

ISA: International Relations or Comparative Politics?

Reflections on the 43rd Annual ISA Convention in New Orleans, LA, March 24–27, 2002

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The ISA Congress this spring, colourful, fragmented, and „big“ as usual, was devoted to one question: Are international relations and comparative politics, usually dealt with in distinct textbooks, really independent realms of study? Do these two sub-disciplines represent distinct areas of politics – and/or of political science? Or are the traditional boundaries between IR and CP blurring and evaporating?

This question is of importance to more than just these two groups of researchers. To separate the discipline political science into clusters of sub-disciplines such as the history of the international system, (state-related) theories of governance, comparative interdisciplinary studies, and IR has indeed been useful for creating curricula and has been helpful to students. Such segmentation implies a neatly divided political science landscape which, however, in fact

imposes artificial limitations on social interactions and relations.

The previous segmentations appeared to make sense at least as long as there was a clear distinction between things „domestic“ and things „foreign“ (kept apart by fixed borders demarcating territories and sovereign states). Nowadays, i.e. in our globalized day and age, however undetermined this concept may be, the neatness of former analytical and theoretical categories becomes highly questionable.

The differences between states which dominate the political scene in certain areas, normal OECD states whose competences are increasingly being eroded by governance bodies both at a supra- and sub-national level, and failing as well as failed states cannot be bridged by insisting on domestic factors that can be compared across borders and

on an international realm where entities can be observed, measured, and compared as units of an international anarchic system.

The fragmentation of the once core unit state combined with a missing inter- or transnational polity and effective governance structures generates increasing problems with respect to model building, in particular due to uncertainties about the relevant levels of analysis (Beth Simmons, University of California, Berkeley). This was, by the way, a phenomenon regional specialists for Eastern Europe could (or perhaps should have) observe/d earlier: Eastern Europe in general and the former USSR in particular are prime and early examples of patchwork-like places.

Simmons explained in one of the more illuminating roundtables that the OECD macro region is internally too homogeneous to warrant comparison between its units, while a meaningful international dimension for this region is missing. Today, simply too many variables are in place. A move by a dominant actor (e.g. the U.S.A.) has the potential to change the calculus of other (state and non-state) actors. The shift in capabilities between states (and other actors) calls forth changes in the correlation of forces and with it new (regional) equilibriums. Simmons suggests that these as well as many other factors invite methodological pluralism in research agendas.

The multiple and intertwined levels of analysis and the multitude of relevant actors exacerbates the general problem of reciprocal causation. Modelling thus becomes more challenging (Ronald Rogowski, University of California, LA).

While there was some consensus on the analytical and methodological difficulties, there was not much of a solution – yet. „The tools in our toolbox for the full integration of domestic and international politics are too crude“, summarized Jeffrey Frieden (Harvard University). To meticulously address the interplay between the domestic and foreign/ international spheres, and to systematically think through the equilibria of the relations between those spheres proves to be „too difficult“. Is there any way out? Frieden offers to follow the roads well known: to research the domestic impact on international factors, and vice versa. He also suggests proceeding from the assumption of state utility – „it is useful to assume that it is an independent entity having an impact“. He admits that the real division may be between the private and public domain, and modestly comes up with the hint that „we should go for partial, not general equilibriums“. Simmons assisted by reasonably proposing to go and look for criteria for „questions we can bite off and digest“. Let's go.

Another roundtable offered insight into this question from some of the giants of the IR-discipline, among them John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago) and Joseph Nye (Harvard University). Mearsheimer – who provoked one of the most furious discussions after the exitus of the Cold War by suggesting, in opposition to Francis Fukuyama

and others, that disorder and violence would continue to dominate the globe – declared that there would no longer be any boundaries between CP and IR. At the same time, he made some compliments regarding the value of area studies – they are, so to say, increasingly theory-oriented, while IR is becoming more open for case studies.

These niceties were balanced by Nye's remarks which lauded area studies for their ability to offer IR people „a feeling, a context for something you can't get by theories“; according to him they gave one „a sense of where to go“. At the same time, area studies' people were not helpful in the construction of grand designs. One could deconstruct this statement as follows: „While the grown-ups do the designs and theories, the area people have a small playground for themselves and sometimes are helpful for providing feelings and contexts.“ Now who is feeling offended?

Some of the panels were encouraging, such as those addressing concrete questions like transborder flows (U.S.A. – Mexico), organized crime and its mechanisms – including state structures (Courtesian) cooperating with trans-national criminal organizations – , new learning tools and methods for IR etc.

What else? Too many panels, roundtables to attend, too many papers to register or to collect, too many impressions. No general denominator. Still, the experience was useful. New Orleans has the Mississippi and boats, Jazz Clubs and Creole and Cajun food, the Garden District and much more – so, it was worth the trip. Including an ISA meeting searching for objects, theories, and methods.

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Regimes am Beispiel
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