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**What's the point of being a discipline?
Four disciplinary strategies and the future of International Relations.**

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Olaf Corry
University of Leeds

Abstract: While disciplinary identities are among the most fraught subjects in academia, much less attention has been given to what disciplinarity actually entails and what risks different disciplinary strategies involve. Analysing current and historical debates in International Relations concerning its subject matter and disciplinary status this article argues that ‘disciplinarity versus intellectual freedom’ is a false choice. Instead, four disciplinary strategies are set out and each one briefly considered in relation to the future of IR: i) remaining a subdiscipline (‘stay put’), ii) viewing IR as an interdisciplinary field (‘reach out’), iii) dissolving IR in transdisciplinary moves or abolition (‘burn down’), or iv) strengthening IR as an independent discipline (‘break out’). Mainstream IR appears to largely be happy with IR being a narrow subdiscipline, while critical IR scholars are wary of disciplinarity and split between the other options. However, recent calls for identifying ‘the international’ positively and independently from the subject matter of Political Science suggest a way forward that could broaden and diversify IR *as* an independent discipline. Thus, while none of the four strategies should be ruled out categorically - or relied upon alone - I argue all of them ultimately rely on IR becoming a more independent discipline.

Introduction

The disciplinary credentials of IR have been debated before (Kaplan 1961; Dyer and Mangasarian 1989; Buzan and Little 2001; Kennedy-Pipe 2007; Grenier, Turton and Beaulieu-Brossard 2015, Kristensen 2012). But the discipline-question resurfaced most recently in response to Justin Rosenberg's startling claim that IR has so far failed to clearly identify its own unique subject matter, defining itself only negatively as a subfield concerned with politics beyond settled state confines (2016). Without a notion of 'the international' as an ontology in its own right, IR has been left confused about its subject matter, narrowly focused on a certain sphere of politics, and famously ineffectual in contributing to other disciplines, runs the argument (Rosenberg 2017, see also Halliday 1994, Brown 2013). Instead, the consequences of 'societal multiplicity' are suggested as the core subject matter of IR: "[N]o matter how much we twist and turn it in our hands, the word 'international' always ends up presupposing the same basic circumstance, namely, that human existence is not unitary but multiple. It is distributed across numerous interacting societies." (Rosenberg 2016:135). Since no other discipline has this as its object, IR can identify its own a unique vantage point, become relevant to the whole of the social world (not just politics), free itself from the 'prison of Political Science' – and thereby become a fully fledged discipline (Rosenberg 2016, see also Albert and Buzan, 2017).

But whereas it used to be a source of worry that International Relations (IR) fell short as a discipline, there is now a widespread anxiety about disciplinarity succeeding. Some fear a new disciplinary prison of colonial modernity (Blaney and Tickner 2017) or perhaps the cage of positivist scientism (Jackson 2017). Catarina Kinnvall captures the sentiments of many aiming to expand the remit of IR while being sceptical of disciplines: "at a time when we are concerned with decentring IR, recognising that there may be many IRs rather than one (...) and when we are increasingly asked to investigate the white mythology of IR (...) the call for disciplinary cores and thus boundaries, seems to be problematic" (2020:153-4). Others see a "set of warning lights" going off and "red flags" waving at the idea of defining a core subject matter risks "catapulting" innovative IR work out of the discipline (Drieschova 2020: 156-7). Patrick Jackson welcomes Rosenberg's argument but declares himself "simply not interested in defining anyone or anything *out of IR*" (2017: 83). What Justin Rosenberg takes as the great selling point is for others the precise reason why his reformulation of IR's subject matter must be rejected.

In this article I argue that, although answers differ as to what the core problem of IR is, the actual crux of this debate is pre-judged: should IR aspire to become a discipline on a par with history, geography or economics with its own unique angle on the social world? Or should it avoid identifying its subject in positive terms to avoid further harmful *disciplining* of knowledge and scholarship about world affairs?

In this debate, 'disciplinarity' has been cast as code for a restrictive state-centric subject matter and exclusiveness in terms of approaches. It is true that disciplines inevitably regulate and restrict, and there are very good reasons to be critical of history and content of the existing IR discipline. In a world of multiple disciplines, however, the alternatives to being an independent discipline might also not be so rosy or lead to more diverse and inclusive scholarship. Tough strategic choices should not be made without pausing to ask, 'what is disciplinarity' and surveying the range of disciplinary options on offer.

I consider four possible disciplinary strategies for IR. Each has advantages and risks, but I argue it is hard to see a route to broader themed and more diverse and critical scholarship about the international without an independent discipline of IR, focused on a subject with general purchase on the social world. The first section sets out the continuing confusion around whether a core

subject matter of IR can be identified and whether IR even has disciplinary potential. Secondly, key characteristics of academic disciplines are explored drawing critically on theorists and histories of disciplinarity, adding that the multiplicity of *disciplines* today makes a rejectionist strategy very risky. Thirdly, the four disciplinary strategies available – subdisciplinarity (‘stay put’), interdisciplinarity (‘reach out’), transdisciplinarity or abolition (‘burn down’), and independent disciplinarity (‘break out’) – are developed in turn, noting, in particular, IR’s early and ongoing epistemic vulnerability to other disciplinary pressures including positivism and, more recently, rationalism. Fourth, Rosenberg’s suggested ‘deep ontology’ for IR in the shape of ‘societal multiplicity’ is critically reconsidered in the light of IR’s inevitable coexistence with multiple other disciplines and epistemic movements.

1. The reluctant discipline

The subject of International Relations (IR) is commonly taught in various ways: through ‘great debates’ or mythical moments (Carvalho, Leira and Hobson 2011), via paradigms, isms and “schools” (Wæver 2004), or via ‘research traditions’ (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Such narratives organise IR into positions and categories that facilitate (or regiment) teaching, scholarship and theorising in IR, (re)producing ‘IR’ as they go. But curiously, these almost always take as given what makes them specifically ‘IR’. IR theories are designated in circular fashion as theories of ‘international events’ (Dunne et al. 2013) and bibliometric studies of the field of IR determine by methodological fiat that IR is simply whatever is published in journals classified as ‘IR journals’ (eg. Kristensen 2012, 2018; Aris 2020). Practice theorists make this contradiction explicit by declaring that “(d)efining what does and what does not count as an international practice becomes an empirical question best left to the practitioners themselves in their actual performance of world politics” specifying only that international practices are the ones that “pertain to world politics, broadly construed” (Adler and Pouliot 2011:6). IR, it seems, is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.

As a result, ambiguity reigns about IR’s subject matter. Diverging labels for it appear alongside and on top of each other, including ‘the field of international studies’ (Lake 2011), ‘world affairs’ or ‘global politics’ (Lee-Koo 2015:381; Owens and Smith 2020:5). The textbook *Global Politics* (Heyward 2010) teaches the apparently synonymous objects of “international relations/global politics” (p. xix) specifying, that ‘global politics’ concerns “politics at, and, crucially, across *all* levels – the worldwide, the regional, the national and subnational” (ibid.). The specificity of the ‘international’ as a subset of globality, students are told, concerns “states as key actors on the world stage” (ibid.). This frames ‘the international’ narrowly as state interactions, but identifies global politics ‘across all levels’ as the object of IR!

When the question of IR’s subject matter is addressed explicitly, statements to the effect that IR simply has no unique subject matter are not uncommon. For Christine Sylvester the days of agreement about the focus of IR are over and as such “IR is at an end” (2007:551). For others it never really was a thing: “the subject matter that IR is concerned with is not distinct to IR” and “the more IR tries to be a discipline, the greater its failure” (Baron 2015, p. 260-61). As George Lawson and Robbie Shilliam note: “IR appears as a kind of disciplinary Polo mint—an enterprise without a centre.” (2010: 70).

The deep hesitancy about defining the subject matter of IR coexists with a confident insistence on diversity in something nonetheless still referred to as ‘IR’. Dunne et al. justify their call for theoretical pluralism by the idea that “(t)he sheer diversity and complexity of what is studied ensures that there will be multiple perspectives on what the most important factors are and how

inquiry should proceed' (2013: 405). Others aim for even the Polo-mint condition to be radicalised via "fragmenting the international" in order to disrupt state-centric views of politics in IR (Huysmans and Noguiera 2016:299).

The need to widen the subject area beyond state interaction is part of the case against considering IR 'a discipline': "a lot of what now counts for IR is not about [interaction between states] but about ideas, peoples, norms, aboriginal rights, culture, multinational corporations and the environment" (Baron 2015: 261). Caroline Kennedy-Pipe's suggestion "for the future of the discipline is that, first, we forget about it as a discipline. It is not" (2007). Self-identifying as a discipline, it is held, only "legitimizes the reproduction of particularly uniformizing and (epistemically) intolerant practices in the academic field" (Grenier 2015:250). Critiques of Rosenberg's idea that IR should embrace the idea of 'societal multiplicity' as the essence of the international echo such concerns: that it risks providing a new standard with which to discipline IR scholars, assumed to favour statist, elitist interpretations of IR (e.g. Shepherd 2017).

For those who do not want a discipline, what should IR then be? A field of study, perhaps, oriented towards multiple objects and drawing on multiple other subjects – "a crossroads for other disciplines" (Kennedy-Pipe 2007:325). Jackson argues that – yes, IR was born in the prison of Political Science (in the US at least), but no, it need not be 'a discipline' of its own with a settled point of focus or object of study – and absolutely not one particular epistemology. Why not remain "a meeting place for a variety of academic disciplines around a common concern with international affairs" he asks (Jackson 2017:83). Let us examine the options more deliberately.

2. What is a discipline?

A common assumption behind all this is something along the following lines: the less 'disciplinary' IR is, the freer the IR scholar or student of world politics will be to include all that which has been excluded and broaden knowledge and perspectives. Without disciplinary boundaries and cores, IR may better escape its current narrow and prejudicial incarnation, and make way for a more wide-ranging and plural object of scholarship focused on [world politics/global politics/international relations/international affairs/world affairs etc.] - the label immediately becomes problematic, but also cannot be dropped.

While IR undoubtedly must change (and is changing), what *does* disciplinarity entail? At one extreme, disciplinarity is simply considered a sociological phenomenon, consisting of institutions, journals and professional practices. In this view, IR's disciplinarity is more akin to a 'simulation' (Baron 2015:261): it need not involve a settled or unique subject matter, agreed upon theories or methods. Demanding that would in any case disqualify most academic fields from being disciplines, and moreover, "it is almost impossible for any discipline to be truly autonomous from other realms of academic pursuit" (Turton 2015:4). Yet focusing on the institutionalisation of IR hardly does away entirely with the question of how it should conceive of itself, Lene Hansen points out, "as it would be difficult to sustain self-identification and resource allocation without a substantial narrative that identifies what one does as at least distinctive if not better than other fields or disciplines." (2015: 267).

For Michel Foucault, probably the most famous theorist of *discipline* (though less known for his thoughts on disciplinarity), a field of knowledge production becomes distinguishable from others when it reaches the "threshold of positivity" (1970:196). A discipline has a defined shape and is unique and identifiable as itself, but also, crucially, can reproduce itself and produce new statements according to its own apparatuses and truth-practices. He contrasts this with truth

previously being attached to certain individuals or other social spheres. Alluding to today's multiple separate disciplines, Foucault points to the emergence of what he terms the "specific intellectual" (*savant*) who "intervenes in contemporary political struggles in the name of a 'local' scientific truth" (1994[1976]: 128-9) rather than the older 'universal intellectual' who posed as a bearer of general values.

In this view,

"a discipline is defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a corpus of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments: all this constitutes a sort of anonymous system at the disposal of anyone who wants to or is able to use it, without their meaning or validity being linked to the one who happened to be their inventor. [...] what is supposed at the outset is [...] the requisites for the construction of new statements". (Foucault 1981: 59).

Thus, while "(t)he discipline is a principle of control over the production of discourse" (1970, p. 61), and hence restrictive, it also provides "the possibility of formulating new propositions *ad infinitum*" (ibid. p. 59) independently of specific inventors or authorities. A discipline is an "anonymous system at the disposal of anyone who wants to or is able to use it" (ibid.). Those new propositions must of course acknowledge a set of rules and procedures for their generation in order to be 'in the truth', but within those strictures (and not 'in a wild exteriority', as Foucault calls it) an endless number of statements can be produced.

Disciplines are thus productive as well as well as restrictive, and outsiders can – in theory – enter and make use of them (albeit after being schooled appropriately). Although Foucault is known as the great critic of disciplinary rule, "it is wholly misleading to focus on the negative functions [of disciplines] alone" (Osborne 2015:26): they are generative too. Foucault admits that in *Madness and Civilisation* he had focused on how psychiatry repressed "a sort of living, voluble, and anxious madness", but later realises that "the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing the productive aspects of power" which rather "transverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse" (1994 [1976]:120).

Disciplines can be enabling in another way: shielding or providing scholarly toeholds in relation to transdisciplinary *epistemes*, e.g. positivism. Foucault, it is true, initially discards disciplines as less significant compared to discursive formations – e.g. the discourse of psychiatry is not reducible to the medical discipline of Psychiatry which "can only be understood as an institution on the basis of something external and general, that is, the psychiatric order" (2007:117); but later he recognises that disciplines allow some insulation from *epistemes* like structuralism or the "alternative danger of a complete dissolution of disciplines into positivism" (Osborne 2015:25). While they can provide shelter from powerful epistemes, disciplines change over time, of course, making them to some degree malleable, though this also makes them subject to political and resource pressures within and beyond the university.

What marks this out from the institutional 'simulation' view of disciplines is that it focuses on how modern social sciences are each crafted, not just via institutions like departments and journals, but through "a series of abstractive moves, each producing a reified object of analysis, each with its own history" (Bell 2019:21). In particular, in order to emerge and be sustained as a discipline requires "the delineation of a specific domain which its members can claim as their own, demarcating it from other disciplines and providing a focal point for research and debate" (Bell 2019:21). This specific domain emerges, often messily, and allows even discipline sceptics to assume there is a subject that IR is attached to, even while they point out it has been conceived

too narrowly. In a thinner version of a scholarly ‘domain’, Ole Wæver defends the much maligned ‘great debates’ and other debating devices precisely for providing a focal point for IR to operate and to critique and develop, short of agreement on the object itself. For Wæver, “we can see the discipline [of IR] as real and reproducing—even in the absence of a clear and given object (international relations) and a shared agreement (IR)” (2021). Almost no discipline has complete agreement about its object, but all have a recognisable debate about ‘it’ and its limits.

Beyond the university, disciplines are in fact only one type of institution in a wider set of ‘*knowledge-complexes*’ (e.g. think-tanks, government agencies etc.) (Bell 2019:27). Even purely within the academy, academic subcultures and other “transversal phenomena, criss-crossing and helping to (re)constitute various disciplines and fields” (Bell 2019: 27) put a question mark over where IR would be without a discipline to support it in relation to knowledge-complexes. Foucault identifies threats from structuralism and positivism, but Bell updates this with modernization theory, neoconservatism, neo-liberalism and war, all of which (re)configured IR as a discipline via knowledge practices within and beyond the university (2019).

Finally, Foucault also recognised that disciplines, rather than being a negation of freedom, are important for *technologies of the scholarly self* (Bell 2019:37) because the latter “require truth obligations”, providing the self at least some tools with which to work (Foucault cited in Osborne 2015: 27). For Foucault “truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of the multiple forms of constraint” (1994:131). The most powerful of scholarly selves in the post war era are “the ‘rational’ social scientist – the individual who comes to view the world in a certain way, as capable of explanation (even prediction) through the application of the arts of ‘scientific’ reasoning” (Bell 2019:21) others such as “radical historicist” also exist (Bell 2019:38). Such identities work *through* disciplines, making the latter a potential vector for them, as well as a potential foothold for those struggling against or between them.

Where discipline sceptics see boundaries as purely coercive¹, the above view situates disciplines in the context of other power-knowledge vectors. But for that reason, it is important not to underplay the power dynamics involved in the emergence of disciplines and Foucault perhaps over-plays the degree to which they in practice are ‘anonymous’ and “at the disposal of anyone who wants to or is able to use”. Colonisation and later industrialisation and the growth of modern (European) state apparatus all historically underpin how knowledge production came to be organised in distinct disciplines. Many contingent knowledge distinctions have emerged or been constructed around which modern disciplines continue to be organised. European colonisation solidified and spread the ‘Cartesian’ nature-human divide as an organising epistemological and normative distinction, placing much of the human and non-human world on the ‘nature’ side of the equation, subject to scientific objectification (Patel and Moore 2017:51). But natural and social sciences only began to diverge formally by the 19th Century after natural philosophy had previously split into natural history and the other physical sciences of chemistry and physics and biology (Heilbron 2003:42). Sociology, in some countries more clearly than others, emerged with western industrialisation to facilitate the study of social life, carving itself out of the “general theory of life”, namely biology (Renwick 2012:2) or for August Comte physics (hence his ‘social physics’).

‘Social science’, first thought of as a meta-discipline but later an umbrella term for several disciplines distinct from the physical sciences and humanities, appeared only in the late 19th Century (Porter and Ross 2008:2). Social sciences divided variously including into Sociology,

¹ Wæver argues that the connotations of social control attached by some postmodernists to the term ‘discipline’ exaggerate anxieties about epistemic disciplines: “This mock-etymology—fun as it is—should probably give way to the real origins of ‘discipline’; in Latin *discere*, to learn” (2021: 327).

Economics, Anthropology Psychology and Political Science, where IR currently mostly resides (departments of just International Relations exist but are rare). Institutionally, “only in the last decades of the nineteenth Century (...) do we see disciplines with three key characteristics: deciding what is taught in the departmental structure, deciding what is good research through dedicated journals, and deciding who gets hired and promoted” (Repko 2012: 30-32). The now dominant ‘departmental’ anchoring of disciplines evolved first in the US context, and only spread outside the United States “well into the postwar period” (Abbott 2001:123). This rested on US hegemony after the Second World War, and its need to organise knowledge production to serve the purpose of first fighting the Cold War and managing decolonisation and then from the 1980s organising a ‘global’ world order with the US at the helm (Kamola 2019:44). Funded by huge flows of philanthropic and federal money, the previously more diverse pre-war international studies scholarship began to be shaped into “a discipline capable of providing the American security apparatus the conceptual tools needed to imagine – and therefore to manage – the world as an international state system” (Kamola 2019:44).

3. IR’s four disciplinary options

Given how disciplines function and historically emerged, and the near-ubiquity of them worldwide today, scholars who wish to depart from or adjust given categories or objects of knowledge production face a set of tough strategic dilemmas. The following boils the options down to four ideal-typical strategies available to IR today: ‘stay put’, ‘reach out’, ‘burn down’ and ‘break out’. Some of these could plausibly be pursued simultaneously, although some trade-offs may also be inevitable. Here I mere focus on setting them out and argue that all of them ultimately rely on IR becoming a distinctive discipline, ideally with a broader purview.

a) ‘Stay put’: IR as sub-discipline

Firstly, mainstream IR currently pursues a sub-discipline strategy in the sense of typically (though not exclusively) being institutionally part of Political Science departments; but virtually always having for itself “an ontology of political power (operating in the absence of central authority) rather than an ontology of the international per se” (Rosenberg 2016:5). This limits IR to a subset of politics, sometimes narrowly, sometimes broadly conceived.

To be sure, Political Science was not the original home for international scholarship everywhere and a rich and deep history of ideas about multiple societies pre-existed the Euro-centric version of IR found widely today (Buzan and Acharya 2021). But in Western canonical texts IR’s object was defined negatively: “the way [E.H. Carr] proceeds is not to identify what premises of its own the international might uniquely contain. It is rather to extend the premises of Politics into the international sphere.” (Rosenberg 2016:131). Hans Morgenthau decided that “for theoretical purposes international relations is identical to international politics” and furthermore: “a theory of international politics is but a special instance of a general theory of politics” (1959:15). Morten Kaplan knew of “no convincing discussion that a specifically international relations discipline in its own right exists” (1961: 465) but considered the field of international politics (just about) viable as a sub-discipline. A politics-centric and statist designation of IR’s subject matter arguably remains the dominant stance today among scholars and teachers of the international (Maliniak et al. 2012: 4).

Besides a restricted subject matter, the main problem of being a sub-discipline lies in negotiating the relationship to the dominant host discipline. Crucially, if a subfield is essentially a corner of

another discipline, does it really need its own theories and methods? Helen Milner argued explicitly that international politics is now so empirically intertwined with domestic politics that there is hardly any reason to have separate theories, never mind distinct disciplines: the rationalist paradigm's common "concern with the mechanisms of collective choice in situations of strategic interaction" (1998:760) obviates the need for an intellectual endeavour distinct from Political Science.

This debate seems perennial. At the Rockefeller-funded 1954 conference on IR, often considered a founding moment, the fortunes of IR were thought to depend on 'a substantive' or 'general theory' of international politics. This was crucial, participants realised, if "doubts about the disciplinary nature of IR as well as about the analytical distinctiveness of its subject matter" (Schmidt 2011: 86) were to be put to rest. David Singer opined that "without theory we have only the barest shadow of a discipline" (cited in Schmidt 2011: 87). Morgenthau warned in that context against "eclecticism which is the exact opposite of theory" (cited in Guilhot 2011: 257) and grounded the need for theory in the threat from social scientific impetuses bearing down on IR as a part of Political Science. In contrast, eclecticism and problem-solving is called on by some to save the discipline from tiresome theory debates (Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Lake 2011) while others insist that "one of IR's comparative advantages over other disciplines might just be its strong sense of being a theory-led and theory-concerned field" (Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013:420, Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Reus-Smit 2021). Yet without an object distinct from politics, why should such theories differ fundamentally, and not just regionally, from those in Political Science? And why should methods prevalent there not suffice here?

Strapped to politics, IR seems unable to find its focus or rhythm.

b) 'Reach out': IR as inter-disciplinary field.

Interdisciplinarity is often a productive and positive strategy for bringing multiple lenses to bear on cross-cutting societal problems. Yet contact and cross-fertilization between disciplines is not preordained to be equal or to end well. Power differences exist between as well as within disciplines (Corry 2022). Disciplines that import or borrow theories from others in the name of interdisciplinarity, especially if they do so without being clear on their own disciplinary contribution, risk becoming what David Long has dubbed 'invaded disciplines' providing "little more than data sets, issue areas, or context – the empirical domain, the field, on which the [invading] theoretical paradigm operates" (2011: 43). The discipline reaching out can also do so in exploitative ways. IR has arguably often treated History in this way, plucking examples to illustrate supposed logics of the international (e.g. Waltz 1979). But, more often than not, IR has itself been invaded by other disciplines, not least by Economic methods and rationalist axioms, often posing as objective policy advice (Rathbun 2017).

On the more critical wing of the discipline the multiple 'turns' in IR suggest an almost limitless appetite to draw on other disciplines. One tally registered six such turns in recent IR scholarship (Baele and Bettiza 2020) importing variously from psychology and neurosciences (affect); sociology and ethnomethodology (practice); while the 'material turn' has imported ideas and concepts also from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and social theory. These have all generated valuable insights when applied to subject matter normally identified as 'international', but often without making clear what is specifically international about the practices, matter, affect etc. in question. If the imported ontology (matter or affect, for example) is centred in analysis, the specifically international dimension can disappear from view. Theories and concepts routinely get imported and deployed without being internationalised, *as if* they fit seamlessly into IR. At the

same time an equivalent ‘international turn’ in Psychology or neuroscience, STS or even Anthropology has not yet happened (although perhaps it has in historiography, see Bell 2002; Armitage 2004). Thus, unwitting internalism - the “tendency, at a deep theoretical level, to conceptualize society in the singular” – abounds in neighbouring disciplines and even in IR itself as it begins to think like sociology, anthropology etc. – disciplines not dedicated to the significance of the international.

Interdisciplinarity has not been all bad of course. The extraordinarily narrow conception of politics that developed in mainstream (US) IR by roughly the end of the 1980s (rationalist and focused largely to states in cooperation or conflict) has been vigorously contested by a broad field of ‘critical IR’ that typically draws on sociological and anthropological theories that see the social as “constituted by practices, as relational, processual, assembled” (Guzzini 2016: 2). This sets up a much wider notion of politics than the mainstream rationalist one pertaining to “the way the fixtures of social reality are constituted” (Guzzini 2016: 3; see also Bigo and Walker 2007). But without a distinct and positive notion of the international, this tends to fall back on the mainstream definition of it, in an attempt to anchor the specificity of the object it focuses on or goes ‘beyond’. In an editorial, the journal *International Political Sociology* celebrates that it no longer has to justify “why our work is legitimate in the context of IR” focusing on diverse “formations of the international”. But the editors call for “submissions that do not shy away from the difficult work of explicitly addressing why a particular topic / question / puzzle matters to the terrain of the global, broadly conceived.” (Lisle, et al. 2017:2). This terrain of ‘the global’ turns out to include many standard IR issue areas: “key areas and processes that remain central to the understanding of transformations of the international, including war, militarization, migration, weapons, security, and colonial legacies” (Huysmans and Noguiera 2016:300). For Mark Salter “(w)hat the field of IR can contribute to ANT and assemblage thinking is a concern with the constitutive nature of sovereignty and the politics that it limits” (2016, xiii).

Thus, in multiple ways the problem of the object ‘the international’ reappears, even – or especially – when inter-disciplinarity is pursued, and interdisciplinarity is paradoxical in that it presupposes what it seeks to go beyond – namely a discipline.

c) ‘Burn down’: transdisciplinary ends and anti-disciplinary means.

In contrast to interdisciplinarity, “transdisciplinarity rejects the parallelism of established disciplinary methods, theories and paradigms, and calls instead for an alternative or novel approach at odds with one or more of the established disciplines” (Long 2011: 38). Transdisciplinarity is typically motivated by the complexity and multifaceted nature of ‘real life’ problems. It tries to “overcome the mismatch between knowledge production in academia, on the one hand, and knowledge requests for solving societal problems, on the other” (Hoffmann-Riem et al. 2008, p. 4).

This idea animates much of the critical opposition to IR as a discipline today, but the clearest exposition is provided by Immanuel Wallerstein and his somewhat older idea for the abolition of social science disciplines and the creation of an open and historically informed uni-disciplinarity (1996). The report ‘Open the Social Sciences’ (1996) was defined in opposition to modern disciplinary boundaries, which Wallerstein deemed to be organizationally strong but to have “lost most of their historic intellectual justification” (2000: 33).

However, worryingly for those aiming for more pluralist knowledge production, transdisciplinarity also comes with risks. As David Long warns, “while the hope is for new theory, in most instances transdisciplinary exchange involves the application of theory from one discipline onto the field of another, or the borrowing of concepts from one by another” (2011: 42). Does opening the social sciences inadvertently roll out “the Trojan horse for the dissolution of particular disciplines by bringing them into a hierarchical relation with more powerful disciplines” (Burawoy 2013:7). Arguably Economics or systems approaches emanating from natural sciences currently look much more likely contenders for the role of super-discipline than Wallerstein’s World Systems approach. Wallerstein himself recognised that disciplines reflected deep world-spanning inequalities and that changing them would take more than innovative scholarship (see also Kamola 2019):

“Today, for obvious economic reasons, the bulk of social science is done in a small corner, the rich corner, of the globe. This distorts our analysis, and the distortion is structural not individual. No amount of virtuous self-discipline on the part of individual scholars will correct this situation.” (Wallerstein 2000:34).

Could an abolitionist strategy concerned with ‘clearing the decks’ therefore still be necessary? If IR is based on *inherently* flawed foundations, it may need to be not just adjusted but taken out – uprooted at its foundations before it can be re-formed. This goes for the mainstream canon of IR which, for example, through epistemologies of ignorance “exclude or exceptionalise the central role of racialised dispossession, violence, and discrimination” in IR (Sabaratnam 2020:12). But it could also apply even to critical IR, the argument runs. Critical scholars may be busy unveiling such epistemologies of ignorance, but what if the tools they use to do so are infected by the same foundations, privileging other white Eurocentric thinkers like Derrida and Foucault (Grosfoguel 2007: 211). Discussing Critical Security Studies (CSS), Chandler and Chipato state that “(a)ny project of reparative work for generative ethico-political openings would have to be undertaken after the abolition or dismantling of critical security studies, not as a substitute for this....” (2021:64). The only strategy left is then “the refusal of the settled order of academia, the flight from the institutional demands of disciplinarity, the embrace of dissonance instead of clarity” (ibid. 65). They end with a call to arms: “The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new” (p. 66).

Highlighting the abolitionist’s dilemma, however, the authors self-avowedly “build on the important existing critiques of race in security studies” (Chandler and Chipato 2021:66). What ‘build something new’ might refer to is left unattended. Though abolitionists are not obliged to answer it, the first question in a post-abolition space would potentially be ‘what is our object of study’, ‘how do we wish to study it’ and ‘for what purpose’, after which an institutional strategy would be required concerning which outlets, professional structures and curricula to aim for – and how to relate to any other disciplines that had not yet been abolished. Either new disciplines would be required or a meta-disciplinarity à la Wallerstein.

An abolitionist strategy may thus be useful for avoiding superficial makeovers that conceal underlying problems born of the history of disciplines and their entanglement with worldly inequities. But it may also backfire by ceding ground to other disciplines or ultimately rely on disciplinary re-building.

- d) ‘Break out’: augmenting IR’s distinctive disciplinarity.

The remaining position is the one that attempts to re-ground or augment IR's credentials as a distinct discipline with a unique subject matter and mode of theorising. Unlike the other disciplinary strategies, this considers IR's disciplinarity 'stunted' (Long 2011: 36), i.e. limited but potentially valuable and salvageable.

Despite some ambivalence, an example of this on the critical side is the ongoing project of 'Global IR' (Tickner and Wæver 2009, Acharya 2014, Rojas 2016) aiming to re-think or re-world IR (Bilgin 2014). Global IR pushes for a broader and less Euro-centric, less rationalist and Western discipline, but from within 'IR' explicitly or implicitly recognising it as a distinct discipline. Roland Bleiker's call to 'forget IR theory' (1997) emphasised also that 'forgetting' involves not an abandonment of IR but rather a supplementary strategy designed "to open up more inclusive ways of perceiving and practicing IR" (1997:76). Non-Western thinkers and "historical patterns of interstate relations in the non-Western world" should on this account be "viewed as sources of IR theorizing" (Acharya 2014: 652; (see also Shilliam 2011)). *Critical of IR*, Amitav Acharya nevertheless aims for "reimagining IR as a global discipline" (ibid. 649, emphasis added). Those who find that Acharya's global project retains too singular a global imaginary also make their case with the express aim of improving the discipline of IR (Anderl and Witt 2020: 26; see also Blaney and Tickner 2017). Others seek to uncover a 'pluriverse' of perspectives, but the purpose is to expand the scope of "the international," contesting its colonial roots (Rojas 2016, Vitalis 2015) or its current Judeo-Christian cosmology (Shani and Behera 2021).

Such efforts to change IR are typically in opposition to the dominance of realist and rationalist approaches to IR, but in their grammar they echo how realists themselves earlier thought about disciplinarity. The latter saw theory as the key to warding off an unwanted positivist *episteme*. The protagonists at the Realism conference considered themselves to be representatives of IR but viewed behaviouralists outside the discipline as the main threat (Wæver, 2011:111). Participants noted with concern that the journal *World Politics* had been taken over by behaviouralists and considered *theory* the bulwark for the independence of IR as a discipline. This was considered crucial as IR faced the transdisciplinary *epistemes* of positivism and 'social science': "unable to contrast the positivist trends transforming the discipline [political science] these scholars settled for controlling a smaller but independent disciplinary territory ... making it immune to the cues of behaviouralism" (Guilhot, 2008: 282).

This ultimately failed, at least in the US. Waltz's post-positivist position set out in chapter 1 of *Theory of International Politics* was subsumed by the sheer force of the positivist-behaviouralist ascendancy in Political Science (Wæver 2009), and IR never left Political Science in the US. With that, 'disciplinarity' itself came to be seen and championed by some because it was associated with 'science' rather than theory (Hoffman 1977). Michael Brecher in his ISA presidential address argued "the field" had not yet "crystallized into a mature social science discipline" due to a "retreat from science in international studies". But if theorising could be overcome and scientific empiricism entrenched, "a genuine social science discipline" beckoned (1999: 213).

Today some critics of current IR content also seem to take the mainstream notion of 'disciplinarity as scientism' at face value (Jackson 2017). In this vein Roland Bleiker pointed to King, Keohane and Verba's positivist manifesto as an example of why disciplinary power needs to be subverted in IR (1997:163). But in doing so he missed that such positivism emanates from a cross-disciplinary social science movement and that Bleiker himself (1997) leans on IR theory from the likes of Carol Cohn, Richard Ashley (p. 67) and Cynthia Weber (p. 78) for counterpoints – i.e. resistance to positivism again comes from (theorists) *within* the discipline *against* positivists outside it.

4. Societal multiplicity re-assessed

Rosenberg's attempt to reground IR on more independent terms in terms of 'societal multiplicity' is unambiguously a disciplinary call to arms. It falls clearly in the 'break out' category even more than 'Global IR', and amounts to something of a classic disciplinary move, as seen many times before in the history of disciplines: a 'jail-break' through theorising a subject and problem area distinct from a 'host' discipline. Societal multiplicity, Rosenberg argues, provides a specific angle on human life with general applicability, since all social phenomena are affected by the coexistence of multiple and uneven societies. Just as all social situations have a history, so all have an international dimension. IR is (or should be) the discipline that theorises and studies that dimension, which – crucially – is not limited to just politics beyond the state.

The international in this sense is significantly *broader* than statist or even global politics: “where societal multiplicity obtains, its significance is not restricted to politics and relations of power. It extends into the social, economic, cultural and developmental dimensions too” (2016: 136). This means that the international becomes identifiable in much more diverse domains and registers than just politics or security – something close to the heart of many critics (Shepherd 2017; Guillaume and Huysmans 2018). In relation to decolonising IR, multiplicity has even been argued to counteract what Sabaratnam calls out as ‘epistemological immanence’ in IR, by taking as foundational “an interactive and pluriversal conception of totality that critically incorporates the problematic of historical difference central to Post-/Decolonial Theories” (Matin 2022).

Those keen to import from Sociology, Anthropology or STS (and so on) into IR fear that ‘the consequences of societal multiplicity’ as a basis for disciplinarity would limit this by requiring agreement about what those consequences are. Yet this buys into the false idea of disciplines being based on *substantive* agreement and presumes that IR must stop engaging in interdisciplinary work if it does become a discipline proper. Since inter-disciplinarity relies on each discipline being able to define its contribution to collaborative work, and to ingest concepts and ideas from other disciplines without losing sight of its own, this is strange. Clarifying the unique contribution of IR and doing so in a way that gives it potential import in any setting could hugely *strengthen* interdisciplinarity. Realism limits itself to the state-related security consequences of societal multiplicity and is as such only a very partial theory of societal multiplicity. Viewing it this way relegates it from ‘leading’ IR theory to a provincial and partial voice in a wider discipline dedicated to exploring the many consequences of societal multiplicity. Rosenberg thus arguably offers a key part of what many in the heterodox camp want: a less restrictive object of study as well as greater interdisciplinary potential.

A good test of all this is perhaps to ask how importing a theory of disciplinarity into IR from Sociology of Knowledge (as done above) might take proper account of the international? With a politics-focused object, IR would have little to say on the matter of disciplines. For its part, Foucault's theorisation of disciplinarity is quite internalist. It does not explicitly address the role of the international in how disciplines are formed or how they work. Yet it is hardly a coincidence that modern academic disciplines emerged as the modern international system spread unevenly across the globe. National contexts and transnational flows have been significant for different developments in intellectual history more widely (Baring 2016:571). In relation to natural sciences too, the international is generally considered irrelevant to ‘science’, assumed to be universal and objective. However, recognition of ‘epistemic geography’ (Mahoney and Hulme 2016) or a “geopolitical approach to transdisciplinary science” is beginning to explore how scientific knowledge originates and circulates through the unevenness and inequalities of the world (Meehan et al. 2018). Another emerging field studies how theories and paradigms “evolve differently in

different contexts – in different disciplines and countries” showing how “the social and human sciences do not form a unified global social field” (Sapiro, Santoro and Baert 2020:2).

Thus, there is a double dialectic to grasp: disciplines are multiple and shaped by their coexistence with other disciplines, but interactions between different uneven societies simultaneously affects how disciplines interact and develop. Like all disciplines, IR is itself heavily marked by the unevenness of the international. Until recently this was ignored despite – or because – “[t]he modern discipline of IR was developed precisely when the West had a whip hand over everyone else,” leading to extreme Eurocentrism in IR (Buzan and Acharya 2021: 4). Histories of the birth of IR are beginning to recognise that IR had multiple births, not just in Aberystwyth in 1919 but in many different national, colonial and post-colonial contexts (Thakur and Smith 2021). This is progress, although whatever its eventual content “the ways IR travels through the ordered paths of international hierarchy” may limit the practical effects of that progress (Hamati-Ataya 2016:339).

It would therefore be problematic if Rosenberg’s proposal for a core subject matter for IR were theorised as a transhistorical “deep ontology” that had been hiding “in plain sight” (Rosenberg 2019:147) – as a brute fact with effects flowing from it that IR simply has to finally pick up and examine. If that were the case then the international itself would be inconsequential for IR.

In contrast, for *historical* ontologists there would be no fact of societal multiplicity without an (international) history of its own. Historical ontology, involves, as Jens Bartelson summarises, “a commitment to dynamic nominalism, a doctrine according to which the ways in which people name and classify themselves and the things around them will interact with the resulting categories across time and space and prompt forever new conceptualisations of things and people” (2019: 109). The subject matters of disciplines are written, practiced and reified into being through knowledge-practices, institutionalisation and identity-work within wider *knowledge-complexes*, which help constitute the societal entities and their inter-relations, which form the basis of more writing and reification. Responding to the critique that ‘societal’ implies, in effect, ‘states’, Rosenberg and Tallis in this issue (Introduction) instead deliberately leave open the specific historical form that ‘society’ or ‘the inter-societal’ takes. But to that it must be added that the analytical lenses used to identify and construct such entities are *also* historically contingent. For this reason, Rosenberg’s ‘societal multiplicity’ would perhaps be better considered a ‘deep epistemology’ rather than a ‘deep ontology’ for IR.

5. Conclusion:

Disciplines raise instinctive ‘red flags’ because they inevitably involve policing of scholarship – something many IR scholars rightly fear, especially those pushing for broadly oriented, pluralist and de-colonised IR scholarship: “an obvious temptation arising from complaints about the limits of a discipline is to call for its erasure” (Bigo and Walker 2007:730). Some of the strongest objections to IR taking ‘the international’ as its general but unique dimension of the social world have therefore come from those challenging the underlying assumption that IR should embrace it and through that become a more independent discipline.

However, in this article I have argued that the opposition between IR’s disciplinarity and critical pluralist scholarship of the international is false. This would assume that disciplines are purely limiting, or that beyond disciplinarity lies unfettered epistemological sunlit uplands. In contrast, disciplines provide one kind of basis for local truth-claims and communities of knowledge-

production or ‘scholarly selves’ that potentially insulate against transdisciplinary *epistemes* like positivism. Just as individual societies are marked by their coexistence with multiple other different societies, individual disciplines exist within in a multiplicity of disciplines and are not shaped purely by dynamics internal to each discipline.

Broadly speaking, IR is currently somewhere between a discipline and a subfield. Mainstream IR is hemmed in by rationalist axioms and an object defined by Political Science (and methods from economics) while critical IR, pursuing a wider notion of politics but a weaker sense of the international, is split between reformist and abolitionist strategies. The latter is in many ways the worst of all worlds. A sub-field has by definition a restricted subject matter and is perennially at risk of being swallowed up by the host discipline. Entering into inter-disciplinary engagements as a subfield is bound to lead to one-sided traffic and ultimately *less* disciplinary diversity. IR has imported a succession of ontologies from other disciplines – perhaps because it lacked its own. Outside disciplines altogether, a free-floating ‘field’ of IR would be a meeting place for other disciplines and epistemes which are congenitally oblivious to ‘the international’ as a distinct problem and only haphazardly take it into account.

While there are no easy options, as the contours of a different and more global IR are clearly emerging (Krishna 2021) an opportunity does exist to reground IR as more than politics beyond the state. Mainstream IR, focused on a narrow object and standards of scientific enquiry defined by other disciplines, appears unable to do this. Critical IR could, but hesitates because it defines itself largely against mainstream IR – a negative identity derived in relation to a field relying on a negatively defined object. What’s the point in that?

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