

International Political Economy

Debating the past, present and future

Edited by Nicola Phillips and Catherine E. Weaver

From denial to acceptance

*Benjamin J. Cohen*¹

Little did I anticipate, when I first undertook to write an intellectual history of International Political Economy (IPE) (Cohen 2008b), that I might trigger a debate as rich and extensive as that represented in the pages of this collection. My purpose in highlighting what I described as a transatlantic divide – first in an essay in the *Review of International Political Economy* (Cohen 2007) and then in my book, *International Political Economy: An Intellectual History* (Cohen 2008b) – was of course not innocent. Long distressed by the lack of communication between different factions within IPE's 'invisible college', I had modestly hoped to stir up at least a bit of interest in renewed exchange and dialogue. The impact, however, has gone well beyond my expectations. Evidently my discontent with the state of the field was shared by many. The tinder was there; all that was needed was a spark.

My main premise was straightforward. Within the English-speaking world, the study of IPE had become divided between two broad 'schools': one, an 'American' school, hewing close to the norms of conventional social science, emphasizing the twin principles of positivism and empiricism; the other, a 'British' school, more inclusive and multidisciplinary in nature and more critical and normative in tone. Catherine Weaver captures the comparison well in her left brain, right brain metaphor. The American school is rationalist, practical, and prizes objectivity above all. Analysis is all about the logics of causation and consequence. The British school, by contrast, is interpretive, skeptical about rational choice, and rejects a positivist epistemology. Analysis focuses more on institutions and history and aspires to say something powerful about broad questions of equity and social justice.

Worse, the two schools had become increasingly isolated and insular, largely deaf to what the other had to offer. Some four decades ago, back when the modern field of IPE was just getting started, Susan Strange (1970) wrote of the regrettable 'case of mutual neglect' that had long persisted between students of international economics and international relations (IR). The triumph of Strange and the other pioneering scholars that I wrote about in my *Intellectual History* was that they succeeded, quite remarkably, in overcoming that historical dialogue of the deaf. The sad irony, I suggested, was that in time a new case of mutual neglect had developed, between the American and British schools. Today a new effort was needed to 'build bridges' between disparate intellectual traditions.

Reactions to my argument, not surprisingly, have been mixed, as the chapters in this volume testify. Commentary on the transatlantic divide, in effect, has traced all four of the classic stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, and – finally – acceptance. Some sources have questioned whether a problem even exists; others have denounced any effort to talk about it; yet others have sought to redefine or refine the issues involved. In the end, however, a broad consensus does seem to have been forged. The field of IPE is fractured, and something ought to be done about it. Collectively, the chapters in this volume help us to see what our future priorities should be.

Denial and anger

The first two stages of grief are said to be denial and anger. Each is a natural, reflexive mode of response to an unwelcome surprise. Both could be found in initial reactions to the issues I raised.

Some sources, for example, acknowledged that a divide may exist but denied there was any point to discussing it. On the American side of the pond, a sense of self-satisfaction prevailed. Little value could be added, I was told, by an attempt to promote transatlantic dialogue. British IPE ‘is not positivist social science’, wrote one senior US colleague in private correspondence. So ‘there really is not much room for discussion ... There is simply not enough common language, or enough common understanding ... Conversations across this barrier are essentially fruitless’. On the British side, responses were more defensive. One scholar in the United Kingdom insisted that in calling for more bridges between the two schools, my intention could only have been ‘to prolong the reach and the hegemony of US IPE by absorbing British IPE into its project’. Another described my approach as ‘smelling of US intellectual imperialism’. Responses like these might be thought risible were they not also indicative of a truly grave malaise in the field.

Others reacted angrily, contending that any talk of distinct schools would only serve to polarize the field. Scholars would feel the need to declare their allegiance to one side or the other, hardening positions. So why not just let sleeping dogs lie? Representative is Catherine Weaver in this volume, who confesses to some concern that ‘the more we think and write about ourselves in terms of competing schools of thought, the more we make the divide real’. Similarly, Eric Helleiner worries that we ‘might be about to plunge into a long phase of navel gazing’. But as scholars, can we really afford the luxury of avoiding debate just because, as Helleiner puts it, ‘it can be overdone’? Divisions over matters of ontology and epistemology are integral to all the social sciences. Argument is essential if we are to avoid intellectual complacency. If we do not occasionally rouse the sleeping dogs, testing hidden assumptions, how can we ever have confidence in the foundations of our research?

Besides, no one can claim to have a monopoly on truth. We all can learn from one other, as both Weaver and Helleiner ultimately concede. Even as they fret about the risk of deepening the transatlantic divide, they acknowledge the costs

of the status quo. In Weaver’s words: ‘We have allowed ourselves to become so entrenched in our imagined communities or defensive of our respective identities that we fail to utilize emerging comparative strengths and exchange ideas across the divide in a constructive or even competitive manner.’ Helleiner pleads eloquently for ‘a little more humility’. Both recognize the value of building bridges across factional lines.

Bargaining

After denial and anger came bargaining – attempts to come to terms with the unwelcome surprise in one way or another. For many of the contributors to this volume, this has meant negotiating over where the lines in IPE are drawn. A divide may exist, but I have mischaracterized it. Various, I have been accused of: distortion; over-emphasis on geography; incompleteness; drawing the line in the wrong place; political bias; and cultural bias. The list of alleged sins is long.

Not that any of this is surprising, of course. After all, as Ronen Palan wryly remarks, ‘it is easy to poke holes’ in any attempt at social classification. But there is no denying the value of the discussion. Though the litany of criticisms may seem dizzying, it is clear that out of this polyphonous chorus a much richer understanding has been attained about the current state of our field of study.

Distortion

One charge is that my characterization of a transatlantic divide was a distortion. Typical was an early commentary by John Ravenhill (2008), who contended that my description of the British version of IPE was ‘ambiguous’ while my characterization of the American school was ‘narrow’. In a parallel comment Richard Higgott and Matthew Watson (2008) went further, accusing me of nothing less than outright caricature. Is there truth to such suggestions?

Personally, I find it hard to deny that a deep gap persists between the versions of IPE that predominate on either side of the pond. Studies of article citations in representative journals or course syllabi in US and British universities show relatively little overlap in what is read or taught. For the most part, scholars in each faction meet separately, in their own respective conferences and professional associations, and even in an age of electronic communications talk largely to one another rather than across the ocean. Jason Sharman is right when he speaks of the ‘problems of intellectual isolationism and uninformed mutual disdain’ across the Atlantic. What he calls a ‘conspicuous disconnect’ is real.

As evidence I can offer my own version of Mark Blyth’s ‘cautionary tale’. In the autumn of 2009 I happened to attend two academic conferences in rapid succession: first a meeting of International Political Economy Society, a new group that is rapidly becoming the principal venue for presentation of IPE research in the United States; and then, just four weeks later, the annual meeting of the British International Studies Association, a traditional showcase for British IPE. The disconnect between the two events could not have been greater. Not only

was there no overlap between the scholars in attendance, there was also no communication at all between the bodies of research on display. On neither side did presenters show even the slightest awareness of, or interest in, work produced on the other side. It was as if they occupied two parallel worlds.

Admittedly, my characterization of the divide is a broad, stylized generalization – and therefore, like all generalizations, something of an over-simplification. Not every detail is likely to conform to the generalization; exceptions can always be found if one is inclined to look for them. But that is nitpicking, which risks losing sight of the forest for the trees. Like it or not, there is a serious communications problem in IPE – a true dialogue of the deaf – however we characterize it. On that point just about all of the contributors to this volume concur.

Over-emphasis on geography

A second charge is that I over-emphasize geography. The gap is not ‘between Brits and Yanks’, as Kathleen McNamara puts it, but between competing ontologies – basic differences over what constitutes valid explanation of social phenomena. At issue is really a fundamental distinction between two sharply varying traditions in social research, one aspiring to scientific positivism, the other to historical understanding. The dichotomy is of long standing. Robert Cox traces it back to at least the eighteenth century, contrasting what he calls ‘problem-solving’ theory (which takes the structural characteristics of the present as given in order to be able to deal effectively with problems arising within it) with ‘critical’ theory (which is concerned with how those structures emerged and how their existing forms may be liable to change). Similarly, David Lake sees it as a contest between rigorously objective social science, with its formal models and statistical tests, and looser, more ‘holistic’ epistemologies.

The point is valid, of course. The question is indeed one of contrasting scholarly standards. But it is also true that the contrast corresponds accurately to a basic difference of intellectual cultures on the two sides of the Atlantic – broadly, to the way international studies traditionally have been approached in British universities as compared with the United States. On the American side, links with political science have always dominated. International studies grew up in an environment framed by the norms of conventional social science, with a particular emphasis on training in quantitative methods. Once IPE was born, it seemed natural for US scholars to channel the infant field’s development along similar lines. In Britain, by contrast, international studies had roots that were spread much more widely into a variety of other disciplines such as sociology, history, religion, and law. Direct links with political science were weaker, with most universities maintaining a strong institutional separation between IR faculty and others. British academics are much more conditioned to think about the international realm in multidisciplinary and normative terms. In terms of underlying modal tendencies, therefore, the geographic appellations do not seem unreasonable. Brits and Yanks, by and large, simply see the world differently.

Incompleteness

A third charge is that my characterization of the divide is incomplete, particularly on the American side. Based on their analysis of the top 12 English-language journals in political science and international relations plus their survey of over a 1,000 US and Canadian IR specialists, Daniel Maliniak and Michael Tierney conclude that I got it right. In their words: ‘The picture that Cohen paints of an American school of IPE is largely consistent with our findings.’ The predominant version of IPE in the United States, their data attest, appears to have become increasingly homogeneous in terms of both paradigmatic orientation and research methodology. Versions of liberalism trump other theoretical traditions; states and interstate relations form the principal focus of analysis; and scientific method – a pure or hard science model – has come to be viewed as the only valid basis for a cumulation of knowledge. Nicola Phillips describes it as ‘the slow death of pluralism’. McNamara, Peter Katzenstein, Jonathan Kirshner, and Robert Wade all use the word ‘monoculture’.

Not everyone agrees, however, that this characterization is wholly accurate. Randall Germain, as well as Katzenstein, McNamara, and Phillips, all dissent, rightly drawing attention to anomalies in Maliniak and Tierney’s methodology that would appear to bias their results. By limiting themselves to just a small handful of political science journals – the ‘dirty dozen’, Germain calls them – Maliniak and Tierney effectively exclude a wide range of research that is published elsewhere, in more specialized journals, in book form, or in cognate disciplines. Katzenstein seems especially sensitive on this point, decrying the failure of his home department at Cornell to make Maliniak and Tierney’s top ten simply because it is a ‘book’ department. Likewise, by limiting their survey only to IR specialists, Maliniak and Tierney effectively reinforce the close association of the American school with the state-centric ontology of conventional political science. Excluded, as Phillips points out, are an array of colleagues with training or affiliations in other disciplines, such as sociology, geography, or business. What we are served is, in Germain’s words, ‘a narrow slice of IPE that cannot be considered to be the field as a whole... a pinched portrayal of IPE in America’.

This point, too, is valid. But as both Germain and McNamara acknowledge, there is also a high degree of hierarchy in US IPE in terms of both publications and training. Some publishing venues – journals or university presses – clearly carry more prestige than others. Likewise, department rankings plainly distinguish elite institutions from all the rest. Maliniak and Tierney’s methodology may not capture the full *breadth* of the field as it actually exists in the United States. But it arguably does succeed in capturing what is done at the *peak* of the field, where standards are established and aspirations are defined. Germain may not like the ‘seeming concentration of academic influence within IPE in America’, which he believes tends to promote ‘group think and herd behavior’. McNamara may disapprove of the ‘strikingly narrower view of IPE’ that is typically taught at America’s premier universities, which she fears circumscribes

students' ambitions. But both acknowledge that the result is a high degree of consensus on the basic norms of the field – what is or is not to be considered 'good' scholarship. In terms of what is privileged as mainstream, the word 'monoculture' does not seem at all inaccurate as a way to describe the American school.

The wrong place

A fourth charge comes from Helleiner, who accepts that the divide is real but feels that I have drawn the line in the wrong place. The founders of both schools, Helleiner argues, shared a fairly similar view of the field's nature and purpose – a point emphasized by Cox and Geoffrey Underhill as well. Thus in Helleiner's view it was only with the emergence of what I have called the Third Generation of US scholars, with their penchant for the reductionist methodology of neo-classical economics, that a serious gap began to emerge. The key divide today, he concludes, is not between a British and an American school but rather between the Third Generation of US scholars and everyone else.

Helleiner's point is appealing, especially to those of us of an earlier generation who have watched the evolution of the American school with, in Robert Keohane's words, 'a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction'. But as with the previous charge of incompleteness, the argument discounts the degree of hierarchy in US IPE. There are, no doubt, many in the United States who would prefer the 'joyous contestation' and 'intellectual adventure' that Keohane recalls from the day when the field (and he) was young. Certainly it can be argued that with the ascendancy of the Third Generation has come a 'certain degree of aridity' in US scholarship, as Henry Farrell and Martha Finnemore suggest. In Keohane's words, 'a price has been paid'. Yet no one can deny that today it is the Third Generation, at the peak of the field, that sets the standards for most American scholarship. In Gramscian terms the Third Generation is 'hegemonic', setting the norms even for scholars in the United States whose intellectual preferences might differ.

Political bias

A fifth charge comes from Craig Murphy, who thinks my characterization of the American school is 'inadequate' since it omits a range of important scholars on the political left – the 'Left-Out', as he wittily puts it. For Murphy, the real divide is between those who, in his words, are 'satisfied' with the status quo and those who are not, which ultimately reduces to 'the much older distinction between left and right'. The implication is that my omission of the Left-Out may have been politically motivated. A similar argument is made in a recent commentary by Heikki Patomäki, who reminds us that throughout the post-World War II period 'political economy remained vibrant amongst Marxists, post-Keynesians, Gramscians and other branches of what has become known as heterodox economics'.

In reality, such criticisms once again discount the degree of hierarchy in US IPE. We know that there are a good number of heterodox scholars in the United States. But we also know that their impact on mainstream American scholarship is close to nil. In spirit, they are more Brit than Yank – more like their counterparts in British academia who share their dissatisfaction with the global political economy and who, like them, want to do something about it. Consistent with the divide between research traditions that underlies the transatlantic divide as I have described it, the Left-Out in the United States are probably better viewed not as part of the American school but rather, as Cox suggests, more or less an extraterritorial outpost of the British school.

Cultural bias

Finally, I have been charged with what amounts to a cultural bias for omitting scholars outside the transatlantic area – voices from Latin America, Asia, or elsewhere. In this volume the point is stressed explicitly by Cox and Helge Hveem and is implicit in the comments of Louis Pauly. Elsewhere, it has been made most forcefully by Anna Leander (2009), who emphasizes the need for 'linking the Anglo-Saxon Atlantic to the world beyond'. In her words: 'We need more than a dialogue across the Atlantic... We need multiple stories.'

In response I can only plead *mea culpa*. My *Intellectual History* was limited to what Pauly calls the 'Anglosphere' for reasons of language alone, and I wholeheartedly agree that we could all benefit from a greater exposure to perspectives and traditions that have grown up elsewhere. Recently a start was made with a new *Routledge Handbook of International Political Economy*, edited by Mark Blyth (2009a), containing chapters on IPE in many parts of the world. One can only hope that more such initiatives will be forthcoming in the future.

The way forward

So what is the way forward? Can anything be done to build bridges between IPE's parallel worlds? Herein, arguably, lies the greatest value of this volume. All the contributors, in one way or another, make worthwhile suggestions about what might be done. Not surprising, opinions differ over who bears heavier responsibility. Blyth and Underhill appear to put most of the onus on British scholars, whom they accuse of curve-fitting and what Underhill calls 'template theorizing'. Others point an accusing finger at the arrogant Americans. For Palan, it is US scholars who are 'ideologically driven and uncritical', unaware or dismissive of 'blind spots' in their research. For Helleiner, it is specifically the Third Generation. For Murphy, it is scholars of the right. Opinions also differ over priorities – what is most essential and what should be done first. Collectively, however, a roadmap emerges to point the way forward. Efforts must be addressed in three key directions: toward ourselves, toward our students, and toward our research. All three are crucial.

First, ourselves. Scholarship, by definition, is supposed to be an exercise in inquiry. There is simply no excuse for arbitrarily excluding anything that does not happen to fall into our comfort zone. Several contributors speak of the desirability of greater personal openness. If we truly seek knowledge, each of us individually must commit to the fullest cultivation of Strange's open range: to be prepared to expose ourselves to what passes for knowledge in every part of the invisible college, no matter how much at variance with our own priors. In Cox's words, we must be willing to enter the 'mind sets' of others. We can all learn from work that proceeds from other theoretical paradigms, methodological approaches, or empirical interests.

Greater open-mindedness was precisely what I had in mind in writing my *Intellectual History*. Mainstream US scholars, it seemed to me, had become remarkably insular, ignoring just about anything originating outside North America. By counterposing the alternative of the British school, I hoped to heighten awareness of the American school's own self-imposed limitations. Other opportunities for raising consciousness are stressed by contributors to this volume. For Keohane it means daring to ask about big changes going on in the world political economy. For Mosley and Singer, it means addressing neglected puzzles in the realm of global finance. For Murphy it means paying more attention to global patterns of inequality, an issue long neglected by mainstream American IPE. For Underhill, it means overcoming a British phobia for the statistical techniques so popular among US scholars. For Palan, it means persuading US scholars to accept the validity of research that does *not* make use of such formal methodologies. For Cox and Hveem, it means listening to voices not just on either side of the Atlantic but from all corners of the world – a genuine 'globalization' of the field. To say that there is room for more genuine intellectual curiosity in IPE would be an understatement. The field is rich with diversity for those disposed to look for it.

Second, our students. Another motivation for my *Intellectual History* was my sense that our mutual insularity was doing a distinct disservice to our students. Too often, I wrote, students are exposed to just a single version of the field. Hence, all too frequently, they complete their training regrettably unaware of the full range of possibilities for research. Without consciously realizing it – and reinforced by pervasive patterns of professional socialization – they become members of a faction, spontaneously distancing themselves from traditions with which they are unacquainted. The theme is picked up on by several authors in this collection, including Farrell and Finnemore, Kirshner, and Sharman. Weaver is especially sharp about the American side, citing the disproportionate emphasis placed in US graduate programs on methodological skills. 'There is an implicit understanding amongst early career US IPE scholars', she rightly observes, 'that to get a job in a mainstream political science department, to get published in the leading journals and to get tenure, you demonstrate your quantitative chops.' I have, with regret, told the same thing to my own students. Both Cox and Underhill stress the need to widen our curricula to include more about the common intellectual origins of the field in European writings from the eighteenth century

onward. Hveem calls for a greater emphasis on pluralism, which he sees as the key strength of the British school. IPE, he suggests, should be taught as a broad multidisciplinary field, understood to overlap integrally with other related specialties such as comparative politics, sociology, or history.

Finally, our research. As important as it is to open our own minds and those of our students, ultimately the real test will be the impact on our research. Several of this volume's contributors are skeptical that any fruitful dialogue can ever be promoted between the British and American schools. One might have thought, for instance, as Underhill suggests, that the current global crisis has been severe enough to shake the American school's faith in 'market fundamentalism and the methodologies which accompanied its rise'. Yet Palan finds no evidence of any change in US IPE's 'belief in its preferred theoretical orientation and methodologies'. Blyth is most adamant, wondering 'if a bridge can, or indeed should be built between such radically different things'. Respectfully, however, I dissent and remain optimistic about possibilities for future discourse (contrary to Underhill's unexpected characterization of me as a pessimist). The whole burden of the argument in my *Intellectual History*, summarized in the final pages, was that there are in fact real complementarities between the American and British traditions that could be productively exploited to the benefit of both. As Cox puts it succinctly: 'The possibility of reconciliation ... lies in a mutual recognition that their purposes are different but not necessarily opposed.'

The key, it would seem, lies in what Peter Katzenstein calls 'analytical eclecticism' – a pragmatic research style that is willing to borrow concepts, theories, and methods from a variety of scholarly traditions as needed to address socially important problems. As summarized by Weaver, 'those adopting an analytically eclectic approach are motivated by problem-driven, rather than paradigm- or method-driven research'. The allegiance is to intellectual inquiry rather than to any particular school of thought. The aim is to use whatever tools may seem relevant to the task at hand, building bridges as we go along. In my *Intellectual History*, I offered several recent examples of published scholarship that might serve as models for that sort of approach, including Katzenstein's own recent study of *A World of Regions*, which quite explicitly borrowed from both the American and British traditions. The Canadians Helleiner and Underhill, in what Helleiner calls 'the spirit of Canadian compromise', offer additional examples. The way forward is clearly marked. All that is needed is the will.

Note

- 1 My thanks to the editors, Nicola Phillips and Catherine Weaver, for inviting me to contribute a final word to this volume. Thanks also to the authors for their many astute observations about my book. I am just sorry that my parents are not alive to see their more generous comments. My father would have enjoyed them. My mother would have believed them.