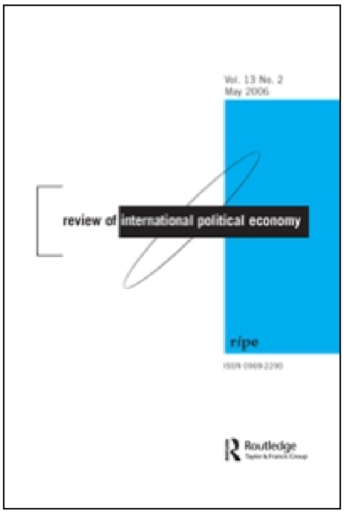

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TRIPs across the Atlantic: Theory and epistemology in IPE

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TRIPs across the Atlantic: Theory and epistemology in IPE

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ABSTRACT

Beginning from the Teaching, Research, and International Politics (TRIP) survey, this paper outlines the most important emerging paradigm in international political economy (IPE), known as open economy politics (OEP). This approach forms the core of the 'American' school of IPE. The paper then contrasts the epistemology of OEP, based on partial equilibrium analysis, with that of the 'British' school of IPE, which favors a more holistic approach. This difference is not captured well in the TRIP survey, nor is it particularly well understood by many proponents of either side. Recognizing the progressive nature of the OEP research program, the essay concludes with a call to bridge but not necessarily to abolish the transatlantic divide.

KEYWORDS

American school; British school; epistemology; IPE theory; open economy politics; paradigm.

Scholarship is a collective enterprise. What constitutes a valid explanation or even a fact is determined not by any individual but only by the community of scholars and other experts. Anyone can claim a new finding or denounce an old one, but knowledge can only be validated by the appropriate collective.

International political economy (IPE), and the larger field of international relations (IR) of which it is part, has been fraught with debates over paradigms and methods throughout its brief history. These debates are contests over what constitutes knowledge, facts, and valid explanations. In turn, our 'contributions' as scholars and our professional careers are deeply affected by the outcomes of these contests. Recognizing this helps us understand – and perhaps appreciate – the intensity of these 'academic' squabbles and their unfortunate tendency to become highly personalized and vitriolic.

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I have relatively little patience for the Great Debates in IR and IPE. Accepting that my views have been shaped by the community of which I am part, and hoping that I have played some small role in shaping its knowledge in return, I often wish that scholars would stop contemplating *how* to do research and simply get on with the business of explaining, understanding, and possibly improving the world we inhabit and, in part, create. Thus, I approach with some skepticism the essay by Benjamin Cohen (2007), the surrounding debate (Cohen, 2008a; Higgott and Watson, 2008; Ravenhill, 2008), and the new essay by Daniel Maliniak and Michael Tierney (2009, this issue) which brings evidence from a survey of North American academics to bear on Cohen's description of the American school. Like Peter Katzenstein (2009: 123), I find that as contributions to the analysis of international relations, these articles have little value in and of themselves. They do not improve our understanding of, say, trade or exchange rate policy. Nor do they shed light on the causes of economic growth and development, income inequality, or effective governance. Yet, the essays do provide a window into what constitutes knowledge in different communities of IPE. It is worthwhile, occasionally, to reflect on the assumptions and standards that define a community of scholars. The value of such reflection – and interchange between communities – is that it may open up new, progressive lines of inquiry.

In this essay, I begin from the Teaching, Research, and International Politics (TRIP) survey as described by Maliniak and Tierney (2009, this issue). I proceed to outline what I see as the most important emerging paradigm in IPE, known as open economy politics (OEP). I see OEP as the core of what Cohen (2007) characterizes as the 'American' school, itself a contested and inappropriate appellation for reasons I shall explain. After providing what I believe is a more accurate depiction of the American school of IPE based upon an OEP approach, I then contrast its epistemology with that of the 'British' school of IPE, which is neither wholly British nor a single school. I argue that the transatlantic divide, such as it is, is really over what constitutes a valid or satisfying explanation of social phenomena, and that a more careful epistemological comparison can lay the groundwork for determining where and how a transatlantic bridge may (or should) be built.

THE TRIP SURVEY

Maliniak and Tierney (2009, this issue) report on a survey of IR scholars conducted in the United States (in 2004 and 2006) and Canada (2006 only).[1] The TRIP survey was developed for purposes other than adjudicating the debate begun by Cohen; limited to North American scholars of IR, it reflects only indirectly on whether or not a transatlantic divide exists in IPE and, if so, what its contours are. There is undoubtedly selection bias in who responded to the TRIP survey, but we cannot know its direction or magnitude.[2] The journals used for the article database are neither comprehensive nor randomly selected, and thus again we would expect some unknown selection bias. Nonetheless, the survey appears to be competently carried out given limits on time and resources and its origins in a study of IR scholars in general rather than IPE scholars in particular. Future improvements promise better and more comprehensive results, but I do not think it is terribly profitable to speculate on what scholars in other countries think or what coding additional journals will reveal until that research is actually completed. Thus, although some (like Randall Germain, 2009, this issue) may be tempted to quarrel with Maliniak and Tierney's results, their findings should be presumed to be a relatively accurate depiction of IR and IPE as it is now practiced in the United States and Canada.

The TRIP results also largely fit my own, more subjective assessment of the field of IPE in the United States. It is undeniable, for instance, that American scholars of IPE have moved increasingly toward formal models and statistical tests over the last decade. The weakness of the TRIP survey, however, is that by focusing on broad existing paradigms and methods for the entire discipline of international relations it channels scholars into established categories for identifying themselves and their work. As would any such survey, it lacks subtlety and focuses more on past than future research programs. The TRIP survey, for instance, does not even include OEP on its list of research programs – and thereby misses the emergence of the most important paradigm in American IPE scholarship.[3]

OPEN ECONOMY POLITICS

As Robert Keohane (2009, this issue) describes in his essay, IPE included a broad array of differing theoretical approaches in its earliest years: dependency theory, hegemonic stability theory, endogenous tariff theory, domestic structures, and more. By the late 1980s, a new school of IPE known as OEP began to emerge from the cacophony. OEP is largely rationalist in orientation, assumes the interests of actors are derived from their position within the international division of labor, and examines how strategic interaction and institutions condition the pursuit of those interests.[4] As other approaches fell from popularity – some because they were falsified by events, others from sheer trendiness – OEP gained prominence. By the mid-1990s, OEP had dramatically reshaped the study of IPE in the United States and stimulated an ongoing period of Kuhnian normalcy aimed at elaborating its logic through formal models, testing its implications in large-scale, cross-national statistical analyses, and extending its scope from trade, where it began, to other issue areas.[5]

OEP is classically 'liberal', but most scholars of OEP do not, in my experience, think of themselves self-consciously in this way – even if they might have checked 'liberal' on the TRIP survey for want of a more accurate paradigmatic category.[6] Yet, its growth in American academia is, I suspect, driving the TRIP results on the disproportionately liberal nature of IPE scholars, the relative absence of the 'ideational turn' in IPE, and the burgeoning use of formal and quantitative methods (Maliniak and Tierney, 2009, this issue).

OEP begins with sets of individuals – firms, sectors, factors of production – that can be reasonably assumed to share (nearly) identical interests. Relevant units of analysis vary by technology, institutions, and other factors. Cohen's (2007: 199) characterization notwithstanding, units are not ontologically given nor are states the primary unit of analysis, although state policy is often the object to be explained.[7] OEP derives interests, defined as preferences over alternative outcomes, from the distributional implications of different economic policies, which in turn follow from how a unit is located relative to others in the international economy. Classes or factors of production in any country, for instance, are abundant or scarce relative to the world economy and, thus, prefer greater economic openness or closure, respectively.

Deducing interests from economic theory was the essential innovation of OEP. Rather than treating units simply by assumption or inferring them from the political actions we often want to explain, interests are derived from a prior, falsifiable, and empirically robust theory. The movement of OEP towards economics is not driven, in my view, by disciplinary envy but by the insights that economic theory provides for political interpretations of policy choice. Building on established theories and models of economics also promotes the use of formal models and existing economic data sets in IPE. Despite Robert Wade's fears (2009, this issue), drawing on economic theory does not necessarily lead to the narrowness or narcissism of economics as a discipline. To date, and hopefully into the future, IPE in general and OEP in particular has been disciplined by an intense concern for explaining real world phenomena. Nonetheless, through its link to economics and by focusing on the distributional implications of economic openness for individuals and groups, OEP has inherited a fundamentally materialist conception of interests – perhaps explaining why many American scholars of IPE missed the 'ideational' turn.

After specifying the interests of differing units, OEP turns to how these interests are aggregated through domestic political institutions. Institutions serve to define what political power means in a particular society, largely by setting the reversion point for policy in the absence of agreement between units. All institutions bias how group interests are combined into a national policy. Drawing on institutionalist theory in political science, OEP thus theorizes how interests get refracted through political institutions and then translated into policy.

With domestic interests specified and aggregated through varying sets of institutions, OEP then understands states as bargaining to influence one another's behavior and, in turn, the joint outcome of their interactions. In focusing on bargaining, OEP once again emphasizes institutions, but now at the international level. Just as institutions aggregate interests within states, international institutions can facilitate cooperation by providing information, thereby reducing bargaining failures, or codify redistributive bargains reached between states, which then 'lock in' gains for the winners.

Few scholars give equal weight to all three steps in the OEP approach. Most focus on only one step – for instance, how institutions aggregate societal interests – and treat others in 'reduced form', or as analytic simplifications that are unmodeled in the specific inquiry (see below). In principle, the shared assumptions of OEP allow the components to be connected together into a more complete whole. Originally formulated in the context of trade policy, OEP has been extended to monetary and financial relations (Berhard *et al.*, 2003; Frieden, 1988, 1991b), foreign direct investment (Jensen, 2006; Pinto and Pinto, 2008), immigration (Leblang *et al.*, 2007), foreign aid (Milner, 2006), regulation (Mattli and Woods, 2009; Richards, 1999), corporate governance (Gourevitch and Shinn, 2005), and global governance (Kahler and Lake, 2003).

OEP is also not the only approach accepted or used by American scholars of IPE. As the TRIP results show in the number of adherents to paradigms other than liberalism, not all international political economists in the United States identify even indirectly with OEP. There is, as Cohen's critics have pointed out, high within country variation (Ravenhill, 2008: 27). Nor is OEP confined to the United States. It informs the work of significant groups of scholars, often with training in Economics but strong interests in politics, in Argentina, Germany, Italy, the Nordic countries, and Switzerland – although it appears to have few direct adherents in Britain. In this way, it is inappropriate to refer to an 'American' school of IPE, as does Cohen. Rather, OEP represents an emergent *international* paradigm with, perhaps, a center of gravity in the United States.

EPISTEMOLOGY, NOT METHODOLOGY

I leave to others whether there is a British equivalent to OEP. From an outsider's perspective, there appears to be greater variation in approaches to IPE in Britain and less agreement on how research should proceed both theoretically and empirically.[8] One key difference between OEP and most variants of British IPE is epistemology. What is a 'satisfying' explanation of any given phenomenon varies by school. This is one of the most important ways in which one paradigm differs from another. Resonating with the second Great Debate in international relations, which pitted Hedley Bull against several American interlocutors on the 'scientific' study of world politics, this epistemological difference appears to be of long standing (see Knorr and Rosenau, 1969).

Like much (but not all) of political science in the United States, OEP adopts a partial equilibrium or comparative statics approach to theory.[9] Research within OEP progresses by bracketing many obviously varying features of a political-economic environment and treating them as exogenous for purposes of isolating and studying a single causal effect.[10] One might, for instance, bracket where interests 'come from' and study how variable features of domestic institutions aggregate these interests in different ways. Employing the classic hypothetico-deductive method, testable hypotheses thus take the form of *all else held constant*, a change in X leads to a change in Y. In reality, of course, all else is not constant, and various research designs are employed to deal with problems of causal inference created by this background variation.

For scholars working within OEP, a satisfying explanation requires a rigorous and logically specified (but not necessarily mathematical) theory and an appropriately designed test that maximizes variation in the causal variable while controlling for possibly confounding effects. Few studies fully meet this standard, and thus research continues to refine the implications of the theory and explore alternative research designs. But in general, scholars sharing this epistemology are willing to sacrifice empirical richness and context for (1) more parsimonious, but therefore more fully specifiable theories, and (2) more narrow, but therefore more easily controlled empirical tests. A satisfying explanation in this tradition is one that 'knows' well specified causal relationships with some degree of certainty.

Recognizing again that I am an outsider to the British school, that there is great variation within the study of IPE in Britain, and that our own epistemologies may blind us to others, it seems fair to say that scholars of British IR and IPE prefer a more holistic approach to explanation. Less comfortable with partial equilibrium analyses, and impatient with the notion that all else can be held constant, adherents to a holistic epistemology seek to endogenize much of what those who use a partial equilibrium analysis treat as exogenous in any particular study.[11] To continue with the example above, even if one were interested in the effects of institutional variation on policy outcomes, a holistic explanation would not find it appropriate to bracket interests; rather, an essential part of the analysis would be to understand how interests and institutions co-evolve and perhaps constitute one another. This approach, in turn, explains through narratives that explicate the contexts of decisions and explore the plausible alternatives to those that were actually selected at key historical junctures. Accordingly, there is a tendency to emphasize the uniqueness of particular outcomes, rather than to generalize to classes of events. Of course, not every narrative can begin with the big bang or even the comparatively recent dawn of human civilization. Guided by theory, scholars make choices about where and when to begin any analysis, and what factors to include. Even holistic approaches are in some sense partial. Nonetheless, a satisfying holistic explanation is one that shows why the phenomenon under study had to turn out the way it did – and equally why it did not take some other possible path.

The difference between partial equilibrium and holistic epistemologies is not the same as that between positivist and post-positivist epistemologies or qualitative and quantitative methods – and thus is not well captured within the TRIP survey that necessarily focused on more readily discernable categories. For instance, most of my published work has been post-positivist (indeed, critical realist), qualitative and historical, but it clearly employs a partial equilibrium epistemology.[12] Conversely, holistic scholars sometimes employ statistical analyses in their work.[13] As Henry Farrell and Martha Finnemore (2009, this issue) suggest, the divide is less about whether one uses 'numbers' or not, but more about how and in what ways those numbers are used.

Although epistemologies are incommensurable on many dimensions, as Higgott and Watson (2008) fear, this particular difference may be bridgeable, as Cohen (2007) hopes. Scholars on either side of this divide typically do not find the explanations of the other entirely convincing; each is slightly dismissive of the other as 'just stories' or 'just numbers'. But partial equilibrium and holistic analyses do complement one another, if approached with an open mind and a willingness to consider the strengths of the other approach. Partial equilibrium analysts know many specific, narrowly drawn causal relationships well, and can accept or reject generalizable conclusions on these relationships with some measure of confidence. Holistic analyses capture feedback effects necessarily ignored by the partial equilibrium approach, and generate insights into historical contingencies – those dimensions of context that are unique to particular events. Each type of explanation generates important but complementary insights into political events that, taken together, are undoubtedly more insightful and complete than either alone.

Yet, it is unlikely that a large number of partial equilibrium analyses will ever sum to a holistic account, or that a holistic explanation can be broken down and tested as a series of comparative static propositions. Given the emphasis on feedback effects and contingency in holistic accounts, and their absence in partial equilibrium models, we have no reason to expect that either type of explanation scales up or down easily into the other. Thus, I am skeptical whether a seamless and sturdy bridge can be built across the epistemological divide identified by Cohen in transatlantic terms. But it certainly seems possible that a disjointed, irregular bridge with inevitable bumps and gaps can be constructed so that we can visit the other shore on an occasional basis. The scholars on the other side may use concepts and terms that require translation but by crossing over we learn to appreciate better both the 'foreign' community of scholars and our own.

CONCLUSION

The TRIP survey usefully documents important trends in IR and IPE in North America. Limited in its possible questions and categories of responses to those readily understood by all members of the profession, it is necessarily backwards looking and cannot capture emergent research programs or epistemological subtleties. It is a blunt but nonetheless useful tool, better at describing where we have been than in predicting we are going.

The study of IPE in the United States has begun to coalesce around OEP. Like any community, by privileging some assumptions over others, OEP has its blind spots, lacunae, and topics that it cannot discuss without calling the collective enterprise itself into question.[14] Yet, it has proven to be a remarkably progressive approach, in the Lakatosian sense (Lakatos, 1978), that integrates diverse economic transactions under a common theoretical umbrella outlined above. Within the approach, there has been a real cumulation of knowledge.

The existence of a transatlantic divide, and variance on both sides, does not worry me. Indeed, perhaps disagreeing with Cohen on this score, I believe it should be encouraged. Research without guiding paradigms is aimless and fails to cumulate. We should not debate first principles without end, lest we as individual scholars advance the understanding of no one but ourselves. At the same time, while applauding the achievements of OEP, it would be wrong – indeed, it would be utterly without foundation – to declare that any one approach has proven superior to others. The accumulation of knowledge within OEP needs to be paired with a tolerance for pluralism or at least civil dialogue with other approaches, lest it suffer from the problems of monoculture identified by McNamara (2009, this issue) and Wade (2009, this issue). It is a mistake to limit competition between different approaches. Progress in a paradigm is something we should seek, but not at the cost of constructing intellectual monopolies. We all have our hunches, and have placed our bets accordingly. But we do not and cannot now know which current or future paradigm will eventually prove more useful in understanding the international political economy.

For this reason, though I agree that trips across the Atlantic are useful and even necessary, I do not believe that the schools should be dissolved or integrated, especially if this occurs at the level of the lowest common denominator. We cannot make progress without paradigms to guide research. Yet, at this stage, we should not all live within the same one either.

NOTES

1 See also Maliniak *et al*. (2007).

2 The response rate (41%) was relatively high, suggesting that the results are less biased that other, similar surveys of academic disciplines, but this is impossible to judge for sure. See Maliniak and Tierney (2009, this issue).

3 See questions 0028 and 0029 on the TRIP survey (Maliniak *et al.*, 2007). Reflecting the inherent problem of capturing any emergent research program, however, respondents to the survey might not even recognize OEP as a distinct school of IPE and, especially, IR.

4 On the early diversity in IPE and for a fuller account of OEP, see Lake (2006). The label OEP comes from Bates (1997). Foundational work was done by Frieden (1991a), Gourevitch (1977, 1986), Milner (1988), and Rogowski (1991). For an early manifesto, see Frieden and Rogowski (1996) in the equally important edited volume by Keohane and Milner (1996). OEP is a subset of the Strategic Choice approach in IR. See Lake and Powell (1999). As the citations in this note suggest, OEP originated not with the Magnificent Seven identified by Cohen (2008b) but with some of their perhaps underappreciated contemporaries and the first generation of graduate students they trained.

5 On normal science, see Kuhn (1970) and Lakatos (1978).

6 See question 0042 on the TRIP survey (Maliniak *et al.*, 2007).

7 On the endogenous nature of units, see Hiscox (2002).

8 Given the emphasis on critical theory in Britain, moreover, I suspect that many British readers will see this as an entirely good and proper thing.

9 Constructivism, which employs what I describe below as a more holistic approach, is the major exception to partial equilibrium analysis in the United States – confirming that there is considerable 'within country' variation.

10 Lake and Powell (1999) refer to this as a 'boxes-within-boxes' approach.

11 By holistic here, I do not mean approaches that emphasize structure over agency, as the phrase has sometimes been used. Rather, I mean to denote precisely the duality or recursive nature of structure and agency central to much of British IPE. An alternative label might be a general equilibrium approach, but this loses the dynamic connotations central to work in this tradition.

12 See Lake (1988, 1999). For years it surprised and annoyed me to be classified by others as a 'quantitative' scholar until I came to understand the common confusion described here between epistemology and methodology.

13 Although American-trained and, perhaps, not technically part of the British school, the best example here is the work of Jeffrey M. Chwieroth (now at the London School of Economics). See Chwieroth (2007a, 2007b).

14 I have indicated directions for future research in OEP in an earlier chapter (see Lake, 2006). A full explication of the limitations of OEP is a challenge left for a future essay.

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