

A Guide to Creative Theorizing

In the previous chapters, seven theoretical traditions, dozens of currents of thought and numerous examples of applicable theory have been introduced (cf. Table 2.1). The chapters contribute considerable evidence to frequent claims that there is ‘One World, Many Theories’ (Walt 1998) and ‘One Field, Many Perspectives’ (Hermann 1998). Furthermore, the chapters demonstrate and confirm that the discipline is truly diverse and characterized by numerous contending perspectives. Such diversity has been praised and celebrated (Lapid 1989) though also observed with various degrees of scepticism (Lijphart 1974; Holsti 2001; Lake 2011). Finally, the previous chapters, especially Chapter 2, have addressed the issue: why theory? In the present chapter, a related issue will be addressed: how theory? How do we theorize? How do we learn to think theoretically?

In this context, it is important to point out the obvious, that ‘theory’ is a noun. It refers to something that can be approached and, in principle, can be comprehended. In our context, it is something we will find in introductions to IR theory such as the one you are reading right now. In Chapter 2 of this book, we were also introduced to the pros and cons of thinking theoretically. Indeed, it is possible to learn about and account for theories without developing the competence to think theoretically. However, the aim of this chapter is to further develop our skills in theoretical thinking. Hence, we proceed from *learning about* theories to an engagement in *active* theorizing. It is therefore useful to keep in mind that ‘theorizing’ is a verb. It is something you *do* and requires intellectual curiosity and engagement to be carried out successfully.

The chapter is based on the hardly controversial idea that theories should not be regarded as non-dynamic, a-historical intellectual constructs. On the contrary, all theories have been created by someone, somewhere and presumably for some purpose. Authorized theorists are not the only ones able to theorize. So can students. Yes you can. Actually, the prime aim of this chapter is to encourage students to engage in active theorizing.

The chapter is intended to serve as a kind of DIY manual and will therefore first introduce key aspects of the craft or art of theorizing, including illustrative descriptions of the process provided by prominent theorists. Second, it will outline the building blocks of theory. Subsequently, we will review a number of issues, each briefly introduced and followed by

an exercise, specifically issues of complementary approaches, theoretical eclecticism, synthesis, reappraisals and theoretical ‘shaping’. Finally, these aspects will be summarized in a DIY manual for active theorizing. In other words, readers will be introduced to a range of guidelines for active theorizing and a number of illustrative examples describing what theorists do when they theorize.

What do theorists do when they theorize?

The following mosaic of five reflections illustrates conceptions of the process of theorizing and is intended to trigger images of the creative art of theorizing. The first part of the mosaic employs a perhaps surprising metaphor of painting. Addressing the issue of what we do when we theorize, Donald Puchala emphasizes that:

[t]he theorists are first and foremost conceptualizers, symbolizers, synthesizers, and abstract organizers ... what they have been doing as theorists is painting for us in their writings bold-stroked, broad-brushed pictures of social reality and telling us that the real world is their pictures. (Puchala 2003: 24)

This is a very apt description of what theorizers do. The painting metaphor is highly suggestive and Puchala is not the only one to use it. Kenneth Waltz also makes use of painting as a metaphor and in a somewhat similar fashion: ‘the neorealist’s world looks different from the one that earlier realists had portrayed’ (Waltz 1990: 32).

The second mosaic points to different characteristics. Terry Nardin, an international political theorist (see [Chapter 3](#)), is very specific in his view of what theory is and is not, as well as the role of theorists:

Making relevance to current affairs a criterion of success in theorizing misunderstands the activity of theorizing and what it can contribute to our understanding of international affairs. The knowledge we call theoretical is by definition detached from factual contingencies and therefore from current affairs. The theorist finds relationships among ideas that are abstracted from the ever-changing spectacle of events ... The aim of the theorist of international justice, as a theorist, is not to prescribe policy; it is to clarify and make coherent the meaning of justice in an international context. (Nardin 2006: 449)

This view does not mean that a given theory cannot be used for policy prescriptions, only that linkages between theory construction and current affairs are weaker than, for instance, in journalism or week-to-week policy analysis.

Third, in his discussion about how economic theory became possible, Waltz points out that:

[t]he first step forward was, as it had to be, to invent the concept of an economy as distinct from the society and the polity in which it is embedded. Some will always complain that it is artificial to think of an economy separate from its society and polity. Such critics are right. Yet the critics miss the point. Theory is artifice. A theory is an intellectual construction by which we select facts and interpret them. The challenge is to bring theory to bear on facts in ways that permit explanation and prediction. That can only be accomplished by distinguishing between theory and fact. Only if this distinction is made can theory be used to examine and interpret facts. (Waltz 1990: 22)

Waltz finds the means used to make economic theory important and interesting, especially because he uses very similar means to build his own theory of international politics.

Fourth, in their book on thinking theory thoroughly, James Rosenau and Mary Durfee reflect on the skills required to theorize. They claim that:

[L]earning the skills underlying the design of theories is not, however, the equivalent of learning how to think theoretically. To move beyond the dos and don'ts of theoretical design, one has to acquire not a set of skills but rather a set of predispositions, a cluster of habits, a way of thinking, a mental lifestyle – or whatever may be the appropriate label for that level of intellectual existence that governs the use of skills and the application of values. (Rosenau and Durfee 1995: 178)

The key to this citation is the distinction between 'a set of skills' and the hard to pin down intellectual competence that governs the use of such skills. Is the act of theorizing an art or a craft? While the distinction can easily be overstated, the assumption behind this chapter is that theorizing is first and foremost a learnable craft. True, some fortunate people enjoy the ability to turn the craft into an art, but this quality does not necessarily depend on the age or status of the person in question. Not only professors master the art of theorizing.

Fifth, Immanuel Wallerstein is an example of a theorist who makes a small change yet with far-reaching ramifications:

I became increasingly aware that all of modern social science presumes that the state boundaries constitute the boundaries of 'societies.' I came to be convinced that this was a very misleading assumption. Instead, I came to argue that the only plausible unit of analysis was a 'world-system,' or more generally, an 'historical social system'. (Wallerstein 2000)

If the five parts of the mosaic describe key aspects of the intellectual process, what, then, is the task we face? The answer is easy. Think traditions. The theoretical traditions represent rich and wide-ranging ontologies, meaning that most of the building blocks are available for further theorizing. The traditions wait for a new generation of theorists who are ready to take up the challenge of theorizing. As emphasized by Jack Donnelly:

[t]he realist research program will continue to generate valuable theories. But the same is true for other research programs. The discipline needs non-realist theories no less than realist ones. Rather than adversaries, let alone enemies, we need to see each other as concerned scholars with different interests, insights and contributions. Rather than *Theory of International Politics*, we need *theories* of international politics, realist and non-realist alike, that together give us a chance to begin to come to terms with the multiple human purposes and complex practices and processes that make up world politics. (Donnelly 2000: 197–8, emphasis in original)

It is against this background that teaching how to theorize becomes relevant and feasible. Rosemary Shinko is a scholar who has introduced experimental teaching in her classes and claims that ‘IR theory is fun and the underlying aim of this class is to allow students to sample the intriguing and engaging craft of the IR theorist’ (Shinko 2006: 45).

Exercise: Find more illustrative examples – pieces of mosaics – and discuss the implications of each conception of theorizing.

Building blocks

Which building blocks do theorists use when building theory? [Figure 11.1](#) shows 14 components that are used repeatedly. It is difficult to imagine any theory that does not include three or more of these building blocks.

In order to understand the nature and function of various building blocks, it is helpful to gain some experience in ‘butchering’ existing theories, for example the liberal democratic peace theory ([Chapter 4](#)), the realist power transition theory ([Chapter 5](#)) or the IPE theory of hegemonic stability ([Chapter 7](#)). Once the components are on the table, we can begin viewing them as building blocks.

Keeping the purpose of our prospective theory in mind, we select from [Figure 11.1](#) the relevant components and make a choice in terms of theoretical ambition. All theories are built by means of a rather limited number of building blocks. If we think in terms of a spectrum, some theories can accomplish much with a very limited number of blocks, whereas other

Figure 11.1 *Some building blocks for theory building*

- assumptions
- claims or propositions
- concepts or sets of concepts
- levels of analysis
- definitions
- kinds of theory
- scope
- philosophical underpinnings
- hypotheses
- criteria for good theory
- specification of actors, structures and processes
- variables
- inductive and deductive reasoning
- eclecticism

theories are very complex yet can do very little for us. Still other theories are simple and explain very little. Finally, some theories can accomplish much by means of a large number of building blocks. The prudent builder of theory will know how to navigate between or around these extremes.

Exercise: Deconstruct a given theory by identifying its building blocks.

Theoretical synthesis

Surely this form of theorizing does not invent everything *de novo*, but the process of combining existing theories or theoretical parts in new ways can be truly innovative and bring about some truly novel analytical options. Theory synthesis is not as straightforward as one might expect. On the contrary, it is an ambiguous and hotly contested way of theorizing that is less technical than first impressions might suggest (cf. Hellmann 2003). The first issue that triggers contention concerns the very meaning of theory synthesis. Some regard synthesis as the outcome of mergers or fusions, that is, as an integration process through which previously independent theories become part of a new composite theory. Others are less demanding and consider discrete theories situated on a common platform as synthesis; in other words, they think that a synthesis is a coherent theoretical framework. The second issue really concerns a clash of different analytical virtues. On the one hand it is common to consider theoretical parsimony a virtue. On the other hand comprehensive explanation is also considered a virtue. By necessity, theoretical synthesis implies a trade-off between these two virtues. Third, the appropriate level of synthesis is contested. Some syntheses comprise theoretical perspectives rather than discrete theories. One prominent example is the so-called neo-neo synthesis, which brings together neorealism

and neoliberalism (Nye 1988; see also Wæver 1996a). Another example is Robert Gilpin's (1987) synthesis of realism and aspects of Marxist political economy. Other syntheses are strictly at the level of discrete theory, that is, involving theories such as those listed above in previous chapters (Chapters 3 to 9) in the variants of theory sections (see e.g. liberal intergovernmentalism in Chapter 4). Fourth, the issue of coherence is contested, because some believe that theories can be synthesized, provided that they are brought together on a common ontological or epistemological footing. Others do not believe that such a common footing is necessary.

The issue of commensurability triggers contending visions of theory synthesis. Some basically hate the idea of incommensurability and do their best to bridge or accommodate any contradictory perspectives. Others believe that incommensurability is a fact of life and that it is a futile endeavour to bring together theories that are bound to have separate functions and qualities.

As an illustrative example, we can see how Andrew Moravcsik accounts for his own attempt at theory synthesis:

[A]n example of structured synthesis, taken from recent empirical research on European integration, places major theories in sequence. In my analysis of major negotiations to create, develop, and amend the treaty structure of the European Union, liberal theory is employed to account for national preferences, rationalist bargaining theory (which could be seen as a non-coercive variant of realism) to account for the efficiency and distributional outcomes of negotiations, and institutionalist theory to account for subsequent delegation. (2003a: 43)

In this example no mergers or fusions take place. The outcome, labelled liberal intergovernmentalism, is rather a synthesis on a common (rationalist) footing (Moravcsik 1998). Frank Schimmelfennig (2003) provides a second example. In order to analyse the European Union enlargement process, Schimmelfennig brings together a rationalist theory of instrumental action and a constructivist theory of communicative rationality. Barry Buzan (1993), who reconstructs neorealism by means of adding further explanatory variables, provides a third and final example.

The choice for theory synthesis is often characterized as bridge building or dialogue, notions suggesting friendly accommodation, innocence, innovation and neutrality. In this context, however, it is worth keeping in mind that some mergers in the business world are frequently referred to as hostile takeovers. Similarly, some dialogues are conducted based on a range of different conditions, including conditions exclusively formulated by one of the dialogue partners. Theory synthesis can also be seen as a subsuming process, that is, a process implying extinction for one or more of the synthesized elements. If you decide to enter a dialogue and do not want to be extinguished, then the game is to make sure that you are the one who subsumes and avoids becoming subsumed.

Finally, one variant of the synthesis game is called ‘add on’. Basically, the proposition is that a favourite theoretical perspective is claimed or assumed to explain most cases or the most important processes, yet an ‘add on’ perspective is required in order to handle residual cases and processes of a secondary order of importance. Gunnar Sjöstedt (1977) represents an illustrative example. Sjöstedt favours a rationalist approach in studies of the EU’s ‘international actorness’ yet reluctantly acknowledges that ideational approaches must be added to the primary theoretical framework. The ‘add on’ option invites conclusions such as the following. Stephen Walt appears to represent a pluralist position, acknowledging a role for realist, liberal and constructivist perspectives alike. Nonetheless, he concludes the following: ‘The “complete diplomat” of the future should remain cognizant of realism’s emphasis on the inescapable role of power, keep liberalism’s awareness of domestic forces in mind, and occasionally reflect on constructivism’s vision of change’ (Walt 1998: 44). Such a conclusion seems to be based on the idea that social reality only occasionally plays a role in world politics, for which reason it should be added on to the perspectives that enjoy the status of ‘master’ perspectives.

Exercise: Discuss the option of synthesizing, including advantages and disadvantages.

Reappraisals

Theoretical orientations come and go. Once upon a time, old-time geopolitics was an attractive perspective, and still is in some places. Later on, during the 1960s, the behavioural revolution swept parts of the Western world, eventually to be followed by the post-behavioural era. Currently, the English School is being ‘reconvened’, a notion suggesting that the School went through a ‘dark ages’ period, a period of relative decline between its foundation and the present. During the 1970s, particularly in Europe, Western Marxism was a respectable orientation. With a few exceptions, for instance the Amsterdam School and world systems theory, this is no longer the case. Since the 1990s, we have witnessed the constructivist turn and the decline of realism.

More examples could be provided yet the important point is that reappraisals of IR theory are unavoidable. The personal reappraisal is the most straightforward. For example, we can see how Robert Keohane became attracted to formal theories in the early 1980s, yet subsequently lost interest:

[A]s a result of my involvement in a collective attempt to understand ‘cooperation under anarchy’ through the use of simple precepts derived from game theory, I concluded that it was unlikely that greater formalization of game theory would provide a clear structure for precise and insightful investigation of world politics – and, in any case, that I was

intellectually unequipped and temperamentally unsuited to making a contribution toward that enterprise. (1989: 29)

Personal ‘aha’ experiences are seldom synchronically accomplished across the discipline. Keohane describes how ‘I can still remember the “aha” feeling, in my fourth floor office at Stanford, when I glimpsed the relevance of theories of industrial organization for understanding international regimes’ (1989: 28). Karl Deutsch (1989) has described his coincidental yet crucially important meeting with Norbert Wiener, the famous inventor of cybernetics. Hans Morgenthau has described his meeting with lawyer Carl Schmitt, as well as the conclusions he reached when sitting in at the early Frankfurt School meetings. In this fashion, the rhythm of ebb and tide as well as the nature of the waves vary across geographies – making it very difficult to synthesize ‘mainstreams’ of thinking and general patterns of intellectual development.

The notion of ‘tradition’ connotes a long-term perspective and a dialectics between continuity and change, whereas the notion of ‘current’ suggests a more dynamic, medium-term perspective. When realists claim that the realist tradition reaches back to Thucydides or Machiavelli, they are claiming to have access to some perpetual insights or timeless wisdom. Philosophy of science approaches draw on other criteria. This is where philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos or Larry Laudan enter the scene, for instance in reviews of major international relations theories (Elman and Elman 2003).

Each of these approaches produces a different narrative of the history of the discipline. Obviously, however, none of them is ideal. Theoretical debates are in part about dogma and progress. Hence, you should be introduced to arguments and behind-the-scene manoeuvres. Without understanding the arguments put forward, you are unlikely to understand theoretical debates and, in turn, the current state of the art. Furthermore, without an introduction to the role of argumentative structures, you will never accept the idea that the state of the art is a bundle of contending perspectives.

Shaping theories

Previous chapters have described how theories can be shaped, that is, given different forms by means of a range of different epistemological commitments. In the words of Martha Finnemore:

Neither constructivism nor rational choice provides substantive explanations of international political behaviour until coupled with some theoretical understanding of who or what are relevant agents and structures as well as some empirical understanding of what those agents might want and what the content of that social structure might be. (Finnemore 1996: 28)

The option of theory shaping, that is, the claim that, for example, constructivism can be merged with a substantive theoretical orientation, can be generalized. In other words, it is possible to fuse constructivist perspectives together with most theoretical traditions, currents and theories. Alexander Wendt's (1999) theory of international cooperation can thus be considered a constructivist liberal theory of international cooperation (see [Chapter 4](#)). Realists have not necessarily argued against the theory because it is constructivist; rather, they might have targeted its liberal elements. In general, to the degree that they have criticized constructivism and liberal theory, they first and foremost criticize the liberal features. Thus, John Mearsheimer (1995) regards 'critical theory' (including constructivism) as a set of propositions – garbage can-like – that he happens not to share. In turn, he turns the richness of perspectives within critical theory into a 'mashed potato' version of theory that probably does not satisfy anybody. Furthermore, he sees an old-time idealist version of liberalism lurking and therefore activates E. H. Carr's prototype realist criticism of utopian liberalism or idealism. By contrast, Jeffrey Barkin (2003) argues that it is possible to fuse realism and constructivism, that is, he basically argues it is possible to develop, for example, a constructivist realist balance of power theory.

The option of shaping can be generalized in a second fashion. Constructivism is not the only approach that can be combined with major substantive traditions. There is a similar option for other second-order theories, including rational choice, behaviouralism, positivism and scientific realism. Let us consider a few examples. Peace research was originally introduced in parallel to – or rather as part of – the behavioural revolution, implying that peace research drew on behavioural armaments when criticizing 'traditional' perspectives, in particular realist traditionalism. David Singer's contribution is but one example and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* another. By contrast Hans Morgenthau's version of realism is informed by continental European political thought, ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to the German 19th-century *Machtschule* (Guzzini 1998; Williams 2005). However, Morgenthau is sometimes categorized as a prototype positivist, particularly because his famous six principles were cast in that fashion. Robert Gilpin explains their origin and function:

When Morgenthau wrote *Scientific Man* he was not at Chicago. When he went to Chicago, however, he found it dominated by the social science fashion of the time; he apparently realized that if he were to make an impact, he had to learn and write social science. He decided that international politics had to aim to become an objective science; I think he was influenced by those in comparative government and other subfields pushing the idea of an objective science of politics. Paradoxically, when you get to the end of *Politics Among Nations* it is a moral tract on how states should behave. (Gilpin 2005: 365)

Like other rich traditions, realism has been cast in all sorts of meta-forms, ranging from the classical approach, behaviouralism (cf. Vasquez 1983) to rational choice (Waltz 1979) and constructivism (Barkin 2003).

The theorizing mode of shaping is not without its problems. Popular images of various substantive theories will inevitably be challenged. John Mearsheimer (2006) believes that there are no European realists. He has reached this conclusion due to his peculiar conception of realism; as the conception's criteria are not fulfilled, he is bound to conclude that whatever European scholars represent, it is not realism. Furthermore, if not realism, then it has to be the default 'other' orientation, that is, idealism (liberalism). Thus reassured about the enduring nature of IR theory, he activates realism's standard operating procedures for encountering liberal thinking. In fact, he effectively joins Robert Kagan (2003) in criticism of liberal thought, European vintage (America is from Hobbesian Mars, Europe is from Kantian Venus).

The shaping option is likely to short-circuit such well-established certainties, which can be considered good news because it promises theoretical reflection and innovation.

Complementary or competitive approaches?

In contrast to Robert Jervis (1998), who clearly regards constructivism as a competitor to realism, Henry Nau (2002) has demonstrated that realist theories of power and constructivist theories of identity can be considered complementary theoretical positions capable of working together within a single framework of analysis. In other words, the two perspectives are established on different assumptions and contribute different insights, but their relationship is not necessarily competitive or conflicting. The relationship can actually be complementary and contribute to our understanding of, for example, American foreign policy (cf. Nau 2002). Martha Finnemore reaches a similar conclusion:

The cases may give the impression that constructivism as a theoretical approach stands in opposition to realism and liberalism. This is not so: the relationship is complementary not competing. My argument is not that norms matter but interests do not, nor is it that norms are more important than interests. My argument is that norms shape interests. Consequently, the two cannot logically be opposed. (Finnemore 1996: 27)

Whenever students face a research question, they also face the problem of identifying a suitable theoretical framework. In case more than one theory has been chosen, it is compulsory to specify their relationship. Are the two or more theories competitive or complementary?

The issue of complementarity takes us to the potentials of eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). On the one hand theoretical eclecticism is often dismissed because: (i) it is said to be an example of mixing apples and oranges; (ii) eclectic analytical frameworks aim at approximating the real world thereby missing the benefits of simplified theoretical propositions; (iii) causal or constitutive logics soon intensify in terms of complexity, making subsequent operationalization difficult. Hedley Bull quite simply warned that ‘in the present controversy, eclecticism, masquerading as tolerance, is the greatest danger of all’ (1966a: 377). On the other hand there have been several pleas for eclecticism. One of the most elaborate cases for analytical eclecticism emphasizes that the gladiatorial approach to theoretical competition has proved to be less than useful. Research traditions should instead be seen as at least partly complementary. If so, a given research question can usefully be answered by means of drawing on two or more research traditions. Hence, the art of theorizing becomes the art of choosing and mixing selected parts of research traditions or parts of specific theories; of describing how the adequate balance of selected parts should be and how they hang together (Katzenstein and Sil 2004). Having made the case for eclecticism, Katzenstein and his team demonstrate how it can be used in the context of rethinking Asian security. Similarly, an eclectic approach has been used to analyse foreign policies in the Middle East (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2002).

Best Western?

Despite the discipline, the diversity and the progress, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan have raised the following key question: ‘Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory?’ (2007). Across the six continents, it is increasingly recognized that IR theory is a form or field of study predominantly cultivated in the United States and Europe (Hoffmann 1977; Kahler 1993; Crawford and Jarvis 2001; Jørgensen and Knudsen 2006; Tickner and Wæver 2009). In most other parts of the world – Australia and Canada constitute a couple of important exceptions – the art of theorizing is hardly on the agenda. This is the case in, for example, Latin America (Tickner 2003; Taylor 2012), China and Japan (Chan 1999; Callahan 2001; Inoguchi and Bacon 2001; Song 2001; Kohno 2013; Cunningham-Cross 2014), South Asia (Behera 2007, 2009), the Middle East and Africa. Is this a problematic state of affairs? Let us begin our examination of the issue by pointing out that part of Acharya and Buzan’s argument is not without its problems. According to Hedley Bull (1991), the term ‘international theory’ is misleading, because it is not the theory but rather the subject matter that is international. A somewhat similar criticism can be directed at Acharya and Buzan’s conception because the IR theories in question are not necessarily

‘Western’, even if created and institutionalized in the West. Furthermore, Acharya and Buzan might be wrong in asserting the absence of theory in the non-Western world. Could it be that, for instance, scholars from the Third World employ different concepts or understand traditional IR concepts differently? That the worlds of their making are so markedly different from the ones cultivated by Western minds that the easy exit route is simply to ignore such atypical conceptions? Arlene Tickner (2003), writing from a conflict-ridden Colombian perspective, emphasizes that Third World scholars look fundamentally differently on IR and also the meaning of key terms, such as war, the state and sovereignty, is markedly different.

In the following exercise, you are invited to imagine that you are an analyst of international affairs based in Beijing, Brussels or Bogota – Taipei, Teheran or Tokyo – Cotonou, Cairo or Catania – Mexico City, Moscow or Male. Make your choice! Perhaps you will conclude that the geography of theory building is utterly unimportant for the form and substance of your theory. After all, you will find realist, liberal and English School theorists around the globe, and you will find rational choicers, constructivists, positivists and post-positivists in most corners of the world. If this is the case, there simply is no Western, Eastern, Northern or Southern theory. The search for a theory with Chinese characteristics is futile (cf. Song 2001), just as African students – despite claims to the opposite (see Gordon 2002) – do not need radical political economy approaches rather than – or at the expense of – realist or liberal theories (see also Dunn and Shaw 2001).

By contrast, you may conclude that the economic, political, institutional or cultural contexts do have an impact on the theorizing process. The artifice characterizing theories may be shaped differently depending on both your experience and the collective experiences characterizing the area you are based in. If this is your conclusion, there is a long way to go in terms of reconsidering the existing theoretical traditions as well as exploring the options of complementing the existing body of theory with theories drawing on non-Western experiences (Lizee 2011). The reconsideration requirement also comprises theory application. While Mearsheimer’s advice on US policy is based on a well-known offensive realist position (cf. Mearsheimer 2003), which advice would an offensive realist give to the EU, China, India or Russia?

A DIY manual in theorizing

Having passed the above waypoints, it is now possible to proceed and put everything together in an 11-step manual. While each step is important in itself, it is perfectly possible to skip one or more steps. In order to optimize the process for your purpose, it might be an idea to browse the steps and reorder their sequence.

1. *Problem-driven theorizing*

Perhaps theorizing is fun. In this context, it is useful to keep in mind that Rosenau and Durfee (1995) emphasize the importance of being professionally ‘playful’ in the course of the theorizing process. Their point is well taken. Theorizing does require a dimension of playfulness, for example trying on for size counter-intuitive reasoning. However, this section focuses on problem-driven theorizing; it emphasizes that you engage in theorizing because you have a given problem in mind. You engage in theorizing in order to better understand or analyse a given problem. Hence, you reflect on the key features of a specific analytical tool that you subsequently intend to use in an instrumental fashion. Instrumental theory building might pursue the following four-step procedure. First, begin by briefly describing how the international political agenda has changed in each decade throughout the 20th century. Subsequently, make your own personal top-three list of world politics issues that you believe are the most important. Explain briefly why you think these issues belong at the top of the contemporary international agenda. Subsequently, discuss proposals in class in order to reach a consensus conception. Second, consider existing theories. Identify their building blocks and the cement binding the bits and pieces together. The following elements are likely to pop up: actors, structures, processes, levels of analysis, propositions, claims, assumptions, concepts or sets of concepts (cf. [Figure 11.1](#)). Even more building blocks can possibly be identified (if so, which ones?). In any case, it appears as though a relatively limited number of key elements can be found in all theories. Once these elements have been identified, it all becomes a question of arranging or rearranging the deck chairs, that is, the building blocks. Third, you want to better understand the top-three issues on the political agenda. Explain how you think your theoretical toolbox should look in order to help you analyse and better understand the issues of your concern. In other words, build a theory that you believe can help. Fourth, consider whether the top three issues contain any normative dimension (hint: they always do). Do you have a preferred solution or outcome in mind? If so, which likely role will this normative dimension play in your theory? Finally, does your theory include any constitutive elements?

2. *Scope*

At some point you need to take a strategically important decision: specifying the scope of your theory. In the present context, scope refers to the ambition of the theory you have in mind, specifically whether you aim at creating a general theory, a mid-range theory characterized by a narrow or specific area of concentration. Obviously, your choice should be consistent with the purpose of your theory. Before deciding, please keep in mind that most attempts at building *general* IR theories have failed and that the interest in the relatively few that have been created is rapidly declining.

3. *Kinds of theory*

Once you have decided on the scope of theory and explained your choice, you can continue by deciding what kind of theory you want to build. In the previous chapters, you have been introduced to a number of different theories, and you know that each kind of theory has its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, you know that explanatory, interpretive and normative theories are designed fundamentally differently. Given what you now know about these options and features, what is your choice?

4. *Procedures of theory building*

You can now consider which procedure of theory building you want to follow. The options include the following four procedures:

- The case study approach invites an inductive approach to theorizing (George and Bennett 2005). Given that your primary interest is in theory construction, you probably do not have time to conduct a sufficiently high number of case studies yourself. This is not necessarily a problem, because you can use the case studies conducted by other analysts and simply summarize or synthesize findings. In other words, you can use other researchers as a kind of sub-contractor and skim their findings for theoretically relevant insights. For you, this is a rewarding form of theorizing, because you get to know the substance of multiple case studies yet are able to maintain your focus on innovative synthesizing and summarize findings, an analytical task that most case study analysts tend to avoid; in part because case studies are very time consuming, in part because many analysts do not aim at theorizing.
- The pros and cons of theory synthesis have been presented above and there is no need to go further into detail about this procedure. Hence, consider if you find synthesis an attractive option.
- The option of reconstructing existing theories is a procedure of theorizing implying both criticism and construction, and the former is usually instrumentally used for the latter. In other words, the point of departure is a given body of theory that, in one way or another, is deemed internally incoherent or insufficient or unsatisfactory for application purposes. An attempt to reconstruct neorealism was presented in [Chapter 5](#) (Buzan 1993). Barry Buzan aimed at reconstructing neorealism by adding a couple of more explanatory variables.
- In many cases, conceptualizing is the first step in theorizing; in some cases the only step. In other words, it is difficult to underestimate the crucially important role of concise conceptualization. Kenneth Waltz once acknowledged that in *Theory of International Politics* (1979) he ‘slipped into using “sovereignty” for “autonomy”’ (Waltz 1990: 37). In this manner, he acknowledges the importance of conceptual precision. When theorizing, keep in mind that you leave everyday language behind and engage

in more or less professional discourses of theory. Words have meanings, some even have multiple meanings and some have contested meanings. When conceptualizing, you should therefore remember to explicate and specify the meaning of the concepts you have decided to employ.

5. Building blocks

In a previous section (cf. [Figure 11.1](#)) you were introduced to a range of different theoretical building blocks. It is now time to identify the relevant building blocks, that is, the bits and pieces of theory that you deem relevant. At least for a start, it is recommended to limit the number of building blocks. You can always add further bits and pieces if you deem doing so necessary or fruitful.

6. Important features

Sooner or later you are bound to identify important actors, structures and processes, explaining connections between them as well as specifying their relative importance. The first part, focusing on actors, is probably the easier part. In most international relations theory, (major) states count as important actors. The question is how many different kinds of actors you want to include when building your theory. Among other kinds of actors, we find actors such as companies, NGOs and other interest groups, as well as entire civil societies. The challenge is to find an appropriate balance between inclusion and exclusion. In this context, you may find Kenneth Waltz's comment thought-provoking:

Should one broaden the perspective of international political theory to include economics? An international political-economic theory would presumably be twice as good as a theory of international politics alone ... A political-economic theory would represent a long step toward a general theory of international relations, but no one has shown how to take it. (Waltz 1990: 31–2)

The reason it makes sense to contemplate such an extension concerning actors is that Waltz uses actors to constitute his conception of structure.

Speaking about structure, you can proceed and begin to contemplate which kind of structures you want to include in your theory. Given that numerous existing theories are characterized by weak notions of structure, this element constitutes a real challenge for many would-be theorists. If you choose to include structures, however, your theory may potentially become more complex and intellectually interesting. If you choose to include both actors and structures, you are subsequently bound to reflect on the relations between them. In other words, you should consider your position concerning the agent–structure problem (cf. Giddens 1984; Wendt 1987; Hollis and Smith 1990).

Finally, it is time to think about your notion of processes. For some, processes are simply the outcome of dynamics between actors and structures (Hollis and Smith 1990). Others have specified notions of process variables (Haas 1958; Nye 1988; Buzan 1993). In any case, the omnipresence of discourses on processes, whether we talk about processes of globalization, European integration, de-colonization or climate change, appears to make it rewarding to think hard on the nature of processes and their respective roles in a theory of international relations.

7. *Import options*

Probably you have knowledge of theories that have been created or employed in other academic disciplines. In any case consider whether importing theories from other fields of study is possible, necessary or desirable. In other words, this step is about the art of grand-scale application and about taking advantage of knowledge of the developments within several academic disciplines. There are many examples of importing theory in this manner. The following five examples will suffice for illustrative purposes. First, in his endeavour to create neorealism, Kenneth Waltz draws heavily on microeconomics. In many ways, neorealism is microeconomics applied to international politics. The relationship between firms and markets mirrors the relations between states and the international system. Furthermore, the assumptions about actors are identical in the sense that states are assumed to be utility maximizers, rational actors engaged in instrumental or strategic action. Finally, a certain sense of timelessness characterizes both microeconomics and neorealism, where any sense of historical development has been ditched. Importing theory from economics is hardly limited to neorealism. Theories of strategy (Schelling 1960), game theory, rational choice, principal agent theory and numerous other theoretical orientations are all deeply inspired by developments within the field of economics.

By contrast, Alexander Wendt draws heavily on developments within sociology; specifically on inter-actionist sociological group theory and structuration theory as developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984). When theorizing global society, Mathias Albert (2001) draws on the work of German sociologist Niklas Luhmann and his systems theory. The discipline of history has also been a very important contributor of inspiration. When conceptualizing historical structure, John Ruggie (1989) draws on the French *Annales* School. Similarly, Donald Puchala (2003) traces relations between history and international relations, and Robert Cox draws attention to the concept of historical structure. Moreover, most of the English School has a very close relationship to history; not least diplomatic history. Several English School studies are macro-historical investigations, for example, concerning the dynamics of states systems across time. As outlined in Chapter 3, international political theory draws – unsurprisingly – on political theory, political philosophy, the history of ideas and conceptual history.

In summary, we can conclude that there is – and presumably always has been – a lively exchange of ideas between International Relations and other academic disciplines. This exchange is likely to continue, perhaps with your theory as the next example.

8. *Teamwork*

If possible, make the theorizing process a teamwork process. Obviously, this is not to say that individuals cannot theorize. Many have done so. However, theorizing in teams facilitates the thorough discussion of decisions, priorities and findings.

9. *Consult other sources of inspiration*

If you get the time, read key books and articles on the art or craft of theorizing, for example the publications listed in ‘Further reading’ (below). There is no single path to theorizing, and reading provides much food for thought. Search the internet for further inspiration, including key terms such as conceptualizing, theorizing, thinking theoretically, theory synthesis, theory building or related terms.

10. *For which reason?*

If theory, as Robert Cox has famously claimed, ‘is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’ (Cox 1981, emphasis added), then *who* is the special someone for your theory and which *purpose* does your theory intend to serve? Discuss the relevance and implications of Robert Cox’s theorem. In case you do not agree with Cox, which arguments can you provide that run counter to his claim?

11. *Problems abound ahead!*

The final step is to attempt to accept the fact that to every solution there is a problem. In other words, you should expect that your theory will be criticized from different perspectives and for different reasons. If you choose a middle-of-the-road theory, for instance, rest assured that those cruising either side of the road will criticize you for misrepresenting something and missing important insights about international relations. The same happens if you theorize in some radical fashion, now with the middle-of-the-roaders popping up as your critics. Theorizing is essentially a catch-22 situation, and you can just as well consider how you will handle criticism, possibly trying to pre-empt at least some kind of criticism. Being pre-emptive means including specification of scope conditions, that is, your claims regarding when or where your theory is relevant, and where or when it is entirely irrelevant. James Rosenau and Mary Durfee (1995) rightly emphasize that you should be prepared to be proven wrong. This may well be a frustrating outcome, yet there is no guaranteed way of avoiding such negative experiences. Furthermore, the act of theorizing is in a certain sense risky business, as you are the

sole person/group responsible for your creation. You cannot blame internal incoherence, misreadings or unintended applications on another distant theorist about whom you often know relatively little.

Conclusion

This chapter is based on the idea that DIY theorizing is both possible and desirable. In order to encourage you to theorize, a range of key aspects of theorizing has been introduced and discussed. Examples of how prominent theorists have tackled these aspects have been provided, and a comprehensive recipe has been outlined in the form of a DIY manual for theorizing. How you may want to make use of the toolbox and its tools is basically up to you. Even if the outcome of theorizing is not a theory of, say, international cooperation, the theorizing process will undoubtedly trigger a better understanding of existing theories. By means of DIY theorizing – the process of building your own theory – you will become familiar with existing theories in ways that are fundamentally different from just reading about them. You will know where theories come from, whether in historical or geographical terms. Who creates them? Furthermore, you will be prompted to explore the structure of a given theory as well as the deeper foundations upon which specific theories have been built, that is, their ontological and epistemological attributes. Finally, having completed the exercises, questions such as the following will acquire a different status and gain in terms of relevance. Which actors, structures and processes are the more important, historically as well as in the contemporary world?

DIY theorizing

Diagnoses of contemporary developments are notoriously difficult, and this feature is also valid concerning trends in theorizing. Summaries of contemporary developments are necessarily marked by the major disadvantage that developments have not been sifted through the big merciless filter of history, that is, the social process through which simplified representations are being crystallized, thereby assuming a form that resembles some kind of order of affairs on which we largely agree. This explains why it is very difficult to predict where the discipline's next theoretical breakthroughs will occur. European émigré scholars introduced the continental European IR theory tradition to the American academic environment, thus making a significant contribution to the discipline (Söllner 1990; Rösch 2014). Subsequently, North America became a hothouse for theorizing international relations and, as demonstrated throughout the book, remains a premier centre for theoretical reflection. In recent decades, European scholars have managed to put a significant mark on international theorizing, and their efforts have gained speed. When looking beyond American and European horizons, we can notice for instance how Song (2001) and Callahan (2001) discuss how

IR in China ought to be developed. Song does not find IR with Chinese characteristics particularly attractive. In his view, Chinese IR scholars should adopt 'modern' theoretical positions and methodologies. Callahan does not find Chinese characteristics attractive either but makes a plea for a more cautious approach than uncritical import (see also Chan 1999). In 2007, the Oxford University Press launched a new journal entitled *Chinese Perspectives on International Relations*, indicating that we should begin to recognize Chinese scholarship as one of several emerging new global centres. Although focusing on German scholarship on international relations, Michael Zürn (1994) and Günther Hellmann (1994) essentially discuss the same dilemma between import and 'home-brew'. Actually, it is a global classic issue that also, for instance, Russian, Indian and Brazilian scholars address. The issue simply reflects the present somewhat uneven production of theoretical knowledge.

Against this background, the invitation to theorize is meant to encourage a more interactive and less 'iconic' approach to the teaching of IR theory. The book has been designed with a view of the idea that competence in theorizing should be extended from the few to the many. In line with Petr Drulak's (2003) argument, theoretical competence should be extended to areas in which such competence has been relatively less developed. The present book has been designed with precisely this objective in mind. The need for such extensions is based on the fact that, in major parts of the world, theory does not have the status of defining the discipline. In these parts of the world, theory does not have the same value as in, say, North America, Europe or Australia. Consequently, descriptive and quasi-normative studies are much more widespread. These comments lead to the principle of DIY theorizing.

The demand for new theories is linked to changes in time and space. As demonstrated throughout the 20th century, changing times trigger a demand for the development of new theories. It is thus no coincidence that realism emerged in conflict-ridden Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, reigned during the Cold War and has experienced decline since the end of the Cold War. However, most of the existing theories were created during the Cold War, that is, in an international context that somehow might influence why given theories were created in the first place, but also influencing the characteristics of these theories. When the Cold War ended, it was therefore time to reconsider the portfolio of international relations theory (Allan and Goldman 1992; Kegley 1993). We now find ourselves in the 21st century, and it is most likely that the new context presents compelling reasons for creating new theories or adapting existing theories to new circumstances. To some degree, the political agenda of the 21st century is markedly different from the 20th-century agenda.

New spaces are also likely to trigger new trends in theorizing. While no space on the globe is novel as such, many are novel in the context of theories

of international relations. As the craft of theorizing becomes less unevenly distributed worldwide, it becomes more likely that unevenly distributed experiences, assumptions and conceptualizations will trigger new trends in theorizing. Morten Valbjørn's (2008b) exploration of the nexus between the general IR discipline and specific area studies represents a promising strategy for fruitful interaction between the quest for generalized broad knowledge (IR) and the competing quest for specific yet deep knowledge (area studies).

Contemporary research agendas

Two important flows of influence in particular determine the shape of research agendas on international affairs. One such flow consists of the kind of questions different people raise when certain events or developments in world politics make them wonder about possible explanations. During the WTO Cancun meeting on trade in 2003, several African diplomats asked why they should accept an agreement that was largely determined by the US and the EU. Similarly, Africans south of the Sahara ask what they can do in order to avoid becoming further marginalized in the world economy. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, many Americans asked, 'Why do they hate us?' This question is inevitably followed by a different kind of question: 'How do we best fight this new kind of threat?' Similarly, the rise of predominantly American power leads some people to ask, 'Is the international system still anarchic or has it become hierarchical?' or, 'Does it make sense to speak of an American empire?' Current affairs politics is also connected to research agendas in a more structured fashion, as many research programmes are formulated by governments. They ask the questions which scholars subsequently aim at answering.

As we have seen in previous chapters, theoretical traditions, currents of thought and individual theories are closely linked. Combined, they produce the second flow of questions, thus contributing to constitute the contemporary research agenda. The chapters on theoretical traditions all include sections spelling out the questions people tend to ask when they work within a given tradition and, in turn, what they study when they analyse international affairs. For each tradition, the section functions as a guide to the FAQs.

In order not to neglect the nuances, diversity within traditions and the shared concerns of traditions will be identified. Two examples illustrate the logic. Feminist scholars begin by asking why (the variable of) gender has played virtually no role in IR theory for such a long time. Subsequently, they proceed by demonstrating instances of importance of gender in world politics. One of the functions of feminist theories is exactly to generate questions to be asked, that is, to provide the stuff that makes research agendas. For scholars working within the English School tradition, the point of

departure is often the existence, expansion and dynamics of international society. Hence, they raise questions about how states behave – or should behave – in international society, about the proper balance between order and justice in international society, or the dilemmas characterizing humanitarian intervention, including the controversial temporary cancellation of national sovereignty and self-determination.

In summary, contemporary research agendas are constituted by the outcome of the turbulent encounters between these two major flows of influence. Christian Reus-Smit argues convincingly that:

More than most fields of social inquiry, IR's principal approaches – its paradigms, schools of thought and 'isms' – retain an animating interest in the question of how we should act. This is true of realists and liberals, feminists and Gramscians. They differ over who the 'we' is (states, scholars or other social actors), over the purposes of action (order, cooperation or justice), and over what counts as action (state practices, social resistance or critique), but they nonetheless share this orientation. (Reus-Smit 2012: 536)

Thus, theorizing and practical relevance can be compatible objectives. Research agendas are determined by the combined output of the questions asked and issues examined, no matter whether questions are related to events or developments within world politics or informed by theoretical reflection and advances.