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International Relations’ Theoretical Cycles: The Search for an Archimedean Point

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ABSTRACT

The study of international relations (IR) is characterized by several key theoretical debates. Each marks an attempt to search for a new Archimedean point — an objective ground that can act as a common framework for the entire scholarly community. IR’s Archimedean point has consistently shifted over time, in reactionary cycles. This article examines the relationship between the neo-neo debate (neorealism and neoliberalism) and critical theory, while evoking Caspar David Friedrich’s painting, “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” as a visual representation. It argues that the consistently reactive cycle of international relations theories is perpetuated by the search for an Archimedean point in a ‘disenchanted’ world. This article is structured in three main sections; it will begin with an introduction of IR theory, particularly the neo-neo debate. It will subsequently discuss the neo-neo synthesis — where the two schools of thought converge at an Archimedean point. Finally, it will dissect the rise of critical theory in response to the synthesis.

International Relations (IR) theorists recognize that the development of the field is characterized by several pivotal debates. Each marks an attempt to search for a new Archimedean point — an objective ground that can act as a common framework for the entire scholarly community. An Archimedean point can be understood as a conventional wisdom, unassuming truth, or common

ABSTRACT (continued)

fundamentals that a field agrees on. Throughout the development of IR, its Archimedean point has shifted from utopian aspirations to pessimistic reality, from historical interpretation to positivist scientism, from consistent framework to fragmentation.

Examining the relationship between the neorealism-neoliberalism debate (hereafter referred to as the neo-neo debate) and critical theory, this article argues that the consistently reactive cycle of international relations theories is caused and perpetuated by the constant search for an Archimedean point in a disenchanted world. ‘Disenchantment’ is a term popularized by German sociologist Max Weber to describe ‘rationalized’, ‘modernized’, and ‘secularized’ post-Enlightenment societies (Chua 2016). Disenchantment refers to the abandonment of religion and the adoption of scientism and humanism — Weber posits that our modern society represents a disenchanted world.

Critical theory in IR emphasizes that an acceptance of the existing Archimedean point reinforces a global liberal-capitalist status quo which marginalizes other states, and is unable to bring meaningful change. Critical theory, therefore, seeks to diversify theoretical grounds and advance IR thinking in a manner that can support the liberation of marginalized groups. While critical theory’s diverse Archimedean points have led to disciplinary fragmentation, postmodernist views have eliminated the possibility of Archimedean points altogether — arguing that conventional wisdom is merely an artificial displacement and simulation. In the concluding section, piecing together all the theoretical shifts from neo-neos to postmodernism, I will demonstrate that IR’s search for Archimedean points is a result of the disenchantment of the social sciences.

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An Introduction to IR Theory

IR theory's origin lies in the classical realist school of thought, which posits that states seek to maximize power above all other goals (Baylis and Smith 2001, 95). Realists posit that states are insecure, competitive, and self-interested — constantly in conflict with each other as a means of accumulating increased wealth and power. Liberalism emerged in the 20th century as a challenge to realist views. It rejects the notion that all political activity is governed by states' desires to increase their power. Instead, it emphasizes the role of domestic politics in determining international policy, and focuses on the benefits attainable from cooperation between states — such as international trade, military deterrence, and the spread of democracy. Together, realism and liberalism are considered the traditionalist IR theories.

Neorealism and neoliberalism emerged from a behaviourist critique to traditionalist theories. Behaviourism argues that traditionalist theories are too dependent on historical interpretive approaches — that is, they were advanced solely by the analysis of past events. Instead, behaviourist scholars sought to apply the research methods of the natural sciences to IR, emphasizing observation, empirical testing, causality, and falsification. Neorealists theorized that inter-state relations are chaotic because states have no guarantee of security in an anarchic global system. The term 'anarchic' refers to the fact that there is no global sovereign state to govern the activities of individual governments — instead, the global political system resembles a country devoid of a government at all. In essence, states engage in conflict as a

means of achieving security, rather than as an attempt to accumulate power. Neoliberal scholars also recognize the anarchic nature of the international system, but they argue that global cooperation between states is possible through international institutions. In their view, global cooperation is sustainable and will ultimately lead to improved economic integration, reduction of state-state conflict, and the remedying of global issues, such as climate change (Keohane et al. 2011, 1). Neoliberalism in IR is separate from liberalism as a political philosophy, despite regrettably sharing the same name.

The Neo-Neo Debate

The first venue of debate between neorealism and neoliberalism is the understanding of the extent to which cooperation between countries is possible. Neorealism emerged as an evolution out of the realist school through Kenneth Waltz's seminal work, *Theory of International Politics*. Neorealism adopts a more 'scientific' approach while retaining realist assumptions about power and conflict (Pfefferle 2016). Through focusing on the anarchic systemic structure, Waltz adopts a deductive approach and reorients realism. Rather than using state motivations to explain behaviour, Waltz focuses on the security-stripping anarchic structure of the global system which all states are subject to (Pfefferle 2016). The rational assumption and structural emphasis resemble methodologies of natural sciences. Waltz conceptualizes the international system as "a structure of constraints to which no [state] is immune" (Hoffman 1987, 70). All states' primary concern under such a system is security;

therefore, they will never consider cooperation unless security is assured — which is nearly impossible. Thus, it is a self-reproducing anarchic structure, which fosters competition and makes cooperation unlikely.

In contrast, the neoliberal view argues that state cooperation is, to a certain extent, possible through international institutions. They disagree with the neorealist claim that the anarchic system is self-reinforcing. Instead, neoliberal scholars argue that states reside in an interdependent world, where they “will seek efficiency in managing collective problems presented by international anarchy” (Kay 2006, 62). Therefore, neoliberalism is rooted in economic theories; it argues that economic interdependence will lead to political integration, creating interest alignment between states, and cooperation on these shared interests in international institutions (Baylis and Smith 2001, 213).

Therefore, by seeking international institutions to establish cooperation in areas of mutual interest, Neoliberal scholars believe that states can alleviate the issues that emerge from anarchy (Lamy 2001, 132). For instance, the European Union is a community of states founded on principles of economic integration which then gradually evolved into political integration. In short, neoliberals have a different perception of the role of international regimes as compared to neorealists. While neoliberal scholars believe that international institutions can facilitate cooperation amid the anarchy of the international system, neorealists maintain that such constraints cannot be mitigated at all.

Another key disagreement between the neo-neos lies in understanding states’ patterns of

behaviour. For neoliberals, states are “egoistic value maximizers” who operate on principles of absolute gains (Baldwin 1993, 9). Specifically, they only seek to maximize personal interests and are indifferent about other states’ gains (Baldwin 1993, 9). They are willing to cooperate — but only as long as they will benefit from it. On the other hand, neorealists argue that state competition is dictated by relative gains — that is, states judge their position in the global system only in comparison to other states. Therefore, states’ willingness to cooperate depends on “how well their competitors do” (Hasenclever et al. 2006, 84). In other words, a state is less likely to cooperate if the other party is expected to gain more from it.

Overall, neoliberalism and neorealism share a similar assumption regarding the anarchic nature of the international system but have different interpretations about how states act within it. The neo-neos diverge on the potential for cooperation, the effectiveness of international institutions, and the states’ behaviour amid anarchy.

Converging Archimedean Point: Neo-Neo Synthesis

The neo-neo synthesis critique was pioneered by Danish political scientist Ole Waever. He states that traditional schools of thought, such as realism and liberalism, all embarked from different ontological, methodological, and epistemological grounds. They focus on different actors, and have separate conceptions of reality. Meanwhile, neorealism emerged in response to behaviourist critiques, and liberalist views of interdependence. It is a relaunch

of realism, tailored to dodging these critiques by incorporating a more scientific approach (Waever 2009, 162; Paoletti 2011). Waever observes that liberalism followed a similar trajectory by narrowing its focus to the impact of domestic politics and institutions on state cooperation. As a ‘neo-evolution’ of the original theory, neoliberalist scholars claim that increased interdependence will lead to a decline in states’ sovereignty and militarization, while state networking will facilitate foreign policies and cultural exchange. Neoliberalism accepts the assumption of anarchic structure and seeks testable hypotheses to counter neorealism on state cooperation (Waever 2009, 163). Therefore, both theories ameliorate their predecessors by incorporating scientism. Both consider the anarchic international system to be the independent variable conditioning the behaviour of the dependent variable — the states (Paoletti 2011). In short, they are ultimately grounded in the same structural assumptions and scientific approach.

Recognizing this convergence, many scholars argue that the neo-neo debate offers no practical advancements to the field of IR, because the two sides share a very similar foundation. Each theory employs scientific methods to garner legitimacy, while anything outside of such a framework is deemed meaningless. The practice of studying IR in the same manner as natural sciences is already questionable, not to mention its operationalization as a method to privilege the concerns of dominating powers and exclude other states. In a sense, they are reinforcing the system created by dominating powers. Waever writes that “both [schools of

thought] underwent a self-limiting redefinition towards an anti-metaphysical, theoretical minimalism” (2009). In other words, by passively taking the fundamental assumptions as intrinsic conditions of the system, they only maintain different interpretations about superficial aspects of IR such as institutions, economic interdependence, and the military (Pfefferle 2016). Establishing themselves on the same Archimedean point, they fall into a trivial spiral of debate, failing to advance the field of IR.

The Rise of Critical Theory

IR critical theory is the most notable critique of the neo-neos’ epistemological practices. It seeks to transform the existing capitalist-oriented international system to advance values of equality and social justice in global politics. Canadian political scientist Robert Cox challenges the rationalists to expand their vision beyond independent state and power struggles because it reinforces domination and coercion. Rather than conforming to the rationalist pursuit for one unchanging absolute truth, Cox writes that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (1981, 128). In other words — theories of the world system are constructed by powerful actors to serve hegemonic purposes. They use IR theory to create narratives that acquire them legitimacy, resulting in entitlement and privilege. In response to the neo-neo synthesis, critical theorists argue that passively accepting the anarchic system as an unchanging fact generates constraints. Any new theoretical thoughts beyond this assumption are deemed illegitimate and will be excluded in the IR theoretical debate. Therefore, the neo-neos

are limited in explaining change, and do not adequately tackle new challenges.

Nancy Fraser states that contemporary political struggle consists of two aspects: recognition and redistribution. Recognition refers to the aspiration for “freedom and justice connected to gender, sexuality, race, and national recognition” (Ferreira 2018). Therefore, in response to the synthesis, critical theory seeks to include marginalized voices. Critical theory pursues liberation and equality through empowering the powerless. It seeks to overcome injustice in the global order by questioning the fundamental claims about its structure. As a result, diverging from the positivist approach, many new Archimedean points such as gender analysis and class analysis have prevailed. Critical theory has shifted IR theory from an Archimedean point to dispersed and fragmented grounds.

Critical theory marks the transition from the also connects to the postmodernist trend. Postmodernists “seek to deconstruct the traditional international relations framework by uncovering the assumptions and artificial construction of political identities” (Constantinou 1994, 22). Specifically, postmodernists seek to and call the “language, concepts, methods, and history” of the field into question (Der Derian 1988, 189). It is difficult to develop a summary of postmodernist theories given their complexity and variety. However, we should highlight Der Derian’s notion of the ‘crisis of modernity’, where “the legitimacy of tradition suffers on several counts, the unifying belief in progress fragments, and conventional wisdom becomes one of many competing rituals of power used

to discipline [international] society” (Derian 1988, 189). In other words, while critical theorists stress that there should never be a single Archimedean point, the postmodernists argue that we may never have had a real Archimedean point at all. Despite critical theory’s effort to diversify the field, its fragmentation led postmodernists to recognize that our theoretical grounds have always been changing, depending on the time and context. Extending on the critical theorist view of domination and legitimacy, postmodernists argue that Archimedean points are merely displaced reality composed by symbols and signs. In other words, an illusion produced by a dominating power to discipline international society. Therefore, the postmodernists seek to “undermine the fundamental tenets of the traditional, state centric international theories, leaving a theoretical vacuum in their wake” (Pickard, 2012). Indeed, the field moved from critical theorists’ multiple Archimedean points to having no core foundations at all. The postmodernist view eliminates the possibility of universal grounds.



Figure 1. “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” by Caspar David Friedrich.

Piecing it All Together: Searching for an Archimedean Point in a Disenchanted World

The reactive cycle of IR debates is perpetuated by the constant search for an Archimedean point. It started from utopian aspirations to pessimistic reality, then from historical interpretation to positivist scientism, from consistent framework to fragmentation. Nonetheless, after a period of searching and testing, the scholarship finally synthesized its epistemological common ground.

On a broader perspective, the search for an Archimedean point in IR scholarship is a product of disenchantment. As Enlightenment scholarship eliminated religious influence, social science studies needed new epistemological grounds for scholars to achieve consensus on. Specifically, the Enlightenment has eroded religious beliefs — we now put faith in science and seek to explain the world in rational terms (Chua 2016). Nietzsche wrote that “God is dead” (Hendricks 2022) because we eliminated the possibility of His existence through the Enlightenment’s rationalization of human life. IR’s search for a theoretical lever can be visualized by Caspar David Friedrich’s painting “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” (Figure 1). The painting illustrates a man, standing alone on a peak, feeling lost in a sea of fog. The man persists to arrive here because of his desire to elevate himself from the limited and subjective perspective found on the ground. He aspires for a clear and complete glimpse of the world from the above and beyond: an objective view. His longing and searching are perpetuated by a curious need to ‘know’, and the need for truth. Instead, he becomes increasingly lost, discov-

ering a sea of fog. Just as the desire for an epistemological lever perpetuated IR theorists to move from one peak to another — from idea to reality, from interpretations to observations, from consistency to fragmentation — each debate marks a more elevated peak than the last one. As we stand on the assumed highest ground of scientism and empirical rationality, we are lost in theoretical fragmentation — like being lost in a sea of fog. In summary, IR’s reactive cycle of debates is perpetuated by the constant search for an Archimedean point in a disenchanted world.

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