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# Is IPE just 'boring',<sup>1</sup> or committed to problematic meta-theoretical assumptions? A critical engagement with the politics of method\*

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## **Introduction**

I would like to preface my contribution to this global conversation with an acknowledgement. I very much appreciate the debate initiated by Benjamin Cohen, not only for his persistence in trying to instigate a wider exchange on *why* IPE today is boring, but also for his call for an inclusive conversation about this and its implications. I am also very grateful to Anna Leander for organising this forum in such a way as to precisely facilitate a more *global* conversation about the important concerns raised by Cohen's intervention—global not merely in the sense that the contributors hail from different parts of the world, but also in the sense of bringing a much wider range of

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approaches and outlooks into the debate than in its previous iterations. I recognise contributors to this forum as engaged (even if in different strokes) in creative and intellectually rich debates that are either explicitly relevant to questions of IPE, or fall directly under the umbrella of IPE, as well as IR more generally. The questions and puzzles that are animating my own research concerns – many of which I would associate with concerns of ‘IPE’, although I prefer to call it global political economy (GPE) – have benefited from the influences of scholars participating in this forum. I feel the need to be explicit about this for the following reasons:

I, too, have over the past years felt somewhat disheartened by the dominance of certain perspectives and methods of analysis in our dominant IPE-related journals. Now conceived as the mainstream IPE journals, these rank as our discipline’s ‘top’ journals; yet they have come to be not only ‘boring’ in the sense conveyed by Cohen, but without a doubt are also decidedly *not* where the big ‘meta-theoretical’ questions are put on the table (even if not always totally refined or settled, these have occurred elsewhere). Thus I was somewhat astounded that the (original) ‘debate about IPE’, picking up on Cohen’s challenge in a special issue of RIPE, consisted of (primarily) contributors I would associate with the mainstream. Glaring omissions in that forum were critical voices working in IPE/GPE, and the global politics of development and historical political sociology – many of whom have been doing the work that was called for. They were absent both as participants, and in terms of having their works engaged in that context.<sup>2</sup> It is also less than clear, for instance, why important issues in IPE/GPE and global development—such as race and racism, and colonialism and its legacies – were completely absent. Equally striking was that there was no engagement with gender theorists working in political economy. For example, in *Bananas, beaches and bases* (1989), Cynthia Enloe demonstrated how power relations play out at the

intersection of 'politics and economics'. Philip McMichael, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, Sydney Mintz, Roxanne Lyn Doty, David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, Siba N Grovogui, Robbie Shilliam, Caroline Thomas, Anthony McGrew and Julian Saurin (among others) have offered historically informed analyses of contemporary challenges in the organisation of IPE/GPE, in some cases drawing out the links between industrialisation, enslavement, and the 'civilizing mission'. The link between Empire, early instantiations of 'companies' and corporations, and social and political formations has been well established by postcolonial theorists and critical human rights scholars (see, for example, Chakrabarty 2000; Baxi 1998). What are assumed to be settled and constitutive political categories in mainstream approaches are virtually everywhere contested, for instance, by indigenous movements struggling for their rights and recognition against displacement due to attempts to 'improve' their lands as part of an ongoing 'civilising process' (see, for instance, Shaw 2002). The IPE section of the International Studies Association recently celebrated the work of Mike Davis (as an 'activist' scholar) not least for his work on unravelling the global political economic organisation of our *Planet of Slums* (2006). None of this work seems to have made any impression on most of the contributors to the debate in RIPE. In short, I was genuinely taken aback that this 'debate about a debate' remained so 'stuck', sterile, and abstracted from the lived lives and experiences of so many people subjected to practices extended through the IPE/GPE and the politics of global development.

I was equally struck by the lack of analytical rigour and critical reflection in some of the contributions to the 'debate about the debate'. A case in point is Farrell's and Finnemore's mapping of IPE in terms of two broadly competing (ontological) perspectives, which they refer to as 'rationalist (liberal)' and 'constructivist'.<sup>3</sup> I found myself asking whether constructivists could not also be committed to

the premises of liberal political economy in their normative or ideological disposition. Those constructivists working on the basis of a broad acceptance of the main contemporary institutional arrangements concerning trade and development, for example, will very likely subscribe to familiar liberal premises of development and progress. These premises include a commitment, implicit or explicit, to the formal comparative method, and its underlying conception of development and progress as tied to discrete units (i.e. states) in an inter-state system (for critical perspectives, see Mitchell 2002; McMichael 1990; Weber 2007). Such a commitment to the formal comparative method is itself premised on normative precepts closely associated with liberal conceptions of development and progress, especially in the contemporary context. I consider the implications of this in greater detail in part three.

In taking the call for a global conversation about the state of IPE seriously, the elephant in the room cannot be ignored. This means that, contra David Lake,<sup>4</sup> the big questions continue to be as important as they have always been, because, as I will show below, accepting some underlying meta-theoretical premises as ‘given’ and ‘natural’ has too much at stake morally, intellectually and politically. I am thinking here in particular of rising global inequalities and the vulnerabilities these engender, as well as the big questions around issues of ecological sustainability in the context of high-level commitments to the pursuit of economic growth, which continues unreformed to be the core measure of development. In raising these concerns, I do not take the position (as recently argued) that the crux of the matter of global inequalities could be resolved through a critical focus on capital–labour relations.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I develop my contribution more in line with the critical perspectives outlined above, and more resonant with John Hobson’s interventions later on in the debate about IPE. I proceed along the following lines:

In part one, I reconstruct central points of Benjamin Cohen's mapping of IPE in his call for more intellectually challenging and stimulating approaches. As part of this examination, I identify some contentious aspects of his approach, and unpack these in the context of a critical examination. In part two, I aim to historicise IPE (contra the mainstream version), following on also from other critical contributions to this debate (including Hobson's). In part three, I return to the bigger question of the politics of method, focusing critically on the practice of conflating methods with ideological commitments, and to some extent on the question of the contradictions of liberalism. In the conclusion, I argue for a much more inclusive conception of political relations, one that gives an account of *social relations* in political terms, and overcomes the artificial distinction between politics and economics. This also means moving beyond reductionist conceptions of development associated with narrowly framed approaches to (international) political economy.

## **Part one**

### **Benjamin Cohen's mapping of IPE: critical reconstruction**

Cohen's central argument is that the study of IPE is bifurcated, with two broad approaches committed to distinctively different theoretical and methodological premises located on either side of the Atlantic. By briefly reconstructing his argument, my aim is to demonstrate why his rendition of this problem is in itself contentious, engendering in turn further potential misunderstandings and misapprehensions. This critical discussion then provides the backdrop to an alternative account of historicising IPE, which I trace in part two.

In his mapping of IPE, Cohen (2007) states that IPE as a 'distinctive academic field [ ... ] was born no more than a few decades ago' (in

other words, in the 1970s). Taking as his point of departure Gilpin's definition of IPE as 'the reciprocal and dynamic interaction in international relations of the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of power' (2007: 197), he goes on to state the following (which is worth quoting in full):

[...] IPE is about the complex linkages between economic and political activity at the level of international affairs. As a practical matter, such linkages have always existed. As a distinct academic field, however, IPE was born no more than a few decades ago. Prior to the 1970s, in the English-speaking world, economics and political science were treated as entirely different disciplines, each with its own view of international affairs. Relatively few efforts were made to bridge the gap between the two. Exceptions could be found, often quite creative, but mostly among *Marxists or others outside the 'respectable' mainstream of Western scholarship*. A broad-based movement to build bridges between the separate specialities of international economics and international relations (IR) in effect, to construct the field we know as IPE – was really of very recent origin (2007: 197, my emphasis).

On the back of this assertion, Cohen proceeds to distinguish between what he identifies as the American School and the British School of IPE. According to Cohen, in the former, 'priority is given to the scientific method.' In quoting Krasner – who is presented as 'one of the American School's leading lights' – Cohen aims to explicate what differentiates the two schools. For Krasner, IPE 'is deeply embedded in the standard methodology of the social sciences which, stripped to its bare bones, simply means stating a proposition and testing it against external evidence' (2007: 198). In contrast, the British ('and elsewhere in the English speaking world') are more receptive to drawing from other disciplines, 'beyond mainstream

economics and political science; they also evince a deeper interest in normative issues. In the British style, IPE is less wedded to scientific method and more ambitious in its agenda' (2007: 198).

Cohen goes on to supplement his account of the differences between the two schools 'in terms of their contrasting understandings about ontology and epistemology' (2007: 199). As Cohen states, in terms of ontology, 'the American school remains determinedly state-centric, privileging sovereign governments above all other units of interest. The British School by contrast, treats the state as just one agent among many, if states are to be included at all' (2007: 197). For the American School, the 'core object of study [ ... ] is limited to state behaviour and system governance. *The main purpose of theory is explanation: to identify causality*' (my emphasis). This rendition of 'the American School' is problematic not least in the way in which 'causality' is associated exclusively with a very narrow set of 'ontological' and 'methodological' precepts. For instance, in both historical and contemporary contexts, globally constituted unequal relations have shaped differentially the very institutions (including 'states') which the 'American School' on Cohen's account takes as its point of departure for analysis; the formal/causal story here simply abstracts from formative/relational underpinnings. I expand on this point below, drawing in particular on critical work on the limits of the formal comparative method.

Cohen moves on to characterise the second broad approach. For the British School, he claims, IPE is

... more inclusive—more open to links to other areas of inquiry. The problematique is more ecumenical, concerned with all manner of social and ethical issues. *The main purpose of theory is judgement: to identify injustice*. The driving ambition is amelioration: to make the world a better place. Where the American school aspires to the objectivity of

conventional social science, the British school is openly normative in the tradition of pragmatism and classic moral philosophy (2007: 199-200, my emphasis).

In terms of epistemology,

the American school is wedded to principles of positivism and empiricism- the twin pillars of a hard science model. Deductive logic and parsimonious reasoning are used to seek out universal truths. Formal research methodologies are put to work to test hypotheses and promote cumulative knowledge. The British School, by contrast, embraces approaches that are more institutional and historical in nature and more interpretive in tone. Less formal methodologies are preferred in order to accommodate the school's wide range of analytical concerns (2007: 200).

With these differences stated, and refracted through the lens of his acceptance of Gilpin's definition of the field, Cohen proceeds to map the context of the historical origins of IPE as he sees it. The account he gives of IPE's origins as a disciplinary concern in the 1970s has already been subjected to critical scrutiny as part of the debate about his framing of IPE (Hobson 2013a, 2013b). My purpose here is to add to these critical engagements by deepening the debate with reference to methodological issues that have been sidelined thus far, including those that touch on questions of ontology and epistemology.

In mapping the differences within IPE, Cohen does capture some tendencies that differentiate approaches to studying the field as he defines it in this context. However, what is more important here is *how* these differences are ultimately framed and presented. Understanding IPE to be fundamentally about 'the reciprocal and dynamic interaction in international relations of the pursuit of wealth



and the pursuit of power' (à la Gilpin) raises inadvertently (and one may add necessarily) a concern with differential power relations, and struggles over the unequal distribution of material resources. Therefore, accepting the implications of Gilpin's definition means that IPE as a field is premised on highly normative precepts. The concept of power itself is relational, and therefore implicates actors with one another in ways necessarily inflected to normative concerns (hence the need for justifications of power). In addition, the pursuit of wealth is already imbued with ideas of 'progress' and 'development', both embedded again in highly normative accounts of what constitutes 'progress' or 'development'.

Consequently, if, as Cohen puts it, IPE is 'about the complex linkages between economic and political activity at the level of international affairs', and is about questions of power and wealth, then the corollary is surely about *relations* of domination and resistance and inequalities (which in turn could be explicitly engaged in terms of question of injustices). If we accept that the study of IPE is about *relations* of power and wealth, then we cannot sever the link to its normative undercarriage.<sup>6</sup> To distinguish the British School as more committed to 'making the world a better place' (which it may be too!) is besides the point, once we have already admitted that the study of IPE is about questions pertaining to *relations* of power and wealth as outlined above. The study of IPE simply cannot then be conceived as value-free or objective, unless we want to defend conceptions of social and political relations as somehow functioning according to some laws of nature, and therefore *not* socially and politically constructed. Such debates have already been had in global development revolving around the core question of whether social change is evolutionary or revolutionary, and I do not wish to rehash them again (although the critical discussion below on method speaks to this point).

Having established that *normative* questions *inadvertently* underline any school of IPE (if we take Gilpin's definition given above), the

question arises as to how these are to be handled theoretically and methodologically. For the most part, the ‘scientific method’ as posited by Cohen will not deliver on questions of the political dynamics of unequal social relations and questions of power and resistance, or will do so only if embedded and circumscribed in theoretical and methodological contexts explicitly geared to disclose these. If the scientific method means ‘stating a proposition and testing it against *external* evidence’ (my emphasis), we will not get very far in *explaining causality* (the ostensible aim of the American School, according to Cohen). One problem here is how the distinction between a proposition and ‘that which is external to it’ is construed in the first instance (I explicate this in more detail by drawing on a case example from World Bank research below). Furthermore, in *explaining causality*, surely one may also be under pressure to explicate reasons for unequal power relations and disparities in material wealth, which cannot but distance such reasoning from *normative* questions. While it is certainly possible to decide not to make this part of a research agenda, this has the effect of *absenting* an account of substantive social and political relations, which have been historically central to large-scale political transformations. Again, Cohen’s distinction in terms of the problematique that sets the two schools apart does not really hold. *To state that the British school is not also about explaining causality but rather intent on establishing judgement is consequently equally misplaced, analytically and conceptually.*<sup>7</sup>

Let me illustrate the broader points with a couple of examples that are quite integral to IPE.<sup>8</sup> Let’s take the following proposition by drawing on an example used by the World Bank: one of its recent studies (2011) draws a correlation (aiming at establishing a causal connection in the sense implied by Cohen) between food riots and poor governance (at the level of the state). The method adopted draws a link between the number of food riots occurring within selected states, and scores on the governance capacity of respective

states (of course, the definition of *weak governance* is not always explicated further; it nevertheless forms the *normative* backdrop). Based on this proposition, one can declare then that food riots occur in contexts of poor governance (as noted, without even necessarily identifying the latter clearly). In so doing, what has been severed is the link between food availability and a lack of *entitlement* to food by those with no entitlement exchange (or lack of purchasing power), and without access to redistributive mechanisms. Instead, the focus shifts simply to 'violence' (food riots) and poor governance, abstracting precisely from any in-depth account of the political economy of 'hunger in the midst of plenty' (Sahlins 1974: 36). To be clear, the corresponding conception of 'good governance' is not to prescribe the redistribution of food (or welfare more generally), but rather, as noted, to deflect away from the *causality* of deprivation, focusing instead on prescriptions, for example, regarding the intensification of food production. How this example of hunger is approached by mainstream accounts, of which the World Bank's stance above is typical, has deeper historical roots: it is of course akin to the Malthusian fallacy, whereby, as Amartya Sen has argued, a question of political science has been reduced analytically (and very problematically!) to two physical magnitudes, namely food availability and population (1983: 92). In this example from the World Bank, the question of entitlement failure, as Sen has put it, does not even come into the equation as a causal link (only perhaps as a set of further, 'exogenous variables', under the header of the violation of 'peace and order'). This and similar approaches to constructing and framing a problem both in research and practice is really reflective of carefully crafted methods in ways that sever links to *causality*,<sup>9</sup> and delink deprivation from the 'market episteme'.<sup>10</sup> Such 'politics of method' continue to hold sway as ostensibly value-free, objective knowledge about hunger specifically, and also continue to inform debates about welfare provision, including in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Another, somewhat different issue I wish to draw on in order to demonstrate the ‘politics of method’ implied in reducing IPE to analytics in terms of inter-state relations is the historical case of the call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s. Cohen also refers to this (2007:201), as an example of an effort to ‘fundamentally transform the rules governing relations between the wealthy “North” and the poverty-stricken “South”’ (2007: 201). That the call for an NIEO did go up at the United Nations is a historical fact. But beneath this fact, the categorisation of the ‘poverty-stricken “South”’ is not a fact to be understood in terms of a pre-given, originary condition. If we were to start from the proposition that it is (as per the American School), we would take states as our formal units of analysis, conceived as discrete for analytical purposes, and proceed to map and compare their respective stages of growth or development (as per modernisation theoretic assumptions); in the more explicit parlance of disciplinary IR, we would perhaps refer to ‘degrees of statehood’ in the same context. The *causalities* beneath their respective experiences of poverty (or disparity in terms of economic wealth) will then not be explained as an outcome of *historical relations and, for instance, legacies of colonialism*, which could explain the substantively unequal international political economic structures of the post-1945 era (inherited in the aftermath of struggles for decolonisation). Rather, applying the formal (state-centred comparative method), one may simply take ‘their’ condition as ‘given’ and an expression of states on ‘lower rungs’ of the development ladder (see, for example, Rostow 1960 and Sachs 2005); explanations of ‘their’ condition are then construed by reference to the unit itself and its purely internal dynamics, and not as an expression of unequally constituted *global* social relations.<sup>12</sup>

Against the backdrop of these two examples, I want to reinforce the critical point that the ways in which we frame our research propositions themselves are highly significant, and that this framing is not a value-free exercise. The same would apply to identifying our

markers for comparison; the question of whether we adopt an immanent critique or aim to develop analysis through 'external' variables is not without social and political implications. The former approach gives us a very different explanation of causality not tied to determining 'positions' on ladders, even if normative positions explicitly accompany the analysis. The latter takes the 'ladder metaphor' (or related modernisation theoretic criteria) as its unquestioned *normative* premise for an evaluation of states based on the formal comparative method (McMichael 1990; Weber 2007). This may not be surprising, given that, as Cohen notes, 'the American School remains determinedly state-centric, privileging sovereign governments above all other units of interest' (2007:199). The issue here is not so much that the state remains the unit of *interest* (of course it may legitimately be that too), but rather that it also stands in as the *unit of analysis* for explaining the distributions of global wealth and power.

The formally conceived analytical approach must be differentiated from substantively constituted global social and political relations. The fact, then, that states may be 'units of interest' in ideological terms does *not* mean that state-centric analysis can necessarily follow to frame *all* relevant analysis, with no acknowledgement of the analytical and conceptual problems this sort of move entails. To subscribe to state-centred analysis as a general premise is to conflate *method* with ideological interests. Conflating a general commitment to focusing centrally on the state with the notion that this delivers an intrinsically *more valid and objective method* of analysis has the effect of delegitimizing analyses that foreground relations reaching beyond and through the inter-state architecture and may be *more* central to understanding IPE.

Before I turn to a more explicit engagement with the ahistorical basis of IPE in the American School, I would like to conclude this section by restating that the distinction set up by Cohen between the two schools of the Atlantic divide is problematic. What is at stake, really,

is whether we accept the American School's premises as intellectually and analytically more rigorous (because of its ostensible adherence to 'scientific method'). Furthermore, as I have argued, to frame the two competing methods as motivated by explanation and judgment respectively is highly problematic, not least because of the ahistorical and judgemental bias (see above) of the American School. The deeper history of social relations in the organisation of global wealth and poverty, which has entailed enslavement as well as racial and gender inequalities, is eviscerated from mainstream IPE. At this point, the question needs to be posed of why more historically based approaches could be categorised as being outside the 'respectable' mainstream of IPE, as Cohen construes them in the quotation above. What *exactly* gives mainstream IPE more 'respectability' over other intellectually rigorous accounts of the relationship between power and wealth? Furthermore, if indeed IPE consolidated as a discipline in the 1970s (as per the mainstream definition), it did so at a point in time when critical challenges to international power relations were forcefully placed at the level of international relations (such as the call by the then 'Third World' for a NIEO). It appears that mainstream IPE instead sought to distance itself (intentionally or not) from explanations of causality in analysis of power and wealth, including and especially by abstracting from historical relations of development and retreating to formal political units of interest to derive explanatory frameworks. It is to a more expansive discussion of the historical relations of global development/IPE that I turn next.

## **Part two**

### **Historicising IPE: why critical historical analysis matters**

The narrative of the origins of IPE as a sub-field of IR emerging in the 1970s is problematic on several counts. As part of this 'debate

about IPE', John M Hobson (2013a, 2013b) has already provided a compelling account of the historical relations that have constituted, albeit unequally, global political economic relations. According to such accounts, colonialism and the colonial division of labour (as part of the legacy of colonialism) that ensued in the post-1945 era (which subsequently came to be referred to as the international division of labour) is a significant causal factor in the reproduction of *international* and *global* disparities of wealth, power, and insecurities. As noted above, the call for a NIEO by the then newly independent states explicitly foregrounded the substantively unequal relations of power and wealth that the formally independent states inherited at the point of decolonisation, which was a consequence of colonialism and its legacies. Properly speaking, then, IPE, was already theorised through historical analysis by early Latin American structuralists (such as Raul Prebisch at the ECLA) as well as those who came to be labelled as *Dependistas* – from Andre Gunde Frank to Samir Amin to Walter Rodney, to name a few. The making of unequal global political economic relations (and I emphasise *relations* here, not least to capture forced movement, displacement, and the dispossession of people to work on plantations, for example) and its enduring legacies have been further elaborated on by Eric Wolf, exposed in the *longue durée* history of development of Fernand Braudel, and rendered in stark terms by Mike Davis (just to give a couple of examples).

More specifically, the relationship between enslavement, the industrial revolution, indentured labour, and the institutionalisation of the plantation complex with all its brutality have also been theorised by scholars such as CLR James, Sydney Mintz and Eric Williams, for example. Others have also connected global and local relations through plantation complexes in the organisation of global capitalism. This history of 'global development' is also the history of IPE, properly speaking (and, of course, the history of international

relations too). This colonial history of the global organisation of wealth and power cannot be eviscerated by ahistorical methods of analysis, wherein the formal is conflated with substantive social and political economic relations. It is through the delinking of these historical and transnational relations by means of state-centred analysis (in this case, the method associated with the American School) that framing categories such as the ‘poverty-stricken “South”’, configured as if this were an originary condition, become possible, and are rendered with whatever plausibility they may have for their adherents.

Inclusive accounts of substantive global connections, including historical and contemporary ones, were therefore already available from a wealth of sophisticated analysis (including, but by no means limited to, those identified above). We could add to this list the work of brilliant historical sociologists/global political economists/scholars of global development such as Philip McMichael, Immanuel Wallerstein and Dale Tomich. Thus the ‘growing interdependence of national economies’ of the 1970s (Cohen 2007:201) actually had a much deeper history that established the unequal political economy connections at the heart of the concerns of the NIEO. While Cohen is right to identify the 1970s as reflective of further significant changes in the global political economy, the period is not the point at which ‘interdependence began to grow or intensify’. Rather, it did signal the beginning of the end of an era in which core capitalist states maintained a political commitment to ‘embedded liberalism’. To this end, John Ruggie’s *normative* analysis associated with the concept of embedded liberalism did, of course, capture the essence of government intervention in the economy to ensure that welfare could be provided for through redistribution in core capitalist states. However, Ruggie’s framework failed to acknowledge the contingency of embedded liberalism: *it rested on the possibilities afforded by*



*inherited structural inequalities, again, which were at the heart of the NIEO debate.* The big political debates and political economic shifts of the 1970s were thus important: these political debates were about historically constituted unequal relations, and yet the mainstream IPE that emerged in this context could simply deflect these concerns away through a recourse to state-centric formalism, and attempts to reinforce the enduring power of the capitalist core through hegemonic stability theory.<sup>13</sup> The latter, too, emerged in a context of crises; for example, in global politics, we saw the forging of OPEC as a power bloc, partially in response to the Yom Kippur War. The 1970s also marked the beginning of the rise of neoliberal ideology, with political efforts aimed at picking away at the welfare-state model (the 'embedded liberal' compromise) aspiring to establish what Philip Cerny termed several decades ago the 'competition state'. It is an era that experienced both the rise of Third Worldism as a political project and the subsequent gradual shift by state representatives towards an acceptance of neoliberal premises of development. Of course, linked to the circulation of 'petro-dollars' are the subsequent debt crisis, and the conditionalities of the World Bank and IMF, which resulted in the re-emergence of 'food riots' in many states of the global South (see Walton and Seddon 1994).

Against this brief sketch of historical relations, then, it is more than a little problematic to locate the origins of IPE in the 1970s. Even if we were to focus away from the insights of dependency theorists, early modernisation theorists were explicitly engaged in normative evaluations of the ostensible 'backwardness' of 'other' societies, and were politically engaged in planning their paths to progress and prosperity based on a 'stages of growth logic' as early as the 1950s. However, even if the specific global political context of the 1970s is identified as significant for the emergence of the IPE Cohen renders in his account, superstars of IPE are clearly selectively identified. The criteria of selection include a commitment to formalism over substantive analysis, reflected in ahistoricism as well as narrow

conceptions of relations of power and wealth. To identify analysis and approaches that ultimately explicitly align with liberalism in terms of political ideology is to define the field of inquiry according to ideological predispositions. But even if one has a commitment to liberalism in terms of ideology, this should not be a licence to insist on methods that are explicitly crafted to reflect and uphold such ideological commitments, cast as ‘scientific method’.

The formalist fallacy, of course, has been the subject of critiques advanced by feminists, critical political economists and critical political theorists. In liberal political economy, formal equality in the economic sphere explains away substantively unequal social relations, because we are said to engage in contracts through free choice. But free choice means little if structural conditions are stacked in order to sustain the reproduction of fundamentally unequal social relationships. Similarly, if ‘American IPE’ is said to retain a commitment to state-centrism (and not just an interest in the state), whereby the state is taken as the ‘analytical point of departure and return’,<sup>14</sup> substantive social and political relations that reach beyond or through the boundaries are eviscerated, both in historical and contemporary contexts. To eschew critical historical analysis based on substantive relations in favour of formal analysis is to miss the sources of social and political change. I will come back to this point in my concluding section. Prior to that, however, I move on to discuss further the question of method in relation to the ‘big questions’ of global political economy.

### **Part three**

#### **Politics of method: why the big questions matter**

Let us set aside, for now, the *normative* question of why any engagement with questions of international political economy ought

to have something to say not just about the 'pursuit of power and the pursuit of wealth', but should also adopt a dialectical approach and say something about deprivation, struggle, resistance, and inequality. Instead, it is instructive to return to the question of method and engage the political implications of methodological choices. In doing so, we should remind ourselves that the context of thinking and writing about IPE is set comprehensively by issues of *development*; in one way or another, *all* explorations in political economy speak to questions of what development means, should comprise, and be expected to change. To heed this basic concern is to open a window on the politics of method, which discloses another important aspect of the 'poverty of IPE' identified by Cohen.

To recap, as Cohen has stated in terms of ontology, 'the American School remains determinedly state-centric, privileging sovereign governments above all other units of interest' (2007: 1999). As noted above, in terms of the American School's approach, the privileging of the state as its key unit of interest proceeds in tandem with the state being the key unit of analysis. There is a difference here. The state can be the key unit of interest without it also being adopted as the key unit of analysis. When the latter is equated with the former, ideological commitment is easily conflated with method. Of course, Cohen does suggest that the state is the 'key unit of interest' (and not analysis), but once we enquire into what co-ordinates make up the method of analysis of the American School, it is clear that the commitment to state-centrism travels well beyond interest in the state and into method (as the key unit of analysis), or what is subsequently presented as 'scientific method'.<sup>15</sup>

But what price do we pay for an adherence to formalism and a commitment to state-centric analysis? As already noted, we dispense with substantive relations that are at the basis of social and political relations and transformations. A consequence is therefore the actual failure to have anything meaningful to say about the relations of

domination and contestation at play in social and political transformations. Philip McMichael already explicitly engaged with the question of method in analysis of social and political transformations in 1990. In explicitly problematising the state as the unit of analysis, acknowledging the insights of world system theorists, but without accepting a structuralist ontology, he argued for an alternative non-state-centric conception of global change. As McMichael noted, the adoption of the state as the unit of analysis is also based on a comparative logic, explicitly in terms of ‘stages of growth’ or stages of development. McMichael went on to show why this comparative logic is ahistorical, and thus also fundamentally flawed. Instead, he argued for the method of ‘incorporated comparison’.

Rather than using ‘encompassing comparison’ – a strategy that presumes a ‘whole’ that governs its ‘parts’ – it progressively constructs a whole as a methodological procedure by giving context to historical phenomena. In effect, the ‘whole’ emerges via comparative analysis of ‘parts’ as moments in a self-forming whole. I call this incorporated comparison. ‘Incorporated comparison’ stems from the critique of ‘modernization theory,’ and includes the theoretical proposition that international organization is continually evolving. The goal is not to develop invariant hypotheses via comparison of more or less uniform ‘cases,’ but to give substance to a historical process (a whole) through comparison of its parts. The whole, therefore, does not exist independent of its parts. Whether considering nation-states or a singular world system, neither whole nor parts are permanent categories or units of analysis. Generalization is historically contingent because the units of comparison are historically specified (1990: 386).

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**Is IPE just 'boring', or committed to problematic meta-theoretical assumptions?...**

As McMichael noted in the abstract to this article, which is worth citing in full:

Recent critiques of modernization theory have questioned the comparability of its central organizing concept, the 'national society.' The logic of comparative inquiry requires independent or independent but uniform' cases' and formal quasi-experimental signs of or comparative generalization. Global conceptions of social change violate formal comparative requirements, necessitating an alternative form of 'incorporated comparison,' that takes both multiple diachronic and singular synchronic forms. Incorporated comparison is used to conceptualize variation across time and space when time and space dimensions are neither separate nor uniform. The fixed units of analysis employed by modernization and world-system theories yield to an alternatives strategy of grounding the analytical units of comparison in the world-historical processes under investigation. Recent studies illustrate this alternative to formal comparison and incorporated comparison into the process of substantive inquiry (1990: 385).

Read through the lens of McMichael's critical account of the comparative method, the logic of analysis according to the American School has propositions in place which abstract from substantive, constitutive relations: 'In the beginning', there were the wealthy states of the West, and the 'poverty-stricken "South"'. The approach favoured by proponents of the conventional perspective is to set aside *any* interrogation or problematisation of their analytical categories (such as the state and the market). At the same time, the criteria of conventional accounts of development (which are linked to the core premises of IPE) are used as core comparative markers.

The central unit of comparison and analysis is the state, at least according to the ‘American School’. There are exceptions, though.<sup>16</sup>

A critical global historical and relationally conceived analysis can explicate how everyday relations of development have come to be located within broader global ‘structures’ (institutions) of governance. Of course, this would not necessarily mean that global relations of inequalities would be revealed in the fullest possible ways. But it would mean being able to provide a more comprehensive account of global relations of inequalities, deprivation and dispossession. It would provide for a distinctively different rendition of how power is organised and sustained globally, rather than merely being reduced to an account of inter-state relations. The historically informed approach I have outlined above can certainly account for states and state power; however, it does so without adopting state-centrism as its ontological premise.

### **Why, then Do the ‘Big’ Questions Still Matter?**

In a world in which global relations affect the lives of distant others, where commodity chains (or ‘value chains’) comprise unequal relations of development, while institutions of governance push for hyper-forms of the ‘competition state’ to the detriment and denial of fundamental entitlements to many globally, we must ask: who and what is the subject of our enquiry, and what is our conception of development? As social movements and practices of resistance to inequalities continue to shape the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with an immanent ecological crisis accompanied by new ‘land grabs’, and the recent (re)endorsement of economic growth as the core measure of development, we must ask the *normative* questions as *political* theorists: through what meta-theoretical assumptions do we justify continuing domination and deprivation?

If the British School, explicitly acknowledging normative questions, is more ambitious in its agenda, and is historical in its approach (going beyond accounts limited by the formalism of state-centrism), surely this ought to entail better prospects for political theory and analysis? Does the British School explain causality better than the American School, and make a normative case for why the pursuit of wealth through domination may not just be politically but also ethically problematic? As the political anthropologist James Scott has argued convincingly, social and political relations of domination are always contingent, precisely because any power relation is never stable, but always processed and resisted. There is a whole rich political life-world that a commitment to formalism cannot even begin to imagine; yet, it is the life-blood of political transformations (Scott 1990).

## **Conclusion**

Towards a more inclusive account of politics, and a non-reductionist conception of development (Going beyond the 'economy')

Given all this, the task for an IPE that is both less boring and more relevant to the ways in which contemporary development trajectories are experienced and processed by people requires first and foremost a widening of our concept of politics. In 1988 already, R J B Walker wrote in *One World, Many Worlds* that political life is an everyday practice and not the privilege of politicians and institutions of governance. In identifying social movements and actors in political struggles, Walker's objective was to explicate the practice of politics as an everyday struggle. To take such insights seriously is to begin to recognize the problems entailed, for instance, as a result of the widespread and much enforced idea that *development* is somehow coextensive with *economic growth*, measured in aggregate at the level of the state. Because of its acceptance of unquestioned underlying premises regarding the separation of politics from economics, as well

as an implicit (if not explicit) acceptance of development and progress as exclusively defined in terms of the ‘pursuit of wealth and power’, conventional IPE systematically *excludes* a whole range of alternative, more inclusive approaches to development and progress. More than merely an intellectual shortcoming, this exclusion amounts to a reductionist conception of development which is closely aligned with predilections for framing social life as inherently grounded in capitalist social relations. An IPE that sees the world through this lens only may *record* the fact that market relations are being intensified, and more and more goods and services privatised and rendered in the required terms of ‘exclusionary property’ through the commercialisation principle. It will *not* be able to *situate* these in relation to the social struggles and conflicts they engender; instead of *interrogating* political economy in depth, it *naturalises* a reductionist version of it.

A completely different understanding of the workings of the ‘world economy’ is advanced when the manifold practices of push-backs, resistances and struggles (sometimes manifest, but always immanent) are put centre stage, not least analytically. Movements and struggles epistemically disclose a *politics* that is in play dialectically, through which the categories of an overly formalistically oriented IPE are unsettled. The challenges to the *ontological* premises of a ‘boring IPE’ (as Cohen has put it) are, in this way, clearly articulated by movements such as La Via Campesina, transnational indigenous activism, or elements of green political movements. Corresponding to such examples of movement struggle, there are the ‘micro-level’ actions at the level of everyday politics that analysts and critical scholars such as Walker, McMichael or Scott (among others) have drawn attention to.

All of this pushes IPE beyond the confines of formalist accounts of politics, which feminists have also long criticised, drawing on similar insights (for example, see Enloe 2011; Elias 2013). The contours of what Hobson has gestured at with his concept of inter-civilisational



dialogue, and Cristina Rojas (2007) has proposed as 'IPE otherwise' in the register of 'cultural political economy', are cogent to such concerns. In his critical engagement with the dominant human rights discourse, Siba N Grovogui, drawing on the Haitian revolution, has argued that much can be said for taking seriously emotions, affect and resistance as underlying sources of social change for realising more progressive relations, particularly in contexts where it is precisely through discourses of 'rationality' that practices of domination and deprivation have ensued for many (2011: 62).

In the liberal-capitalist world economy, the artificial distinction between the public and private spheres plays out in terms of juxtaposing politics and economics. However, the accounts of selfhood (and selves) that emerge from this imaginary and are central to it are demonstrably mere abstractions. This was identified already by Karl Polanyi who pointed out the contingency of attempts to treat as commodities that which is not, and cannot be in accordance with its original condition. Importantly, then, through analysis premised on relational perspectives, more comprehensive accounts of 'causality' can be rendered, explicating how everyday relations of inequalities, ostensibly construed as natural, are anything but that. Through such critical perspectives, their social construction can be revealed, following Gramscian and neo-Gramscian accounts of hegemony and social struggles, for example. Critical historical analyses (relational) also open up the substantive contexts through which the *normative* questions can be debated in normative terms.<sup>17</sup> A relational (and dialectical) analysis pushes for enquiry to be substantively grounded over theoretical abstraction, while a commitment to relational analysis is also uniquely conducive to keeping meta-theoretical questions and concerns in the forefront of research.

Once again, I am grateful to Benjamin Cohen for initiating the debate without which this critical conversation would perhaps not have

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taken place. Anna Leander's commitment to organising this forum as a global conversation has taken it to another level. My thanks!

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## **Notes**

- 1.** I refer here to the title of an article by Cohen (2010): 'Are IPE journals becoming boring?'
- 2.** Ravenhill mentions the works of Caroline Thomas and Anthony McGrew, among others, as representing a 'missing middle' (2008: 24). While this recognition of their work is important, and thus welcome, I am not sure that either would locate themselves in terms of a 'missing middle'.
- 3.** See Farrell and Finnemore (2009: 60).
- 4.** For instance, in his contribution to the 2009 debate about IPE, Lake states: 'I have relatively little patience for the Great Debates in IR and IPE. [...] I often wish that scholars would stop contemplating how to do research and simply get on with the business of explaining, understanding, and possibly improving the world we inhabit and, in part, create' (2009: 48). Katzenstein offers a considered and critical engagement with Lake's framing of the American School of IPE in terms of the open economy politics (2009: 125-127).
- 5.** See, for example, Selwyn (2014).
- 6.** Higgott and Watson (2008: 10) make a similar point: 'First, IPE is bound by the exploration of the relationship between power and wealth. It cannot therefore be modeled on modes of analysis appropriate to studying one in isolation from the other ...'
- 7.** Higgott and Watson (2008) also critically discuss Cohen's framing of the debate about IPE itself. See especially pages 6-7.
- 8.** My contribution to this forum focuses on the 'bigger picture' challenges implied in Cohen's call, and hence does not afford me with an opportunity to develop detailed case examples. For those looking for applications of some of the methodological and conceptual moves I sketch here in the context of empirical cases, see for instance Weber (2002, 2004, 2006, 2014 and 2015).
- 9.** I elaborate some of this in more detail in Weber (2015).

- 10.** I am drawing on McMichael's argument about the epistemic privileging of the 'market calculus – where the market has become the dominant lens through which development is viewed. An episteme is an approach to knowledge about the world, based on a core set of assumptions that seem like common sense. Thus the market and its 'invisible hand' assumptions (neutrality, efficiency, rationality) have come to represent the central episteme in the modern enterprise of development. Since these assumptions have common-sense appeal, they normalise the market calculus in the discourse and pursuit of development' (2010: 3).
- 11.** For a critical account, see, for example, Somers and Block (2005).
- 12.** In many ways, this was the critique of Dependency Theory (DT) as a counterpoint to modernisation theoretic accounts of development. This critical point is expanded upon below.
- 13.** See also Hobson for a similar point (2013: 1047).
- 14.** See Saurin (1995: 245). He offers an excellent critical discussion of state-centred analysis, exposing its high problematic implications.
- 15.** Cohen's persistence in defending the American School (2008) must be called out for its ideological disposition rather than 'scientific method', even though he insists that: 'I am inclined to award points to the American School for its closer adherence to the principles of positivism and empiricism – the twin pillars of conventional social science. The formal research methodologies that are so powerful in the United States allow for rigorous testing of hypotheses and a systematic cumulation of knowledge, as compared with the more informal approaches traditionally favoured by the British School scholars' (2008: 32). He continues: '[T]his is not to say that the British School lacks rigour ... but formal empirical inquiry is simply not the British School's strong suit' (32). A similar critique about Cohen's framing of IPE is made by Higgott and Watson who state that 'the presentational device embedded in Cohen's caricature serves to naturalise a particular way of doing IPE so as to enforce exactly the sort of limits on IPE scholarship that he uses his article to warn against (2008: 2). On the contrary, one could argue that (upon close reading) Cohen does not really warn against the American School, but rather aims precisely to shore up its approach and delegitimise those critical historical approaches by framing them as 'informal' and thereby less scientific and ultimately less rigorous.
- 16.** See, for example, Germain's contribution to the 'debate about IPE' (2009). He also cautions against the influence (and power) of the 'Harvard School' and its followers (students). See also Katzenstein (2009).

**17.** See also, for example, Katzenstein on the intellectual and political significance of normative dimensions (2009: 132). He also makes the point about the significance of listening to dissenting voices (2009: 133).

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## **Abstract**

**Is IPE just 'boring', or committed to problematic meta-theoretical assumptions? A critical engagement with the politics of method**

In my contribution to this forum on IPE, my aim is to add further to the critical interventions in the debate ignited by Benjamin Cohen. The call to

discuss the state of IPE has been timely, though not only because (some) IPE journals have indeed become uninteresting; much more is at stake. Intellectual debate in the field has now not only narrowed, but has also shifted away from engaging the underlying premises of (global) development, inequalities, and relations of domination. As such, the mainstream framing of IPE is arguably also implicated in a project of ‘gate-keeping’. This is not to say that the intellectual richness and creativity that Cohen has called for in the study of IPE does not exist; such work is pursued by scholars of IR, more broadly conceived, and not just by those in other disciplines. Such richer scholarship has for instance, been advanced by historical sociologists, postcolonial theorists, and critical scholars of global development/global political economy including many working from feminist political-economic perspectives. The absence of an engagement with such perspectives in the mainstream of IPE can perhaps be explained to some extent by reference to ideological dispositions and attempts to maintain a hold on the disciplinary core along epistemological and methodological premises committed to ostensibly power-free and value-free analysis. The consequences are felt, as Cohen notes, also in the context of training and preparing future generations of IPE scholars, where current practices tend to reproduce students unable to ‘ask and respond to the big questions’, and who have instead come to be satisfied with applying ‘accepted’ methods. Critical scholars, on the other hand, have continuously pushed beyond the analytical and theoretical boundaries, engaging for example, with questions of power, domination and resistance, and more often than not such analyses are grounded in empirical research. In this contribution, I aim to demonstrate, through a critical reconstructive sketch, how mainstream IPE falls short, and what the value is of alternative, relationally conceived, analytical approaches.

**Keywords:** IPE – Politics of Method – Formal Comparison – Development – State-Centrism – Inequality – Poverty