Progress, History and Identity in International Relations Theory: The Case of the Idealist-Realist Debate

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This article examines the link between disciplinary identity formation, history creation and progress by undertaking an excavation of the idealist–realist debate in International Relations theory. I demonstrate how the debate was framed by the realists, who constructed a unified ‘idealist’ temporally located in the interwar period to be the straw man for the justification of their theories and the starting point for construction of the realist identity. The unified paradigm of ‘idealism’ turns out to be a multiplicity of discourses running throughout the first half of the 20th century. As those discourses intersected with ‘utopian’ realism, two in particular became central to realist identity. The world federalism discourse became the unacknowledged, implicit goal of realism as the realists simultaneously constructed it as the explicit and sole goal of the ‘idealists’. The sovereignty/anarchy discourse became the lived ideal made real through power for the realists who suppressed any mention of this discourse during the ‘idealist’, ‘interwar’ years. I argue that the appropriation of these two discourses by realism is the reason that the narrative history of the discipline requires us to forever remember realism’s progressive victory over ‘idealism’ in the First Great Debate.

Key Words ♦ disciplinary history ♦ disciplinary identity ♦ idealism ♦ progress assessment ♦ realism

Introduction

International Relations scholars are known to take stock of their work from time to time. This impulse to gauge progress is quite natural given the enormous amount of literature generated during the time that International
Relations has existed as an organized academic discipline. Unfortunately, little consensus has been achieved on the appropriate method for assessing progress within the discipline. Despite the occasional nod to Kuhn, Lakatos, Laudan and other philosophers of science, the actual community standard of assessing progress is far more basic than the application of some idealized version of progress assessment derived from the study of the natural sciences.¹

This article argues that the standard method of gauging progress in International Relations theory relies on the construction of disciplinary history by particular communities of researchers. If a group’s construction of disciplinary history is effective, then they will have successfully reshaped the discipline’s history to legitimate their own paradigm while simultaneously delegitimizing those of others. This retelling of the discipline’s history provides a sense of progress by demonstrating how one paradigm can better explain past and present events than another. But this is only part of the story. Progress assessment is actually a reflection of a more fundamental aspect of the construction of disciplinary history — that of forging and maintaining a social identity. In order for any individual to understand that component of their identity which is social, she or he must have a sense of the history of the group. One cannot identify oneself as a realist, idealist, peace researcher, neoliberal, neorealist, etc. without having a sense of the story of that identity. Thus, disciplinary history, identity and progress are inextricably linked in the study of International Relations, which is why our discipline is fraught with periodic ‘Great Debates’. The Great Debates mark our progress in theoretical and empirical ways based on a retelling of real-world and academic history, but they also serve to create and maintain an identity for members of communities of researchers within the discipline.

In order to demonstrate the connection between history, identity and progress this article embarks upon an investigation of the First Great Debate between idealism and realism. The victor in this debate was declared with the arrival of the Morgenthau and Kennans on the intellectual scene in the immediate post-World War II era. The history of the emerging discipline of International Relations was formulated to demonstrate the progress of the realist paradigm in explaining the empirical world of International Relations in comparison to the ‘idealist’ paradigm. This history also helped to forge a strong in-group identity for realists within an academic discipline characterized by scholars working from a wide variety of approaches. But, in order to understand the process of creating a realist disciplinary history, and its relationship to progress and identity, we must have a working knowledge of texts from the days when ‘idealism’ supposedly reigned supreme. An exploration of these texts is an essential task simply because we are told the history of ‘idealism’ from the realists’ perspective. That is to say, one could
list a number of scholars who would willingly identify themselves with the realist tradition, but it is uncertain that one could find anyone who labeled himself as an ‘idealist’.2 The fact that several scholars (e.g. Vasquez, 1983; Osiander, 1998) have attempted to reconstruct an ‘idealist’ paradigm should indicate that one did not previously exist. One might ask, why shouldn’t we just take the realists at their word? Because, as Cox (1981: 128) reminds us, every theory and every history is created for someone to serve some purpose. In the present case, the purpose of the realist version of disciplinary history is to support and maintain a realist identity while at the same time it serves to demonstrate the progress of realism over ‘idealism’ through a particular reconstruction of the interwar literature.

### Disciplinary History and Disciplinary Identity

The recent rise of constructivist theory, which draws heavily from sociology and social psychology, has emphasized the importance of identity in understanding international politics.3 In fact, social identity theory (SIT), which was developed in the interdisciplinary field of social psychology, has been applied to groups at all levels of human society, including states, in the study of International Relations (Mercer, 1995). Tajfel and Turner’s work, as well as prior work by Sherif and Sherif (1953) on realistic conflict theory demonstrates that members of an in-group will often create stories about their out-group that help establish group solidarity. These histories are accounts of events or interactions that may or may not be factual, yet all serve the purpose of forging a positive in-group identity at the expense of an out-group. Since International Relations scholars are not completely immune from these temptations, it seems logical that we would engage in similar storytelling, or disciplinary history creation, in the formation of our own professional group identity.

Dryzek and Leonard (1988) make the case that disciplinary history is central to the practice, progress and identity of an academic discipline. According to their account, disciplinary history is written to legitimate a particular perspective while simultaneously delegitimizing contending approaches. A neutral stance is impossible when writing disciplinary history because all histories are engaged in constructing a particular identity. Such an identity is grounded in a history that demonstrates how its own perspective is rationally superior to all competitors past and present. Dryzek and Leonard argue that most histories are poorly constructed, and can be classified as either Whiggish or skeptical.4

Skeptics are excessively dismissive of the past. Whigs are overly condescending toward the past. Whigs believe that the discipline’s past was mired in ‘ideology’ or ‘philosophy’ and that only now with the present approach
can we begin to clearly understand politics. In fact, Whigs demonstrate the efficacy of their approach in its ability to cope with empirical and conceptual problems as defined by the present. The Whigs thus ignore the contextual nature of political problems in favor of a ‘presentist’ approach. It is my contention that the realists have inculcated the discipline with their Whiggish version of history. What makes this history even more difficult to probe is that unlike the texts Dryzek and Leonard (1988) explore much of realist disciplinary history is unwritten, and is instead passed along verbally from generation to generation of faculty, graduate and undergraduate students.

Schmidt (1994) concurs with the heart of Dryzek and Leonard’s (1988) thesis, yet he offers several important qualifications that help to illuminate disciplinary history in International Relations. First, Schmidt (1994: 353) distinguishes between a historical tradition and an analytical tradition. A historical tradition is one which is transmitted intergenerationally by word of mouth or practice without writing. An analytical tradition is an intellectual construction in which scholars present particular ideas, texts or genres as functionally similar. Analytical traditions are posited to be most often retrospective constructions determined by ‘presentist’ needs for legitimation. The real danger that Schmidt (1994: 353) finds is when the two types of traditions are conflated.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty that results from viewing a retrospectively constructed analytical tradition as an actual historical tradition is that attention to the real academic practices and individuals that have contributed to the development and current identity of a discipline are cast aside for a more epic rendition of the past.5

The academic discipline of International Relations is particularly vulnerable to this kind of problem simply because it is so steeped in ‘great traditions’ (Dunne, 1993). As I demonstrate in this article, the realists have forced the interwar literature into an analytical tradition known as ‘idealism’ based on ‘overarching ahistorical exemplary statements’ that present an unrealistic attachment to some form of world federalism (Schmidt, 1994: 359). However, realists have failed to ‘trace the actual lineage of scholars who self-consciously and institutionally understood themselves as participating in the academic discourse of International Relations’ (Schmidt, 1994: 359). Thus, the realists have also created an unwritten, historical tradition of ‘idealism’ to serve as a foil for their own research program.

In a second qualification, Schmidt (1994: 360) finds that contextual explanations are inadequate to fully explain the disciplinary history of International Relations. Schmidt notes that it is common to explain the evolution of the field exclusively in contextual terms. In this approach, real-
world events serve as important independent variables that can explain the character of the field at any given point in time. An exclusively contextual explanation of the origins of the field of International Relations finds ‘idealism’ as a reaction to World War I and the Treaty of Versailles (Neal and Hamlett, 1969; Olson and Onuf, 1985; Smith, 1987). World War II then logically provides the context for the origin of realist theory. This is the contextual component of the narrative history that realists have created for the discipline. However, as Schmidt (1994: 362–4) correctly observes, the realists never demonstrate the actual connection between the external context and changes in internal concepts and theories. A lag often exists between an external event and the discipline’s reaction to it, and that reaction will often be quite eclectic and multi-sided. The point is that external events do not automatically determine the internal workings of the discipline.

The distinction between external and internal explanations for progress and theoretical development has not been lost on other scholars of IR disciplinary history. For Guzzini (2000: 150), for example, the emergence of new paradigms or approaches to the study of International Relations is always part of a ‘double conjuncture’, reflecting historical events taking place outside of the academic community and of the ‘structure and content of the debates that define the identity of an academic community itself’. Thus, our understanding of International Relations is enhanced to the extent that we consider it a reflexive field of social inquiry epistemologically grounded in the social construction of knowledge and ontologically concerned with the construction of social reality (Guzzini, 2000: 160).

Jorgensen (2000: 10) also suggests that explanations of theoretical developments in the discipline have relied too much on external events, yet internal explanations relying on epistemological progress or progressive shifts share a flaw with most external explanations, namely, that they are generally presented in a universal mode. He (2000: 11) instead suggests that the ‘cultural-institutional context’ is important. To that extent, the organizational culture of the universities, and the peculiarities of professional discourse in the discipline in question have to be taken into account. In applying his approach to the specific case of the First Great Debate, Jorgensen (2000) demonstrates that an ‘idealist’ paradigm did not exist in Continental Europe to debate, and eventually be replaced by realism. However, Jorgensen (2000: 15) offers little explanation for why realism was able to take hold in the United States, which is especially troubling given his characterization of realism as an ‘alien injection of Continental political thought’ brought with refugees from the war like Morgenthau, Herz and Wolfers (cf. Shimko, 1992). In the attempt to remedy this situation, this article focuses specifically on the development of a realist identity in the
Anglo-American community of International Relations scholars through the
construction of ‘idealism’ to form the ‘First Great Debate’.

In the next section I lay out my strategy for uncovering the Whiggish
realist disciplinary history that pervades the field. I will focus this research on
the internal workings of the discipline, largely bracketing contextual factors.
It is not that I think real-world, external political events are unimportant,
but that they are muted (or amplified) to a large extent by theories anchored
in historically constructed identities within the discipline.

In Search of ‘Idealism’

In order to understand the realist–‘idealist’ debate we must begin with an
excavation of the ‘idealist’ writings of the interwar period. We should inquire
into the ‘real academic practices’ and the ‘real individuals’ contributing to
the discipline in the interwar period. Such a project unfortunately encoun-
ters numerous difficulties. First, as previously mentioned, no one claims to
speak authoritatively for the ‘idealists’. Second, no one is heralded by others
as an authority on ‘idealism’.6 Third, international organization and
International Relations were just in the formative stages of development as
academic disciplines during this time.7 Fourth, as such, academic journals
devoted to international organization or International Relations were rare.8
One possible solution to these difficulties would be to examine the writings
of known realists for their references to ‘idealist’ scholars. This proves
problematic in that most realists refer only to the philosophic tradition of
‘idealism’ and its supposed re-emergence in the interwar period without ever
actually citing an incidence of a modern ‘idealist’.9

However, there was a small group of scholars who may provide some clues
to the ‘idealist’ past. Dryzek and Leonard (1988: 1254) suggest that
Whiggish historians will often point to a select few ‘precursors’ of their
tradition who nearly ‘got it right’, but whose work is improved upon by
locating it within the present tradition. In this case, these writers have been
labeled ‘utopian realists’, ‘liberal utopians’, or even ‘anguished romanticists’,
by their fellow realists. They include E.H. Carr, John Herz and Quincy
Wright. What separates these authors from other realists is that they are not
nearly as hasty in their dismissal of so-called ‘idealist’ goals and values.

In a discussion concerning the development of the discipline of Inter-
national Relations Wright (1955: 69–70) finds that during the interwar
period, courses on international organization assumed a prominent role in
most curricula in the field.10 Such courses generally assumed that inter-
national organization was the appropriate way to reduce war and increase
respect for law in interstate relations. These courses usually criticized the
American policy of staying out of the League of Nations. Additionally, they
pondered whether the League could succeed as long as the United States remained outside its membership. Wright notes that the accusation was often made that the emphasis in courses on international organization during this period tended to create attitudes of utopian optimism in the League of Nations. This utopianism proved blinding to the war-forces of power politics. However, Wright’s experience in teaching courses in international organization in that period, in discussing courses given by others, and in reading the most popular textbooks does not confirm this generalization. Wright further states that courses in international organization during this period consisted of historical analyses of the practice and ideas of international organization in modern history. Considerable effort was spent on objective analyses of the League’s activities with appropriate emphasis upon its difficulties, and on the capacity of the League to meet its goals, especially if the United States refused to participate (see the discussion of the American Leadership discourse below). So far, Wright’s account does not support the traditional narrative history of the discipline. Further, Wright does not apply the idealist label to any scholars working during this time period. Thus, we must turn to the texts of the interwar period to see if they provide any corroborating evidence.

Excavating the ‘Interwar’ Period

The following excavation of texts concerning international organization is unconventional by most social science accounts. First, it is not all-encompassing. This article deals with a small portion of the entire body of written work from the early days of the discipline of international organization. No concerted attempt was made to include every viewpoint, nor was any attempt made to exclude certain views. One might object that all of the ‘mainstream’ scholars are not represented in the following sample. Yet, the works of Angell, Zimmern and others are already represented in the modern discourse on ‘idealism’. The current sample allows other voices from the interwar period to be heard as well, for how many of us would be counted as ‘mainstream’ in some future post-mortem of the discipline? The fact that even the less well-known scholars in this sample participate in a discussion of the same themes as Angell and others should add additional validity to this study as well as previous reconsiderations of interwar discourse. The main problem with a more purposive sample, and the researcher selecting ‘representative’ or ‘mainstream’ scholars for review is selection bias. As Lustick (1996) reminds us, historical research is fraught with the problem of selection bias. His strategy to avoid bias is to introduce a type of randomization in the selection of source material. Following Lustick’s advice, I chose my sources by drawing a simple random sample from those
books falling under the subject heading of international organization within
the time frame specified below. 12

Second, the review does not allow the imposition of chronological time to
arbitrarily set the boundaries of texts to be considered. Instead, as Ruggie
(1986b) argues, time frames are social constructions. 13 I argue that the
discipline of International Relations has constructed its own time frame that
temporally locates ‘idealism’ in the interwar period. 14 Recall that it is the
realists who temporally locate ‘idealism’ in the interwar period. By centering
‘idealism’ at that moment, the realists sever the multiplicity of discourses
running through the interwar period. Undoubtedly, by chopping up
discourses and rendering them less coherent, one facilitates the repackaging
and reconstruction of the many voices into one. It is as if someone entered
a room full of conversations, turned on a tape recorder for an instant, turned
the tape recorder off and then transcribed the snippets of dialogue in an
effort to remember the conversations. The location of ‘idealism’ in the
interwar years is so generally accepted that even Nicholson’s (1998: 66)
otherwise critical assessment of realist disciplinary history accepts that
utopianism existed as a true parallel to realism only during the interwar
years.

Osiander (1998: 411) recognizes this problem, but curiously decides that
rather than accept the realists’ version of a single-themed ‘idealism’, or deny
the acceptability of repackaging the past to fit the present, he should instead
reconstruct a different and ‘more accurate’ version of the paradigm. The
main difference between Osiander’s approach and my own is that Osiander
believes it is important to reconstruct the analytical tradition of ‘idealism’
that I argue never existed. I claim that the only reason to engage in this type
of reconstruction is to justify one’s own presentist project. For example, a
neoliberal or ‘neoidéalist’ research program would be strengthened by a
version of disciplinary history that stretches back to the early 20th century,
just as the many realist research programs derive strength from their
history. 15

The excavation has discovered a multiplicity of discourses that were
ongoing during the ‘interwar’ period, confirming Wilson’s (1998: 13)
intuition that ‘a greater variety of ideas, opinions and theories than is
conventionally appreciated’ were actively discussed during that time. For
simplicity’s sake the discourses will be organized according to their central
themes. The names assigned to these discourses are: Historic Peace Projects,
Christianity/Morality, Education, Commerce, American Leadership, Social
Darwinism, World Federalism and Anarchy/Sovereignty. Obviously, this
naming convention is somewhat arbitrary. However, for the sake of the
reader, and of analysis of the results of this excavation, the ability to refer to
a number of texts sharing certain characteristics proves helpful. The naming
of these discourses is not meant to force texts into particular boxes where they must remain in our memory. Indeed, one finds that these texts are often simultaneously engaged in several discourses.

**The ‘Idealist’ ‘Interwar’ Texts**

The amount of information gathered about specific texts uncovered in this research project is far too great to be presented in an article format. However, for the purpose of demonstrating the existence of numerous discourses where the realists tell us there is only one, I have provided brief synopses of the main themes and authors associated with each discourse in Table 1. As these synopses indicate, Wright’s (1955: 69–70) observation that the study of international organization assumed prominence during the ‘interwar’ period is confirmed. It also appears that Wright is correct in stating that this emphasis did not create an attitude of ‘utopian optimism’ as most of these discourses are aimed at solving practical problems of international organization, and at least one, the commerce discourse, exhibits little internal agreement. For my own presentist purposes of exposing the identity dynamics behind this ‘debate’, I argue that two of these discourses became central to the realist construction of disciplinary history: *world federalism* and *anarchy/sovereignty*. A closer investigation of these discourses will help to expose the Whiggish history created by the realists to construct their identity and establish the basis for assessing their own academic progress.

**World Federalism**

The *world federalism* discourse is closely related to the *anarchy/sovereignty* discourse in that its associated scholars view the primary cause of war to be the division of the world into territorially fixed, sovereign states. The world federalist solution is not to eliminate the territorial nature of the state, but rather to impress upon states the necessity of ceding certain aspects of sovereignty to a higher authority. Thus, international organization into some type of federation of states is the solution to war.16 I shall discuss several exponents of this point at greater length.

The Marquis of Lothian, a British diplomat and well-known supporter of world federalism, provides the conventional argument of the day for international organization into a federation of states. Lothian (1935: 10–11) asserts three propositions about international life. First, war is an inherent feature of an anarchical system of sovereign states. Second, previous attempts to end war through international organization or law, such as the League of Nations or the Kellogg Pact, were doomed to failure in such a system of states. Finally, the absence of war can only be brought about through a
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Central theme</th>
<th>Associated scholars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historic Peace Projects</td>
<td>Historical analyses of the successes and failures of previous attempts at international organization for peace.</td>
<td>Beales (1931); Hembleben (1943); Marriott (1937/1939)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian/Morality</td>
<td>The breakdown of morality is connected to the incidence of war. Attempts at organization for peace must have a notion of morality at their base.</td>
<td>Alberdi (1913); Butter (1938); Clark (1935); Grane (1914); Trueblood (1932); Veblen (1919); World Alliance (1927)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education is essential to laying the groundwork for international organization for peace.</td>
<td>Adler (1944); Dunn (1950); Eagleton (1937); Krehbiel (1916)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>Disagreement among the scholars as to whether growing international trade leads to cooperation or conflict.</td>
<td>Alberdi (1913); Brailsford (1916); Clark (1935); Cornejo (1932); Heymann (1941); Krehbiel (1916); Taylor (1916); Viner (1940)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Leadership</td>
<td>US leadership is vital to any attempt at international organization.</td>
<td>Ashbee (1917); Bryce (1922); Butter (1938); Cloan (1914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Darwinism</td>
<td>Human beings are evolving toward cooperation and peace.</td>
<td>Crile (1915)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Federalism</td>
<td>States must cede certain aspects of sovereignty to a higher authority in order to eliminate war and guarantee peace in the world.</td>
<td>Alberdi (1913); Brinton (1948); Butter (1938); Curtis (1946); Eagleton (1937); Hembleben (1943); Kerr and Curtis (1923); Reeves (1945); Schuman (1952); Streit (1940)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchy/Sovereignty</td>
<td>Emphasizes the problematic nature of anarchy and state sovereignty for international organization.</td>
<td>Beveridge (1945); Butter (1938); Cornejo (1932); Curtis (1946); Eagleton (1937); Hembleben (1943); Kerr and Curtis (1923); Krehbiel (1916); Marriott (1937/1939); Reeves (1945); Schuman (1952)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
commonwealth of nations that will extend the rule of law throughout the world. Lothian (1935: 43) is quite clear that the League of Nations is only an educative step in the right direction, but it is not a world state, and if it were made to perform as if it were such an entity ‘it will break in our hands’. However, he understands that a ‘world commonwealth or the federation of even a group of like-minded nations is still a long way off’ (1935: 41). His realistic assessment is that in the immediate future (post-1935) we may see a reconstitution of the League of Nations, which he prefers, or a return to the alliance system.

Spencer (1923: 392) suggests that the special task for the ‘student of political science in its international phase’ is to use history as a means to study the evolution of ideas and institutions that replace anarchy with order. This order can take three forms – an ‘H.G. Wellsian structure’ of a unified world state — ‘after millenniums’; the present order of multiple sovereign states which generally observe international law, but still lapse into war on occasion; or ‘a federal combination of unity and multiplicity which we call internationalism’. Spencer (1923: 393) finds the last option most attractive as it offers a combination of ‘realism and idealism, an opportunity for feasible progress toward a constitution, while maintaining civilization in stable equilibrium’. Spencer is ‘realistic’ about the timetable for the creation of some form of international union and world consciousness, and at times in the text declares this work to be of decades, centuries or even millenniums. Spencer (1923: 395) also defends this work against condemnation as ‘mere ideals’, or ‘idealistic mouthing’, since science must offer some understanding of the future, instead of just dwelling in the past. And finally, since history emphasizes tradition, which is passive and inert, international political science ‘must play a more active role, must use constructive imagination’ (1923: 400–1).

Lynch (1911) suggests that while the 19th century was one of national development, the 20th century will be one of international development. He argues that evidence for this proposition abounds, as many instances of intergovernmental cooperation, such as the First and Second Hague Conferences, and nongovernmental international meetings, such as the Young Men’s Christian Association and various conferences of the world’s religions, are becoming more frequent during this time period. As a result of these contacts across nations, individuals will transcend their ‘blind and exclusive devotion to one nation’ and develop a ‘sense of world citizenship and devotion to humanity and justice for all men’ (Lynch, 1911: 64). His (1911) ultimate goal is a world federation with a supreme court of states and a parliament or congress of states based in Washington, DC.

Several of the scholars in this discourse believe that the American model of federalism should be adapted to the global level. Edwin Ginn, the founder of
the World Peace Foundation and eventual publisher of *International Organization*, was one of an early group of philanthropic American industrialists including Andrew Carnegie, who met to discuss proposals for world peace at the Lake Mohonk Conferences (Holcombe, 1965). Ginn’s original interest was in promoting education as a method of achieving peace, leading him to publish many textbooks on the subject that were to be used in his proposed international school of peace. He eventually abandoned the peace school idea and took up the cause of world federalism as the solution to war. Ginn (1911), like many of the other world federalists discussed here, argued for a series of international institutions, including an International Supreme Court, International Executive, International Parliament and, perhaps most controversially, an International Police Force. However, in addition to these institutional features Ginn argued that an international sense of community, or feeling of world citizenship, was necessary to persuade states to participate in this type of system. As Holcombe (1965: 4) notes in his review of Ginn’s contributions to the movement, ‘being a good American, Mr Ginn was naturally disposed to believe that the answer to the problem [of war] would be some form of world federalism’ based in large part upon the American model and American participation.

Other scholars working within this discourse share an affinity to the American Leadership discourse through their insistence that the United States, and indeed all democracies, join any future international organization of states designed to prevent war. For example, Eagleton (1937: 132) argues that to remove war from the international scene requires ‘an international organization to which all states belong, willingly or not, with a program wide enough to meet all the needs for which war might be urged, and with a force behind it capable of overcoming all resistance’. Accordingly, the League of Nations was a step in the right direction, but it lacked universal membership and a commitment to the use of force to prevent and punish aggression.18

Others explicitly reject the American model for a future world federation. Culbertson (1943: 239) envisions:

... a voluntary association of two or more leading sovereign states, open to all states, the object of which is to establish adequate machinery for collective defense of its members against aggression. The World Federation that I propose embodies the ideal of world citizenship, to be achieved eventually through gradual evolution. But it is not yet the brotherhood of man. It is not a guarantee of eternal peace. It is realistic, and it puts war into a strait jacket tighter than any yet devised.

This World Federation is not ‘a closely knit union of states under a powerful central government along the lines of the United States of America. Nothing is farther from my thoughts than to work for establishment of a world state
with manifold sovereign powers.’ Culbertson (1943) then sets out a fairly
detailed plan to achieve his World Federation, including regional federations,
a World Supreme Court, President, World Court of Equity, World Trustees,
World Vocational Senate, the same institutions replicated at the regional
level, and finally a World Police Force consisting of both national and
international contingents.

Finally, several scholars warn that progress on world peace will come
slowly. Brinton (1948: 119) regards the notion of progress inherited from
the Enlightenment as leading people, especially the young elite of the US,
toward utopianism. Even if those pushing for world federalism were to
succeed in their goal, Brinton believes that the project would fail in a manner
akin to the failure of the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.
Schuman (1952) also believes that progress toward world peace will be slow
in coming. However, he does believe that world federalism is a more
promising option than collective security, or peace by the sword to overcome
the terror of international anarchy. In sum, the world federalists seem much
more ‘realistic’ about their ‘idealistic’ projects than latter day realists seem to
recognize.

Anarchy/Sovereignty

The discourse that emphasizes the problematic nature of anarchy and state
sovereignty for international organization weaves its way through many of
the texts examined in this excavation of the ‘interwar’ literature. Several
scholars debate the logical foundations of sovereignty and its supposed
consequences in the international system. Cornejo (1932) provides an
argument linking the security of the individual to the sovereignty of the
state. He maintains that states, in order to justify the resort to war, must
appeal to the egoism of each individual to satisfy or resist ambitions of
conquest. The egoism of the individual in society is then transmogrified to
the egoism of the state in the international arena. The state maintains the
unity of egoistic individuals, by recalling its egoism in the international
sphere. Thus, if the individual is to survive, the state must survive, and that
means that war is a necessary feature of interstate relations.

On the other hand, Reeves (1945) suggests that individual security would
be enhanced if the state ceded some aspects of its sovereignty to a higher
authority. He (1945: 126) argues that the notion of democratic states
’surrendering’ sovereignty to an international organization is nonsensical
because states are not sovereign. The real source of sovereign power is the
people, not the state. Should the people in these states come to the
conclusion that they would be better protected by delegating part of their
sovereignty to bodies other than nation-states, nothing would be surrendered, but rather increased autonomy would be acquired. These authors advocate some form of world federation to abolish war between states as it has been eliminated between individuals in domestic society.

Korff (1923) reviews the development of the theory of sovereignty just prior to and after World War I. Korff identifies two schools of thought on sovereignty. One group, writing primarily, but not exclusively, in Germany prior to the war, advocates the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of the state. The other group, including Laski, argue that the power of the state must be limited by law. Korff’s (1923: 412) judgment is that:

Legal sovereignty, can never more be an unlimited power; it must be strictly bound by legal limitations. If we consider sovereignty from this point of view, we see that it is no longer dangerous politically. In other words, we can keep the idea of sovereignty in our conception of the state and need not be afraid of it, so long as we attribute to it a purely legal character, which in itself implies the existence of limitations and is a negation of all-powerfulness.

Lothian (1935: 13) links the anarchy of the international economy to the anarchy of the international political system by arguing that ‘it is inter-state anarchy which is the fundamental cause of poverty and unemployment, of the partial breakdown of capitalism, and of war, in this modern world’. He dismisses the argument that capitalism causes war since it does not cause war within the state and the division of the world into sovereign states predated capitalism. As he states (1935: 48):

It is inconceivable to me that we can continue much longer as an anarchy of twenty-six states in Europe and over sixty states in the world, each raising its tariffs to the clouds against one another, each armed to the teeth, and each darkening the skies with bombing aeroplanes whose most fatal destruction would be directed against the civilian population. Some form of integration — both economic and political — is bound to come, and if this does not come by voluntary federation it will come by way of empire.

Laski (1933), like Lothian (1935) is concerned with the dual anarchy posed by the international political economy. Laski (1933: 532–3) states that ‘a world divided into sovereign states cannot, by reason of their sovereignty, successfully organise their relationships upon any basis which can reasonably assume that peace is permanent’. Due to increased economic interdependence, Laski (1933: 534) finds that ‘it is obvious that the national state is an impossible unit of final discretion’. The effect of sovereignty in the economic realm is the push toward imperialism, and war. The solution reflects Laski’s (1933: 533–4) concurrence with H.G. Wells ‘that there are really no effective middle terms between the anarchy of the pre-League world, and a world-state in the full sense of the term’. Laski argues that a society of
Socialist states with economic planning for the entire world is the best option to preserve the peace.\textsuperscript{22} Angell (1933: 21–2) agrees that ‘the existence of a number of independent sovereignties side by side, each a law unto itself, with no general “rule of the road” governing their intercourse, has always involved war’. Angell observes that in the course of history the wars fought under the condition of anarchy have always been brought to an end by substituting the principle of authority, or a federal bond, for anarchy. Since that authority was not always imposed, such as in the case of the American colonies forming a federal union, there is nothing that could theoretically prevent the same from happening on a world scale. However, Angell (1933: 26–7) does not necessarily think that the ‘surrender of sovereignty by the nations of the world as complete as that made by the States of the American Union; nor the formation of a Federal authority as overpowering as that of Washington’ is required. Angell believes that there are many different arrangements of authority to choose from in superceding international anarchy. According to Angell (1933: 27) the main obstacle to achieving some type of supranational authority is ‘that we have made of national sovereignty a god; and of nationalism a religion, so that even when the most solid advantages for international cooperation are offered they are rejected impulsively’.

Many other scholars also find the solution to the problems of sovereignty and anarchy to be some form of international organization above the state. Eagleton (1937) cautions that states should divest some measure of their sovereignty to an international organization to avoid the constant state of war within which all states find themselves. Similarly, Schuman (1952: 481) counsels that ‘the politics of the polis or of the nation-state or even of the far-flung imperium no longer serve these needs in an age when nothing short of the governance of all mankind offers promise of protecting men from the evils of anarchy’.

Other scholars bemoan the problem of anarchy among states without providing any hint of a solution. Krehbiel (1916) posits that just as individuals are led to war without a government, so are states, being composed of individuals, in an international environment that offers no recourse above the state. Marriott (1937/1939: 13) notes that the nature of the problem for organized permanent peace is ‘how are a number of independent communities, sovereign states acknowledging no common superior, to live side by side in harmony? Or, failing that, how to settle quarrels without resort to war.’ Hembleben (1943: 184–5) reinforces this point by asserting that the balance of power and alliances among states are not adequate guarantors of peace. Anarchy undermines both configurations.
Elements of this discourse are found in many of the texts listed in Table 1. Obviously, the problems of sovereignty and anarchy are important to the discipline of International Relations. Therefore, it is quite understandable that many texts will mention these problems, even if their purpose is to advance arguments concerning commerce or morality. What is most interesting about the world federalist and anarchy/sovereignty discourses is that they overlap in important ways. The world federalists are of course explicit in the form of international organization that they believe can best promote peace among states. However, many of these scholars emphasizing the problems of sovereignty and anarchy also agree that some form of international organization is the solution to the problem of war. In fact, many of these scholars are making arguments for international organization for peace in the wake of World War II, and not during the period between the wars when the realists tell us that these utopian arguments were made.

The Utopian Realists: Precursors in a Modern, Realist, Whiggish History

The excavation of the ‘interwar’ period has illuminated a number of discourses where realist disciplinary history tells us there is only one. Each of the aforementioned discourses has its own ethos, its own raison d’etre. Collapsing the multiplicity of discourses into a single ‘idealism’ masks internal disagreements and debate. However, the existence of a discourse on anarchy and sovereignty during a time when scholars were supposedly unaware of the effects of these concepts on International Relations poses an interesting problem for the realists, especially when many of the contributors to that discourse come to the same conclusions as those operating within the world federalist discourse.

In order to understand why the modern realists want us to remember the variety of ‘interwar’ discourses as a unity we should look to the precursors of the modern, Whiggish realists. One finds evidence of an unacknowledged tension between realism and ‘idealism’ within the writings of the utopian realists. These writers find nothing strange in the ability of ‘idealism’ and realism to coexist within their work. Now that we know there are a number of discourses within ‘idealism’, we might ask which of these is incorporated into the utopian realist texts, and which might be appropriated from the utopian realists by the modern realists. What I am suggesting is that these precursors form a bridge from the realist-constructed version of ‘idealism’ to the modern realists. However, realists must deny this bridge if they are to maintain a separate identity from the ‘idealists’ and argue that realism has proven more progressive than ‘idealism’.

E.H. Carr, writing in The Twenty Years’ Crisis, looked back on the
development of international politics as being markedly utopian. Carr (1939: 8–10) attributed the naivete of political science to the fact that it was a science in its infancy. As with any physical science, international politics must pass through the ‘stage of wishing’ to a stage of ‘hard and ruthless analysis’ known as realism. However, Carr did not intend utopianism to be discarded completely from international politics. In fact, he believed that utopia and reality are permanent and necessary fixtures of political thought. Thus, even as Carr is writing, a unified utopian ‘idealism’ has been constructed, and in some sense incorporated into his work. Carr is perhaps an essential precursor to modern realists in that he himself is engaged in constructing a Whiggish history that demonstrates that the discipline’s past is a progression from philosophy or ideology to science.23

The philosophical underpinnings of Carr’s view of international politics points to an essential tension between realism and ‘idealism’. Carr (1939: 11–12) finds that the antithesis of utopia and reality corresponds to the antithesis of free will and determinism. The utopian believes in free will and the ability to reject reality by the sheer force of will. Ultimately, the complete utopian will fail to understand the reality to be changed as well as the process by which such change can occur. The realist, on the other hand, is a determinist who in the extreme accepts reality unquestioningly and deprives himself of the possibility of ever changing it.24 Further, the antithesis of utopia and reality is also coincident with the antithesis of theory and practice. The realists create political theory to codify political practice while the utopians create political theory in the hope that practice will conform to its efforts. Therefore, all ‘healthy’ human action should establish a balance between utopia and reality, free will and determinism, and theory and practice (Carr, 1939: 12).25

Quincy Wright (1955: 59), in The Study of International Relations, argues for a ‘synthetic discipline’ which will moderate ‘the advocates, respectively of world government and of national sovereignty, the socialists and the individualists, the idealists for whom the possibilities of the future are real and the realists for whom only the past and the present exist’. Through such a discipline, all scholars might see the relativity of their positions and compromise on their rigid principles. However, it is apparent that Wright has appropriated the discourse on sovereignty for the realists, while assigning that of world government to the ‘idealists’. Thus, despite the fact that the world federalism and anarchy/sovereignty discourses seem to overlap in the ‘interwar’ period, by Wright’s time they are evolving into discrete narratives.

Wright’s feelings on the tension between realism and ‘idealism’ are crucial to an understanding of their ensuing ‘debate’. Wright is concerned with the relationship of reality to truth. According to Wright (1955: 9), any
explanation of the reality of International Relations should be a phase of truth. However, he notes that in the field of International Relations, the words reality and truth are often used as terms of propaganda rather than elucidation of political events. In this sense, realism is contrasted to idealism as presenting a realistic account of International Relations which avoids any charge of wishful thinking (Wilson, 1998: 4).

Wright (1955: 11) suggests that reality can be divided into four classes: (1) the actual, what is or was; (2) the probable, what may be or is likely to be; (3) the possible, what can be; and (4) the desirable, what should be. The first three types of reality are rather uncontroversial. However, the fourth type, what ought to be, is often labeled as ideal and antithetical to what is real. This view is naive according to Wright (1955: 12):

> What should be is the form of reality most frequently in the consciousness of the philosopher. He is aware that man is not an automaton but a creator, realizing his aims, purposes, intentions, aspirations, ideals, in short converting what really ought to be into what really is.

According to Wright, the title of reality cannot be denied to the project that establishes the consistency of choices of values with one another and with what is known about nature. But, as we have seen, Wright has previously separated world federation from sovereignty. World federation occupies the position of desirable reality, while sovereignty that of actual reality. Might this be the kernal of truth, the source of the tension between realism and ‘idealism’? This is the point where modern realism begins to separate itself from the ‘idealism’ that it is simultaneously creating. These utopian realists, like Wright, have just enough realism in their writings that the balance struck in their work between utopianism and realism can be interpreted to tilt toward realism. Thus, these ‘precursors’ to modern realists ‘nearly got it right’, but according to modern realists we are better off neglecting any mention of ‘idealism’ or the ideal in forming the modern realist identity. As Wilson (1998: 13) notes, there is a general failure on the part of modern realists to appreciate the radicalism in Carr’s work, as well as in the work of other utopian realists like Herz and Wright.

John Herz, like Carr and Wright, similarly felt that elements of utopianism were a necessary feature of international politics. In the preface to Political Realism and Political Idealism, Herz (1951: v) states that: ‘The human cause will be lost if the liberal ideal is forgotten, even as surely as it is lost if left to the utopian Political Idealist.’ The caution is issued at a time in which Herz believes that International Relations is still battling over competing paradigms — pessimistic power politics versus naive, utopian ideas of a coming world state.

Nevertheless, the utopian realists’ writings contain many passages that
assist the modern realists in their attempt at removing any vestige of utopianism from these precursors’ work, thus allowing modern realists to claim them as their own. Herz (1951: 33) states that utopianism is transformed into political idealism when a connection is established between ideals and the actual history of humankind. This can be done by putting forward political ideals as the goal of political action, or by demonstrating that political ideals are being realized in the present. However, he denies reality to the ideal because political idealism incorporates flawed assumptions that have rendered it sterile, ‘so far as a realization of political ideals in historic reality is concerned’ (Herz, 1951: 39).

Indeed, the judgment of all three utopian realists is that power politics is the reality of International Relations. Wright (1955: 13) observes that the struggle for power is required for continued existence, it is the policy that is expected of states, and it is the policy that they have been perceived to follow in the past. Similarly, Herz (1951: ix) finds that at certain times there exists a harmony between life and thought among humankind. Political thought becomes part of a harmonious worldview, in which fundamental agreement prevails. Minor divergences in opinion may exist, but not enough to challenge the worldview. This worldview of theory and practice seems to side with political realism. Political realism takes into account the security and power factors inherent in human society which political idealism fails to understand (Herz, 1951: 18). For Carr (1939: 51) the temptation to assume a natural harmony of interests in international politics is strong but it is severely misguided because of the absence of an organized power to create such harmony.

The utopian realists have claimed that ‘idealism’ and realism are essential components of International Relations theory and practice. However, it is also clear that these precursors to modern realists are already leaning toward a disciplinary history that splits realism and ‘idealism’ into competing paradigms. It is no coincidence that this occurs as the discipline of International Relations moves from its formative stage toward a more permanent, organized presence in academia. Creating the modern realist disciplinary identity that would come to dominate the field required a history that separated the self from the other.

We can see this development in Morgenthau’s (1948) review of Carr’s major works. As Morgenthau (1948: 133–4) states:

It was Mr Carr’s purpose not only to give a critical analysis of the Western tradition of political thought, but also to replace the old and obsolete with a new synthesis of realism and utopianism, theory and practice, ethics and politics, and the main bulk of Mr Carr’s work is dedicated to that purpose. In view of this purpose the overall impression of Mr Carr’s work is one of failure.
Thus, Carr ‘almost got it right’, but interestingly enough Morgenthau did not like the divorce of morality and power posited by Carr. As Morgenthau (1948: 134) states, ‘It is a dangerous thing to be a Machiavelli. It is a disastrous thing to be a Machiavelli without virtu.’ However, in the same review Morgenthau (1948: 129) consistently replicates the notion of a unified ‘idealism’ by suggesting that:

The League of Nations, harmony of interests, collective security, identification of the national interest with the universal good — are indeed classic examples of utopian rationalism which erects limited experiences and interests into absolute principles and deduces from those principles solutions capable of universal application.

These utopians were responsible for the ‘marked decline in the political intelligence of the Western world’, ‘a fundamental misconception of what foreign policy is all about’ and the ‘blindness to the realities of international affairs’ (Morgenthau, 1948: 127). These criticisms were also present in Morgenthau’s (1946: 41–2) earlier work, where he specifically locates the rise of ‘idealism’ in the interwar period marking the combination of rationalism and domestic liberalism into the foreign policy of the era.

Realists of all stripes began to remember and construct a unified paradigm of ‘idealism’ that was very different from their own. Fox (1949: 77) recalled that during the interwar years ‘the analytical model used for investigative purposes was a world commonwealth characterized by permanent peace’. ‘International relationists’ of this era took ‘a leap away from applying the analytical skills of the social sciences to solving the problems of war and peace’ (1949: 76). This approach to International Relations ‘diverted energy and resources which might have otherwise gone into genuine research’ (1949: 76). Finally, in true reactionary form, ‘those who did not accept the League of Nations focus for the subject frequently found themselves in a difficult predicament’ (1949: 76). However, Fox (1949: 77) deploys the standard realist version of disciplinary history by suggesting that the aforementioned characterization of the interwar years was more true of the beginning of the period than the end with the emergence of a ‘new realism’ and concern over the concept of the national interest.

Wolfers (1951: 39) also recalls the valiant realist fight against the ‘idealists’ by remarking that ‘today more than ever American statesmen and the American public find themselves torn between the conflicting pulls of idealist and realist thought’. In fact, Wolfers (1951: 39–40) becomes quite defensive about realism when he says that ‘today, the “realist” engaged in theoretical pursuits finds himself swimming against the stream, and a powerful stream it is when the leaders of both political parties insist that American foreign policy centers on the United Nations and collective
security’. This kind of heroism in the face of a degenerate ‘idealism’ certainly makes for a good disciplinary history and foundational identity for the realists.

Wolfers (1951: 44) is interesting in this regard because on the one hand he states that ‘the idealist model, if such there be, cannot be as easily derived from the writings or statements of the exponents of the idealist school itself’. This is a clear illustration of Schmidt’s (1994: 353) notion that ‘idealism’ is a conflated historical-analytic tradition that ignores the ‘real academic practices and individuals’ that have contributed to a discipline. In fact, the only ‘idealist’ Wolfers mentions is Woodrow Wilson, hence his references to the ‘optimistic Wilsonian school’. Wolfers (1951: 40) also remarks in footnote 2 that ‘not all authors can be classified as belonging clearly to one of the two schools’, except for Carr who is ultimately claimed by Wolfers as a realist.

On the other hand, Wolfers (1951: 44) clearly identifies the ‘idealists’ as adherents of the world federalism discourse, and not the anarchy/sovereignty discourse as he states that ‘the idealist seems to be looking out not on a multistate system with its separate national entities, but on a nascent world community and the people who make it up’. Dunn (1948: 145) extends this caricature of ‘idealism’ in his review of the scope of International Relations by suggesting that ‘early students of IR tended to conceive of ideal social systems in which wars did not exist and then to evaluate existing practices in light of these ideal conceptions’.

The modern realists thus began the creation of a disciplinary history with two competing communities of researchers, operating in two distinct time periods, so that they could claim a progressive research agenda from the beginning. Once the modern realists shed the precursors’ attachments to anything that smacked of the ideal, they could solidify their claim that two competing paradigms had debated, and that theirs had won. But, have the modern realists completely rid themselves of the influence of the ‘idealist’ paradigm that they crafted in their version of disciplinary history?

**Utopian Realism and Beyond**

I argue that two of the discourses from the ‘interwar’ period have continued through the utopian realists and beyond. The analysis of these ‘precursors’ to modern realists has shown that two of the discourses are crucial to the modern realist identity. The world federalism discourse remains a submerged, unacknowledged part of utopian realism, and of the realism of Morgenthau, and the neorealism of Waltz. The anarchy/sovereignty discourse is maintained as an essential part of those realisms as well. Essentially, they are flip sides of the same coin.
Carr (1939: 96) was partially correct in saying that realism lacks a finite goal, something that is indispensable to effective political thinking. The goal is there, but it remains unacknowledged. Indeed, it must remain obscured or realism loses its separateness from ‘idealism’. Some type of hierarchy, such as world federalism, must be the finite goal of realism. Skeptics may disagree with this conclusion, but consider the following two points. First, most realists would state that their goal is to further peace, or minimally, to avoid war. Forde (1995: 155) illustrates that realists as varied as Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Kennan, Herz, Wolfers and others are dedicated to the creation of a more peaceful world and even to the ‘science of peace’ in Gilpin’s case. Second, in the absence of any overarching global governing authority that can guarantee peace, the best that can be hoped for is a system of self-regarding states participating in a balance of power regime. This point is given its fullest expression in Waltz’s (1979) formulation of neorealism. Waltz’s structure has three components — an ordering principle, the differentiation of units and the distribution of capabilities. If the ordering principle were changed from anarchy to hierarchy, with a world government, then the problem of international organization for peace would be resolved. Since most realists consider it idealistic to think that the ordering principle will change to hierarchy, and since the constituent units (states) are functionally undifferentiated, the only component allowed to vary in Waltz’s formulation is the distribution of capabilities (Ruggie, 1986a). If it is the case that states are forever stuck trying to balance, and war still occurs, how are we to arrive at peace? Neorealism simply lacks a theory of change that could enable states to surpass a balance of power system that does not always preserve the peace.

I argue that the ultimate, unacknowledged goal of these realisms must be to surpass anarchy with hierarchy. And, in fact, the hegemonic stability literature and at least part of the regime literature are the most obvious acknowledgements of that goal. Life in the international system does seem to be more peaceful, and interaction more predictable when a hegemon is providing public goods, or when the institutions it creates to provide those goods outlast their creator. However, the goal of hierarchy or world government is continuously held in abeyance for the realists. This phenomenon manifests itself in realist thought through the lack of a theory of change. Transformation in global political life is halted indefinitely so that we can focus on what is (Wright’s actual reality). What is is the sovereign state. That is the nature of the trade-off the realists make — the sovereign state and world government are not simultaneously possible. They are mutually exclusive for the realist. However, we know that they are compatible for the ‘idealist’, or at least that such discourses intermingled and often ran in tandem during the ‘interwar’ period.
Even more problematic for the realist is that sovereignty is an ideal as well. This ideal is essential to the realist discourse, which demands that the ideal becomes real — sovereignty occupies the position of Wright’s desirable reality. Indeed, rather than viewing state sovereignty as a hindrance to the realization of peace, realists view the sovereign state as the only guarantor of safety for the people. World federalism is therefore problematic for the realists, because it also occupies the position of desirable reality. However, both are not simultaneously possible for the modern realist because of the perceived loss of sovereignty from the site of the state to a supranational body under world federalism.

The two discourses I have been discussing here are crucial to the construction of the realist identity. The realists’ construction of a conflated historical-analytical tradition of ‘idealism’ based upon a singular focus on world federalism obscured any other discourse from the interwar period — including the anarchy/sovereignty discourse. Some version of world federalism became the core of ‘idealism’ as constructed by the realists at the same time that they downplayed any ‘idealist’ discussion of anarchy/sovereignty as limiting the impact of world federalism. The realists used the anarchy/sovereignty discourse to form the core of their own historical tradition. According to this historical tradition, realists since the time of Thucydides have understood the effects of anarchy upon a system of sovereign states.28

This realist historical tradition fails to make the actual transmission of ideas clear and is in reality a flawed analytical tradition. It is flawed in that it skips the entire ‘interwar’ period when positing the continuity of the sovereignty/anarchy discourse from the ancients to the present realists. The key point is that what the realists suppress in one instance (‘idealist’ discourse on anarchy) and amplify (‘idealist’ discourse on world federalism) is reversed in the construction of their own tradition (the amplification of anarchy and the suppression of world federalism).

The insistence of latter day realists/neorealists upon the clear distinction between ‘idealism’ and realism has had a number of important ramifications for the study of International Relations. First, by constructing a unified paradigm/research program of ‘idealism’ in our minds, realism can claim that it has surpassed ‘idealism’. Realism can thus claim a Lakatosian progressive problem-shift (Lakatos, 1970: 133), or a Kuhnian (1962/1970) paradigm shift as argued by Smith (1987: 192). As we have seen, this was a two-step process for the realists. First, a historical tradition of ‘idealism’ was created and passed into the narrative history of the discipline. Second, the realists constructed their own historical tradition in opposition to the tradition they created for the ‘idealists’. However, as we have seen, the evidence cannot support the claim to a progressive problem-shift or a paradigm shift if no unified paradigm existed to be surpassed. The realists fail because they are
bad historians if we use Dryzek and Leonard’s (1988) criteria of comparing disciplinary histories to measure progress. 29

Second, this ‘debate’ has re-emerged in the derivative form of neoliberalism versus neorealism because, despite realist claims, there was no victor in the ‘idealist’–realist debate. The First Great Debate was a botched version of Whiggish history that has left us as a discipline still struggling with the same themes more than 50 years after the debate was supposedly settled. For example, the neorealist–neoliberal debate appears to rest largely upon the assumption of anarchy and its effects (Milner, 1991).30 Neoliberals view the possibility of cooperation under anarchy as a strong possibility, especially when a hegemon is willing and able to provide regimes to foster that cooperation (Keohane, 1984). In this view of neoliberalism we can see the intellectual influence of both the world federalism discourse (hegemonic leadership and regimes) and the anarchy/sovereignty discourse. Neoliberals (and neorealists) are also pursuing many topics related to the discourses uncovered in the previous excavation of interwar texts, such as the effect of commerce on conflict (see McMillan, 1997 for a recent review), evolutionary approaches (e.g. Axelrod, 1984), American leadership (see Layne, 1993 for a brief review of declinist/revivalists) and ethics in International Relations (see Franke, 2000 for a recent review).

The conclusion that the same themes prevalent in the ‘interwar’ period are now resurfacing is in direct contradiction to other work on the First Great Debate. Nicholson (1998: 67) suggests that none of the movements that he defines as utopian has any ‘obvious intellectual origin in the interwar period amongst the utopians’. The list above suggests otherwise, and Nicholson’s conclusions may result from the fact that he is imposing a definition of utopianism on the past in the attempt to see if a unified ‘idealist’ paradigm existed — it did not, so such an exercise is bound to fail.

Nicholson (1998: 81) also suggests that the issues facing modern utopians and realists are broader than they were in the interwar period. Again, it is somewhat startling to see just how many of the same issues have resurfaced today, or perhaps never disappeared entirely at all. Further, Wilson (1998: 1) laments that ‘a rich variety of progressivist ideas have been consigned to oblivion as a result of an uncritical acceptance — and, indeed, a less than subtle reading — of Carr’s rhetorically powerful text’. It should not be surprising that powerful ideas have endured attacks by Carr and the modern realists who appropriated his work.

As I have also suggested, neorealists have also been preoccupied with the supposed structural effects of anarchy, but also implicitly acknowledge the impact of the world federalism discourse (e.g. hegemonic stability theory). An even more interesting and related development is a resurgence of traditional realism, known as ‘modified structural realism’, ‘postclassical
realism’ or ‘neoclassical realism’ that is now seeking to account for the effects of institutions on International Relations (Brooks, 1997; Schweller and Priess, 1997; Rose, 1998). In fact, Schweller and Priess appear to be realists rewriting realist and neorealist history to account for a phenomenon that was previously regarded as epiphenomenal (e.g. Mearsheimer 1994/1995). What this suggests is that as a discipline we are constantly rewriting our histories in an attempt to show that one research tradition is better at explaining conceptual and empirical problems than another — we are constantly legitimating our own approach while delegitimating others’ for the purpose of defining and reinforcing the boundaries of our identities.

A skeptic might suggest that the neorealist–neoliberal debate is entirely contextually driven, as has been suggested for the realist–‘idealist’ debate. In this case, neorealism faltered in its explanations during the turbulent 1970s when economic shocks seemed to take precedence over traditional security issues. Corresponding disciplinary theoretical developments included Keohane and Nye’s (1977/1989) notion of complex interdependence, which suggested that realism could not explain international interaction in all issue areas. Their work later developed into regime theory and neoliberal institutionalism. However, neorealism did not disappear from the intellectual scene as ‘idealism’ supposedly did when contextual factors changed. In fact, neorealism even survived the demise of the Cold War, which it failed to predict.

The change in context has led some to call this point in time in the post-Cold War world the ‘neoidealist moment’ (Kegley, 1993). Dryzek and Leonard (1988: 1250) suggest that apparently obsolete research traditions may be resurrected if empirical problems shift in a manner which gives the tradition renewed leverage. However, ‘neoidealism’ presumes an ‘idealism’ which I have shown did not exist in any unified form. Rather, many of the discourses under way during the ‘interwar’ years may yet again be appropriate to the post-Cold War era as I have suggested above. But just because they are appropriate does not mean that scholars will automatically seize upon these discourses for knowledge in dealing with the present, nor should they do so haphazardly. Therefore, the argument that contextual factors completely determine intradisciplinary conceptual and theoretical shifts seems weak.

Finally, although realist disciplinary historians have posited a large impact of contextual, real-world events on ideas within International Relations, few have examined instances of reverse causality. The neoliberal–neorealist debate has virtually excluded the examination of the impact of ideas on International Relations until only recently.31 Realists are apt to view ideas as the clothing within which states wrap their interest-driven decisions for
public consumption. Nevertheless, ‘ideas’ are more palatable to realist scholars than ‘ideologies’ or concern with the ‘ideal’, believed to be remnants of International Relations’ pre-scientific history. At another level, the causal impact of International Relations theory on real events is also deserving of attention. The realists posit that the ‘idealists’ unrealistic notions of world peace led to the tragedy of World War II, but what tragedies has the realist tradition been party to?

Recent disciplinary developments have taken the role of ideas even further than neoliberalism. In at least one formulation, constructivism is developed as a form of ‘structural idealism’ in opposition to Waltz’s (1979) ‘structural materialism’ (Wendt, 1999). According to Wendt (1999: 377), idealism is ‘the view that the culture of international life does depend on what states do — that anarchy is what states make of it — and that IR should therefore focus on showing how states create that culture and so might transform it’. Wendt’s normative preference is for the evolution of a Kantian world culture, thus transforming an anarchic system of sovereign states into a situation in which collective identity and presumably some form of supranational authority structures interstate action toward peace and away from war. Constructivism may be the ultimate blending of the supposed bedrock principles of both ‘idealism’ and realism.

However, it is interesting to note that even constructivism, the most reflexive and self-conscious mainstream theoretical approach to international politics today, is still engaged in the creation of a social identity for its adherents, and a disciplinary history that accomplishes that goal. As one illustration, Wendt (1999: 32) produces a map of ‘structural theorizing’ which arrays a holism–individualism dichotomy against a materialism–idealism dichotomy. Any theory in the holist, idealist quadrant is constructivist according to Wendt. This includes the English School (e.g. Bull, 1977), World Society approaches (e.g. Meyer et al., 1997), Postmodern International Relations (e.g. Ashley, 1989) and feminist International Relations (e.g. Peterson and Runyan, 1993). Wendt is not alone in his efforts to construct imagery and a history that solidifies a constructivist paradigm. Dunne (1995), Adler (1997) and Ruggie (1998a), among others, have all produced two-by-two matrices or categorization schemes designed to capture those scholars with whom they identify (whether or not the feeling is mutual). Despite the fact that each of these matrices and stories captures different groups of scholars, most constructivist maps tend to exclude the same groups of scholars — neorealists and neoliberals in particular. Thus, we are witnessing — and we should document the process while it is happening — the birth of a new academic identity for International Relations scholars. Constructivists will continue to create and modify this identity with their version of disciplinary history that will undoubtedly also
be used to illustrate the progressive nature of their paradigm. Disciplinary history, identity and progress are just as inextricably linked today as they were when the realists were fashioning the First Great Debate.

The argument developed in this article can be generalized to the other ‘Great Debates’, such as the Second Debate over tradition versus science (Bull, 1966; Kaplan, 1966), and the Third Debate between positivism and post-positivism (see Lapid, 1989). Other debates, such as the neorealism–neoliberal debate (see Baldwin, 1993; Kegley, 1995), the agent–structure debate (Wendt, 1987; Dessler, 1989) and an emerging debate between rationalism and constructivism (see Katzenstein et al., 1998) may also be viewed through this argument. The main difference between the First Great Debate and the others is that the latter debates have self-selected, competing communities of researchers engaged in writing disciplinary history, forging their own sense of identity and assessing progress. However, in the First Great Debate, the realists constructed ‘idealism’ and included it within their own version of disciplinary history to cement their identity as a community of researchers and show the progress of realism over ‘idealism’.

The ‘idealist’–realist debate is probably the defining debate for the field of International Relations. It firmly entrenches what Lijphart (1974) calls the ‘traditional paradigm’ — revolving around the twin notions of state sovereignty and international anarchy. In preparing the way for a separate discipline of International Relations, realist scholars needed to anchor or ground their approach in something (in)tangible. What better way to demonstrate their competence at managing the academic enterprise than to say to the policymakers — ‘We have cleared up all the fog and haze that led the world astray and into two devastating wars. We have proven to those of our colleagues that favored pie-in-the-sky approaches to peace were the cause of our misfortune. The true guarantor of peace is power.’32 In our collective imagination the realists created a unified, nameable paradigm (‘idealism’) that they could use as a straw man to demonstrate the utility and progressive nature of their own approach, and provide a basis for their own disciplinary identity.

Conclusion

The project begun in this article is concerned with the development of disciplinary history, identity and progress in the context of the realist–‘idealist’ debate. We have seen how the debate was framed by the realists, who in the course of forging their own identity constructed a unified ‘idealism’ to be the straw man for the justification of their theories (call it a debate if you like). The unified paradigm of ‘idealism’ turned out to be a multiplicity of discourses running throughout the first half of the 20th
century. As those discourses intersected with utopian realism, two discourses in particular became exceptionally important. The world federalism discourse became part of an unacknowledged goal of realist discourse. The anarchy/sovereignty discourse became the lived ideal made real through power. As a result, realist identity became tied to a particular construction of disciplinary history, and the progress that history was intended to demonstrate. The realists, therefore, would lack an identity without the ‘idealists’ that they created as part of this history.

Any objective method of progress assessment in theoretical development is somewhat illusory according to the perspective developed in this article. According to Dryzek and Leonard (1988: 1250), progress consists of the expanding capacity to explain current and past empirical problems and events. Disciplinary history becomes the ongoing saga of how a theoretical tradition was/is able to explain such events. This history also forms the heart of our identity as a community of scholars within a wider discipline. Thus, our ability to properly judge the quality of histories produced by competing research communities is clouded by emotion. In essence, in order to judge progress based on disciplinary history we must judge the value of our respective identities. It is no wonder that academic debates become so heated!

This project is far from complete. The excavation of ‘interwar’ literature could continue, discovering new perspectives, perhaps even new discourses. Although I have offered some hypotheses about the necessity of several of the ‘idealist’ discourses to realism, further examination of ‘idealist’ and realist texts would help to refine and elaborate them. I have treated the realists as a relatively undifferentiated group of scholars for the purposes of this article because their version of disciplinary history created the conflated historical-analytical tradition known as ‘idealism’ that we are taught. A more careful examination of the writings of modern realists with regard to ‘idealism’ is an area of future research that should eventually flesh out the current argument.

The project could move on to examine other debates, both ‘great’ and small, to illuminate their identity/history/progress dynamics. However, since current International Relations theory is still preoccupied with realism in one form or another, much of what we have learned about the realist–‘idealist’ debate will probably generalize to other identity forming encounters. When the story of realism is told, we are constantly reminded of the failure of ‘idealism’. This is true whether we are speaking of the past ‘interwar’ experience, or the recent debate between structural realism and structural idealism. By resisting this claim, one requires that realism give an account of itself. Realism cannot claim that it represented a shift to a superior paradigm, if ‘idealism’ as such cannot be represented as a unity.
Questioning its claims to progress also implicates its version of history, including the ongoing revisions of history required to meet new empirical problems and events. Progress and history also implicate identity, which explains why realism in its various forms will always resist claims that it has met its demise, or that it has been surpassed by a research tradition centered on another community of scholars.

Notes

I would like to thank Rick Ashley, Roxanne Doty, Friedrich Kratochwil, Steve Walker and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments at various stages in the completion of this article.


2. References are often made to ‘Wilsonian idealism’, such as found in Kegley (1993) or Smith (1987), but as we shall see this is but another effort to create a disciplinary history for the purpose of identity formation and progress assessment.


4. The authors’ interpretation of Whig history is drawn from Butterfield (1931).

5. The emphasis is mine.

6. Vasquez (1983: 15) provides a short list of scholars he identifies as sharing the ‘idealist’ paradigm. However, his explicit purpose is to create a unified paradigm of ‘idealism’ that he can compare to realism to demonstrate that a Kuhnian paradigm shift has occurred. Vasquez’s efforts to measure paradigmatic progress have met with some skepticism. See Vasquez (1997) and the responses regarding his assertion of a degenerating, unified ‘realist’ paradigm. Fox (1949: 73) also provides a list of the ‘chief international relations professorships’ in political science departments during the interwar period. The list includes a number of scholars that have been traditionally included in the realist paradigm, including Spykman and Wright, and thus is not particularly helpful in isolating the ‘idealist’ paradigm. Olson and Groom (1991) also include vague references to ‘idealists’, including a list of authors from the interwar period on p. 130 who are not necessarily identified as such. Osiander (1998) identifies Angell, Woolf and Zimmern as idealists for the ‘idealist’ paradigm that he is reconstructing from past scholarship.

7. Olson and Groom (1991: 47) refer to the publication of Reinsch’s (1900) World Politics at the End of the Nineteenth Century as one of the ‘first glimmerings of international relations as a discipline’. The first academic Chair in International
Politics in the United Kingdom was created at the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth in 1919 (Olson and Groom, 1991: 61). Much of this early period in the study of International Relations may be seen as the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of study led by individuals attempting to separate from established disciplines such as history and geography (Olson and Groom, 1991: 68–9). Fox (1949: 72) questions the extent of interdisciplinary integration by suggesting that in the 1930s and 1940s the dominant approach was still to apply the various existing disciplines (economics, history, etc.) sequentially to international problems. Fox (1949: 79) concedes that ‘whether international relations has yet “arrived” as a separate social science discipline is probably as much a matter of debate in 1949 as 1929’. Dunn (1948: 143) judges International Relations to be still in an ‘early stage of development and that much of what is talked about under the label scarcely deserves recognition as a legitimate subject of academic concern’.


9. Osiander (1998: 411) mentions this problem with respect to Carr (1939) and Bull (1972) who only refer to a few scholars and then fail to clearly identify their philosophical tradition. Wilson (1998: 11) reviews Carr (1939) and provides a short list of individuals (not all of whom are scholars) who are explicitly condemned as ‘idealist’, and a much more wide-ranging list of individuals implicitly identified as ‘idealist’.

10. This is not to say that the traditional focus on war and peace, the study of international law or diplomatic history disappeared from the curricula of the time. However, many of the ideas, themes and methods of these areas of study were harnessed to the study of international organization. As Fox (1949) notes, of the four main subfields he identifies at the time — international law, international organization, international trade and finance, and diplomatic history, international organization and particularly research ‘oriented toward international government’ and the ‘intensive study of League activities’ seemed to dominate. Goodrich (1951) notes that this interest in international organization was not confined to the interwar years, but rather increased after World War II, at least as judged by a review of the doctoral theses in preparation in political science published annually in the *American Political Science Review*. On the contrary, Potter (1923: 387) states that university courses on international organization were rare even by 1920, which deeply disturbed him given the urgency of the world’s problems.

11. I use ‘mainstream’ to refer to those scholars from the past currently identified as representative of thought during the time under consideration.

12. Scholars from the world federalist and anarchy/sovereignty discourses are oversampled for illustrative purposes. The additional scholars do not change the tenor of the discussion in any significant way, but they do add to the richness of the presentation of texts from the period.

13. Referencing Durkheim, Ruggie (1986b: 214) states that time frames ‘serve to
structure intersubjective expectations concerning the temporal location of events and processes in society’.

14. Osiander (1998: 409) chooses the period from 1910 to 1940 for his reconstruction of ‘idealism’. Schmidt’s (1998: 439–40) approach to the appropriate time frame is similar to my own. Schmidt argues that the institutionalized history of political science can be traced back much further than the conclusion of World War I — even to the mid to late 19th century. Olson and Groom (1991: 42–3) similarly trace the modern ‘idealist’–realist debate back to at least 1875 with an exchange between British Prime Minister Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli over British foreign policy in the Orient.

15. This review attempts to overcome the problems of repackaging and reconstruction by allowing discourses on International Relations to run through the ‘interwar’ period, thus one might find texts from before World War I, as well as some from during and after World War II.

16. Additional scholars reviewed in this section include Culbertson (1943), Ginn (1911), Joad (1939), Lothian (1935), Lynch (1911) and Spencer (1923).

17. Spencer’s (1923) use of the words realism and idealism do not seem to implicate analytical/theoretical traditions in International Relations, but rather general philosophic orientations. However, this usage indicates that the language of idealism and realism was in use in political science during the ‘interwar’ years, hence it was available for realists to appropriate for the later creation of such ‘traditions’.

18. Hembleben (1943) concurs that the League was a positive first step, but that any subsequent world federation must have the membership and force to eliminate anarchy. Streit (1940) also argues that the way to organized world peace is through a Union of North Atlantic Democracies. Such a Union, ‘built on and for the thing they share most, their common democratic principle of government for the sake of individual freedom’ is the only practical way to avoid future wars. This Union would give power to a supranational government where such common government will ‘clearly serve man’s freedom better than separate governments’, reserve all other power to separate national governments and serve as the nucleus of a universal world government (1940: 4). Alberdi (1913) similarly aspires to a society of nations based on democracy, or what he calls an ‘associated authority of the whole world’. Joad (1939) argues for the establishment of some form of federal organization leading to a ‘super-national State’. He believes that this is the natural progression of social evolution that has moved humans into larger and larger political groups. Joad is clear that such a federal organization should include a parliament composed of directly elected representatives of the people of the world, and not representatives appointed by national governments. Joad’s (1939: 177) plan to achieve such a federation starts with the incorporation of the ‘leading democracies of the world’, including the US, Great Britain, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries. Most of the world federalists reviewed here are critical of the League of Nations as simply a tool of national governments (Lothian, 1935: 43), or as an instrument of the foreign policy aims of particular great powers like
Britain and France (Joad, 1939: 35), or as just generally a poorly devised institution (Eddy and Page, 1924: 145).

19. Additional scholars reviewed in this section include Angell (1933), Eddy and Page (1924), Joad (1939), Korff (1923), Laski (1933), Lothian (1935) and Potter (1923).

20. Potter (1923) indicts political scientists for their role in failing to prevent World War I. Potter (1923: 385) suggests that ‘a doctrine of state sovereignty which political scientists invented, developed to extreme proportions, set loose in the world in a day when we were leaders of public thought, and left by our abdication of the task of leadership in these later days unsupported by any complementary doctrine of international solidarity. We taught an extreme doctrine hostile to international organization to begin with, we remained hostile or at least indifferent to the latter movement throughout its formative years, we did not provide any adequate or satisfactory plans for its development, and, when roused slightly by the catastrophic results of our action and inaction combined, we turned only fitfully and temporarily to the task, reverting now to indifference again or to hostility.’ Potter (1923: 389) thus believes that it is the duty of political scientists to refocus our efforts on the problem of state sovereignty and international organization ‘to attempt to repay the world for our indifference and neglect’ in the years before 1914.

21. Joad (1939: 159–60) echoes this sentiment in his discussion of the two methods of ‘putting an end to the present anarchy of competing and conflicting sovereign states’. One is world domination by a single power, a world empire, which ‘it must be admitted, be infinitely superior to the existing international anarchy’. However, he is doubtful that a world empire would persist because of resistance by formerly sovereign states and the amount of repression needed to bring it into being. The better choice from his viewpoint is the establishment of some type of world federal organization. This type of government would involve the ‘supercession of the absolute sovereignties of individual states’ (1939: 13). Joad (1939: 15) is so clearly disturbed by the obstacles posed by state sovereignty that in his discussion of the German occupation of the Sudenten he remarks that while the suffering and humiliation of the people was deplorable, the fact that the authority of the Czechoslovakian state had been infringed ‘left my withers completely unwrung’.

22. Eddy and Page (1924) take a historical view of anarchy and the lessons humans have learned in the attempt to overcome it. Accordingly, there have been many instances of anarchy in human history, including those experienced by chieftains, feudal barons, cities and the 13 American colonies after the Revolutionary War. ‘Human experience has demonstrated that the only way to end lawlessness and anarchy is by creating appropriate agencies of government’ (1924: 136). Higher levels of government were the solution for chieftains, feudal barons, cities and states within the nation, so it is obvious to Eddy and Page that the process must be carried to an even higher level by creating an international government to overcome the anarchy of states.

23. Ball (1987: 13–14) argues that progress in political science has always been the
story of the struggle between idealism and empiricism. Wilson (1998: 10) lays
the blame for the ‘remarkable sweeping away of such a wide variety of ideas and
beliefs into a single category perjoratively labeled idealism’ squarely at the feet of
Carr. However, it is more likely that Carr began the written, analytical tradition
that would eventually separate a unified, ‘idealist’ paradigm from realism by
fusing it with an already existing historical tradition passed by word of mouth.

24. Wilson (1998: 9) suggests that the possibility of ‘conscious, progressive change’
is the glue that would hold an ‘idealist’ paradigm or school of thought together
if one ever existed. Nicholson (1998) argues that utopianism and realism are not
true opposites, but at most may represent different ‘temperaments’.

25. Herz (1951: 3–7) also suggests an underlying antithesis of the security dilemma
and pity. The social condition, according to Herz, is characterized by mutual
suspicion and the dilemma of ‘kill or perish’. This condition has nothing to do
with the nature of humankind — it is purely a social condition. The resulting
security dilemma leads to a competition for the means of security. However,
humans also feel compassion for their fellow human beings. Thus, human beings
struggle with a world of fundamental antagonism. ‘Pity, the urge to oppose
suffering and pain, is irreconcilable with the survival urge’ (Herz, 1951: 7).

26. The ‘idealists’, or the scholars writing on international problems during the
‘interwar’ period, are not observed to engage in the construction of their own
disciplinary history since the discipline of International Relations was still in its
formative stages. If anything, we would expect that scholars during this time
were engaged in the process of separating International Relations from already
existing disciplines, such as history and geography (Fox, 1949; Olson and
Groom, 1991; Spencer, 1923). After these scholars and those who would take
the label ‘realist’ accomplish this goal is when we observe the realists creating a
Whiggish version of disciplinary history that derided the pre-scientific and pre-
paradigmatic days of International Relations when ‘idealists’ supposedly reigned
supreme.

27. See Lake (1993) for a review of the hegemonic stability literature. In particular,
see Grunberg (1990) for a thorough critique of the ‘myth’ of hegemonic
stability and its peculiar ability to cohabit with balance of power theory in the
realist paradigm. See Krasner (1983) and Keohane (1984) for the fundamentals
of regime theory.

28. See Garst (1989) for a critique of the realist appropriation of The Peloponnesian
War.

29. For other criticisms of realists’ and International Relations scholars’ use and
abuse of history see Schroeder (1994), Elman and Elman (1995), and Elman
and Elman (1997).


discussions of the causal roles of ideas in International Relations.

32. This is essentially Fox’s (1949: 67–8) argument. Hoffman (1977) makes a
similar argument that realism provided US foreign policymakers with the
justification to defend the US’s role as a superpower in the international system.

References


