

Did the Great Debates Really Take Place?

Written by Peera Charoenvattananukul

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Ole Weaver (1998: 715) satirizes the IR discipline by encouraging one to “ask an IR scholar to present the discipline in fifteen minutes,” and probably, s/he will “get a story of the three Great Debates.” This implies that the Great Debates narratives have been popularized in mainstream IR scholarship. They have also been widely recounted in academia; most introductory textbooks in IR normally begin the discussions of the books with the legendary parables of the three Great Debates (Jackson and Sorensen 2010; Brown and Ainley 2005; Kegley and Blanton 2011).

The First Great Debate was an argument between idealists, who dominated the paradigmatic thinking of post-war scholars after the end of the First World War, and realists, who challenged the assumptions of the former in viewing the nature and reality of international politics.

The Second Great Debate was in the 1960s, held between scholars from the two sides of the Atlantic; namely, Hedley Bull from the United Kingdom and Morton Kaplan from the United States of America. The two represented the debates over methods employed to understand relations of states in the world. The former was a staunch advocate for the study of IR by examining history, philosophy and international law, whereas the latter’s approach was firmly grounded in natural science.

The Third Debate, which took place in the mid 1980s, revolved around the rationalists and reflectivists. Basically, the rationalists believed in the fundamental principles of positivism, which firmly recognized the importance of testable theories for research program evaluation (Keohane 1988: 392-3). Its debating counterpart, the reflectivists, who were composed of post-structuralists, critical theorists and post-positivist constructivists, mainly sought to deconstruct the taken-for-granted notions, concepts and ideas; that is, their center of gravity was in dissolving the hegemony of positivistic precepts cherished by the rationalists.

Although the story lines of the Great Debates have been securely established, there is currently the emergence of a body of work in IR scholarship that questions whether the Three Great Debates actually took place. This paper seeks to examine this question by having conversations with skeptics through their published works, and posits that the facts presented by the skeptics are insufficient to shake the ground of the Debates’ existence. It mainly argues that the Three Great Debates did in fact take place amidst light criticisms from revisionist scholars who tirelessly worked on IR disciplinary history. Although these Debates have been grouped, carelessly historicized, and nastily politicized by scholars in academia for the purpose of strengthening the IR discipline, criticisms made by the skeptics do not invalidate the fact that the Debates *par excellence* have taken place.

Prior to delving further into theoretical conversations, some key scholars who make a case against the mainstream IR disciplinary history should be introduced. The revisionist scholars who work on IR disciplinary history are prominent figures such as Brian Schmidt, Lucian Ashworth, and Peter Wilson. Although they have been widely recognized as the IR disciplinary history skeptics, most of their pieces (ironically) focus heavily on the First Great Debate.

The works of Schmidt, for instance, have implicitly been influenced by an approach that bears a resemblance to post-structuralism. This can be interpreted from how Schmidt (1994: 367) applauded the Third Great Debate, as it “offers a favorable intellectual opportunity to explore the historical roots of the discipline.” He believed that post-structuralists could fulfill the task of unearthing the marginalized. He called this approach “critical internal discursive history”

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(Schmidt 1994: 365). Furthermore, most of his books and articles on this particular subject frequently refer to Lyotard and Foucault accordingly. For example, Schmidt (1994: 364) has quoted Lyotard to characterize the Great Debates as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” This implies that Schmidt employs a post-structuralist approach to examine the historiography of the discipline.

Schmidt's books such as *the Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* and his journal and chapter articles accentuate the claims against “how the disciplinary history has been taken for granted in IR scholarship” and criticize how the history of the discipline has been written based on what he calls “presentism” and “contextualism” (2013: 8-13). The former simply refers to how IR scholars habituate themselves by building a timeless nexus between traditional thinkers and the contemporary paradigms such as realism and liberalism. In Schmidt's own words (2013: 9), “One of the primary purposes of the various histories of IR is to say something authoritative about the field's present character, and this often contributes to the tendency to distort the history of the field.” In regards to the latter, the presentism, Schmidt crusaded against Stanley Hoffman, Steve Smith, William C. Olson, and A.J.R Groom who proposed that external events in international politics have been responsible for the development of the discipline. For Schmidt (1998: 35), “this type of general external explanation...raises the issue of what *the actual* connection between external contexts and internal conceptual could be.”

Basically, Schmidt calls upon scholars who work in the discipline to become aware of the taken-for-granted version of history. Nevertheless, he himself fails to systematically propose his own narrative about the Great Debates. Worse than that, he has been unsuccessful in developing his own research design on the history of the IR discipline. His project on “critical internal discursive history”, which he has claimed will avoid imposing any preconceived presentist framework (2013: 19), remains in his own fantasy.

The works of Ashworth (2002, 2006) and Wilson (1998) (whose work is less extreme than Schmidt's) simply leveled criticisms against Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* and his harangue on “utopianism”, and they exposed Carr's contradictory arguments against renowned scholars such as Norman Angell, Alfred Zimmern, Leonard Wolf and David Mitrany.

For Ashworth (2002: 46), the First Great Debate, which he uses interchangeably with the realist-idealist debate, was not the disciplinary debate per se. Nonetheless, the notions of realism and liberalism in the interwar period were originally employed to denote those who were cynical about the League of Nations and those who advocated in favor of the League, respectively. Furthermore, Ashworth conceived that Carr's intellectual targets did not feel devastated as the mainstream historical narrative suggests.

In a similar vein, Wilson's journal article called “The Myth of the First Great Debate” did not refer to the myth of this Debate with the implication that it did not occur. On the contrary, Wilson (1998: 10) provided extensive arguments against Carr's contradictory statements and his inconclusive conceptualization of utopianism and moralism. In fact, Wilson listed a number of responses to Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis*. For instance, Angell, the target of Carr, denounced Carr's writing as being a “a piece of sophisticated moral nihilism” (Angell quoted in Wilson 1998: 2). Similarly, Alfred Zimmern vituperatively responded to Carr by stating that, “If justice and liberty, courage and self-sacrifice, mercy and decency, right and wrong [were] only matters of ephemeral convention,” then the student of international relations, continued Zimmern, would be in a state of “blank frustration” (Zimmern quoted in Wilson 1998: 3).

Simply put, there was an exchange between Carr and those who were the subjects of his criticisms. By and large, these responses were well documented by Wilson himself, who is one of the skeptics of the First Great Debate. In addition, to tackle the argument of the revisionists specifically, Ashworth and Wilson's defense of Carr's intellectual targets does not mean that the debate itself did not take place.

Despite the tendencies outlined by the revisionists, their contributions to the field can hardly dismiss the evidence that a debate did take place, even though Carr himself was lambasted and even shamed for labeling those who disagreed with him as utopianists.

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The evidence presented by those revisionists of the First Great Debate did not shake the foundational core of the Debate; that is, the exchange between what Ian Clark (1989) called “the tradition of optimism” versus “the tradition of despair.” The revisionists failed to nullify the historical fact that Carr had led the grand crusade against those who believed in progress in spite of his unequivocal category of utopianism. In short, the fact that there was no dominant paradigm called the “idealist paradigm” during the interwar period as Wilson and Ashworth suggested, does not mean that those who subscribed to the tradition of optimism such as Woodrow Wilson, Alfred Zimmern, and Norman Angell, who were optimistic about the League of Nations, did not exist during that time.

On closer inspection, if one were to adhere to the revisionists’ approach blithely, there would be no narrative of any debates at all in the world. This is similar to saying that it was not the First World War that occurred, but rather the Great War.

Drawing on the Second Great Debate, which was not the central tenet of the revisionists, Schmidt (2013: 18) himself admitted that “the details generally associated with the ‘second great debate’ or ‘the traditionalism versus scientism debate’ have not been carefully and systematically investigated.” This should come as no surprise however, since the debate between Hedley Bull and Morton Kaplan in fact occurred through a *World Politics* journal in 1966, the period during which Bull (1966: 362) directly referred to Kaplan as one of the forefronts of using a scientific approach, and Kaplan (1966: 7, 8, 12) nicely quoted Bull’s article in the same journal.

It can be said that Kaplan’s article, “The New Great Debate: Traditionalism vs. Science in International Relations”, was devoted to tackling Bull’s traditional approach. As a result, this proves to be quite difficult for Schmidt and his cliques to do justice to the Second Great Debate question, since Kaplan himself was fashioned by the vogue of the “Great Debate” trend, as the name of the article clearly suggests. In other words, there is no leeway in distorting the form of the Second Great Debate as the revisionists attempted to do with the First Great Debate.

Apart from the revisionists’ criticisms, Arend Lijphart (1974) believed that the traditionalism-science debate of the 1960s was a theoretical revolution in IR as it changed the scope from traditionalism to the domination of a scientific approach. The implications of the Second Great Debate are significant, as they help facilitate the hardening of the IR discipline in the US while characterizing the English school traditions; that is, the Second Great Debate demarcates the two schools from the two sides of the Atlantic.

The Second Great Debate also bequeaths its legacies of a scientific research method to IR scholarship. The Correlates of War project and the Waltzian realism revolution, which closely cling to positivism (Kahler 1997, 35-36), should acknowledge the merits of the Second Great Debate. These methods have contributed tremendously to the discipline, and can hardly be treated with academic negligence. Hence, denouncing the occurrence of the Second Great Debate is a near impossible task for the revisionists.

The discussion can now be shifted to the Third Great Debate, which is the debate between the so-called rationalists and the reflectivists (Smith 1996: 11-46). Hard-core revisionists such as Schmidt, as quoted earlier in the paper, tend to show sympathy for or a neutral stance toward this particular Debate. For Schmidt, it is as though the Debate has no relevance to his previous attempts to deconstruct the disciplinary history of IR.

It seems that Schmidt forgets to question the conditions of the Third Great Debate with his very own criteria. He, in a sense, implicitly accepts the existence of the authenticity and the virtue of the Third Great Debate without ever being skeptical of the historiographical dimension of the Third Debate itself. That is, he opines that the Third Great Debate “foster[s] a more pluralistic and tolerant intellectual climate in the field” (Schmidt 1998: 9). His subscription to the Third Great Debate, regardless of whether he is conscious of his position, ties his hands in a sense and prevents him from debunking this debate as mythical, as he tried to do with the First Great Debate.

In conclusion, the Three Great Debates did take place even though they have been glossed over by some myths and readjustments. As some scholars have suggested, the Great Debates are “half-truth, or highly distorted and overly simplistic caricature, rather than a complete fiction” (Quirk and Vigneswaran 2005: 91). In short, any metanarrative has always been colored and constructed for some purpose. Nevertheless, the Great Debates maintain their virtues

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by rectifying IR as a clear-cut discipline. This is similar to Weaver's belief (2001) that the Great Debate narratives are an integral part of the discipline, that should not be easily dismissed.

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