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The Fourth Great Debates In International Relations Theories: Rationalist Versus Reflectivism

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Abstract: *With the emergence of fourth great debates in 1980s, In the late 1980s, as one of the major figures of the 'fourth debate', Robert Keohane argued that"the greatest weakness of the reflective school of international relations lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective program that could be employed by students of world politics." He further suggested that "until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues of world politics they will remain on the margins of the field*

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Introduction

International relations theory refers to the study of transnational relations by the use of theoretical perspectives. Great debates refer to intellectual clashes that occurred amongst scholars due to conflicting theories that were developed in an attempt to explain the history and development of international relations. One group of scholars and their proponents initiated a scholarly battle against another group of scholars and their supporters (Rodrigo, 2022).

Since its foundation as a discipline, there have been four so-called 'major/great debates' in the International Relations (IR) theory literature. The first was in the interwar period, between realism and idealism about the role of international institutions and the causes as well as prevention of war. The second debate emerged in the 1960s between traditionalists (a more interpretivist/historicist methodology) and behavioralists (arguing for a scientific methodology) on the question of a 'scientific methodology' of International Relations. By the 1970s-80s positivism had become the dominant way of thinking in International Relations. This also corresponds when the third debate (the inter-paradigm debate) emerged between Realism, Marxism and Pluralism. In mid-1980s the debate between rationalist and reflectivist approaches, which has mainly developed around the issue of science in the history of International Relations, has started"(Keohane 1988: 392 : Cagla Luleci & I. Erkam Sula, 2016).

In the late 1980s, as one of the major figures of the 'fourth debate', Robert Keohane (1988: 392) argued that"the greatest weakness of the reflective school of international relations lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective program that could be employed by students of world politics." He further suggested that "until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues of world politics they will remain on the margins of the field, largely invisible to the preponderance of empirical researchers"(Keohane 1988: 392). This argument has been one of the initiators of the above-mentioned debate between rationalism and reflectivism.

Contextualizing the first three 'Great Debates'

Even when the sole idea of 'Great Debates' has been debated in return, there is no denying that it can help people picture how the theoretical developments in the field occurred, and roughly group the dissonances between them. Casting aside the contentious nature of the debates, they can be understood in the following order, according to Lake (2013, pp. 569-570):The first 'Great Debate' developed around World War II, and it encompasses the discussions between realism and idealism, where the latter prevailed in an early stage before its dominance was taken over by the former(Lake, 2013, pp. 569-570:Rodrigo, 2022).

The second 'Great Debate' consisted of the dichotomy of traditionalism versus behaviorism that took place in the1960s, where the former addressed the complex nature of world politics and the latter emphasized the observation of patterns shared across similar events. The third 'Great Debate', on the other hand, is harder to pinpoint because it overlaps with the fourth debate. It is generally agreed that it occurred in the 1970s and consists of a discussion between liberalism, realism, and radicalism. The first two theories are the precursor of rationalist theories, whereas radicalism influenced reflectivist theories, which would be, later on, at the center of the fourth 'Great Debate' to (Lake, 2013, pp. 569-570; Rodrigo, 2022).

The Fourth Great Debate: Rationalist Versus Reflectivism

Following the debate between traditionalist (a more interpretivist /historicist methodology) and behavioralist (arguing for a scientific methodology) of 1960s, positivism has become dominant in the academic discipline of International Relatios. In the 1980s, a new discussion is initiated between two approaches, and characterized in various ways: "explaining and understanding" (Hollis and Smith 1991) "positivism and post-positivism" or "rationalism and reflectivism" (Keohane 1988). Literature on International Relations also considers this debate as an ongoing one, since the discipline is currently organized around the divisions that emerged during this debate and the major 'camps' still exist and the issues are still discussed. The debate revolves mostly around epistemological questions, namely, claims of knowledge. According to Smith (1996) rationalism is a foundationalist approach to philosophy of science. Influenced by positivist emphasis on the 'unity of scientific methodologies' rationalism refers to the idea that nature is governed by regular laws. It offers the notion of reason to explain these regularities by developing causal mechanisms (Smith 1996: 21).

For positivist epistemology that is adopted by rationalism "events in the empirical realm are held to be instances of observable regularities" (Neufeld 1995: 28). These regularities are seen as independent of time, space, the human observer (as an outsider), and they are approached in terms of Human understanding of causality. The aim of a positivist approach is to find out initial conditions for outcomes/occurrences. Rationalism treats individuals as rational actors, and ignores some other characteristics of them, not merely because they believe in this assumption but for the purpose of parsimony and generating predictions. This approach, for Keohane, is useful for knowledge production (Kurki and Wight 2013: 24). The roots of this deductive approach lie in observation and measurement. This approach has been quite influential in the International Relations theory literature. Broadly speaking in International Relations theory rational approaches include the variations of realism and liberalism Cagla Luleci & I. Erkam Sula, 2016).

Particularly Lakatos's model on "research programs" has been adopted by the 'positivist' wing of the discipline (See Kurki and Wight 2007: 18-20; Hollis and Smith 1990: 28-36). Positivists adopt a rationalist research program that seeks falsification and progress. Their aim is to find causal links between observable variables with objective lenses. According to Smith (1996: 16), there are four main features of positivism, which he names as a methodological position: belief in (1) the unity of science, (2) the distinction between facts and values (the idea that facts are theory natural), (3) the existence of regularities in social and natural world, and (4) empiricism as the hallmark of enquiry (Cagla Luleci & I. Erkam Sula, 2016).

For Kurki and Wight (2013: 24) and Smith (1996: 12), Keohane's 'reflective scholarship' includes Critical Theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and feminism. These approaches are reflective due to their rejection of positivism/rationalism. Apart from this shared interest in questioning positivist/rationalist understanding of International Relations, these theories are not easy to group together since there are important differences between reflectivist theories on their empirical focus (Smith 1997: 172). Post-positivist epistemology that is adopted by reflective scholarship is uncertain of almost all clearly defined and defended knowledge claims.

Reflectivist scholarship oppose the argument that social scientists can be like natural scientists regarding being independent from their subject matter. As Horkheimer argued, the connection between knowledge and power is very close when it comes to 'social sciences' (Smith 1997: 175). Horkheimer opposed to the application of positivism to social sciences since he did not believe that 'facts' were waiting out there to be discovered by the observer. Rather, facts are the product of political, social and historical frameworks. This was the reason that he proposed critical theory's adoption to world politics (Smith 1997: 176).

Neufeld (1993: 54-55) addresses three main elements of reflectivist understanding as follows: (1) it is self-aware of its premises, (2) it emphasizes political and normative dimension of paradigms and their 'normal science' approach, (3) a 'neutral observation language' needs to be absent for reasoned judgments of these paradigms. According to him, reflective scholarship does not seek for "a research program designed to provide cumulative knowledge about the world of empirical facts or about the world of theory" (Neufeld 1993: 60). In other words, reflectivism is a meta-theoretical stance, rather than a research program. Thus, with its core assumptions, reflectivist understanding of IR is capable of responding to positivism but it also refers to a more generic term, which includes a variety of theories. These multiple theories need to be able to choose their objects of study respectively, yet, they also need to be "consistent with reflexivity as an underlying principle" (Hamati-Ataya 2013: 20) Their ability to understand the world of facts and values, and doing these from a reflexivist theory of knowledge, is how it becomes possible to take reflective scholarship seriously (Hamati-Ataya 2013: 20).

Rather than establishing a distinctly defined research program, reflective scholarship's 'task' is to reflect on political and normative aspects of world politics as well as academic writing. Differentiation in their academic purposes and their understanding of the world further reflect on rationalism and reflectivism's approaches to how to study social world. Kurki (2008: 124) argues that reflectivist or post-positivist approaches are named and grouped [as reflectivist] due to their reluctance to endorse "the mainstream rationalist conception of how to study world politics." They reject Humean assumptions regarding the nature of causality that is accepted by

rationalist approaches. They also avoid causaldescriptions that claim universality even in favor of non-causal or constitutive terminology (Kurki 2008: 130). The mainstream does not take reflectivist scholars' knowledge claims seriously due to their rejection of the former's ontological, as well as epistemological and methodological assumptions (Kurki and Wight 2013: 24). Their way of making "unscientific" knowledge claims are seen as unproductive by rationalist scholars. According to the rationalist camp's argument, without a proper research program, knowledge does not accumulate and science does not progress mainly because of the lack of falsifiability (Cagla Luleci & I. Erkam Sula, 2016). .

Conclusion

The so-called fourth debate between rationalism and reflectivism in International Relations theory has emerged in the 1980s and it continues since the arguments by both approaches are still being discussed in the current literature. While analyzing Keohane's claim that the reflectivist scholars should develop a distinct research program if they desire not to remain in the margins of the field, On the one hand, rationalist scholars try to build causal relationships between variables, find patterns of regularities, and create objective law-like generalizations of these relationships. On the other hand, reflectivist scholarship has mainly tried to deconstruct these embedded knowledge claims. Indeed, reflectivist scholars did not aim to build a distinct research program but instead attempted to deconstruct certain assumptions of the existing research programs in the so-called mainstream International Relations.

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