

The Italian Approach to International Relations

Written by Antonio Calcara and Davide Vittori

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ANTONIO CALCARA AND DAVIDE VITTORI, APR 22 2019

Despite being a relatively young discipline, International Relations (IR) have been continuously characterized by a lively debate among different epistemological, theoretical and methodological approaches (Smith 1987; Balzacq and Baele 2014). Moreover, each national IR community has produced several analyses of the state of the art of the discipline, the prevailing theoretical and methodological approaches, and the broader organizational culture of specific national and/or regional IR contexts (Knudsen and Jorgensen 2006; Breitenbauch 2013). The aim of this article is to contribute to this tradition of research by providing an overview of the IR discipline in Italy. This article, just published in an extended version on “European Political Science” (Calcara and Vittori 2019), summarizes the results that we collected from a database containing 340 articles written by Italian scholars between 2011 and 2017. Specifically, the more relevant results concern gender issues, geographical distribution, academic affiliation and the main topics covered by the Italian scholars in IR. We believe that both the article and the database, which is freely available online, may interest not only IR scholars and students, but may also attract a wider public interested in the complexities of the study of international affairs. Moreover, we present new avenues for research and we kindly encourage other students or scholars to contribute to this research strand in other national and/or regional contexts.

Critical Self-Reflections in IR

IR scholars have always produced numerous reflections on the state of the discipline. Besides the great epistemological, theoretical and methodological debates within IR, self-reflections on the IR discipline have mainly focused on either the western-dominated or global nature of the discipline.

In this regard, some scholars have emphasized that IR is a strictly American discipline (Hoffmann 1977) and they have noted that there is a centre-periphery relationship between the United States “centre of IR scholarly production” and the European “periphery” (Turton 2015). In contrast, other scholars have argued that each European national and/or regional context is actually characterized by its own epistemological, theoretical and methodological peculiarities (Knudsen and Jørgensen 2006; Bátorá and Hynek 2009; Chillaud 2014).

Recently, the IR debate has mainly focused on the so-called “End of International Relations” (Dunne et al 2013). According to some IR pundits, the discipline is no longer based on the grand theories or “isms” that once constituted its intellectual core, but is instead based on more eclectic, middle-range theorizing (Rosenberg 2016). Other scholars view the same developments with a more positive outlook, lauding the turn towards mid-range theorizing focused on “real problems” or, at least, a more conciliatory and eclectic pluralism among the “isms” (Lake 2013). However, Kristensen (2018) has recently noted that traditional theoretical approaches (e.g. Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism) remain the cornerstones of the discipline.

In Italy, the debate on the IR discipline has been characterized by conflicting point of views. On the one hand, some scholars argued that the lack of “critical mass, influence and visibility” of the Italian IR discipline has negatively affected its impact and visibility both in the Italian and in the international academic context (Lucarelli and Menotti 2000:2). On the other hand, other scholars drew a more positive picture of Italian IR as a discipline (Andreatta and Zambonardi 2010). However, few studies have focused on the scientific publications of Italian scholars in IR, while most studies on the subject are based on anecdotal evidences or personal experiences. For this reason, we have decided to undertake this research.

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The Database

In order to fill the just-mentioned gap in the Italian self-reflection on the IR discipline, we decided to focus our research on articles in peer-reviewed journals. Specifically, we selected 5 Italian journals and 25 international academic journals to assess who is publishing where. We selected 5 Italian journals that publish IR scholarly works so as to take into consideration the debate produced within the country and we have also selected 25 international journals using the *InCites Journal Citation Report Index* impact factor as a reference point. Impact factor is not a perfect indicator of leading journals, but it is a transparent and consistent way of selecting top journals. Regarding the temporal span of our analysis, we focused on the interval between 2011 and 2017. We selected this interval in order to paint a current picture of the discipline. We also took the typical publication timeline into account, which means that the above interval arguably captures research articles authored from 2009 to 2015. According to several authors, this period also coincides with substantial changes in the discipline, in particular surrounding the “End of International Relations” debate (Colgan 2016).

Each article either authored or co-authored by an Italian scholar has been coded based on abstracts and keywords. After collecting 340 articles, we categorized each article in terms of 20 distinct variables. First, we decided to focus on profiling Italian scholars. We therefore included variables on gender, university affiliation and job position at the time of publication. This information allowed us to get a clearer picture of who publishes, their place in the academic career track, their affiliation to an Italian, European or non-European university and, if affiliated to an Italian university, its location in North, Central or South Italy. We believe this distinction is crucial for assessing the differences among the most relevant Italian macro-areas. Second, drawing on Maliniak et al (2011), we included distinct categories for theoretical approach, theme, issue area and methodology. Third, we divided the journals into three main categories: we called all the journals that have impact factors greater than or equal to 2 “top journals”. Then there are journals with impact factor lower than 2 and journals which do not have impact factor. This distinction is crucial to better understand where Italian scholars publish.

Findings

For a more complete view of the findings, we invite you to read the extensive version of our article. In this section, we focus only on the results that confirmed or contradict some of our preliminary hypotheses on the Italian IR approach.

First of all, for what concerns the geographical distribution, the dataset shows a predominance of Italian scholars working outside Italy in European or non-European institutions (54.9%), while Central (20.9%) and Northern Italian universities (19.3%) are equally represented. Southern Italian universities (1%), on the other hand, lag behind the other macro-areas. This result is not surprising since the CENSIS rankings on the best IR faculties in Italy highlighted the higher quality of Northern Italian IR faculties as compared to those in South Italy (Censis 2017). Second, the dataset highlights that Italian scholars affiliated to foreign universities publish more and in journal with higher impact factor, emphasizing the problem of the “brain drain” that negatively affect the Italian university system. Third, other results confirm our preliminary expectations: a) men publish more than women due to structural gender gap of the Italian IR discipline; b) associate and full professors publish less than early career researchers, but in journals with higher impact factor; c) the Italian scholarly production is predominantly qualitative in methodology, even if the journals with a higher impact factor tend to publish more quantitative-based than qualitative analysis.

However, we have also found some surprising results that deserve careful consideration. First of all, contrary to recent analyses on the topic (Kristensen 2018), the database suggests that the classical approaches to IR – Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism – have almost disappeared from Italian IR papers. Moreover, only a very limited number of publications deal with General Theory. Second, contrary to previous studies (Lucarelli and Menotti 2000, who nonetheless approached the topic from a different viewpoint and with a different methods), there are few articles that deal specifically with Italian foreign policy or Italy in general. Indeed, perhaps surprisingly, Italian scholars publish in journals with high impact factor on three main topics: International Political Economy (42.1%), International Security (21%) and International Organization(s) (14.3%). Third, even if the gender gap is stable among all subsets of the dataset, we observe a relative increase in female-authored publications when the prestige of the journal increases. In

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this regard, it is interesting to note that women seem more efficient when it comes to publishing in top journals. The data show that the gender gap still plays a role when combined with the university affiliation of Italian scholars. Non-Italian-affiliated male scholars predominate in all three subsets. Italian-affiliated female scholars' impact decreases in impact factors journals and then increases above 10% again in the top journals' category.

Discussion

Overall, the Italian discipline of IR is definitely a vibrant research field. Indeed, the Italian IR scholars tend to consistently publish in impact factor international journals. Our database indicates that Italian scholar publish more than in the past and in better journals (see Lucarelli and Menotti 2002). However, as our database suggests, the Italian IR discipline is negatively affected by some more general problems of the Italian university system. First of all, our results are consistent with the traditional cleavage between North and South Italy, as the universities in the North tend to produce more research than those in the South. Moreover, we have highlighted that the majority of published articles have been written by authors with a foreign academic affiliation. These results therefore pose a problem for the Italian university system, unable to attract the most productive Italian scholars. Second, the IR discipline in Italy suffers from a significant gender imbalance, given that the number of women in IR is significantly lower than the number of men, especially in Central and South Italy.

For what concerns the topics and the theoretical and methodological approaches employed, the IR discipline in Italy is gradually conforming to the international IR scholarly production. Indeed, contrary to the previous works on the subject (Lucarelli and Menotti 2000; Friedrichs 2004), we did not find the parochialism that characterized the IR discipline in the past: there are few articles that focus specifically on Italian foreign policy or specifically on Italy as a case-study. This is because Italian scholars are forced to publish in international journals to pursue an academic career and, in order to do so, they need to broaden their field of research and their audience. On a related note, we can also note how the traditional approaches to IR – Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism- have disappeared from Italian IR paper and only a limited number of publications deal with General Theory. This supports one of the central themes of the “End of International Relations” debate, as the discipline is less and less based on the grand theories or “isms”, which once established its intellectual core, but is instead based on middle-range theorizing and hypotheses-testing research designs. Several causes could help explaining this. First of all, as highlighted in our analysis, Italian scholars are forced to publish since the beginning of their career. This obviously produces an incentive to produce less ambitious theoretical articles, in order to publish peer-reviewed articles before getting a tenured-track position. Second, this result could also be a consequence of the traditional center-periphery cleavage that characterizes the Italian IR discipline compared to those of other countries (predominantly US). Indeed, many Italian IR scholars have undertaken various specialization courses in American universities or, in any case, are encouraged to “import” theoretical and methodological approaches developed in major American universities, so as to fit into the circuit of the top journals in the field.

Avenues for Future Research

Through the construction of a database that includes 25 high IF international peer-reviewed journals and five Italian journals, our research aims to assess the impact of Italian scholarly production in IR and to evaluate who is publishing where. This article, besides developing an innovative working method and generating unexplored findings on the Italian approach to IR, aims also to provide three potentially fruitful avenues for future research.

First, it would be interesting to expand methodological approach proposed in our database, both in terms of the journals and the time frame under consideration. It would be interesting to extend the database longitudinally, thereby allowing us to make a comparison between decades (for example, 1990–2000, 2000–2010, 2010–2020). This research effort would allow us to develop a more complete picture of the Italian approach to IR and the main changes it has undergone over the years.

Second, it would be important to complement our methodology with other techniques. Indeed, our initial goal was also to investigate the impact of each article in the academic literature. However, the altimetric is measured differently in each journal, and it is therefore difficult to rely on homogeneous data. Recent analyses have tried to

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overcome this obstacle through co-citation analysis, which visualizes communicative networks in the disciplines (Kristensen 2018).

Finally, it would be interesting to employ this methodology on a comparative level. In this regard, we ask all scholars and/or students interested in this database and that are considering using this methodology in other countries/regional contexts to contact us. We would be glad to help in the collection and analysis of data, given that we are convinced that these self-reflections, especially if backed up by reliable data, can certainly be beneficial to the whole IR discipline. A comparative approach at the European level, for instance, could shed light on several important elements that characterize the debate on the IR discipline. For example, while we have suggested that the IR scholarly production in Italy generally follows the trend developed in American academia (for example on middle-range theorizing and on a predominantly quantitative approach), other European schools could suggest a more heterogeneous IR theoretical and methodological panorama.

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