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Is Anybody Not an (International Relations) Liberal?

BRIAN C. RATHBUN

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While realism has recently been subjected to intense examination with regard to its theoretical coherence, liberalism—often thought to be the bookend to realism—has so far escaped such scrutiny. Liberalism is generally defined in one of two ways, each faulty. The first definition is in terms of the dependent variable as any argument that expects growing cooperation and progress in international affairs, understood as increased peace and prosperity, seizing for liberalism any independent variable found important for potentially promoting international cooperation. Second, liberalism is defined in terms of the units of analysis as any argument that disaggregates the state into smaller units. This equates liberalism with an entire level of analysis. This strategy of appropriation is inappropriate. Approaches to international relations need a core logic in order to justify the inclusion of particular independent variables or the use of a particular level of analysis. Since so many other paradigms also lay claim to those same entities, we are left wondering if anybody is not a liberal. Appropriation leads us to miss crucial distinctions between alternative explanations of the same outcomes, such as the "liberal" phenomena of the democratic peace and the transformative effects of international organizations.

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International relations scholars have grown increasingly introspective in recent years, undertaking numerous efforts to clean up the alleged sloppiness of the various perspectives that guide their research. More than the other subfields in political science, international relations scholars have relied on distinct points of view—variously called paradigms, research programs, or research traditions—to derive hypotheses and explain politics. Most notably, Jeffrey Legro, Andrew Moravcsik and John Vasquez criticize the growing incoherence and indistinctiveness of realism, the oldest and most dominant approach to international relations theory.[1] Yet liberalism, the traditional counterpart to realism in international relations theory, has largely escaped such scrutiny, despite a recent attempt to establish its social scientific credentials as a rigorously defined alternative.[2]

The realist-liberal tandem serves as the point of departure for countless undergraduate and graduate textbooks and syllabi as well as books and articles. Based on a survey of over 2700 academics around the world, the Teaching, Research and International Policy Project (TRIP) reports that scholars estimate they devote 19 percent of their introductory international relations courses to teaching liberalism. Realism receives 22 percent of their attention, constructivism only 11 percent. In the United States, 20 percent of scholars surveyed identify themselves as liberals, 21 percent as realists, and 17 percent as constructivists. Academics from across the globe estimate that 28 percent of academic work is liberal in nature, 30 percent realist, and 21 percent constructivist.[3] I have not been able to find an international relations textbook that does not use realism and liberalism as a starting point.[4]

With liberalism having cemented its status as one of the major three paradigms, asking if it has the substantive foundations necessary to be a coherent approach is important. Do we know what it means to be a liberal? Can liberalism serve as the source of hypotheses and help structure debates about key phenomena in international relations? Such an interrogation seems

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editor William Wohlforth. Robert Keohane and Bruce Russett also graciously offered to be interviewed for the piece.

[1] Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 5–55; John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 899–912.

[2] Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–53.

[3] Richard Jordan, Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney, "One Discipline or Many? TRIP Survey of International Relations Faculty in Ten Countries" (Williamsburg, VA: Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations at the College of William and Mary, February 2009), http://irtheoryandpractice.wm.edu / projects / trip / Final_Trip_Report_2009.pdf.

[4] See, for example, John Baylis and Steve Smith, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Joshua Goldstein, *International Relations* (New York: Pearson, 2004); Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflict: An Introduction to Theory and History* (New York: Longman, 2003); Alan C. Lamborn and Joseph Lepgold, *World Politics in the Twenty–First Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

especially merited given that one of the fiercest critics of realism's coherence, Andrew Moravcsik, is an advocate of the theoretical progressiveness of liberalism.

Liberalism is generally defined in one of two ways, each epistemologically faulty. The first is in terms of the *dependent* variable (the phenomena or event to be explained) as the set of theories and arguments that expect increasing or potentially greater cooperation and progress in international affairs, generally defined in terms of increased peace and prosperity. Second, liberalism is defined in terms of the *units of analysis* as the set of arguments or theories that disaggregates the state into smaller units (whether they be individuals, political parties, or bureaucracies) or sees other non-state actors (such as transnational advocacy networks of non-governmental organizations) as influential.

The problem with these definitions of liberalism is that they are based on *appropriation*, which is not the proper basis for a paradigm. The first definition has the result of seizing for liberalism any *independent* variable found important for understanding international cooperation, whether it be international organizations (IOS), technological change, democratic institutions, or economic interdependence. Liberalism defined in this way works back from cooperation and appropriates any factor associated with it as liberal. The second amounts to a claim of ownership equating liberalism with an entire *level of analysis*. By this definition, any argument that incorporates domestic politics is liberal.

Liberalism as it is defined suffers from a kind of gluttony. Any argument that incorporates these elements, which arguably includes the majority if not the predominance of IR scholars, becomes liberal. Therefore, just as we must ask whether anybody is still a realist, it is also important to ask whether anybody is **not** a liberal. The answer, "very few," reflects poorly on liberalism's prospects as a self-standing approach.

Paradigms, research programs, or research traditions are built through logic not appropriation. They are logics of explanation based on a set of central, interdependent propositions about the phenomena under study. On the basis of this logic, paradigms are led toward particular units or levels of analysis, the building blocks of an approach that we call their "ontology." This means that no particular paradigm or approach owns the various factors used to make arguments about international politics but rather justifies their presence logically and utilizes them in a particular way. This does not foreclose the possibility of other paradigms or approaches also utilizing those same elements in a different manner.

Liberalism, in the two ways it has been defined, simply does not have such coherence. The independent variables that are considered liberal are not connected in any logical way. To the extent that a paradigm expects more cooperation than conflict, or vice versa, this must emerge logically out of a set of foundational propositions that liberalism does not provide. And

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particular levels of analysis are not for one approach to claim for itself either. The levels of analysis are a categorical scheme not a substantive foundation. If liberalism specifies its independent variables, units of analysis, and levels of analysis, but does not limit itself by justifying their inclusion and their use in a particular way, these factors are effectively appropriated for the approach, making it impossible to draw boundaries with others. Whereas Legro and Moravcsik admonish realists for departing from their core, I claim that liberalism does not have a core to start with. Liberalism appropriates because it has no coherent logic of its own.[5]

To claim that liberalism is not a coherent paradigm does not say anything about the empirical accuracy of scholarship identified as liberal. For instance, criticizing liberalism for defining itself on the basis of the effects of democracy, interdependence, and international organizations does not mean that these things do not indeed matter for the reasons that liberal scholars say they do. Nor do I have a paradigmatic axe to grind. Indeed my own work would be, and indeed has been, placed under both these traditional notions of what it means to be an IR liberal.[6] I merely argue that there is currently no way to systematically understand what liberalism means as an international relations paradigm. My focus is on the epistemological status of liberalism. Seemingly sensing this, most prominent liberal scholars actually avoid applying the "liberal" label to their own work.

In the following sections, I first review the two conventional notions used to define liberalism as a paradigm. I then, drawing on three different philosophers of science, offer some guidelines for establishing what is or is not a paradigm. Although there is great disagreement in the epistemological literature on what constitutes research progress, there is nevertheless a consensus on what a paradigm is, even if different philosophers of science use other terms for it. I assess the two conceptions of liberalism against these criteria and find them wanting. Almost everybody is a liberal under those definitions, even work that by most measures is based on fundamentally different core assumptions.

Of course, it could be argued that no aspiring paradigm in international relations clears this threshold, in which case one might ask, who cares? This could be the case, and no article can address the coherence of all applicants to paradigmatic status. Even if none reach this bar, however, it is still important to note where a paradigm's limitations lie so as to highlight the issues that need to be redressed. In the last section, I note one particular pitfall that results from liberalism's somewhat shaky foundation and the costs. If liberalism is allowed to appropriate the democratic peace and international organizations, it blinds us to the fact that rationalism and constructivism

[5] Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?"

[6] Brian C. Rathbun, *Partisan Interventions: European Party Politics and Peace Enforcement in the Balkans* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004).

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provide very different explanations of the same liberal phenomena, differences obscured by simply categorizing these arguments as "liberal."

TWO DEFINITIONS OF LIBERALISM

By Independent Variables by Way of the Dependent Variable: Liberalism as Any Factor Promoting Cooperation

In the most comprehensive effort to find the common threads within liberalism, Mark Zacher and Richard Matthew identify a number of central themes, two of which are that international relations is being transformed so as to promote greater freedom and that more peace, prosperity, and justice—with greater international cooperation—is symptomatic of that process.[7] Progress therefore is the outcome liberals expect, and cooperation is the means by which it is achieved.[8] Similarly, Robert Keohane writes that liberalism "rests on a belief in at least the possibility of cumulative progress in human affairs" and adopts an "ameliorative view of progress in international affairs.[9]

This notion of liberalism flows naturally and understandably from liberalism's origins in normative theory and political ideology. Liberalism began of course as a critique of the existing social order. Its adherents argued that progress was possible by reducing restrictions on freedom, in terms of both economic and political activities. Under this understanding of international relations liberalism, the "ought to" becomes the "is" (or at least the "can be," as argued below). What liberalism as an ideology had identified as the end goal or as a means to it, liberalism as IR theory takes as its explanandum.

This understanding of liberalism ties together different generations of what is commonly understood as liberal theorizing in modern international relations. Interdependence theory, which describes a world in which force is no longer a constant option, is understood as liberal because it implies that cooperation and non-military forms of state interaction are increasingly important.[10] The next generation was dubbed "neoliberal institutionalism," which sets out to show the possibilities of cooperation even while adopting (somewhat unrealistically, by its own admission) realist premises.

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[7] Mark Zacher and Richard Matthew, "Liberal International Relations Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands," in *Controversies in International Relations Theory*, ed. Charles Kegley (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 107–50, 109–11.

[8] David Baldwin, "Neoliberals, Neorealism, and World Politics," in *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. David Baldwin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 1–28; Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[9] Robert O. Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism: A Perspective on World Politics," in *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder: Westview, 1989), 1–20, 10; Robert O. Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," in *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, ed. John Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 165–94, 174.

[10] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977).

International institutions were the missing ingredient.[11] Neoliberal institutionalism's intellectual father, Robert Keohane, writes that its connection to liberalism was in its embrace of the "potentially progressive" nature of world politics.[12] The debate between neorealism and neoliberalism was over just how conflictual or cooperative the field of international relations is.[13]

The fact that liberalism is often defined in terms of the dependent variable is evident in a brief review of commonly identified variants of liberalism.[14] Republican liberalism is the set of arguments linking democratic institutions to more peaceful international relations, at least among liberal democracies. This has numerous variants. The institutions themselves prevent rent seeking on the part of smaller segments of society that benefit from war. Or democratic institutions indicate an acceptance of liberal norms of nonviolent conflict resolution at home that translate into foreign affairs as well.[15] Commercial liberalism stresses the mutual gains possible from economic exchange that place a constraint on war and conflict for fear of their disruptive effect.[16] This growing interdependence is partially driven by technological advances that permit a growing amount of trade and exchange.[17] Military liberalism emphasizes the decreasing gains from warfare either due to the increasing destructiveness of weaponry, such as nuclear weapons or the inability of states to make economic or military use of the spoils of war.[18] To the extent that economic wealth is a product of technological know-how rather than territory or industrial capacity, there is less of an incentive for conflict.

Cognitive liberalism is the growing recognition of the increasing possibilities of mutual benefit arising from technological progress. Functionalism, neofunctionalism, and epistemic community research can be classified under this category; they claim that individuals and groups would increasingly realize mutual interests that transcend national boundaries. Experts would

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[11] Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[12] Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," 11.

[13] Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1998): 485–507; Baldwin, "Neoliberalism, Neorealism, and World Politics."

[14] Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered"; Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously"; Zacher and Matthew, "Liberal International Relations Thoery."

[15] Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946–1986," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 624–38.

[16] John O'Neal and Bruce Russett, "The Classical Liberals Were Rights: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950–1985," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 267–94.

[17] Jeff Frieden and Ronald Rogowski, "The Impact of the International Economy on National Policies: An Analytical Overview," in *Internationalization and Domestic Politics*, ed. Robert Keohane and Helen Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25–47.

[18] Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

coordinate efforts to reach those gains in a way that deemphasizes politics and national boundaries to the benefit of transnationalism and technocracy.[19] Sociological liberalism is the emergence of a feeling of transnational solidarity owing to the increased level of interaction in the modern world.[20] Cosmopolitanism steadily wins out over nationalism in this view. It is the precursor to contemporary constructivist theories of identity change. Finally, regulative liberalism refers to regimes and IOS increasing their role in facilitating cooperation, thereby providing a bit of order and stability in world politics, making them more akin to domestic politics.[21]

To say that the key definitional element of liberalism is its focus on cooperation is emphatically not to say that the individual scholars identified as liberals do not make causal arguments with variation on the dependent variable. The spread of democracy might lead to more peace, scholars claim, but autocracy leads in the opposite direction. Interdependence lessens the likelihood of war, while autarky fosters it. Nor are these authors necessarily utopians who believe that cooperation is easy or more commonplace than conflict or who make the teleological claim that the world is becoming more peaceful. Keohane notes that relations among nation-states are only "*potentially* progressive."[22] Keohane and Joseph Nye have been very careful to note that the state of complex interdependence and the potential for cooperation only apply to some, not all, situations, with the interesting question being when, not whether, they apply.[23] Complex interdependence is an ideal type. Doyle writes that for liberals, "world politics, rather than being a relatively homogenous state of war, is at the minimum a heterogeneous state of peace and war and might become a state of global peace, in which the expectation of war disappears."[24]

I am asserting instead that liberalism is generally understood as a set of arguments that expect either increasingly or at least potentially greater cooperation in the modern world. The stress on potential cooperation is the only core definition that links together all these variants and generations of liberalism. In some ways, this definition serves and is reinforced by those opposed intellectually to the paradigm. The broad-brushing of liberalism as

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[19] Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press); Ernst B. Haas, "Why Collaborate? Issue–Linkage and International Regimes," *World Politics* 32, no. 3 (1980): 357–89; Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Coordination," *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 1–35.

[20] Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1953); Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered."

[21] Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

[22] Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," 11.

[23] Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 4, 24–25, 29.

[24] Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism and Socialism* (New York: Norton, 1997), 210.

naïve utopianism, generally by realists, has a long history.[25] The very label of "neoliberal" institutionalism was applied by realists, not Keohane, almost as a kind of pejorative.[26] Despite the fact that it might serve the purposes of realism to define liberalism as optimistic and progressive, this is nonetheless a conception that many identified as liberals, such as Keohane, Doyle, and Zacher, have also used, as cited above. None of these scholars, however, believe that it serves as the proper basis for a coherent approach, a point to which we will return.

To the extent that many accept this as the core logic of liberalism, it follows that the natural result is to hand over to this paradigm a set of independent variables associated, in the literature, with potential progress and peace in international politics. Along with Zacher and Matthews' first two core pillars of liberalism, progress and cooperation, they list a third—a transformation driven by the spread of democracy, interdependence, and international institutions.[27] These three ontological entities are what Bruce Russett et al. call the "Kantian tripod."[28] Jack Snyder also understands a stress on these same three independent variables as defining liberalism's core.[29] This was another reason that Keohane's transaction cost approach to international organizations was defined as neo-liberal, even while Keohane initially balked at the label.[30] However, Keohane, by referring to commercial liberalism, republican liberalism and neoliberal institutionalism, implies an acceptance of liberal ownership of those variables.[31] If "X matters" in outcomes leading to cooperation, any argument using X is liberal.[32]

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[25] E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis* (New York: Harper, 1964); Andreas Osiander, "Re–reading Early Twentieth Century IR: Idealism Revisited," *International Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1998): 409–32; Cameron Thies, "Progress, History and Identity in International Relations Theory: The Case of the Idealist–Realist Debate," *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 2 (2002): 147–85; John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994–1995): 9–49.

[26] Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation."

[27] Zacher and Matthew, "Liberal International Relations Theory," 109–11.

[28] Bruce Russett, John R. O'Neal, and David R. Davis, "The Third Leg of the Kantian Tripod for Peace: International Organizations and Militarized Disputes, 1950–1985," *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (1998): 441–67.

[29] Jack Snyder, "One World, Rival Theories," *Foreign Policy* (November/December 2004): 53–62, 54.

[30] Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation"; Robert O. Keohane, "Institutionalist Theory and the Realist Challenge after the Cold War," in *Neorealism and neoliberalism: the contemporary debate*, ed. David Baldwin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 269–300; Peter Wilson, "Twenty Years' Crisis and the Category of 'Idealism' in International Relations," in *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter–War Idealism Reassessed*, ed. David Long and Peter Wilson (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1–25.

[31] Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," 11.

[32] This notion of liberalism is often associated with two factors, agency and modernization, that might be argued to provide a thread in liberalism focused on a common independent variable rather than the dependent variable of cooperation. In both cases, however, cooperation seems to be the common denominator. Jennifer Sterling–Folker distinguishes realist "environmental" factors, from liberal "processes," which include any product of human creation to reach collective outcomes such as norms or democratic forms of government. Liberalism is therefore change and agency. Keohane thinks of

By Level of Analysis by Way of Units of Analysis: Liberalism as Domestic Politics and Pluralism

The second way in which liberalism is often defined is through units of analysis. It is based on a more pluralistic notion of the actors in international affairs.[33] Keohane and Doyle stress that this notion of liberalism puts the emphasis on the individual as the unit of analysis and analyzes how institutions aggregate their interests.[34] Liberalism is regarded as a "bottom-up" approach of interest aggregation that disaggregates the state, whether into bureaucracies, parties, or branches of government.[35] It also includes non-state actors at both the domestic and international levels, admitting activists in non-governmental organizations, epistemic communities of technical experts, and international organizations.[36] This definition has the benefits of freeing liberalism from its moorings in the dependent variable of cooperation, what Moravcsik calls liberalism's "legalist, moralist, and utopian" temptations inherent in the first conception described above.[37]

Most who have taken this path have not argued explicitly that liberalism is a paradigm, so using this as a definition might seem suspect. Recently, however, Moravcsik has offered a framework in this vein. In a threefold definition, Moravcsik defines liberalism as arguments in which individuals collect in groups competing for access to domestic institutions. Variation in the latter determines access to the levers of state power and the implementation of favored policies as the national interest. International outcomes reflect the configuration of these states' preferences, all of which are formed

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liberalism as stressing "human action." However, cooperation still provides the common denominator. Sterling–Folker notes that the processes generally incorporated into liberalism are selective, including only those whose end effect is cooperation and progress even though there are likely elements of modern societies and acts of human agency that lead to more rather than less conflict. Of course the presence or primacy of agency allows for the prospects of progress but does not necessitate it. Eschewing agency, more structural liberal accounts understand progress as being driven by a modernization process marked by the spread of capitalism and democracy. These arguments, however, are "liberal" because they presume that this modernization fosters cooperation, when of course it might also lead to more conflict. Jennifer Sterling–Folker, "Realist Environment, Liberal Process and Domestic–Level Variables," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997): 1–25; Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," 10; Zacher and Matthew, "Liberal International Relations Theory"; Osiander, "Re–reading Early Twentieth Century IR."

[33] Peter J. Katzenstein, Robert O. Keohane, and Stephen D. Krasner, "International Organization and the Study of World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (1998): 645–85.

[34] Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," 174; Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered"; Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, 208–12.

[35] Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation"; Thomas Risse–Kappen, *Cooperation and Nations: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 25; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 12, 31, 249; Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," 174; Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, 9.

[36] Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination"; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Katzenstein et al., "International Organization and the Study of World Politics."

[37] Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."

through the same bottom-up process. In sum, individuals matter; domestic institutions matter; and state preferences matter.[38]

These three pillars amount to a claim that liberalism is a set of arguments that draws on domestic politics. Claiming domestic institutions is the equivalent of asserting that any argument using regime type—that is, the second level of analysis—is liberal. And unlike the definitions of liberal used above, this one claims both democratic and non-democratic institutions as its own. The absorption of individual and private groups is the same as identifying liberalism with the first image, and to the extent that there are contacts or interdependent outcomes among non-state actors across borders (such as NGO networks, transnational relations among government bureaucracies, or firms whose economic policy preferences depend on their international competitive preferences) Moravcsik's liberalism can also claim to embrace some part of the systemic level of analysis as well. Still, the focus is predominantly on domestic politics.

The stress on domestic politics as the core element in defining liberalism is evident in Moravcsik's decision to include any reference to competing social identities concerning the nature of legitimate domestic social order as liberal but not to include transnational social identities such as global norms of human rights. Moravcsik also excludes functional regime theory arbitrarily from the liberal paradigm because it takes state preferences as fixed or exogenous, thereby violating his core criteria for liberalism, that it incorporate domestic pluralism.[39]

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EPISTEMOLOGICAL COMMON DENOMINATORS AND THE CRITERIA FOR THEORETICAL PARADIGMS

In their now famous critique of realism, Legro and Moravcsik identify two criteria for a productive paradigm: coherence and distinctiveness. They effectively accuse realists of pursuing a strategy of supplementation, in which factors incompatible or at best unconnected with its core logic approach are added in the service of particular accounts. They ask where realism ends and other paradigms begin if realism could embrace ideas, domestic politics, and international institutions, elements of politics that realism was heretofore skeptical of. Is anybody still a realist? they ask. If these unconnected factors are included, realist arguments become indistinguishable from those offered by other paradigms.

Legro and Moravcsik draw on Imre Lakatos' philosophy of science, one of the most popular epistemologies for international relations scholars.[40]

[38] Ibid., 516–21.

[39] Ibid., 525–28, 535–36.

[40] Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm"; Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, "Lakatos and Neorealism: A Reply to Vasquez," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 923–26.

Lakatos prefers the term “research programs” to “paradigm,” defined as a “series of theories . . . connected by a remarkable continuity,” which have both a “hard core” (or “negative heuristic”) and a “protective belt” (or “positive heuristic”).[41] The former is a set of fundamental assumptions that cannot be questioned without undermining the integrity and viability of the research program. The latter is less sacrosanct and, in combination with hard core assumptions, provides suggestions for the articulation of more specific theories to solve anomalies or puzzles for the research program, thereby expanding the program’s reach.[42]

Legro and Moravcsik’s choice of Lakatos makes sense, as they are primarily concerned with new variations on old realist themes, whether realism’s positive heuristic is connected or even consistent with its negative heuristic. Lakatos claims that if this is not the case, a research program has become “degenerative.” Lakatos is primarily concerned with the questions of whether, how, and how to judge if science progresses.[43]

This, however, comes at the expense of a firm notion about the criteria for a core logic in the first place. This is an important, even primary concern, as the core logic serves as the foundation for the enhancement of a research program (or paradigm). The most precise definition of a paradigm or a research program comes from Larry Laudan, who explicitly sets out to better specify what for Lakatos is a somewhat fuzzy concept, although he uses a new term.[44] Laudan writes that “every research tradition exhibits certain *metaphysical* . . . commitments which, as an ensemble, individuate the research and distinguish it from others.” Those commitments include an “ontology which specifies, in a general way, the types of fundamental entities which exist in the domain or domains within which the research tradition is embedded.” However, an ontology is not just a list of entities. A research tradition “outlines the different modes by which these entities can interact.”[45] Paradigms put ontological elements to work in a particular way that indicates a certain logic. This gives them what Legro and Moravcsik might call “coherence.” Coherence implies a logical connection among a number of different elements, in this case, core assumptions. Theoretical coherence must be defined not only negatively, as the lack of internal contradictions, but also positively, as the interdependence of core propositions. There are practically an infinite number of theoretical statements that do not contradict one another but that have no real connection to one another either.

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[41] Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 132.

[42] Ibid., 133–37.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems: Toward a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 75–76.

[45] Ibid., 79.

Even though Laudan uses a different term, it is important to note that Laudan is not arguing with Lakatos but rather merely seeking to better define his research traditions in a way consistent with equivalent concepts of those authors. He only takes issue with their vagueness, not their conception of paradigms. It is only on other matters, such as the criteria for judging the effectiveness of a paradigm, or how many paradigms tend to exist contemporaneously in the history of science, that Laudan takes issue with them. Despite Lakatos' ambiguity, it stands to reason that Lakatos' criteria for a positive heuristic, that "additional assertions must be connected with the contradicting assertion *more intimately* than by mere conjunction," must apply to the core propositions of the paradigm as well. He writes of the "remarkable continuity which welds [a series of theories] into research programmes."[46]

Neither are Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn, another of the most prominent philosophers of science, at odds.[47] Lakatos notes that this continuity is "reminiscent" of Kuhn's idea of paradigms.[48] Kuhn's notion of paradigms is notoriously vague, but he does refer to them as "coherent traditions of scientific research."[49] Kuhn also claims that specific theories drawn from the logic of a paradigm presuppose one or more elements of the paradigm. That presupposition, if one were to extend this line of argumentation, should apply to the core assumptions of the paradigm as well. In sum, all three authors, who exemplify three fundamentally different approaches to the philosophy of science, agree that the core assumptions of a paradigm, research program, or research tradition are bedrock, interdependent fundamentals with a logic from which more specific theories are drawn. I call this "common denominator epistemology."

The implication is that paradigms are not simple lists of things that "matter." For example, realism is not the simple claim that power or states are important. Constructivism is not identical to a mere assertion of the influence of norms, ideas, or identity. Paradigms require a logic that specifies why these factors matter (or why they don't) and how. A coherent approach has an ontology, which is a "*structured* set of entities; it consists not only of certain designated kinds of things but also of *connections* or relations between them."[50]

Without such a logic, a paradigm is just a set of entities, with nothing to distinguish it from other paradigms that might embrace those same building blocks. Defining a paradigm merely by designation of those entities would

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[46] Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs," 131–32 (emphasis added).

[47] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[48] Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs," 132.

[49] Kuhn, "Structure of Scientific Revolutions,"10.

[50] David Dessler, "What's at Stake in the Agent–Structure Debate," *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (1989): 441–73, 445 (emphasis added).

amount to a strategy of *appropriation*. By this, I mean that a paradigm defines itself (or at least comes to be understood) as synonymous with certain ontological elements, such that other paradigms are not allowed to use them in their own unique way. This is often evident in the misconceived definition of paradigms by the fact that some X matters. X might matter but only for a particular reason that the paradigm provides. And X might matter in other approaches too but on a different basis. No one paradigm can lay claim to any particular casual factor, ontological entity, or level of analysis. The crucial difference is the "how," not so much the "what" of a paradigm. Rather than simply specify, each paradigm must justify the use these factors in a particular way that serves and reflects the logic of its approach.

Neorealism, for instance, does not simply assert that states are best understood as unitary actors and that outcomes in international politics are best understood as a product of the distribution of power. It justifies those claims logically by reference to anarchy. The lack of effective international authority means that states cannot escape the security challenges that affect all. Insecurity provides a powerful incentive for all states to perform certain functions, such as accumulating power and assembling military forces, regardless of the character of a state's domestic politics. There are powerful forces encouraging contestation among individuals and groups in society to give way to the overriding common goal of security and survival, without which nothing else is possible. This justifies the black box and billiard ball approach.[51] Neorealism also holds no exclusive rights to the use of the state. Neorealist arguments are generally statist, but not all statist arguments must be neorealist. The paradigm does not own the state but rather is led toward using it as a unit of analysis by virtue of its stress on anarchy. Some realists might not always make explicit the interrelatedness of their assumptions, instead simply stating them in laundry list fashion. But such a positive connection can be made.

Ideas are another example of a causal force that might be included in a paradigm's ontology, but like all others, must be justified by and used in a way that matches its logic. Constructivism utilizes ideas because it stresses the social nature of international relations.[52] Social construction is a process by which groups create realities that are no more than the collectively held ideas of the groups' members. Constructivism uses ideas in a particular way and uses particular types of ideas—the social ideas of norms, values, and culture that are intersubjectively shared. This is how constructivism differs from other approaches that stress ideas in a less social sense, such as cognitivism, in

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[51] J. David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961): 77–92; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

[52] Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 319–63; Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of World Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–410.

which ideas are tools that help decision makers reduce the complexity of policy making. Rationalism understands ideas as private information used by strategic actors in interdependent situations.[53] Constructivist arguments are ideational, but not all ideational arguments are constructivist.

This structured set of entities does the work in paradigms. From it, scholars working within a paradigm draw out specific theories about particular events of phenomena. To the extent that a paradigm specifies that there is a particular nature of the world scholars study, this view stems from logic. For instance, structural realism is not the same thing as an expectation of competition in world politics. That pessimistic view is drawn out of the core set of propositions. There are many reasons to be pessimistic about the nature of international politics and skeptical of the prospects of cooperation that have nothing to do with anarchy. The logic generates the expectation rather than the reverse.

The criteria of positive coherence draws from the common ground among very different philosophies of science and, I would argue, reflects the way that most international relations scholars who do not self-consciously concern themselves with epistemological questions approach paradigms. It avoids the questions on which epistemologists fundamentally disagree, such as what anomalies are serious enough to falsify a research program, the standards for measuring the successful development and refinement of a paradigm, and the proper relationship between a hard core and auxiliary assumptions. International relations analysts disagree as to which epistemological standards are most appropriate for these questions and whether these criteria for research progress are even applicable to social science at all.[54] International relations scholarship is not mature enough, perhaps might never be, to assess on these grounds, and the very questions themselves are too contested in the philosophy of science to offer proper guidance. Rather, we first need an assessment of whether we can even specify an aspiring paradigm's core logic that is a prerequisite for a subsequent elaboration of theories.

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INAPPROPRIATE APPROPRIATION: LIBERALISM'S UNJUSTIFIED MONOPOLIES

Monopoly over Independent Variables

Liberalism does not have a core logic and is defined instead through appropriation. This is true of both understandings of the approach. The first definition, liberalism as optimism about cooperation and progress, is essentially

[53] Brian Rathbun, "Uncertainty about Uncertainty: Clarifying a Crucial Concept for International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2007): 25–47.

[54] Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm"; Elman and Elman, "Lakatos and Neorealism."

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a hodgepodge collection of otherwise unrelated independent variables associated with increased international cooperation. Individually, these liberal arguments carefully specify mechanisms and internal logic. But as fruitful and useful as these research avenues have been, the only link among them is that they arguably push toward greater peace and cooperation in international relations. They might not contradict one another, but there is no real positive connection either. That lack of connection is an indictment not of the work but of the categorization. The fact that the more sophisticated "liberals" do indeed see both the potential for cooperation and conflict indicates the very problem itself: liberalism does not have a core logic.

To the extent that liberalism expects cooperation, it must do so on the basis of a series of interdependent propositions about the nature of international reality. Cooperation is an outcome that might perhaps be an expectation based on logic but is not itself a logic. This notion of liberalism works backwards from cooperation rather than moving forward from some understanding of what drives international politics.

As Peter Wilson writes, "There does not seem to be anything tying these ideas together which might constitute the core of a 'doctrine,' 'approach', or 'tradition."' Only "one common factor does become apparent: all of these ideas, beliefs, and proposals presuppose that conscious, progressive change is possible in international relations."[55] Keohane notes that the variants of liberalism mentioned above, while they are "not inconsistent with one another," they are "logically distinct."[56] Wilson writes of a "tendency to equate . . . idealism with a range of not necessarily compatible things," such as a belief in progress, collective security, international law, and interdependence.[57] Jennifer Sterling-Folker argues that the systemic and domestic forms of liberalism actually contradict one another.[58]

Although it is seemingly paradoxical, to claim that liberalism does not have a core is not to take issue with the work of scholars typically classified as liberal. This is because so very few actually identify themselves with this approach or believe that it is a coherent research paradigm. Many "liberals" understand that liberalism is a tradition without the same canonical foundations as realism.[59] This is very different from the relationship between realists and realism. For instance, Keohane asserts that he does "not like the label," and that in his book *After Hegemony,* he "tried to avoid the 'liberal' label precisely because it had come to mean so many quite different things."[60] It is often others who place "liberals" in the liberal category.

[55] Wilson, "The Twenty Years' Crisis," 13.
[56] Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," 175–76.
[57] Wilson, "The Twenty Years' Crisis," 8.
[58] Sterling–Folker, "Realist Environment."
[59] Doyle,*Ways of War and Peace*; Zacher and Matthew, "Liberal International Relations Thoery."
[60] Robert Keohane, interview with the author, March 2009.

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Similarly, a review of Bruce Russett's solo and co-written work does not find any reference to a liberal approach. As Russett says, "I don't believe in a fully deductive paradigm of liberalism." He describes his own research agenda as driven by the observation of a democratic peace and an interest in explaining that puzzle. "I have always been more of an empiricist," he said. Russett notes that his own research proceeded inductively rather than drawing deductively from Kant. He was not teasing out the implicit hypotheses of a liberal paradigm. Kant provided a "useful hook." Interestingly, when Russett would later pair up with John O'Neal to test the importance of the commercial interdependence and democracy in determining propensity toward conflict, their initial premise was actually that these were rival independent variables and that perhaps the statistical impact of one was an artifact of the other given their strong covariation. Instead, Russett and O'Neal found that both mattered. There was, however, no common theoretical core from which they drew the hypothesis that both democracy *and* interdependence lead to peace.[61]

Both Russett and Keohane understand their research as driven by a dissatisfaction with and belief in the limitations of realism. Keohane and Nye's "complex interdependence," which was the first of the modern versions of liberalism, consists of three pillars, each juxtaposed against a core realist axiom.[62] Keohane and Nye explicitly argue that these three propositions are the "opposite of realism."[63] They argue that force is not always an option in world politics, that there are "multiple channels" of contact among states other than "interstate" relations so that states are not the sole important actors, and that military concerns do not always trump other issues within a hierarchy of issues. Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism attempts to demonstrate that the pessimism of realism is unjustified, even while accepting realism's premises of anarchy and unitary state actors. He resists realism's determinism. In describing his research on the Kantian tripod, Russett notes that it proceeded from a "dissatisfaction with Waltzian pessimism and determinism." Russett was looking for a way to account for an astonishing puzzle for realism, the ability for democracies to carve out a zone of peace and prosperity for themselves.

Dissatisfaction with realism, however, is not the same as defining a coherent liberal approach to international relations. Russett and Keohane were attempting to carve out room for a number of different approaches other than realism to explain world politics, not to establish a coherent liberal alternative. Major problems emerge to the extent that we understand Russett and Keohane as defining a self-standing and coherent approach to international politics (against their own wishes!) in opposition to realism's

[61] Bruce Russett, interview with the author, March 2009.

[62] Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence.*

[63] Ibid., 23.

pessimism. Paradigms differ, but distinctions are not their sole raison d'être. Contrasts help elucidate, but they cannot sustain paradigms. There are many potential paradigms that differ from realism. By understanding liberalism as opposition to the pessimism of realism, we inadvertently fold a number of different coherent alternatives into a liberalism that lacks any logic of its own. Below I argue that rationalism and constructivism are fundamentally different from realism but that they each differ fundamentally.

Individual theories, such as Keohane's transaction cost approach to international institutions or Russett's Kantian tripod, can use an opposition to realism as a starting point for very productive research that is empirically grounded and theoretically rigorous. However, this is not the basis for a research paradigm. Keohane's and Russett's common adversary only makes them allies, not compatriots. Russett and Keohane do not mistake the two, but others do by attempting to fold them into a single category that does not have a positive core. This puts the focus on the potential for cooperation, facilitates accusations of utopianism and excessive optimism, and distracts us away from the very different mechanisms that Russett and Keohane and others identify for reaching those conclusions.

One might argue that since most liberals do not themselves believe that liberalism is a coherent tradition or even self-identify with the paradigm, this exercise is unnecessary. This faulty notion of liberalism, however, is often taught as a paradigm of IR theory and is used in countless works as a counterargument to realism as if it did assume such a status. In this sense, liberalism appropriates even if certain key (even most) liberals do not.

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Monopoly over Levels of Analysis

The problem with this definition of liberalism as pluralistic politics is that the levels of analysis are a categorical schema, not the theoretical basis of a paradigm.[64] How an argument is placed is a reflection of its logic; the level of analysis itself is not the paradigm. The same argument advanced earlier about independent variables applies equally well here. To the extent that paradigms operate at the systemic, domestic, or individual level, it is a result of principles deduced from the core logic of the theory, not an assertion to ownership. Defenders of this notion of liberalism might simply claim that liberalism amounts to a focus on individuals as its units of analysis. The specification of units of analysis, however, does not make a coherent paradigm. Even neorealists must utilize individuals as actors if only to show that the systemic pressures they share with others mean they ultimately act in concert with others.

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[64] Singer, "The Level–of–Analysis Problem."

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As noted above, Moravcsik's is the most prominent, explicit, and rigorous statement of liberalism of this kind. Recognizing the error of defining liberalism as cooperative and progressive forces in international relations, Moravcsik makes the attempt to put liberalism on a sounder basis.[65] Moravcsik separates his notion of liberalism from approaches linked only to certain independent variables, such as neoliberal institutionalism.[66] He also explicitly argues that his notion of liberalism can explain both conflict and cooperation and applies to both international political economy and security outcomes.[67] Moravcsik's effort to highlight the importance of preferences should be applauded. Too often IR scholars, in a bid for generalizability, neglect and simply assume constant preferences. This is so often not the case in international relations, and the result can be poor theory.

Yet the alternative Moravcsik offers is even more brazenly appropriative. Although his solution is not to seize a certain part of the spectrum of dependent variables for liberalism, the solution ends up equating to an appropriation of even more of the spectrum of independent variables. Under his definition, liberalism is no longer tied together by the possibility of cooperative outcomes but now includes any instance in which the preferences of individuals or groups or domestic institutions matter. Moravcsik's notion of liberalism automatically would make liberal any argument that disaggregates the state into institutions and individuals competing for control and access, and thereby any argument taking domestic politics seriously as a force in international relations.

The flaws in Moravcsik's definition are evident in what he tries to claim for liberalism as well as what he arbitrarily excludes. Because he does not identify a core logic, he ends up incorporating elements of distinctly different logics. His liberalism incorporates both a rationalist, utilitarian logic and a constructivist, appropriateness logic. While these are potentially complementary, even the most optimistic scholars see these two paradigms as operating side by side in a kind of division of labor, not as capable of true synthesis.[68] However, Moravcsik is only interested in them if they operate at the domestic level of analysis. For instance, domestic norms show the importance of the liberal paradigm whereas global norms do not. Moravcsik subsumes two distinct logics but cuts each in half. This is an arbitrary distinction that truncates constructivism on the basis of the level of analysis and is indicative of an effort to claim all of domestic politics for liberalism based on an appropriation of the level of analysis and not logic.

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[65] Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," 516–21.

[66] Ibid., 536.

[67] Ibid., 533.

[68] James Fearon and Alexander Wendt, "Rationalism vs. Constructivism: A Skeptical View," in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlnaes, Thomas Risse–Kappen, and Beth Simmons (London: Sage, 2002).

Simultaneously, Moravcsik's liberalism incorporates the rationalist dynamic of instrumental self-interest maximization but only if it operates at the domestic level of analysis. He arbitrarily excludes functional regime theory from the liberal paradigm because it takes state preferences as fixed or exogenous and thereby violates his core criteria for liberalism: incorporation of domestic pluralism.[69] However, fixing preferences and assuming states are unitary actors offer an analytic convenience to prove a point about realism's overly pessimistic views about cooperation, not an ontological principle or core assumption.[70] Subsequent generations of rationalist scholars almost always deal with the interaction of international organizations and domestic politics.[71]

A version of Moravcsik's liberalism could avoid the pitfalls of appropriation and establish a greater claim to coherence if it were to identify a core logic of utility maximization rather than simply lay claim to a level of analysis. Aspects (but not all) of Moravcik's notion of liberalism[72] are very similar to what David Lake and Robert Powell call a "strategic choice" approach premised on a logic of individual utility maximization[73] that we might call also call rationalism.[74] Moravcsik's original empirical work would fall under this category.[75]

In the strategic choice approach, individuals aggregate into groups on the basis of common interests and engage in a process of bargaining and strategic interaction to realize their preferred ends. This quickly brings in domestic institutions as the approach raises the question of how conflicting interests are mediated, and this does not occur through any form of social solidarity or norms as might be the case in constructivism. Institutions are the key mediating influence as they privilege some groups over others.[76] For instance, democratic institutions represent a broader swath of societal interests, while illiberal institutions allow for more narrow rent-seeking groups. This difference in representation is often known in rationalist literature as

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[69] Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," 535–36.

[70] Keohane, *After Hegemony*, chap. 1.

[71] Helen V. Milner, "Rationalizing Politics: The Emerging Synthesis of International, American, and Comparative Politics," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 759–86; Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal, *The Rational Design of International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[72] Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."

[73] David Lake and Robert Powell, eds., *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[74] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "The Contribution of Expected Utility Theory to the Study of International Conflict," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1998): 629–58; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman, *War and Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[75] Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[76] Milner, "Rationalizing Politics."

the size of the "selectorate."[77] The approach applies to both security and international political economy.

Once a particular policy preference emerges amongst competing groups, say political parties in a democracy, the broader group to which they both belong, say the state, then engages in a process of bargaining and strategic interaction with other like units.[78] The sum total of these parts is a very pluralistic approach of "boxes within boxes," as Lake and Powell describe it.[79]

A liberalism along these lines, based on a logic of utility maximization would be coherent. However, it would involve abandoning the attempt to form an independent paradigm focused on domestic politics, which appears to be Moravcsik's aim. To make his notion of liberalism more epistemologically sustainable, Moravcsik would have to surrender some of his claims on empirical and theoretical turf and broaden them in others, specifically, jettisoning claims to constructivist dynamics at the domestic level and including rationalist processes at the systemic level (such as in international organizations). Strategic choice never defines itself as the set of arguments embracing domestic politics or claims that others have no recourse to this level of analysis nor does it arbitrarily warden itself off from any reference to international institutions as Moravcsik does. Such a move, however, would essentially make liberalism into rationalism. Rationalists like Lake and Powell, who argue they have designed a coherent approach of their own, might object that they were there first.

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MISSING THE TREES FOR THE FOREST: SEPARATING RATIONALIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST LOGICS IN LIBERALISM

These two major flaws of liberalism make it difficult to establish who is *not* a liberal. Any scholar who utilizes domestic factors in his explanation or focuses on how IOs, democracy, or interdependence might create more peaceful relations among states becomes a liberal. Not only might this include the vast majority of international relations scholars, this inappropriate label obscures important differences in how many use the domestic level of analysis or these independent variables to build arguments, particularly rationalists and constructivists. The fact that these two approaches rest on

[77] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alistair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Marrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[78] Of course in many cases these processes occur simultaneously, in a two–level game, and that fact can be used strategically in a group's negotiation both abroad and at a home. See Robert Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two–Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–60.

[79] Lake and Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations.*

very different (albeit potentially complementary) logics of explanation, yet are each hard to distinguish from liberalism, speaks to liberalism's problem.

One might ask, who cares? What harm is done by an incoherent liberalism? To close the piece, I review just one example. By allowing liberalism to appropriate particular independent variables or cooperative outcomes, we obscure important differences between alternative explanations of the same phenomenon—the effect of international organizations on world politics and the democratic peace, two of the three elements of the liberal Kantian tripod.[80] If we understand liberalism in either of the two traditional ways identified above, we are distracted into a simplistic debate about whether international institutions and democratic regimes matter, as opposed to how, because "liberalism" has no unique logic explaining why this is the case. It instead obscures important differences between two other paradigms, lumping together any argument that takes IOs and democratic institutions seriously as liberal, effectively appropriating these important independent variables. Both rationalism and constructivism argue that democracy and international organizations make a difference but for different reasons.

In rationalism, international institutions are the reflection of state interests. In keeping with the premise of utility maximization, they are instruments efficiently designed to serve a particular situation and distribution of egoistic state preferences.[81] International organizations help reduce uncertainty and prevent market failure by providing incentives not to cheat, allowing the signaling of cooperative intent, and providing data about compliance. All add more complete information about intentions, reducing ignorance. By lengthening the "shadow of the future" and establishing issue linkages, IOs force states to think more holistically, reducing incentives for short-term defection that might yield momentary unilateral gains at the expense of potentially larger multilateral payoffs to come. This makes all involved more certain and confident that their cooperative behavior will be reciprocated.[82] By voluntarily constraining the exercise of their full power by tying themselves down in IOs, mighty states convey information and reveal their type as trustworthy partners so as to reduce the uncertainties of others regarding their intentions.[83] Finally, institutions can help states detect possible cheating. They provide forums for states to exchange information and increase transparency.[84] IOs can serve as successful independent monitors of

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[80] Russett et al., "The Third Leg of the Kantian Tripod for Peace."

[81] Lisa L. Martin, "Interests, Power, and Multilateralism," *International Organization* 46, no. 4 (1992): 765–92; Koremenos et al., *The Rational Design of International Institutions*.

[82] Robert Axelrod, "The Emergence of Cooperation among Egoists," *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 2 (1981): 306–18; Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

[83] G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions: Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Erik Voeten, "The Political Origins of the UN Security Council's Ability to Legitimize the Use of Force," *International Organization* 59, no. 3 (2005).

[84] Katja Weber, "Hierarchy amidst Anarchy: A Transaction Costs Approach to International Security Cooperation," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1992): 321–40.

compliance or executor of decisions in those situations in which violations are difficult to detect by national parties, and states do not trust one another or even themselves to implement or keep to an agreement.[85]

International organizations in constructivism are social entities. Institutions are created on the basis of a common recognition of a mutual goal that is generally normative.[86] IOs reduce the uncertainty of cheating not through punitive sanctioning or monitoring mechanisms but through their legitimacy. State compliance is due to a belief in the intrinsic goodness of an institution's goals. States are shamed into meeting their obligation. Once constituted, institutions have significant power to promulgate or enforce new norms. They are not merely the instruments of prominent members maximizing their utility. This legitimacy also allows them to redefine state interests by offering new ideas about what states should do.[87] Their independence gives them moral authority among states that is unrivaled.[88] The mechanism is again persuasive, not coercive, since coercion is never regarded as legitimate. Norms are spread through an IO-fostered international socialization process of diffusion across borders.[89] International organizations matter but in a very different way than in rationalism. If any argument that stresses their importance is considered "liberal," we obscure these important differences.

Rationalists and constructivists each offer explanations for the democratic peace, the empirical finding that democracies almost never fight one another yet are no less likely to fight nondemocracies. Constructivists stress the normative foundations of the phenomenon.[90] Democracies externalize their internal norms of nonviolent conflict resolution vis-à-vis those whom they expect to do the same. They embrace particular notions of appropriate behavior by virtue of their common liberal worldview. In the rationalist vein, Bueno de Mesquita et al. explain the entire democratic peace phenomena on the basis of the office-seeking desires of politicians.[91] Democratically elected

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[85] Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Why States Act through Formal International Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 1 (1998): 3–32; Virginia Page Fortna, "Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace," *International Organization* 57, no. 2 (2003): 337–72; Andrew Moravcsik, "The Origins of Human Rights Regimes," *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (2000): 217–52.

[86] John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 379–415.

[87] Martha Finnemore, "International Organizations as Teachers of Norms: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and Science Policy," *International Organization* 47, no. 4 (1993): 565–87; Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[88] Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[89] Frank Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[90] Maoz and Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946–1986"; John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (1994): 87–125.

[91] Bruce Bueno Mesquita, James D. Marrow, Randolph Siverson, and Alastair Smith, "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999): 791–807.

politicians have a more fragile hold on office and therefore must be more selective about the wars they fight.[92] They also fight to win. Knowing that a war with another democracy will be long given that the opponent faces the same electoral incentives, democracies spend more time negotiating to avoid war, which explains the relative absence of war among them. Again, democracy matters but for very different reasons.

OVERLY LIBERAL DEFINITIONS OF LIBERALISM

Some might argue that paradigmatic research is old-fashioned; to nitpick as to the coherence of paradigms amounts to navel-gazing that distracts from simply doing good work. I am all for pragmatic theory building that draws on multiple perspectives. Criticizing the coherence of liberalism is emphatically not the same as insisting all research must be clearly in one camp or another. I am setting a standard for paradigms, not individual works of scholarship. Yet while much good work is done outside and across research paradigms, the vast majority of international relations scholars work within them. In the TRIP survey, 26 percent of these individuals reported that they did not partake in paradigmatic analysis, while almost three quarters did.[93] This means we should know what we mean by liberalism and whether it means anything at all.

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An examination of some leading IR textbooks reveals an overwhelming use of the first definition of liberalism—potential progress through the joint effect of democracy, international organizations and law, and economic interdependence. Alan Lamborn and Joseph Lepgold juxtapose the "optimistic assumptions of liberalism" against the "pessimistic assumptions of realism" and highlight liberalism's "emphasis" on the three legs of the Kantian tripod.[94] Tim Dunne notes that "belief in the possibility of progress is one identifier of a liberal approach," the determinants of progress being interdependence, open governments responsive to public opinion, and world government.[95] Nye's conception of liberalism lists a series of objections to the pessimism of realism.[96] Traditional liberalism, for Joshua Goldstein, has "since the time of Sun Tzu in ancient China . . . provided a counterpoint to realism. This long tradition of idealism in IR holds that: morality, law and international organization can form the basis for relations among states; human nature is not evil; peaceful and cooperative relations among states are possible; and states can operate as a community rather than merely as autonomous self-interested

[92] Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, III, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998): 259–77.

[93] Jordan et al., "One Paradigm or Many?"

[94] Lamborn and Lepgold, *World Politics in the Twenty–First Century*, 37.

[95] Tim Dunne, quoted in Baylis and Smith, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 186–87.

[96] Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts*, 5.

agents."[97] This suggests we have some work to do. This kind of liberalism is faulty.

I do not recommend neglecting the role that liberal thought has played in the evolution of international relations theory, emphatically to the contrary. A real understanding of the classics that have been brought together under the label of "liberalism" breathes life into the stale conceptions of liberalism as an approach to international relations that we have today. However, to think of these contributions as amounting collectively to a coherent paradigm means that, to paraphrase Nixon, we are almost all liberals now. And if almost all international relations scholars are liberals, what can liberalism mean?

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[97] Goldstein, *International Relations*, 75.