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A POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES: WHO GETS WHAT, W--ETC(U)

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Who Gets What, When, and Why,

Steven J. Rosen

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Who Gets What, When, and Why

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Prepared for a Conference on the Future of International
Studies, sponsored by the International Studies Association.

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I have been asked to reflect upon the condition of the field of international studies at the threshold of the 1980s: where we are, how we got here, and where we are headed or should be headed. Candidly, I'm not sure that I'm the right guy for this assignment, for several reasons. First, while use of the term "we" is probably a useful convention to enhance the sense of community across the vast sea of international studies and specialists, and certainly reflects a feeling of goodwill at this conference, the population of the international studies "community," as I've come to know it, actually consists of many hundreds of sects, tribes, families, and one-man schools of thought, each of which has only a passing interest, if not outright disdain, for the others. Lacking an accepted general theory, or even a body of competing theories (in spite of the best efforts of anthology editors to describe the field as a battleground of contending approaches), I have come to the unhappy view that international studies is not a field at all but merely a domain of human interaction. In practice, an international studies specialist is anyone who is interested in some dimension of one or more foreign countries and/or some form of social interaction that happens to cross national boundaries. I am happy that there is an International Studies Association to hold meetings where I can exchange meetings with old friends and new ones, and exchange ideas with the handful of people I can respect and understand, but from a leadership point of view even our mightiest efforts as an organization will have little

noticeable effect on those unimpressionable middle-aged minds out there. The International Studies Association is a very useful and necessary address where we can find each other, I hasten to add, and I am certainly not calling for its dissolution. But as a non-believer who comes only for the church socials, I am an odd choice to lecture to the faithful (if that's who you folks are) on theosophical issues.

Another reason why I may not be the right guy for this assignment is the fact that some time ago, after what seemed to me to be strenuous efforts with like-minded colleagues to change the field, I despaired of this effort and retired to cultivate my own research garden. Frankly, I find most of the theoretical work in the field tedious, repetitive in its essentials, and mired in abstraction and methodological gimmickry rather than useful substance. The publishers of most of the learned journals, sadly including the *International Studies Quarterly*, apparently put some kind of soporific gas in the glue they use in the bindings, because I find that if I open the pages all the way I fall promptly to sleep. For this reason, the *Quarterly* makes excellent bedtime reading, but I don't know anybody who reads it for guidance on the state of international affairs or to deepen their understanding of the real issues of war and peace, how to understand and deal with the Soviet Union, issues of the Third World, etc. There is, of course, a good piece from time to time, but the amount of slag that has to be separated to get to the

iron makes the operation of this mine uneconomical for anybody but friends and relatives of the authors or other readers whose primary motive is to get clues how they can get their own writings accepted for publication by imitating what has already appeared.

Perhaps it is a credit to the vitality and healthy spirit of self-criticism in the field, or the pervasive liberal impulse of masochism, that a skeptic like me is given such an opportunity to express his doubts. Or maybe the truth is that, behind the pious facade, similar dark thoughts harbor in the recesses of many minds, and people would like them ventilated. Whatever the reason, I take as my assignment the sources of our dilemma. Those who don't think things are so bad may well find what follows irrelevant.

The Sources of Our Dilemma

My central argument is that theoretical work in international studies did not come to its present sorry condition by accident. Several vectors of force determined its direction and mission. Nor could the field be reengineered without affecting adversely many interests. While the field lacks intellectual integration, it has a highly organized social structure, a privileged establishment, well understood rights and responsibilities, a system of rewards and punishments, and the other accoutrements of a social order. Any attempt to change the field necessarily would alter the distribution of costs and benefits, gains and losses within it, and those who propose to try must expect that there will be firm resistance by

others whose interests are served by things as they are. One could probably elaborate a full class analysis of the social system of international studies.

But how did the system come to assume the shape that it has? Perhaps the application of other analytic devices from the literature, applied to the international studies system itself, will offer some clues. For example, we know from the study of bureaucratic politics that where you stand is importantly a function of where you sit, or, in the case of younger entrants to the community, where you would like to sit. To illustrate: we have by now a considerable number of international studies specialists who have achieved influential positions in many universities by propagating the notion that revolutionary advances in knowledge of the field can be attained by applying rigorous statistical and mathematical methods. If, somehow, it could be proven that this effort has been relatively fruitless and digressive, these men and women would lose their claim to their posts and the many privileges and powers that they have accumulated. When such an effort is made, however, it is only to be expected that the quantitative academic bureaucrats will use the means at their disposal to resist. What is at issue for them is no longer merely the truth content of their original methodological assertion, but by now also an array of concrete, material interests to perpetuate the "scientific" effort and to secure jobs for their disciples. Their first line of defense

may take the traditional forms of reasoned argument, but eventually they demonstrate all the symptoms of cognitive dissonance: signals consistent with their deeply held values and beliefs are recorded and added to the body of dogma, but messages threatening to their cognitive structure are ignored and forgotten. Also, like any other bureaucracy, they use the rewards and punishments available to advance the positions of junior colleagues who share their values and will strengthen their offices, and to stop the advancement of those who do not share the core values and may threaten the system. The point here is not that it is any worse than would be done by another bureaucratic elite, but rather that it is precisely the same, and that, by implication, the growth and survival of the quantitative school is explained largely by political determinants rather than its intellectual claims.

To the bureaucratic determinants, we can add factors derived from the related approach known as organization theory. Once the members of an academic coalition reach a certain critical mass, the doors to permanent autonomy open, even if the field is weak in academic terms. It spins off its own journals to provide a means of communication, established publications are taken over, and the editorial boards of elite presses are penetrated. Exploitation of these outlets feeds back into the university recruitment and promotion process, and the symbiosis of the system is assured. As the system grows, its senior members gain patronage positions.

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graduate students devote their dissertations to testing or expanding the theoretical work of their mentors, and undergraduates serve as a captive audience and market for the products of the new subdiscipline. Once this point is reached in the development of the organization, it becomes almost completely invulnerable to external challenge. In the liberal environment of the university, it is not necessary to demonstrate that the world really benefits from or needs a given discipline or subdiscipline--it is sufficient to prove that a field exists, that it is the fashion of the times (the "prevailing paradigm in the discipline"), and that a given candidate has sufficient reputation among other members of the field to be worth hiring as its local representative. The much vaunted "national reputation," of course, means nothing more than a certain dispersion of adherents to the creed over space. Mr. X in California is the "national reputation" for Mr. Y in Michigan, and vice versa. A situation has long since been achieved where a quantitative scholar can be trained, hired, published, promoted, wined and dined, and even married entirely within the community of international studies behaviorists, and hardly needs to answer to the skeptics from outside this community at all. Even some deans and university presidents have been promoted from this society to higher office and influence. The organization is established and extraordinarily secure.

Still, we have not explained why this particular element and not some other has come to virtually dominate the international studies community. After all, the same devices of system growth and defense could, in principle, have served another interest group rather than this one. Unless we can find some unique advantage of the behaviorists, we would have to concede that they have done nothing more than enter the arena of competition with other factions, and by the sheer power of their ideas and achievements have come out on top. Yet any observer with ordinary common sense can see from the sterility of the results of quantitative research that this explanation, understandably the favorite of the behaviorists, cannot possibly be the reason.

Here we come to the heart of the matter, and to the special insights contributed by communications theory and integration theory. International studies, as noted earlier, is not a field, but merely a domain of human interaction. Anybody who studies one or more of the 150 countries in the world, or who asks virtually any question about interactions across all these boundaries today, yesterday, or tomorrow, is an international studies specialist. As a result, the field has a fissiparous tendency to fractionation and factionalism, as subdisciplines proliferate. In addition, given the difficulty of theoretical generalization over the great variety of issues and cases, and the unlikelihood of finally proving one theory over another, it is uncommon for any single conceptual approach to attract

more than a few adherents or to persist over any period of time. As a result, it is difficult if not impossible to form sizeable coalitions within the field over substantive matters.

Under these circumstances, the emergence of a school integrated by a methodological rather than a substantive principle has an inherent superiority. The cardinal advantage of the behaviorists is their use of a *lingua franca*--numbers, "the language of science." The non-behaviorists--their forms are so numerous that it is impossible even to cluster them in a few schools--speak in a great babble of tongues. Moreover, the behaviorists, driven by the requirement to define issues in terms of a small number of variables systematically linked by an explicit logical system, give to their verbal expressions an exactness that may be deceptive and invalid but that facilitates communication and common understanding. As a result, more international studies specialists share a commitment to quantitative and systems approaches than share any other methodological or substantive interest. Automatically, they are the single largest coalition in the field, a plurality (though far from a majority) with a wide margin of advantage over any possible challengers.

Moreover, this faction enjoys other inherent advantages. Much of its work aims at replicable, reproducible results, and there is an agreed means to validate or invalidate compact propositions. A new entrant to the field can quickly identify the state of the debate, and corner for himself a follow-on issue for the next

research project. The results aim to be cumulative, and there is reasonable confidence of publication to an assured audience. In short, there is a community of discourse.

But the most important advantage transcends all of the above, and relates to integration and socialization. Behaviorism offers to its adherents not only fairly explicit assignments and a leg up on career advancement, but also participation in a community with a special sense of mission. The whole enterprise is infused with energy by the myth that international studies is being carried by Herculean efforts and against entrenched resistance into a golden Scientific Age. Progress is its most important claim and its most important product, and the lonely scholar is offered the chance to be part of this historic undertaking. Like all revolutions, behaviorism fictionalizes and makes worse than it was the history which preceded its emergence. Once upon a time, there was the dark, pre-scientific age, when sloppy thinking ruled the earth of international studies. Then there was a Revolution, replete with Founding Fathers whose names (Quincy Wright, Lewis Richardson, etc.) should be recorded in a Hall of Fame and taught to schoolchildren. Now we are at the dawn of Science--still at the stage of experimentation and error, to be sure, but on our way. Still, there are the barbarians, the know-nothings who, in their ignorance, revile our efforts. But this drives us to ever greater heights under the hail of blows--converting the heathen wherever possible, and offering them

a certain mutual tolerance in other cases, but never slowed by their objections. Bound together by our truth, growing ever in numbers, we have a common history (the Revolution), a common language, and a common destiny (to put the science back in social science).

Finally, there is the political economy of international studies, and especially the politics of financial support for research. In its very nature, many of the research topics of international studies are highly controversial, and there is a general reluctance on the part of government agencies and foundations to support research whose findings might conflict with the prevailing orthodoxy of the moment or embarrass the sponsors. On the other hand, highly abstract theories and abstruse propositions, applying arcane methodologies understandable only by a few specialists, are not likely to offend, not to mention interest, a wider audience. These are "safe" projects for the sponsors, who can at the same time claim to be supporting research on the frontiers of modern social science. These projects also have the appearance of being very tightly conceived, compared to proposals set forth in ordinary language, and there is a more objective set of methodological criteria for their evaluation than is available to assess projects whose main claim to attention is mere substantive ideas. For these and other reasons, behavioral research has a better chance of being funded, adding to its strengths.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that this particular element of international studies or the International Studies Association has sought to drive out all other approaches nor that opportunities for others are entirely lacking. For example, in the case of the International Studies Association, there is a conscious and energetic effort to secure representation of all interests and schools of thought at annual meetings, and virtually any interest group which can muster a quorum of three panelists and an audience of ten can get on the schedule. I cannot think of a "behaviorist" who does not pride him or herself in openness to a variety of approaches--an attitude that is sometimes contrasted to the perceived close-mindedness of the critics of behaviorism. There are even some quantitative scholars who have real substantive ideas from time to time, and who put aside formal methods to express them. Nor should new entrants to the field who find international behaviorism as sterile as I do despair of the career opportunities. It is a very tight market, and every disadvantage hurts, but at least some dedicated and talented people do make it, nor is life always a bed of roses for the young behaviorist.

My purpose has been only to identify the vectors of force which have made behaviorism the dominant faction in spite of its failure to deliver important research results. These, I believe, have more to do with politics than with science.

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