

Tilting at windmills: a final reply to Jahn¹

ANDREW MORAVCSIK*

*Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Department of Politics, Woodrow Wilson School,
Robertson Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA*

To judge from the soothing tones of Beate Jahn's latest response, one might think she had become a card-carrying liberal theorist. In relating her own work to liberal international relations theory, she writes:

So what exactly did I do? I took the work of an eminent liberal (or protoliberal) thinker, John Locke, and showed that this contains ... a general claim that all human beings are rational, and a historical or empirical claim that this rationality did not result in general support for what one might for the sake of brevity call 'liberal' politics and policies. Locke's proposed solution to this problem, I showed, was to create the circumstances, the social and political conditions, under which the potential rationality of all people could be expected to result in specifically 'liberal' policies. Finally, I provided a range of evidence suggesting that Locke's solution was indeed translated into political practice over several centuries both domestically and internationally. In short, I distilled a theoretical claim from the work of John Locke and then provided empirical evidence of its centrality to subsequent liberal political practice. This general procedure does not depart in the slightest from Moravcsik's own (Jahn, 2010: 145–146).

Though the relationship between land tenure and democracy is, strictly speaking, an issue in comparative politics, Jahn's project on that subject seems an inquiry consistent with the spirit of liberal theories of international relations.²

* E-mail: amoravcs@princeton.edu

¹ This article is a response to Beate Jahn, 'Universal languages?: A reply to Moravcsik', *International Theory* (2010), 2:1, 140–156. I am indebted to Mareike Kleine, Duncan Snidal and Alexander Wendt for suggestions on this response.

² The article contains only two paragraphs of actual historical analysis, alongside a few pages of exegesis of Locke, mostly, based on the work of secondary intellectual historians. It shows that some people in Britain and British colonies sometimes cited Locke's work. It would be interesting to see how Jahn, who to date has preferred to cite political philosophers and intellectual historians in lieu of more directly applicable empirical literature, might engage the work in comparative politics, which she does not cite. The relationship between agrarian class

It stresses particular liberal causal mechanisms and assumptions about politics.³

The key causal mechanism in liberal theory is variation in the nature and strength of social pressure, which in turn generates varied interstate distribution of (pre-strategic) ‘state preferences’ over states of the world, which in turn drive patterns of instrumental state behavior (Moravcsik, 1997, 2008, 2010). Different strands of liberal theory stress distinct sources of variation in state preferences: domestic political institutions (republican liberalism), economic interdependence (commercial liberalism), and domestic values (ideational liberalism). These causal mechanisms are distinct from those of realist theories, which stress the distribution of coercive power; institutionalist theories, which stress the distribution of information, norms, and transaction costs; and various non-rational, constructivist, psychological, and epistemic theories, which vary the nature and level of ‘rationality’ in means–ends calculations. Jahn’s conjecture about early modern Europe, as near as we can tell from the sketchy account in her initial article – assumes actor rationality, focuses on the ways changing exogenous constraints drive domestic socioeconomic behavior, and stresses the role of new political institutions and alignments on foreign policy. As such, it is consistent with liberal theories of international politics.

Yet one puzzle remains. Jahn’s speculative explanation of international politics in early modern Europe is embedded in a strident critique, many pages long, of my reformulation of liberal IR theory. This is now followed, in her rebuttal, by many more pages. Why? If Jahn’s ‘general procedure does not depart in the slightest from Moravcsik’s own’, why not simply focus on extending the empirical work beyond the few paragraphs she has given us, and then present it in support of liberal theory, or perhaps suggest minor revisions and amendments to theories within that paradigm. Why does she agree with liberals in practice but not in (meta-)theory? I admit to some reluctance to engage in meta-theoretical debate for its own sake, but I will seek, one more time, to address the

relations and democracy is a venerable topic, having generated one of the largest literatures in the field (e.g. Moore, 1966; Boix, 2003) and much recent scholarship on the international dimension of precisely this issue (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006).

³ Liberal international relations theories are not defined as theories ‘of’ or ‘about’ liberal states or liberal policies like free trade. Liberal factors operate in all settings: authoritarian and democratic, pre-modern and modern, poor and rich, non-Western and Western. The predicted outcomes may be peace and cooperation (as in the democratic peace claim and theories of functional regimes), or war, conflict and hatred (as in theories of aggressor states, trade protectionism, and conflicts of values).

issues of method, paradigmatic assumptions, and philosophy of science that Jahn believes divide her from liberal theory.⁴

Jahn advances two related concerns. The first is that she believes the liberal paradigm in international relations (thus, implicitly, all ‘positivist’ paradigms) to be indeterminate. The second is that ‘positivist’ theories cannot be generalized, so paradigms are meaningless. What is at stake more generally here is whether scholars can learn from one another with reference to potentially generalizable deductive theories and empirical findings in the field, as most social scientists believe, summarized in paradigms, or whether empirical analysis should be pursued *ad hoc*, as Jahn argues, without structured attention to the attempts by other theorists to advance similar arguments about similar cases.

These claims, as I demonstrated in my previous response and will reiterate here, misread the explicit meaning of liberal and non-liberal writers, ignore the state of the art in international relations and philosophy of science, and rest on internal contradictions that leave Jahn bereft of any justification for generalizing her own arguments.⁵ Her latest response reiterates and, at times, compounds these errors, equally unsubstantiated claims, without answering my objections. Below I document these tendencies.

Is the liberal paradigm distinctive?

Jahn believes that since liberal mid-range theories are not unambiguously deduced from paradigmatic assumptions, testing the former tells us

⁴ As in an earlier version, Jahn attributes to me, without any source, a position I did not hold. After noting, uncontroversially, that we share the view that ‘global economic development... has led to greater per capita wealth, democratization, and education; in short, to the establishment of liberal polities’, she continues: ‘What this narrative obscures, however, is the fact that the initial economic development... was based on the systematic political oppression and economic expropriation of the vast majority of the population, in the domestic and the international sphere. The implementation of these policies generated conflict and required the use of force. The transformation of non-liberal into liberal societies was thus not the evolutionary process characterized by an extension of peace, prosperity, and cooperation as which it appears in Moravcsik’s narrative. Rather, it took the form of a political struggle.... Attention to this variety of liberalisms, and a contextual historical analysis of their conditions of emergence, rise, fall, and transformation would have alerted Moravcsik to the fact that liberalism did not just enter this world as a benevolent rational force which gradually conquered ground by the authority of example’. In my previous response, I pointed out that this is a straw man. I never said any such thing. Nor does liberal theory rest on any such premise. Indeed, the liberal paradigm in my reformulation deliberately replaces such ‘idealistic’ theories assumptions about learning by ‘example’ and ‘idealistic’ commitment with the presumption of ‘political struggle’. It is a quasi-tautology to observe that many actors, forces, and preconditions in such an early-modern struggle must have been non-liberal. None of this poses any necessary challenge to liberal theory (Jahn, 2010: 146).

⁵ I am not the only modern liberal theorist to be misread by Jahn. For an misplaced critique of Michael Doyle for overlooking democratic imperialism, see Jahn, 2006: 180–181, 203).

nothing about the utility, fruitfulness or veracity of the latter. This standard of universal laws rigorously deduced from fixed premises is a straw man – a pipedream of libertarian economists, extreme rational choice theorists, a few political philosophers, or Kenneth Waltz in an ill-considered moment (e.g. Becker, 1976). In the previous round, citing my work on the philosophy of science, I responded:

According to the modified Lakatosian and Laudanian views I actually defend in the body of my relevant work Jahn ignores – including a book chapter devoted almost entirely to this issue – individual theories need only be *consistent* with paradigmatic assumptions, not deduced from them ... Social scientific research paradigms aim instead to maintain a measure of coherence and distinctiveness (via ‘core’ assumptions), while affording precisely the sort of flexibility, particularity and diversity Jahn espouses via ‘auxiliary’ assumptions.⁶

Social scientists working within a paradigm advance specific theories and hypotheses consistent with paradigmatic assumptions, but in order to rigorously define them, they incorporate what Imre Lakatos calls ‘auxiliary assumptions’. So, for example, all liberal arguments assume rational state behavior, the decisive importance of variation in state preferences, and social pressures as a source of state preferences, but use different auxiliary assumptions to specify the nature of social pressures, the translation mechanisms of social pressures into state preferences, and the nature of preference-based interstate interaction. This give rise to various strands of liberal theory, such as commercial, republican, and ideational liberalism. In this case, as in all applied social scientific claims, the result is a set of *bounded and conditional* statements, which we then test empirically. We have confidence in them only to the extent they test out.⁷ In her latest rebuttal, Jahn simply restates her old ‘straw man’ view.⁸

If...the positivist method adapted to the field of International Relations does not any longer allow a logical derivation of mid-range theories from paradigmatic assumptions, then those general assumptions *cannot* be tested by comparing the explanatory power of mid-range theories (Jahn, 2010: 144).

⁶ Moravcsik, 2010.

⁷ In most respects I am more sympathetic to Larry Laudan and ‘scientific realism’, with its emphasis on causal mechanisms, than Imre Lakatos, with his emphasis on scope. But paradigmatic reasoning helps make causal mechanisms explicit (Moravcsik, 2008).

⁸ In her latest response, Jahn alleges I have ‘watered-down’ or ‘loosened’ this standard ‘to one of mere consistency’. This is simply untrue. Paradigmatic assumptions are necessary but insufficient to derive specific liberal theories. This is Lakatos’s position, it is mine, and it always has been.

As applied to liberal theory:

The claim that rational and risk-averse individuals and private groups are the fundamental actors in world politics does not logically imply...the particular liberal forms of socio-economic organization (market democracy, for instance) or of decidedly liberal foreign policies such as free trade. Indeed, as Moravcsik himself points out, under certain circumstances it can be perfectly rational to support imperialism or protectionism. In short, once the connection is loosened, as it is when mid-range theories are not any longer derived from core assumptions but merely consistent with them, this method does not deliver any longer the superior logic and consistency of its original formulation (Jahn, 2010: 142–143).

Again, Jahn portrays the choice as one between positivism and relativism.

This sort of dichotomous reasoning is at best misleading, at worst incoherent.⁹ The mere fact that liberal theories predict widely varying behavior implies neither that actors are non-rational, nor that the liberal paradigm is logically indeterminate. Social scientific theories do not predict single specific outcomes (e.g. ‘free trade’), but variation (e.g. a continuum from free trade to protection), and they do so by defining mechanisms through which varying outcomes take place *under certain conditions*.¹⁰ These antecedent conditions, mechanisms, processes, and

⁹ In her initial critique, Jahn toyed with the critique that liberal theory can only explain ‘liberal’ outcomes. She has now quietly dropped that view (Jahn, 2009).

¹⁰ Elsewhere she writes: ‘If the particular form rationality [here: actor’s strategies] takes is determined by the circumstances, this undermines the general assumption of rationality as a meaningful claim. If the implications of rationality can range from free trade to protectionism, from imperialism to self-determination, or, for that matter, from empiricism to ideology critique, this claim does not provide some common ground either for political action or its theorization’. Jahn misunderstands rationalist social theory in a number of ways. She fails to grasp the distinction between constants and variables, and the role of empirical data in specifying theories. Rationality, in this as in most rationalist accounts, is a constant, while the variables are the nature and preferences of actors, their capabilities and information, and the resulting structure of interaction. These factors vary across time and place, and this variation in underlying conditions helps explain variation in individual political behavior and collective outcomes. This is the structure of most rationalist theories (Coleman, 1990). Much of Jahn’s criticism seems to rest on her misunderstanding that all outcomes should follow from ‘rationality’, with no other input of empirical information. This may be a project of ambitious pre-modern political philosophers or certain libertarian economists, but it is not political science (cf. Becker, 1976). As Jahn sets it forth, namely that preferences and uniform behavior must be derived from ‘rationality’ alone, it is a quaintly pre-modern, pre-pluralist view, one that seems to imply that all actors have the same preferences and ‘irrational’ actors are those whose preferences are such that collective outcomes are suboptimal. In modern political science, however, preferences are not derived from rationality, but given by the environment, and rationality is an assumption about individual choices, and a certain amount of conflict among goals is inevitable. Liberal theory theorizes them, but not ‘all the way down’. On the evolution of liberal political philosophy to include ever more empirical data of this kind, and the link to

outcomes are observable, and we evaluate theories – always, of course, against other potential explanations of the same phenomenon. Paradigms play the same role at a deeper level, ordering sets of theories into categories based on their core assumptions.

Jahn seems concerned that there exist a seemingly infinite number of theories consistent with assuming rational behavior of social actors driving varying state preferences, and the auxiliary assumptions are arbitrary. Here Jahn misunderstands the Lakatos/Laudan heuristics.¹¹ In evaluating a paradigm, we do not (as Jahn implies) ask: What are all the (infinite) theories and hypotheses that could be derived from the core assumptions? We ask: Have research programs consistent with the assumptions proven fruitful empirically? If these prove finite, focused, and parsimonious, then the paradigm is useful. This is why my articles on liberalism contain *ex post* assessments of the empirical trajectory of a limited number of empirically successful liberal theories. This standard is empirical more than theoretical – a point Jahn seems to miss entirely. Thus, curiously, she does not dispute the extraordinary empirical fruitfulness of these theories, but only their deductive relationship to core assumptions.

This lack of an unambiguous connection between paradigmatic claims and mid-range theories thus makes it impossible to test the validity and range of the former through the performance of the latter.... A successful empirical challenge to the Democratic Peace thesis, for example, does not simultaneously undermine the paradigmatic claim that rational individuals are the core actors in international affairs.

‘Impossible to test’? ‘Cannot be tested’? Why? Even if auxiliary assumptions add some complexity, we are still indirectly, over time, evaluating core assumptions. The increment of one study of, say, the democratic peace on a very widespread assumption of state rationality may be small, but surely it is positive.

empirical social science, see Wolin, 1960 – who is cited in the earliest versions of my liberalism paper, along with Stephen Holmes, Don Herzog, and John Dunn, who take a similar view (Moravcsik, 1992: 5–6). Jahn’s consistent inability to come to grips with the role of empirical analysis in theorizing modern society, which in my view is an inevitable consequence of a modern view of rationality and value pluralism, hampers her in grasping applied theories of international politics. Hers is an odd position for a person who criticizes others for their unwillingness to theorize the essential importance of pluralist political conflict.

¹¹ Jahn protests that not all people in IR currently accept the ‘liberal’ designation for theories of preferences. This is irrelevant. The (Lakatosian) question is rather whether, *ex post facto*, research programs are consistent with various assumptions, not whether all scholars explicitly recognize them. The critical point is that liberal assumptions draw consistent distinctions with those Morgenthau, Waltz, Keohane and Wendt suggest for their own paradigms (Jahn, 2010).

Jahn's only response is to reiterate another argument she has already made, namely that there is nothing distinctive about the specific core assumptions of the liberal paradigm. Hence any findings about liberal hypotheses, while they may tell us something about the assumption, do not tell us anything about liberal core assumptions. In my previous response, I documented that liberalism's three core assumptions – namely (1) variation in state preferences (over states of the world, not over strategies), (2) state-society relations as a source of those preferences; and (3) rational state behavior as a result of those preferences – collectively constitute a distinctive paradigmatic position. As I have now twice documented from their writings, rejection of the importance of variation in state preferences is central to Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz's formulations of realism, Robert Keohane's formulation of regime theory, and Alexander Wendt's formulation of systemic constructivism. In her latest response, Jahn now maintains she 'never denied' the 'distinctness' of liberal 'mid-range theories' vis-à-vis other arguments from other paradigms, but only the distinctness of the liberal core assumptions. Therefore, she says by way of rebuttal, 'this literature (i.e. Morgenthau, Waltz, Keohane, and Wendt) is not relevant for my argument' (Jahn, 2010: 4n.).

This response is bewildering. Jahn misstates the work of Morgenthau, Waltz, Keohane, and Wendt so completely, one wonders if she actually bothered to consult the relevant passages. They are paradigmatic thinkers *par excellence* – who more than them? – and quite explicitly so in the cited passages. More fundamentally, Jahn's distinction between mid-range and core assumptions is logically incoherent. She agrees that mid-range liberal theories are paradigmatically distinctive, but how would we know this to be the case unless they shared distinctive core assumptions? What else does paradigmatic distinctiveness mean? (Jahn, 2010). Similarly, if the rationality assumption were doing no work, how could Jahn criticize liberal theory – even if incorrectly – as inherently incapable of engaging in true pan-disciplinary 'dialog' because its core assumptions systematically exclude non-rational behavior?¹² As is often the case with relativists, Jahn is drawn into contradictions when advancing even the simplest criticisms.

¹² Jahn maintains 'Moravcsik's version of positivism... far from providing a language for 'inter-subjective communication of social science', excludes all non-rationalist approaches together with their arguments and evidence from this communication'. Jahn's criticism is, of course, invalid – indeed, it is based on an elementary error, but one common in the literature 5–10 years ago, that we cannot test rational and non-rational claims against one another. Yet such tests are, in fact, common occurrences in political science. For example, Allison, 1971; Khong, 1992; Almond and Verba, 1963. See also fn. 25.

Jahn has *never* –not in this debate, not in her published work, nowhere – offered a single substantive reason to doubt that the three assumptions distinguish liberal theories from realism, institutionalism, constructivism, and other paradigmatic alternatives.¹³ Indeed, she has never even discussed other paradigms in substance. She provides airy meta-theoretical speculation, rather than exegesis or empirical analysis to back her claim. Absent one or the other, further consideration of her critique is pointless.

Are paradigms useful?

The liberal paradigm is distinct, but is it useful? This is a more interesting question. In theory, paradigmatic language can help us to identify the common theoretical assumptions underlying bodies of theory. Paradigms in social science are, at the very least, an instrument for ex post reconstruction – following Lakatos and Laudan, they permit us to, retrospectively, assess the underlying meaning of a body of empirical research. It is possible, also that they can play some heuristic role in structuring scholarly debates going forward.¹⁴ Perhaps the most important potential role of a comprehensive set of paradigms would be to structure research so as to consider important theoretical alternatives. This involves expanding the set of alternatives, but also tailoring them to our prior expectations. In addition, paradigms help relate specific claims to broader social theories, broad assumptions and antecedent conditions, familiarize us with frequent-encountered causal mechanisms, alert us to the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of certain categories of theory, direct research in more promising empirical directions, to outline promising modes of theory synthesis, and, yes, help us generalize findings by highlighting more fruitful basic assumptions.¹⁵

¹³ In arguing by assertion, she ignores dozens of pages of argument (e.g. Moravcsik, 1997, 2008, 2009; Legro and Moravcsik, 1999) outlining specific reasons why socially-induced variation in national preferences are sufficient to define a distinct paradigmatic category of theory.

¹⁴ The use of ‘paradigm’ in international relations should not be understood, by analogy to natural science examples such as the Newtonian or Einsteinian paradigms in physics, to create a fundamental, unquestioned mode of inquiry, within which all empirical analysis takes place. Instead a ‘paradigm’ is summary of the core principles of a category of similar theories, all of which still compete with theories inside and outside that paradigm, to conceptualize and explain real-world phenomena.

¹⁵ Jahn seems to find it obvious that theory synthesis cannot overcome the rationalist/non-rationalist divide. In her latest rebuttal, she argues: ‘Moravcsik’s version of positivism, I will argue in conclusion, that far from providing a language for “inter-subjective communication of social science”, excludes all non-rationalist approaches together with their arguments and evidence from this communication’ (p. 2) and ‘Yet, this language is based on rationality as the lowest common denominator and may thus provide the basis for a synthesis of rationalist

Introduction, for example, of an explicit ‘liberal’ paradigm – or, in the language of rational-choice theorists, explicit attention to distinctiveness of theories that stress variation in state preferences (over states of the world) – helps highlight the extraordinary empirical advances over the past two decades that liberal preference-based theories have made vis-à-vis theories that stress coercive power (realism), informational norms (institutionalism), and means–ends beliefs (constructivism) in almost every issue area. It permits us to see also that many ‘neo-classical realist’ or ‘constructivist’ arguments are in fact dependent in one-way or another on “degenerative” arguments invoking exogenous state preference shifts (Oye, 1986: 7; Legro and Moravcsik, 1999). At the same time, it alerts us to various distinctive challenges, issues, and methods involved in elaborating and testing such theories. For liberals, for example, perhaps the most consistent challenge is that attributing of a set of goals to a social group, state or other political actor as a “preference”. It is exceptionally difficult to distinguish ‘preferences’ (across states of the world, induced by exogenous factors) from ‘strategies’ (across actions, induced by the distribution of coercive power, information, beliefs and other strategic concerns; Frieden, 1999; Moravcsik, 1997). Paradigmatic categories help keep us focused on such issues.

Properly constructed paradigms also help us to aggregate empirical findings. Republican, commercial, and ideational liberal theories – like other rationalist and non-rationalist ‘positivist’ paradigms – rest on a considerable body of empirically verified theory of just this kind. None to my knowledge claim ‘universal’ validity for specific liberal causal mechanisms, as Jahn’s dichotomizing criticisms imply, but there exists an expanding set of interesting bounded generalizations about behavior. The empirical success of these various liberal ‘research programs’, even in explaining the behavior of pre-modern, non-democratic, conflictual behavior, creates a presumption in favor of generalizing by material or institutional conditions. Liberal explanations are expanding in influence not because they are elegant or ideologically attractive, but because they test out (Moravcsik, 1997, 2003, 2008; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2009). Were someone to combine one of these theories with empirical data, extending it to another case, as Jahn proposes to do, this would – on the conventional social scientific reading – constitute further evidence of the strength of liberal theory.

Jahn adopts a curious double standard with regard to this view. She argues that those (such as liberals) who explicitly seek to support generalizations

approaches, as Moravcsik argues, but it certainly does not provide a basis for communication between rationalist and non-rationalist approaches or subjectivities’.

in an orderly and self-conscious fashion are doomed to fail, but those (such as Jahn) who do not theorize such efforts explicitly, but simply offer particularistic historical generalizations, will prove able to do so without qualification.

Jahn chides liberals, and all other ‘positivists’, for generalizing. She repeats, ‘This liberal theory of international relations contains some important truths – if not about international relations in *general*’ (Jahn, 2010: 153). Jahn is not simply making the obvious point that decision-makers fail to appreciate and implement most of the lessons they should learn from the world around them. She is saying that it is *in principle* impossible for even the best scholars to learn anything at all by examining comparative historical cases. Suppose, for example, under certain conditions we observe competitive exporters looking for opportunities to trade freely and non-competitive import-competing firms seeking state protection or subsidy. According to Jahn, we cannot use theory to generalize any aspect of this claim to similar cases under similar conditions.

The question, then, is whether Moravcsik’s [liberal] approach actually does encourage the analysis of concrete problems of world affairs.... The democratic peace thesis, for example, claims that democracies do not fight each other. This claim quite explicitly entails the recognition that the real problems of world affairs lie elsewhere – and not in the relations between democratic states. The thesis does thus not appear to address, at least not directly, a particularly urgent problem.... There is nothing in this method, then, that particularly encourages the study of concrete political problems. On the contrary, it may be argued that what it does encourage is the testing of theories, rather than the study of concrete problems (Jahn, 2010: 150–151).

This is nothing if not extreme: are domestic regime type, globalization, value change, and other liberal factors really of *no relevance whatsoever* in understanding modern global politics?

What justification does Jahn offer for this sweeping claim? Only, as we see from the quotation above, that the ‘democratic peace’ is of concern only to democracies, and thus limited. This is nonsense at every level. As a practical matter, the influence of the ‘democratic peace’ is hardly limited to democracies: US and European foreign policy have rested since the end of the Cold War (and during it as well) on democracy promotion in various guises.¹⁶ From a social scientific perspective, the assertion that the

¹⁶ The Chinese, for example, are worried about proposals such as a ‘Concert of Democracies’ in large part precisely because it can be used as part of a global strategy with implications for their country. The Obama Administration’s ‘smart power’ strategy and the

‘democratic peace’ is limited to democracies is an even more dubious. All theories explain variation on causal variables, thus the ‘democratic peace’ proposition necessarily implies various claims about non-democracies – with theories of ‘aggressor states’ and the less cooperative behavior of non-democracies being only the most obvious (Moravcsik, 2008: 241–245). And even if Jahn’s specific claims about the narrow scope of the ‘democratic peace’ proposition were valid, they would apply only to one narrow line of liberal theory. Such criticisms are manifestly inapplicable to commercial liberal arguments about interdependence and globalization, ideational liberal arguments about the impact of varying national values, other republican liberal arguments about domestic political institutions, or positivist IR theory in general – none of which is in any sense limited to democracies. Finally – in a truly ironic inconsistency – Jahn is essentially arguing, first, that theories should not generalize, and then, to support her view, that liberal claims are insufficiently ... general.

Jahn’s position might be salvageable as coherent – only just – if she retreated at this point to thorough-going historical particularism. There is evidence that she believes this in her text. At one point she speaks, in regard to the democratic peace claim, of ‘the impossibility of a purely empirical refutation of such theoretical claims’ because while the ‘thesis invites empirical testing, ... the conditions under which the thesis could be refuted cannot be specified, this method sends scholars off onto a wild goose chase for empirical evidence that can never reach its goal’.¹⁷ But no, evidently Jahn like many relativists, finds a world in which specific findings lack any general implications to be uncongenial and unrealistic. To avoid this, she – like her intellectual inspiration Karl Mannheim – adopts a neat double standard: while criticizing others for their attempts to generalize, she heroically insists upon her own ability to do so. Her historical study of the emergence of 16th century proto-liberal politics is,

European Union’s post-modern ‘civilian power’ strategy alike are focused on transformation of social, cultural and institutional fundamentals in places where liberal conditions do not exist. An understanding of Western limitations and failures – and the limits of all great power projection today – lies fundamentally in the exceeding difficulty of engineering any enduring change in social preferences, which, from a liberal perspective, is needed to generate enduring international transformation (e.g. Cooper, 2000).

¹⁷ Jahn elaborates no consistent position on what constitutes empirical confirmation/disconfirmation. At some points, as noted in this text, she says her procedure is the same as mine. Elsewhere she concedes the empirical power of mid-range liberal theory, but not paradigmatic core assumptions. Still elsewhere she claims the narrow results are correct, but cannot be generalized. Here she argues theory testing is in principle impossible. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jahn has not made up her mind about when and why empirical theory testing is possible. This makes it rather difficult for those engaged in a debate with her on more fundamental issues of philosophy of science and method.

‘surely relevant for concrete political questions’ today because, she asserts – with no apparent irony – its core claims are more general.

My reflections on the implications of ideology, in contrast, lead straight back into the analysis of concrete problems in world affairs. An appropriate response to the problem of ideology, I suggested, ‘requires in practice an engagement with (the) conditions of emergence (of political knowledge) and an historical account of its struggle with internal and external competitors’.... Applied to the concrete case of liberalism at hand, it requires an account of the historical conditions of emergence of liberal thought and practice and of its struggle with internal and external competitors. This brings the conflict between liberal and non-liberal forces, as well as the internal competition between different versions of liberalism directly into focus.... And these issues are surely relevant for concrete political questions like democracy promotion, intervention, statebuilding... (Jahn, 2010: 151).

So, according to Jahn, we can generalize within particular historical trajectories (e.g. from the liberal movement in 1700 to the liberal movement in 2010) but not across similar institutional, material, or institutional formations (e.g. competitive industries, systems of political representation in different times and places, forms of political ideology), as commercial, republican, and ideational liberal arguments often imply.

This double standard is audacious and arbitrary. Jahn offers no argument in its favor – or, indeed, any philosophical position with regard to historical generalization at all. The simplest way to see the absurdity of this is simply to note that Jahn’s own generalization about the effects of early modern liberal theory falls comfortably under the liberal paradigm as I redefined it – so there is really no difference between the claims she makes and those she criticizes.¹⁸ The notion that intellectual views of property rights, along with market opportunities, encourage certain distributive settlements, thereby predisposing countries to conduct international politics in particular ways, is a classic liberal claim that mixes ‘ideational liberal’ and ‘commercial liberal’ elements.¹⁹

¹⁸ Indeed Jahn comes close to admitting this in her statement about how ‘this general procedure does not depart in the slightest from Moravcsik’s own’.

¹⁹ Ideational liberal theories concern ‘core domestic social identities.... In the liberal understanding, [they] stipulate who belongs to the society and what is owed to them [including] the nature of legitimate domestic socioeconomic regulation and redistribution...’. Commercial liberal theories concern to Moravcsik (2008: 240, 242). Early modern Europe is a particularly interesting area to test such arguments, because of the unique variation in liberal variables such as views of distribution, property rights, interdependence and domestic regime type. It is also the moment when an evolution begins toward new forms of domestic redistribution, as Karl Polanyi and John Ruggie observed, which is why in my liberal writing I

So the real question is this: Why should we accept, before we even consider at the empirical evidence, Jahn's arbitrary blanket privileging of some (liberal) generalizations rather than others? Jahn doesn't offer any *prima facie* reason to draw such distinctions. My view is far more even-handed – and more democratic. These claims are no different from any other. I submit we should subject Jahn's claim, like those advanced by theorists of interdependence, the democratic peace, and social identities to the same standards. The only valid reason for accepting any of these would be the existence of a theoretical argument grounded in plausible assumptions and mechanisms, backed by empirical evidence, which tests out against the strongest alternative explanations.

Thus, in the end, Jahn's labored philosophical and methodological criticisms of 'positivism' are simply irrelevant. We are all in the same boat. The real question is not what philosophy of science or methodology we espouse. It is how persuasive our theories are and how well the evidence supports them.

Yet Jahn's criticisms of this kind are sparse and strikingly unpersuasive. They are (as is all her analysis of liberalism) entirely focused on the democratic peace claim, thereby ignoring commercial and ideational liberalism – a point to which I shall return. She notes it is difficult to decide whether to code countries as democracies and non-democracies, with some cases (e.g. Imperial Germany) ambiguous. Because such codings are sometimes disputed, she concludes that comparative social science is impossible (Jahn, 2010). This criticism is another example of Jahn's unnecessarily dichotomous view of social science: if it is not perfect, do not do it at all. In fact, few debates illustrate more clearly than the 'democratic peace' debate that scholars can debate and improve coding and measurement. The particular coding criticisms she cites are minor, 10–15 year old anachronisms, long since surpassed in scholarly debates. The more striking finding from that controversy is that the empirical relationship underlying the democratic peace is so strong that we cannot reverse its sign even if we bias the results by coding all the ambiguous cases against the claim – an extraordinary finding in social science. In any case, one cannot seriously argue that because no perfect measurement exists, there can be no criteria for better or worse measurement, and thus scholarship must make do with unreflective interpretation and conjecture. True, the debate has grown more diverse, in part in response to multiple

acknowledge these thinkers so extensively (Moravcsik, 1997: 520, 522–523, 525, 527–528, 535, 544; Moravcsik, 2008: 241–242). Here is another reason why Jahn is incorrect to say that liberal theory excludes ideology and non-rational elements, or is incapable of synthesis.

methods, but it has also evolved away from certain explanations and toward others in response to empirical findings.²⁰

The most important point is that the only way we would know whether Jahn's criticism is correct or not is by evaluating the empirical fruitfulness of the entire 'democratic peace' research program. This is precisely the 'bottom-up' Lakatosian standard I propose. Nothing Jahn has written calls it into question. This may seem an abstract issue, but it is not. It goes to the heart of why, on the conventional social scientific account, we have theories, paradigms, methodology and all the other elements of formal social science with which Jahn would dispense. Jahn's own work provides a clear example. Proper paradigmatic thinking might improve Jahn's critique and her empirical work.

In her attack on liberal theory, Jahn invokes almost exclusively the democratic peace theory. Her justification is one of convenience: 'I will return to this example of the democratic peace thesis throughout the text simply because it is such a well-known case that Moravcsik himself also uses' (Jahn, 2010: fn. 24). It is also the only aspect of liberal theory on which she has ever written. And in this case convenience comes at the cost of rigor. We have seen that Jahn's abuse of synecdoche – reading all of liberal IR theory through the specific theory of democratic peace – leads her to a number of overtly invalid criticisms. She argues that liberal theory applies only to democratic states, open trading systems, modern rather than religious actors, etc. Had she considered the matter *paradigmatically*, rather than in terms of the single research program on the democratic peace, it would have instantly become clear that such criticisms are untenable: the claim that 'democratic peace' arguments are limited to democracies is wrong; the claim that globalization and national identities arguments are so limited is unthinkable. A more thoughtful, nuanced, relevant criticism might have been the result.

By viewing her own empirical work in a paradigmatic context, that is, as connected to other scholarly traditions besides political philosophy, Jahn might also have been led to set forth causal mechanisms with greater precision, and to apply more rigorous methods. No one would ever know that the claims she advances about early modern Europe seem broadly consistent with liberal theory – or perhaps with positivistic formulations of realist or constructivist theories. Jahn acts as an unquestioned authority: she considers no alternative explanations, states her theory loosely, offers no falsifiable implications or standards for disconfirming

²⁰ Research does respond to empirical anomalies at the theoretical and paradigmatic level. For example, recent empirical anomalies in accounts of the democratic peace that rest on pure state preferences have recently led many analysts to argue that this regularity is, rather, a function of the interstate distribution of information (e.g. Schultz, 1999).

her claims, states, and considers no alternative theories, backs her favored conjecture with citations from a few sympathetic secondary sources (mostly other political philosophers), advances extraordinarily broad claims for generality. This style of scholarship reduces the probability of the reader encountering contrary evidence or explanations to zero. The bias is too obvious to require elaboration.²¹

This mode of inquiry – at once solipsistic and authoritarian – is not happenstance. It is related to Jahn's overt rejection of paradigmatic generalization.²² Social science, as opposed to philosophy, literature, or the arts, is about placing your favored theory (for, as Jahn rightly points out, everyone has a favored theory) at risk, by putting it up for evenhanded testing against the other plausible theories. The more methodological challenges one creates for oneself, the more confidence others can have in the empirical results. Yet in Jahn's non-paradigmatic world, in which neither general alternative views nor meaningful empirical testing exist, there exists neither incentive nor means to convince the reader that one has fairly considered the issue, or any way to convey the broader significance of an empirical result.

Jahn's self-regarding approach is doubly ironic. It not only contravenes conventional research methods; it violates her own espoused methodological authorities. Near the conclusion of her rebuttal, Jahn criticizes me and other liberals for failing to engage in 'real intersubjective communication' or sincere 'dialog' with those of other philosophical, theoretical, methodological, ideological and cultural persuasions. Characteristically, she offers no specific criterion to tell precisely what such a 'dialog' or 'communication' entails.²³ Nor, again characteristically, does she mention any particular scholarship of mine that qualify me for this criticism.²⁴ Yet, when it comes to the one sort of dialog that matters most – letting others have an equal shot at explaining the empirical phenomenon one is researching – Jahn's own sense of tolerance deserts her. Her position is that one cannot simply 'test' interpretations or theories against patterns of crude facts, but we should view facts in a theoretical context – a point for

²¹ See fn. 2 above.

²² For one exception on alternative explanations, see fn. 4 above.

²³ Instead Jahn engages in a characteristically 'authoritarian' mode of argument: in lieu of providing a clear definition or justification, she cites a criticism borrowed from another scholar, while ignoring my responses to it in the same symposium from which it was cited (Hellmann and Wolf, 1993).

²⁴ Even a cursory look at my c.v. should leave no doubt that I am interested in dialogue – and, indeed, co-authorship – with scholars from other theoretical persuasions, including constructivists, normative theorists, institutionalists, realists, post-modernists, economists and legal scholars.

which she cites an excellent essay by Fritz Kratochwil. Yet, she neglects the methodological consequence, which Kratochwil notes a few pages later: ‘We cannot test our ideas against reality as all our questions to nature are already phrased in a theory (or language); we test only theories against other theories’.²⁵ This makes sense. We know scholars are exposing themselves to a serious risk of disconfirmation when they take other theories seriously. Kratochwil is quite correct that we can have no confidence in the naïve empiricism practiced by Jahn.

Thus, in the end, the only concrete function served by Jahn’s belabored meta-theoretical and philosophical arguments against paradigms has been – unconsciously, I am sure – to relax the rigorous methodological, theoretical, and empirical standards to which normal ‘positivistic’ social science must adhere. She has spent dozens of pages tilting at paradigmatic windmills rather than doing the hard empirical and mid-range work required to establish her argument vis-à-vis those of other scholars who have invested in the topic. This isolates her work intellectually. In the end, the conventional paradigmatic and methodological limitations we place on ourselves, onerous and frustrating though they may often be, are the signs of respect and deference we pay our colleagues. It permits us to learn from them, and they from us. The aim is to facilitate conversation on an equal basis. In social science, as in most things, you cannot get something for nothing. Jahn seems unaware of alternative theories, even in an area on long-standing debate and current controversy, adhere to no standards that should encourage a skeptical reader to believe her claims, and launches criticisms with little or no knowledge of her targets. Like Don Quixote, she has lost touch with the outside world, misinterprets the intentions and statements of her ‘enemies’, and – although, well intentioned – has caused more harm than good.

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²⁵ Kratochwil (2003: –). This is Lakatos’s view as well, in his celebrated dictum: ‘Tests are – at least – three-cornered fights between rival theories and experiment’ (Lakatos, 1978: 31).

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