

On the Role of Metatheory in the Academic Discipline of International Relations

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates in three parts the role played by metatheory in the discipline of International Relations (IR). Part one defines metatheory as 'systematic discourse about theory' and classifies it in a typology combining elements internal or external to the discipline with intellectual or contextual aspects of theorising. Each combination has particular functions. They also add to the roles played by several modes of metatheoretical inquiry (hermeneutical, evaluative, corrective, critical and historical). The typology offered in part one clarifies the general roles of metatheory as a constraining and enabling discursive mechanism. This is also discussed in part two, addressing how IR scholars portray metatheory's role in the discipline. Arguments against and in favour of metatheory are scrutinised, leading to a qualified defence of metatheoretical research in IR. Some of the negative impact of metatheorising in IR is acknowledged, but ultimately a stronger case attempting to eliminate it from the field cannot be sustained for analytical reasons. The merits of metatheory, therefore, will depend on how it operates in particular instances. A selection of illustration cases in part three further develops the argument. The first case stresses how metatheoretical directives shaped 17th century views of the Holy Roman Empire. It indicates that metatheory can frame theoretical claims even in a weak disciplinary context. A stronger disciplinary environment frames the second case, analysing a number of IR theories on the impact of the Peace of Westphalia in the European states-system. This discussion often alludes to the notion of hierarchy. The third case examines the interaction between metatheoretical directives and theories of hierarchy. These arguments are not necessarily compatible with the metatheoretical principles argued by their authors. As a mechanism, therefore, metatheory does not relate to theory in a deterministic way. Part three itself is, of course, a metatheoretical study that further illustrates the thesis.

Contents

Introduction	9
Metatheory as an issue in IR	9
IR studies on aspects of metatheory	11
The argument under consideration	16
PART ONE	
1. Theory in the Discipline of International Relations	21
Introduction	21
Context in philosophy and social science	23
Theory in classical, behavioural and normative IR	27
Science and theory in mainstream IR	32
IR theory as social theory	37
IR theory as discourse and practice	43
Questions on theory and IR	48
Another level of discourse	54
2. What is Metatheory?	56
Theory of theory	57
Metatheory in cognate disciplines	59
Typology of metatheorising	62
Metatheoretical research	67
Synthesis and clarifications	71
Final remarks	75
PART TWO	
3. Negative Views of Metatheory in International Relations	77
Introduction	77
Intrinsic features of metatheory	78
The complexity of metatheory	85
The teaching of metatheory	92
The politics of metatheory	97
Discussion	103
Final remarks	108
4. Positive Views of Metatheory in International Relations	110
Introduction	110
A tool for improving IR theory	111
A tool for understanding the IR discipline	115
A tool for understanding theoretical material	118
A tool for understanding theories in the social world	122
Discussion	127
Interlude	131

PART THREE

5. Metatheory and International Political Theory: The Holy Roman Empire in Early Modern thought	133
Introduction	133
The Empire as universal public association	136
The Empire as a monstrous political body	141
The Empire as a union and state	145
Metatheory in international political theory	149
Final remarks	157
6. Metatheory and Theoretically-Oriented History in IR: Narratives on the Peace of Westphalia	161
Introduction	161
Westphalia, legitimate authority and anti-hegemony	162
Westphalia as the constitutional order of a modern system	169
Westphalia as consolidation of a pre-modern order	176
Discussion	181
Final remarks	188
7. Metatheory and a Theoretical Notion: Hierarchy in World Politics	191
Introduction	191
A note on the context of the hierarchy literature	193
Hierarchy and weaker states in neorealism	195
Mainstream theorising and dyadic hierarchy	198
Normative theory and hierarchy in peripheral realism	202
Deductive theory, time-preferences, wealth and power	207
Eurocentrism and hierarchy in international thought	212
Final remarks: levels of metatheoretical analysis	218
Conclusion	222
A summary of the primary contribution	222
Secondary contributions	223
Questions, answers and evaluation	225
Final remark	227
Bibliography	229

Tables and Figures

Table 1.1 – Views of theory in IR	49-50
Table 2.1 – Metatheorising according to focus, with examples	64
Table 2.2 – Metatheorising continuum, according to focus	66
Table 2.3 – Combined foci, relations and ways of metatheorising	72
Table 4.1 – Negative claims against metatheory classified	129
Table 4.2 – Positive claims for metatheory classified	130
Figure 5.1 – Politics as symbiotic consociation	138
Figure 5.2 – The universal public association	140
Table 6.1 – Three IR accounts of the Peace of Westphalia	182-3
Table 6.2 – Theory-history discussions in the typology of metatheory	183
Table 6.3 – Roles of the metatheoretical study of discourses on Westphalia	185

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And further, by these, my son, be admonished:
of making many books there is no end;
and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

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