

UTILITY AND FUTILITY OF THE THEORIZATION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Essay written in May 2000 for the Philosophy and Methodology of International Relations course given by Pr. G. Geeraerts at the Brussels School of International Studies.

Released on the web at <http://tomdsm.multimania.com/analyses.html>

The International Relations discipline is full of theories which are either in the continuity with the past or a kind of revolution in the history of thought. Different theories can explain the same events or phenomena with totally divergent means and lead to very opposite conclusions... What theory is the right one, why the other is wrong or false? The first question that we have to ask is "what is the purpose of a theory in International Relations?". A theory can be a series of causal links, like chemical formulas. For instance, the probability that two democratic countries wage war on each other is not high. We know that the International Relations discipline is not a science because human beings are not things; they are both observers and subjects of the discipline. So the application of scientific method to elaborate a theory in International Relations could be seen as dubious. Anyway, to answer to the question of the purpose of such a theory, I would argue that there exist two kinds of theories: descriptive theories and constructive theories¹. The former is quite close to a historical work. The latter has rather a utopian purpose. The descriptive theories are useful in a historical prospect, in order to understand why such wars occurred within a given context, for instance. The normative theories make suggestions about what we should do; how the decision-makers have to behave in order to promote peace, reduce inequities and so on. The same theory can be at the beginning constructive and become progressively descriptive. For instance in the 19th century, the realist paradigm and its concept of "balance of powers" was born in order to maintain stability in Europe. Now this paradigm is still advocated by some authors but it is no more related to the actual facts; it has become an historical theory of International Relations. Both kinds of theories have a part of utility and a part of futility. The futility of the realist paradigm today is that it is too far from the actuality and can only be useful to build the future just as the history does. The futility of new theories that set up kinds of utopia is that it could be completely useless, looking too far in the future without taking into account the actual reality and therefore this theory would never been followed. The utility of such a theory is important if it looks both to the future and to the present: how to build a better world, given the current situation.

In order to discuss about the theorization in International Relations, I will first ask the question of the possibility of the existence of theories in International Relations (I); then I will explain how a theory can be meaningful (II).

¹ The term "constructive" here means that the theory bring some ideas in order to build the future design of international relations; I could use the term "normative" ("what we should do?") but it refers too much the concept of ethics in International Relations.

I. ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF THEORIZING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

I will first expose the different methodologies of the elaboration of theories (A); then, I will argue that the theorization of International Relations today is becoming more and more complex (B).

A. The methodologies of the elaboration of theories

How we know what we know? How we know that what we know is the truth? Such questions are the essence of the epistemology of International Relations, i.e. the core-issue of the theorization. The positivist scope is the most common today (at least the neo-positivist). Though the neo-positivism is divided in different categories (logicism, verificationism, etc.) the common ground is that the international relations can be explained by empirical observations (so this stream of thought is closed to the natural sciences methodology). The positivism does not look to the future, it does not tell us "what we should do" but only expose the ontology of the international relations: "what is it". This method (observations lead to conclusions, general law, through repetitions) is very interesting because it describe as neutrally as possible the actual design of the international relations. The objective purpose of this method is very useful in terms of what we could call "facts-finding". If we want a guideline that tells us what to do for a better future, the positivist observations are not very useful. In other words, we can say that it is useful for short-term actions but futile for long-term projects.

Popper² argues that it is impossible to draw general laws from observations. He proposes first to imagine a theory and then verify it in the reality. This theory can be "falsified" by the facts; that is what we call the "falsificationism"; we cannot know what is true but well what is false.

Another question is the one of the evolution of a theory; how a theory evolves? In brief, authors like Kuhn³ argue that structural or social factors influence the changes of paradigms. The concept of "research program" explained by Lakatos⁴ is very interesting. It argues that the process of falsification does not lead automatically to the abandon of the tested paradigm. So a theory can evolve even if some elements are falsified. Indeed a hardcore of assumptions remains around which the paradigm can evolve and be adapted to the international changes. This theory tells that a paradigm in International Relations can remain as long as it is able to bring some news.

In accordance with Spinoza, International Relations is a discipline within the theory is very far from the reality⁵. It is this gap between theory and reality that leads to the issue of the utility of the theorization of international relations. This question is particularly acute today, since the international relations are faster and faster shifting and since the actors of international relations are less and less stable and easily definable.

² POPPER Karl R., *The logic of scientific discovery*, Hutchinson & Co, London, 1959

³ KUHN Thomas, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962

⁴ LAKATOS Imre, "Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes", in LAKATOS Imre & MUSGRAVE Alan (eds.), *Criticism and the growth of knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1970

⁵ Cited in ROCHE Jean-Jacques, *Théorie des relations internationales*, 3rd edition, Montchrestien, Paris, 1999, p.15

B. The need of a wider scope in theorization today

Is the realist research program still useful? Can the hardcore of the theory still be conflicted with the reality without being strongly falsified? I do not think so. Indeed some of the major basic assumptions of the realist paradigm are that the state is the only actor in the international relations; that the actors are rational; the state of nature; etc. It is becoming obsolete. Indeed with the globalisation, the development of new technologies and so on, the number and nature of actors are evolving very quickly, their ways of doing things are no more led only by the national interests etc. But even the recent theories are susceptible to be quite rapidly obsolete. So, the theorization of international relations today is becoming more and more difficult. The new theories have to take into account new actors, new fields that have been internationalised, the rhythm of exchanges (of all kinds) which is growing fast... How to explain ethnic conflicts with the realist theory? There are no answers at all in the realist paradigm concerning the internal conflicts. Within a positivist scope, a theory is becoming less and less useful since the facts, objectively observed and that lead to laws, are faster and faster changing. On the contrary, the positivist way of work is exemplary in the sense that it constantly refers to the actuality, and for that reason it is very useful. What are in certain circumstances less useful are the general laws drawn from these observations. I would be close to positivism as for the importance given to the observation of the reality, but close to Popper's thought as for the impossibility of generalization and close to the Lévi-Strauss' word: "l'illusion inductive"⁶.

II. THE UTILITY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DISCIPLINE

A theory of international relations is to have as primary goal to influence the decision-makers in order to build a future (utopian?) peaceful world. I do not consider the International Relations as a purely academic discipline that would be the sole right of a handful of recognized scholars. It has to be politicised in the noble meaning of the term (i.e. "to get its hands dirty", to be confronted to the reality), and so it has to be a guideline to those who decide, in the reality, of the present and future of international relations. First of all, I will argue that, the new theories today not only have to be of a wider scope but also have to loose any rigidity and be very flexible. Then I will show that in order to give projects to decision-makers, a theory has to look to the future and not to the past.

⁶ Cited in ROCHE Jean-Jacques, *Théorie des relations internationales*, 3rd edition, Montchrestien, Paris, 1999, p.16

A. A flexible theory

The theory (or rather "a" theory) has to evolve as rapidly as the reality of international relations evolves. It has to be constantly updated and follow the frantic development of the international politics. A theory has to take into account all the actors playing an important role on the international scene, i.e. states, international organizations, NGOs, multinational corporations, lobbies, individuals, etc. All these actors have functions in international politics. Probably states still act for their national interests, but they are no more alone. International organizations more and more encroach on the state-sovereignty and have their own interests and functions. NGOs are playing an increasing role in defining the agenda of decision-makers and in relaying the people's wants. MNCs have a crucial leverage power in several issues in international politics. The individuals have more and more their say and not to consider them as such could lead to conflicts. The main topic of the international relations is the conflicts: how they occur and why, how to prevent them? Since the conflicts (very often internal) are more and more complexes in their causes, in their resolutions; since, unhappily they are very bloody and the civilians are the first targets, the theories have to be relevant in analysing each case. I mean that each conflict has to be treated as a single case that hardly can be explained by general laws. In other words, a theory has to be non-assertive and open to adaptations.

B. A guidance to decision-making process: a look to the future

The utility of an International Relations theory is to understand the present and help to build the future. Other theories are to be classified in the discipline of History which is very noble and of course essential for International Relations, but do not provide any framework in which decision-makers could find a guideline to build the international politics. I must here precise that I do not consider that a theory has to be determinist in its purpose. That could be seen as contradictory with the advocating of theories that provide guidelines to the future. In fact, it is not paradoxical since I mentioned that such a theory has to be very flexible and that it is its essence to be changed in order to follow the international politics rhythm. Determinism is what causes the rigidity of a theory and its obsolescence (Waltz⁷ and Morgenthau⁸ are determinist in their realist way of analysing international relations). A theory cannot tell what will automatically happen if a certain event would occur. No certain assertions can be made about the future of international politics. The future will be what the Humanity will want to do. I think there are no other forces in international politics than the will of a big number of decision-makers of all kinds (heads of states, chiefs of rebels, chairman director of MNCs, members of lobbies and other citizens groups such as NGOs, local authorities, and so on). So, if the purpose of International Relations discipline is to influence these decision-makers, at all kinds of levels, it has to provide projects for the future and acute analyses of the current international relations. Theories have to draw goals, and guidelines to suggest the means of reaching these goals. Theories especially have to be always in concordance with the reality; if a theory moves away from the actuality of international politics, it loses all its credibility and becomes futile.

⁷ WALTZ Kenneth, *Theory of international politics*, Addison-Wesley, 1983

⁸ MORGENTHAU Hans J., *Politics among nations, the struggle for power and peace*, Alfred Knopf, New-York, 1985

CONCLUSION

Do such theories exist? Probably the theories dealing with conflict prevention issue are close to "useful" theories as defined above, since they deal with individuals' needs, they put the priority on facts-finding, they look to the future in providing guidelines to avoid conflicts, they have to be flexible and close to the reality in order to be relevant... Anyway, each theory that can be confronted to the reality and then provide clever analyses and guidelines to solve a problem is to be enhanced since its utility ought to be fast recognized. On the contrary, each theory that seems to provide obsolete analyses of a certain situation in world politics, or that does not take into account important actors; such theory cannot provide relevant guidance to decision-makers whose actions would be biased by misunderstandings. The futility of such theories will also fast be identifiable.

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