

# The Evolution of International Relations in France

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AYRTON AUBRY, THIERRY BALZACQ AND FRÉDÉRIC RAMEL, DEC 11 2019

Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) surveys are important indicators for tapping into the evolution of International Relations worldwide. TRIP reached France in 2011 and has been conducted three times since then in 2011 and 2014. Previous studies led to two articles, respectively in *Revue Française de Science Politique* (Cornut and Battistella, 2013) in 2013 and in *Critique Internationale* in 2017 (Balzacq, Cornut and Ramel, 2017). This essay provides an analysis of the third iteration of the survey's results. It builds upon the previous research on this topic and identifies the global trends and the specificities of this year's edition. Specifically, the first two articles shed light on what could be considered as French characteristics of International Relations as a discipline, with a growing attention on how French scholarship was being integrated within the "Global" field of International Relations.

This essay argues that the 2017 TRIP survey captures two intriguing evolutions of the French International Relations (IR) landscape. The first concerns knowledge production. Indeed, the survey demonstrates that the opposition between positivists and post-positivists has hardened, but qualitative approaches remain the preferred methods used by IR scholars in France (Jorg, 2001). The second noteworthy evolution is that a new generation of French IR scholars is increasingly moving beyond the Francophone area, for example, by contributing to the Global IR conversation. It pertains, in other words, to the global reach of French IR. In this respect, we argue that the future of IR in France hinges upon the extent to which French IR scholars would be able to adapt to the global standards of knowledge dissemination while offering a distinctive approach to our understanding of international relations.

The essay is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the sample that constitutes the raw material of this essay. Section 2 examines and defines how knowledge production is undertaken within French IR. The 2017 TRIP suggests that various strides have been taken within French IR regarding the internationalization of knowledge production and dissemination, including a more robust participation in international conventions and publication in English speaking outlets. Thus, Section 3 offers insights as to the ways in which French IR community has striven to adapt to the global trends of knowledge production and dissemination.

### About This Survey

Since 2003 TRIP Surveys have been elaborating to shed a light on the relationships between IR scholars and policymakers and to understand how IR scholars grasp the evolutions of a changing world. More importantly, they systematically interrogate scholars about their practices in research and teaching IR. Such surveys aim at furnishing reliable data to explore the causal relationships between the study, the teaching and the practice of IR in the world (it covers 32 countries).

The TRIP survey team identifies as an IR scholar all individuals "who do research in the IR sub-field of political science and/or who teach international relations courses" and "with an active affiliation with a university, college, or professional school". The nationality of the scholar is thus not considered, as opposition to the national setting of the university in which s/he is working. Whereas in 2011 more than 100 scholars accepted to take the survey, the 2017 edition only gathered around forty answers.

The thin amount of data collected during the 2017 survey tends to confirm the trend observed during the first two previous inquiries. How then do we proceed? To start, these figures indicate that in France academics who teach

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International Relations classes do not necessarily portray themselves as internationalists. That is, many lecturers, in particular those who do not hold a PhD in political science or IR, prefer not to present themselves as IR scholars, a discipline whose existence they deny (Roche, 2001, and Smouts, 2002). In general, they would situate their work essentially within their disciplinary framework (sociology, law, history, etc.), which is a long tradition in French IR (Duroselle, 1952). This process of disciplinary affiliation has a lot to do with the troubled relationship between IR and other disciplines in France. The lack of clear disciplinary identification can be a tool to put into question the very methodological cohesion of IR and subsequently its scientific legitimacy for instance (Balzacq and Ramel, 2013). However, a more focused group of answers ought not be regarded as a problem *per se*. In fact, it could be that less answers collected signals that the survey primarily reaches profiles with more IR characteristics than historians or sociologists, as it may have been the case in the previous editions. In this perspective, the overall quality of the sample is bolstered.

Now, first in the technical sense, some trends and lessons may be learned from these results, about what could be the contours of French IR in years to come as well as about the extent to which it might affect how the French IR community interacts with the global discipline. Many answers confirm the previous years' lessons. For instance, answers show a higher degree of polarization, especially concerning epistemological and methodological questions. It appears that research areas are scattered. The study of international organisations attracts most scholars. The second main topic is international or global security, followed by the study of a particular region or a country's foreign policy. The weight of this area of research can be explained by the research preferences of the *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales* (CERI, Centre for International Studies), France's largest research centre, which focuses on IR and area studies, among other centres. The Sciences Po mapping of political science in France counts 11 centres of IR studies, but this number seems difficult to assess, as this count sometimes conflicts with those centres' self-identification. These three topics gather almost half of the scholars who answered the survey. The rest being distributed between IR theory and international political economy. Of note, few themes that are newly debated in IR at a global level are mildly represented, such as religions and environment. Finally, more established topics, including global history and development studies are covered by scholars who took the survey.

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## Areas of Knowledge Production

The first two articles on the TRIP surveys raised the question whether there existed a distinct French school of IR. According to Jeremie Cornut and Dario Battistella, because there is no common agenda or a consensus on research assumptions, it is probably not appropriate to speak of a French School. Rather, there is a “French Touch” in International Relations, with some methodological and epistemological preferences. In 2011, 70% of respondents considered that there was a specificity of a French approach to International Relations, although the nature of this specificity was not shared across the board. Some thought French IR was unique because it emphasized a non-paradigmatic approach to IR, while others held that French IR was unique because it was genuinely transdisciplinary.

Most French academics reject the idea of a “theoretical identity card” (around 44%). As a consequence, almost half of the sample does not rely on any theoretical paradigm. Among the others, constructivism is the main paradigm, followed at a far lower level by the realist paradigm and the English school. An important evolution compared with the 2014 survey is that constructivism and realism were then at almost the same level, accounting for half of the answers collected. Constructivism is usually well represented in non-US or non-UK universities, and it has close links with an important community of the French approach to International Relations (Balzacq, Cornut and Ramel, 2017). This approach places stress essentially upon mobilizing sociological concepts in the study of international relations (Devin, 2007). A continuity between the 2011, 2014 and 2017 surveys is the surprising marginalization of the liberal school of thought in International Relations. While this is difficult to explain we can, perhaps, postulate that this has deeper roots. In fact, French academia tends to part ways with anything that bears the word “liberal” because the word now smacks of pathologies associated with neoliberal economic ideas.

Lastly, a more counter intuitive result of the study is the absence of critical theories, whereas the “French Touch” might have some proximity with these schools of thought (Badie et al., 2018). But it could be that critical theorists are hidden under the assertion “I do not use paradigm analysis” (especially among those who align themselves with international political sociology). By the same token, scholars influenced by an Aronian approach to IR would resist any label that takes them closer to critical theory. The presence of many authors known as critics in the interparadigmatic debate later in the survey seems to support this hypothesis.

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These results are counter intuitive because they do not appear the same way in the epistemology that French IR scholars declare using. The 2017 survey shows that positivism, largely mobilised by neorealism and neoliberalism, is still employed by most French scholars (almost 44%), whereas realism and liberalism are precisely less used as a “theoretical ID” for these scholars. Positivism is closely followed by a post-positivist epistemology (34%). Less than a quarter claims a non-positivist approach.

This is a clear departure from results gathered during the previous surveys. In 2011, for example, results were almost equally distributed between positivism, non-positivism and post-positivism. In 2014, 45% of French scholars in International Relations declared relying on a non-positivist approach. These huge evolutions from a survey to another may be explained by the blurred lines of this category, especially concerning its differentiation with post-positivism. The 2014 article already constructivism offered many French IR scholars a safe intellectual environment, as it was accepted as a via media between positivism and post-positivism. The “Non positivist” is a category, whose content is difficult to fathom. Be that as it may, the bulk of this group encompasses those who are uncertain about their affiliation with a philosophy of social science’s school. However, some may have selected “non-positivist” to highlight their opposition to positivism. In this sense, non-positivism should be interpreted as “anti-positivism”.

### **Global Trends, National Preferences**

The Surveys indicates that the field of IR remains torn between national preferences and international research agendas. But zooming in, we found that IR scholarship in France was swinging toward global practices. This occurs along three axes, including the scholars French IR specialists want to emulate, how IR scholars in France disseminate knowledge and the kind of research outlets they privilege.

### **Role Models**

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First, authors considered as major voices of theoretical debates are cited as preeminent references for French scholars in IR. Two-thirds of the answers cite Alexander Wendt as one of the four most influential scholars in the last twenty years, and one out of three also cites Robert Keohane in the same category. Considering these results, French scholars' positions are consonant with IR scholars in other countries. On the whole range of answers, only 10% do not cite any author with a clear position on the inter-paradigmatic debate (including among others Joseph Nye, James Rosenau, Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz, Hedley Bull, John Mearsheimer). But while no French scholar declared using a critical paradigm in its research, some of the leading figures of critical theories are considered as most influential in today's IR, as well as their inspiration from the *French Theory*. The *French theory* is an intellectual ensemble of French intellectuals that have had a huge influence on the intellectual life in the US during the 1980's (Cusset, 2008). Relying on postmodernism, they shaped part of the critical theories in contemporary IR studies (Neufeld, 2011): Robert Cox, Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu. The last two authors are profoundly influential of the International Political Sociology movement, propounded by Didier Bigo.

In general, and confirming the trend of the previous surveys, constructivist authors are the most cited in this ranking. In addition to Wendt, scholars who frequently appear in the survey include Martha Finnemore, Michael Barnett, and Kathryn Sikkink. This further exhibits the importance of constructivism and the sociology of IR as it is developed in France. But beneath this role model, surfaces a separation within IR scholarship between those who self-identify with a sociology of international relations, in Durkheim's and Aron's wake (Ahmed Michaux Bellaire, 2017), and those who pursue an international political sociology, inspired by the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida, Deleuze, etc. Raymond Aron is often referred to as the founding father of the sociology of international relations in France and was for a long time the most quoted French scholar abroad on IR issues. The field of IR in France seems today more fragmented, as other authors, mainly those who defend an international political sociology, drive it in more anti-positivist or non-positivist paths. The main difference is epistemological. While the sociology of international relations brings together students who subscribe to positivism and post-positivism (in the Frankfurt School's parlance), the international political sociology is distinctively anti-positivist or non-positivist. In sum, in the French context, international political sociology and the sociology of international relations do not flock together.

## Knowledge Dissemination

The 2011 survey revealed a growing internationalisation of French IR, which was nonetheless held back by two main features: the lack of self-appropriation of the theoretical debate in IR (the analysis of the survey insisted upon the perception of French scholars in IR as critics toward mainstream US theories and as identifying themselves rather as part of the Global IR literature), and the weakness of collaboration between French and IR scholars of other countries. Some authors identified the concentration of France's major research centres in Paris as the cause of this intellectual sealing (Jorg, 2001). Important steps forward have however been made since then. The 2017 survey shows that IR scholars based in France now have a growing number of peer-reviewed articles in English speaking journals, and take part in large international conventions. The publication in English-language outlets is supported by new schemes that translate works published in French into English, with the hope that specifically French ideas would enrich the global conversation. For instance, the CERI offers editing support for scholars who wish to publish in English-language peer-reviewed journals.

A report by the AFSP (*Association Française de Science Politique*) in early 2019 confirms, by and large, the 2011 TRIP results. Indeed, the report finds evidence of a steady progress in the internationalization of the discipline, but it observes that such internationalization remains within the confines of a set of national preferences. That is, many French IR scholars are yet to be fully integrated within global networks of IR. For example, the report notes that only a few scholars co-write with their English-speaking colleagues. As a matter of fact, it appears in that report that internationalisation may be perceived as a loss of scientific liberty by some scholars, as they have to conform to standards that are designed in different contexts with little or no sensitivity to cultural specificities. But here, too, the younger generation seems to be more proactive, which bodes well for stronger ties between French IR and the global field.

A new element that can be drawn from this ranking of the most influential IR scholars around the world is precisely the growing influence of French scholars. In 2011 and 2014, only Bertrand Badie appeared as a French scholar

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having influenced the field. The 2017 ranking gives some space to a handful of French scholars, especially from Sciences Po Paris, including Bertrand Badie, Thierry Balzacq, Guillaume Devin and Frédéric Ramel. Other scholars such as Dario Battistella appear in the survey. Finally, those who took the survey regard some non-IR scholars as central figures of IR in France, thus mixing the translation or appropriation of their research insights with the direct contribution of these scholars to IR *per se*. Examples include Bruno Latour (for his work on Actor-Network Theory) and Michel Foucher, whose main contribution lies with border studies. The growing number of French scholars regarded as influential in the survey indicates a departure from the 2011 and 2014 surveys. These results only concern the IR production in France, and don't give any information about how French scholars in IR are perceived outside France.

### Research Outlets

A last index of French scholars increasing integration to the global agenda of international relations is that French peer-review journals have lost their appeal and status in the ranking of the most influencing journals in IR. The 2011 survey showed that *Le Monde Diplomatique* had a huge influence; in 2017, it has disappeared. Further, the *Revue Française de Science Politique*, which traditionally holds a good position only appears once in the 2017 edition. Other peer-reviewed journals in French language are also cited once or twice, such as *Critique Internationale*, *Etudes Internationales*, and *Cultures & Conflits*. The ranking however gives a consistent space to the *European Journal of International Relations*. These results can be interpreted as an illustration of how French scholars rely more and more on English-language peer-reviewed journals to disseminate their research results. The cultural responsibility to publish in French against an anglophone academic hegemony, as it is often argued in the Global IR literature (Balzacq, Cornut and Ramel, 2017), remains important, but it is weakening. Consistent French specificities in the conduct of research, such as the prominence of qualitative methods, are confirmed.

As the 2011 and the 2014 editions of the survey highlighted, qualitative methodologies are deeply appreciated among French scholars. In 2017, the TRIP survey stresses that qualitative methodologies are by far the dominant approach in the French context. As in the 2014 edition, the convergence between qualitative methods and the combination of post-positivists and non-positivists is striking (26 qualitative analyses and 28 either post-positivists or non-positivists). This trend is growing, as well as the gap between the use of qualitative methodologies and other methods. By comparison, in 2011 qualitative methodologies were used by 57% of the scholars while in 2014 they were 62% to prefer qualitative methodologies. In 2017, around 76% of French scholars in International Relations declare using qualitative methodologies. The gap between methodologies thus tends to grow. As a result, the field is undergoing a growing and sustained polarization. Other methodologies are far behind, policy analysis representing around 10% of the scholars. Finally, counterfactual analysis, pure theory, and quantitative analysis are generally not used by French IR academics.

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To be sure, the results appear mixed when one considers approaches used by French scholars in International Relations. Even if more than 60% of French academics rely on “both rationalist approaches and alternative approaches that do not assume the rationality of actors”, a significant number of scholars lean on “broadly rationalist, or what sometimes is referred to as ‘soft rational choice’, and accept general assumption of utility-maximizing actors”.

## Conclusion

The development of IR in France has been held back essentially by its lack of autonomy, and by the fact that, in many settings, cognate fields such as History, Sociology or Law compete with IR for resources. In 2011, the question of the autonomy of the discipline was raised by Jeremy Cornut and Dario Battistella. In France, they noted, IR remains underrepresented in academic institutions such as the *Conseil National des Universités* or the National Scientific Research Council (CNRS). But the recent survey shows that things are changing, albeit slowly. For example, the 2019 aggregation exam that recruits Associate Professors at the national level, selected two internationalists out of five admitted candidates. The 2017 survey confirms the growing autonomy of IR in France, thanks in part to its internationalization. Scholars in France seem to participate in the constitution of French IR as part of the Global IR literature, which provides a stronger academic recognition both at the national and international levels (by publishing in non-francophone peer-reviewed journal for instance). However, many authors continue to adhere to some kind of epistemological and methodological “codes of conduct” which tend to reinforce themselves. French scholars thus publish at an international level, but with specificities regarding the methodology they rely on or the epistemological perspective they use. In sum, there seems to be a tension between a necessary appropriation of global standards and the pull to safeguard national preferences. These preferences come in part from both a solid set of institutions that are historically installed in the French academic landscape in terms of IR (Jansen, Scot, 2019), and the legacy of French intellectual figures, may they be Aron or Foucault, that are regularly mobilized today.

It appears, nonetheless, that French approaches to IR which sit between a sociology of international relations and international political sociology might in fact prepare scholars to increase their international presence and impact. Whereas the US academic landscape is still essentially positivist, France’s academic diversity might be an asset to better adapt to a global turn in the discipline of IR. In fact, such a diversity both in the theoretical offering and in the epistemology menu that shapes research is now becoming a distinctive feature of global IR. In this sense, it might be argued, it is less French IR that has adjusted to global IR than a big chunk of the discipline’s evolution that has met with French ways of studying IR. This is provocative, but worth exploring in additional studies, including in next TRIP surveys and in comparing French trajectories to that of other nations.

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### About the author:

**Ayrton Aubry** is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Sciences Po Paris.

**Thierry Balzacq** is Professor of International Relations at Sciences Po Paris and Professorial Fellow at CERI-Sciences Po.

**Frédéric Ramel** is Professor of Political Science at Sciences Po and Professorial Fellow at CERI-Sciences Po. He

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is also the Director of the Political Science Department at Sciences Po.