

The First Great Debate

Written by Brian C. Schmidt

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BRIAN C. SCHMIDT, SEP 28 2012

According to the conventional wisdom, the field of International Relations (IR) experienced what is commonly described as great debate between opposing groups of scholars identified as idealists and realists. This academic debate, which took place during the 1930s and 1940s, has come to be understood as constituting the “first great debate” in the history of the field. The story of the first great debate between idealists and realists has become a dominant part of the self-image of the field and has been repeatedly retold in countless textbooks and “state of the discipline” articles, and it has served as the starting point for most of the orthodox disciplinary histories of IR. The first great debate is part of the larger story that the field has constructed about its own disciplinary history.[i] The widespread belief that the field’s history has been characterized by a number of successive great debates is so pervasive and dominant that, as Ole Wæver notes, “there is no other established means of telling the history of the discipline.”[ii]

The chronicle of the disciplinary history of IR in terms of a series of great debates begins with the story of the first great debate between “idealists” (or “utopians”) and “realists” in the 1930s and 1940s. The interwar “idealists” are typically depicted as a group of pacifists, moralists, and legalists who focused their attention on reforming, rather than analyzing, the harsh realities of international politics. Many assume that the interwar scholars’ desire to change these realities took precedence over a rigorous examination of them. E.H. Carr, in his famous book *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (1939), was greatly responsible for popularizing this particular view of the interwar scholarship when he wrote on the eve of World War II that the field “has been in the initial stage in which wishing prevails over thinking, generalization over observation, and in which little attempt is made at a critical analysis of existing facts or available means.”[iii] While the “idealists” supposedly envisioned ever-lasting peace and placed their hope on the League of Nations, the outbreak of World War II is depicted as a glaring anomaly representing a severe crisis in the idealist paradigm, which eventually resulted in its replacement by the realist paradigm that was superior in its ability to explain the ubiquitous struggle for power among sovereign states. The systematic repudiation of the ideas of the interwar “idealists” by members of the realist school has been construed as marking the field’s first great debate. Almost every historical account concedes that the realists won the debate and, as a result, reoriented the field in a more practical and scientific direction. The ideas of the interwar scholars have been judged to be naïve and out of step with current reality and thus assigned to the dustbin of history.

Recently, however, a new group of revisionist disciplinary historians has challenged the assumption that the first great debate actually took place.[iv] On the basis of new historical research, the authenticity of the idealist-realist debate has been disputed. The revisionists have advanced two controversial claims regarding the so-called first great debate. First, they argue that, contrary to popular belief, the field was never dominated by a group of utopian scholars who adhered to something akin to what has been described as the idealist paradigm. Many of those, such as Norman Angell, Leonard Woolf, and Alfred Zimmern, who have been dubbed “idealists” turn out, upon closer inspection, to be more sophisticated, complex, and hold positions at odds with the caricatures in the secondary literature of IR.[v] Second, the revisionists claim that during the late 1930s and 1940s there was no meaningful intellectual exchange between interwar “idealists” and early self-identified “realists.” Miles Kahler, for example, refers to the first great debate as the “foundational myth of the field,” and argues that contrary to the conventional wisdom that realism superseded idealism, “international relations was not marked by a clear Kuhnian paradigm shift after 1945; the field remained heterogeneous and continued to include a liberal (or at least nonrealist) corps of practitioners.”[vi] The revisionist historians have concluded that there is a lack of historical evidence to support the

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idea that an actual debate took place between rival idealist and realist schools of thought.

Yet the revisionists' claim that the first great debate is nothing more than a disciplinary myth has not escaped critical scrutiny. Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran, for example, prefer to describe the first great debate as a "half-truth, or highly distorted and overly simplistic caricature, rather than a complete fiction." [vii] Contrary to the revisionists who argue that there is no historical evidence of an intellectual exchange between idealists and realists, others maintain that a number of scholars in the 1940s were instrumental in creating an idealist-realist dichotomy. They also provide some evidence that an actual academic controversy did in fact take place after World War Two between rival idealist and realist scholars. Many of the post-World War Two surveys of the field did hold a disparaging view of the scholarship from the interwar period and noted a movement away from idealism toward realism. [viii] And still others have argued that regardless of the recent historical criticisms of the previously dominant image of the first great debate, and critiques of the great debate framework in general, the great debate narrative cannot simply be dispensed with because it is an integral element of the discipline. [ix]

Today, eighty plus years after the debate between idealists and realists allegedly occurred, the first great debate continues to occupy a central place in the field's historical consciousness. Although we now have a much better understanding of the historiography of the field, the notion that a disciplinary defining great debate took place in the 1930s and 1940s between idealists and realists continues to persist.

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[i] See Brian C. Schmidt, "On the History and Historiography of International Relations," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2012).

[ii] Ole Wæver, "The Sociology of a Not so International Discipline," *International Organization* 52, no. 4, (1998): 687-727.

[iii] E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 8.

[iv] Brian C. Schmidt ed., *International Relations and the First Great Debate* (London: Routledge University Press, 2012).

[v] See Peter Wilson, "The Myth of the 'First Great Debate'", *Review of International Studies* 24, Special Issue (1998): 1-16 and Lucian Ashworth, "Where Are the Idealists in Interwar International Relations?" *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 291-308.

[vi] Miles Kahler, "Inventing International Relations: International Relations Theory After 1945," in Michael Doyle and G. John Ikenberry eds., *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), p. 29.

[vii] Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran, "The Construction of an Edifice: The Story of a First Great Debate," *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005), p. 91.

[viii] Dwight Waldo, *Political Science in the United States of America : A Trend Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1954).

[ix] See Ole Wæver, "The Speech Act of Realism: The Move That Made IR," in Nicolas Guilhot ed., *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

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