Theoretical Synthesis in International Relations

The 20th century can be described as an era of intense global transformation. Growing global interconnectedness has led to the emergence of a global governance regime made up of international institutions, that attempts to regulate and channel the flow of information, ideas, people and goods across national borders. Naturally, scholars of international relations have devoted much time and energy to the analysis of said institutions. Analyses generally attempt to trace or predict the creation, design and impact of international institutions, while analytical findings vary, depending on the theoretical perspective that a scholar subscribes to. Generally, theories help us to assess the importance of institutions and the driving forces behind their existence. However, in recent decades the strict and exclusive adherence to distinct theories has become contested. Thus, in this essay I will set out to examine the potential for synthesis of separate IR theories, in analysing institutional impact. I will argue that increased openness towards theoretical synthesis is indeed desirable, in light of the complex nature of empirical political phenomena. However, it will become clear that theoretical synthesis is not a one-size-fits-all approach. If we wish to meaningfully contribute to the analysis of institutional impact, we must be careful in choosing our theoretical tool kit in relation to empirical circumstance.

In order to assess the potential of theoretical synthesis this essay must begin by introducing the theories that are to be synthesised. I will be focusing on the three dominant IR schools: neorealism, neoliberalism and constructivism, and their respective assumptions about institutional impact. I will then highlight both differences and complementarities of said approaches, and conclude in the first part of this essay that widespread scholarly support for theoretical synthesis warrants further consideration of the method. In the second part I delve further into the distinct possibilities for theoretical synthesis, by exploring Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel's models for theoretical dialogue (2003). It will emerge that choice of a model must be informed by questions about parsimony and empirical fit. In the third part of the essay I introduce my empirical case study. The expansion of both EU and NATO to Eastern Europe will act as an example of institutional impact, though which I subsequently assess the explanatory potential of two models of theoretical synthesis. It emerges that both Schimmelfennig's 'rhetorical action' and Adler's 'cognitive learning' present models of theoretical synthesis which can increase our leverage in analysing institutional impact.

The Big Three

International relations scholars arrive at differing conclusions concerning institutional impact depending on their theoretical perspective. Theoretical analyses typically differ most in their assessment of the depth and expanse of said impact. According to neorealists, international institutions carry low significance in international affairs (e.g. Waltz 2000, Kindleberger 1981). This is because international institutions don't act autonomously, but directly reflect the interests of powerful states. Accordingly, any institutional impact will be tied to the power of the state which leads the institution. Vezirgiannidou (2008) illustrates this nicely in her account of the United State's role in determining the impact of the Kyoto Protocol. She argues that changing security interests, based on 'relative gains concerns' towards China, led the US to withdraw their support for the treaty in 2001 (2008: 42). Ultimately, the shift of US interests away from the treaty, which included binding commitments for treaty members to reduce their emission of greenhouse gases, resulted in it having little to no impact. Similarly, Kindleberger explains the Bretton Woods institutions as having a stabilizing impact only as long as this was in the interest of the benevolent hegemon by whom they were spearheaded (1981: 253). When US preferences shifted towards financial liberalization, the impact and policies of the Bretton Woods institutions changed accordingly.

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Neoliberals have decidedly more faith in the power of institutions to impact on state behaviour and interests. According to neoliberals, institutions are created to improve efficiency and lower transaction costs in interaction between states. Even though states know that cooperation will benefit them, they encounter problems, which relate to enforcement and distribution of mutual gains (Keohane 1984). To overcome these problems and ensure efficient cooperation, states are willing to subject themselves to external constraints. The self-imposed nature of these sanctions means that institutional impact remains subject to member state's preferences. Fortna's analysis of interstate peacekeeping explains how states may benefit from institutionalised cooperation. Constraints, which take the form of institutional monitoring and information provision, result in long-term benefits by improving welfare and preventing war in the regions to which they are deployed (2004: 487). By reducing uncertainty and increasing the cost of an attack, they can essentially eliminate states' fear of defection. Institutional impact is thus analysed by neoliberals as a metaphorical 'tying of hands' and the ensuring of compliance.

Finally, constructivists institutions are seen to play a more autonomous role in the production of state preferences, in the sense that they provide norms around which the latter then construct their own identity. Hall and Taylor assert that institutions influence behaviour by providing 'cognitive scripts' for what one can do and what one can imagine oneself to do, thus impacting on actor identity and preferences (1996: 947). In her analysis of the growing adoption of science policies by states, Finnemore observes that UNESCO has played a leading role in teaching states appropriate behaviour (1993: 566). Through making normative statements about how states 'should make it their business' to coordinate and direct science, UNESCO impact on state policy debates 'in a positive rather than a merely negative and constraining way' (1993: 593).

Now that we have briefly outlined the dominant discourses that define each theoretical school, let us deepen our comparison by examining the ontological and epistemological assumptions they each make. A key distinction between the schools is that neorealists and neoliberals see the world as a material entity and states as rational units of social analysis with fixed exogenous preferences (Jupille et al: 2003: 14), while constructivists argue that material structures are given meaning only by their social context and institutional environment. State preferences are seen to be endogenous. Another divide presents itself in the 'logic' by which state behaviour is shaped. In rationalism, states are seen to be utility-maximisers who want things and consequently 'act in such a way as best to obtain what they want' (Jupille et al: 2003: 12). Their 'logic' is one of 'consequentiality. Meanwhile, in constructivism state actors are guided by a 'logic of appropriateness', which is informed by their institutional environment. Hasenclever et al sum up the above differences between rationalists and constructivists as being substantive in nature while adding a methodological cleavage between rationalist positivism and constructivist claims for more interpretive analyses (1997: 220). There is also a divide between the two rationalist schools. While neorealist see security concerns and relative gains as the ultimate driving force behind state interaction, neoliberals are concerned with absolute gains and the improvement of welfare. Because in contrast to security, welfare concerns do not present a zero-sum game, the international structure is seen to be one of interdependence (Keohane 1984). Ultimately this distinction is crucial in understanding the pessimism towards institutionalized cooperation amongst neorealists one the one hand, and the optimism amongst neoliberals on the other.

Do these differences mean that the theories are inherently incompatible and that we should abandon our attempt to assess their potential for synthesis? Opponents of synthesis have asserted that the lack of ontological and epistemological commensurability between the theories is indeed insurmountable. Theories should be seen as 'language systems with limited mutual translatability', their full translation thus being neither possible nor desirable (Jupille et al 2003: 18). Yet, a growing IR literature examining dialogue between theoretical schools and the uses of theoretical synthesis still warrants attention. The next step is to look at commonalities between the three dominant schools to see how they may provide a ground for theoretical synthesis.

Commonalities between neorealism and neoliberalism, which we have pointed out above, become apparent. Their joint rationalist mode of analysis and vision of states as key actors and utility maximisers ensures a significant degree of commensurability, even if both sides remain in disagreement about the impact that institutions play in the international systems (Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010: 8). Meanwhile, the ontological and epistemological cleavage between the rationalist schools and constructivism is substantial. Nonetheless, scholars have pointed out space for dialogue between the approaches based on varying adherence to canonical assumptions. While Jupille et

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al propose that rational choice theorists are often aware of the existence of exogenous and environmental constraints to state behaviour, so are not all constructivists equally concerned with ontology and epistemology (2003: 12-13). Similarly, Finnemore and Sikkink criticize that norms and ideals are understood as inherently irrational, a distinction which they find 'untenable both empirically and theoretically' (1998: 909). If we consequently conclude that the commensurability problem can be overcome, synthesis of dominant IR theories could show potential. However, the nature and form that such analyses could take must be determined first.

Models for Theoretical Synthesis

The persistence of distinct meta-theories in the discipline of international relations must be attributed to their historical ability to satisfactorily explain and predict the behaviour and interaction of international actors. Gradually however, such ability is waning. The grand theoretical narratives of the 20th century simply cannot seem to keep up with the pace of social and political change, especially since the end of the Cold War. Today scholars are learning that power, interests and knowledge interact in the production and sustenance of international institutions. So, although separate theories may seem ontologically or epistemologically incompatible, our understanding of particular social or political phenomena is limited by their inability to capture all essential dimensions of international organizations and regimes on their own (Hasenclever et al 1997: 224). Traditionally, theories have helped structure empirical findings and thus helped us in gaining a thorough and meaningful understanding of problems at hand. How then can we ensure that theoretical synthesis really does increase our leverage over analysing institutional impact, without drifting into excessive particularism? Jupille et al (2003) have attempted to outline different ways in which theories may be effectively and parsimoniously synthesised. Let us take a look at the potential of the different types of synthesis for our analysis of institutional impact.

Jupille et al (2003) distinguish four main models of theoretical dialogue of which three can be considered as models for synthesis according to Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi (2010: 3). The three models of synthesis are (1) domains of application, (2) sequencing and (3) subsumption. The domains of application-model can be seen as the attempts to combine different theories in the hope that together they may increase our ability to explain the empirical world. This combination works best when 'multiple theories explain similar phenomena, when explanatory variables have little overlap, and when these variables do not interact in their influence of outcomes', in other words, when they are complementary (Jupille et al 2003: 22). In the sequencing model each theory depends on the other temporally to explain a given outcome. Sequencing is a popular model of synthesis because it allows one theory to fill gaps in the explanatory power of another. Thus, cognitivist theories may sequentially complement rationalist explanations of international regimes, for example by allowing problematization of state preferences and interests (Jupille 2003: 23). Hasenclever et al refer to synthesis by sequencing as a 'division of labour' by illustrating that (1) cognitive factors may precede interests in a 'causal chain' while (2) ideas intervene and provide 'focal points' for interest formation (1997: 216). Finally, subsumption describes the process whereby theories are integrated in that 'one can be logically derived from the other' (Jupille 2003: 23). Effectively the subsumed theory is thus rendered meaningless. Due to their ontological and epistemological similarity we often hear from scholars in the two rationalist schools, who claim that neorealism effectively subsumes neoliberalism or vice versa (Hasenclever et al 1997, Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010).

Although we have established techniques for theoretical synthesis that may potentially benefit our analytical leverage, the question about which technique to use in which circumstance essentially remains. Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi rightly point out that there is no universally applicable blueprint for synthesizing theoretical approaches and that thus, not all situations warrant all types of synthesis. Although synthesis is potentially desirable its benefits and costs need to be assessed 'carefully and case by case' (Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010: 2). This means paying particular attention to empirical fit. While opponents of synthesis may argue that contextualization undermines the entire point of theorising, which is essentially an effort to generalize and abstract, we should keep in mind that the validity of theories has to be established through empirical tests (Thies in Andreatta and Archibugi 2010: 9). I would argue that this is particularly relevant in today's pluralistic and changing world. Ultimately, while the potential of theoretical synthesis is conditional to situational attributes, especially in terms of choosing the best model for synthesis, it would be hard to argue that empirical reality fits neatly into one, rather than multiple, theoretical categories. In the following paragraphs I wish to illustrate the potential of theoretical synthesis in analysing a

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particular empirical example of institutional impact.

Analysing Institutional Impact: NATO and EU Enlargement

For an analysis of institutional impact this paper will examine the process of institutional expansion in the post-Cold War decade in Europe. In detail, this essay will be inquiring into how and why the EU and NATO were able to impact on current and future member-states' preferences, so that eastward enlargement would be in their interest. Ultimately, this paper will be comparing singular and synthesised IR theories in their capability to increase our understanding of political and social change. My reasons for choosing said empirical case are twofold. First, the immediate post-Cold War period saw the breaking up of many firmly held beliefs, by academics and policy-makers alike, about the nature and purpose of political institutions. Second, the deep cleavages between theoretical schools in explaining the eastern enlargement of NATO and EU hold until this day. Theoretical synthesis may finally offer some hope for an end to 'meta-theoretical name-calling', as Jupille et al have put it (2003: 16).

As an example of a neorealist attempt to explain the impact of institutions on state preferences regarding institutional expansioncan is Waltz's account of NATO in post-Cold War Europe (2000). Waltz views its persistence and expansion in Europe as a continued reflection of US interests. While he admits that neorealist alliance theories were struggling to explain NATO's persistence after the collapse of the Soviet Union as an external threat, the creation of a power imbalance left the US with less external restraints in making foreign policy decisions (Waltz 2000: 24). Thus, Waltz sees NATO's post-Cold War resilience as 'a means of maintaining and lengthening America's grip on the foreign and military policies of European states' (Waltz 2000: 29). The changes within NATO are a reflection of a change in US interests towards ensuring its relative security gains through the expansion of liberalism in Eastern Europe. Unsurprisingly, Waltz has little regard for institutional impact in changing state preferences towards NATO expansion.

Meanwhile, a neoliberal case for institutional impact on state preferences is made by Schimmelfennig (2001) in his analysis of EU enlargement to Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). He asserts that neoliberals can account for enlargement preferences by means of a simple cost-benefit analysis. The benefit of enlargement is seen as the stabilization of CEECs and the facilitation of increased economic exchange. Therefore, according to the neoliberal logic of consequentiality, 'member states should be most interested in the membership of those countries with which they share a border or are in close proximity' (Schimmelfennig 2001: 50). Schimmelfennig's empirical findings support this assumption and lead us to believe that divergent state-preferences can in fact be brought down to egoistic calculations of national welfare. Institutional impact is limited to self-imposed constraint with states hoping to reap long-term benefits from cooperation. Schimmelfennig also offers us a constructivist account of EU eastern enlargement. He suggests that the EU is conceived of as the organization of the European liberal community of states. Thus, to remain legitimate it must admit any European state that reliably adheres to its 'liberal norms of domestic and international conduct' (59). Accordingly, EU member states will adjust their preferences to suit the institution's logic of appropriateness. In the debate over eastern enlargement this has meant the opening of accession negotiations with five CEECs that are adhering to the appropriate values (Schimmelfennig 2001: 47). Ultimately, institutional impact is viewed not as a merely constraining, but a productive force as member states construct their preferences and identity around ideas that are circulated by the institution.

While these distinctive theoretical accounts offer some insights into institutional impact – or lack thereof – on state preferences and behaviour, they fall short in crucial aspects. For example, Adler argues that while NATO may have expanded due to relative gains calculations of its hegemon, realists fail to account for the institution's post-Cold War identity transformation from a defensive alliance to a security community (2008: 197). Meanwhile Schimmelfennig points out that, while rationalist explanations for EU enlargement may account for initial enlargement preferences, they cannot account for 'the Community's decision to go beyond association and offer (the CEECs) full membership' (2001: 47). Ultimately the accession negotiations happened against the opposition of a number of member governments and thus cannot be satisfactorily explained by rational 'cost-benefit calculations' (Schimmelfennig 2001: 58). Finally, Finnemore and Sikkink point out that while constructivism has the potential to explain a wide range of state behaviour, it fails to deliver on actual interaction processes between agents. All of these authors thus propose a move away from the use of singular theories towards theoretical synthesis. Let us explore in the next

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paragraph how they apply some of the models outlined earlier in their own analyses of institutional impact in post-Cold War Europe.

Theoretical Synthesis: Accounting for NATO and EU Enlargement

Schimmelfennig proposes that the 'missing link' between pre-given neoliberal state interests and changes in state identity, which allowed for the opening of accession negotiations in the EU enlargement process, can be found in 'rhetorical action' (2001). Rhetorical action can be best understood as 'the strategic use of norm-based arguments' (Schimmelfennig 2001:48). It is the causal mechanism through which EU values and norms asserted themselves against self-interested national preferences. Schimmelfennig asserts that rhetorical action presupposes weakly socialized actors who 'belong to a community whose constitutive values and norms they share', yet they may still pursue egoistic, material interests (2001: 62). However, because bargaining power within a community is linked to legitimacy claims, the public exposure of illegitimate goals and behaviours will have a negative impact on actors' bargaining power. According to Schimmelfennig, in the case of EU enlargement, rhetorical action prevented 'brakemen' in the accession negotiations from 'openly opposing the goal of enlargement' for fear of losing their legitimacy (2001: 72). Institutional impact translated to an increase in bargaining power of materially weak actors. Because rhetorical action is ultimately the performance of strategic action in an institutional environment, which means that ideational and material forces take turns at impacting on state preferences, behaviour and outcomes, the model of theoretical synthesis used by Schimmelfennig is that of sequencing. By appropriating Schimmelfennig's notion of rhetorical action, in his analysis of the UN sanctions placed on Libya in the 1990s, Hurd demonstrates the complementary relationship between norms and strategic interests. He too suggests that the nature of the empirical problem at hand has 'made it necessary to draw from different approaches in novel ways' (2005: 496) and concludes, like Schimmelfennig that the sequencing model of theoretical synthesis has provided him with crucial leverage in analysing the impact of international institutions on state behaviour.

This paper has previously addressed the critique by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) of the misleading assumption that norms and ideals are irrational. The authors suggest that this distinction is not helpful or desirable in explaining many of the most salient processes in political research today. They derive the notion of 'strategic social construction' from their discovery that 'processes of social construction and strategic bargaining are deeply intertwined' (1998: 912). Adler (2008) builds on this idea in his unconventional analysis of post-Cold War NATO transformations. He suggests that NATO enlarged its membership for both instrumental and normative reasons. Adler overcomes the theoretical dichotomy that has been so widely criticized by advocates of theoretical synthesis, by placing state actors within a joint community of practice. Within this community of practice structure and agency overlap, making it possible to imagine actor behaviour, socialization, persuasion, and strategic choice against a backdrop of shared practices and background knowledge (2008: 204). In that sense, the post-Cold War NATO transformation can be traced to changes in background knowledge of NATO and CEECs, through engagement in cooperative security practices, which led to the convergence of interests and development of joint strategic goals. Adler describes this process of transformation as 'cognitive evolution' (2008: 215). He concludes that 'a theory of communities of practice and cognitive evolution broadens constructivist IR theory' because 'it is an excellent way to cope with the agent-structure dilemma' so often encountered by scholars who limit themselves to a single theoretical perspective (2008: 220).

Ultimately, cognitive evolution allows us to study processes as they move from structure to agency, and again to structure, because 'communities of practice are simultaneously agents – who act on the basis of learning and identity change – and structure – background knowledge on which learning and identity-generating practices are based' (Adler 2008: 221). Like Finnemore and Sikkink, Adler emphasises the constructed nature of rationality in his analysis. Although neither of the authors explicitly refer to their analysis as mimicking a model of theoretical synthesis as outlined above by Jupille et al, this paper argues that 'strategic social construction' is loosely related to the idea of theoretical subsumption. It can tentatively be suggested that Adler's theory on cognitive evolution effectively subsumes both rationalist and constructivist theories, by rendering their distinctions meaningless. At the same time one might say that cognitive evolution can be 'logically derived' (Jupille 2003: 23) from the combination of rational choice and social context, but this must be dissected in another paper.

Conclusion: Reservations vs. Potential

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What I have been trying to argue in the preceding essay is how, despite limitations, theoretical synthesis can potentially benefit our analyses of institutional impact in international relations. I began by comparing dominant IR theories that have sought to examine institutional impact, in order to establish a ground on which to justify theoretical synthesis. I then examined the methodology by which theoretical synthesis could be conducted in a way that would limit the sacrificing of parsimony yet broaden our analytical leverage. It emerged that in order to assess the true potential of theoretical synthesis, methodology would have to be chosen in careful consideration of the empirical problem at hand. Finally, I contrasted various analyses of institutional impact, in order to illustrate that authors, who employed theoretical synthesis were more successful at answering empirical questions than those who stuck to classical perspectives. Because the empirical world is fluid and complex, theoretical generalizations are inherently exclusive in nature. Although they may guide us in predicting certain types of actor behaviour, they may never account for all facets of the human experience.

While mixed-theories resulting from synthesis are unlikely to be 'as neat, transparent, and well-specified' as the meta-theories from which they are derived (Simon in Hasenclever et al 1997), I will side with Jupille et al who suggest that 'metatheoretical debate has run its course and must now give way to theoretical, methodological, and carefully structured empirical dialogues' (2003: 7). I conclude that theoretical synthesis, as a highly mediated form of theoretical dialogue, has the potential to bring us closer to inclusivity while still preserving leverage in our analyses of institutional impact. Ultimately, if IR scholars hope to gain greater understanding of the contemporary empirical world, benefits of analytical eclecticism certainly outweigh its weaknesses.

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Date written: 05/2013