

About those IR theory day jobs: a response to Chris Brown

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Abstract. Chris Brown's invitation in 'IR Theory in Britain – the New Black?' to consider whether theory's pre-eminence in British IR is warranted appears to have gone unheeded. He asks whether the consuming preoccupation with theory can be justified or will turn out to be as transitory as the 'new black' soon to be supplanted by the next 'new black'. There are many possible explanations for the neglect of Brown's views, but whatever the reason, epistemology can provide some answers. It draws attention to the applied aspect of IR theory as well as the nature of theory's relations with the rest of the discipline, buttressing Brown's arguments to this effect. I go further to ask whether theory's place is not ultimately best seen as one element in an approach not unlike classical *redux*.

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With 'IR Theory in Britain – the New Black?' Chris Brown has placed us in his debt for providing a provocative, stimulating *tour d'horizon* of British International Relations (IR) theory.¹ He wonders whether contemporary British 'IR theory could be the 'New Black'', something that is currently fashionable but for no good reason, and as such destined to be replaced by a new "new black" in the not too distant future'.² Concluding that 'International Relations theory is a branch of applied political philosophy, with emphasis on all three terms, and attempts to theorise a practice, and for the discourse to be hermetically sealed off from other parts of the discipline [...] would be a disaster',³ Brown invites readers to consider whether theory's dominance is warranted. Few, if any, scholars, however, appear to have taken up Brown's invitation. Why this is the case is itself intriguing. There are many possible explanations. Firstly, Brown has unjustifiably problematised the condition of British IR theory; the current state of affairs reflects a consensus, or, at least, a point of diminishing returns beyond which debate is unprofitable.

¹ Chris Brown, 'IR Theory in Britain – the New Black?', *Review of International Studies*, 32 (2006), pp. 677–87.

² Brown, 'IR Theory', p. 685.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 687.

Secondly, an intellectual impasse characterised by irreconcilable conceptions of IR theory has been reached. Thirdly, an orthodoxy that discourages forthright exchanges of views has set in; we have become alarmed by the rancour that can be stirred up by vigorous debate. Hence we retrench, considering that the better part of valour is to live and let live. Whatever the reason, it is the position of this note that there is a lot more to be said about Brown's concerns, and that the issues that need to be addressed will continue to bedevil British IR theory until they reach a higher level of resolution.

Brown's essay abounds with fruitful points of departure but I shall single out two: his claim that British IR theory is sufficiently substantial, if not entirely autonomous, for its practitioners to give up their 'day jobs' to focus exclusively on theory, and his insistence that British IR theory needs to maintain relations with other parts of the discipline. Although Brown's analysis is admirably cogent in most respects, I want to go a step further to argue that it is the character of IR theory's associations with the rest of the discipline that in fact determines whether theory can provide day jobs. I write parenthetically, as a 'third country', that is, neither British nor American, practitioner, who sees more promise in the British than the American approach to the study of IR.

Brown contends that British IR theory can provide day jobs for its practitioners because it embraces so many demanding discourses (for example, the revisiting of classical philosophers, analytical philosophy, post-modern approaches, post-structural and gender-related theories) that scholars have their hands full mastering any of them. By the same token, because of theory's demands theorists lose touch with other areas of IR research. 'In these circumstances', Brown notes, 'one might expect theory to be marginalized – but, in fact, theorists have come close to achieving a situation in which they have marginalized everyone else.'⁴ As Ken Booth put it, 'we are all theorists now, whether or not we recognize it, whether or not we like it'.⁵

The lure of theory to IR scholars is apparently irresistible. Whether its attraction can be explained by its *caché*, the exhilaration and psychological satisfaction in doing theory, or something else, from an epistemological perspective, variants of IR theory can not be vindicated by the fact that so many of us are engaged with it. Whether IR theory can provide day jobs ultimately depends on its value. Indeed, it is noteworthy that among the many discourses that Brown thinks comprise British IR theory, epistemology is conspicuously missing. Yet the epistemology of IR is as perennial a concern as any other philosophical dimension of IR. Indeed, Brown's project is itself epistemological.

The prospects of explanatory theory

The question then arises what light epistemology can shed on the worth of British IR theory. Brown initially differentiates 'explanation', on the one hand, and 'interpretation', on the other, and we can, for the moment, work with this

⁴ Ibid., p. 678.

⁵ Ken Booth, 'Discussion: a Reply to Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, 23 (1997), p. 377.

distinction. Epistemology's most profound insight into IR theory's explanatory role is that its subject matter is inherently inhospitable to theory.⁶ Many decades ago Johan Galtung observed that the phenomena of IR are 'diachronic', rather than 'synchronic'; 'idiographic' rather than 'nomothetic'.⁷ In other words, the subject matter of IR has more in common with history than science. Thus, reflections on historical narratives and the philosophy of history are on the right track. The recent reappraisal of the role of history in British IR is to be applauded.⁸ Even in the US, where one might expect less appreciation of its importance, Donald J. Puchala and others have also rediscovered history.⁹ It is, however, one thing to give the historical dimension its due and another to expect to find theory there. Indeed, we have seen this movie before. As we exhaust the meagre possibilities of scientific theory, and, arguably, its successors, we seem to be about to reinvent ourselves with theory about history. But if 'history is too important to be left to the historians'¹⁰ it is also true that '[w]e learn from history that we do not learn anything from history'.¹¹ It seems intuitively obvious that what we can expect from history are relatively modest generalisations that have more affinity with interpretation and analysis than the grand theory with which we are enamoured. It is good to bear in mind that historical patterns are underwritten by nothing more substantial than notoriously unstable trends. Consider as well, the enormous improbability of the most significant historical events noted by Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Francis Fukuyama,¹² and the powerlessness of experts in its face.¹³

The biochemist Michael Polanyi identifies another essential epistemological consideration that raises doubts about the prospect of explanatory theory – that the more 'intrinsically interesting' a subject matter is, the less precisely it can be understood.

'[I]n science, as in ordinary perception alike, we are drawn to things that are useful or dangerous to us, even though they present themselves less distinctly and less coherently [...] [T]hings are also interesting in themselves, and their intrinsic interest varies greatly. Living animals are more interesting than their dead bodies; a dog more interesting than a fly; a man more interesting than a dog. In man himself his moral life is more interesting than his digestion; and, again, in human society the most interesting subjects are politics and history, which are the theatres of great moral decisions [...]'.¹⁴

⁶ Carol A. L. Prager, 'Taking Theory for Granted in International Relations', *Political Studies*, XXVI (1978), pp. 15–29.

⁷ Johan Galtung, 'The Social Sciences: An Essay on Polarization and Integration', in Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau (eds), *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1969 p. 251. See also Gerard Holden, 'Who Contextualizes the Contextualizers? Disciplinary History and the Discourse about IR Discourse', *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002), pp. 253–70.

⁸ Michael Cox, Tim Dunne and Ken Booth 'Empires Systems and states: Great Transformations in International Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), pp. 1–15.

⁹ Donald J. Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁰ Cited by Cox, Dunne and Booth, 'Empires, Systems, and States', p. 1.

¹¹ Anonymous. {<http://thinkexist.com>} accessed on 9 May 2009.

¹² Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007); and Francis Fukuyama (ed.), *Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wildcards in Global Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007).

¹³ Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 138.

From Polanyi's perspective, Hedley Bull, Martin Wight, and Robert Jackson's focus on such moral decisions could hardly be more astute. Understanding the ingredients that comprise and justify such decisions would seem to be the essence of what we do, eroding in the process the distinction between explanation and interpretation. Indeed, Brown, rightly, states, 'following Hidemi Suganami, I take the contrasting of "explanation" and "understanding" as a false dichotomy [...]'.¹⁵ The focus on collective moral decision-making would doubtless be less attractive to anyone who sees the essence of politics as external, or even opposed, to government.¹⁶ That view, however, has its own difficulties: we cannot avoid focusing on the decisions and policies of governments because they remain the most authoritative and effective way of accomplishing anything within a political space. Although there is room for cynicism about every government, revolutionary and 'transformational' figures (as Barack Obama was originally perceived to be) do come along. However this may be, practitioners of British IR need not feel defensive that it does not pursue the quantitative and rational-choice approaches fashionable in American universities. Very much to the contrary, they are entitled to congratulate themselves because their less pretentious methodologies are more rewarding. Hedley Bull's arguments against the 'scientific' approach in 'A Case for Classical IR' are as unanswerable today as they were when he penned them in 1966.¹⁷ Indeed, it seems likely that it was the increasingly apparent limited prospects for explanatory theory that helped to drive IR scholars towards 'interpretive' theory.

The condition of interpretive theory

As Brown points out, interpretive IR theory has not only grown in importance but also, more strikingly, in the asserted sweep of its authority. Thus, for example, Steve Smith writes of 'the fundamental divide [...] between those theories that seek to offer explanatory accounts of international relations and those that see theory as constitutive of that reality'.¹⁸ Here is a radical claim that arrogates to theory a much broader scope than that asserted in classical political theory, with which it claims to be continuous. There is no need to deny a place for meditation on, or illumination of, international relations. What does, however, seem essential is bearing in mind the epistemological status of such reflections. Moreover, one can not help noticing that the more autonomy interpretive theory asserts, the more politically impassioned it tends to become. As Ian Shapiro notes in his book *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* more generally, it sometimes seems that

¹⁵ Brown, 'IR Theory', p. 682.

¹⁶ Steve Smith, 'Power and truth: A Reply to William Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, 23 (1997), p. 508.

¹⁷ Hedley Bull, 'International Relations: The Case for a Classical Approach', in Klaus Knorr and James N. Rosenau, *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

¹⁸ Steve Smith, 'The Self-images of a Discipline', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 315. Cited by William Wallace, 'Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 22 (1996), p. 315.

political scientists have more interest in affecting politics than in affecting the study of it.¹⁹ ‘Detachment’ is a virtue admirably ascribed by Nicholas J. Wheeler and Timothy Dunne to Bull²⁰ but it is a virtue much less in evidence today. Brown suggests that the ‘relative decline’ (p. 684) of Britain’s influence in the world has impelled theorists toward interpretive theory. The impotence critics feel in the face of US policy in Iraq has also inspired theory development. At the same time, while interpretive theory makes increasingly broader claims for its authority, its actual content seems, according to Brown, to be narrowing. For many to be a theorist today is to be cosmopolitan, to privilege notions of solidarity and emancipation, and to be utopian, realistic or not.

An epistemological perspective on interpretive IR theory might draw attention to the qualitative difference between much of today’s interpretive theory and that of classical political theory. The latter was typically more positivistic. It was usually occasioned by traumatic historical developments which led philosophers to reflect, for example, upon the fundamental nature of political obligation, the preconditions of order and the requirements of fairness and justice. Political theory was the rational attempt to uncover the underlying features of political life as it was more or less closely observed. Interpretive IR theory as Brown rightly claims, and Stanley Hoffmann has argued in the context of international ethics,²¹ is ‘applied’ in that it can not be formulated completely in the abstract; concrete circumstances are integral to its articulation. Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* exemplifies applied political theory. In his review of Walzer’s much admired book, Hedley Bull praises his approach because it ‘bears the mark of intellectual honesty: there is no attempt to disguise the loose ends, the unresolved dilemmas, that the argument contains [...] [I]t is founded in reflection about substantive political and moral issues, and is “political theory” in the best sense’.²² If interpretation can be separated from historical reality only at its peril, it is something approximating Bull’s classical approach to the study of International Relations, which draws on both, that provides the royal road to achieving the limited theoretical understanding of IR phenomena that they can support. Very much to his credit, Brown recognises the epistemological wisdom embedded in the classical approach as well as the imperative of keeping theory enmeshed with application as well as the dynamics of concrete historical settings.

Although not everything that we do will be helpful to the policy community, one test of the value of IR theory might be its usefulness to policymakers. Many scholars, from Steve Smith to Joseph Nye,²³ bemoan the fact that the policy community does not avail itself of IR expertise. We need to come to grips with the reasons for this irrelevance. Ultimately, if IR theory is to be respected by policymakers, I suggest, it has to recognise its essential applied nature and its dependence on ‘ordinary knowledge’, the crudely empirical and commonsensical

¹⁹ Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 212.

²⁰ Nicholas J. Wheeler and Timothy Dunne, ‘Hedley Bull’s Pluralism of the Intellect and Solidarism of the Will’, *International Affairs*, 72 (1996), p. 91.

²¹ Stanley Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

²² H. Bull ‘Recapturing the Just War for Political Theory’, *World Politics*, 31 (1979), p. 591.

²³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., ‘Scholars on the Sidelines’, *The Washington Post* (13 April 2009), p. A15.

understandings of the world that we all share.²⁴ This modified understanding of international theory and knowledge would help restore some measure of systematicity to IR theory. Its lack permits some of us, for example, to support solidarism and a duty to protect, on the one hand, and to deplore the Second Gulf War, on the other, without clarifying the intellectual terrain between these two positions. Without a doubt this terrain contains some of the most compelling issues facing scholars and policymakers alike. It was indeed a policymaker, the French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who has courageously struggled to reconcile these positions.²⁵

Whether IR theory can provide day jobs

Brown has gone a long way in illuminating the condition of British IR theory and he is arguably right on the most important things. Still, in spite of his misgivings about theory's relations with other branches of IR, Brown seems to concede, if only *de facto*, that British IR theory can provide day jobs. My position is more categorical. It affirms, first, the need to appreciate the epistemological weights, so to speak, of various approaches to theory, an appreciation which ultimately raises doubts about day jobs for many interpretive theorists. Second, it holds that unless IR theory embraces its fate as an applied field of study, it will have no legitimate claim to specialism status. Third, to the extent that explanation and interpretation can be distinguished, the distinction will not be qualitative but a matter of focus. Perhaps it's time to abandon the quest for the next new black and embrace the classical approach redux. Part explanation, part interpretation, embracing historical knowledge, it is at once and happily not only the most defensible approach to IR theory but also what British IR does best.

²⁴ Charles Lindblom and David K. Cohen, *Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

²⁵ John Vinocur, 'One Popular French Voice Who Supports a War', *International Herald Tribune* (24 February 2003).