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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 773564139]

Publisher Routledge

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Review of International Political Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713393878>

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Nicola Phillips ^a

^a Political Economy Institute and Politics, University of Manchester, UK

Online Publication Date: 01 February 2009

To cite this Article Phillips, Nicola(2009)'The slow death of pluralism',Review of International Political Economy,16:1,85 — 94

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09692290802524125

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09692290802524125>

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The slow death of pluralism

Nicola Phillips

Political Economy Institute and Politics, University of Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I draw attention to what I see as a slow death of theoretical, methodological and empirical pluralism in American-school international political economy (IPE). In the first instance, I identify its roots in practices of editorial gatekeeping among the leading journals and the self-selection of authors who publish in them, and on this basis put forward a set of sceptical reactions to Maliniak and Tierney's contention that we can adequately depict the 'state of the field' by analyzing the content of the 'top' journals. I go on to explore the implications of the close disciplinary association of IPE with the discipline of international relations in the United States, and argue that the marked contraction of pluralism in the American school of IPE is due in large part to its continued shackling to international relations as much as its emerging methodological monoculture.

KEYWORDS

American school; British school; international relations discipline; interdisciplinarity; pluralism.

The lively recent discussions surrounding the transatlantic divide in international political economy (IPE) starkly illuminate how far the American school is from constituting the 'open range' that Susan Strange (1984) famously advocated for the field. It is, if anything, moving apace in the opposite direction. The reflections offered by Cohen (2007, 2008), the responses by Higgott and Watson (2008) and Ravenhill (2008), and the data presented by Maliniak and Tierney reveal clearly the bases of the contraction and demeaning of pluralism – an openness to a variety of theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and empirical concerns – that many will recognize and accept as an accurate characterization of the contemporary American school. Liberalism is manifestly in the ascendant, Marxism has almost disappeared and there has been a sharp methodological homogenisation. Few of the more recent theoretical

innovations, such as ideational and constructivist approaches, have found significant expression in IPE scholarship published in the leading American international relations (IR) journals which Maliniak and Tierney survey. It should be added that the profiles of these journals are also dominated by United States authors (over 80%), by people working in a fairly small handful of the most prestigious United States universities (29% of articles from 11 universities), and by men (86%).

What I wish to do in my contribution to this debate is to reflect briefly on these trends towards a contraction of pluralism in the American school – where they originate, what implications they carry and what they tell us about the divide between American-school and British-school IPE that some have identified (Cohen, 2008; Murphy and Nelson, 2001) – as well as to provide some direct reactions to Maliniak and Tierney's interesting discussion. While my own sympathies and affiliations lie with what has come to be called the 'British school', this is not intended to be yet another instance of lazy fist-waving at the American school from the safe shores of the 'other side'. Rather, it is an attempt to engage with the present debate concretely about the American school, emphasising what I see to be the troubling implications of the trends we are discussing here. My observations do not discount the parallel questions that need to be asked about the 'British-school' vision of IPE, and there will be another moment in this wider debate to reflect on those.¹

IR-CENTRISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF DISCIPLINARITY

Maliniak and Tierney (this issue) base their discussion on the '12 leading political science journals that publish articles in the sub-field of IR' (Maliniak and Tierney, 2009: 7, this issue). In so doing, they produce a set of interesting and provocative insights into the state of the field, which themselves suggest a stimulating array of questions and issues for future reflection. But they also, entirely unquestioningly, reinforce from the outset the strongly disciplinary association of IPE with IR. This is an association that is by no means universally accepted, particularly outside the American-school community. In my view, it is also highly problematic. IPE scholars publish in IR journals, they are telling us – sometimes also in more properly 'political science' journals, but the point is that we know where to find IPE scholarship, and in surveying these 12 journals we can uncover what we need to know about the state of the field. It would be hard to find a clearer assertion of what the field of IPE is and what it should be. Regrettably, it is one that perhaps the huge majority of IPE scholars in the American school would accept without hesitation.

The obsession with journal rankings and citation indices, which is spilling over increasingly into the ways in which academic life is organized

outside the United States, mean also that the 'holy grail' for aspiring IPE scholars, and the natural homes for successful and eminent ones, are represented by the small handful of journals that Maliniak and Tierney identify in their survey. Most of them are what we would call 'generalist' IR and political science journals, which should, according to that definition, publish scholarship drawn from across the field to which they correspond. Yet, the point is that these 'generalist' journals are not in fact 'generalist' at all. The arresting narrowness of their remit, particularly in terms of the types of articles published is well documented by both Maliniak and Tierney and Cohen (2009, this issue). Over 80% of authors publishing in these journals are from or working in the United States, no articles employing a Marxist frame of reference have appeared in any of the 12 journals since 1990, close to 70% of all articles published in these outlets between 1980 and 2006 have worked within the liberal paradigm, and 90% of all IPE articles published in 2006 employed quantitative methods.

Cohen's (2008) book provides us with pertinent observations about the provenance of the intellectual trends that are reflected in these statistics. But we are missing a sustained focus on how the practice of editorial screening, or what some like to call 'gate keeping' – establishing and policing the remit and focus of journals, and deciding what is and is not appropriate and acceptable scholarship – is at least as important as wider intellectual trends, and indeed may well be a crucial *cause* of their emergence. Indeed, the impact of particular kinds of incentives and disincentives for publication is a preoccupation for several of the contributors to this special issue. In this regard, the more revealing clues about why IPE has moved in this direction in the American school would surely lie in data not on the nature of articles published in these journals, but rather on *submissions*, particularly in terms of how many and what kinds of articles are rejected on the grounds that they are not suitable in their theoretical or methodological approach, or even empirical focus, for the journal in question.

It would also be highly illuminating (although naturally a much more difficult undertaking) to consider the issue of 'non-submissions', as scholars are systematically deterred from approaching particular outlets for their work. Journals hostile to particular kinds of scholarship become known for their assiduous screening practices, to the extent that disincentives to submit to particular journals are continuously reinforced. Many scholars perceive that it is simply not worth the time and trouble even to have a shot. Anecdotal knowledge of the experiences of scholars not associated with the mainstream of the American school in submitting to the 'top' United States IR journals certainly indicates that such data on submissions (and insights into non-submissions) would be helpful in understanding the extent to which screening and gate-keeping practices contribute to the manner in which the field of IPE and its intellectual trends are consciously and cumulatively constructed. As John Ravenhill (2008: 26) points out, it is precisely

for this reason that many will be watching with interest the direction taken by *International Organization* since its recent move to an editorial base in Canada and a new editorial team, in the expectation and hope that one of the results may be a decline in the number of articles based on formal modeling and a greater receptiveness to theoretical and methodological approaches other than those associated with liberalism and quantitative analysis.

Supposedly the great concession to a higher level of 'pluralism' in the dominant United States journals over the last couple of decades was, of course, the incorporation of constructivism and the so-called 'ideational turn' in IR. Indeed, the hallmark of the progressive IR journal became the inclusion of constructivism alongside the other well-worn paradigms, and much was made in the bars and corridors of IR conferences of the new receptiveness of journals such as *International Organization* and *International Studies Quarterly* to constructivist work. Maliniak and Tierney show us that this turn has been less well represented in IPE scholarship than IR scholarship, and indeed that IPE scholarship has made little discernible contribution to the relevant debates in IR, at least in the pages of the leading journals (see McNamara's paper in this issue). This is troubling, and the reasons for it invite much more reflection. Maliniak and Tierney's speculation in a footnote that the most influential constructivist scholarship is showing up in book form rather than as journal articles again prompts us to think about the role of journals in defining the contours of the field. But it also induces us to reflect on (and indeed doubt) the extent to which a survey of 'leading' journals can be effective in revealing the condition of the field of IPE or the substance of the scholarship pursued within it.

Even so, a concession to constructivism or ideational arguments does not go very far in representing the diversity of IPE scholarship even in the United States, let alone in the wider IPE community. One is struck by the absence of data on critical approaches such as feminism, for instance, which goes entirely unmentioned in the discussions of American-school IPE that have prompted the present debate, or indeed post-structuralism and other critical, non- and post-positivist approaches. Again, one suspects that these approaches may be comparable to those which emphasize ideational factors and have achieved less representation in IPE than in IR, although data that encompassed these kinds of scholarship would be valuable. Is it the case that we have been seeing a widening of IR scholarship over recent years and at least some movement towards a more pluralist definition of the subdiscipline, but a contraction in IPE of the kind of pluralism that was once heralded as precisely what the field stood for? And if IPE is so explicitly defined by its relationship to IR, why should this be the case?

The strongly disciplinary association of IPE with IR also, necessarily, has the effect of squeezing the space for interdisciplinary work, not only in the United States, but also, one fears, in non-US scholarship. A

propensity to think of IPE as inherently an interdisciplinary enterprise has been associated strongly with the British school (Cohen, 2008: 4), and an interdisciplinary bent has long been what we have thought to be one of the defining features of what IPE does and should look like, as summed up in Susan Strange's invocation of the 'open range'. The most salient contributions to the development of British-school IPE have been self-consciously open to a variety of disciplinary and, indeed, theoretical perspectives, leading to the 'eclecticism' for which the work of scholars such as Robert Cox, among others, has been celebrated by many of British-school persuasions and variously ignored or scorned by many in the American school. Yet what we see is a dilemma, especially for ambitious younger international political economists on the promotion ladder or tenure track, between this intellectual commitment to interdisciplinary openness (and eclecticism, as suggested by Peter Katzenstein in this issue) and the creeping pressures to publish in what remain strongly discipline-based journals. We have seen a proliferation of league tables of journals disseminated to all colleagues and used increasingly as a proxy indicator of the quality of a person's research in selection and promotion committees. The same, supposedly 'generalist', political science and IR journals that appear in Maliniak and Tierney's (this issue) survey are strongly represented in these lists. The emphasis on citation indices as a similar indicator is also manifestly increasing, to the consternation of many, particularly given the widespread indifference of United States scholars to British-school scholarship (Cohen, 2008: 65). In this sense, despite the constant promotion of interdisciplinary research in universities and all the major funding bodies (Moran, 2006), we are in fact *returning* to a heavily disciplinary approach to matters of publications and indicators of recognition. This is very much in the style of United States academic practice and in keeping with the IR-centrism of the American school of IPE. If sustained, this may herald a rather more difficult time for British school IPE in its commitment to interdisciplinary openness.

Notwithstanding these worrying prospects for the future, the commitment to openness and pluralism does not appear immediately to be waning as the defining characteristic of the British school. In this sense, it is perhaps interesting to wonder whether taking Maliniak and Tierney's exercise across the Atlantic, as they suggest they will, has the capacity to reveal anything meaningful about the state of IPE outside the United States. Targeting what are perceived to be the top IR journals in search of their 'IPE' content would, it seems to me, be looking in entirely the wrong place. The best British-school IPE scholarship is instead scattered across journals identified variously with such fields as IR, politics, political economy, sociology, development studies and geography, with representation from those associated with such fields as anthropology and management and business studies, and found also in generalist social science journals, including those with particular theoretical inclinations. Given the much wider spread

of regional interests in the British school, and the much greater attention to political economies outside the small handful of advanced industrialized countries, one is also obliged regularly to consult work published in journals with a specific regional or country focus and in those which identify more explicitly with the fields of comparative political economy and development studies. Focusing predominantly on IR journals would, in this sense, capture only a tiny part of what members of the British school would consider to be the totality of IPE scholarship.

In a related vein, a strongly discipline-based focus on scholars working in departments of politics and international relations, as in Maliniak and Tierney's survey of the American school, would exclude attention to an array of colleagues whose work is considered by many to be of considerable importance to the enterprise of IPE. With the same trepidation as John Ravenhill (2008: 24), when he lists some of the figures associated with the British school, I will offer merely a very small clutch of illustrative examples: Giovanni Arrighi, Saskia Sassen, Michael Mann or William I. Robinson, all professors of sociology, David Harvey, working as a geographer in an anthropology department, Neil Smith, also a professor of geography and anthropology, Robert Wade, working in a development studies department, trained as an anthropologist and economist, and Richard Whitley or Karel Williams, who work in a business school, not to mention a wide array of philosophers and economists. The work of these scholars and many such others – on capitalism, development, space, neoliberalism, globalisation, financialisation, business systems, firms, international organisations, East Asia, Latin America, poverty and inequality – is admired and cited extensively in British-school IPE. They make crucial contributions to the key debates in the field, but are not scholars who are identified with the disciplines of politics and international relations.

If IPE is defined by its strong association with IR, these people are, as it were, political economists rather than International Political Economists. However, if, like many in the British school, one thinks that IPE is a field rooted at least as much (or indeed should be rooted much more) in the traditions of political economy as in the field of IR (Gamble *et al.*, 1996; Phillips, 2005; Underhill, 2000; Watson, 2005), then the task for Maliniak and Tierney in discovering where to find 'International Political Economists' outside the United States becomes manifestly more challenging than a trawl through departments of politics and international relations. Similarly, an exercise like Cohen's of assembling the 'magnificent seven' of British-school IPE would immediately pose a huge number of problems in deciding who qualifies in this vision of the field as an international political economist. In short, a critical reaction to Maliniak and Tierney's proposal to replicate their exercise in the British-school context would have to be sceptical of the utility of basing it on the same strongly disciplinary, IR-centric view of IPE as that which prevails in the United States.

This may be considered yet another reflection – and not a flattering one – of the lack of boundaries and the excessive inclusiveness of British-school IPE. This may be a valid observation, and it is most certainly an issue which deserves sustained and critical debate. But my point here refers to the deficiencies and dangers of the continued shackling of IPE to IR and the prevailing IR-centric vision of what IPE is and should be – a vision which both produces and is reflected in the screening functions of the dominant journals. This demeans the worth of interdisciplinary openness and, furthermore, carries important consequences for the substantive value of IPE scholarship. I will make just a few comments on this latter point in the space that remains.

WHAT IS OF INTEREST IN IPE?

Cohen (2008: 82–3) argues that the American school today is characterized by a ‘loss of ambition’ and a move to a much more ‘micro’ view of the world. These trends form the basis of Robert Keohane’s (2009, this issue) criticism, in this issue and elsewhere, of IPE’s growing inattention to the ‘big questions’ in the global political economy. The ‘micro’ view of the world is inevitably reflected in the ways in which the key questions for IPE are identified and formulated, as well as the theoretical and methodological apparatus that is constructed for the purpose of scholarly analysis.

In part, this narrowing of the remit of IPE is clearly the result of the growing dominance of quantitative methods, inasmuch as a preference for mathematical modeling and other forms of quantitative analysis plays a key part in defining what *can* be studied in IPE. Recall that by 2006, 90% of IPE articles published in the twelve journals employed quantitative methods – the clearest possible indication of what is now judged in the American school to constitute ‘proper’, ‘rigorous’, ‘scientific’ enquiry. As Robert Wade argues in his contribution to this issue, the deficiencies of such techniques in the discipline of economics have been increasingly recognized over many years now. Yet, the drift (or indeed lurch) towards a dominance of quantitative methods in American-school IPE has continued either regardless of or oblivious to these critical debates in the field from which these methods are drawn. The result is an array of restrictions not just on the inclination, but also on the *ability* of American-school IPE to address the ‘big picture’. How can one subject to quantitative analysis questions of systemic transformation, for instance? How to deal with power in any convincing kind of way? How to think about the role of ideology and ideas in shaping the global order? The difficulties extend to a whole range of issues that are critical to the global political economy but less (or not at all) amenable to quantitative methods, such as, among many others, informal and illicit activity, the ‘macro’ questions about migration, the gendered dimensions of global political-economic processes, ‘unfree’

forms of labor and informal employment, and a whole range of questions about development and inequality. Equally, the regional scope of interests in the field of IPE is inevitably narrowed when the field is becoming more and more dependent on the availability of reliable data. Such data are often not available to students of developing economies, who are much more likely to pursue their work through systematic and extensive qualitative research, often in the form of field research. The result is an entrenchment of a narrow empirical focus on a small handful of advanced industrialized countries – predominantly the United States, but also Europe and Japan, and increasingly the major East-Asian economies (Phillips, 2005; see also remarks in Cohen, 2008: 145, 167).

Yet, this narrowing of the substantive scope of IPE is not only the result of trends in methodology. It is also directly the result of the IR-centric vision of IPE which prevails in the American school. Just as IR was constructed as a discipline both for and about the ‘great powers’, and an ‘American social science’ (Hoffman, 1977), so IPE has crystallized as a field in which the primary concerns and theoretical frameworks are both derived from the experiences of the advanced industrialized powers and built for the principal purpose of analyzing the particular political economy of advanced capitalism that knits them together and underpins their dominance. In other words, as Cohen’s (2008) survey of the ‘magnificent seven’ reveals, American-school IPE developed in the United States as a means of addressing a set of questions of very particular relevance to the United States itself, namely the problem of hegemony and the position of the United States as the global hegemonic power. While this is not to say that everything was explicitly *about* the United States in a direct sense, nevertheless the ties to a set of core questions about the position and nature of United States power in the global political economy were central. As such, the American school in its origins was marked by an innate ‘parochialism’ in its concerns and its identified remit, to borrow the term Kalevi Holsti (1985) uses to describe the introspection and narcissism of United States IR. It is a narrowness that has not only persisted but also, as a result of the growing prioritisation of what can be quantified and modeled, been steadily reinforced.

Maliniak and Tierney (2009: 23, this issue) report that 67% of IPE scholars believe that East Asia will be the ‘strategically important’ region over the next 20 years, and implicitly suggest that this region will therefore feature prominently in the future agenda for IPE. It is indeed entirely correct that the growth of East Asia, particularly China, presents (and for some time has presented) students of IPE with a range of profoundly significant questions, including those of a ‘big picture’ nature concerning the manner in which the global political economy is being and will be restructured over the coming decades. Yet, three observations are warranted on this point. First, again, the agenda is being defined by what is ‘strategically important’ to the United States, reinforcing still further the excessively narrow focus on the

advanced industrialized countries. Second, we have here clear evidence again of the IR-centrism of IPE in the 'inter-national' focus on a particular region and its relationship to the United States. Maliniak and Tierney (2009: 23, this issue) go on in the same paragraph to frame the data in terms of the 'most important foreign policy issues that will face the United States in the next 10 years'. This can be interpreted as an indication that the agenda for IPE will be driven, as in the past, by these questions of strategic concern to the dominant power, particularly in terms of the regions from which the primary economic competition emanates. The parallels with the explosion of interest in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, which was hugely influential in defining the field of IPE, are very clear. And third, the manner in which East Asia is studied in IPE is strongly tied to the staple IPE questions of trade, finance, competition, regulation and so on. It is much less tied to the relevance of the growth of East Asian economies to questions of global development, migration, poverty, labor standards, environment and climate change, and so on. It is consequently to be expected that it is the issues that are associated very directly with the 'strategic importance' of East Asia to the United States, rather than their wider global resonance, that will preoccupy the American school over the coming decades.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If it is indeed the case that we are seeing the slow death of pluralism in the American school of IPE and if – a very big if – there is any consensus at all that this might not be a desirable thing, then collectively we face the question of what might be done. That is clearly not something that can be addressed in the context of a short response to recent interventions in this debate, and will be something that should preoccupy us for some time to come. But one conclusion that both Maliniak and Tierney's discussion and my comments here suggest is that the role of journals and their editorial boards is important. Collectively, there is a responsibility to reflect carefully on publishing strategies and to recognize that a greater pluralism carries with it an array of merits and benefits. The question of whether greater engagement is even possible between the so-called American and British schools, which some of the responses to Cohen (2007) have answer in the negative (e.g. Higgott and Watson, 2008; Ravenhill, 2008), is a rather different point, and not one there is space to address fully here. But, to state the obvious, without greater exposure to work being conducted in the other school – or, put more constructively, to work which starts from different theoretical paradigms, methodological approaches or empirical interests – there can be no prospect of any future engagement, and the dialog of the deaf will simply continue. As Robert Wade observes in his contribution to this special issue, the present, strikingly homogenous profile of articles in the most visible journals is not in itself an indicator of the health of the

discipline – and, I would suggest, quite the contrary. Equally damaging is the continued shackling of IPE to the discipline of IR, which, in my view, is stunting the development of the field in deeply unfortunate ways. The benefit of greater pluralism, in all its guises, is something on which we could do well to reflect.

NOTE

- 1 A special issue of *New Political Economy* (forthcoming in late 2009) will continue this debate, concentrating on the ‘British school’ of IPE.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Nicola Phillips is Professor of Political Economy and Director of the Political Economy Institute at the University of Manchester and Managing Editor of the journal *New Political Economy*. Her most recent books are *The Southern Cone Model: The Political Economy of Regional Capitalist Development in Latin America* (Routledge, 2004), and editor of *Globalizing International Political Economy* (Palgrave, 2005).

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