

*International Relations and the First Great
Debate*

edited by Brian Schmidt

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Ricardo Villanueva (University of Glasgow)

Over the last years, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has undergone a considerable self-assessment of the history of the field. Edited by Brian Schmidt, *International Relations and the First Great Debate* is one of the most important recent efforts to criticise the conventional self-image of the discipline during the interwar years and the Second World War. The scholarship of the contributors of this piece of work is impressive.¹

According to the traditional history of the discipline, the carnage of the Great War and the fervent desire to avoid another major international confrontation originated the birth of a discipline and a school of thought that has been labelled as ‘idealism’. Idealists, we are told, were characterised by having a naïve faith in the possibility of ending war, a harmony of interests between states in global affairs, and the belief that a supranational entity above states could regulate international anarchy. This ‘utopian’ stage of the discipline was followed by a more ‘realistic’ phase as a consequence of geopolitical international events, such as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and

¹ Lucian Ashworth is Head of Department and Professor at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. David Long is Professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. Peter Wilson is a Senior Lecturer in IR at the London School of Economics. Brian Schmidt and Cameron Thies are Associate Professors in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University and the University of Iowa respectively.

more importantly the failure of the League of Nations to prevent the Second World War. It is during this period that the IR traditional historiography affirms that realist scholars, such as E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, had an intellectual confrontation with ‘idealists’ (i.e. what is conventionally called in the discipline the ‘first great debate’) and successfully crushed their utopian ideas by stressing that they had neglected the issue of power in real world events (p.4).

The book in review aims to address the question of whether or not the first great debate actually took place in the formative years of the discipline and it provides specifically two powerful and well historically supported arguments to challenge the traditional wisdom in IR. First, the authors of this book sustain that the scholarship of the interwar period cannot be featured as ‘idealist’ as the mainstream disciplinary story has claimed. Peter Wilson’s chapter, for example, contents that as ‘a cohesive and certainly self-conscious school of thought, an “idealist” or “utopian” paradigm never actually existed’ (p.16). Lucian Ashworth agrees and adds that the label of the interwar years as ‘idealist’ is a mere devise of realism to disqualify the tradition of ‘liberal internationalism’ (p.60-61).

The second main general argument of the book is that the period of the so called ‘first great debate’ did not actually experience ‘any meaningful intellectual exchange’ between realists and the so called idealists (p.1). This is well supported by Peter Wilson who argues that even though as a pedagogical instrument ‘the notion of the first great debate is not without merit..., as a historical fact it is highly misleading’ (p.16). Instead of an exclusive intellectual confrontation between realists and idealists on matters frequently tackled by these two schools of thought, Wilson found that the period produced interesting theoretical writings on several issues important in the

discipline that are frequently outside the topics covered by these theories such as class-based analyses (p.28). Ashworth was also unable to find historical evidence of a realist-idealist contest, but instead found that during the 1920s and the 1930s there was a debate in the discipline over whether or not capitalism produces war (p.60). In the final chapter of the book Brian Schmidt contends that the so named first great debate ‘...is little more than a disciplinary myth’ (p.94). However, he does find evidence of a major intellectual confrontation between realists and idealists, but after the Second World War and not during the 1930s and early 1940s as the mainstream IR account has usually affirmed (p.94).

For IR students, and in particular those interested in the history of the discipline, there is little doubt that *International Relations and the first Great Debate* is a major contribution to show the inaccuracy of the traditional narratives in IR. However, the book omits several important theoretical contributions to understand international affairs that at that time were done outside the disciplinary orthodox boundaries of ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’. Some of the insights from the Frankfurt School which was formalised in 1923 through the creation of the ‘Institute of Social Research’ could have for instance been taken into account. In particular, this German cohort of theorists contributed with an important criticism to ‘positivism’, the primary epistemological way to understand the world in social sciences in general, and in IR in particular, at the time. In the essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937) Max Horkheimer criticises what he calls ‘traditional theory’ for being founded on rigid ‘scientific’ principles such as ‘objectivity’, as in the natural sciences. Horkheimer stressed that this way of gaining knowledge treats individuals as things/objects and makes an artificial distinction between facts and values and thus it

presumes are possible to separate the knowledge obtained ‘objectively’ from the interests/principles of the researcher (Horkheimer 1937, pp.190, 209, 215). The critique to ‘positivism’ has been important in International Relations as it was later demonstrated by Robert Cox (1981, p.128). As a result, considering the Frankfurt School as a significant theoretical contributor to IR would have been an important plus to the book in review as this would have strengthened the argument that there were other theoretical contributions to IR outside the tradition of idealism within the interwar period.

Nevertheless, the book remains one of the best recent efforts to demerit the quasi mythological mainstream narrative of the disciplinary origins of IR. This piece of work should be of great value to higher education students and academics interested in enhancing their knowledge about the history of the discipline of IR.

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