

Theoretical Pluralism in International Relations – Implications for the Development of the Discipline*

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The aim of the article is to discuss the problem of theoretical pluralism in International Relations (IR), therefore it refers to the fact that, as IR scholars, we work with multiple, often competing, theories offering different ways of explanation or understanding of a given question. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part is focused on the role that theories played at the moment of formation of IR and the role they play today. The second one discusses theoretical pluralism in the meaning of a feature of IR, taking into account in particular its consequences for all IR scholars and theorists, as well as distinguishing between two terms: ‘plurality’ and ‘pluralism’. The third part discusses the opinions on the problem of theoretical pluralism present in the literature – ranging from ‘embracing’ to ‘structured’ versions of pluralism.

Keywords: plurality, pluralism, international relations theories

*Given how little we know, and how little we know about how to learn more,
overinvesting in any particular approach seems unwise¹*

Introduction

This paper discusses the problem of theoretical pluralism in International Relations. Therefore, it refers to the fact that, as IR scholars, we work with multiple, often competing, theories offering explanation or understanding of the fragment of reality

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* The present paper complements my earlier publication on theoretical pluralism in IR. Cf.: M. Kozub-Karkut, ‘Pomiędzy pluralizmem a teoretyczną syntezą: próby *łączenia* teorii stosunków międzynarodowych’ (Between pluralism and theoretical synthesis: attempts to combine the theory of international relations), in: E. Haliżak, R. Ożarowski, A. Wróbel (eds.), *Liberalizm i neoliberalizm w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych. Teoretyczny pluralizm* (Liberalism and neoliberalism in the science of international relations. Theoretical pluralism), Warszawa: Rambler, 2016, pp. 69–85.

¹ J.J. Mearsheimer, St. Walt, ‘Leaving theory behind: Why simplistic hypothesis testing is bad for International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 19(3), 2013, p. 449.

that interests us. It is also an issue that gives rise to lively debates often raising doubts every one of us will have to face at some point. Moreover, as IR scholars, we experience not only theoretical pluralism, but also methodological pluralism, as we are also faced with multiple ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding international relations,² and pluralism of analysis levels,³ even though it is not as controversial and more popular among scholars identifying with Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA).

The debate about values of theoretical pluralism is not a novelty, as it first started in the 1980s.⁴ This subject was discussed during some of the annual conventions of the International Studies Association (ISA)⁵ or British International Studies Association (BISA).⁶

Since then, the problem of theoretical pluralism has been discussed in articles and collective works of the most prominent IR scholars.⁷ Some Polish researchers also raise this issue, often attempting at presenting its advantages and opportunities

² See: E.G. Guba, 'The Alternative Paradigm Dialog', in: *The Paradigm Dialog*, Newbury Park: Sage, 1990, pp. 17–30, E.G. Guba, Y.S. Lincoln, 'Kontrowersje wokół paradygmatów, sprzeczności i wyłaniające się zależności' (Controversies around paradigms, contradictions and emerging relationships), in: N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Metody badań jakościowych* (Qualitative research methods), Vol. 1, Warszawa: PWN, 2009, pp. 281–313, P.Th. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations. Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, London, New York: Routledge, 2016 (2011), pp. 26–41.

³ See: B. Buzan, 'The level of analysis problem in international relations reconsidered', in: K. Booth, S. Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today*, Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1995, pp. 198–216, K.N. Waltz, *Man, State, and War. A Theoretical Analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1954, 1959, 2001, J.D. Singer, 'The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations', *World Politics*, No. 14(1), 1961, pp. 77–92.

⁴ See: K. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory*, Allen and Unwin: Boston, 1985; 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Are the Fairest Theories of All?', *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 33(3), 1989, pp. 255–261.

⁵ See: R.O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 32(4), 1988, pp. 379–396; S. Smith, 'Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11', *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 48(3), 2004, pp. 499–515.

⁶ Among others, during the panel sponsored by *European Journal of International Relations*, during the joint ISA/BISA conference in 2012 in Edinburgh, titled 'The End of International Relations Theory', organised also during the annual ISA convention in San Diego. This panel inspired several papers published in a special edition of *European Journal of International Relations* of 2013 and multiple later inspiring or even provoking works. See: Ch. Brown, 'IR Theory in Britain: The New Black?', *Review of International Studies*, No. 32(4), 2006, pp. 677–687, C. Wight, L. Hansen, T. Dunne, 'Special Issue: The End of International Relations Theory?', *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 19, 2013, pp. 405–665, Y.H. Ferguson, 'Diversity in IR Theory: Pluralism as an Opportunity for Understanding Global Politics', *International Studies Perspectives*, No. 16(1), 2015, pp. 3–12, H. Leira, 'International Relations Pluralism and History – Embracing Amateurism to Strengthen the Profession', *International Studies Perspectives*, No. 16(1), 2015, pp. 23–31, N. Rengger, 'Pluralism in International Relations Theory: Three Questions', *International Studies Perspectives*, No. 16(1), 2015, pp. 32–39, J. Sterling-Folker, 'All Hail to the Chief: Liberal IR Theory in the New World Order', *International Studies Perspectives*, No. 16(1), 2015, pp. 40–49.

⁷ Cf.: O. Wæver, 'Still a Discipline after All These Debates?', in: T. Dunne, M. Kurki, St. Smith (eds.) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 306–328, S. Smith, 'Introduction: Diversity and Disciplinarity in International Relations Theory', in: T. Dunne, M. Kurki, St. Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1–13.

it gives. Among others, Anna Wojciuk's publication pointing out that not only the development of theoretical thought, but also the extension of IR research area can lead to the development and innovation of the discipline is worth noting.⁸ Andrzej Gałganek's paper,⁹ as well as the publication edited by Edward Haliżak, Rafał Ożarowski, and Anna Wróbel also address some of the problems of theoretical pluralism.

Theoretical pluralism can be defined descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, it is defined as a multitude and diversity of theories to which IR scholars refer in their works. Nevertheless, the assumption that the ability to take advantage of multiple theories not only is beneficial *per se*, but also allows IR to develop, for example through the possibilities provided by combining themes of various theories, adopted by most theorists, is much more important, also from the point of view of the present paper.¹⁰ Pluralism in normative terms, understood as an opportunity for progress within IR, is however much more difficult to describe. Even though the majority of scholars consider it a positive phenomenon¹¹ (although there is also some criticism),¹² the opportunities it offers still seem not fully used.¹³

Unlike Polish literature, the English one distinguishes two terms used to describe the phenomenon. There are two terms, namely: 'plurality' and 'pluralism'. The first one means 'multitude' and is used in this sense in theoretical IR works. The researchers define 'plurality' as presence of multiple theories in academic discourse and the ability to use different theoretical assumptions in IR works. 'Pluralism' is used in its usual

⁸ See: A. Wojciuk, 'Innowacje teoretyczne w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych' (Theoretical innovations in the science of international relations), in: M.F. Gawrycki, E. Haliżak, R. Kuźniar, G. Michałowska, D. Popławski, J. Zajączkowski, R. Zięba (eds.), *Tendencje i procesy rozwojowe współczesnych stosunków międzynarodowych. Księga jubileuszowa z okazji 40-lecia Instytutu Stosunków Międzynarodowych Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* (Trends and development processes in contemporary international relations. Jubilee book on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Institute of International Relations at the University of Warsaw), Warszawa: Scholar, pp. 250–260.

⁹ See: A. Gałganek, 'Pierwsza „Wielka Debatę”? Rewizjonistyczna historia genezy teoretyzowania w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych' (The First 'Great Debate'? The revisionist history of the origin of theorizing in the science of international relations), *Przegląd Strategiczny*, No. 7(10), 2017, pp. 15–39, *Liberalizm i neoliberalizm w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych...* (Liberalism and neoliberalism in the science of international relations...), op. cit., passim.

¹⁰ See: H. Leira, *International Relations Pluralism...*, op. cit., p. 23.

¹¹ Cf.: A. Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; Ch. Brown, 'The Poverty of Grand Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 2013, 19(3), pp. 483–497; D. Lake, 'Theory is Dead, Long Live Theory: The end of the Great Debates and the Rise of Eclecticism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 19(3), 2013, pp. 567–587; J.J. Mearsheimer, St. Walt, op. cit., passim, H. Leira, *International Relations Pluralism...*, op. cit., passim; R. Sil, P. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics*, London, New York, 2010, 'Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics', *Perspectives on Politics*, No. 8(2), 2010, pp. 411–431.

¹² Cf.: B. Buzan, R. Little, 'Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do about It?', *Millennium*, No. 30(1), 2001, pp. 19–39; C. Wight, 'Incommensurability and Cross-Paradigm Communication in International Relations Theory: 'What's the Frequency Kenneth?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, No. 25(2), 1996, pp. 291–319.

¹³ Cf.: H. Leira, *International Relations Pluralism...*, op. cit., p. 24.

meaning¹⁴ in the context of public or political life, so not only the ability to use the output of different theories, but also the value it brings.¹⁵ I believe that this distinction has not been fully established in Polish works concerning the analyzed problem yet, but using it would be definitely justified. Then, we would use ‘plurality’ with reference to a certain state of things and ‘pluralism’ to emphasize the values that come with it, treating it as a value in itself.

The present paper discusses the approach to theoretical pluralism and its meaning in the literature. Its most important question concerns the value the plurality of theories offering explanation and understanding of the fragment of social reality interesting for IR scholars represents for them. In the first part of the text, I will focus on the role theories played at the moment of formation of IR and the role they play today. In the second part, I will describe theoretical pluralism in the meaning of a feature of IR, taking into account in particular its consequences for all IR scholars and theorists. In the third part, I will present the opinions on the problem of theoretical pluralism present in the literature.

Theories in International Relations

During his presentation at the aforementioned annual ISA convention in 2012 in San Diego, Ole Wæver emphasized the fact that theory (theories) had been playing a very important role not only in the intellectual development of the discipline, but also in the processes related to its organization and definition of identity of scholars working within it.¹⁶ It is difficult to disagree with this opinion, especially given that the history of IR is the history of development of international relations theories. The main debates shaping its identity were in fact focused on theories, the best-known IR scholars are theorists, and the most desired model of a paper published in the most prestigious journals of the discipline is an analysis of a chosen case based on a theory.¹⁷

The most important moments of the development of IR prove the importance of theoretical thought for the development of social science disciplines. The representatives of the theory that dominated IR for decades, i.e. realism, contributed the most to the constitution of IR as a separate discipline. The biggest progress took place

¹⁴ See: Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/pluralism> (accessed on: 20 August 2019); More information on the essence, meaning, and consequences of methodological pluralism for IR can be found in the text by M. Filary-Szczepanik in this volume.

¹⁵ Cf.: G. van der Ree, ‘Saving the Discipline: Plurality, Social Capital, and the Sociology of IR Theorizing’, *International Political Sociology*, No. 8(2), 2014, pp. 218–233. DOI: 10.1111/ips.12053; D.J. Levine, D.M. McCourt, ‘Why Does Pluralism Matter When We Study Politics? A View from Contemporary International Relations’, *Perspectives on Politics*, No. 16(1), 2018, pp. 92–109.

¹⁶ O. Wæver, *Theory – The Shifting Center of Our Discipline. Paper for the International Studies of Association Annual Meeting, San Diego*, 1–4 April 2012, pp. 3–7.

¹⁷ O. Wæver, *Theory – The Shifting ...*, pp. 3–7; J.J. Mearsheimer, St. Walt, *Leaving theory behind...*, op. cit., pp. 427–457.

after the Second World War. The intense development of IR and political science back then was a result of intensification of scholars' work on specific research methods and their respective theories leading to the definition of research area of the aforementioned sciences, as Nicolas Guilhot clearly pointed out.¹⁸ He believes that until the 1950s, the importance of IR theory for the entire discipline was rather low, which changed in the second half of the 20th century. It was mostly due to the fact that 'the idealists' from the interwar period were not able to give an appropriate form to their theses. Such form could qualify as a theory thanks to consistency or proper scientific rigor.¹⁹ Taking advantage of the moment of intense deliberations on the state of development of political science and International Relations in the mid-twentieth century, IR scholars tried to emphasize the distinctive nature of the latter. S. Guzzini rightly highlights that the alleged qualitative difference between domestic and international politics allowed anchoring the independence of IR.²⁰ It is the realists who opposed the assumptions presented back then by political scientists who questioned the independence of IR and believed that it only deserved autonomy within political science. Influenced by behaviouralism,²¹ which in the 1950s was acquiring a dominant position, realists were seeking to create a uniform research framework encompassing both domestic and foreign policy and adopted a pluralistic concept of state, seen as a differentiated unit within which different groups of interests, sometimes even contradictory, compete with each other. In contrast, realists defined the state through the well-known black box metaphor.²²

As history shows, the realist theory turned out to be a 'double winner' back in that period. Its representatives managed not only to demonstrate the rationale of the thesis about the independence of International Relations from political science, but also, by depreciating the work of idealists, the validity of their theory for explanation of the then shape of international relations. Moreover, as S. Guzzini pointed out, it

¹⁸ N. Guilhot, 'The Realist Gambit', in: *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*, N. Guilhot (eds.), New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 128.

¹⁹ See: A. Osiander, 'Rereading Early Twentieth-Century IR Theory: Idealism Revisited', *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 42(3), 1998, pp. 409–432. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00090>.

²⁰ S. Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 11.

²¹ Behaviouralism became the mirror image of behaviourism (a school of psychology) in social science. The beginning of the behavioural approach in political science is dated to 1951, when David Easton published his article titled 'The Decline of Modern Political Theory'. The basic principles of behaviouralism are: (i) adoption of naturalist ontology, (ii) emphasis on building theories identifying causal relationships, (iii) separating research from values, (iv) use of quantitative methods. Cf.: D. Easton, 'The Decline of Modern Political Theory', *Journal of Politics*, No. 13(1), 1951, pp. 36–58; R. Dahl, 'The Behavioral Approach in Political Science: Epitaph for a Monument to A Successful Protest', *American Political Science Review*, No. 55(4), 1961, pp. 763–772.

²² The current realist theory (in particular in the neoclassical realism version) is much more multithreaded and diverse, but this is not the subject of the present work.

was realism that defined the boundaries of the discipline of International Relations.²³ In his opinion, the significance of international struggle for power, which Hans J. Morgenthau emphasized, contributed to the essence of international politics, vastly different from domestic relations. The aforementioned distinction between internal and external realm and clear attribution of the latter to IR made the IR scholars who wanted to highlight their independence from political science divert their attention away from the inside of the black box.

The above paragraphs prove the thesis, correct with regards to almost all social science disciplines, that what determines the independence of a given discipline is not a specific subject or methods, but particular theoretical thought. In case of IR, the situation seems even more difficult, because its boundaries are more ephemeral than the core and boundaries of other disciplines. In fact, the efforts of American realists from the 1940s and 1950s were aimed at unambiguous determining of the boundaries of IR that needed arguments in favour of its independence from other social sciences.

Theories turned out to play a crucial role also in other moments important for IR development, for instance in the late 1980s, when post-positivist theories were gaining popularity. Even though theories have always been crucial for the development of IR, currently we are facing a situation which may be called ‘degeneration of theoretical debates’.²⁴ It not only took the form of paradigm wars, which make scholars attached to one theory ignore the themes of other theories. When undertaking the analysis of international reality, most scholars decide to work within one selected paradigm. In consequence, the acceptance of some preliminary assumptions requires accepting the precedence of particular causal factors over those marginalised by the adopted paradigm.²⁵ Hence the opinion that the debates are no longer theoretical, but theological.²⁶

O. Wæver pointed to four trends, important for IR development perspectives, namely: the declining importance of ‘great debates’, division of scholars based on their preferred theories, tendency to use theoretical work of other disciplines (such as economics or sociology) or tendency (that Wæver considers the most revolutionary for IR) to conduct research based on the so-called ‘large N data set’, i.e. analysing many cases with limited use of theoretic principles. His theses harmonise with the theses

²³ ‘(Realism) set the paradigmatic boundaries of the discipline’. S. Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 27; The Polish edition of this publication was published in 2017; See: S. Guzzini, *Realizm w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych* (Realism in the science of international relations), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2017.

²⁴ Cf.: O. Wæver, *Theory – The Shifting ...*, op. cit., passim.

²⁵ T. Łoś-Nowak, ‘Wyjaśnić czy interpretować: dylematy i wyzwania czwartej debaty interparadygmatycznej’ (Explain or interpret: dilemmas and challenges of the fourth interparadigmatic debate), *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, 2009, 39(1–2), p. 46. Quoted after: P.K. Frankowski, ‘Pragmatycznie i eklektycznie o stosunkach międzynarodowych’ (Pragmatically and Eclectically on International Relations), *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska Lublin – Polonia*, No. 20(2), 2013, p. 8.

²⁶ D.A. Lake, ‘Why “isms” are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress’, *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 55(2), 2011, pp. 465–480.

of J. Mearsheimer and St. Walt who indicated that in the recent years, IR have been moving away from theoretical research and confining themselves on testing hypotheses. They believe it leads to generating misspecified theoretic models, but first of all, it reduces the probability of accumulation of knowledge. In consequence, the opinion suggesting that even though most scholars are aware of the advantages offered by theoretical pluralism, they seldom use such advantages in their studies, is quite popular in the literature.²⁷

Consequences of theoretical pluralism

I understand theoretical pluralism, following the aforementioned distinction between ‘plurality’ and ‘pluralism’, as a view according to which among the possibilities of learning the reality surrounding us there are multiple independent elements offering scholars more opportunities, that in turn allow progress in the discipline. It can also be understood as presence of multiple ideas and other factors determining the development of diverse theories that interact both during theory building and attempts of using it.

IR scholars often ask whether pluralism is ‘real’ or only apparent. N. Rengger, referring to Jennifer Sterling-Folker’s deliberations, suggested that although there were many international relations theories, they were mostly created within the western tradition and thus only a representation of a larger entirety.²⁸ In consequence, he referred to theoretical pluralism in IR as ‘contingent pluralism’, which implies that only a small group of theories is privileged. Only in the recent years, the interpretations of international relations from places such as Asia that do not adopt many assumptions typical for realist or liberal theories created mostly in the United States and United Kingdom started gaining popularity.²⁹ The apparent pluralism is often a result of actions of scholars themselves, as they tend to favour one theory and postulate the so-called ‘limited pluralism’, which leads to the exclusion of a group of theories from the debate.³⁰

There are many publications not only about theoretical pluralism itself, but also about the way scholars should organise their work to make the most of the opportunities that pluralism offers. In the following paragraphs, I will present selected stances on this problem. However, I am aware that the selection is not exhaustive due to length limitations of this type of publication. Based on the stance towards theoretical pluralism,

²⁷ For more information on this subject, see: H. Leira. *Idem*, op. cit., passim.

²⁸ See: N. Rengger, ‘Pluralism in International Relations Theory: Three Questions’, *International Studies Perspectives*, No. 16, 2015, pp. 32–39; J. Sterling-Folker, ‘All Hail to the Chief: Liberal IR Theory in the New World Order’, *International Studies Perspectives*, No. 16, 2015, pp. 40–49.

²⁹ See: A. Acharya, ‘Theoretical Perspectives in International Relations in Asia’, in: D. Shambaugh, M. Yahuda (eds.), *International Relations of Asia*, 2008, pp. 57–82; Yong-Soo Eun, K. Pieczara, ‘Getting Asia Right and Advancing the Field of IR’, *Political Studies Review*, No. 11, 2013, pp. 369–377.

³⁰ See: St. Walt, ‘One World, Many Theories’, *Foreign Policy*, No. 110, 1998, pp. 29–36; S. Smith, ‘Dialogue and Reinforcement of Orthodoxy in International Relations’, *International Studies Review*, No. 5, 2003, pp. 141–153.

the following types can be distinguished: (i) in favour of overcoming the plurality of international relations theories (using different methods), (ii) suggesting a *via media* theory combining main themes of all other theories, and (iii) in favour of pluralism guaranteeing tolerance for all theories in IR and their equal status.³¹

The first group includes the practices observed during the so-called first great debate. One of them, according to G. van der Ree, can be referred to as ‘zero-sum logic’, and the other ‘extending the hand, but not really’. The zero-sum logic is strictly related with IR development history and its description using the so-called “great debates”. The first great debate, as mentioned above, was presented from the perspective of its winner, realism, which earned the right to restore its dominance over idealism from the interwar period. However, many publications, including those written by Polish scholars,³² indicate that this debate in fact did not take place, but was fabricated due to, among other things, the publication by Edward Carr, who presented his theory in opposition to idealism. In consequence, E. Carr is considered the first scholar to identify the realism–idealism dichotomy. His 1939 work was not only the starting point of the debate on IR identity, but also an important manifesto of the theoretical identity of its author and other realists, which Carr admitted himself. As a result of his scepticism towards idealism and his accusations of utopianism towards the interwar theoretical thought, not only the first great debate was misinterpreted, but also the theoretical achievements from the interwar period were treated unjustly. Hence, the assumptions that the debate with idealists was fabricated and had never actually taken place.³³ Nevertheless, it allowed the establishment of the founding myth for the entire discipline, which is characterised by oppositions such as realism/idealism or neoliberalism/neorealism even today. Idealism was for them the straw man that provided the basis for their own history.³⁴ It has some consequences for the zero-sum logic supporters’ stance towards theoretical pluralism, as it assumes the necessity of theoretical rivalry and final victory of one of the presented theories, in accordance with the principle

³¹ Cf.: G. van der Ree, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

³² See: A. Gałganek, ‘Pierwsza „Wielka Debata”... (The First „Great Debate”...), *op. cit.*, *passim*; T. Pugacewicz, *Teorie polityki zagranicznej. Perspektywa amerykańskiej analizy polityki zagranicznej* (Theories of foreign policy. Perspective of the American analysis of foreign policy), Kraków: UJ, 2017, pp. 60–70.

³³ Lucian M. Ashworth clearly pointed out that the journals on international relations published back then do not mention any debate at all. See: E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, New York: Palgrave, 1939, 1945, 1981; L.M. Ashworth, ‘Did the Realist-Idealist Great Debate Really Happen? A Revisionist History of International Relations’, *International Relations*, No. 16(1), 2002, pp. 33–51. Cf.: M., Kahler, ‘Inventing International Relations: International Relations Theory After 1945’, in: M.W. Doyle, G.J. Ikenberry (eds.), *New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997; N. Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

³⁴ C.G. Thies, ‘Progress, History and Identity in International Relations Theory: The Case of Idealist-Realist Debate’, *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 8(2), 2002, pp. 147–185; K. Both, ‘75 Years On: Rewriting the Subject’s Past – Reinventing its Future’, in: S. Smith, K. Booth, M. Zalewski (eds.), *International Relations Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 328–339.

‘my stance is right and other stances are not’, like during the first great debate and the debate between behaviouralists and traditionalists, referred to as the second debate in the literature. The latter did not end with the victory of one side, but rather with scholars’ attempt to use the themes proper for both sides.

In consequence, the second debate represents, according to G. van der Ree, the second practice from the group (i), i.e. ‘extending the hand, but not really’. It does not assume total criticism or negation of other theoretical stances, but rather a constructive debate the aim of which is to prove superiority (validity) of one of the theories. According to Patrick Th. Jackson, this practice was typical for the second debate, during which James N. Rosenau and Klaus E. Knorr suggested that behaviouralists and traditionalists agreed upon the basic issues concerning conducting studies of international relations. The supporters of traditionalism agreed to present their conclusions as hypotheses that can be empirically tested and behaviouralists agreed to summarise their works using traditionalist language. Nevertheless, as emphasised by Patrick Th. Jackson and G. van der Ree, the price for such a compromise was paid by traditionalists rather than behaviouralists.³⁵ The latter only have to add specific summaries to their works, while the former *de facto* adopt behaviouralist principles. The result of such a resolution is particularly the lack of confrontation between the representatives of the two sides and the combination of their assumptions following the mainstream of the discipline, which contributed to the integrity of IR. Still, such operations are meant to include only the willing participants in the mainstream while excluding all others, which solidifies the dichotomous divisions immanent for the discipline. In this case, there is an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ group: those who adopt epistemological and methodological assumption of the mainstream and those who do not, respectively.³⁶

The opinion of Robert O. Keohane on constructivism, post-modernism, and feminism, presented during the annual ISA convention in 1998 in St. Louis and later published in an extended version in two articles in *International Studies Quarterly*³⁷ and *Journal of International Relations* is a good example of such an approach.³⁸ The most important thesis of the then president of the International Studies Association was that even though there is room for trends labelled as post-positivist in the field of international relations theories, their only chance of survival is the adoption of assumptions proper for the so-called rationalist theories based on positive epistemology. One may assume that the hand was extended, but on terms of positivist theories, which has been heavily

³⁵ See: J.N. Rosenau, K.E. Knorr, *Contending Approaches to International Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 18. Quoted after: P. Th. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations. Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, Routledge, Abingdon 2011, pp. 7–8.

³⁶ G. van der Ree, op. cit., pp. 223–224.

³⁷ See: R.O. Keohane, *International Institutions...*, op. cit., passim.

³⁸ Idem, ‘International Relations Theory: Contributions of a Feminist Standpoint’, *Millennium: Journal of International Relations*, No. 18(2), 1989, pp. 245–253.

criticised,³⁹ as it went beyond the assumption adopted also by philosophy of science that one cannot criticise particular philosophical assumptions from the perspective of other, disproportionate philosophical assumptions. R. Keohane assumed that only through generating hypotheses that can be tested empirically one can obtain convincing results and only after adopting this definition of science, constructivism, post-modernism, and feminist theory can ensure their position as IR theories. He also suggested that until these theories clearly define their research programme, they would remain marginalised within IR, dominated by advocates of positivism and logical empiricism.⁴⁰ This approach assumes that although theoretical pluralism creates measurable value for scholars, international relations theories should still be set in order. Moreover, the inside/outside dichotomy identifies those outside as responsible for problems arising when functioning in the conditions of many competing theories. The outsiders do not want to adopt ‘the most basic’ assumptions organising the entire discipline, which leads to their marginalisation.

The stance G. van der Ree refers to as the third way or *via media* presents a different approach. Its representatives, assuming that at some point, pluralism may lead to a deadlock blocking the progress of the entire discipline, are convinced that finding contact points located between extreme principles of theories is necessary. An example of a theory, the creators of which adopted the idea of *via media*, is social constructivism — one of the most important IR theories since the 1980s. Its principal advantage is the broadest possible ontology that can be summarised in a tautological sentence suggesting that the social world, part of which are international relations, is socially constructed.⁴¹ Such ontology may encompass assumptions typical for other, competitive theories. Therefore, there is no longer the need to deny the anarchical structure of the international system or the assumption that gender roles assigned in the process of socialisation serve as a deep structure generating replicating domination of one group over the other.⁴²

Due to the fact that the popularity of social constructivism was growing back when IR were dominated by positivist methodology, the majority of the representatives of this theory adopted it. In consequence, social constructivism is ‘cracked’ and encompasses trends referring to both positivism and interpretationist tradition (sometimes referred to as post-positivism). It is worth mentioning that this was the assumption of Alexander Wendt, the author of the breakthrough publication defining the main principles of social

³⁹ See: A.J. Tickner, ‘You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists’, *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 41(4), 1997, pp. 611–632; P.Th. Jackson, *The Conduct...*, op. cit., pp. 7–8.

⁴⁰ R.O. Keohane, *International Institutions...*, op. cit., p. 392.

⁴¹ A. Polus, K. Chweczek-Szulc, ‘Konstruktywizm społeczny a prognozowanie w stosunkach międzynarodowych’ (Social constructivism and forecasting in international relations), in: *Normy, wartości i instytucje we współczesnych stosunkach międzynarodowych* (Norms, values and institutions in contemporary international relations), Vol. 1, E. Stadtmüller, Ł. Fijałkowski (eds.), Warszawa: Rambler, 2015, p. 32.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 32–33.

constructivism.⁴³ When formulating his theory, he wanted to go beyond the distinction between positivism and interpretationism.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, as a representative of this approach, he assumed that the development of too many IR theories differing in ontological and methodological assumptions does not benefit the discipline. This view on theoretical pluralism in IR, just like the two described above, assumes that theoretical pluralism is inconvenient for IR scholars. This is why attempts at overcoming these difficulties should be made. Moreover, constructing a theory allowing reconciling two extreme positions leaves these positions untouched, while it can contribute to the progress of the entire discipline. As G. van der Ree rightly pointed out, this stance postulates both maintaining the *status quo* and assuring progress.⁴⁵ However, it is worth noting that finding a *via media* is not a concrete solution for many theories, as it does not end with or resolve the ‘problem’, but only diverts scholars’ attention from it. Moreover, in order to make the third way possible, one would first have to antagonise the representatives of two extreme positions and then present them with a theory combining the principles of the two positions. The second part is the more difficult the better is the outcome of the first part — it is hard to reconcile two strongly conflicted parties. Finally, the third step is to convince the scholars that the third way deserves the dominant position in the discipline. This is why social constructivists often state that their theory ‘can do more’.

The last stance towards theoretical pluralism is the acceptance of it, as a multitude of theoretical positions does not mean hampering the development of the discipline or condemning it to eternal immaturity. The representatives of this stance clearly declare that they are not interested in creating one general theory of international relations, because they find it unjustified. Nevertheless, it is not a uniform stance, and the acceptance of many competing theories includes many different practices. For instance, disengaged pluralism described by Tim Dunne, Lenne Hansen, and Colin Wight does not assume any relations between theories that function side by side and each of them is justified only based on its own principles. Due to the lack of agreement regarding a common research method, every manner is justified and the representatives of each of them do not even feel the need to debate with representatives of other paradigms. R. Bernstein calls this a ‘fortress-like pluralism’, as it excludes the possibility of finding a common language between the representatives of different theories.⁴⁶ G. van der Ree uses

⁴³ See: N.G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia: University of South California Press, 1989; A. Wendt, ‘The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory’, *International Organization*, No. 41(3), 1987, pp. 335–370; ‘Levels of Analysis versus Agents and Structures: Part III’, *Review of International Studies*, No. 18(2), 1992, pp. 181–185; ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, No. 46(2), 1992, pp. 391–425.

⁴⁴ See: A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations (Społeczna teoria stosunków międzynarodowych)*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2008, pp. 11–12.

⁴⁵ G. van der Ree, op. cit., p. 227.

⁴⁶ R.J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, p. 335. Quoted after: P. Frankowski, op. cit., p. 20.

the term ‘embracing plurality’, emphasising that it is the mildest practice and it does not support any form of theoretical integration or attempt to meet halfway. It is fine with accepting the plurality of autonomous perspectives.⁴⁷ This state is very hard to achieve and even scholars declaring full acceptance for theoretical pluralism express their preferences by stating that some theoretical assumptions have more possibilities than others.

As stated above, the literature refers to this state of things in multiple ways. Moreover, even though G. van der Ree points out to two practices of advocates of theoretical pluralism, the literature provides more examples. I will discuss some of them in the following paragraphs. Their common trait is the belief that theoretical plurality is not a problem for IR or their development. To the contrary, the possibility of using themes of different theories allows scholars to understand and explain the reality better. Apart from ‘embracing plurality’, ‘integrative pluralism’ described by T. Dunne, L. Hansen, and C. Wight is also worth mentioning. It is not an attempt of theoretical synthesis or creation of one great theory accumulating basic assumptions for further deliberation. It assumes only the recognition of the importance of different theoretical perspectives and tries to capture theoretical diversity using it to understand the increasingly complex reality better.⁴⁸ Thus, it introduces balance between a multitude of theories and increasingly complex image of current international relations. However, it is not a sum of different theories that is supposed to provide complete assumptions about the current international relations. The authors of the term do not explain how to conduct research adopting integrative pluralism, which is definitely a shortcoming. Apart from noting that during analysis of a particular problem, some theories may be more helpful than others, they do not provide any specific guidelines nor indicate how to assess the research conducted from the perspective of integrative pluralism. In consequence, it seems justified to ask what integrative pluralism is and what is its merit. It seems that it is only a step forward from the fortress-like pluralism towards analytic eclecticism,⁴⁹ which will be discussed in the next paragraph, or theoretical synthesis.⁵⁰ It is definitely something more than only a debate or dialogue between

⁴⁷ Nevertheless, G. van der Ree himself does not assume the lack of forms of imposition of research methods by some scholars. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s views on symbolic violence, he states that each of the stances towards theoretical pluralism may be considered a strategy of building a social capital through the improvement of one’s own position within IR or through questioning the leading theoretical assumptions of the discipline.

⁴⁸ T. Dunne, L. Hansen, C. Wight, ‘The End of IR Theory?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 19(3), 2013, pp. 405–425.

⁴⁹ See: R. Sil, P. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms...*, op. cit., passim; *Analytic Eclecticism in the Study...*, op. cit., passim.

⁵⁰ A. Moravcsik, who suggested that theories should be treated as instruments helping explain and understand the reality better, is in favour of formulating theoretical syntheses. In his opinion, a synthesis consists of different theories with a common set of principal assumptions. It offers an analysis of reality based on a small number of axioms taken from several different theories. See: A. Moravcsik, ‘Theory Synthesis in International Relations: Real Not Metaphysical’, *International Studies Review*, No. 5(1), 2003, pp. 123–153.

the representatives of different theories, as it assumes overlap of interests and doubts of scholars representing different theories. This, in turn, requires sharing at least a group of principles. According to the authors, the current state of theoretical debate does not allow for such an agreement, which makes it still immature for integrative pluralism.⁵¹

Another possible practice within the stance accepting theoretical pluralism is what G. van der Ree calls the regrounding of international relations theories in a way that prevents their diversity from hampering the development of the discipline. Although pluralism is defined as a problem, this stance is considered an accepting one, because its advocates 'know' how to transform it into the success of the entire discipline. Analytical eclecticism, considered by some to be a midway position between pluralism and integration of multiple theories in form of synthesis, is a good example of using such a practice. Its authors, Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, make it clear that their proposition does not involve synthesis and is not a new theory of international relations, but only an addition to the techniques of research of modern international relations. It is based on pragmatism ethos (i), postulating creating middle-range theories explaining specific political phenomena, which is to some extent similar to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, practical wisdom, Daniel J. Levine, and David M. McCourt also refer to in the context of theoretical pluralism.⁵² Secondly, analytical eclecticism refers to wider problems, as opposed to only testing hypotheses (ii). Thirdly, constructing specific, substantive arguments concerning the aforementioned problems, analytical eclecticism focuses on causal relationships (iii). Analytical eclecticism involves a totally different, new way of thinking on relations between assumptions, concepts, theories, organisation of research, and real world problems. The group of norms and notions describing the studied reality within particular paradigms rests untouched, and every IR scholar has to ask how particular theories contributed to the analysed problem.⁵³ The pragmatic approach prompts the analysis of the manner particular paradigms define particular problems and reflection on how they relate to each other when confronted with specific political problems (political practice). Therefore, the advantage of analytical eclecticism is the redefinition of the problem so that its scope (and possible solutions) is extended in a way that allows more narrowed down solutions from different theories. For example, the realist vision of balance of power may be combined with economic interdependence through questions on how the distribution of power affects economic relations between states or how to use interdependence analysis to study conflict on the international stage.⁵⁴

⁵¹ T. Dunne, L. Hansen, C. Wight, op. cit., p. 420.

⁵² In their paper, they pointed out to six possible reactions to theoretical pluralism in the meaning of not only a multitude of theories, but also the benefits they offer. Among the identified opinions on pluralism, they listed pluralizing knowledge, analytical eclecticism, bridging the gap, from *technè* to *phronèsis*, reflexivity, and Socratic belief. See: D.J. Levine, D.M. McCourt, 'Why Does Pluralism Matter When We Study Politics? A View from Contemporary International Relations', *Perspectives on Politics*, No. 16(1), 2018, pp. 92–109.

⁵³ P. Frankowski, op. cit., p. 19.

⁵⁴ R. Sil, P. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms...*, op. cit., passim; *Analytic Eclecticism in the Study...*, op. cit., passim.

Apart from analytical eclecticism, another regrounding example provided in the literature may be Barry Buzan and Richard Little's postulate to reorganise theoretical assumptions within IR and attempt a theoretical integration around the assumptions of the English school. They believe that the latter offers not so much a *via media* as a certain set of assumptions proper also for other theories allowing distinguishing the non-mutually exclusive ones. Milja Kurki's postulate of adopting the assumptions of critical realism that in her opinion offers an ontology acceptable for almost everyone, thus allowing taking full advantage of theoretical pluralism, is similar. The biggest problem is that many IR theories adopt different ontological and epistemological assumptions, which means that their criteria of scientific viability are different. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about progress within the discipline when each scholar may interpret it differently, which is also an interesting issue, worth discussing in a separate publication. The value of regrounding would be the adoption of common criteria of scientific viability by all scholars.⁵⁵ However, there would still be scientists who would not accept these criteria, similarly to the case of extending the hand.

Andrew Bennett proposes a slightly different use of theoretical pluralism, pointing out to structured pluralism. The author adds a classification or glossary of concepts facilitating communication between the representatives of main theories of international relations to this version of pluralism. The attempt of defining structured pluralism seems consistent with the author's views on presenting the history of the discipline in categories of the great debates. It assumes the possibility of communication between representatives of different theories of international relations using an appropriate pre-established 'structure' that would finally assure not only scientific progress, but also new possibilities of dialogue between theorists, and lead to changes in international relations theory courses.⁵⁶

Accepting A. Bennet's version of theoretical pluralism requires adopting his conceptual framework based on two main dividing lines forming a matrix systematising paradigms and allowing the use of their output. The first division includes three different ways of explaining phenomena in international relations that are consistent with the assumptions of the three most important paradigms. This tripartition includes the material power's effect on international relations (i), efficiency of institutions in international relations (ii), and legitimacy of undertaken actions (iii). These elements correspond to realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and social constructivism, respectively. Defining specific mechanisms allowed the author to avoid a direct reference to paradigms. Additionally, the author extends the three categories to include levels of analysis and IR research areas. The second division is based on actor–structure

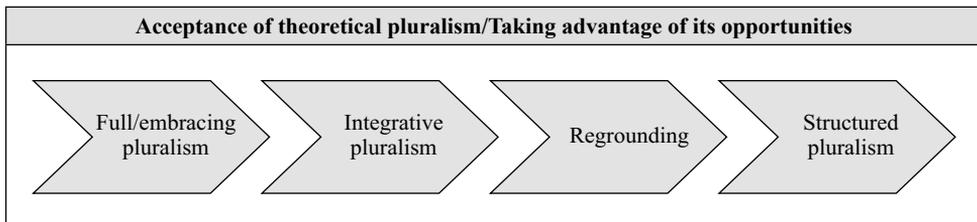
⁵⁵ M. Kurki, 'Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, No. 35(2), 2007, pp. 361–378; *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

⁵⁶ A. Bennett, 'The Mother of All Isms: Casual Mechanisms and Structured Pluralism in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 19(3), 2013, pp. 462–464.

relations borrowed from social constructivism and introduces four possible variants, i.e. impact of an actor on another actor, impact of a structure on an actor, impact of an actor on a structure, and impact of a structure on another structure.⁵⁷ According to the author, such framework allows communication between the representatives of different paradigms within IR, as well as between representatives of theories from other disciplines. It is rather a systematics than an attempt to create one big theory encompassing all categories of phenomena. It can be treated as a platform allowing placing particular studies on a ‘theoretical map’. It should answer traditional scholars’ questions independently of assumptions of a single paradigm, but still in order assured by the structure that allows communication. Similarly to R. Sil and P. Katzenstein, A. Bennett suggests moving away from working within a single paradigm and increasing attention to mid-range theories developing within it. It will allow drawing scholars away from never-ending theoretical debates and contribute over time to the progress in International Relations.⁵⁸

Scepticism towards theoretical pluralism/attempts at overcoming it through confrontation		Via media/attempts at overcoming it through meeting halfway	Acceptance of theoretical pluralism	
<i>Zero-sum game</i>	<i>Extending the hand</i>	<i>Via media</i>	<i>Regrounding</i>	<i>Full pluralism</i>

Source: own work based on G. van der Ree, *Saving the Discipline...*, op. cit., passim.



Source: own work based on: G. van der Ree, *Saving the Discipline...*, op. cit., passim; T. Dunne, L. Hansen, C. Wight, *The End of IR Theory...*, op.cit., passim; A. Bennett, *The Mother...*, op. cit., passim; A. Moravcsik, *Theory Synthesis...*, op. cit., passim.

The idea of structured pluralism came into being after the publication of R. Sil and P. Katzenstein’s work on analytical eclecticism and was an attempt to supplement their assumptions. However, A. Bennett suggests that it is a version of pluralism, although

⁵⁷ The two divisions form rows and columns of the table created by A. Bennett. Nevertheless, the analysis of its structure is not the subject of the present publication, so the issue is only briefly mentioned. More on this subject in: A. Bennett, *The Mother...*, op. cit., passim.

⁵⁸ Idem, ‘From Analytic Eclecticism to Structured Pluralism’, *Qualitative & Multi Method Research*, No. 8(2), 2010, pp. 6–9.

it was created in response to the shortcomings of analytic eclecticism he had defined. Thus, structured pluralism is considered another step towards integration of theories and one of many possible practices within the stance approving the existence of multiple theories within IR. The next step is theoretical synthesis, which is not the subject of the present paper though.

Conclusion

The above paragraphs prove not only that, as international relations scholars, we function in the conditions of plurality of theories (this is a rather well-known and accepted fact), but rather that we perceive the value of this situation for the studies we conduct and, in consequence, possible progress in the entire discipline, in different ways.

In my opinion, the merit of theoretical pluralism is that it highlights weaknesses and limitations of each theory, encouraging scholars to abandon disputes about paradigms and focus on the advantages of combining themes from many theories. This is why the authors of all the stances accepting theoretical pluralism discussed above are sceptical towards presenting the history of the development of disciplines in categories of the great debates. They clearly indicate that the debates between the representatives of different paradigms either existed only in textbooks or did not contribute much to the development of the discipline. Moreover, the main paradigms of IR offer a limited vision of the modern world, whereas the attempts at combining them are not only a challenge for scholars, but also, as P.M. Haas pointed out, a sort of art.⁵⁹

However, one should not identify the postulate of combining themes of multiple theories with the use of theoretical perspectives without awareness of differences between them. It is the 'dark side' of pluralism — scholars using the output of multiple theories should be aware not only of potential accusations of relativism, but also of the risk of providing many answers to one research question that may be mutually exclusive due to being based on different theories. It leads to a sort of paradox, because the scholars declaring multi-theoretical approach may not apply correctly any theory at all.

However, regardless of the difficulties related with theoretical pluralism and one's approach to it, one has to admit that its roots are in the scholars' convictions that a 'fully real' cognition, although resulting from the social reality surrounding us, is in fact unattainable. Theoretical pluralism seems to be rather a proof (or even a result) of our epistemological scepticism and conviction that we can only approach the truth.⁶⁰ To summarise, one can agree with D. Levine and D. McCourt that the merit of theoretical pluralism is not what it offers scholars, but what it takes away from them. In other words, it shows that we are not able to comprise the complex reality we are trying to get to know and understand in one simple theoretical scheme.

⁵⁹ P.M. Haas, 'Introduction', *Qualitative & Multi Method Research*, No. 8(2), 2010, p. 5.

⁶⁰ D.J. Levine, D.M. McCourt, 'Why Does Pluralism Matter When We Study Politics? A View from Contemporary International Relations', *Perspectives on Politics*, No. 16(1), 2018, pp. 92–109.