Symposium on Interdisciplinary Approaches to International Studies: History, Psychology, Technology Studies, and Neuroeconomics

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This symposium focuses on application of an integrated approach toward bringing together insights from respective disciplines and interdisciplinary fields to move International Studies (IS) forward. History and psychology, disciplines with an established connection to IS, are explored. Interdisciplinary fields with limited linkages to IS, referring to technology studies and neuroeconomics, also are probed for potential contributions. The introductory essay summarizes how contributions from the preceding disciplines and interdisciplinary fields are identified by the symposium’s essays within an integrated approach.

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International studies (IS) sometimes seems like an amoeba. Here and there it throws out a pseudopod and gathers in ideas from another field of study, with varying degrees of success. Examples run the gamut from the humanities to the natural sciences; relatively recent instances include postmodernism and neural networks. This gradual incorporation of terminology and insights from an ever-widening set of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields is a blessing and a curse. On the plus side, increasing points of reference bode well for adding insights and averting tendencies toward reductionism. Where would IS be without ideas and findings from sociology, statistics, and a host of other fields? On the minus side, incoherence is the great risk of expanding intellectual diversity. How are axioms from a vast range of fields to be reconciled with each other—even translated into commensurable terms? The present symposium does not render a judgment on whether the plus exceeds the minus or vice versa. It instead offers a vision of how progress can be achieved through the more effective integration of research from across disciplines. Put differently, the idea is to keep moving forward on the plus side while simultaneously seeking to minimize the minus side.

This symposium assesses interdisciplinary research in a focused manner by examining realized and potential contributions from diverse fields. Examined are two realized pseudopods from the disciplines of history and psychology, along with potential contributions that are only beginning to extend outward from IS, referring in this instance to the interdisciplinary fields of technology studies and neuroeconomics.¹ What is pulled back in by each pseudopod, as the

¹Note the point of recognition concerning respective disciplines versus interdisciplinary fields. In the present symposium, history and psychology represent the former, while technology studies and neuroeconomics embody the latter. Thus the range of intellectual diversity and ways of intersecting with IS increase both quantitatively when new disciplines are introduced and qualitatively through linkage with already crystallized interdisciplinary fields. All of this highlights the value of obtaining greater direction and integration as noted already.
contributors to the symposium reveal, is well worth incorporating into IS. The essays that follow engage IS and each other in a number of productive ways and, as would be expected from an exercise of this kind, raise more questions than they answer about the further direction of IS. This brief overview will offer basic concept formation to provide a context, introduce the essays, highlight some of the significant insights from them, and finish with a sense of what the symposium seeks to contribute in an overall sense.²

Before moving on to an overview of the contributions from each entry included in the symposium, it is appropriate to pause for essential concept formation. Now is not the time and place to engage in extensive reflection, but invoking a tentative sense of meaning for IS is in order to provide a context for what follows. The metaphor regarding an amoeba offers a point of departure; it refers to the dynamics of IS as a field that continues to absorb content through some mixture of chance and design. IS therefore is expanding through both evolutionary and sometimes revolutionary means, depending on the degree of difference from existing consensus introduced by newly acquired points of view. IS, as pointed out effectively by Yetiv in this symposium, focuses on international phenomena, while international relations (IR)—only somewhat less expansive—pertains to power and conflict and to the various factors that contribute to and flow from these two central concerns.³ Thus, the core research agenda of IR also can be informed by many fields that focus on international interactions either by individuals or groups in the exercise of power and conflict processes.

Given their panoramic character, it makes little sense to dwell pedantically on the content of IS that is excluded by IR or whether more narrowly focused definitions would be appropriate for one or the other. A better question is whether, regardless of which acronym is used, IR or IS, a set of priorities can be identified for contributions from disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. One priority is to connect with the ideas and findings of fields that already are represented in order to produce a greater overall understanding of IS. It also would be desirable for both established and new fields within IS to convey insights about both individual (micro) and collective (macro) behavior.⁴ With these two overarching criteria in mind, the four fields represented in this symposium have been selected.

With an initial focus on history—the most time-honored discipline from which IS borrows—the first essay identifies several features, generally positive, of what history as a discipline can offer. History can assist with the study of change and highlight causal connections over time. Knowledge drawn from history facilitates theory-building, modeling, and testing. Historical analysis can be applied in tandem with other disciplines to produce greater insight. Limits and misuses of history also are identified as important to bear in mind; borrowing from this discipline is not always straightforward and needs to be pursued rigorously or not at all.

²The essays in this symposium will vary in format as a reflection of their field’s background engagement with IS. Accumulated research in history and psychology dwarfs that of technology studies and neuroeconomics regarding application to IS, so the former two essays feature more discussion of that context than the latter two. In addition, the essay on history refers to IR more than IS because of the long tradition of engagement using that term in relation to foreign policy and security studies.

³Even many decades ago, an authoritative effort to map out IR in terms of disciplinary components revealed its already realized vastness in terms of intellectual scope (Wright 1955).

⁴James (2002) makes the case at great length that fully specified explanations should include a complete set of linkages regarding individual and collective interactions, namely, micro $\rightarrow$ micro, micro $\rightarrow$ macro, macro $\rightarrow$ micro, and macro $\rightarrow$ macro. The emphasis in this symposium on accounting for both individual and collective patterns points in that more ambitious direction for further theorizing within an integrated, interdisciplinary approach.
Like the others in the symposium, this essay follows its general overview of what history offers, but then tackles a broader question of how to enhance interdisciplinarity in IS writ large. For this purpose, it presents what Yetiv refers to as the “integrated approach,” which at its core explains how to use different perspectives to explain foreign policy decision making (Yetiv). The approach also entails testing these diverse perspectives, sometimes against the historical record of foreign policy cases, as well as theory-building by cross-fertilizing some compatible elements of these perspectives. The interdisciplinary contribution from history, as well as from multiple other disciplines, comes into focus. For its part, history informs IR and IS by providing narrative that facilitates assessment of ideas from a wide range of other disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. The integrated approach, as developed by Yetiv, applies perspectives on government decision making that are diverse along the following dimensions: level of analysis, goal or results expected for actor behavior, and type of decision-making process. When perspectives such as the rational actor model, domestic politics, and others that emerge from and are shaped by different disciplines are applied, new and potentially interesting empirical and theoretical insights can be realized and hypotheses can be derived. An example is that strategic interactions resembling non-iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma at the international level are more likely to generate groupthink than strategic interactions resembling iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma. Note the inherently interdisciplinary character of this proposition—connected with both game theory and social psychology—which awaits testing from the historical and empirical record.5

Second among the essays is an exposition on both the established record of psychology as a discipline contributing to IS and its potential to do even more. The track record of psychology, as conveyed by this treatment, is long and distinguished. This is true especially with regard to the study of foreign policy decision making among political psychologists, who bridge psychology and political science. Political psychology also can take credit for introducing a wide range of methods to IS—sociometric analysis, psychobiography, and various others. But this hardly means that all is said and done with regard to application of psychology to IS. Instead, a relatively new and building area of research, post-traumatic stress, is singled out for more in-depth discussion. Already established is the insight that exposure to political violence is associated with acute forms of stress in victims. Loss of resources emerges as a key factor in collective response to political violence. The resulting stress is sustained and connected to the perpetuation of conflict. In particular, political violence may leave the target disposed against efforts toward reconciliation. Another important finding is that post-traumatic stress impacts on judgment and may bring about a condition, known as “dissociation,” which perniciously affects decision making.

This result creates an interesting agenda to pursue in further research on foreign policy. Post-traumatic stress, however, is not without positive effects. The ability to see new possibilities and place a lower emphasis on material matters are just two results supported by research so far. This result is worth exploring in other contexts, with post-genocidal environments as one priority for investigation.

Limitations and recommendations of psychology round out the discussion. Surveys and experimental research, along with other less familiar methods, will be needed to overcome challenges to both internal and external validity of respective findings. With regard to stress in particular, multi-level analysis is

5A full version of the integrated approach is developed and applied to American decision making in cases of the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and is salient to explaining foreign policy in general. See Yetiv (2011).
essential to deciphering overall effects on decision making. As with the preceding essay on history, this treatment concludes with a call for further interdisciplinary cooperation.

Third among the essays is a review of technology studies. Unlike its preceding companions in this symposium, the essay covers a less well-travelled area. To return to the metaphor from the outset of this overview, the technology pseudopod from IS is just beginning to project results from technology studies. Analysis begins by identifying schools of thought with regard to technology studies, a field less familiar to IS than either history or psychology, which have provided a wide range of applications to its subject matter over the course of several decades. The point of departure for theorizing is technological determinism. Its properties include the belief that technology is the dominant source of political and economic change. Technology is regarded as pervasive throughout human life, at both individual and group levels. Technology changes evolve toward greater efficiency and proneness to acting autonomously once a threshold of development is reached. There is no such thing as neutral technology, and unintended side effects will be the norm. Based on the belief that political and economic decision making significantly affects technology, social constructivism arose as an alternative to technological determinism. Technology, from this point of view, needs to be assessed within the social context. It arises in response to society’s needs and, in turn, impacts upon political processes.

From technological determinism and social constructivism emerges a middle ground on the role of technology. The essay brings this out in focusing on the technology conceptions of three perspectives from IS: realism/neorealism, liberalism, and social constructivism. Issues from IR in general and international political economy in particular are examined from these respective vantage points focusing on the role of technology. Technological conceptions are found to vary significantly. Realism, for instance, sees technology overwhelmingly in its role as a source of military power. From the viewpoint of liberalism, by contrast, technology is regarded as facilitating interdependence. More nuanced examples reinforce the idea that technology studies can and should be built into theorizing about IS and vice versa.

Among the pseudopods influencing IS, both very new and exciting in its potential is neuroeconomics, covered by the symposium’s fourth essay. This transdisciplinary approach is barely a decade old. It introduces the direct study of brain activity into IS and focuses on how choices are made. Standard economic theory, based on self-interest, is challenged by the still small—but rapidly expanding—number of experiments now conducted by neuroeconomists. These experiments reveal much higher levels of trust among strangers than would be consistent with postulates from economics that emphasize decision making in terms of individuals who maximize their individual utility. An impressive example concerns measurement of levels of the chemical oxytocin (OT) to assess the impact of human behavior affected by brain chemistry. Treatment subjects received an intentional transfer of money from someone else for safekeeping, while control subjects received a random monetary transfer. Experimental subjects, on average, increased their trust and showed much higher levels of OT compared with those in the control group. Another experiment manipulated the level of OT pharmacologically and found higher levels of generalized interpersonal trust.

These experimental results, in turn, impact upon models from IS that are inspired by conventional economic theory. For example, game-theoretic models, used extensively to study topics ranging from international institutions to deterrence, need to be re-evaluated to include trust variations among participants. The experimental results involving OT are sufficient to raise any number of questions for the study of decision making in foreign policy analysis. In a more general
sense, neuroeconomics goes beyond the contributions of behavioral economics because of its contribution to understanding of causal mechanisms. A common observation regarding economic models is that they satisfy an “as if” proposition, that is, people behave as if they made the elaborate calculations that appear in complex microeconomic models (Friedman 1953). Neuroeconomics creates the opportunity to go beyond predictive modeling into a search for causes and effects related to behavior at the most fundamental level.

History, psychology, technology studies, and neuroeconomics, the disciplines included in this symposium, reveal significant accomplishments and great potential for further application to international studies. What, then, is the intended overall contribution of the symposium? Return momentarily to the idea of IS as an amoeba sending out pseudopods corresponding to various disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. With its emphasis on the integrated approach, the symposium makes that case for more systematic interdisciplinary research. The integrated approach, developed at greater length in the context of the discipline of history and study of decision making, creates the potential for more coherent and productive expansion of IS. It is easy to imagine many other disciplines and interdisciplinary fields that could be explored via the integrated approach; anthropology, sociology, biology, and complexity science are just a few pseudopods that come to mind. In closing, if this symposium succeeds in the way envisioned by its participants, more coordinated efforts to combine insights from a wider range of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields will ensue. The IS amoeba will move forward with a greater sense of direction and purpose to illuminate the complex problems faced by our world.

References