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History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations

R.B.J. Walker

The explanation of social and political life is a notoriously contentious enterprise, and the Anglo-American discipline of international relations is no exception to the general rule. As with so many other disciplines that have been shaped by the broader ambitions of post-war social science, controversy has occurred largely on the terrain of epistemology. All too often, the more far-reaching epistemological problems, posed by those who seek to understand what is involved in making knowledge claims about social and political processes, have been pushed aside in favour of more restricted concerns about method and research techniques. Narrowing the range of potential dispute in this manner has undoubtedly enhanced an appearance of professional solidarity. But it has also obscured many of the more troublesome and, in my view, more important fractures visible to anyone now canvassing contemporary debates about the general nature and possibility of social and political enquiry.

In this article I want to draw attention to some of these fractures and to indicate their significance for current discussions of appropriate research strategies in the analysis of world politics.[1] To begin with, I distinguish between different philosophical contexts in which appropriate research strategies may be judged. Here I reflect on a recent assessment of these strategies offered by Robert Keohane, who judges them primarily according to epistemological and methodological criteria. I then explore some of the broader ontological, ethical and ideological dilemmas that are at stake in the literature that Keohane discusses. I am especially concerned with the tension between the atemporal structuralism that informs current social scientific approaches – especially the theory of international regimes and structural realism – and approaches that give priority to historical interpretation.

While my primary intention is simply to insist on the significance of themes that are played down in Keohane's analysis rather than to pursue them in any detail, I also argue in favour of three broad conclusions. First, priority should be given to history and thus to approaches that stress interpretation, practice and the critique of reification. Second, differences among approaches to world politics must be addressed at the level of basic ontological assumptions: the possibility of empirical research strategies is a significant but decidedly secondary matter. Third, the contemporary analysis of world politics poses fundamental questions of political theory – questions that remain interesting and provocative despite socio-scientific attempts to reduce them to problems of utilitarian calculation and empirical testing.

Beyond Hegemony, Before Epistemology

In a recent text, first delivered as a presidential address to the International Studies Association in 1988, Robert Keohane offered what is in some respects a generous

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assessment of the different perspectives currently used to examine developing patterns of interstate co-operation.[2] Distinguishing between his own 'rationalistic' orientation and positions that he identifies as the 'reflective' approach, Keohane is relatively sympathetic to the contributions of those who have criticised the rationalists for their reliance on ahistorical utilitarian presuppositions adapted from liberal microeconomics and public choice theory. Moreover, his claims for the explanatory power of the rationalist or utilitarian position are relatively modest. The text as a whole is written as an invitation to a more constructive dialogue between what are characterised as potentially complementary schools of thought.

Nevertheless, the central argument of the text is bold and blunt: the reflective school have 'failed to develop a coherent research program of their own' – coherent, that is, in the sense that it bears comparison with the paradigmatic research programme exemplified by the structuralist models of Kenneth Waltz or the utilitarian categories that constitute the theory of international regimes. An encouraging opening towards a positive assessment of the plurality of theoretical perspectives is quickly closed off by the preference given to a highly specific and philosophically contested account of what a proper research programme should look like.

It is not difficult to find evidence of the continuing influence of similar claims that scholarly controversies should be resolved on the preferred terrain of empirical method. These claims have been especially tenacious in international relations, although even here they have begun to seem out-dated. One of the significant achievements of the debates about social scientific explanation in the 1960s and 1970s is a much greater awareness of the controversial character of what social science is or should be. Invocations of the logic of explanation in the physical sciences have become relatively rare, not least because our understanding of what is involved in even the most precise sciences is sharply contested. The general lesson that seems to have been drawn is not that empirical social science is impossible or undesirable, but that its achievements and possibilities ought to be placed in a more modest perspective.

This lesson is reflected in Keohane's emphasis on the context-specific character of generalisations, as well as in the emphasis on model-building in the work of the utilitarian rationalists more generally. The hope, of course, is that the models offered for empirical testing can transcend their origins as analogical or metaphorical speculation. Whether the utilitarian images that have been deployed recently to explain interstate co-operation are successful in this respect will undoubtedly remain contentious. Some students of world politics will continue to be fascinated by the social, political, ideological and philosophical conditions under which a liberal utilitarian account of human action can aspire to hegemony – particularly in a discipline that continues to have more success in raising interesting questions than in providing plausible answers.

Meanwhile, those concerned with what it means to study social and political life have turned away from the largely discredited positivistic accounts of scientific explanation to a much broader arena of philosophical debate. In this arena, the explorations of literary theorists are treated at least as seriously as pre-Kuhnian dogmas about cumulative scientific knowledge. Some scholars have been

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impressed by the vitality of interpretive or hermeneutic procedures, especially where the old Cartesian assumption that language can be separated from the world in which it participates is resisted. Some have become immersed in controversies generated by the revival of political economy, controversies in which it has been relatively difficult to erase fundamental philosophical and ideological differences through the claims of universal methods. Others have been drawn into forms of critical theory associated with, for example, the Frankfurt School or post-structuralism and thus into long-standing controversies about modernity and late/counter/post-modernity. Whatever one makes of such trends, they undoubtedly reflect a different intellectual atmosphere than prevailed when the discipline of international relations became institutionalised as a major branch of social science some three decades ago.[3] Keohane is clearly aware of these developments. But in affirming a more social scientific account of what a proper research agenda should look like, he minimises much of their significance and complexity.

Keohane groups together a very broad range of perspectives as exemplars of the reflective approach. They include the broad sociological influences on the work of John Ruggie, Hayward Alker's explorations of dialectical logics, Friedrich Kratochwil's concern with analytic philosophies of action and the post-modernist sensitivities that have guided Richard Ashley's critical commentaries on the modernist impulses affirmed by the utilitarians. If we add all those who have resisted the charms of social scientific theories of international relations by drawing on neo-Marxist forms of political economy, theories of ideology and discourse, or critical and interpretive forms of political thought, the ranks of the reflective school could be made to swell still further. If we then consider the potential range of ontological, ethical and ideological commitments that are likely to be held by such a diverse group of scholars, Keohane's hope for some kind of convergence with the insights of utiliarian rationalism seem exaggerated.

In this sense, much of Keohane's discussion is reminiscent of the quite misleading exchange in the 1960s between 'scientific' and 'traditionalist' approaches to international relations. Keohane's judgement reflects epistemological preoccupations, and is reinforced through an undiminished confidence in the promises of modern social science. However, as with the earlier exchange, many of the crucial differences between the utilitarian rationalists and the historically inclined reflective school extend to prior and even more contentious problems, many of which have long been assumed to challenge the claims of modern social science.

In the earlier exchange, debate was preoccupied with contrasting accounts of scientific explanation, and with how the more historical and even philosophical concerns of the traditionalists might be updated through the judicious application of appropriate method.[4] Yet in initiating the debate, Hedley Bull offered a critique of the pretensions of scientific method that rested less on claims about knowledge as such than on arguments about the very nature of world politics. Scientific method was inappropriate, he argued, because of what world politics is. He was especially concerned with the dangers of the 'domestic analogy', that is, the transfer of philosophical and theoretical premises derived from the analysis of political community within states to the analysis of relations among states. After all, from the classical Greek accounts of life in the *polis* to more recent accounts of

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the persistence of the state as the dominant expression of political power, interstate relations have been treated as quite fundamentally different from political life within states, both in essential character and potential.

Unfortunately, Bull's underlying concerns about whether interstate relations or world politics are in principle any different from politics within states were quickly translated into more limited epistemological questions about how analysis should be conducted. While initiated on the ground of an ontological dualism – between statist community and the society of states, or in the unfortunately more common rendition, community and anarchy – debate quickly turned to the claims of an epistemological monism. Consequently, where Bull articulated a traditional claim that relations between states are distinctive enough to justify a separate discipline and different research strategies (not to mention an account of the relation between knowledge and power, or truth and violence, that would seem scandalous in the context of theories of political life within states), social scientific approaches have affirmed a fundamental continuity. Hence the possibility, so eagerly grasped by those searching for empirically testable models, of transferring assumptions, metaphors, research strategies and accounts of rational actions from one context to the other.

Nevertheless, Bull's concerns cannot be made to disappear quite so easily. It may now be common to speak of 'interdependence', to analyse international regimes, or to enquire about the potentials of international organisation, but few would argue that we have moved from a world of statist communities to a global community. The early modern European account of political life as the establishment of relatively autonomous political communities coexisting in territorial space has yet to be superseded by a coherent account of a common planetary identity or a cosmopolitan human community. The epistemological claim to a universally applicable scientific method thus coexists quite uneasily with the contrary claim, articulated variously in ontological, ethical and ideological forms, that human life is fragmented. Similar problems have beset students of comparative politics or anthropology, where they have generated considerable controversy. In international relations, they have captured the attention of a few critical theorists and defenders of the more traditional approaches represented by Bull, but for the most part they have gone unnoticed, obscured by the achievements of what can now plausibly pass for the social scientific orthodoxy.

Keohane's more recent discussion poses similar difficulties. Many of the differences among the positions he examines arise far more from disagreements about what it is that scholars think they are studying than from disagreements about how to study it. The latter depend in large part upon the former. To attempt to turn all theoretical disputes into differences over method and epistemology is to presume that we have acceptable answers to questions about the kind of world that we are trying to know. This is a rather large presumption, as Keohane only partly acknowledges. Moreover, even if Keohane's distinction proves useful at some level, it is not altogether clear why the methodological prescriptions of the utilitarian rationalists should be treated as the successful orthodoxy on whose terms the contributions of the reflective school should be judged. It might be argued, for example, that there are very strong continuities between the work of the reflective theorists – Kratochwil and Ashley especially, though quite distinc-

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tively – and the work of Bull and others who begin their work by attempting to come to terms with the historically constituted distinction between politics within and among statist communities.[5] Keohane's polarity might then be reversed by suggesting that utilitarian rationalism merely adds some interesting analytic models and a distinctive vocabulary to traditions of considerable standing and achievement. Claims about what constitutes orthodoxy in this respect can vary considerably depending on the cultural and temporal horizons of the claimant.

In any case, the appropriate context in which to situate Keohane's discussion is less the controversy about social science than the even earlier 'great debate' between realists and idealists. While it is against the obvious limitations of that debate that the promises of social science were articulated in the first place, the categories through which that debate was constituted have remained very influential. In fact, far from being merely one of a series of debates that have characterised the history of the discipline, the distinction between political realism and political idealism has provided the context within which other disputes about appropriate method or the priority of state-centred accounts of world politics could occur at all.[6] Framed within this distinction, 'metaphysics', 'ethics' and 'ideology' have become the names for roles in an old and obviously decrepit manichean theatre. Tamed in this way, it is hardly surprising that they have been marginalised in favour of the louder and seemingly more up-to-date claims of social science. Nevertheless, as Keohane moves closer and closer to the primary themes that distinguish utilitarian rationalists from the historically inclined reflective school, the echoes of this older debate become clearer.

To draw attention to the connection between current controversies and the older debate is certainly not to suggest that the categories of either realist or idealist can now offer much useful guidance. As roles in a manichean theatre, these terms have served primarily to close off serious discussion in a manner that has helped to insulate the discipline of international debate ever since. Rather, the categories of realist and idealist, as they were deployed in these debates – and as they have since come to provide convenient labels and systems of classification – should be understood as the primary forms in which the basic assumptions governing the study of world politics have been left to congeal, requiring little further exploration. As such, they provide a starting point, and a point at which awkward questions may be deferred. Within their stylised horizons it is possible to honour all those who, for some reason, are revered as contributors to the distilled wisdom of tradition. Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau and the rest may then commune with more modern masters like E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau and their even more modern disciples.

Much of the literature that Keohane seeks to judge as contributions to empirical social science can also be understood as attempts to re-engage with the philosophical and theoretical dilemmas that were packed away when the realist-idealist dichotomy was constructed as the appropriate arena in which orderly, unthreatening dispute could be permitted to occur. Unpacking these categories, it is possible to reformulate questions about, for example, the relationship between claims to legitimate political community within states and the legitimacy of violence in relations between political communities; or the relative claims of people as human beings and people as citizens; or the tensions between univer-

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salist and pluralist ethical claims; or the relation between power and knowledge as this has been mediated by the claims of state sovereignty.

Questions like these have come to be treated largely as the preserve of those toiling in the vineyards of social and political theory. They raise the awkward philosophical themes designated as ontology, ethics, ideology or even the relation between theory and practice. These are themes that most scholars in the discipline of international relations have been loath to confront, except on terms permitted by the discipline's great debates. These are also themes that are at play in the differing perspectives canvassed by Keohane. To enquire into patterns of interdependence or dependence, or the emergence of international regimes and institutions, is to work both within and against inherited accounts of the possibility of political community. These inherent problems in these accounts, I believe, are systematically obscured by ahistorical utilitarianism and the categories of realist and idealist alike.

The assumption that informs the alternative reading of contemporary perspectives on world politics to be sketched here, therefore, is that the central task now confronting students of world politics is not the refinement of utilitarian calculation or social scientific method, but a renewed engagement with questions in relation to which the categories of realist and idealist constitute only a great refusal. These categories fix historically contingent answers to questions about the nature and location of political community. Such questions are necessarily re-opened by any attempt to understand what terms like international regime, or international institution, or interdependence and dependence – and especially *world* politics – can possibly mean.

Keohane rightly emphasises the significance of historical interpretation for all those who have challenged the structuralist tendencies of the utilitarian rationalists, and it is this theme that I want to explore. One way of reframing an account of current debates about approaches to world politics is to emphasise how contrasting perspectives have tended to give priority to either history and time, on the one hand, or structure and space on the other. The tendency to privilege either history or structure rests upon historically constituted philosophical options. To emphasise one or the other is to generate distinctive theoretical puzzles. These options and puzzles explain part of what is at stake in the opposition between realism and idealism. They also underlie many of the claims made on behalf of, as well as the criticisms voiced against, social scientific forms of structural realism and regime theory. Moreover, the categories through which the priority given either to history or to structure is sustained are themselves the product of distinctive historical conditions. They now tend to freeze or reify complex philosophical questions into a permanent problem: either an eternal debate between realists and idealists or a progressive struggle to establish a properly empirical social science against the recalcitrant metaphysicians, ideologists, historicists, hermeneuticists or critical theorists. Neither of these legacies seems likely to advance our understanding of the transformative character of contemporary world politics very far.

In this articles's introductory and schematic exploration of the tension between history and structure in the analysis of world politics, I want to suggest that it provides a clearer indication of what is at stake in current debates than is derived

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from fixing the discussion on the terrain of epistemology or method. Beginning with history, I move on to structure before returning to problems raised by Keohane's delineation of the options before us.

History, Structure and Reification

Once upon a time, as the story goes, the world was not as it is now. Precisely what it was like is not clear. Accounts vary, depending on when and where 'once upon a time' is supposed to have occurred. Records and memories are notoriously deceptive, and require careful coding and interpretation. The skills of the story-teller may be judged mainly by the expectations of the audience, but even so, the story remains evocative. It tells of feudal modes of production, hierarchical arrangements of power and authority, and medieval forms of life and consciousness. The story can be told in many different versions. The version that concerns me here might be called 'Life before International Relations'.

The telling of this story is often short and snappy, a preface to an equally concise denouement: feudalism gives way to capitalism, more modern forms of life and consciousness emerge, and political community gradually coheres around the sovereign claims of the state. This story in turn has a sequel, full of plots etched deeply in the contemporary imagination. This sequel has come in two quite distinctive, but mutually interdependent variations.

One, especially favoured by those who refer to their stories as histories of social and political thought, impresses us with accounts of the progressive emancipation of statist political communities and the emergence of modern conceptions of freedom, justice and rationality. Another, favoured by an apparently more hard-bitten breed who refer to their scripts as theories of international relations, depresses us with tragic tales of violence, intrigue and the triumph of might over right. In both versions, however, the story of how the world that was not as it is now recedes into the background, and we are gripped instead by more topical tales of the world as it has become.

References to accounts of medieval life or the complex transformations of early modern Europe as mere stories may seem flippant given the massive and erudite literature that has advanced our understanding of these phases of human experience. Nevertheless, this literature is not invoked very often in the contemporary analysis of world politics. Significant exceptions to this rule are not difficult to find, but, for the most part, influential strategies of analysis have been framed against a generalised story about when, where and how interstate politics emerged as an appropriate object for scholarly reflection. In this sense, the well-known stories continue to exercise a powerful hold over categories of analysis and methodological strategies. Implicated in these stories are at least four groups of puzzles, which regularly enter discussions of what the analysis of world politics ought to involve.

One set of puzzles arises from the rather sharp disjunction between the comfortable rhythms in which the best known stories about the early modern period have been reiterated and the untidy, even recalcitrant, evidence that enters into the deeply contested accounts offered by contemporary historians. While old distinctions between ancients and moderns remain deeply entrenched in popular

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accounts of our origins, the role of these distinctions in legitimising modernity against the presumed darkness that came before is transparent. While the grand narratives of Marx and Weber continue to offer crucial insight into the forces responsible for the emergence of capitalism, modernity and the state, linear projections and monocausal theories have been sharply qualified by the details of multiple transitions. While we may remain impressed by the rapidity and scale of the socio-economic innovations of the sixteenth and seventeeth centuries or the spectacular intellectual achievements of the Renaissance, it is increasingly clear that the transformations of the early modern period grew out of complex, mutually reinforcing processes that had already been underway for a considerable period. Continuities have come to seem at least as important as ruptures.[7]

In short, the simple story of life before international relations has become quite implausible. Yet while often prepared to admit the inadequacy of the conventional stories, theorists of international relations are easily drawn into an affirmation of them as a convenient myth of origins. By identifying when interstate relations began, and providing a sharp contrast with what came before, these stories offer a powerful account of what interstate politics must be, given what it has always been since the presumed beginning.

Without such a myth of origins, of course, a number of rather basic questions from the philosophy of history begin to assert themselves. To what extent does our interpretation of contemporary interstate politics depend on particular readings of macro-history? To what extent might these readings be challenged by, say, anthropologists, or by macro-historians who are more reluctant to place early modern European experiences at the centre of their analysis? To what extent are these readings caught up in unacknowledged assumptions about progress, or evolution, or eternal return? To what extent is our understanding of the possibilities of contemporary transformations constrained by our assumptions about the historical processes that have made us what we are now? Threatened by the implications of questions like these, a retreat to a clear point of origin from which contemporary trajectories may be delineated and continuities generalised can seem very comforting. Nevertheless, it has rarely escaped the notice of the more astute political commentators that the capacity to construct a myth of origins carries enormous political advantage.

Similar questions are at play in a second set of puzzles that regularly beset analysts of world politics, which arise from competing accounts of the most appropriate point at which to identify the origin of the modern states-system. Once we move away from the most caricatured accounts of life before and after the rise of the state, the variety of presumed points of origin can be quite striking. Two options have been especially popular. One is to focus on the emergence of the state as a distinctive and relatively autonomous form of political community in late fifteenth century Europe. Another is to stress the period in which claims of state sovereignty became formalised and codified in international law. Here the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 serves as a crucial demarcation between an era still dominated by competing claims to religious universalism and hierarchical authority and an era of secular competition and co-operation among autonomous political communities. But there are also analysts who would direct our attention to earlier periods. They may want to push accounts of relatively autonomous state

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authority back further into the feudal era, or more usually, point to analogies between early modern Europe and the states systems of antiquity. Others prefer to focus on later dates on the grounds that, for example, only in the eighteenth century does the states-system generate recognisably modern procedures and 'rules of the game', or that only later still do we discover a system of relations between properly national states. Taking things to rather absurd extremes, it is even possible to derive the impression from some textbooks that interstate politics is the invention of the twentieth century.

This elastic identification of points of origin again raises serious questions about what an analysis of world politics ought to involve. To examine the literature on the emergence and development of the states system is to be impressed by the transformative quality of both the state and the character of relations between states. States can then appear to us as historically constituted and always subject to change. In this context, such distinctions as those among the absolutist state, the nation-state, the welfare state and the national-security state become very interesting. For example, the Canadian state is likely to be a significantly different phenomenon ten years after the advent of the 'free trade' agreement with the US than it is now. And yet this historicity of states is at odds with a contrary sense that whatever their historical transformations, states and states systems exhibit certain regularities across time. Scholars do claim to be able to make plausible analogies between, for example, the struggles of Athens and Sparta and our own epoch. Canadian spokesmen on defence policy will continue to justify their proposed procurements in the name of Canadian sovereignty.

In this way, the perspectives of history begin to give way to those of structure. In some accounts, definitions are offered of a sort of permanent essence: the interstate system is in principle always anarchical, for example, or the state is always a maximiser of power, status or its own welfare. Sometimes it takes the form of comparative analysis of various structural configurations: the differences between multipolar and bipolar systems, for example, or of systems with and without a dominant actor. In either case, the historicity of states and state systems recedes into the background, and world politics begins to be portrayed as a permanent game, which can appear to have followed more or less the same rules for time immemorial.

This sense of permanence, or at least repetition, is particularly attractive to scholars who seek to develop an explanatory science of the politics of states-systems. Problems from the philosophy of history are difficult to negotiate. The historicity of states systems leads to the contentious constructions of historical sociology or political economy. Discontinuity and historical transformation have long been viewed as threats to the accumulation of objective knowledge. One cannot step into the same river twice, say some. We have only managed to interpret the world while the point is to change it, say others. Against temporal flux, contingency, idiosyncrasy and revolutionary praxis, the identification of structural form offers an alluring possibility of a universalising objectivity.

This leads directly to a third set of puzzles, arising from claims that there is indeed a firm body of knowledge about the character of interstate politics enshrined in the 'great tradition' of international theory. The account of tradition may take a number of distinct forms. Three versions have been particularly

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influential: the permanent debate between realism and idealism; the repetitious monologue spoken by those who have been conscripted into the army of realists; and – the most interesting version – the account of a tradition of international relations theory as a negation of a presumed tradition of political theory.[8] In all three cases, anachronistic interpretive procedures have served to obscure another version of the contradiction between history and structure. Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau and the rest are presented as unproblematic figures, often in disguises that make them unrecognisable to anyone who examines the textual evidence we have of them. That each of these figures is open to sharply differing interpretations has mattered little. In place of a history of political thought is offered an ahistorical repetition in which the struggles of these thinkers to make sense of the historical transformations in which they were caught are erased in favour of assertions that they all articulate essential truths about the same unchanging and usually tragic reality: the eternal game of relations between states.

Following from this, a fourth set of puzzles arises from the historically constituted character not only of the state and the states system, but also of the categories in which we seek to understand the dynamics of contemporary world politics. This is perhaps the most disconcerting puzzle of all. It is tempting to minimise the significance of the historical experiences through which crucial concepts and ways of speaking have been formed. The longing for timeless categories has exercised a profound influence on many of those we associate with rationalism in the more philosophical sense of this term. Yet it is possible to trace the history of the terms 'state', 'sovereignty', 'individual', 'culture', 'security' and many of the other terms now taken for granted. In doing so, it is possible to discover how they emerged in response to specific historical conjunctions and contradictions. Accounts of history as a sharp break between life before international relations and life since international relations detract attention from the historically specific meanings embodied in concepts and categories that can so easily appear to transcend historical contingency. The categories and concepts we have learnt to use with such facility, almost without thinking, come to appear natural and inevitable. Their contested history is soon forgotten.

Structures, Meanings and Practices

Once the story has been written, and has solidified into received accounts of origins, traditions and analytical concepts, attention may turn to the architecture of structures. Grand structures having emerged, it is possible to enquire into their modes of operation, their mechanisms and determinations, their forms and their functions, their regularities and repetitions. Some of the most familiar and enduring analysis of world politics has been facilitated by a certain forgetting of history.

In its more extreme forms, structuralist analysis tends towards universalism. It is associated historically with attempts to identify the universal principles of reason, myth or language – the deep structures that inform the spatial variety and temporal variability on the surface of things. In practice, however, structuralist analysis is itself subject to considerable variation, partly with respect to the

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number of structural patterns that may be identified, and partly with respect to the way that structural patterns always seem to mutate into processes of historical transformation uner critical inspection.

It is in this context, for example, that Thomas Hobbes can be identified as a paradigmatic thinker. Because individuals are autonomous and equal under conditions of scarcity, Hobbes suggested, they necessarily find themselves in a position of perpetual insecurity. Each individual's struggle to enhance his or her own security increases everyone else's sense of insecurity. Hence the imagery of both the 'state of nature' and the 'security dilemma'. On the other hand (and contrary to the usual direct translation of the fictive state of nature into an account of the security dilemma between states) Hobbes argued that precisely because states are both unequal and much less vulnerable than individuals, they have significantly different structural relationships among themselves than individuals have. Among individuals, Hobbes argued, structural relations of insecurity demand a superior sovereign power for an ordered polity to be constituted. Hence the powerful resolution of the relation between sovereign individuals and sovereign states through a contract that is both freely entered into and yet necessitated by structural conditions. Among states, by contrast, structural conditions of inequality suggest other ordering principles in what is nevertheless a 'state of war', although Hobbes himself was not much concerned to identify these principles.

It could be argued, of course, that in contemporary world politics, both the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the legal principle of sovereign equality have begun to make Hobbes' account of relations between individuals a more instructive guide to the dynamics of interstate relations than Hobbes himself suggested. For the most part, however, despite continuing references to Hobbes as a theorist of international anarchy, most accounts of world politics presume that states are not equal. Conflict there may be, insecurity certainly, but structuralist accounts of world politics are just as likely to show that insecurity arises from patterns of hegemony, hierarchy and penetration as from autonomy and equality.

Among the most important structural forms in world politics primacy has commonly been given to the balance of power, especially by those who identify the subject of world politics specifically as relations among states. The familiar themes of different distributions of power and the presence or absence of great or hegemonic powers lead directly to a concern with, for example, the nature of alliances or the transformations induced by the deployment of weapons of mass destruction and the regularised rituals of nuclear deterrence. When patterns of hegemony begin to seem especially significant, attention may turn to the difficulty of distinguishing the dynamics of states systems from those of empires.

Those who situate the dynamics of interstate relations within a broader account of international or global political economy see different primary structuring principles in world politics. Here the range of perspectives is striking. Much of the literature on international regimes is classified under this rubric. But the liberal categories of economic analysis deployed by this literature set it apart from more explicitly mercantilist or Marxist traditions that also inform contemporary political economy, especially outside the ideological confines of the United States. Some, like Robert Gilpin, seek to combine liberal economic categories with a more mercantilist or 'realist' account of the state, expecially in the context

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of contemporary disruptions and transformations in international trade and finance. Some, like Immanuel Wallerstein, echo Adam Smith in stressing the determining nature of a global division of labour and a world market, minimising the autonomous role of the state while highlighting the relations between centre and periphery in a world system. Others, like Robert Cox and Stephen Gill begin – in my view more helpfully – with a concern for the global structuring of relations of production, and thus emphasise the transformation of state practices in response to the contemporary global reorganisation of production currently in progress.[9]

To canvass the range of structuralist accounts of world politics in this way is to become aware of the diversity of philosophical, theoretical and ideological assumptions that can be embraced under the heading of structuralism. In this sense, Keohane's category of rationalists is just as much in need of differentiation as his fusion of reflective approaches. But equally striking is the difficulty of distinguishing between structuralist and historical analysis.

Keohane recommends a greater openness to the reflective approach partly because it would complement the ahistoricism of the rationalists. But once we move away from the explicitly utilitarian models of regime theory, it is clear that accounts of the character of historical change are already built into many of the structural approaches to world politics. These accounts may not be entirely convincing, falling back, for example, on notions of changes as alterations in the distribution of power in a system that remains essentially the same, or on accounts of history as either a sequence of repetitive cycles or a linear road from darkness to light. Nevertheless it is probably fair to say that few students of world politics would argue that structuralist analysis can be divorced from a concern with history and change. There is a 'plain common sense' view that both perspectives are necessary. Some might argue, for example, that purely structural analyses of balances of power are intrinsically interesting, and that formal modelling or ahistorical ascriptions of utilitarian behaviour to states are entirely justified, as long as a complementary historical perspective is also encouraged. Even so, both the superficial tolerance of 'plain common sense' and the division of academic labour can obscure some of the characteristic difficulties structuralist analysts have in explaining the historical political practices through which structural forms have been constructed.

Again it is helpful to reflect upon the supposedly paradigmatic quality of Hobbes' thinking for the analysis of world politics. Hobbes built upon a fairly radical reworking of philosophical categories within the broad context of the scientific cosmologies associated with the early modern period. He was impressed, for example, with the unchanging character of reason, the spatial regularities of Euclidean geometry and the possibility of grounding social explanation in a firm foundation of precised definitions. Unlike Machiavelli before or Rousseau after, he paid little attention to history, at least not in the passages for which he has become a realist icon. Instead we find a classic expression of life before and life after the social contract, a shrinking of historical time and human practice to an ahistorical moment of utilitarian calculation informed by reason and fear.

Again, it is possible to identify a range of difficult questions that have beset those who have followed Hobbes in assigning overriding importance to structural

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form. Even if we try to avoid questions about whether structures can be said to exist, it is still necessary to engage in complex philosophical interrogations that converge on the question of defining a structure. Many of these arise from the contemporary emphasis on relationality rather than substance. Understood as part of a broader challenge to Newtonian metaphysics, contemporary structural analysis conflicts with popular accounts of the world as a accumulation of things. Some people may kick tables to affirm the material solidity of the 'real world', but the demonstration is unlikely to be convincing to anyone familiar with categories of contemporary physics.

With a stress on relationality come questions about how one understands the distinction between the parts of a structure and the 'emergent properties' that arise because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Hence the dilemma, especially familiar in sociological theory, of whether social explanation should begin with an account of 'society' or with the behaviour of 'individuals'. Hence also some of the central dilemmas of the theory of international relations: the delineations of distinctions between individual, state and states-system in the so-called 'levels of analysis' typology, for example, or controversies about whether the states-system should be considered to have an autonomous logic of its own or to be part in a broader system of global political exonomy. The concept of causality also becomes problematic in this context, especially given that most popular accounts of causality are still informed by images of billiard balls colliding in a Newtonian universe. With causality come questions about determinism, particularly whether structural forms should be understood as constraining or enabling.

In pursuing questions like these, however, questions about the relationship between structure and history are never far away. Thus contemporary structuralism does not exhibit the same attachment to timeless universals as the earlier forms of axiomatic rationalism. On the contrary, as it has been used by anthropologists and theorists of language, structuralism has become more preoccupied with understanding the rules of transformation than with identifying patterns of continuity. More crucially, as a broad philosophical and theoretical movement, associated with the work of Claud Levi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, for example, structuralism mutated rather rapidly into what has become known as post-structuralism. And one of the central insights of post-structuralism, explored especially by theorists of language from Fernard de Saussure to Jacques Derrida, has been that structural patterns are constituted through historical processes of differentiation. The emphasis on relationality is pursued in a temporal direction with the well-known result that post-structuralist analysis has come to be indicted for all the sins previously associated with those who insisted on the historicity of human existence. The indictment is issued in the name of objectivity and universal standards, although it is the historically constituted nature of the capacity to issue the indictment in the first place that post-structuralism has sought to challenge.

As if this is not enough, questions about whether structures do, in fact, exist will not go away. They are especially important for attempts to construct a theory of international regimes. The very term regime, like similar uses of the term governance, attempts to capture phenomena that seem to have a status somewhere

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between a concrete institution and a more or less invisible field of forces generated by structural determinations. The term international organisation is also problematic in this respect, caught as it is between accounts of specific institutional arrangements like the United Nations and incohate attempts to forge an analysis of processes that are neither inter-state relations as conventionally understood nor precursors of some kind of world state.[10]

Interrogations like these lead into some of the most difficult conceptual terrain in contemporary social and political theory. They ought to give pause to anyone attempting to confine discussion of contrasting perspectives on world politics to questions about epistemology and method. Even those who adhere most rigorously to an empiricist conception of research discover that they have to struggle with interrogations of this kind. Kenneth Waltz's accounts of systemic explanation and the level- of-analysis typology or Robert Gilpin's attempt to reconcile modernist social science with an essentially historicist account of a classical tradition of theories of international relations, clearly, involve taking position on these questions. Their positions may or may not be satisfactory, but their work has to be judged at least partially in terms of how far their more empirical work is both shaped and constrained by their prior ontological commitments.[11]

A second set of questions follows directly from such considerations, for in practice answers to these more philosophical problems are often articulated in the form of metaphors, analogies and models derived from other areas of human experience. Metaphors, analogies and models are a crucial aspect of theory formation, even in the more rigorous sciences. They assist in conceptual clarification and the development of systems of classification. It may well be that much of what we understand to be scientific analysis has been articulated against the dangers of false analogy or the slippages in meaning that are intrinsic to metaphorical reasoning; that is, against the very possibilities that are often celebrated in the realms of literature and art. But again, the conventional distinction between the sciences and humanities obscures more than it reveals. In the analysis of social and political life especially, textual strategies and literary devices are a characteristic part of even the most formalised modelling.

Two sub-themes are especially important here. One concerns the tendency to draw analogies between relatively simple structures in order to explain ones that are more complex. The role of images taken from Newtonian mechanics or Darwinian biology is relatively familiar and has generated long standing debate about the reductionist character of much functionalist explanation in sociology.[12] In the analysis of world politics, the concept of a balance of power itself rests on an analogy, and leads to questions about whether the notion of equilibrium it implies is sufficiently nuanced to encompass the dynamics of great power diplomacy or the dialectics of nuclear deterrence. Similarly, many of the ideas articulated under the rubric of social choice theory or utilitarian accounts of instrumental rationality have a reductionist quality. In part this derives from the assumption that social processes can be explained in terms of the behaviour of individuals, as if individuals somehow exist prior to society. A second sub-theme concerns the circulation of the metaphors and analogies used to analyse world politics within a broader cultural and political economy. Social and political explanation

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constantly draws on and collides with the imagery, prejudices and ways of speaking of the society being explained. The meanings of such terms as 'security', 'equilibrium' or 'nuclear umbrella' are mediated by complex cultural codes of which strategic analysts are themselves only partly aware.[13]

This leads directly to a third group of questions, which focus on the relationship between structures and human consciousness or practice. Some of the most intense debates about structural analysis in modern social and political theory have occurred on this terrain, not least because structuralism has seemed to imply the erasure of human subjectivity. In the context of world politics, versions of this problem have occurred in debates about whether a balance of power should be understood as an automatic mechanism to which statesmen simply respond, or whether it should be regarded as a practice or policy that statesmen have developed on the basis of long historical experience.

Something similar is involved in the different accounts of international co-operation and regime formation. In an extreme utilitarian approach, for example, human action is explained in terms of the rules of efficient conduct, rules that have a certain structural necessity. It is in this context that 'normative' behaviour is interpreted as following the prudential rules of utility maximisation. This is clearly not the only available account of human action, or of what normative behaviour involves. Even Max Weber, whose account of instrumental rationality is often invoked by utilitarian analysts, tended to see modernity not as a simple embrace of instrumental rationality, but as an intensifying clash between the meaningless rules of efficient action and a struggle to give meaning to life in a disenchanted world. And those who begin their account of human action in an analysis of, for example, labour or language are unlikely to be persuaded by the limited claims of utilitarian efficiency. To begin with the constitutive character of labour or language is to challenge the fundamental premises on which a utilitarian account of social and political life is grounded. There is nothing very novel about this. It merely serves as a reminder that the distance between Keohane's categories covers some deeply rooted, complex differences among those who seek to understand social and political life.

To make matters worse, it is possible to raise a still further group of questions about our prevailing understanding of terms like structure and history, and how it is informed by historically constituted concepts of space and time. Here metaphysics enters with a vengeance. Questions about ethics and ideology cannot be far behind. For some, of course, this would be enough to bring on a bad case of positivist vertigo. But in a discipline in which the reflections of Machiavelli, Kant and St. Augustine have not been entirely obliterated by the myth of a tradition, this should come as no surprise.

From International Relations to World Politics

While introducing his analysis of the relative merits of the rationalistic and reflective approaches, Keohane affirmed his commitment to a socio-scientific analysis of world politics by explicitly marginalising the themes I have tried to

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sketch here. In his view, he said, it

> will not be fruitful . . . indefinitely to conduct a debate at the purely theoretical level, much less to argue about epistemological and ontological issues in the abstract. Such an argument would only take us away from the study of our subject matter, world politics, towards what would probably become an intellectually derivative and programmatically diversionary philosophical discussion.[14]

The problem, however, is that Keohane's discussion is full of ontological and epistemological claims that are left abstract; his account of an empirical research programme is dependent upon ontological (as well as ethical and ideological) commitments; and in marginalising problems that have long been central to (non-empiricist) philosophies of social science, he diverts attention from the serious philosophical and political problems that are at stake in even postulating world politics as subject matter. This is not, I should re-emphasise, to underestimate the importance of serious empirical research, merely to suggest that there is rather more involved in postulating concepts like interdependence, regimes, or international institutions than the formulation of an empirical research programme. As neo-Kantian philosophies of science have insisted time and time again, the appropriate conceptualisation of the problem already prefigures the solution. It is not a matter of arguing about ontological and epistemological issues in the abstract. Philosophical commitments are already embedded in concepts like state or state system, typologies like the level-of-analysis distinction and utilitarian accounts of rational action. The ideology-laden distinction between social science and socio-political theory, between empirical and normative forms of enquiry, simply cannot be sustained, no matter how much it may have legitimated disciplinary divisions and claims to professional expertise.

To advance concepts like interdependence or international regime is already to admit the significance of historical transformation. But to begin with history is to encounter problems that are usually encountered under the heading of the philosophy of history. Given the difficulty of some of these problems, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that they are so often marginalised and resolved in favour of ahistorical accounts of continuity and structural form. This has even happened to the interpretation of such a central figure as Machiavelli who is invoked, perhaps more than anyone else, as the prototypical theorist of international relations. Despite the prime place he occupies in the myth of a tradition, his concern with the relationship between the force of circumstance (*fortuna*) and the possibility of *virtu* in a political community is rarely taken seriously in this context. Machiavelli's *questions*, in fact, are hardly discussed at all. Hobbes has been much easier to assimilate for, with Hobbes, temporal questions are subordinated to historically specific accounts of structural form. For all his reputation as the devil incarnate, Machiavelli's thought has been reified and tamed. Yet Machiavelli's questions about the relationship between time or history (an era of accelerating transformations) and the possibility of new forms of political community are arguably much closer to what is involved in speaking about interdependence, or regimes or world politics, than are Hobbesian-style structuralist models.[15]

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Similarly, many of the older realists were deeply preoccupied with questions about the philosophy of history. Many explicitly invoked an Augustinian contrast between time and eternity to explain the tragic condition of life on earth. Others responded to the relativistic implications of a loss of faith in the grand vision of historical progress. To read older realists like Carr, Morgenthau, Herz or Niebuhr is to be struck by the intensity of their philosophical and even theological concerns with time and history. As such, their writings stand in the sharpest possible contrast with those of contemporary structural or neo-realists. Unfortunately, however, their concern with history was rarely serious enough. It usually amounted to little more than the negation of Christian views of eternity or Enlightenment views of progress, a negation understood to be especially appropriate for a realm – interstate relations – that was itself understood as the negation of that political community in which perfectability on earth was a least approachable – the state.

A sensitivity to history and time is always in danger of being undermined through reification. This is the essential complaint brought against the utilitarian approach by those who are identified with reflection. Historical practices are analysed as ahistorical structures. Conscious human practices are erased in favour of structural determinations. But problems of temporality rarely disappear entirely. Attempts have even been made to analyse temporal process in terms of structural patterns. The flux of time has been portrayed as teleological or dialectical necessity. The history of human consciousness has been portrayed in relation to the generative structure of grammar. The logic of scientific explanation has been extended from the sciences of inert matter to encompass patterns of probability in historical practices. But such strategies have always encountered powerful opposition. The historicity of human experience remains deeply problematic.

These are not simply abstract considerations, to be deferred as somehow merely theoretical or philosophical. They are at play in the concrete practices of intellectual life. Claims about a point of origin, a tradition or an essentially timeless form known as the state have had an enormous impact on what world politics is assumed to be, and thus on what it means to participate in or offer a legitimate account of world politics. Questions about the relationship between reified structures and conscious human practices are at the heart of the dominant ideological forces of modern political life, though these forces resolve the questions in distinctive ways.

These remarks do not imply that empirical research is unimportant, nor that structuralist analysis has nothing to offer. Still less do they suggest that the questions pursued by the utilitarian rationalists are trivial. On the contrary, questions about processes of interstate co-operation and discord; the emergence of new patterns of interdependence and dependence; the appropriate conceptualisation of regimes or institutions; the globalisation of production, distribution and exchange or the changing character of state formation in response to economic and technological transformations, functional problems and political struggles are obviously crucial. Contemporary world politics is, as Keohane rightly emphasises, 'a matter of wealth and poverty, life and death'. Indeed, these questions should be understood in relation to the possibility of thinking about

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political life at all in the late twentieth century. They put in doubt the political categories that assume, with both Machiavelli and Hobbes, a fundamental distinction between political life within states and political life between states – the distinction that is constitutive of the discipline of international relations as we now know it. The questions are undoubtedly crucial, but the inherited categories of international relations theory do not necessarily offer the sharpest articulation of what they involve.

Structuralist analysis is also important, but so too are the persistent problems that structuralist analysis brings with it. Kenneth Waltz has to wrestle with the relative merits of systemic and reductionist forms of explanation, choosing – contentiously – to resolve competing metaphysical claims through a reifying typology of the individual, the state and the states system as the essential components of the 'real world'. Others try to reconcile conflicting accounts of the primary structure as either the states system or a more inclusive global political economy. In both cases, it is possible to see powerful tensions between the claims of structure and those of history.

These tensions have characterised much of contemporary intellectual life. They have been a familiar theme even within North American social science. Attempts to employ functional explanation or cybernetic and systems analysis, for example, have quickly attracted the charge of conservatism on the grounds that mechanistic and biological models systematically downplay the signficance of human consciousness and political struggle. In a broader context, existential or phenomenological humanism was once challenged by the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss or Louis Althusser; which were then challenged in turn both by reassertions of humanism and, more iconoclastically, by the non-humanist historicism of the post-structuralists and post-modernists. In the background, of course, lie all those complex yet stylised codings in which Hegel's universal history challenges Kant's universal reason, or Aristotelian teleology follows Plato's geometrically inspired account of unchanging forms. In contemporary social and political theory, the tension between structure and history remains especially acute in ongoing debates about the relative significance of structure and action (and thus of explanation and interpretation) and about the status of modernity. It is no accident, therefore, that claims about the promise of a social scientific approach to world politics should be challenged by positions that draw from the interpretive and critical techniques of hermeneutics and deconstruction.

It seems reasonable to expect that the need for accounts of world politics that are somehow both structuralist and historically informed will continue to be urged. Keohane's hope for an eventual synthesis of utilitarian and reflective approaches can be read in this way. So can several other major theoretical perspectives that are for some reason excluded from Keohane's discussion: the society of states perspective associated with Hedley Bull, for example, or forms of political economy that seek to extend Marx's account of capital as an historically structured and always transformative force. It is certainly likely that greater attention will in future be given to understanding the historical interplay between the structuring of the states system and the structuring of global relations of production, distribution and exchange. But again, the limitations of traditions that give priority to either politics or economics draw attention less to the problems of

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a particular academic discipline than to tendencies that inform the most influential currents of social and political theory in general.

Yet if it is reasonable to argue the necessity of both structuralist and historical sensitivities, then it is also necessary to insist that empirical social science holds no monopoly on what this might bring. It might bring about a greater concern for the reifying practices that have been so powerful in accounts of a tradition of international relations theory, or in the more extreme presumption that a state is a state is a state. It might force open serious philosophical questions that have been closed off by the categories of realist and idealist, or by the pretence that neo-realism or structural realism is just an updated account of eternal realist principles. It might focus greater attention on the principle of state sovereignty as the crucial practice through which questions about human community are fixed within a spatial dimension that is sharply at odds with the historically constituted claims of the state. It might even focus attention on the deeply rooted categories through which we pretend to know what space and time are.

All of the above serves to identify the analysis of world politics with a much broader account of social and political enquiry than is usual in the specific discipline of international relations. If questions about interdependence, dependence, regimes and institutions are taken seriously – that is as possibly putting into question the early modern European accounts of what political community can be, given the passing of life before international relations – then it is not clear that such explorations are any less significant than, in need of subsumption into or just a prelude to a utilitarian and empirical social science. Vague and obscure hypotheses about the existence of something called world politics involve a claim to historical and structural transformation that throws historically derived concepts and disciplinary divisions into rather serious doubt. The difficulty of analysing political life at this historical juncture remains more impressive than the achievements of theories of international relations. It is this difficulty, not the extravagant presumptions of modernist social science, that demands our immediate attention.

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1. In this paper, I refer to international relations as an academic discipline; to world politics as an array of political processes that extend beyond the territor-

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iality and competence of single political communities and affect large proportions of humanity; and to inter-state relations or the politics of states-systems as the narrower array of practices constituted through interactions between states. All these terms are highly problematic in ways that serve to underline the significance of questions about the character and location of political community in the late twentieth century. International relations, for example, reifies a specific historical convergence between state and nation; references to states systems tend to encourage a conflation of accounts of the state as a territorial space and as governmental apparatus; while world politics is used to refer to global political processes that largely escape prevailing analytical categories. The horizons of our language in this respect reflect the limits of traditions of political analysis that depend on a distinction between community within states and non-community (relations, anarchy, war) between them. For brief elaborations of this argument – which forms the subtext of the present paper – see R. B. J. Walker, *State Sovereignty, Global Civilisation and the Rearticulation of Political Space* (Princeton, NJ: Center of International Studies, Princeton University, World Order Studies Program Occasional Paper No. 8, 1988) and R.B.J. Walker, 'Ethics, Modernity and the Theory of International Relations', paper presented at the Conference on New Directions in International Relations: Implications for Australia, Australian National University, Canberra, 15-17 February 1989.

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