

Introduction

IR/foreign policy theory and German foreign policy

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Sociological analyses of the discipline of International Relations (IR) have convincingly shown that IR is ‘a two-tiered discipline’ (Wæver 2007: 297). Citations indices and disciplinary surveys (Jordan *et al.*, 2009) have indicated again and again that the top of the disciplinary hierarchy is occupied by those scholars who are known for doing ‘theory’ — ‘grand’ theory (i.e., ‘systemic’ or ‘structural’ theory) at that. By most understandings of ‘theory’ — whether it is conceived of as ‘explanatory’, ‘critical’, ‘constitutive’, ‘normative’ or ‘as a lens through which we look at the world’ (Kurki and Wight 2007: 27) — foreign policy in general and the foreign policy of individual countries in particular is usually not tackled with the standard ‘theoretical’ tools cherished in the discipline. It is probably no coincidence that the (second-tier) subdiscipline dealing with foreign policy issues is usually called ‘foreign policy analysis’ (FPA) or ‘comparative foreign policy’ (CFP) rather than ‘foreign policy theory’. For many scholars in the field of foreign policy, this amounts to an implicit acknowledgement that their subfield is theoretically weak, especially when measured against the essentially unavoidable yardstick of (first-tier) ‘IR theory’. The term ‘theory’, for instance, is used more than 80 times in the lead article by Valerie Hudson (Hudson 2005) launching *Foreign Policy Analysis*, the first (and indisputably leading) IR journal exclusively devoted to the theoretical analysis of foreign policy. Yet, the journal itself (for which the article by Hudson formed something like a ‘mission statement’) is *not* called what it obviously is supposed to publish, i.e., ‘foreign policy theory’.

In Hudson’s case, the hesitation to speak of foreign policy theory (she uses the term ‘FPA theory’) probably has to do with her explicit ‘actor-specific focus, based upon the argument that all that occurs between nations and across nations is grounded in human decision makers acting singly or in groups’ (Hudson 2005: 1). If ‘only human beings can be true agents’ and if ‘their agency’ is said to be ‘the source of all international politics and all change



therein' (Hudson 2005: 2–3), the multiplicity of potential causal variables involved almost inevitably cautions against using the term 'theory' straightforwardly. Given the history and tradition of IR, you cannot hide as easily behind the shield of parsimony and theoretical elegance if you are locating *non-residual* causal weight to 'human beings' rather than 'system structure'. If creativity is posited as an essential and systematic component of *any* type of human action, it is difficult to see how 'theory' can be formed that lives up to the expectation of specifying causal links between independent and dependent variables (as is usually the case for conceptions of 'explanatory theory'). Understandably, therefore, the term 'theory' has been largely left to grand IR theory with foreign policy scholars usually satisfying themselves with 'approaches' and 'models'. Yet, if foreign policy results from (and impacts upon) processes linking domestic as well as international structures and agents — as has been argued ever since Snyder, Bruck and Sapin had put forth their interactionist perspective on 'foreign policy decision-making' in the early 1950s (Snyder *et al.* 1954 (2002)) — it is difficult to see how one might continue to hold the view that international politics is *less* complex as an object of study than foreign policy, i.e., that *fewer* causal variables are at play when 'patterns of state behaviour at the aggregate or population level, i.e., the state system' are the object of our analysis rather than 'the behaviour of individual states'. This is how Wendt (in citing Waltz) initially distinguished 'theories of international politics' from 'theories of foreign policy' (Wendt 1999: 11). Explicitly or implicitly, this is also what has been widely accepted (for whatever reason) as the leading assumption among both first-tier IR theorists and second-tier foreign policy theorists. Given the 'star' quality of Waltz, Wendt and other 'grand theorists'¹ it always looked like an impossible task for foreign policy scholars to meet them on a level playing field. The disciplinary presumption that 'real' theory was essentially lying beyond the reach of the foreign policy level was mutually shared. In IR, 'real' theory was and remains to be parsimonious and/or grand IR theory — irrespective of whether it flies a positivist or a postpositivist flag. For foreign policy scholars, recognition from the first tier was usually achievable only if one of two pathways was followed: either one contributed to and expanded one of the dominant IR theory debates in the context of some broader foreign policy issue; or one succeeded in launching a new theory sufficiently enticing to the first tier, which nevertheless was unmistakably tied to the analysis of state action/foreign policy.

The impetus that first led to the organization of two linked panels at the 2007 ISA Annual Convention in Chicago on 'IR/foreign policy theory and German foreign policy' and, ultimately, this special section in the *Journal of International Relations and Development* took its clues from the first intuition. As elaborated in some details later on (Hellmann 2009), the study of German foreign policy experienced a fascinating boost in the decade following



unification. The first-tier IR journals, such as the *European Journal for International Relations*, *International Organization*, *International Security* and *World Politics*, were suddenly publishing articles on German foreign policy.² Both the impressive rise of interest in German foreign policy in this type of journal as well as the ebbing of theory-oriented articles on Germany in *any* type of IR journal after 2000 reflects on the discipline as a whole; it tells something about how specific fads as well as some more deeply ingrained disciplinary habits combine to render a certain topic into an interesting ‘case’ at particular junctures and a less interesting one at others. To some extent, one might argue — and Moritz Weiss (Weiss 2009) makes this case persuasively in his contribution to the special section — that the broader paradigmatic lines of debate will most likely continue to inform our study of foreign policy, the foreign policy of great powers in particular. Pointing to some ‘puzzling’ observation and resolving the puzzle either with an established theory (or some refined version of it) or, alternatively, with a newly developed theory will most likely continue to remain a recognized pathway of scholarly foreign policy research in the discipline as a whole. The same holds for the contribution of Rainer Hülse on ‘Germany’s New Foreign Image Policy’ (Hülse 2009). Hülse makes a significant contribution to foreign policy theory by developing the concept of ‘foreign image policy’. He also convincingly argues that contemporary states care much more about their foreign image than the rationalist approaches would make us believe.

In terms of changes at the level of ‘systemic’ (or macro) structures, the effects, which such foreign image policy concerns may yield may be minuscule or irrelevant. Indeed, whatever differences they may have otherwise, Waltz (1979) and (pre-‘quantum social science’) Wendt (2006) are in agreement on that point. However, as appealing as their theories may be due to their parsimony and elegance, it is clear (and sometimes even explicitly acknowledged) that a systemic theory, which reduces the notion of ‘systemic change’ to a dramatic switch from ‘anarchy’ to ‘hierarchy’ (as in Waltz’s case) is not really helpful in coming to grips with widespread intuitions that the Westphalian state system may have experienced at least a *gradual* transformation in its basic parameters since the seventeenth century. Similarly (and drawing on John Ruggie (1986: 151), emphasis in original), when ‘*unit-level processes* become all product and are not at all productive,’ most readers would intuitively react with dismay that a theory built on such a foundation cannot be true. In an attenuated form, a similar critique can even be voiced *vis-à-vis* Wendt (1999). Although his ‘social theory of international politics’ explicitly leaves open the possibility of changes in the process of progressing from one ‘culture of anarchy’ to another (and while he actually hints that the dynamic would probably come from actions and patterns of interaction at the interstate level, such as the European Union), he does not see a need to specify in his theory how such a change might come about.



To be sure, systemic IR theories do not *deny* agency (and how could they?). However, in both Waltz's (1979) and Wendt's (1999) versions, they reject the belief that foreign policy *theorizing* can be done in a meaningful and systematic fashion built on a strong notion of agency. Waltz, for instance, held that scholars interested in theories of foreign policy often 'confuse analysis with theory. Neither realists nor anyone else believe that unit-level factors can be excluded from the foreign policy analysis. The question is not what should be excluded from one's account of foreign policy, but what can be included in a theory of international politics. Much is included in an analysis; little is included in a theory. Theories are sparse in formulation and beautifully simple. Reality is complex and often ugly' (Waltz 1996: 56). Again, Wendt is not very far from this account in his own theorizing of international relations. In addressing the charge that his view about the inevitability of a world state denies agency, he responds with a dual argument in favour of a concept of agency that includes primarily those '*intentions*' of an agent, which 'challenge existing structures, whether by reinterpretation, resistance or transformation' and those elements of '*agency as power*,' which we can observe when we attribute certain systemic outcomes to the ability of actors in realizing their goals (Wendt 2005: 591–2). Again, even though it is highly implausible to assume that the transformation of the international system from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century was only marginally affected by individual and collective actors, this is, in essence, the fundamental assumption behind a focus on the system as a whole. Although Wendt defines structure as 'contributing to agency's fullest expression' (rather than merely 'limiting' it; Wendt 2005: 597), the whole thrust of his theorizing exercise remains at the systems (or structure) level, relegating the specification of a theoretical concept of agency that a theory of foreign policy necessarily requires to the level of a residual category.

No doubt, it should give us pause that (well beyond Waltz and Wendt) most of the major theorists of the discipline shy away from theorizing foreign policy as they theorize 'international politics'. What is more, this hesitation about the minor theoretical status of foreign policy seems to be even shared among foreign policy scholars. Many of them appear to have accepted the Waltzian distinction between 'analysis' and 'theory' (recall 'FPA' as the label for the field of study as well as its main academic journal). Some at least grant that FPA is 'an uncommonly complicated field of study' (Carlsnaes 2008: 85). At the same time, the ordinary use of 'theory' in all kinds of fields of human action and the social sciences imposes the question whether we are using the term 'theory' properly when we essentially restrict it to denote general statements about cause-effect (or 'constitutive') links between a very limited set of variables. Again, in what ways can we plausibly argue that the complexity of 'international politics' is more easily simplifiable than the complexity of 'foreign policy'? Besides the habits of



(traditionally largely realist inspired) IR theorizing, I can see none. Brighter minds have suggested before that ‘the study of foreign policy cries out for developmental theory’ and that ‘single-country theories of foreign policy’ might be the best match (Rosenau 1987: 53). The key question would be whether they would indeed have to be ‘grounded in the epistemology and methods of science’ (Rosenau 1987: 54) — at least as far as classical uses of ‘science’ in IR are concerned.

The idiosyncratic answer of someone who has spent the better half of his academic career on studying (German) foreign policy *in the context of* IR and social theories is that this is a worthwhile undertaking. The pragmatist emphasis on the situated creativity of *any* type of social action would provide additional incentives to pursue such directions further (see my contribution to the ‘special section’ for elaboration). Moreover, seeing one of the standard bearers of ‘constructivist’ and ‘systemic’ theorizing to take a ‘quantum turn’ — which now emphasizes ‘much more than *Social Theory* did the becoming (wave) as opposed to being (particle) aspect of social life’ and which conceives of the ‘hanging together’ of ‘parts and whole’ in almost Wittgensteinian terms as ‘entanglement’, rather than ‘supervenience’ (Wendt 2006: 184, 209) — one might be forgiven for not giving up hope to eventually ‘theorize’ foreign policy, and perhaps even *German* foreign policy.³ However, two requirements might have to be fulfilled beforehand for such a vision to come true: (a) an easing of the subsumptionist reflexes in the discipline as a whole (especially in the way they are reflected in parsimony fixations and paradigmaticism); and (b) a renunciation of the narrow version of method-driven research, which has forgotten the Deweyan plea that method is ‘never (...) something outside of the material’ (Dewey 2008 (1916)). If this vision came to be true it would, in essence, amount to an abolition of the two-tiered system of IR/foreign policy theorizing. Even if it might seem as far-fetched as ‘world government,’ it is difficult to see why one should dislike it if one were able to achieve it.

Notes

1 Wendt and Waltz rank second and third after Robert Keohane in the most recent ‘TRIP’ survey (Jordan *et al.*, 2009: 43) conducted among IR academics in ten, mostly ‘Western’, countries. IR scholars were asked to ‘list four scholars whose work has had the greatest influence on the field of IR in the past 20 years’. With the possible exception of James Rosenau (ranked nineteenth), none of the 24 scholars ranked had established his or her profile in the field of FPA.

2 Even if one applies different measures, the four journals mentioned usually rank among the top ten journals of all political science journals (see Giles and Garand 2007). See also Jordan *et al.*, 2009: 49 listing *International Organization* with an overall rank of first, before *International Security* (2), *World Politics* (4) and the *European Journal of International Relations* (8). IR scholars were asked to ‘list the four journals in IR that publish articles with the greatest influence on the way IR scholars think about international relations’.

3 For an exemplary case of theorizing German foreign policy, see Wæver 1996.



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