

Introduction

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The articles assembled in this issue of the *Journal* were prepared for a Symposium on the Place of Theory in the Conduct and Study of International Relations, held at the University of Michigan on May 12-14, 1960, under the sponsorship of the Department of Political Science of that institution and The Center for Research on Conflict Resolution. A generous grant from the New World Foundation made it possible to organize the symposium, bringing together some fifty scholars who approach the study of international affairs from a variety of disciplinary standpoints. The papers reproduced in this issue served as foci for intensive discussion of the broad subject areas to which they relate.

No attempt will be made here to present a formal summary of the proceedings of the symposium or to formulate a set of conclusions which might be attributed to the group of participants. To attempt the former would involve the risk of understating the richness of conversations whose informal character made them inherently resistant to the process of freezing in cold print; to attempt the latter would involve the hazard of overstating the consensus obtained or obtainable among scholars seriously concerned to explore such a frontier zone of intellectual activity as the theory of international relations. What follows is rather a formulation of personal reactions to and reflections upon the symposium by a participant, the editor of the present is-

sue: one man's version of a complex pattern of interaction which doubtless made different impressions upon the minds of other participants.

The sponsors of the symposium were motivated by the following convictions: that progress toward the scholarly understanding and practical solution of the problems of international relations requires the development of a respectable body of theory; that a considerable quantity of theoretical bits and snatches and a hopeful assortment of theoretical beginnings are already in existence; and that the time is ripe for careful assessment of those theoretical fragments and the effort to construct—from them and from such new materials as may be required—a more systematic and elaborate body of theory. In short, the problem was conceived as that of surveying existing theory and plotting a strategy for moving from the theory which we have to the theory which we need for the study and conduct of international relations.

It appears that the participants were in general accord with this viewpoint. They believed that theory is important in the field of international relations. They believed that existing theory is hopeful but inadequate. They believed that it is worthwhile for specialists in international relations to occupy themselves, singly and cooperatively, with the task of theory-building. The suggestion, made several times during the symposium—that it would be de-

sirable to have a group of "full-time theorists"—evoked considerable disagreement; but it is clear that the participants approved theory-building activity, whether conducted in accordance with the principle of division of labor or the notion of "every man his own theorist."

It has been evident for some time that specialists who think they are in basic accord because they share the urge to advance the development of international relations theory are frequently in basic discord because this urge means utterly different things to different individuals. It is easy to agree on the need for theory; it is difficult to agree on what theory *is* or on what *kind* of theory is needed. Bluntly, "theory" is a fashionable word, a prestigious word in the scholarly realm, and students who wish to be regarded as sophisticated can hardly resist being "for" it. But what does it mean? For some, it means the "right set of questions" about international relations; for others, it means an allegedly "right set of answers." For some, it means a proper kit of tools, a well-developed research methodology; for others, it means the substantive product of whatever methodology may be adopted, the generalizations which may be formulated as the result of research. In some instances, "theory of international relations" appears to refer to ideas about the *academic discipline* of international relations and how a scholar in this field should conduct his work; this is essentially the *methodological* usage. In other cases, the phrase evidently refers to ideas about the *actual realm* of international relations which forms the subject matter of the academic discipline; this is essentially the *substantive* usage.

From the vantage point of this commentator, the symposium seemed to dramatize the baffling situation which stems from these disagreements and ambiguities within

the community of theory advocates. Yet, if it confirmed the suspicion that scholars who profess interest in the theory of international relations are actually expressing a vast heterogeneity of interests, it also had the more hopeful effect of indicating that a meaningful area of common concern can be found when such people confront each other in intimate discussion and make a determined effort to explain what they are talking about and to discover what they are hearing about. It was striking to observe how the obscurities of written communication were reduced by the solvent of discussion and how specialists whose conceptions of theory were quite different could discover in conversation an unexpected mutuality of interest. This is not to say that the group reached an agreed definition of what one should mean when he espouses an interest in the theory of international relations. However, to this member of the group, the experience suggested that the differences of meaning, when clearly exposed, may be subject to erosion.

The proceedings of the symposium confirmed the impression that theory-conscious specialists tend overwhelmingly to fasten their gaze on the ideal of a general, all-encompassing theory of international relations. The urge for Big Theory frequently militates against interest in little theories, snippets of theoretical insight into specific substantive aspects of international relations. This attitude presents the danger of visualizing a forest without any trees. It must be said that the symposium group expressed caution against being excessively concerned with "theorizing about theory," even when it could not wholly resist the temptation to do just that. The peril was recognized, and to some degree avoided. This observer must confess that the symposium left him unshaken in the belief that

the feasible ideal for the field of international relations is not a grand theoretical scheme, embracing the entire reality of international relations within an agreed intellectual framework, but rather an ever growing collection of theories about particular aspects of that reality—theories that will be stated with increasing explicitness, debated with increasing vigor, and subjected to increasingly rigorous testing against the facts which they purport to explain and illuminate.

Above all, the papers and discussions strengthened the case for bringing the laborers in the theoretical vineyard into intimate contact with each other, for con-

frontation of differences of conception and approach, discovery of convergencies which are all too often concealed by the perverse uncommunicativeness of their written communications, and development of common awareness of the problems which inhibit adequate theoretical understanding of the complex realm of international relations. It would be too much to say that the symposium foreshadowed the creation of a master theory of international relations. It did stimulate, in this participant, the hope that many of the best minds in the field will be increasingly devoted to the development of theoretical insights and participation in a productive theoretical discourse.