

# Subvert the dominant paradigm: A critical analysis of rationalism's status as a paradigm of international relations

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**Abstract**

It is frequently maintained that rationalism is something other than an 'ism' of international relations. Inspired by critical theory but using quantitative survey data, this article takes issue with that notion, arguing that rationalist work – with its emphasis on interests, institutions, and information – has a distinct logic of individualistic utilitarianism. It therefore exhibits all of the subjective biases of other 'isms', defining both the answers and the very questions that are asked. Rationalism might even be an ideology. Using data from the 2011 TRIP survey, I show that those substantive commitments reveal themselves in the economic ideology of those who make rationalist assumptions in their work. Parallel to a view of international relations in which egoistic units seek material gains, rationalists identify as economic libertarians at a much higher rate than non-rationalists. All of this suggests that rationalists have an unacknowledged and unconscious bias in their scholarship that threatens the positivistic epistemology to which most claim to be committed.

**Keywords**

international relations theory, paradigms, rationalism

There is increasing frustration in the field of international relations concerning the use of paradigms, those organizing frameworks such as realism, liberalism and constructivism that have guided so much theory building in the past. Their use was the subject of a blistering critique by David Lake in a series of keynote addresses delivered in his capacity as President of the International Studies Association. Lake describes 'isms' as 'evil', amounting to no more than 'academic sects' that impede progress in

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international relations by precluding theoretical synergy and biasing the selection of evidence.<sup>1</sup> Extremists preach to their respective choirs and gain undeserved notoriety for their stridency, he claims. Adopting a 'dualist' epistemology, Lake's objections center on the lack of objectivity in international relations work. Lake senses a 'growing frustration with the dead hand of the isms and a quest for alternative ways of organizing intellectual inquiry'.<sup>2</sup> He might be right. The Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) surveys of over 2000 international relations academics reveal a declining level of identification with paradigms on the part of respondents.<sup>3</sup>

Lake has an unlikely ally in this complaint. Critical theorists and poststructuralist scholars of international relations have long made similar accusations, arguing that international relations theorists, indeed no social scientist, can claim to offer an objective and unbiased view of the world.<sup>4</sup> However, they go much further, claiming that paradigms are ideologies that reify existing structures in the international system in such a way as to impede progress in the course of international affairs. The international relations theorist therefore is not merely a passive observer of foreign affairs but also participates in their very making, consciously or unconsciously. International relations theory is political. According to this view, theorists have a normative obligation to uncover hidden assumptions in international relations that impede change in a more inclusive, egalitarian and just direction.

Lake suggests an alternative to the 'isms', an analytical eclecticism centered on a problematique of identifying political actor's interests, the institutions that aggregate them, and the interaction between units as they attempt to implement their preferences. Such an approach would avoid the subjective quality of existing paradigms. Critical theorists, however, remind us to be wary of such claims to objective theorizing, the more so as they more self-consciously protest their objectivity. In this article, I demonstrate that Lake's self-described analytically eclectic alternative is a paradigm or research tradition of its own, that of rationalism, that demonstrates all of the subjective biases of other paradigms. Following the admonition of Robert Cox, I seek to reveal the assumptions underlying rationalist theory, exposing it not only as a paradigm but even perhaps as an ideology.<sup>5</sup> Rationalism comes with all the dangers that Lake warns about, perhaps even to a greater degree, given that rationalists do not believe or recognize that they are operating within the confines of a particular 'ism'. Even non-rationalists often argue that rationalism is something other than a paradigm; it is a methodology or meta-approach without ontological content. Reducing international relations to interests, institutions, and interactions simply substitutes one paradigm for many others.

In the sections that follow, I briefly lay out the substance of the rationalist tradition in international relations, arguing that it has a unique ontology that differentiates it from other approaches. Focusing on the primary exponents of this research tradition as defined by rationalists themselves, as well as on an analysis of a prominent international relations textbook co-authored by Lake, I show that rationalists paint a picture of utilitarian individuals acting strategically and instrumentally to further their own egoistic interests. This is an asocial, atomistic, and anomic view of the world that privileges a particular set of questions and consistently highlights particular answers, just as other paradigms do. I also anticipate the objection that rationalism is not distinct enough from utilitarian approaches such as realism and liberalism.

If rationalism is a paradigm, this means that it is a subjective *Weltanschauung* with substantive commitments through which international relations scholars interpret the world. In other words, it is an ideology. Having identified that set of core ontological assumptions, we should be able to test whether they correlate with other markers of such substantive beliefs. I use political ideology, making the case that rationalism most resembles the individualistic, materialistic worldview of the economic libertarian in which every man or woman seeks his own way with care only for his or her own interest. No social glue holds them together, either of deference to authority and loyalty to an in-group, on one hand, or humanitarian and egalitarian concern for others, on the other. This is the same move I use earlier work, showing that IR academics choose paradigms that are more consistent with their underlying political beliefs.<sup>6</sup> However, my previous study could not separate economic ideology from a broader political preference for left and right and was therefore ill-suited to reveal the materialist egoism that is at the heart of rationalism.

I use the 2011 TRIP dataset, a cross-national survey of several thousand international relations scholars in numerous countries. It was designed and administered by scholars at the Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations at the College of William & Mary. The survey organizers compiled comprehensive lists of all faculty doing research in international relations or teaching courses on international relations or other topics that involved interactions across borders in all 10 countries. They were then solicited via email to participate in an online survey asking them about their teaching, research, and advocacy.<sup>7</sup> TRIP survey data indicate that those who work from the ontological premises of rationalism in their work are considerably more economically libertarian than those who do not. In other words, we see a logical connection between one's personal political beliefs and his or her vision of world politics.

The use of survey analysis is an unlikely move for a paper inspired by critical theory but a necessary one. My argument might be accepted as natural by critical theorists as they have been making these kinds of arguments for decades. However, they have not sought to adjudicate their claims with the hard data that rationalists are more likely to take seriously. If the field is divided into academic sects, as Lake maintains, I do not want to simply preach to the choir. And there is nothing about critical theory that precludes this type of analysis. On the contrary, I would maintain it *insists* on it. **TAQII**

The last section addresses the stakes, arguing that the lack of recognition by rationalists of their substantive commitments threatens the objectivity essential to their own epistemological standards, those of positivism. Just as is the case with other paradigms, assumptions potentially bias the interpretation of evidence and even the selection of what constitutes an interesting question. The fact that these assumptions are implicit, unacknowledged, and unrecognized by rationalists raises the level of concern even further. Here, I depart somewhat from the critical theory project. While I have personally taken on the important insight that all theory is subjective, even political, and that complete objectivity is impossible, I embrace the more pragmatic position that self-awareness of potential threats to objectivity makes for better theory than obliviousness to such a danger. I do not personally identify as either a critical theorist or a poststructuralist, but I have learned an important lesson from these approaches, the implication of which I draw out for rationalist theorizing.

To preempt the question of why I am focusing on rationalism's status as opposed to other approaches, it is not out of any hostility to the substantive claims of rationalists but rather because they are apparently the most resistant to seeing themselves as working within a paradigm (see below). I am emphatically *not* arguing that rationalism has little to contribute to the field of international relations or that it threatens to become hegemonic in particular subfields, the subject of previous controversies.<sup>8</sup> The paradigm I am trying to subvert is the view that rationalism is not an ism. I also do not consider whether rationalism meets some absolute standard for being an ism. Likely, none of the international relations isms meet the epistemological criteria of a paradigm more applicable to the natural sciences.<sup>9</sup> That does not negate the critique made by Lake and others of the potential downsides of isms, *which can be maintained whether IR isms meet the standard for paradigms or not*. The point is that in relative terms, rationalism is as much an ism as other approaches. If the use of other paradigms has significant downsides, even in their debilitated state, the same is true for rationalism, and the appropriate caution is therefore warranted.

Below, I use the terms 'paradigm' and 'ism' interchangeably. There is considerable variation in the discipline and in the philosophy of science as to what these terms mean.<sup>10</sup> Lest I be accused of conceptual sleight of hand, in establishing that rationalism is a paradigm I have chosen to use Lake's own understanding of the term, one as predominantly ontological (and not epistemological) in character. Isms are constituted by a unique set of core assumptions about the nature of world politics. These assumptions, in turn, are often incommensurate across traditions. They specify different units of analysis (individuals, groups, and states), varying interests of actors (wealth, power, and status), even different decision-making processes (logic of consequences vs. logic of appropriateness). Perhaps most importantly, they embody different visions of world politics as inherently conflictual, more cooperative, or the 'open' product of the actors' own actions. As in all research traditions, these assumptions define the boundaries of inquiry, what is 'known' and unknown, and even what questions and puzzles are 'worth asking'.<sup>11</sup> **FAQ2** Paradigms are theoretical worldviews that particular scholars embrace, and out of which they derive more precise theories about more specific phenomenon. At their worst, they might serve as theoretical ideologies about the way the world works.

## **Holier than thou: isms as religious faiths**

Lake's frustration with isms emerges out of a particular notion of how social science should proceed, what Patrick Thaddeus Jackson has recently called 'dualist'. It is marked by the 'drive for classical objectivity'.<sup>12</sup> Good scientific practices are those that better 'guarantee that knowledge of the world corresponds to the world itself; valid knowledge means mirroring the world, representing it accurately, and not ignoring any of its important and essential features'.<sup>13</sup> The virtues of the good academic are being even-handed and balanced, objective observers of what the data tell us. The social scientist is 'merely a neutral conduit for "the facts"'.<sup>14</sup>

Lake worries that paradigms interfere with the objectivity so precious to dualists by telling us the answers going in, guiding our selection of evidence and even telling adherents what constitutes an interesting question. 'Having adopted a tradition', he writes:

we then look only for evidence that affirms our prior belief in the rightness of that tradition. Practice becomes not an attempt to falsify theories through ever more demanding tests, but to support theories that were adopted prior to their confrontation with evidence.<sup>15</sup>

Lake complains that those who identify with paradigms or research traditions in international relations engage in 'self-affirming research and then wage theological debates between academic religions'.<sup>16</sup> Religion is, of course, in this formulation the opposite of objectivity as religious debates, as matters of faith, cannot be resolved by facts.

After diagnosing the field's ills, Lake claims to offer an effective alternative that avoids the pitfalls of present-day paradigms, 'to think of politics as composed of some actor pursuing interests while engaged in interactions with other actors within institutions'.<sup>17</sup> Such a 'lexicon' does not privilege any approach over another, he claims. In previous works, along with Robert Powell, Lake has articulated this 'strategic choice' approach, an attempt to create a unifying framework for rationalist advances in international relations.<sup>18</sup>

Rationalism is often maintained, by rationalists and even non-rationalists, to be non-paradigmatic in nature and by extension to avoid the problems of objectivity inherent to paradigms. Perhaps most prominently, Fearon and Wendt make the case for seeing rationalism and constructivism as something other than realism, liberalism, or other international relations traditions:

[R]ationalism seems to refer to a methodological approach that may imply a philosophical position on what social explanation is and how it ought to work, the nature of which is debated ... If the field does focus on rationalism versus constructivism, then the central debate in IR will not be about international relations but rather about how to study international relations.<sup>19</sup>

In this view, rationalism implies no substantive commitments or assumptions about the nature of world politics.

The organizers of the TRIP survey seem to agree. They ask respondents to self-identify with a paradigm, but they do not include rationalism as one of the options. Alongside realism, liberalism, and constructivism, other options such as Marxism, feminism, and the English School either are marginal to the field in terms of its overall composition or have shaky paradigmatic claims. Similarly, in the article database created by the TRIP project, there is no coding option for rationalist work. Articles, however, might be classified as formal in their methodology, and almost half (47%) of these pieces are classified as non-paradigmatic.

Although the 2011 TRIP survey does not specify rationalism as a paradigm, a separate question asks respondents whether they assume the rationality of actors in their research. A greater percentage (30.6%) of those who employ a rational choice framework in their work identify as non-paradigmatic than those whose work does not assume the rationality of actors (20.9%) or who take a position in the middle (22.9%). I refer to these three groups as hard rationalists, non-rationalists, and soft-rationalists below. The difference is highly statistically significant. Similarly, the same TRIP survey reveals that 70 percent of formal modelers identify as non-paradigmatic. They

assume strict rationality at a much higher level than the overall sample, 50 percent as compared to 7 percent.

There is therefore a clear relationship between assuming rationality and feeling like one is avoiding the isms altogether. Critical theorists are likely not surprised that international relations scholarship is marked by such subjective theorizing, which is in their view the unavoidable norm in social science. Although a diverse set of scholars, critical theorists share a common skepticism toward what they would regard as the prevailing pretense of objective understanding of international relations or any other social phenomena. Cox writes eloquently, 'All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space'.<sup>20</sup> Critical theory 'refuses the assumption of value neutrality or objectivity while remaining committed to a comprehensive research agenda', writes Shapcott.<sup>21</sup> Its 'major contribution ... was to question the idea of disinterested, value-free inquiry in the social science and to expose the unacknowledged ethical assumptions and inclination that inevitably shape both theoretical and empirical inquiry in international relations'.<sup>22</sup>

Theory is not only subjective, it is political, reflecting value and ethical judgments and even sometimes the interests of theorists, a theme in critical theory that comes out even more forcefully in poststructuralist work. Zehfuss writes of the latter:

Crucially, thinking about the world is a (political) practice; theories are part of the world they claim to elucidate and must be studied in their own right. As scholars are unable to stand apart from the world they study, their ways of making sense of the world are inevitably political.<sup>23</sup>

Burke writes that the prevailing positivism in international relations research 'privileges facts over values, reason over subjectivity, and truth over opinion, obscuring the presence of opinion in every claim to truth, of subjectivity in every claim to reason, and value judgments in every assertion of fact'.<sup>24</sup>

While critical theorists and poststructuralists would agree with Lake's observations about international relations theory, they would be more skeptical of Lake's solution. Just like any other body of theory, rationalists have substantive commitments that guide their choice of questions and answers which might be reflected in their political beliefs. In other words, rationalism is itself a paradigm and a subjective lens for looking at the world. The task is to 'examine and question claims and assumptions that may be taken for granted by others. Starting assumptions – particularly those that appear to be common sense – limit how we may think about an issue and therefore support particular solutions'.<sup>25</sup>

Below, I begin the process of interrogating Lake's claim to offer an alternative perspective on international affairs that avoids the subjectivity pitfalls of paradigms. As Cox argues, when any approach claims to offer an objective approach, the alarm rings louder:

There is ... no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and place. When any theory so represents itself, it is the more important to examine it as ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective.<sup>26</sup>

The paradigmatic nature of rationalism emerges in both a review of the works of its central theorists and an analysis of a textbook written by Lake along with Frieden and Schultz.<sup>27</sup>

## **Rationalism's substantive commitments: utilitarianism as an ism**

In order to identify the substantive commitments of rationalism, it is helpful to know who speaks for rationalism. By cherry-picking particular authors who identify as rationalists, we might be able to claim that rationalists believe in anything. Therefore, we pay particular attention to the works deemed most influential by rationalists themselves. These can be considered spokespersons for the approach. And, indeed, as we go through their work, we see a distinct ontology for looking at the world emerge.

Table 1 lists the 20 most influential international relations scholars over the last 20 years, as captured in the 2011 TRIP survey. Each survey subject can name up to four. 'Hard rationalists', those who employ a rational choice framework, have a very different view as to who have been the most influential international relations scholars over the last 20 years than non-rationalists and soft rationalists. Two figures are disproportionately represented in comparison to the non-rationalists (those who do not assume the rationality of actors) – Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and James Fearon. The ratio between the percentages of hard rationalist respondents who listed Fearon as compared to non-rationalist is 4.5 to 1; Bueno de Mesquita is even higher at 5.2 to 1. Bueno de Mesquita and Fearon are the only scholars represented more frequently among hard rationalists than the population as a whole. Somewhat ironically, there are major differences over the influence of the two authors who have made one of the strongest cases against rationalism and constructivism as opposing research traditions – Fearon and Wendt. The percentage of hard rationalist respondents who listed Alexander Wendt as a highly influential scholar is half of that of non-rationalist respondents, 27 percent as compared to 53 percent.

In the TRIP survey, respondents are also asked to identify four individuals who have done the most interesting work in the last 5 years. Among those who assume the rationality of actors in their work, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita is listed at #1, although he ranks #16 in the overall sample. James Fearon is ranked #2, although he ranks 11th in the overall sample. Bratislav Slantchev, David Lake, and Robert Powell round out the top five, although of these three only Lake is among the top 20 in the sample as a whole (at #12). The results are not an artifact of method either. Excluding formal theorists from the sample, the rankings remain the same. Fearon, Lake, and Bueno de Mesquita are in the top three among hard rationalists as to who has done the best work over the last 5 years.

We see a common thread in the work of these scholars deemed most influential and most talented by hard rationalists in the field: a focus on the factors of interests, institutions, information, and interactions. Lake and Powell's<sup>18</sup> 'strategic choice' approach fits hand and glove with Bueno de Mesquita's 'selectorate' theory of politics.<sup>28</sup> The latter's framework draws heavily on Fearon's<sup>29</sup> insights about how domestic institutions affect the ability of state's to signal their interests and the same's argument that war results from commitment and uncertainty problems given state incentives to misrepresent their true preferences.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 1.** Most influential international relations scholars by rationality assumption.

		I employ a rational choice framework ('Hard rationalist')	My work is broadly rationalist, but I do not employ a strict rational choice framework ('Soft rationalist')	My work does not assume the rationality of actors ('Non-rationalist')
Alexander Wendt		27	45	
Robert Keohane		35		36
Kenneth Waltz		22		25
Joseph Nye		21		17
John Mearsheimer		10		17
James Fearon			11	5
Samuel Huntington		10		10
Barry Buzan	8	8		
Robert Cox	8	4	6	
Bruce Bueno de Mesquita		17	5	3
Peter Katzenstein	7	1	7	
Robert Jervis	7	4	6	5
Stephen Walt	6	4	3	5
Bruce Russett	5	1		2
John Ikenberry	5	0	5	4
Martha Finnemore	5	0	5	5
Stephen Krasner	5	3		5
James Rosenau	4	2	4	4
John Ruggie	4	2	3	
Susan Strange	4	3	3	

TRIP: Teaching, Research, and International Policy

Table entries are percentage of each category, identifying individual scholars as among the four most influential of the last 20 years in the 2011 TRIP survey. Dark shading indicates that scholar is more frequently indicated among those in that particular column than in the population as a whole.

Rationalism is based on a particular micro-economic building block, the assumption of individualistic and egoistic actors seeking to maximize their personal interests, generally but not exclusively material in nature. Firms seek profits, leaders seek office, and militaries seek larger budgets. Benefits of different choices are weighed against costs in a utilitarian fashion.<sup>30</sup> While at first glance the claim seems obvious, indisputable, perhaps even banal, from this assumption rationalists are able to develop a distinct vision of what international politics looks like that directly challenges other approaches in international relations.

While rationalists might make use of social aggregates larger than the individual, this is an analytical convenience rather than an ontological assumption. Keohane's 'neoliberal institutionalism' assumed states as unitary actors not because it was empirically plausible but explicitly because he wanted to critique structural realism on its own terms.<sup>31</sup> Subsequent generations of scholars, often supervised by Keohane himself, dropped this assumption. Lake and Powell explain that 'where one cuts into



this aggregation of social actors is a function of the purposes and limitations of the author'.<sup>32</sup> As against realism, which posits the existence of a state that safeguards the national interest, rationalists such as Bueno de Mesquita consistently stress, instead, that what is good for leaders is often not what is good for citizens, contrasting this with the typical realist approach. They are unsurprised therefore that when elites are faced with a choice as to what preserves their leadership tenure and what maintains security, they favor the former. Of democratically elected leaders, Bueno de Mesquita writes that their behavior is unique only in so far as they 'less likely to do better by making their citizenry miserable than they are by improving their citizenry's quality of life'.<sup>33</sup> As against constructivism, it makes sense to speak of social aggregates only to the degree that common interests bind them together. Rationalism presupposes an anomic world without any social glue. While factors such as nationalism, morality, and identity might, of course, in theory be incorporated in a utility function, in practice such arguments are almost impossible to find in international relations rationalism. I consider rationalism's contrast with realism and other 'rationalist' approaches like liberalism further below.

The assumption of largely egoistic, individualistic, and utilitarian actors gives rise naturally to the question: with all of these competing micro-level actors, whose interests ultimately prevail? Rationalists provide two answers to this question – institutions and interactions.

Institutions provide advantages to certain interests over others.<sup>34</sup> The classic example is rent-seeking behavior by protectionist interests with privileged access to the policy-making process. Although free trade is in the public's interest, ordinary incentives have less of an incentive and ability to effectively lobby on behalf of their concerns.<sup>35</sup> Rationalists point over and over to foreign policies and international outcomes that might not benefit the aggregate wholly. **[AQ3]** This reinforces their implicit point about the atomistic, egoistic, and individualist nature of politics.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that, consistent with rationalism's anomic ontology, domestic institutions have no social or normative content. They are simple rules for aggregating preferences – no more, no less.

Since the choices of others often affect political actors' ability to get what they want, individualistic units interact with one another strategically, making judgments in situations of incomplete information as to the preferences, strategies, and power of others.<sup>37</sup> As those with whom they are interacting are self-serving, egoistic actors like themselves, individual units must constantly guard against opportunism. It is presumed that in strategic settings, egoistic actors must assume that other actors are egoistic, ready to defect at a moment's notice when interests dictate with no compunction.

Cooperation is possible in rationalism but it is a function of mutual self-interest. Others are simply means to an ends in rationalist work. As a consequence, units must guard against opportunism. Where there are incentives to defect, cooperation is facilitated either by adjusting features of the situation to make cooperation in the self-interest of the units or by making defection more visible. This is the common denominator linking rationalists' preferred variables for explaining durable cooperation – concern for reputation, issue linkage, small numbers of partners, monitoring, and iteration. By raising the costs of defection or the likelihood of getting caught, cooperation becomes more likely.<sup>38</sup> International institutions are useful in this regard.<sup>39</sup>

Rationalists neglect other mechanisms that might allow for cooperation, however. Rationalism does not allow for a feeling of social obligation based on a notion of what is morally right or wrong.<sup>40</sup> Nor does it allow for deeper feelings of trust based on something other than shared self-interest. In rationalism, states or other political actors trust when they have credible evidence that convinces them that others do not have a self-interested incentive to defect.<sup>41</sup> This is undoubtedly an important mechanism. However, there are other notions of trust that rationalists do not pay attention to, such as the perception of others as intrinsically honest, what is called 'moralistic trust'.<sup>42</sup> Moralistic trust does not have an evidentiary basis; it is not grounded in information.

As institutions play such an important role in determining whose interests are represented, they are themselves the subject of political contestation and strategic interaction. Political actors seek to rationally design institutions in such a way that makes it most likely that their interests will prevail.<sup>43</sup> This is true at both the domestic and the international levels. However, institutions come with their own dilemmas of opportunism, the main concern of principal-agent theories of institutions.<sup>44</sup> Decision-makers in institutions, particularly international organizations, might have their own parochial interests that diverge from those whose interests they are supposed to represent.

While this review has focused on rationalist insights into security affairs, an identical set of arguments are used in international political economy (IPE), where what Lake calls 'open economy politics' has become practically hegemonic, leading to consternation on the part of scholars with other theoretical orientations.<sup>45</sup> As Lake describes it, 'OEP begins with sets of individuals – firms, sectors, factors of production – that can be reasonably assumed to share (nearly) identical interests'. These interests are derived 'from the distributional implications of different economic policies, which in turn follow from how a unit is located relative to others in the international economy'. The next step is to select among these micro-level interests. 'After specifying the interests of differing units, OEP turns to how these interests are aggregated through domestic political institutions'. Finally, 'OEP then understands states as bargaining to influence one another's behavior and, in turn, the joint outcome of their interactions'.<sup>46</sup>

## **A textbook case of a paradigm: Frieden, Lake, and Schultz's *World Politics***

In his cautionary article on the evils of isms, Lake makes reference to his textbook with Jeffry Frieden and Kenneth Schultz as capturing his non-paradigmatic, analytically eclectic alternative, avoiding 'sectarian debates' and focusing on 'substantive topics'.<sup>47</sup> Entitled *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, Institutions*, it is based on the same solution to the paradigmatic problem he offers in his ISA address.<sup>48</sup> Lake argues that his framework 'does not ... privilege one tradition over another ... There is nothing inherently rationalist or constructivist, realist or Marxist ... about this set of categories'.<sup>49</sup> However, we see the selective attention in, both questions and answers, in their book.

The textbook does, indeed, avoid sectarian debates but precisely by *not* offering alternative accounts of prominent international relations phenomena other than the

rationalist. Every chapter presents political actors as primarily interested in private, individualist gains. A subsection called 'What Do Leaders Want?' in a chapter on 'Domestic Politics and War' begins: 'The leaders of states are not solely, *if at all*, statesmen or stateswomen looking out for the best interests of the nation'.<sup>50</sup> The rest of the chapter is devoted to the office-seeking motivations of political actors, followed by sections on diversionary war and how the parochial interests of the military and interest groups might lead to wars even if they are not in the overall interests of a country.

War is undoubtedly the most studied aspect of international relations, with potentially dozens of potential causes. Yet Frieden, Lake, and Schultz's chapter, 'Why Are There Wars?' presents only Fearon's rationalist bargaining model of war. War, as is stated, results from an information problem and a commitment problem. There is no mention of nationalism, misperception, ignorance, or the social construction of others as enemies that one finds in almost any other textbook of international relations.

The rationalist paradigm also affects the very definition of the questions to be answered. The textbook is predominantly concerned with suboptimal outcomes that emerge from collective action problems. This is true of war, international pollution, international development, and trade policy. The globe would benefit from comprehensive cooperation on environmental quality, yet the global commons is bedeviled by problems of free-riding and compliance due to a lack of effective monitoring. Polluters get their way because they have more focused interests and political power. Free trade would increase the aggregate welfare, yet protectionism is common due to the power of rent-seeking groups who benefit from closed markets. These are undoubtedly important phenomena but they are hardly the totality of international politics. They are, however, what rationalists tend to focus on.

Even the chapter on why states sign human rights agreements devotes only one page to moral and philosophical motivations as compared to two pages on self-interest motivations, such as the efforts by labor unions in advanced industrialized countries to raise the wages of workers in poorer countries, thus, reestablishing their competitiveness. The point of, course, is not that such self-interested motivations exist, as they surely do. But they are presented unproblematically and without evidentiary basis as the primary aspect of international politics.

In those few instances, such as suicide bombing, in which behavior that does not conform to an individualistic, rationalist ontology is mentioned, it is regarded as puzzling. The authors write:

It is true that we do not currently possess good explanations for why any particular individual chooses to become a terrorist or a suicide bomber. After all, the sacrifice of one's own life seems a high price to pay for any cause.

Their response, however, reveals their implicit ontology. 'However, we also lack complete explanations for why an individual man or woman may voluntarily choose to join a national military and go into battle to risk death for his or her country'.<sup>51</sup> Do we, however, lack a complete explanation for these individual acts? Only if we regard individuals as atomistic and anomic actors does this behavior perplex. Rationalism, as a paradigm, blinds as much as any other.

## **Nothing Neo under the sun: rationalism as distinct from liberalism and realism**

Even if we accept that rationalism is, indeed, marked by a distinct ontology, one might argue that it is simply a broader category that incorporates other paradigms regarded as rationalist, such as realism and liberalism. If rationalism is just a broader category that encompasses both of these two approaches, it lends credence to understanding rationalism as a meta-approach without any specific substantive content.

This was the initial framing of the rationalist-constructivist divide, which lumped neoliberalism and neorealism together as utilitarian and consequentialist.<sup>52</sup> Critical theorists equated neorealism with utilitarianism, which I have called rationalism.<sup>53</sup> This distinctiveness criterion is the one used by Legro and Moravcsik to challenge the paradigmatic status of realism. Indeed, many equate rationalism, at least those rationalist theories that assume unitary actors, with realism.<sup>54</sup> Fearon argues that his rationalist explanation for war is equivalent to a neorealist theory of war, for instance.<sup>55</sup> Rational deterrence theory is often argued, mistakenly, to be neorealist in character simply based on its focus on force and the (former) assumption of unitary actors. Many neorealists self-consciously assume the instrumental rationality and utilitarian behavior of states.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, liberalism and rationalism are often used interchangeably owing to a common tendency to disaggregate state actors. Lake notes the self-identification of most American IPE scholars as liberal.<sup>57</sup>

Rationalism is, however, quite distinct from realism, even if the lines are not completely bright. This is true even of rationalist work that, for convenience, assumes unitary actors. Consider the work of two enormous figures in rationalist theorizing, both of whom have made influential critiques of realist thinking even while retaining the analytical assumption of the unitary actor. Whereas realists have historically argued that the balance of power is the most important determinant of outcomes, the simple notion that states make a cost-benefit calculation in determining whether to use force alerts us to the possibility that highly resolved states might knowingly enter into a conflict with poor odds, provided they highly value the gains from winning enough.<sup>58</sup> Without formal proof or empirical evidence, Schelling captured the logic of this distinction earlier that international relations amounted to as much or more a test of will than a test of strength.<sup>59</sup> As Fearon empirically shows, this opens up the possibility that weaker states, by escalating a crisis, might demonstrate their resolve in a way that powerful countries cannot.<sup>60</sup> In terms of card games, realists think of international relations as a game of 'war', and rationalists as a game of poker.

A strong case can be made that realism, even structural realism, is not based on rational decision making at all. A number of IR scholars note that neorealists believe that states make 'possibilistic' judgments, assuming the worst, rather than 'probabilistic' ones in which they weight the alternative costs and benefits of cooperation and competition based on credible information, as rationalists maintain.<sup>61</sup> This distinction is at the heart of the original rationalist-realist debate between 'neoliberal institutionalists' and neorealists. If states operate in a possibilistic mindset, they will always be more concerned about relative than absolute gains as the former might be used against them.

Glaser and Kydd have recently made arguments critiquing realism for its non-rationalist bases. The supposedly utilitarian neorealism implicitly supposes

a decision-making logic biased against information conveying benign intentions. In offering his rationalist alternative to realism, Glaser criticizes this 'competition bias' in neorealism.<sup>62</sup> Instead, a rational, security-seeking state 'should be interested not only in being capable of defending itself, but also in increasing its adversary's security' because this is in their own self-interest.<sup>63</sup> A truly rational actor will weigh the costs of potential conflict against the benefits of more conciliatory strategies. Sometimes, demonstrating trustworthy and cooperative intentions through costly gestures of reassurance is as important (and more rational) than signaling resolve. Similarly, in offering his own Bayesian realist approach, Kydd's issue with realism is that it is not rationalist enough. In contrast to realism, he maintains that '*rational* security seeking states can reassure each other and cooperate ... Contrary to defensive realism ... Bayesian analysis does not reveal an inherent tendency towards unjustified mistrust in international relations'.<sup>64</sup> In other words, in rationalism, states make probabilistic rather than possibilistic judgments. They can update their beliefs and make decisions on a case-by-case basis, rather than always assuming the worst. Both authors contrast their approach with both offensive *and* defensive realism.

The contrast between rationalists and realists persists even when realists and rationalists drop the convenience of the unitary actor assumption. 'Neoclassical' realists open up the black box and grapple with the role played by societal interests in the formulation of foreign policy. They nevertheless maintain an ontological commitment to the existence of the state as something more than the simple aggregation of the interests of societal actors (Rathbun 2008; Rose 1998). **[AQ4]** The state is more than a vessel. It is the perspicacious and sagacious agent of a country's true interests, which are threatened by subjective biases and parochial interests. Christensen argues that the state needs the backing of public opinion and therefore might be forced to mislead average citizens by trumping up ideological and nationalist reasons in order to mobilize support for what are inevitable confrontations driven by structural circumstances.<sup>65</sup> But the state is a genuine ontological entity looking out for the state's interests. The public, short-sighted and uninformed, is simply not up to the task. This is a decided contrast to a rationalist approach in which elites routinely take advantage of the public's lack of attention or expertise to pursue private ends.

There are instances when private interests might 'hijack' the state, leading to suboptimal foreign policy outcomes for the country as a whole. However, the very term suggests that there is something to seize in the first place, an institution with social content that looks after the nation-state's actual interests (Snyder 1991). What for realists is a pathology that needs an explanation is normal politics for rationalists.

What about liberalism? Like rationalism, liberalism is regarded as a 'bottom-up' approach of interest aggregation that disaggregates the state, whether into bureaucracies, parties, or branches of government.<sup>66</sup> Moravcsik has offered a way of understanding the liberal paradigm that seems to be very similar to the notion of rationalism sketched above.<sup>67</sup> In a three-fold 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 through the same bottom-up process. This is partially the way by which articles are categorized



rationalism, in practice, is overwhelmingly focused on the personal accumulation of power and/or profits.

Both economic libertarians and rationalist IR scholars think about politics in atomistic terms. Libertarians have an ethics and set of values that parallel closely the ontology of rationalism, as shown in pioneering work by Iyer et al.<sup>77</sup> Libertarians have been found to score low on moral foundations of concern for others. They are low in moral idealism, such as altruism. However, they also eschew in-group identity, respect for authority, and other moral foundations typical of social conservatives that serve to bind individuals together in groups. Libertarians, instead, value personal autonomy, captured in values such as hedonism and stimulation. Indeed, they are self-consciously amoral; more than others they do not describe moral traits as being relevant to describing themselves. Libertarians' cognitive style is less hot and emotional and more deliberative and cold. They have been found to weigh ethical decisions in utilitarian terms in a way that others do not, such as by pushing an individual on the tracks to save others in the 'trolley car dilemma'. Even in their personal lives, social relationships play less of a role in their subjective well-being.

This is the perfect parallel to the rationalist ontology of international relations. Rationalists paint a picture of the world composed of economic libertarians free from social constraints. It is important, here, to distinguish between libertarians and liberals. Dworkin famously distinguishes between liberalism's 'liberty as independence', which stresses the belief that individuals should be autonomous because they are entitled to equal concern and respect, and libertarianism's 'liberty as license', in which individuals are given the maximum possible free reign from social and legal constraints. The latter is the unbridled individualism that many argue leads to rampant egoism, particularly in the economic sphere. 'In this neutral, all embracing sense of liberty as license, liberty, and equality are plainly in competition. Laws are needed to protect equality, and laws are inevitably compromises of liberty'.<sup>78</sup>

The 2011 TRIP survey asked respondents to identify their political orientation on two dimensions of issues – social and economic. Academics in the United States were asked to place themselves on a seven-point liberal-conservative spectrum and those from other countries on a seven-point 'left-right' spectrum. Higher scores indicate more libertarian that is more economically conservative or right-leaning views. Table 2 shows that the American mean on the economic scale was 2.9, with a standard deviation of 1.5. Those respondents who utilized a hard rational choice approach, however, were a full point higher, with a mean of 4. Soft rationalists (3.1) were also considerably more economically conservative than non-rationalists (2.6), although not as economically conservative as harder rationalists. F-tests in an analysis of variance all demonstrate very high statistical significance ( $p < .0001$ ) between the economic ideology scores between all of the three categories of rationality, indicating these are meaningful differences, not a function of pure chance given the selection of a particular sample. Formal theorists are also considerably more economically conservative than those who employ other methodologies less tied to the rationality assumption. Formal theorists have a mean economic ideology of 3.9, compared to 2.9 for those who do not use modeling in their work.<sup>79</sup>

**Table 2.** Economic ideology and the rationality assumption.

	All	Mean economic ideology score		
		Non-rationalist	Soft rationalist	Hard rationalist
United States	2.9	2.6	3.1	4.0
	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.6
	1340	570	665	90
Australia	1.2	2.7	3.8	3.3
	1.4	1.2	1.4	2.3
	132	80	47	3
Brazil	2.3	3.2	3.3	3.4
	1.0	.9	1.2	.7
	158	62	67	25
Great Britain	2.8	2.7	3.0	3.8
	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.4
	328	219	96	10
Mexico	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.8
	1.0	1.0	1.0	.7
	93	28	56	8
Turkey	3.4	3.3	3.5	3.8
	1.1	1.3	.9	1.2
	175	53	97	20

Table entries are mean ideology scores followed by standard deviation and number of respondents. Ideology is measured on a seven-point scale from liberal to conservative for respondents in the United States, from far left to far right for respondents outside the United States.

Rationalists are hardly Tea Party conservatives. They are middle of the road on economic issues. However, they are distinctly more economically conservative than the general population of IR academics. Considering that IR scholars cluster so heavily toward the left, the full point difference between non-rationalists and hard rationalists is all the more striking. We must also consider a likely response bias, that given the prevailing political norms of the academy economic conservatives are likely to underreport the degree to which they identify with the economic right.

This is not just an American (or North American) phenomenon, although it is more pronounced in the United States. Table 2 also presents the results for other countries and finds the same general pattern for countries with more than 100 respondents. For reasons of scaling, we cannot simply lump together the non-American respondents. What it means to be, for instance, on the hard left in one country is not the same as in another. While this is not definitive proof of a distinct set of political views consistent with a rationalist ontology, it is surely suggestive. The author cannot think of another set of factors that might lead to such an association.

Are these results statistically significant, particularly after we control for other possible variables? Table 3 presents the results of a multinomial logit model in which we can estimate the precise effect of economic ideology on rationalist assumptions. This type of analysis is used when the dependent variable is categorical and nominal in



nature that is best thought of in qualitative (and not quantitative) terms. The analysis included other variables that might influence the rationality assumption, such as the use of formal modeling, association with a typically rationalist paradigm such as liberalism or realism, the use of ideational variables, the use of quantitative methods, preference for basic or applied research, positivistic epistemology, and an IPE research focus. It is restricted to American-based respondents for scaling reasons. We find that self-identified realists and liberals are more likely to identify as rationalists, whereas Marxists and feminists are not. Having an IPE focus and working with quantitative and formal methods is also associated with rationalist identification, although, of course, we cannot say anything about the causal direction.

More importantly, for our purposes, the positive and highly significant coefficients show that an increase in economic libertarianism is highly associated with greater identification with both soft and hard rationalist assumptions in research, as compared to not assuming rationality at all. The latter forms the base category, or the comparison group in this multinomial analysis, for each column. When that base category is changed to hard rationalism, increases in economic libertarianism make one more likely to be a hard rationalist than a soft rationalist (results not displayed,  $p = .003$ ). Social liberalism, in contrast, does not drive the results in the same way. These latter coefficients do not meet the standard threshold for statistical significance of  $p < .05$ . It is materialist individualism that defines rationalists.

It might be argued that the results indicate not that rationalists are considerably more economically conservative but rather that non-rationalists are particularly left-wing and extremist on economic issues. However, the analysis controls for a number of factors such as identification with Marxist and feminist research paradigms and a preference for post-positivism, which takes a more activist and emancipatory approach to international relations scholarship, generally in an egalitarian direction.<sup>42</sup> And there are important differences not only between non-rationalists and rationalists as a whole but also among rationalists. Hard rationalists are more economically libertarian than soft rationalists.

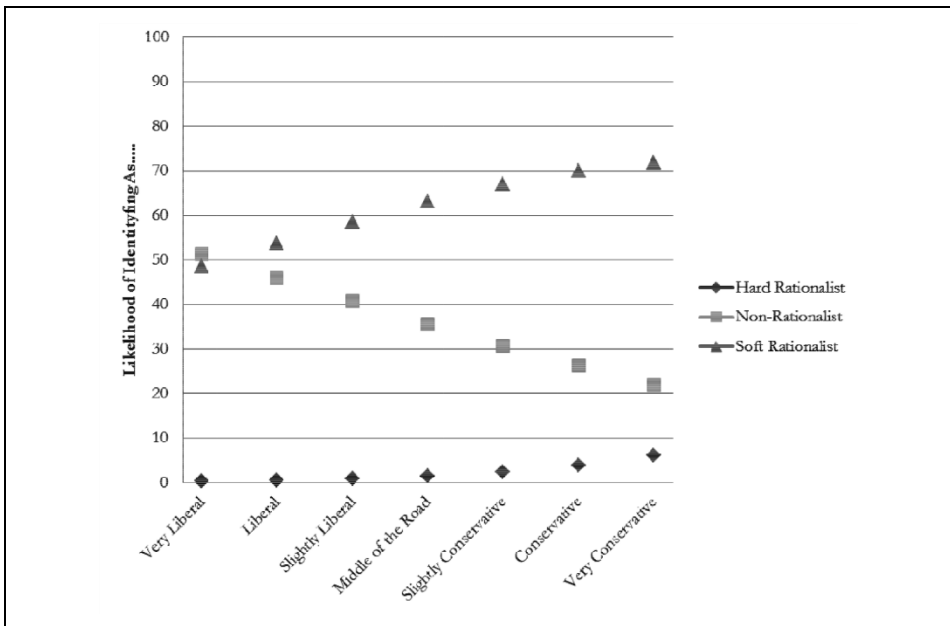
The size of the effect of ideology is difficult to assess in the coefficients of this multinomial logit models. So as to better understand the substantive effects, Figure 1 presents the predicted probabilities of making certain assumptions regarding rationality in one's research based on one's economic ideology score and on the coefficients calculated in Table 3.<sup>80</sup> The predicted probabilities show that as one moves from the extreme liberal end of the economic ideology spectrum to the extreme conservative side, the chance of identifying as a hard rationalist increases from just .3 percent (less than a third of a percent) to over 6.1 percent, a 20-fold increase. We also see a steady increase in the likelihood of being a soft rationalist as one becomes more economically libertarian, from 48 percent to 72 percent from the far left to the far right of the economic spectrum. The likelihood of being a non-rationalist, in contrast, declines from 51 percent to 22 percent from the economic left to the economic right. There is a distinct difference between the economic ideology of non-rationalists, on one hand, and both soft and hard rationalists, on the other. The results are not just driven by a narrow subset of hard rationalist respondents.

**Table 3.** Effect of economic ideology on rationality assumption.

	Soft rationalist vs. non-rationalist	Hard rationalist vs. non-rationalist
Economic ideology	.21*** (.07)	.64*** (.13)
Social ideology	-.14# (.08)	-.22 (.14)
Realist	1.61*** (.26)	1.80*** (.44)
Liberal	1.17*** (.21)	.39 (.43)
Marxism	.15 (.53)	-13.15*** (.94)
Feminism	-1.42 (.92)	-12.60*** (.76)
Quantitative methods	1.02*** (.23)	2.12*** (.38)
Formal theory	.17 (.70)	3.55*** (.82)
Positivist	1.70*** (.21)	1.35* (.56)
Post-positivist	.35 (.24)	-.64 (.86)
Ideational	-.26 (.24)	-1.39*** (.37)
Basic vs. applied	-.06 (.06)	-.40* (.16)
IPE research focus	.41 (.26)	1.01* (.41)
Constant	-1.48	-3.63
	Wald chi-squared	1199.68
	Pseudo R-squared	.26
	N	970

IPE: international political economy.

Table entries are multinomial logit coefficients with non-rationality as the base category for the dependent variable. Realist, liberal, Marxist, feminist, use of quantitative methods, use of formal theory, ideational, and IPE research focus are dummy variables. Basic versus applied is based on a five-point scale. For epistemology, non-positivist is the excluded category. Economic and social ideologies are based on a seven-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, \*p < .05, #p < .10.



**Figure 1.** [AQS] Predicted probabilities of rationalists assumptions by economic ideology.

It might be, however, that the arrow is reversed. The embrace of rationalist assumptions in one's work might drive economic ideology, rather than the reverse. This might be the case but, of course, it would not solve the problem. It would still indicate that rationalists have a cross-domain perspective that informs both their politics and their scholarship – that is, they share an ism.

## **Rationalism's epistemological commitments: practicing what they preach**

Having argued that rationalists have distinct substantive and ontological commitments in a way that is true of practitioners of other isms, the question remains as to what negative effect this might have on international relations scholarship. I argue that the threat is to the practice of good social science as rationalists themselves see it. Dualism is certainly an important element of positivism, and rationalists are overwhelmingly positivist in their orientation. Three quarters of hard rationalists in the 2011 TRIP survey identify as positivists compared to 39 percent in the sample as a whole and 25 percent of non-rationalists. The problem is that Lake and other rationalists decry the lack of objectivity of IR paradigms yet advance their own. In Burke's wonderful phrase, 'Your paradigm is killing you'.<sup>81</sup>

These blind spots are particularly worrisome as they affect even those who should be most attentive to them. Our unrecognized prejudices are perhaps more dangerous than our acknowledged ones precisely because they have become reified, taken for granted, and unquestioned. To his great credit, Lake has recently been moving away from a strict rationalist approach in his own research, pointing out the weaknesses of bargaining theories of war and the importance of moral values in the creation of foreign policy preferences.<sup>82</sup> This article is a call for others to do the same.

Rationalism's claim to purely objective, non-paradigmatic theorizing becomes even more potentially pernicious to the extent that others unwittingly believe it. If rationalism is understood as non-paradigmatic, and non-paradigmatic is increasingly considered a good thing (as the TRIP survey indicates), its value as an approach increases. It attracts new adherents, who come to use what are marketed simply as 'tools', which, in turn, structure their very view of the world. Rationalism's putative objectivity thereby serves ironically to increase subjectivity in the field as a whole.

In this way, although inspired by poststructuralist and critical thinking, I do not walk the entire way with them. Critical theorists deny a 'view from nowhere', an objective platform from which to survey the environment independent of values, biases, and interests.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, in Murphy's words, I 'abandon the *strictest* version of the ontological assumption of a world independent of the knower', yet nevertheless maintain that a greater effort at objectivity certainly makes for a better understanding of international relations than no effort at all.<sup>84</sup> How much so, we cannot be sure. Fearon and Wendt write that there is always 'danger ... that analytical assumptions will become tacit empirical ones, but given sufficient methodological self-consciousness this problem can be avoided'.<sup>85</sup> Avoided, almost certainly not, but perhaps ameliorated. This is surely a pragmatic approach based on a belief that paradigms are not going anywhere soon. If isms are indeed evil, then they are like drugs, gambling, or other

vices that is probably impossible to extinguish. Therefore, it is best that their use is out in the open, well labeled, and tightly monitored.

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74. Ravi Iyer, Spassena Koleva, Jesse Graham, Peter Ditto and Jonathan Haidt, 'Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians', *PLoS ONE*, 7(8), 2012, p. e42366.
75. Of those who do not adopt a rationality assumption in their work, 93 percent claim to make use of 'ideational factors (such as culture, perceptions, ideology, and beliefs)'. That number decreases to 54 percent among those who adopt a hard rationalist assumption. In terms of articles, 92 percent of international relations articles are classified as materially oriented in the TRIP database. Formal work is almost completely material with only 3 percent of articles using modeling judged as non-material. While 44 percent of international relations articles in the sample are classified as ideational, only 16 percent of formal work meets that standard. Articles can be both material and ideational in character.
76. Fearon and Wendt, 'Rationalism vs. Constructivism ', p. 59; Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics*, p. 9.
77. Iyer et al., 'Understanding Libertarian Morality'.
78. Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).
79. It is perhaps the case that the results are being driven by realist respondents. Previous work has indicated that realists are the most conservative of international relations academics (Rathbun, 'Politics and Paradigm Preferences'). Realists often identify as rationalists. Excluding realist respondents, however, does not change the results. Non-realist hard rationalists have a marginally lower economic conservative score, a mean of 3.9, and this is still noticeably different than the non-rationalist mean of 2.5 and the soft rationalist mean of 2.9. The difference is still pronounced, and the results are equally statistically significant.

80. Using *Clarify*. Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberg and Gary King, 'CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results', *Journal of Statistical Software*, 8, 2003. **[AQ7]**
81. Burke, 'Postmodernism', p. 359.
82. David A. Lake, 'Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War', *International Security*, 35(3), 2010, pp. 7-52; David Lindsey and David Lake, 'The Moral Foundations of Individual-Level Foreign Policy Preferences' (Unpublished Manuscript, 2014).
83. Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Looking Back from Somewhere: Reflections on what Remains "Critical" in Critical Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 33(S1), 2007, pp. 25-45. I recognize that critical theorists remain somewhat conflicted by this conclusion given their commitment to reasoned dialogue, something which distinguishes them from poststructuralists.
84. Craig N. Murphy, 'The Promise of Critical IR, Partially Kept', *Review of International Studies*, 33(S1), 2007, p. 120.
85. Fearon and Wendt, 'Rationalism vs. Constructivism', p. 52.

### Author biography **[AQ8]**