

SPECIAL SYMPOSIUM

The Way Forward

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Little did I anticipate, when I first undertook to write an intellectual history of IPE, that I might trigger not one but two special journal symposia – first a special issue of the *Review of International Political Economy* devoted to what I called the American school, and now a parallel issue of this respected publication focusing on the British school. My purpose in highlighting what I described as a transatlantic divide 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.

Each of the distinguished contributors to this symposium accepts the reality of something that may be described as the British school. An intellectual tradition does indeed exist, centered in Britain – though by no means exclusive to Britain – that is distinctively different from the mainstream of IPE scholarship in the United States. But there consensus ends. What are the distinguishing characteristics of the British school? What are its achievements? And, perhaps most important, what are the prospects for bridging the gap between the British school and its American counterpart? On these critical questions, the contributors offer many wise judgments and perceptive insights – but little agreement. A broad agenda thus remains to point the way forward.

Distinguishing characteristics?

In *International Political Economy: An Intellectual History*, I suggested that the British version of the field defies easy characterisation. Nothing in this symposium disabuses me of that conviction. The hallmark of British IPE is its *inclusiveness* – its determined commitment to preserve the broad 'open range' so fervently advocated by Susan Strange. No discipline is automatically excluded; no topic or

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methodology is considered beyond the pale. The goal, in the words of Geoffrey Underhill, is nothing less than 'the study of the wider social whole'. With an ambition so grand, it is not surprising that there might be some ambiguity about the grubby details.

Mark Blyth is right that identity tends to be defined against some 'other', and in this case the 'other' obviously is the dominant US version of IPE. That is how I approached the question in my *Intellectual History*, comparing core differences across the Atlantic. In contrast to the American school, as I defined it, British IPE seems more interdisciplinary and normative, less wedded to conventional social-science methodology, and above all more ambitious in scope. Catherine Weaver captures the comparison well in her left brain, right brain metaphor. The British school is interpretive and 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.

Some of the contributors to this symposium question the dichotomy between the American and British schools as I have posed it. That is not surprising. After all, as Ronen Palan wryly remarks, 'it is easy to poke holes' at any such attempt at classification. Helge Hveem, for instance, rejects the exercise altogether, declaring it 'not very useful'. Eric Helleiner, by contrast, 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 emphasised by Robert Cox and 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 neoclassical economics, that a serious gap began to emerge. The key divide today, he concludes, is not between a British school and an American school but rather between the Third Generation of US scholars and everyone else.

In a similar vein, Craig Murphy thinks my characterisation is 'inadequate' since it appears to omit a range of important scholars on the political left – the 'Left-Out', as he wittily puts it. And Robert Cox argues that the classification may be misleading, since my geographic appellations tend to distract attention from what, in his view, is really at issue – namely, the troubled coexistence of two distinct approaches to IPE, which he long ago labelled 'problem-solving' theory and 'critical' theory. For both Murphy and Cox, the real divide is between those who, in Murphy's words, are 'satisfied' with the *status quo* and those who are not. For Murphy, this reduces to 'the much older distinction between left and right'. For Cox, using more formal jargon, it reflects a contrast between scholars who take a 'synchronic' approach, focusing on interactions in the present and assuming structural characteristics to be given (problem-solving theory) and others who take a 'diachronic' approach considering how structures emerge and change over time (critical theory).

None of these qualifications is without merit (though I do take exception to Murphy's inference that my omission of the Left-Out may have been politically motivated, which I consider a cheap shot). But neither do they in any way undermine my definition of the British school. Scholars who are identifiably part of the British tradition clearly reject the 'creeping economism' favoured by the Third Generation in the United States. Likewise, they are far more likely to share a

dissatisfaction with the global political economy as it is and to want to do something about it. The fact that some like-minded scholars can be found outside Britain does not change the nature of what is done inside Britain. As I wrote in my *Intellectual History*, you don't have to be British to be part of the British school, or even to be resident in Britain. You just need to be as right-brain-oriented as the mainstream of British IPE.

Achievements?

Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as Ronan Palan reminds us. So given its distinguishing characteristics, what has the British school achieved? What do we learn from its distinctive style of scholarship?

Judging from some of the comments in this symposium, the answer might seem to be: not much. Bluntest are Blyth and Underhill – one a Scot working in the United States, the other a Canadian based in the Netherlands – each of whom, in effect, accuses British scholarship of closed-minded political bias. Blyth (in a pungent example of the use of anecdote as data) recounts his experience at a scholarly meeting in Britain, where in place of pragmatic inquiry he found a well-rehearsed set of unquestioned answers – ‘a disciplinary monotheism that would make [U.S. scholars] blush . . . All questions were already answered; the trick was to simply find the evidence to back it up’. Phrases like curve fitting, data mining and confirmation bias all came to mind. In similar fashion, Underhill accuses British scholarship of a pervasive lack of analytical rigour – a problem, he says, that ‘is if anything becoming worse, deteriorating into declaratory theoretical posturing essentially devoid of empirical underpinning . . . theorising [that] “discovers” stylised facts’. His word for it is ‘template’ theorising. Weaver is only slightly less damning when she urges British-style scholars to ‘resist the urge to proclaim that they already know the answers (neglecting the need to provide evidence)’.

These are devastating critiques. Had I, from my perch across the Atlantic, suggested anything remotely as disapproving, I would have been accused of the most egregious sort of American hubris. But in my *Intellectual History* and elsewhere, I have chosen to concentrate on the best of what the British school has to offer, not the worst. That may be ‘charitable’, as Palan suggests, but it is not unfair. The best of the British school can quite good indeed.

Palan himself provides an apt illustration. Presently the world is in the grip of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. Asks Palan: how well did British scholarship stack up against the American school in shedding light on the financial developments that led up to this sad impasse? In practice, he answers, not badly at all. There was of course some work by US scholars addressing the broad area of finance, but few even considered addressing ‘big’ questions about the overall fragility of global capital markets. Research may have been rigorous, featuring much formal modeling and sophisticated testing, but typically was limited to narrow questions within an overall structure that was assumed to be given and thus essentially stable. Scholarship in Britain, by contrast, was full of critiques pointing to worrisome trends building towards a deeper structural crisis. This does not mean that British scholars were particularly prescient; overall, Palan exaggerates their actual accomplishments. Few foresaw the specific conditions

or sequence of events that unfolded; certainly none got the timing right. But his basic point is well taken. Across the pond the sense of a looming crisis was palpable. No one reading the British literature could say that they were not warned.

Why the contrast? Clearly it goes back to the differences captured by Weaver's left brain, right brain metaphor. The American school's commitment to the 'hard-science' model of conventional social science naturally drives research toward what Cox calls problem-solving theory – in effect, partial-equilibrium (or mid-level) analysis – thus eschewing what I described in my *Intellectual History* as the Really Big Question of systemic transformation. The approach, in Cox's words, is typically 'synchronic' rather than 'diachronic'. British scholarship, by contrast, is much more comfortable with research that looks at the big picture and at how broad structures change over time. In Palan's words, the British school is able to 'home in on some of the critical developments of our time', precisely because of its historical bent, 'critical' attitude and ambition to create a better world. As Palan acknowledges, the British school may be weak in theory construction or methodological rigour. Many scholars may indeed be guilty of promoting unquestioned answers or template theorising. But as compared with the American school, British scholarship is not without achievements of its own. For those willing to pay attention, there is indeed much to learn.

Building bridges?

So what is the way forward? Can anything be done to build bridges between IPE's parallel worlds? *Should* anything be done?

There are some, of course, who might just as soon let sleeping dogs lie. Representative is Weaver, who professes to be concerned that 'the more we think and write about ourselves in terms of competing schools of thought, the more we make the divide real'. Helleiner too 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 utilise emerging comparative strengths and exchange ideas across the divide in a constructive or even competitive manner'. Helleiner pleases eloquently for 'a little more humility'. Both recognise the value of building bridges across factional lines.

But how? Herein, arguably, lies the greatest value of this symposium. 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,

with their curve fitting and template theorising. 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 Hel-leiner, 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 or open-mindedness. 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 symposium. 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 'globalisation' 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 realising it – and reinforced by pervasive patterns of professional socialisation – 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. 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 obviously 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 special issue'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 economic 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 characterisation of me as a pessimist): The whole burden of the argument in my *Intellectual History*, summarised 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 summarised 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

My thanks to the editors of NPE for inviting me to contribute to this special issue. 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.