theory and realism.
  - While realism emphasizes power and interests, critical theory stresses ideas and identities.
  - Realists define the structure of system as the distribution of power. Constructivists see it as the distribution of ideas.
The Fourth Debate: Debate among Paradigms

- Realism vs. critical theory
  - The constructivists argue that anarchy is not a given but what states make of it.
  - The postmodernists seek to deconstruct basic concepts such as the state and sovereignty.
  - Feminist theory criticizes realism for ignoring the importance of gender.
The Fourth Debate: Debate within Paradigms

- Offensive, defensive, and neoclassical realisms
  - Offensive realists assume all states are power maximizers.
  - Defensive realists assume all states are security maximizers.
  - Neoclassical realists argue that some are power maximizers and some security maximizers.
The Fourth Debate: 
Debate among/within Paradigms

- Implications of the Forth Debate
  - The forth debate as an ongoing debate is very comprehensive and diffuse.
  - The debate between realist and liberal paradigms is still the core and mainstay.
  - There is no winner or loser in the debate and all theoretical paradigms seem to make progress.
  - IR theory has really become pluralistic.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>1st debate</th>
<th>2nd debate</th>
<th>3rd debate</th>
<th>4th debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>1920s-50s</td>
<td>1960s-70s</td>
<td>1980s-</td>
<td>1990s-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm</td>
<td>Idealism / Utopianism vs. Realism</td>
<td>Behavioralism vs. Traditionalism</td>
<td>Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism</td>
<td>Among Realism, Liberalism, Radicalism, Critical Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>bilateral</td>
<td>bilateral</td>
<td>bilateral</td>
<td>multilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Human nature, state behavior, international arrangement.</td>
<td>Methodology.</td>
<td>Anarchy, cooperation, gains, goals, intentions, institutions, etc.</td>
<td>Actors, ideas, institutions, anarchy, system, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Sum: Developing and Learning Theories through Debates

- While IR theory is a theoretical reflection of international politics, its development also follows its own logic.
- The progress of IR theory was to an important extend driven by theoretical debates.
- Debating is the way of theory development and the way of learning international politics theoretically as well.