

# Of Great Debates and the History of IR: Why the 'Great Debate' Story is Wrong

Written by Lucian M. Ashworth

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LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH, FEB 12 2014

From Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, through Provençal troubadours, Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, the Victorian Gothic revival, Hollywood spectaculars, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and finally to the BBC's *Merlin* series we have been entertained by the Arthurian legends about a splendid golden age somewhere in the British Dark Ages. A very different picture of sixth century Britain has come from archaeology, where there is no sign of Camelot. Which are we to believe, the romances or the archaeologists? Well, for entertainment value the romances are certainly better, but when our goal is to understand post-Roman Britain then we rely on the archaeology.

International Relations (IR) has its own set of Arthurian romances. Among these one of the most popular is the story of the first Great Debate between a group of people called idealists and another called realists. Like the Arthur stories each generation adds or subtracts parts in order to fit the story into the concerns of their own times. Because the Arthurian romances are products not of the past, but of the times in which they were written and reinterpreted, the stories tell us much about the world that does the reinterpreting, but precious little about the time when the romances are set. Similarly, the realist-idealist debate story is usually used as a means to make sense of whatever current theoretical divisions are seen to exist in IR scholarship.

Not surprisingly, historians who study sixth century Britain never use the romances as source material. Unfortunately, IR has not been so lucky. When most IR textbooks or introductory IR courses raise the subject of the history of international thought and IR theory, the realist-idealist 'Great Debate' (alongside other myths like the 'Treaty' of Westphalia) is used as the basis for an understanding of the origins of IR. Students are told that there was a debate between realists and idealists, and the idealists were trounced due to the failure of such things as the League of Nations or appeasement. Textbooks often include a grid of antimonies that distinguish realists from idealists (sometimes the latter are renamed liberals).

The problem with this story, exciting and simple though it is, is that there is no evidence for it. Like the archaeologists trying to find sixth century Britain, various historians of international thought and IR theory have dug down (in old texts, in archives and in private papers) and have failed to find this lost titanic battle. What is more, the lessons from the events of the time, especially from the 1930s and the road to the Second World War, even contradict the myth. The historical evidence does not fit the story. Basically, there never was a realist-idealist 'Great Debate' – at least not in the way that it is presented in textbooks – and over the last decade and a half a scholarly literature has built up that has convincingly argued that this debate did not occur in the interwar years (Wilson, 1998; Osiander, 1998; Ashworth, 2002; Thies, 2002; Quirk & Vigneswaran, 2005; Schmidt, 2012a).

**'... but if it is a myth, why do so many people talk about it?'**

It is at this point that the busy instructor or student will interject: 'but if that is so, how come the realist-idealist debate has been such a feature of IR textbooks, monographs and articles all the way back to E. H. Carr? Surely, if you are going to say it does not exist you have to confront the wealth of literature that says it does. After all, has not this first Great Debate framed the foundation and development of IR theory ever since its modern founding after the Second World War?' Now, it may be true that the realist-idealist 'Great Debate' has framed modern IR, but it has not framed

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it since 1939. Rather, it has framed it since the mid-1980s (see Quirk & Vigneswaran, 2005: 101ff). The idea of three successive 'great debates' that framed the field of IR was largely a product of an attempt to understand the theoretical contours of what seemed in the 1980s to be an increasingly divided discipline.

The result of this was the development of the idea of IR being engaged in an inter-paradigm debate between three paradigms: realism, liberalism and structuralism. The first articulation of this three-way split, coupled with the idea of two other past great debates, can be found in a series of works published in the early 1980s (Maghroori, 1982; Banks, 1984; Banks, 1985, Holsti, 1985). Much of this discussion around the nature of IR theory drew from earlier debates in the philosophy of science. From Thomas Kuhn came the idea of paradigms, and also the notion that normal science was often interrupted by scientific revolutions that replaced one normal science paradigm with another. Thus, in 1987 Steve Smith could claim that in the 1930's a realist paradigm had replaced an idealist one 'in good Kuhnian fashion' (Smith, 1987, 192).

Very quickly it became standard to think of IR as going through three debates, of which the on-going inter-paradigm debate of the 1980s was only the third. A second 'Great Debate' was identified amongst the discussions and disagreements between advocates of a traditional (or historical) approach, and those of a more systemic (and often quantitative) bent. The first debate, though, was central to the arguments going on in the 1980s. This first debate was presented as the one that had witnessed an idealist paradigm being seen off by a realist paradigm in the 1930s, and it was this realist paradigm that was now defending itself in the inter-paradigm debate (Banks, 1985).

For supporters of realism this first debate vindicated and justified realism's domination of IR because of the success of realism in answering the questions of the 1930s and 1940s. For opponents of realism this first debate showed realism its future. Just as idealism had lost to realism in the first great debate, so realism would now lose to its enemies in the third great debate. Thus, the existence of a realist-idealist 'Great Debate' served both sides (see Quirk & Vigneswaran, 2005; and Ashworth, 2014: 261, 265-6).

## Where is the evidence?

Yet, did this first 'Great Debate' actually happen? The first thing that should alert us to a problem is the use of the term paradigm. Just as the presence of a baroque French chateau in *Merlin* should tell us that the series is not presenting historical fact, so the use of a term associated with a book published in 1962 should tell us that recent versions of the realist-idealist story are not creations of the 1930s. In fact, the idea of realism and idealism as paradigms is a child of the 1980s. Between the two wars both 'realist' and 'idealist' were thrown about loosely by a full spectrum of international writers, although they were rarely employed to explain international relations (see: Ashworth, 2006; Ashworth 2014: chs 6-7).

Even E. H. Carr's 1939 definitions of realist and utopian are more complex on closer inspection (See, for example the contributions to Cox, 2000; also Wilson, 1998; & Wilson, 2003: ch. 8). In using this dichotomy to advance his support for appeasement and peaceful change Carr makes claims about the categories that did not remain uncontested by his contemporaries, especially after the policy-relevant aspects of Carr's argument had been undermined by the German invasion of Czecho-Slovakia. It is not until the late 1940s and 1950s in the United States that we find a debate over American foreign policy that resembles anything like a realist-idealist debate (Schmidt, 2012b: 94-117; Thies, 2002). Even here there is no consistency. It is never clear if realism and idealism are two modes of thought necessary for the construction of a good foreign policy (a tradition that goes back to Mackinder in 1919), or whether they are instead two different methods of argument that may conceivably lead to the same conclusions (Morgenthau's preference). So there are no paradigms here.

Basically, saying that there was an idealist paradigm in the first half of the twentieth century because someone at the time was called an idealist by someone else is like saying there is a communist paradigm in twenty-first century America because some people have called Obama a communist.

Like our stories of a lost Arthurian world, the realist-idealist debate is a recent story that says more about IR over the last three decades than it does about the past. Untroubled by any link to past forms of IR or international theory, it

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was free to be moulded into whatever the current generation of textbook writers wanted it to be. The concept of idealist that emerged was a contradictory one that could be used in any number of cautionary tales. An idealist, it seemed, advocated both collective security and strict pacifism (although strict pacifists opposed collective security); an idealist supported both the League and appeasement (although the diplomacy of the appeasers abandoned the League); and an idealist both ignored power and supported stronger international organisations (although the central argument for international organisations in the interwar period was based on an analysis of power). The idealist is a shadowy and contradictory 'other' that can be used as a convenient scapegoat by any group of scholars in need of a justification rooted in the early history of the field. The problem is that, like the figure of Arthur, the idealist never existed.

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