

# IR Theory's 21st Century Experiential Evolution

Written by Robert L. Oprisko

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/25/the-fall-of-the-state-and-the-rise-of-the-individuals-ir-theorys-21st-century-experiential-evolution/>

ROBERT L. OPRISKO, MAY 25 2013

Twenty-first century scholarship within international relations illuminates a sea-change away from the primacy of the state and second order analyses toward the relationship that individuals have within the international system, linking first- and third-order analyses together. This intellectual movement reflects experiences in international history that diminish the role of the state and reinforce the humans and humanity into the heart of a discipline whose origins lie not only in what has been done (international history) but also in the motivation for action. This change is a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon with experiential roots in the terror attacks of 9/11, the Global Financial Crisis, the resultant uprisings such as Arab Spring and Occupy, and the rise of hacktivism. These global, historical experiences are fostering the rise of cutting-edge and revolutionary IR theory that embraces complexity and multidisciplinary rather than paying homage to self-absorbed philosophical traditions.

There has been a necessary and important link between international history and the study of international relations. Tracing IR theory to its earliest (claimed) historical roots emphasizes the human motivations that catalyze action:

Thucydides' system of psychological motivation . . . human nature (*physis*) supplies the impetus for action (*orge*), the conscious mind (*gnome*) reacts to the opportunities and dangers of uncertain circumstances (*tyche*) primarily in accordance with its current attitude or disposition, whether that be one of hope or fear.[1]

IR theory is returning to its roots by looking not only at individual humans as the main unit of analysis under humanity, but also on their actions and motivations.

### The 21<sup>st</sup> Century as Experience(d)

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is marked not with the political maneuvering of great states representing competitive visions of how the world ought to be, but with power accumulation by the elite few and the rejection not only of the accumulation of power by elites, but of elitism itself by the general public. The first movement toward a revision of the status-quo interpretation of the international system was the terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda against the United States on September 11, 2001. The reaction of panic against this "new kind of enemy" and the resultant "war on terrorism" epitomized an important reengagement with the social contract; the state, the sovereign authority of the people, was no longer the only independent actor in the international political arena.[2] Donald Rumsfeld recognized the amorphous and atypical character of terrorism in political contestation saying, "The people we're dealing with have no armies or navies or air forces or battle ships or carriers or capital cities, even, or high-value targets . . . it is a very different kind of war." [3]

Arguably, the Bush administration was incorrect in asserting that the war was against a "new kind of enemy". The strategy employed by Al Qaeda is ancient and indicative of asymmetrical warfare: the use of regular troops, of "regular" soldiers who embody the will of the sovereign government, are fighting an instrumental war and, typically, lack the absolute will employed in fanatic power-projection or resistance.[4] The use of, and focus on, terror as the anthropomorphic personification against which the United States would engage in war became an excuse for the accumulation of greater executive power. Public reaction from the victims of 9/11 and their families prompted not a jingoistic crusade against Al Qaeda, but rather a resistance to the exploitation of personal tragedy for political ends.[5]

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Widespread resistance against power-accumulation and domination by the powerful elite emerged within academia and finance among others. The Declaration on Research Assessment fought against the use of Journal Impact Factor in academic hiring, which privileges elite universities with large networks premised on prestige rather than on the "scientific quality of research in the article." [6] The greatest reaction followed the financial collapse of 2008:

The Great Crisis promises to have lasting political and policy consequences. The crisis has sharpened the class dimensions of partisan conflict. The combination of poor macroeconomic performance and the large allocation of public money to rescue and rebuild the financial system fueled the Occupy Wall Street movement and pushed the politics of inequality to the fore. [7]

The wake of the collapse and subsequent austerity endured by common citizens hit a breaking-point with the suicides of Tarek al-Tayeb Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia and D. X. in Greece. [8] Dignity-filled rage erupted across four continents as the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East and North Africa and Occupy protests engulfed Europe and North America. [9]

A final, though hardly exhaustive, addition to these protests emerged with the dissemination of information regarding the selfish nature of elite actors. Both WikiLeaks and Anonymous took an active role in illuminating situations, fomenting protest, and keeping the internet alive as a tool for human revolution. [10] Human(s/ity) have begun rising up against established institutions and resisting established bastions of power accumulation in favor of direct agency.

## The Human Revolution

As we progress from the competing idealist traditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the emphasis from structural impositions are waning. Early 21<sup>st</sup> century history is revealing that human action and selfishness are responsible for rising inequality and the loss of dignity. Neorealism and its progeny have focused on the tragic state of anarchy and the resultant pressure to balance power, threat, or interest, however, blaming the system is growing less persuasive. [11] There has been a clear movement away from systemic forces (which are scarcely forces and much more a milieu) in favor of a revised engagement with the human element, or first-order analyses. [12]

The movement toward a deeper engagement with social-construction is evident in the oeuvre of Alexander Wendt and the field's engagement with it. [13] "Human social agents and social structures are mutually constitutive, and social change can proceed causally in both directions [simultaneously] from agents to structures and from structures to agents." [14] The cutting-edge of IR theory is embracing feminist themes, especially an increasingly pluralist foundation, "our knowledge is always partial, contingent, and subject to ongoing contestation." [15] This movement is exemplified by Markus Kornprobst's subsuming multiple logics of action (consequences, appropriateness, argument, and habit) under that of judgment wherein he focuses on the dialog premised on reception and persuasion between individual human actors. [16]

The injection of constructivist and feminist thought traditions into realist-dominated IR theory has led to a deeper integration with philosophy in general and ontology specifically. Sergei Prozorov has been pain-stakingly developing a hopeful neo-nihilistic ontology, extending from Badiouian set-theory, premised on the world-as-nothing (2012) in order to unveil the emergent generic universalism of humanity (2009) by focusing not on structure, but on the freedom that exists outside of it (2007). [17] Karen Barad has rejected Cartesian epistemology in favor of Bohr and a pure materialism that affects individual behavior. [18] Wendt is writing a book that explores the intersection of quantum decision theory and vital agency. [19] I have developed a realist ontology focusing on axiological processes that link the individual to the international and focuses on the marginalized and the statistically insignificant which leads not to a materialist monism, but rather to a dualism (materialism and vitalism) that is critical of simplifying the complexity of plural wills, arguing that quantum prediction amplifies the error of our models, allowing not for greater predictive capabilities, but rather the reinforcement of infinitesimally minute moments of time that must represent our units of observation in order to decrease the likelihood that our models fail. [20]

## Conclusion

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The trend within IR theory is mirroring the shared experiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: renewed emphasis on terror, revolutions against inequality and social-immobility, and the success of hacktivism. It is not any of these, but rather their intersection that has catalyzed a renewed engagement with the individual human and his relationship with humanity. The new directions in IR theory are leading to a multi-disciplinary approach where politics will meet philosophy, economics, quantum physics, etc. without batting an eye. In an increasingly complex world, cutting-edge IR theorists are embracing the world in its complexity and divesting itself of the intellectual shackles of thought-traditions for tradition sake.[21]

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[1] Robert D. Luginbill, *Thucydides on War and National Character* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999). 70.

[2] Kenneth R. Bazinet, "A Fight vs. Evil, Bush and Cabinet Tell U.S.," *Daily News*(2001), [http://web.archive.org/web/20100505200651/http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/2001/09/17/2001-09-17\\_a\\_fight\\_vs\\_\\_evil\\_\\_bush\\_and\\_c.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20100505200651/http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/2001/09/17/2001-09-17_a_fight_vs__evil__bush_and_c.html).

[3] Ibid.

[4] This sentence represents an entire body of literature in its own right. Begin by exploring the distinctions between soldier and warrior illuminated by Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012). Along with this distinction comes that of Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York, NY: Telos, 2007). Finally, the type of war being waged is absolutely critical: Hans Speier, "The Social Types of War," *The American Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (1941).

[5] Sergei Prozorov, "Generic Universalism in World Politics: Beyond International Anarchy and the World State," *International Theory* 1, no. 2 (2009).

[6] "San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment," American Society for Cell Biology, <http://am.ascb.org/dora/>; For greater detail on the impact that networks of elite institutions have on hiring: Val Burris, "The Academic Caste System: Prestige Hierarchies in PhD Exchange Networks," *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 2 (2004); Robert L. Oprisko, "Superpowers: The American Academic Elite," *The Georgetown Public Policy Review*(2012), <http://gppreview.com/2012/12/03/superpowers-the-american-academic-elite/>.

[7] Thomas Oatley et al., "The Political Economy of Global Finance: A Network Model," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 1 (2013).

[8] Robert F. Worth, "How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution," *New York Times*, January 21, 2011 2011; "All Hope 'Annihilated', Retiree Kills Himself outside Greek Parliament," *NBC World News*, April 4, 2012 2012.

[9] Robert L. Oprisko, "The Rebel as Sovereign: The Political Theology of Dignity," *Revista Pleyade*, no. 9 (2012).

[10] Kenneth Einar Himma, "Hacking as Politically Motivated Digital Civil Disobedience: Is Hacktivism Morally Justified?," ed. Kenneth Einar Himma, *Internet Security: Hacking, Counterhacking, and Society* (Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2007).

[11] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, ed. Robert Jervis, Robert J. Art, and Stephen M.

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[12] Patrick James, "Elaborating on Offensive Realism," in *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 45.

[13] Although far from exhaustive, this represents a fantastic introduction into the thought of Alexander Wendt: Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable," *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (2003).

[14] Andrew Bennett, "A Lakatosian Reading of Lakatos: What Can We Salvage from the Hard Core?," in *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 489.

[15] Jacqui True, "Feminism and Realism in International Relations," in *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 231.

[16] Markus Kornprobst, "The Agent's Logic of Action: Defining and Mapping Political Judgement," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011).

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[20] Robert L. Oprisko, *Honor: A Phenomenology*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); Robert L. Oprisko, "Strings: A Socio-political Theory of Multi-Dimensional Reality," (Butler University, 2013).

[21] For a beautifully scathing critique, see: Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Forward Is as Forward Does: Assessing Neoclassical Realism from a Traditions Perspective," in *Rethinking Realism in*

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