
International Relations Theory: Future Prospects

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Abstract

The field of International Relations (IR) is full of various ‘isms’, which some scholars find problematic. They suggest that IR theory should focus on issues instead. This essay examines this suggestion and argues that it fails to take into consideration the contemporary condition, which is marked by diversity and heterogeneity, requiring different ‘isms’ to voice their concerns.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY: FUTURE PROSPECTS

I

David A Lake complains that the contemporary International Relations (IR) scholarship fragments into ‘academic sects’ which does more harm than good (Lake 2011, 465-6). According to him, therefore, the IR scholarship should organize ‘around problems not academic sects’; that the scholarship should ‘focus on what we have in common, not what makes us distinct’ (Lake 2011, 474). He further claims that ‘it is the only way forward’ if we were to be regarded as one field of inquiry (Lake 2011, 474).

If we follow Lake’s prophetic suggestions, IR disciplines should evolve a common lexicon. Academic sectarianism, as he puts it, is nothing more than reflections of ‘our own internal political struggles’, which should give way to ‘interests, interactions, and institutions’ – the core ideas which make the discipline (Lake 2011, 465, 466). At stake here is the status of IR as a

discipline. If we endorse Lake (2011), IR discipline risks trivializing its subject matter, that is, politics. In this article, I attempt to show why Lake's suggestion is neither desirable nor feasible and that a superior alternative to his 'the only way forward' proposal is possible.

While making his claims, Lake ignores the contemporary human condition. The contemporary world is characterized by diversity, plurality and multi-locality – of ideas, practices, political cultures and conceptions of good life. Politics is an activity for making arrangements to live as social groups despite differences and disagreements. Lake's 'the only way forward' proposal would clearly design an IR discipline that would be oblivious to the contemporary fact of human life. His advocacy, if realized, would depoliticize IR discipline, and create a gulf between theory and practice. For this reason, his proposal is not desirable.

Lake's suggestion is not feasible either. For him, the academic sects act as the 'enforcers of purity' (Lake 2011, 472). He disagrees with the academic sects – 'the status quo' – over the future state of IR unambiguously. Yet it is also clear that the realization of his suggestion depends upon the acceptance of his proposition by other scholars. IR scholarship is a collective enterprise; each member has a stake in its future. Lake must confront a paradox: he disagrees with those who he thinks should agree with him. Evidently, his proposal will require a reasonable justification for others to agree with him.

To solicit cooperation of the scholars, Lake does issue an appeal as he feels that the competition between different 'isms' makes everyone's pursuit of inquiry incomplete and that everyone would be better off simply by cooperating (Lake 2011, 471). By contrast, I will argue that Lake's social cooperation argument fails because it does not fulfil the conditions for its success. A social cooperation scheme requires a prior conception of a social common good along with a scheme which makes everyone better off if all cooperated. Lake's formulation presents an understanding of social common good only. Lake also ignores the plural fact of human life where disagreements are common. A superior alternative to Lake's proposal can be achieved by accepting this as the central premise. The alternative I propose will take into account the plural

and diverse theories of IR; it will also establish conversation across academic sects which Lake believes, eludes IR discipline at present.

I discuss next why Lake's (2011) proposal is not feasible. Subsequently, I also suggest an alternative that is superior to Lake's.

II

Humans are rational, thinking beings. They disagree over what they believe to be true. This is true of IR scholarship as well. According to Lake, IR scholars treat the theories as if they embody 'universal truth and virtue' (Lake 2011, 466-7). The followers of a theoretical tradition claims that all problems could be answered by it alone, as if this were some sort of a war. This begs the question. If the academic sects engage in 'self-affirming research', and have 'formed mutually exclusive churches' (Lake 2011, 465-466), why will they cooperate for the 'common good' or 'the only way forward' that Lake proposes?

On my understanding, Lake treats the IR scholarly community as a system of social cooperation where every member must contribute her share for realizing a 'common good'. This is clear through his appeal to the academic community to cooperate (Lake 2011, 471). Lake's argument is similar to the one presented by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (2005 [1971]). Rawls conceives domestic society as a social cooperation arrangement where each member endorses the social common good of realizing the principles of justice. In a fair way, members also accept the benefits and burdens of cooperation.

A social cooperation argument, thus, presupposes the social common good in advance, expects the rational members of a society to accept this as their own conceptions of good and contribute their fair share to realize the good. The success of a social cooperation arrangement depends on partial contributions by each member. Lake clearly shares this view. At one point he likens the works of IR scholars to seeing truth only partially and hopes that by 'pooling our knowledge of different parts, we might then be able to describe the whole animal more effectively' (Lake 2011, 472).

Note that in Lake's formulation, the common good is the 'animal' that needs to be understood. This is a known prior fact for which social cooperation should be solicited. Cooperation is necessitated because Lake believes that the various 'academic sects' offer only partial understanding. Rawls demonstrates that it is possible to achieve social cooperation of this sort if rational individuals negotiate behind a 'veil of ignorance'. That is, if only the rational individuals are made unaware of their position in society, their privileges or status, that a cooperation of this order is possible. In Lake's formulation, however, no such notice qualification can be noticed.

Lake's rational individuals or the IR scholars comprise those who have formed 'academic sects', act as professional gatekeepers, and have developed vested interests in the present order (Lake 2011, 472). This means that the rational individuals in Lake's social cooperation scheme are privy to information which they should have been unaware of. It is highly suspect that the IR scholars, as rational beings, would give up their privileges to realize a common social good at Lake's appeal. Since Lake's social cooperation scheme does not satisfy the conditions of its realization, it is safe to conclude that his scheme will not succeed.

However, if Lake (2011) reformulates his position by recognizing the distinctiveness of different theoretical traditions, a cooperation of this order might still be possible. Conversation across the academic sects could still be a possibility without the mandatory use of Lake's proposed common lexicon.

Consider that Lake (2011) understands the academic sects as 'comprehensive doctrines'. That is, according to him, the academic sects claim to embody 'universal truth and justice'; the academic sects 'wage theological debates among academic religions' when they assert their universality and superiority; the academic sects wish for dominance (Lake 2011, 466-471). Academic sects represent the plural fact of contemporary existence, holding incompatible assumptions considering them as true. It is useful, therefore, to recognize this as the central premise for generating an IR for the future.

In *Political Liberalism* (1996 [1993]), Rawls tells us that ‘overlapping consensus’ is possible with mutually exclusive comprehensive doctrines also. It is possible, Rawls suggests, to achieve tolerance among academic sects their disagreements notwithstanding. What we require to do is to accord equal positive status to each ‘academic sect’, provided each sect would accord a similar treatment to another. Implicitly, this means that the rational actors should also be reasonable. That is, no one should impose her conception of the good on others. Given the fact of contemporary plural human existence, consensus will emerge from negotiation, debate and compromise.

The ‘overlapping consensus’ approach has benefits that Lake’s original proposal lacks. It’s starting point is the existing fact of diversity of theories; it seeks to integrate the theories without compromising their distinctiveness. On the other hand, Lake’s proposal to ‘standardize theories’ through a common lexicon aims at their assimilation. Where the alternative approach seeks to build consensus through deliberation and debate by recognizing the contributions of each theory, Lake’s original proposal seeks to privilege ‘the only way forward’ conception of the future of IR.

The future of IR as a discipline can only be built upon a premise that values its present. A projection of the future that is divorced from the contemporary reality is utopian. Lake seems to be projecting precisely this kind of an image. In short, Lake’s claim is not ‘the only way forward’ for the discipline of IR. In fact, it is not the way given its ignorance of the current state of the discipline. A better approach would proceed with the fact of plurality, diversity and distinctiveness of theories, as I have shown here.

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