Liberal International Relations Theory:
A Social Scientific Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This paper, part of a multi-author project evaluating the evolution of theoretical paradigms in international relations (IR), evaluates the Liberal paradigm form a Lakatosian perspective. There is a distinct "Liberal" Scientific Research Program (SRP) in the study of international relations, based on three core assumptions. These Assumptions are shared by Ideational, Commercial and Republican variants of Liberal theory. The Liberal SRP is clearly progressive in the Lakatosian sense, that is, it explains a broad and expanding domain of empirical phenomena more accurately than competing research programs—and does so in such a way as to meet the specific Lakatosian criteria of "heuristic", "temporal" and "background theory" novelty. Liberal theory is thus among the most promising, perhaps the most fruitful and promising, of contemporary paradigms in IR theory. Yet legitimate doubts can be raised about the utility of Lakatosian theory as a means to evaluate research in IR. In particular, one might question its view that theories from competing paradigms are mutually excusive, which encourages one-on-one testing of unicausal theories, rather than estimation of the proper (and sometimes overlapping) scope of paradigms, or the construction of multi-paradigmatic syntheses. Given the current stage of IR theory, these two tasks may offer greater explanatory insight into world politics than unicausal theory testing. This conclusion does not undermine, however, the positive assessment of Liberal theory, which both supports clear empirical scope conditions and can play a foundational role in fruitful multi-theory syntheses.

Is there a distinct Scientific Research Program (SRP) in the study of international relations associated with Liberal theory?[1] Is it progressive, in the sense of explaining a broad and expanding domain of novel empirical phenomena more accurately than competing research programs? The answer to each question, I shall argue below, is yes. Judged by Lakatosian criteria—no matter which proposed interpretation of those criteria one chooses—the liberal paradigm is one of the most dynamic, perhaps the most dynamic, research program in contemporary international relations. Such an assessment, however, is only as sound as its philosophical basis, and there are important reasons to doubt the utility of Lakatosian philosophy of science as a means to evaluate research in international relations.

The paper proceeds in three sections. In the first section I propose three "hard core" assumptions of the Liberal paradigm and present three major variants of Liberal IR theory that follow from those assumptions—Ideational, Commercial, and Republican Liberalism.[2] All trace the influence of variation in pressure from societal actors on variation in state preferences, which is used in turn to explain interstate politics. This is the foundation for theories that link foreign economic policy to economic incentives (notably "endogenous" theories of foreign economic policy); theories that link variation in domestic political representation to foreign policy (notably democratic peace theory); and theories about the influence of collective preferences about public goods provision (notably those about the scope of ethnic identities, "embedded liberalism," and distinctive ideologies of domestic political legitimacy). All these arguments can be traced back to classical Liberal IR theory, which emerged over the past two centuries from a self-conscious line of liberal philosophers and publicists, including Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Richard Cobden,

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[1] Please send comments to the author or request a current version for citation at <moravcs@fas.harvard.edu> or Center for European Studies, 27 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. This paper will appear in revised form as "The Liberal Paradigm in International Relations Theory: A Social Scientific Assessment" in Colin and Miram Fendius Elman, eds. Progress in International Relations Theory: Metrics and Measures of Scientific Change (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001). In that volume, these two initial questions serve as the basis of a comparison among major paradigms and theories in the field of international relations.

[2] A scientific research program (SRP) is the essential unit of analysis for a Lakatosian analysis of scientific progress. It contains a hard core of inviolable assumptions, a positive heuristic, and a resulting "protective belt" of "auxiliary hypotheses" designed to cope with specific empirical circumstances.

John Stuart Mill, Giuseppe Mazzini, John Hobson, Woodrow Wilson, and John Maynard Keynes.

In the second section I evaluate the Liberal SRP using three criteria—each a widely accepted interpretation of the concept of novel "excess content" central to Lakatosian philosophy of science. By each criterion, Liberal IR theory has been and continues to be a "progressive" research program—arguably more so than any other paradigm in the study of international relations. Of these, I argue, the most useful is "background theory novelty"—a criterion disparaged by the Colin and Miriam Elman in their guiding chapter for the project of which this essay is a part.[3] Yet this criterion, more consistent with Laudanian rather than Lakatosian philosophy of science, provides the most illuminating test of a social scientific paradigm.

The third section steps back to highlight some general limitations of any application of Lakatosian criteria to IR theory. To be sure, the focus on Lakatosian theory on empirically confirmed claims—that is, on parsimonious explanation, rather than parsimonious theory—is of great utility. Yet Lakatosian theory has tempted many analysts into viewing theoretical disputes as "fights to the finish" among a small handful of unicausal theories. For this reason, the Lakatosian approach, I argue, encourages less useful forms of theory debate in international relations—and probably in political science more generally. There are negative consequences for concrete research. In particular, the focus on unicausal battles between two theories foregoes two potential benefits of a less competitive interaction among competing theories: the clear delineation of relative explanatory scope and creative multicausal synthesis. At this stage in the development of contemporary IR theory, delineation of the precise scope of theories and the creation of testable multicausal syntheses offer more fruitful roads forward than direct contests

[3] Colin and Miram Fendius Elman, "Progress in International Relations Theory," in Elmans eds. Progress in International Relations Theory.

among unicausal claims. While this study demonstrates the increasing utility of liberal theory, a conclusion that can be reached using Lakatosian criteria, we should nonetheless adopt a healthy skepticism toward the uncritical application of Lakatosian philosophy of science to IR theory. Fortunately, liberal theories, properly understood, also contribute to these two tasks, thereby demonstrating their essential utility in understanding modern world politics.

I. RECONSTRUCTING THE LIBERAL "SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PROGRAM"

Liberal arguments about world politics can be reconstructed in the form of a Lakatosian Scientific Research Program (SRP). This requires that we focus successively on "hard core" assumptions and the "protective belt" of auxiliary propositions.

A. The Hard Core: Three Common Assumptions

All liberal theories place state-society relations at the center of world politics. They rest on the fundamental premise that state behavior reflects the relationship between it and the domestic and transnational society in which it is embedded. This basic claim underlies theories about the influence of economic interdependence, varying conceptions of collective goods provision, or domestic representation. This basic insight can be restated more precisely in terms of three "hard core" assumptions, which specify, respectively, the nature of societal actors, the nature of the state, and the nature of the international system.[4] These three assumptions distinguish Liberal IR theory from its realist, institutionalist, and most epistemic or constructivist alternatives.[5] Let us consider them in turn.

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[4] A more detailed version of arguments in Sections One and Two, with fuller citations, can be found in Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51:4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513-553.

[5] There is considerable overlap here. Constructivism is now widely considered to be an ontology, not a theory, and thus cannot be tested against variants of realist, liberal or institutionalist theory. Instead it would propose versions of those theories.

1. The fundamental actors in international politics are rational individuals and private groups, who organize and exchange to promote their interests. Liberal theory takes on a "bottom-up" view of politics, whereby the demands of individuals and societal groups are treated as analytically prior to state behavior. Socially differentiated individuals define material and ideational interests, which they advance through political exchange and collective action.[6] Scarcity and differentiation render some measure of competition inevitable. (Liberal theory thereby rejects the utopian notion that there exists an automatic harmony of interest among individuals and groups in society.) Political order and conflict result from the underlying pattern of such interactions. It is of specific interest in interstate relations, societal demands so conflictual that coercion is likely to be employed in pursuit of them are associated with three social factors: contradictory claims based on fundamental beliefs, extreme scarcity of material goods, and extreme inequality of social influence. These three potential motivations define, as we shall see below, with "ideational", "commercial," and "republican" liberalism.

2. States (or other political institutions) represent some subset of domestic society, whose interests rational state officials pursue through world politics. For liberals, representative institutions and practices constitute the critical "transmission belt" by which the disparate preferences and social power of individuals and groups in civil society are transmitted

[6] This assumption has been the source of some confusion. Neither the assumption that individuals pursue their preferences instrumentally nor the assumption that the formation of such preferences is exogenous to interstate politics imply that individual preferences are independent of culture and other collective social institutions. Individuals can seek instrumentally to realize preferences that ultimately reflect collective social norms. Liberals need only assume that individual views about the proper scope of political responsibility are prior to and independent of international politics, at least in the short term. Individuals pursue their particular beliefs about nation, redistribution, and political regime instrumentally, even if they are grounded in collective social beliefs. Earlier metatheoretical discussions between "constructivism" and "rationalism" have obscured this potential complementarity between rationalist and cultural explanations, but more recent discussions acknowledge it. For acknowledgements, see, for example, Jeffrey W. Legro, "Culture and Preferences in the International Cooperation

into the political realm, aggregated, and translated into state policy.[7] In the Liberal conception of domestic politics, the state is not an actor but an institution constantly subject to capture and recapture, even construction and reconstruction, by coalitions of social actors. This assumes neither that all individuals and groups have equal influence on state policy, nor that the structure of state institutions is irrelevant. No government rests on universal or unbiased political representation. Every government represents some individuals and groups more fully than others—from a single tyrannical individual, an ideal-typical Pol Pot or Josef Stalin, to broad democratic participation.[8] We can think of societal pressures transmitted by representative institutions and practices as defining "state preferences"—that is, the ordering among underlying substantive outcomes that could potentially result from interstate political interaction.

3. The configuration of state preferences determines state behavior. The distribution and interaction among the preferences of different states, liberals argue, is the determinate influence on interstate behavior. In other words, liberal theory causally privileges variation in the configuration among state preferences, while treating configurations of capabilities (central to realism) and information (central to institutionalism) "as if" they were either fixed constraints or endogenous to state preferences.[9] Liberal theory sets aside not just the Realist assumption that

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Two-Step" *American Political Science Review* 90 (March 1996); Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 90:1 (August 1998), pp. 118-137.

[7] This assumption has also been the source of some confusion. It does not privilege the nation-state absolutely. To be sure, institutions and practices of political representation result from prior contracts and can generally be taken for granted in explaining foreign policy, but where the primary interests and allegiances of individuals and private groups are transferred to a sub-national or supranational institutions empowered to represent them effectively, a Liberal analysis would naturally shift to these levels. If the act of creating new institutions is to be explained through liberal theory, however, it must be explained as the result of representation channeled through previously existing institutions.

[8] Representation, in the Liberal view, is not simply a formal attribute of state institutions, but may include other stable characteristics of the political process, formal or informal, that privilege particular societal interests, such as informal ties, the form of individual and group rights, the nature of opportunities for exit, or an unequal distribution of property, risk, information or organizational capabilities that establish social or economic monopolies.

[9] Similarly, liberals set aside variation in psychology and instrumental beliefs, which lie at the core of epistemic and some constructivist theories.

state preferences must be treated "as if" naturally conflictual, but equally the Institutionalist assumption that they should be treated "as if" (conditionally) convergent.

A critical theoretical link between varying state preferences, on the one hand, and varying interstate behavior, on the other, is provided by the concept of policy interdependence. Policy interdependence is understood here as the set of costs and benefits created for foreign societies when dominant social groups in a given society seek to realize their preferences in the international realm, that is, the pattern of transnational social externalities resulting from the pursuit of domestic and international goals. Liberal theory assumes that the configuration of interdependent preferences imposes a binding constraint on state behavior. States require a "purpose"—understood as a perceived underlying stake in the matter at hand—in order to provoke conflict, inaugurate cooperation, or take any other significant foreign policy action. The precise nature of those purposes are the primary determinant of state policy.[10]

Liberals do not to assert that each state simply pursues its ideal policy, oblivious of others. Instead, each state seeks to realize its distinctive preferences under constraints imposed by the preferences of other states. That is to say, Liberal theory is just as "systemic" a theory—in the Waltzian sense—as Realism or Institutionalism. The major difference is that the distribution of

[10] Here it is essential—particularly given the inconsistency of common usage—to avoid conceptual confusion by keeping state "preferences" distinct from national "strategies", "tactics" and "policies," that is, the particular transient bargaining positions, negotiating demands or policy goals that constitute the everyday currency of foreign policy. States preferences, as the concept is employed here, comprise a set of fundamental interests defined across "states of the world." They are by definition causally independent of and prior to specific interstate strategic interactions, such as external threats, incentives, withholding of information or other interstate bargaining tactics. The phrase "Country A changed its preferences in response to an action by Country B" is, for example, an abuse of the term as defined here, implying less than consistently rational behavior. By contrast, strategies and tactics—sometimes termed "preferences" in game-theoretical analyses—are policy options defined across intermediate political aims, as when governments declare an "interest" in "maintaining the balance of power," "containing" or "appeasing" an adversary, or exercising "global leadership." Liberal theory focuses on the consequences for state behavior of shifts in fundamental preferences, not shifts in the strategic circumstances under which states pursue them. In many traditional areas of foreign policy, "politics stops at the water's edge" and there is strong coordination among its

preferences, not of capabilities or information, decisively shapes the behavior of states, and thereby systemic outcomes. In all three theories, states strategize, that is, they compare their characteristics with those of foreign states to develop their policy. Thus Liberal IR theory is not, in any essential sense, a "domestic" or "second image" theory—a point to which I shall return below.

Patterns of policy interdependence can be divided into at least three broad categories, corresponding to the strategic situation (the pattern of policy externalities) that result from various actions.[11] In the liberal view, these patterns of policy interdependence reflect, above all else, the pattern of underlying social purposes. Where preferences are naturally compatible or "harmonious," that is, where the externalities of unilateral policies are optimal for others (or insignificant), strong incentives exist for coexistence with low conflict and simple forms of interstate coordination. Where, by contrast, underlying state preferences are "zero-sum" or "deadlocked," that is, where an attempt by dominant social groups in one country to realize their preferences through state action necessarily imposes costs (negative externalities) on dominant social groups in other countries, governments face a bargaining game with few mutual gains and a high potential for interstate tension and conflict. The decisive precondition for costly attempts at coercion, for example, is not a particular configuration of power, as Realists assert, or uncertainty, as Institutionalists maintain, but configurations of preferences conflictual enough to motivate willingness to accept high cost and risk. In other words, intense conflict requires that an

national officials and politicians. This restrictive definition of preferences greatly restricts liberal theory, distinguishing it from a loose view that "state interests matter."

[11] See Lisa Martin, "Interests, Power, and Multilateralism," *International Organization* 46:4 (1992), pp. 765-792.

"aggressor" or "revisionist" state advance demands to which other states are unwilling to submit.[12]

Where preferences are mixed such that an exchange of policy concessions through coordination or pre-commitment can improve the welfare of both parties relative to unilateral policy adjustment, states have an incentive to negotiate policy coordination. Games like coordination, assurance, prisoner's dilemma and suasion having distinctive dynamics, as well as imposing precise costs, benefits and risks on the parties. Within each qualitative category, incentives vary further according to the intensity of preferences. The form, substance and depth of cooperation depend on the nature of this pattern of preferences. In this regard Liberalism offers a notion of the systemic constraints distinct from other IR theory paradigms. Where interstate interaction generates Pareto-inefficient outcomes—trade protection is a commonly cited example—Liberals turn first to countervailing social preferences and unresolved domestic and transnational distributional conflicts, whereas Institutionalists and Realists turn, respectively, to the absence of an appropriate institution or configuration of power.

B. Auxiliary Propositions and the Protective Belt: Three Variants of Liberal IR Theory

The three assumptions in the Liberal "hard core," like those of institutionalism and realism—as well as any other Lakatosian SRP—are relatively "thin" or "content-free." To be sure, these assumptions do exclude existing realist, institutionalist and epistemic theories, as well as many domestic explanations not based on pluralist and rationalist assumptions. Yet they do not, taken by themselves, define a single unambiguous model or set of hypotheses. This is

[12] Revisionist preferences—underlying, socially grounded interests in revising the status quo—are distinct from revisionist "strategies," that is, a need to alter the status quo to protect enduring interests under new strategic circumstances. Liberals focus on the former, Realists (and Institutionalists) on the latter. Hence while both theories predict security conflict, they do so under different circumstances. For example: Increased military spending in response to an adversary's arms build-up is a change in strategy with fixed preferences consistent with Realism;

precisely what the Lakatosian understanding of a paradigm would lead us to expect. Core assumptions define a paradigm, yet auxiliary propositions are required to specify it. While the core assumptions of Liberal theory may appear broad, the viable variants of Liberal theory are few and focused.

There are three distinct variants of Liberal theory, namely Ideational, Commercial and Republican Liberalism. Each rests on a distinctive specification of the central elements of Liberal theory. At the core of each lies a distinct view concerning the sources of the preferences of powerful domestic social groups, the causal mechanisms whereby they are transformed into state preferences, and the resulting patterns of national preferences in world politics. Following Assumption One above, such preferences may reflect fundamental beliefs concerning the provision of public goods for society as a whole, desire to accumulate scarce material goods, and the distribution of political power. Specifically, Ideational Liberalism focuses on the compatibility of social preferences across fundamental collective goods like national unity, legitimate political institutions and socioeconomic regulation; Commercial Liberalism focuses on incentives created by opportunities for trans-border economic transactions; and Republican Liberalism focuses on the nature of domestic representation and the resulting possibilities for rent-seeking behavior. I have described these three variants in more detail elsewhere so do no more than sketch them here.

1. Ideational Liberalism: Identity and Legitimate Social Orders

Ideational Liberalism views the configuration of domestic social identities and values as a basic determinant of state preferences and, therefore, of interstate conflict and cooperation. Drawing on a Liberal tradition dating back to John Stuart Mill, Giuseppe Mazzini and Woodrow

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increased spending initiated by a new ruling elite ideological committed to territorial aggrandizement is a preference-induced change in strategy consistent with Liberalism.

Wilson, most liberals IR theories define "social identity" in this context as a set of preferences shared by individuals concerning the proper scope and nature of public goods provision. These, I turn, specify the nature of legitimate domestic order by stipulating which social actors belong to the polity and what is owed them.[13]

Three of the most important public goods around which strong social identities form are geographical borders, political decision-making processes and socioeconomic regulation. Each can be thought of as a public or club good; the effectiveness of each typically requires that it be legislated universally across a jurisdiction. Recall that for Liberals, even the defense of (or, less obvious but no less common, the willing compromise of) territorial integrity, political sovereignty or national security is not an end in itself, but a means of realizing underlying preferences defined by the demands of societal groups. *As per* Assumption Two, social actors provide support to the government in exchange for institutions that accord with the their identity-based preferences. Such institutions are thereby legitimate. Foreign policy will thus be motivated in part by an effort to realize social views about legitimate borders, political institutions and modes of socioeconomic regulation. The consequences of identity-based preferences for IR depend, *as per* Assumption Three, on transnational externalities created by attempts to realize them. Where national conceptions of legitimate borders, political institutions and socioeconomic

[13] As I have noted above (see footnote 3) there is no contradiction between the collective origin of individual preferences and instrumental and atomistic efforts to realize them. Here is, therefore, a point of tangency with recent constructivist work, much of which is far less "sociological", in the sense of specifying and theorizing socialization processes, and far more concerned with rational state action on the basis of ideational preferences. The concept of preferences across public goods employed here is similar, but deliberately narrower than Ruggie's "legitimate social purpose" and Katzenstein's "collective identity." Whether the fundamental sources of societal preferences are ideational is the focus of a debate among social theorists for which IR theorists lack any distinctive comparative advantage. Liberals take no distinctive position on the origins of social identities, which may stem from historical accretion or be constructed through conscious collective or state action, nor on the question of whether they "ultimately" reflect ideational or material factors. Liberal theory need not and in general does not claim that shared identities emerge from chance interactions among "atomistic" individuals, or that nationality must reflect "timeless" factors like language, religion or ethnicity. Identities need only be translated into political preferences through individual and group commitments. Insofar as Constructivists take such ideationally based preferences as given, as

equality are compatible, generating positive or negligible externalities, harmony is likely. Where social identities are incompatible and create significant negative externalities, tension and zero-sum conflict is more likely. Where national claims can be made more compatible by reciprocal policy adjustment, cooperation is likely.

Distinct, but parallel, predictions about international politics follow from each of the three essential sources of ideational preferences: national, political and socioeconomic identity. The first fundamental type of social identity, the set of fundamental societal preferences concerning the scope of the "nation," suggest the legitimate location of national borders and the allocation of citizenship. Where borders coincide with underlying patterns of identity, coexistence and even mutual recognition are more likely. Where, however, inconsistencies between borders and underlying patterns of identity exist, greater potential for interstate conflict exists. There is substantial evidence for this claim. Over the last century and a half, from mid-19th century nationalist uprisings to late 20th-century national liberation struggles, the desire for national autonomy constitutes the most common issue over which wars have been fought and great power intervention has taken place; the Balkan conflicts preceding World War I and succeeding the Cold War are only the most notorious examples.[14]

The second fundamental type of social identity stems from the commitments of individuals and groups to particular principles of domestic political order. Where the realization of legitimate domestic political order in one jurisdiction threatens its realization in others, conflict is more likely. This differs from Realist theory, which accords theoretical weight to domestic regime

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do most constructivists who stress domestic ideas, their view is epistemologically and ontologically compatible with the Liberal view—as Thomas Risse has clearly explicated when he speaks of "liberal constructivism."

[14] Even those, such as James Fearon, who stress the absence of credible commitment mechanisms in explaining nationalist conflicts concede the importance of underlying identities. To be sure, Mearsheimer bravely asserts that nationalism is a "second-order force in international politics," with a "largely…international" cause, namely

type only insofar as it influences the distribution of capabilities, and from Institutionalist theory, which accords such influence only insofar as it contributes to the certainty of coordination and commitment. Recent trends in Cold War historiography and social science—some based on Soviet documents heretofore inaccessible to Western scholars—tend to offer considerable confirmation for this prediction, in that the clash between Western and Soviet conceptions of political order left little room for political conflict.[15]

The third fundamental type of social identity is the nature of legitimate socioeconomic regulation and redistribution. Modern liberal theory (as opposed to the *laissez faire* libertarianism sometimes invoked by critics as quintessentially "liberal") has long recognized that societal preferences concerning the nature and level of regulation impose legitimate limits on domestic and transnational markets. Following Karl Polanyi, John Ruggie reminds us that efforts to liberalize domestic and international markets are inevitably embedded in particular local social compromises concerning the provision of regulatory public goods. Such compromises underlie varying national regulations on immigration, social welfare, taxation, religious freedom, families, health and safety, environmental and consumer protection, cultural promotion and many other public goods increasingly discussed in international economic negotiations. Recent work has suggested a series of predictions from this model.[16]

2. Commercial Liberalism: Economic Assets and Cross-Border Transactions

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multipolarity. This is testable: Is violent nationalism more of an international problem in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe, as Liberalism predicts, or an equal problem in both areas, as Realism predicts?

[15] John Lewis Gaddis, *We Know Now: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); William C. Wohlforth, ed. *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996).

[16] One example is the emergence of so-called "Baptist-bootlegger" coalitions around transnational regulatory issues among advanced industrial countries. David Vogel, *Trading Up* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); John Gerard Ruggie, *At Home Abroad, Abroad at Home: International Liberalization and Domestic Stability in the New World Economy* (Fiesole, Italy: The Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute Jean Monnet Chair Papers, 1995).

Commercial Liberalism explains the individual and collective behavior of states based on the patterns of market incentives facing domestic and transnational actors. At its most general, the Commercial Liberal argument is broadly functionalist: Changes in the structure of the domestic and global economy alter the costs and benefits of transnational economic exchange, creating pressure on domestic governments to facilitate or block such exchanges through appropriate foreign economic and security policies. The greater the economic benefits for powerful private actors, the greater their incentive, *ceteris paribus*, to press governments to facilitate such transactions. Yet Commercial Liberal theory does not predict that economic incentives automatically generate universal free trade and peace—a utopian position critics who treat Liberalism as an ideology often wrongly attributed to it—but instead stresses the interaction between aggregate incentives for certain policies and obstacles posed by the conflict over domestic and transnational distribution and adjustment costs. The more costly the adjustment imposed by economic interchange, the more opposition is likely to arise. Rather than assuming that market structure always creates incentives for cooperation among social actors as well as states, or focusing exclusively on those issue areas where it does, as do some Liberal ideologies, Liberal IR theory focuses on market structure as a variable explaining both openness and closure. The resulting Commercial Liberal explanation of "relative gains" seeking in foreign economic policy is quite distinct from that of Realism, which emphasizes security externalities and relative (hegemonic) power, or that of Institutionalism, which stresses informational and institutional constraints on interstate collective action.[17]

One source of pressure for protection lies in uncompetitive, monopolistic or undiversified sectors or factors that lose the most from liberalization and have an incentive to oppose it. This

[17] This body of literature on "endogenous" foreign economic policy theory is exceptionally deep. For a review and debate with republican liberals, see Robert O. Keohane and Helen V. Milner, *Internationalization and Domestic*

induces a systematic divergence from *laissez faire* policies—a view dating back to Adam Smith's complaint, echoed by many subsequent Liberals, that "the contrivers of [mercantilism are]…the producers, whose interest has been so carefully attended to...our merchants and manufacturers". Helen Milner and others have argued that free trade is most likely where strong competitiveness, extensive intra-industry trade or trade in intermediate goods, large foreign investments, and low asset specificity internalize the net benefits of free trade to powerful actors, thus reducing the influence of net losers from liberalization. Novel predictions about the cross-sectoral and cross-national variation in protection support have been confirmed.[18]

Commercial Liberalism has important implications for security affairs as well. Trade is generally a less costly means of accumulating wealth than war, sanctions or other coercive means, not least due to the minimization of collateral damage. Yet governments sometimes have an incentive to employ coercive means to create and control international markets. To explain this variation, domestic distributional issues and the structure of global markets are again critical. Commercial Liberals like Steven Van Evera argue that the more diversified and complex the existing transnational commercial ties and production structures, the less cost-effective coercion is likely to be. Cost-effective coercion was most profitable in an era where the main sources of economic profit, such as farmland, slave labor, raw materials or formal monopoly could be easily controlled in conquered or colonial economies. Yet economic development tends to increase the

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Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[18] James Alt and Michael Gilligan, "The Political Economy of Trading States: Factor Specificity, Collective Action Problems, and Domestic Political Institutions," *Journal of Political Philosophy* (1994); Helen Milner, "Trading Places: Industries for Free Trade," *World Politics* (1988).

material stake of social actors in existing investments, thereby reducing their willingness to assume the cost and risk of costly coercion through war or sanctions.[19]

3. Republican Liberalism: Representation and Rent-Seeking

While Ideational and Commercial Liberal stress social demands, Republican Liberal theory emphasizes the ways in which domestic institutions and practices aggregate those demands and transform them into state policy. The key variable here is the nature of domestic political representation, broadly speaking, which determines how much weight is given to which social preferences.[20] When institutions of political representation are biased in favor of particularistic groups, such groups tend to "capture" government institutions and employ them for their ends alone, systematically passing on the costs and risks to others. The precise policy of governments depends on which domestic groups are represented.

The simplest Republican Liberal prediction is simply that foreign policy is biased in favor of the governing coalition or powerful domestic groups. A more interesting extension of this reasoning focuses on rent-seeking. When particularistic groups are able to formulate policy without necessarily providing offsetting gains for society as a whole, the result is likely to be inefficient, sub-optimal policies from the aggregate perspective—one form of which may be costly international conflict. If, following Assumption One, most individuals and groups in society, while acquisitive, tend also to be risk-averse (at least where they have something to lose), the more unbiased the range of domestic groups represented, the less likely they will support policies that impose high net costs or risks on a broad range of social actors. Thus

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[19] Realist theory, with its assumptions of a unitary state and fixed preferences, simply presumes that the greater the wealth and power of a state, the less the marginal cost of deploying it, thus reducing power to capabilities. Liberal theory suggests different predictions. The two are testable.

[20] While many Liberal arguments are concerned with the seizure of state institutions by administrators (rulers, armies and bureaucracies), similar arguments apply to privileged societal groups that "capture" the state, as per Assumption Two, or are simply able to act independently of it.

aggressive behavior—the voluntary recourse to costly or risky foreign policy, such as aggressive war—is most likely in undemocratic or inegalitarian polities where privileged individuals can easily pass costs on to others.[21]

Despite these potential complexities and caveats, Republican Liberalism nonetheless generates remarkably parsimonious predictions where conflictual policies impose extremely high costs and risks on the majority of individuals in domestic society. With respect to extreme, but historically common policies like war, famine and radical autarky, it is reasonable to presume that fair representation tends to inhibit international conflict. In this way, Republican Liberal theory has helped to explain phenomena as diverse as the "democratic peace," modern imperialism, and international trade and monetary cooperation. Given the *prima facie* plausibility of the assumption that major war imposes net costs on society as a whole, it is hardly surprising that the prominent Republican Liberal argument concerns the "democratic peace," which one scholar has termed "as close as anything we have to a law in international relations"—one that applies to tribal societies as well as modern states.[22] Liberal democratic institutions tend not to provoke such wars because influence is placed in the hands of those who must expend blood and treasure and the leaders they choose. This line of argument, as Ray notes elsewhere in this volume, has generated many novel predictions.

Often overlooked is the theoretical obverse of “democratic peace” theory. If liberal democracies with accurate representation are more peaceful among themselves, abnormally risk-

[21] This does not, of course, imply the existence of a one-to-one correspondence between the breadth of domestic representation and international political or economic cooperation, for two reasons. First, in specific cases, elite preferences may be more convergent than popular ones. Second, the extent of bias in representation, not democracy per se, is the theoretically critical point. There exist predictable conditions under which specific governing elites may have an incentive to represent long-term social preferences in a less biased way than does broad public and elite opinion.

[22] Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

acceptant leaders and rent-seeking coalitions provoke war. There is substantial historical evidence that the aggressors who have provoked modern wars among great powers tend either to be risk-acceptant individuals in the extreme, or individuals well able to insulate themselves from the costs of war, or both. Jack Snyder, for example, has recently deepened Hobson's classic rent-seeking analysis of imperialism—whereby the military, uncompetitive foreign investors and traders, jingoistic political elites and others who benefit from imperialism are particularly well-placed to influence policy—by linking unrepresentative and extreme outcomes to log-rolling coalitions.[23] Consistent with this analysis, the highly unrepresentative consequences of partial democratization, combined with the disruption of rapid industrialization and incomplete political socialization, suggest that democratizing states, if subject to these influences, may be particularly war-prone.[24] Such findings challenge what is sometimes referred to as Liberal ideology but they confirm Liberal theory.

There are precise analogs to the "democratic peace" argument in foreign economic policy. Perhaps, for example, the most strongly confirmed explanation for the persistence of illiberal commercial policies such as protection, monetary instability and sectoral subsidization—at least where such policies manifestly undermine the general welfare of the population—points to pressure from powerful domestic groups. In this view, the creation and maintenance of regimes assuring free trade and monetary stability result not primarily from common threats to national security or appropriate international institutions, as realists and institutionalists respectively argue, but from the ability of states to overcome domestic distributional conflicts in a way supportive of international cooperation. This may ultimately result from the power of certain

[23] Snyder presents this as a reformulation of realism, a point to which I shall return below. For a critique, see Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics," *International Security* (Summer 1992), pp. 177-198.

[24] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security* 20:1 (1995), 5-38.

business interests in civil society, as noted by Commercial Liberal theory but might also reflect biases within representative institutions, as Republican Liberals theory suggests. Where the latter biases exist—and substantial misrepresentation of this type is seen as endemic to most contemporary representative institutions—rent-seeking groups are likely to gain protection through tariffs, subsidies, favorable regulation or competitive devaluation. Where policy-makers are insulated from such pressures, which may involve less democratic but more representative institutions, or where free trade interests dominate policy, open policies are more viable.[25]

II. IS LIBERAL IR THEORY A PROGRESSIVE RESEARCH PROGRAM?

Assessing whether any given SRP is progressive requires that we ask whether it generates excess content in the form of novel predicted facts. The chapter by the Elmans in the volume in which this paper will appear provides a helpful discussion of four possible Lakatosian criteria for judging the novelty of facts. From the beginning I set aside one of these criteria, namely "new interpretation novelty" ($Lakatos_2$) on the ground, reported by the Elmans, that it has little support in the secondary literature. This leaves "strict temporal novelty" ($Lakatos_1$) and "the heuristic definition of novelty" ($Lakatos_3$), considered in the first section below, and "background theory novelty" ($Lakatos_4$), considered in the second section below. The first two I assess with reference to the intellectual history of the Liberal SRP. The latter I assess with reference to the current research findings of Liberal theory and their competitors.

All three criteria offer insight into the health of a research tradition, and each consistently supports a clear conclusion that the Liberal SRP in IR is progressive. In contrast to the Elmans, however, I find that the most telling criterion is "background theory novelty." This is because it

[25] From this insight follows an entire line of literature about the role of national executives in foreign economic policy. For example, see Stephan Haggard, "The Institutional Foundations of Hegemony: Explaining the Reciprocal

in fact proves quite difficult—far more so than Lakatos (and the Elmans) assume—to subsume new empirical results through auxiliary assumptions within the constraints of fixed hard-core assumptions. Hence the ability to explain more or different facts than competing paradigms is an important criterion. Recent modifications in realism, for example, which have adopted the propositions and assumptions of liberal theories to explain anomalies, demonstrate the difficulty of modifying realism itself.

A. Temporal and Heuristic Novelty: The Intellectual History of Liberal IR Theory

The intellectual origins of an SRP are directly relevant to judging consistency with two Lakatosian criteria: temporal and heuristic novelty. Both embody "the simple rule that one can't use the same fact twice: once in the construction of a theory and then again in its support." The first is "strict temporal novelty" (Lakatos_1), namely whether the SRP successfully predicts facts unknown, "improbable or even impossible in the light of previous knowledge." The second is "the heuristic definition of novelty" (Lakatos_3), namely whether the SRP successfully predicts facts that did not "play some heuristic role in that theory's construction." (The first implies the second, of course.) The Elmans' introductory chapter treats the first, strict temporal novelty, as "unsuited for social scientific theories that deal with social behavior," because it is too restrictive.[26] The criterion that any "fact that is known to anyone at any time before the theoretical modification" is not novel is, in their view, so strict as to "exclude almost any social behavior from ever being counted as a novel fact." In short, temporal novelty may overlook some progressive SRPs, though it is unlikely to code degenerating SRPs as progressive. They ultimately side with the second, heuristic novelty, but note that it is difficult to employ, since

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Trade Agreements Act of 1934," *International Organization* 42:1 (Winter 1988): 91-120.

[26] Elmans, "Progress in International Relations Theory."

"the determination of novelty depends on private, inaccessible biographical knowledge about the scientist."

I submit that, at least at the broadest level, the Liberal SRP in IR not only meets both the strict temporal and heuristic criteria, but does so in a way that belies the Elmans' methodological and pragmatic misgivings. The most fundamental hypotheses of modern Liberal IR theory were initially advanced, as described below, by political philosophers and publicists of the 18th and 19th centuries, who wrote before the independent variables underlying liberal theory (democratization, industrialization, and particular secular belief systems) were widespread enough to generate any sort of consistent record. The critical insights of Liberal IR theory in the 18th and 19th centuries can be symbolized in the writings of the three most prominent philosophers and publicists in this tradition: Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. Each was a visionary who predicted the implications for international relations of a social trend that had only just begun when they wrote. Obverse phenomena—wars waged by autocrats, pre-industrial mercantilism for control over fixed resources, and religious fundamentalism—were visible, yet liberal philosophers advanced predictions about the potential for change on the basis of only a small spectrum of historical or geographical variation. Important examples of prescient Liberal analyses can be found in republican, commercial and ideational liberal traditions.

Republican Liberalism: When Immanuel Kant advanced a theory about the pacific implications of republican governance for foreign policy in the early 1790s, there was but a handful of extant modern republics, if any at all.[27] Subsequent thinkers from Woodrow Wilson to Francis Fukuyama developed the insight. Belief in the democratic peace served as the basis for

[27] Kant is often misunderstood in this regard as a global federalist. Yet his movement from the world republic envisioned in "Theory and Practice" of 1793 to the structured relations among republic envisioned in "Toward Perpetual Peace" in 1795 is unambiguous. In the latter, Kant's definitive statement, the internal sovereignty of nations remains a constitutive principle of global order. James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann,

many elements of the post-World War II Western international order, not least George Kennan's strategy of containment, US economic and military assistance to Europe, and international human rights regimes.[28] Political scientists, beginning with Michael Doyle in the early 1980s, further analyzed and refined it.

Commercial Liberalism: Adam Smith advanced a firmly-grounded theory about the socioeconomic and regulatory pressures for free trade and protectionism in a world still dominated by great-power mercantilism. Subsequent thinkers in this vein included Richard Cobden and John Maynard Keynes. A parallel line of argument about the pacific influence of economic trade on warfare can be traced from Paul Proudhon though Norman Angell and John Hobson. Most recently, political scientists such as Bruce Russett have confirmed the existence of a link between trade and peace, though subject to interaction (as Angell and others argued) with democratic institutions.[29]

Ideational Liberalism: John Stuart Mill advanced systematic conjectures about the implications of collective cultural phenomena—national identity, education, and cosmopolitan values—in an era in which these were only emerging as a dominant locus of political organization. For him, a key determinate of state behavior was whether "the boundaries of the government coincide in the main with those of nationalities."[30] Subsequent liberal thinkers in this vein included Giuseppe Mazzini and, of course, Woodrow Wilson, for whom "self-determination [was] an essential correlate of democracy." These liberal traditions maintained their integrity

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"Introduction," in Bohman and Lutz-Bachmann, eds. *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 6-7.

[28] For an example of the power of democratic ideology in the immediate postwar period, see Andrew Moravcsik, "The Origins of International Human Rights Regimes: Democratic Delegation in Postwar Europe" *International Organization* 54:2 (Spring 2000), pp. 217-252; and, on Kennan, Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," 51:4 pp. 546-547.

[29] John Oneal and Bruce Russett, "The Classical Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950-1985," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997), pp. 267-93.

over the past two centuries even in the face of the rising and declining fortunes of democratic government, free trade, and cosmopolitan ideology. Myron Wiener, Stephen van Evera and other ideational liberals today have further refined these ideas.[31]

The assessment of Lakatosian "temporal" and "heuristic" novelty requires, of course, that we examine intellectual history. Some might criticize this *ex post* imputation of intellectual antecedents before the area of professionally self-conscious social science. Might it be objected that Kant, Smith, and Mill are not social scientists? Are they rather a set of idealistic visionaries? This is, after all, precisely what realists like E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz have long argued. Since Machiavelli advanced his celebrated distinction between "the effective truth of things" and the "imaginary republics and monarchies that have never been seen or have been known to exist," much ridicule has been heaped on theories of world politics that stress the preferences, rather than power. Liberal theory has come in for its share of such criticism. The arguments of Liberal philosophers, critics charge, are grounded in idealized notions of enlightened, benevolent individuals inhabiting a state of nature—notions drawn from very limited experience of world politics. Idealistic individualism, the critics maintain, leads Liberals to assume the existence of a perfect harmony of interests, between individuals as between nations, which the spread of education and cosmopolitan values will progressively make known to all. Among analysts of international relations, Realist Michael Howard (before undergoing a partial conversion

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[30] Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 140.

[31] Myron Weiner, "The Macedonian Syndrome: An Historical Model of International Relations and Political Development," World Politics 23 (July 1971), 667-668, 670; Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War," International Security (Spring 1994). Conflict based on national identity includes aggressive alliance formation, domestic repression, nationalist ideology, civil war, aggression and risk-acceptance in foreign policy--a recurrent complex of disruptive international behavior Myron Weiner has termed "the Macedonian Syndrome." The empirical result: over the last century and a half—from the nationalist uprisings of the mid-19th century to contemporary national liberation struggles—attempts to achieve autonomy for ethnic groups constitute the primary issue over which wars have been fought and great power intervention has taken place. Even Realists now concede that disputes between "intermingled or divided nationalities" are the most probable catalyst for war in Eastern

to liberal theory) criticizes Liberals for their naiveté in demanding a "Gandhian" sense of individual self-sacrifice. Hans Morgenthau contrasts this alleged self-abnegation with Realism's "theoretical concern with human nature as it actually is, and with the historical processes as they actually take place."[32] Arnold Wolfers and Laurence Martin treat Liberal theory as a narrow doctrine bred of the insularity and unique domestic political legacy of the Anglo-American tradition—which, indeed, it once was.[33] Even social scientists sympathetic to the Liberal SRP have therefore been quick to grant that Liberal theories cannot meet the social scientific standards set by Realism, precisely because their underlying assertion of the moral worth and independence of the individual introduces, Robert Keohane argues, an ineluctable source of "indeterminacy."[34]

This criticism is misplaced.[35] Liberal IR theory as developed by philosophers and publicists like Smith, Kant, Mill, Wilson, and Keynes, was grounded in what we would term today a distinctive social scientific analysis of world politics. These Liberal philosophers, publicists and politicians did not simply offer an abstract ideal of global harmony, but sought to account for variation in international cooperation and conflict, and therefore to chart the prospects for the realization of liberal ideals in the real world. Therefore—as we hinted in the preceding section—

Europe and the former Soviet Union. See Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 144-145, 280-282.

[32] Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978), p.134; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* , 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1960), p. 4.

[33] Arnold Wolfers and Laurence W. Martin, eds. *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs: Readings from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

[34] "In contrast to Marxism and realism," Keohane concludes, "Liberalism is not committed to ambitious and parsimonious structural theory," but remains a "guide" to normative choice. Robert Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," in John Dunn, ed. *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics* (Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press, 1991), pp. 166, 172-173. See also Yale H. Ferguson and Richard N. Mansbach, *The Elusive Quest: Theory in International Politics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

[35] Strictly speaking, this criticism is probably irrelevant. The motivations and self-conceptions of a thinker are not generally regarded as an input into the ex post reconstruction of a scientific paradigm. The motivations of Copernicus, for example, a man steeped in Platonic philosophy, do not alter his position in the development of science. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

any distinctively liberal theory of peace tends to be linked to a corresponding liberal theory of war, any liberal theory of free trade and cooperation to a corresponding liberal theory of protectionism and mercantilism, and any liberal theory of ideological conflict to a corresponding liberal theory of ideologically-induced consensus.

Accordingly, by the time of Smith in Britain, Kant in Germany and Benjamin Constant, if not already Montesquieu, in France, abstract utopias—even if they occasionally reappeared later—had been supplanted by efforts to ground Liberal political philosophy in modern sociological and political theory. The essential liberal move—here I risk gross oversimplification—was to place a modern civil society of individuals making choices at the basis of theorizing about political order. Thus the normative claims of subsequent Liberal philosophers generally rest on a set of increasingly sophisticated claims about the variety of possible relationships within society and between the state and society—of which ideal conditions and prescriptions were simply a limiting case. Modern attempts to assert a normative Liberal position must begin by accepting what John Hall has termed a sociological "wager on reason"—namely, the assumption that certain conditions will impel rational individuals in civil society to act politically in predictable ways.[36]

The existence of a quasi-scientific foundation holds for classical philosophers as well as modern IR theorists. It is doubtful that even early Liberals subscribed to the idealistic view that their doctrines could be deduced from a mythical state of nature, that societies harmoniously tend

[36] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960); Don Herzog, *Without Foundations: Justification in Political Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 204-207; John Dunn, *Rethinking Modern Political Theory: Essays 1979-83* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 154-163; Stephan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-22; John Gray, *Liberalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 45-56; John A. Hall, *Liberalism: Politics, Ideology and the Market* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

toward progress, or that human beings, once they are persuaded by Liberal arguments, can be trusted to morally regenerate themselves. Sheldon Wolin observes:

> Liberalism has repeatedly been characterized as "optimistic" to the point of naïveté; arrogant in its conviction that human reason ought to stand as the sole authority for knowledge and action; bewitched by a vision of history as an escalator endless moving upwards towards greater progress; and blasphemous in endowing the human mind and will with a godlike power of refashioning man and society in entirety. For the most part, these criticisms have little or no support in the writings of the liberals.[37]

More specifically, Wolin argues, the evolution from Hobbes to Locke marked a shift from the former's "vigorous assertion of the distinctiveness of the political"—the view that the rules of political life were independent of their social or theological context—to the latter's premise that political life is decisively shaped by underlying forms of social cooperation.[38] Kant constructed a plan for movement toward world peace that he asserted would be effective "even in a world of devils."[89] Of Benjamin Constant, a critical figure in the modernization of 19th century liberal political theory, Stephen Holmes observes:

> Once again following Montesquieu and other eighteenth-century (particularly Scottish) examples, he deliberately supplanted the contract myth with the theory of social change. The liberal state is desirable not because it mirrors human nature or respects eternal human rights, but because it is the political arrangement most adequate to solving the problems of European society in its current state of economic, scientific and moral development.[40]

Similarly, Adam Smith took an intellectual journey from the notion that commercial activity could tame, or at least successfully oppose, the more militant passions to the notion of a self-regulating society largely independent of the nature of individual norms.

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[37] Cited in Andrew Moravcsik, "Liberalism and International Relations Theory," Center for International Affairs Working Paper Series 92-6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1992/revised 1993).

[38] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, pp. 286-294, 305-309, with the quotation on 305. See also Gray, *Liberalism*, 7-15

[39] Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," in Hans Reiss, ed. *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 112.

[40] Cited in Moravcsik, "Liberalism and International Relations Theory."

The intellectual history of the Liberal SRP—the remarkable foresight of early liberals and the resulting ability of liberal theory to meet the criterion of temporal novelty—stands in striking contrast to intellectual history of realist and institutionalist SRPs. The realist SRP as we know it emerged from the inductive analyses of Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Meinecke, and Hans Morgenthau. Each observed in his era characteristic realist pathologies of anarchy—an overriding concern for security, the formation balances of power, the dynamics of deterrence and preventive war—then developed a theory *ex post* to explain it. (To be sure, much subsequent history confirmed the balance of power theory, yet these new cases of balancing were surely far less novel than the emergence, spread and pacific implications of modern republican government.) Similarly, it might be argued that the modern institutionalist SRP, which emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s, was developed to explain success of post-World War II international organizations, which appeared anomalous from a realist perspective—as Keohane and Martin note in their contribution to this conference. This is not to say that these research programs have not explained some temporally novel facts, only that new facts and major developments in world politics appear to have preceded major theoretical innovations in Realist and Institutionalist SRPs to a greater extent than was the case with the Liberal SRP.

All this speaks well for the Liberal SRP, which easily meets the criterion of temporal or heuristic novelty—and does so better than its competitors. Yet I remain quite unconvinced that this particular sort of novelty is an essential criterion for judging SRPs. Whether the behavioral regularities a theory can convincingly explain are known before or after the development of the theory appears to be an entirely secondary consideration. I dispute the Elmans' claim that it is generally "trivial" to develop a coherent theory to account for an extensive set of facts, even if

they are fully known in advance. If I maintain that liberal theory is analytically prior to other IR theories and unjustly neglected in current debates, it is not because it is historically prior, or because it was derived deductively rather than inductively. More important than novelty, in my view, is performance—confirmed predictions minus confirmed anomalies—as compared to competing SRPs. If a particular theory most convincingly fits a specified pattern of facts without generating greater numbers of anomalies, it should granted greater weight. Let me turn now to a criterion more consistent with this view.

B. Background Theory Novelty: Liberalism and its Competitors in Current Research

"Background theory novelty" ($Lakatos_4$), the interpretation of Lakatos' central criterion proposed by Musgrave, instructs us to assess the excess content of novel facts explained by research programs over time by asking whether Liberal SRP "predicts something which is not also predicted by its background theory." (For Lakatos, "background theory" represents the dominant paradigm, but this could be taken more loosely to refer to the prevailing theoretical alternatives.) By this criterion also, I submit, Liberal theory is a progressive program. By social scientific standards, as we have seen, there exists remarkably strong support for key liberal theories, such as those predicting the democratic peace in the Republican Liberal tradition, endogenous international trade and monetary policy in the Commercial Liberal tradition, and the role of societal preferences across public goods in a range of phenomena from nationalist conflict to regulatory harmonization in the Ideational Liberal tradition. We have seen in our discussion of temporal and heuristic novelty that liberal theory has generated fruitful new lines of theory in security studies, international organization, and international political economy. Certainly the Liberal SRP advances a wide range of distinctive confirmed predictions not successfully predicted—or in any way derivable from—Realist or Institutionalist theory.

Perhaps most important, given the Lakatosian tendency to view inter-paradigmatic conflict as "three-cornered," recent empirical and theoretical debates demonstrate the very limited capacity of non-liberal SRP's to generate plausible (internally coherent and empirically confirmed) explanations for regularities predicted by Liberal theory. Contrary to what the Elman Memo suggests about "background theory novelty," it seems in fact quite difficult to generate plausible auxiliary explanations for many phenomena uncovered by competing IR SRPs. A comparison of specific areas in which Realist and Liberal theories have been applied generates numerous anomalies where Realists have tried and failed to generate satisfactory explanations for confirmed Liberal predictions, and numerous cases in which Realists, even in the absence of a direct Liberal challenge, advance formulations of realism that overtly degenerate toward Liberalism, even judged by the core definitions realists themselves advance.

1. Realist Anomalies, Novel Facts, and Liberal Theory

In numerous areas of recent IR theory, Realism has failed to propose any detailed explanation for salient phenomena well-explained within Liberal theory. In other related areas, Realist explanations for confirmed Liberal predictions that, on closer inspection, have proved unconvincing. This suggests that Liberal theory has, at least in some matters, broader scope than either Realist or Institutionalist theory, and that the latter two are accumulating anomalies especially visible from the liberal perspective. Consider the following examples.

?? *Realism and Institutionalism provide no explanation for differences in the substantive nature of formally similar orders.* What accounts, for example, difference between Anglo-American, Nazi and Soviet plans for the post-WWII world? Or the substantial differences between the compromise of "embedded liberalism" underlying Bretton Woods and arrangements under the Gold Standard? Divergences between economic

cooperation under the EC and COMECON? The greater protectionism of OECD agricultural policy, as compared to industrial trade policy? These are Realist anomalies. Yet, as John Ruggie and others have shown, plausible, parsimonious, and empirically confirmed Liberal explanations grounded in the variation in national socioeconomic preferences exist for each of these novel phenomena.[41]

?? *The "democratic peace" remains a robust and significant anomaly for both Realism and Institutionalism.* Attempts by Gowa, David Spiro and Randall Schweller to debunk the "democratic peace" hypothesis advanced by Doyle, Russett and others have not succeeded in reversing the relationship or finding a stronger alternative explanation.[42] Others assert that the democratic peace may change in the future. No critique consistently reverses the causal relationship, or accounts for its power in other ways. More broadly, Realists provide no explanation for the consistent tendency of perceived threats to very independently of power. What explains US concern about a few North Korean, Iraqi or Chinese nuclear weapons, rather than the greater arsenals held by Great Britain, Israel and France? Surely the democratic peace hypothesis, as well as theories of ethnic attachment, are relevant.

?? *Liberal theory offers, in particular, a uniquely plausible explanation for the distinctiveness of politics among advanced industrial democracies.* A stable form of interstate politics has emerged, grounded in reliable expectations of peaceful change, domestic rule of law, stable international institutions and intensive societal interaction.

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[41] Ruggie, *At Home Abroad*; John Gerard Ruggie, "Embedded Liberalism Revisited: Institutions and Progress in International Economic Relations," in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, eds., *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 201-234.

[42] At most, they demonstrate that under certain extreme specifications—limited periods of time and limited numbers of countries—the relationship between democracy and peace can become statistically insignificant. They fail to reverse the signs.

This is the condition Karl Deutsch terms a "pluralistic security community" and Keohane and Nye term "complex interdependence." Whereas Realists (and, as we see below, Constructivists) offer no general explanation for the emergence of this distinctive mode of international politics, Liberal theory argues that the emergence of a large and expanding bloc of democratic, interdependent, nationally satisfied states has been a precondition for such politics. Consider, for example, the current state of Europe. Unlike Realism, Liberal theory predicts and explains the absence of competitive alliance formation among West European powers. For example, the lack of serious conflict over Yugoslavia—the "World War I scenario"—reflects in large part a shared perception that the geopolitical stakes among democratic governments are low. Liberalism similarly makes more sense of the sudden reversal of East-West relations, a shift made possible by the widespread view among Russian officials (so interview data reveal) that Germany is ethnically satisfied, politically democratic and commercially inclined. These facts are novel both by the temporal and the background criteria.

?? *Realists themselves are led to invoke underlying patterns of national identity in identifying the causes of and policy solutions for ethnic conflict in modern Europe.* Ideational Liberal theory predicts that areas like the former Yugoslavia, where ethnic and state boundaries do not overlap, will be ripe for conflict, unless strong economic interests or political institution offset underlying pressure. John Mearsheimer, a leading realist, seeks to explain conflict in the former Yugoslavia by asserting that external threats under multipolarity trigger nationalist reactions. Yet even if this casual claim were accurate—and there is ample reason for doubt—it begs the underlying issue, namely the source of variation in the security threats that trigger nationalism. With

respect to this question, Realism remains powerless to explain perhaps the most salient fact about post-Cold War European politics, namely the complete peace among the established democracies of Western Europe and the sporadic conflict (and threat of conflict) among the transitional democracies and non-democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. This evolution, which emerged after predictions were on the table in 1990, confirms the novelty of the liberal theory.

?? *Realist arguments about the formation of international institutions have been disconfirmed.* Under the rubrics of hegemonic stability theory and relative-gains seeking, Stephen Krasner, Joseph Grieco, David Lake and others have posed realist challenges to liberal theories of economic integration and commercial liberalization advanced by Helen Milner, Jeffry Frieden, Ronald Rogowski, John Ruggie, myself and others within the now massive literature on endogenous tariff theory.[43] Yet hegemonic stability theory has all but disappeared from the academic scene after a series of disconfirming analyses. At best, it does not appear robust beyond a single case, namely US policy after World War II.[44] Grieco has argued that governments are concerned with "relative gains-seeking" in trade policy, but fails to demonstrate a link between security and trade.[45] The most that can be said for this line of recent realist work is that Joanne Gowa and Edward Mansfield have succeeded in demonstrating the existence of a modest correlation between alliances and trade.[46]

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[43] Joanne Gowa, "Democratic States and International Disputes," *International Organization* 49:3 (Summer 1995), pp. 511-522.

[44] See Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."

[45] Joseph M. Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). For the debate, see David A. Baldwin, ed. *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[46] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Decline of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York:

?? *Liberal theory offers a plausible explanation for long-term historical change in the international system.* The static quality of both Realist and Institutionalist theory—their lack of an explanation for fundamental long-term change in the nature of international politics—is a recognized weakness. In particular, global economic development over the past 500 years has been closely related to greater *per capita* wealth, democratization, education systems that reinforce new collective identities, and greater incentives for transborder economic transactions. Realist theory accords these changes no theoretical importance. Theorists like Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin and Paul Kennedy limit Realism to the analysis of unchanging patterns of state behavior or the cyclical rise and decline of great powers.[47] (Institutionalist theory, it should be noted, might attribute this to the spread of international institutions—a line of theorizing that has yet to be developed.) Liberal theory, by contrast, forges a direct causal link between economic, political and social change and state behavior in world politics. Hence, as we have seen above, over the modern period the principles of international order have been decreasingly linked to dynastic legitimacy and increasingly tied to factors directly drawn from the three variants of Liberal theory: national self-determination and social citizenship, the increasing complexity of economic integration, and democratic governance.[48] This is a novel fact—so much so that Michael Howard, a leading realist,

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Random House, 1987); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[47] Here there is, of course, a realist alternative. See Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

[48] Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

was forced to reverse course and concede the limitations of realism in the second edition his classic critique of Liberal IR theory, *War and the Liberal Conscience*.[49]

In each of these areas, liberalism provides a viable and often superior explanation—sometimes, the only viable explanation—for essential aspects of modern world politics.

2. Realist Degeneration vis-à-vis Liberal Theory

Even more striking than the ability of liberal theory to explain realist anomalies is the increasing tendency of self-styled realists to explain core security relations—patterns of war, alliance formation, arms control, and imperialism—by invoking liberal and institutionalist factors. In numerous areas of empirical research, notably in security studies, the hard core of contemporary Realist theory is spontaneously degenerating in the direction of Liberal and Institutionalist assumptions by invoking exogenous variation in societal preferences and transnational information flows through international institutions.[50] A closer examination of this tendency is instructive not only because it demonstrates the power of Liberal IR theory, but also because it demonstrates—contra Lakatos, who assumes this is trivially easy—the difficulty of explaining anomalies by adjusting auxiliary assumptions while retaining the sanctity of hard core assumptions.

Jeffrey Legro and I demonstrate in a recent article that leading self-identified realists—among them Steven Van Evera, Jack Snyder, Steven Walt, Charles Glazer, Fareed Zakaria, Randall Schweller, Gideon Rose, William Wohlforth, and Joseph Grieco—share a tendency to water down the "hard core" of realism to generic assumptions of rationality and anarchy shared by all major IR theories, including institutionalism, liberalism, realism, and even some (more

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[49] Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* 2nd edition, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

[50] In many of these areas, liberals have not explicitly proposed hypotheses. Still it is important to note that the Lakatosian enterprise is about the ex post reconstruction of scientific progress based on coherent assumptions.

"liberal") variants of constructivism.[51] These self-styled realists—about their willingness to label themselves "neoclassical" and "defensive" realists, there is no ambiguity—seek to explain the clear tendency of states to make war and alliance decisions unexplained by Waltzian balance of power theories. Some such efforts explain anomalies by elaborating auxiliary assumptions surrounding the core realist assumptions about the resolution of interstate conflict over scarce resources through the application of relative power capabilities—as we seen in theories stressing geographical proximity and offensive vs. defensive military technology. Yet most of these scholars place primary emphasis on factors derived from paradigms traditionally seen as fundamental opposed to realism. These factors include the nature of international institutions, variation in misperceptions and belief systems, and—most relevant for an assessment of liberal theory—variation in state preferences. They offer no distinctively realist reason for invoking these traditionally non-realist factors, which often reverse empirical predictions. In sum, if we are to judge by core assumptions rather than paradigmatic labels—recent "realist" literature has done more to strengthen the liberal, institutionalist, and epistemic paradigms than the realist one.

This degenerative tendency in recent realist theory is reflected also in the Elmans' own "illustrative specification of the neo-realist research program." There they argue that the neo-realist hard core might consist of seven assumption. To simplify a bit, they believe the realist SRP must assume egotistical, rational, strategic states employing limited resources to assure security in an anarchic international system. The memo concludes with the assertion that "work by structural realists"—by which is clearly meant something far broader than Waltzian neo-realism—"would share these central and unchanging elements."[52] As the Elmans concede,

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[51] For a more detailed and fully documented version of this argument, see Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* (Fall 1999).

[52] Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, "Lakatos and Neo-Realism: A Reply to Vasquez," *American Political Science Review* (1997) 91(4): 923-926.

however, this is far from the case. Walt, Van Evera, Snyder, Zakaria, Schweller, Grieco, and Glazer do not accept all these assumptions. In particular, the Elmans concede, these theorists invoke exogenous variation in national preferences—what the Elmans somewhat misleadingly term "internal factors"—and international institutions. Following Zakaria, Rose, Schweller, and others, the Elmans conclude that we should not term these theorists neo-realists but instead should treat this shift as an inter-paradigm shift from "neo-realism" to "neoclassical" (or "neotraditional") realism. Yet this raises the question, not satisfactorily addressed in either this work or in the Elmans' gloss of it, what the true core "realist" propositions are, to which both neo-realists and neo-classical realists adhere. Does "neoclassical" realism have a distinctive hard core, that is, does it contain "realist" elements distinct from other "background theories," say liberalism and institutionalism? If so, no one has set it forth.

Legro and I argue that the answer to this question is clearly negative. No distinct realist paradigm has been proposed that can subsume recent self-styled realist writings, while not expanding to include nearly all rationalist theories of IR. Once realists permit intentions and institutions to vary independently and accord them causal importance, no specific assumption remains to distinguish neo-classical realism, and realism generally, from existing liberal and institutionalist paradigms. Most realists who address this question—and surprisingly few do so explicitly—seek to reassert a "minimal" realist definition, whereby all realists (whether neo-realists or neoclassical realists) assume only that states are rational, unitary actors, they are driven by self-interest, and they co-exist in anarchy where security concerns are important, even paramount. Even the Elmans' seven-fold definition boils down to a form of "minimal realism" that fails to distinguish realism from a generic commitment to rationalism shared by the Liberal and Institutionalist SRP.

This core remains unacceptably broad, since the only state behaviors excluded are outright self-abnegating altruism or delegation of power to a world state. Hardly any IR theorist today—certainly no major regime or liberal theorist—maintains that states are altruistic, irrational, unstrategic, inward-looking, omnipotent, or oblivious of security matters. Nor do many maintain that the international system, even if influenced by international regimes, is hierarchical.[53] And while some liberal theories stress national goals other than security, most liberals see states as placing a preeminent value on security. The democratic peace predicted by liberals and the formation of arms control regimes, predicted under certain conditions by institutionalists, for example, are held together precisely by the high value participating governments place on security.[54] Making such assumptions, therefore, does nothing to define the critical parameters of inter-paradigmatic debate in contemporary international relations—the minimal function of any Lakatosian reconstruction.

In their discussion of realism, the Elmans themselves overlook this degeneration. Somewhat ironically, this is so in part because they ignore a central element of the Lakatosian method: comparison among paradigms, each defined in terms of a "hard core." In lieu of setting forth such competing paradigms, the Elmans are wedded to the "level of analysis" distinction, whereby realist theories—neo-realist or not—are said to share a focus on the "external" environment of the state, as opposed to its internal environment. This formulation of the level of analysis distinction, though it has been widely accepted in teaching and research for a generation,

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[53] It is true that liberal hard core assumes that contestation among sub-national actors influences national preferences, but this is employed only the explain variation in preferences. Few liberals deny that states are the major instrumental actors in world politics. Even those who stress the role of NGOs increasingly focus on their ability to influence states to act in a particular instrumental manner. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Transnational Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[54] Notice that this tendency to degenerate into uncontroversial assumptions means that the realist paradigm is far broader than the definition of a liberal paradigm I have proposed. The latter explicitly excludes realist,

is incoherent and unhelpful. No rational power calculation focuses entirely on the "external" environment. Instead all such calculations compare ("internal") domestic power to the ("external") power of others; it is the relative position of a country vis-à-vis others that matters. This focus on comparison between the self and the environment—broadly speaking, what one does as opposed to what others do—is the essence of what is meant by a "strategic" calculation. Thus it is in fact implied by the Elmans' own definition, which terms states "strategic." In essence, the Elmans recapitulate the "minimal realist" mistake of defining realism as a form of generic rationalism so broad that it leaves space for no serious competitors.

From this perspective, the primary difference between realism, liberalism and institutionalism lies not in their respective focus on "domestic" or "external" variables, but in the particular structural characteristics of states they choose to compare.[55] For realists it is material power capabilities. For institutionalists it is information. For liberals, it is underlying social preferences as transmitted by representative institutions. In each case, rational states must pay attention to both the internal and external factors. As against these alternatives, any reformed variant of then realism paradigm (e.g. "neoclassical realism") can itself meet the "background

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institutionalist and some constructivist arguments, as well as many psychological approaches to IR. Yet, ironically, my reformulation of liberalism has been criticized by realists for its breadth.

[55] I therefore disagree with the suggestion of Steven Krasner and Robert Jervis at a conference of this project that liberal theories simply rename what were traditionally called "second image" theories. The core liberal claim is not that "domestic politics" is dominant. Indeed, the liberal understanding of IR rejects the traditional level of analysis distinction altogether. For liberals, two other conceptual distinctions are fundamental: the first stresses the fundamental sources of differences among states, the second the way in which those differences translate into political behavior. The first is a distinction between the international political system, on the one hand, and civil society (domestic and transnational) on the other. Liberals, in contrast to realists and institutionalists, stress the importance of state-society relations and the ultimate primacy of the societal context. In other words, underlying interdependence among societies, which drives interdependence among policies, is the fundamental force underlying state behavior. The second distinction, entirely at the interstate level, is between different characteristics of states that might drive policy—the distribution of preferences, resources, information and beliefs. Liberal analysis stresses the distribution of preferences, and hence all major liberal variables are "systemic," at least insofar as the influence of commercial incentives, national ideals, and regime type on the foreign policy of a given country cannot be assessed in isolation from the corresponding characteristics of other countries. More broadly, this suggests that the level of analysis distinction is a hindrance to understanding. The real debate in IR theory is not between second and third image theories, but between different conceptions of the structure of the international system. Is that structure

theory novelty" criterion only by maintaining fixed preferences (which distinguishes realism from liberalism) and the resolution of conflict on the basis of the relative control over material resources (which distinguishes realism from institutionalism).[56] Yet instead these theorists have borrowed from non-realist theory in such a way as to render their theory indistinguishable from—albeit less fully theorized than—existing liberal and institutionalist theory.

The lack of distinctiveness of realist theory is a flaw so fundamental that it transcends debates about the virtues of various philosophies of science proposed by Lakatos, Larry Laudan and others. If a set of core assumptions is so broad as to be shared by a paradigm and nearly all its recognized competitors, what use is it? In addressing this problem, realists face a difficult choice. They may either define realism narrowly, and thereby admit the existence of increasing numbers of empirical anomalies, or they may water down the hard core to a "minimal realist" foundation, thereby permitting realist theory to degenerate into a loose and generic rationalism consistent with nearly every claim about world politics advanced in the past generation. Unwilling to either limit their empirical claims or make peace with their theoretical opponents, contemporary realists are left in an internally incoherent position. The discourse of realism—"systemic" vs. "reductionist" explanations, "levels of analysis", and such—obscures rather than resolves this tension. This is precisely the sort of analytical and terminological confusion that the Lakatosian approach, with its insistence on explicit causal assumptions, is designed to prevent.

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best understood in terms of the distribution of preferences, resources, or information? This is consistent with the analysis of Lake and Powell 2000.

[56] Returning to the Elman's definition of neo-realism, the analysis above implies that the seven assumptions set forth in their paper—states are rational, egotistical, and strategic, possess limited resources, seek security, and act in anarchy—are insufficient even to define neo-realism. These assumptions are, at least at the level of generality they are stated, entirely consistent with the "democratic peace," theories of interdependence and war, the importance of "security regimes", and many other ostensibly non-realist bodies of theory. Again, either neo-realism becomes coextant with all rationalist IR theory or it is underspecified.

IV. THE LIMITATIONS OF LAKATOSIAN PHILOSOPHY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

We have seen that the Liberal paradigm in IR theory can be reconstructed in terms of a parsimonious hard core of three distinctive assumptions. The scientific research program based on Liberal paradigm, furthermore, meets the three most important Lakatosian criteria for excess explanatory content—temporal novelty ($Lakatos_1$), heuristic novelty ($Lakatos_3$), and background theory novelty ($Lakatos_4$). The Liberal SRP does so at least as well, perhaps better, than any other major IR theory.

Let me conclude, however, by turning away from this specific substantive finding to three broader conclusions concerning the application of Lakatosian philosophy of science to IR theory in general. Despite the strong positive result, this application of Lakatosian criteria suggests more broadly their inappropriateness to IR theory. The viability of "background theory novelty", examined in the previous section, and the liabilities of evaluating theories on the basis of their empirical scope, counsel caution. Overall, this more pragmatic "problem-solving" approach suggests the greater appropriateness of Larry Laudan's approach, rather than that of Imre Lakatos—if any strict philosophy of science is appropriate at all. It is important to note, however, that Liberal theory meets these more sophisticated criteria. It can support subtle claims about the proper domain of liberal explanation, and can play a fundamental role in multi- theory syntheses.

A. The Primacy of the Lakatosian "Background Theory Novelty" Criterion

The degeneration of realism demonstrates not only the power of liberal theory, but because it instructs us about philosophy of science. In particular, the recent degeneration of realism demonstrates the power of Musgrove's criterion of "background theory novelty" ($Lakatos_4$). The

Elmans, following Lakatos's own tendency, reject background theory novelty because they feel that, in the face of anomalies, it remains trivially easy to develop auxiliary propositions that successfully protect the hard core. One can, they assert, always add appropriate auxiliary propositions to account for certain anomalies, without thereby creating other anomalies or violating core propositions. In IR theory, I see little evidence that this is the case, as the recent degeneration of the realist research program demonstrates.

Within many IR paradigms, it is in fact quite difficult to explain new facts within a consistent set of hard-core propositions without generating overt contradictions. In the case of recent realist writings, the result has been a transparent appropriation of propositions based on assumptions that—as a matter of intellectual history as well as modern paradigmatic reformulation—are anything but realist. This failure, it is critical to note, is not simply an outside judgment reached by liberals, institutionalists and epistemic theorists defending arbitrarily chosen terrain.[57] Instead, the position of recent realists is internally contradictory. Contemporary realists lack a plausible formulation of their "hard core" assumptions that is both distinctive and consistent with their empirical work. Realists have found it very difficult to match the distinctive and confirmed empirical claims without violating its traditional hard core. These conclusions suggest—in the spirit of essays in this volume by Andrew Bennett and David Dessler—that "background theory novelty" is a more useful criterion than the Elman's introductory chapter suggests, and one that casts the Liberal SRP in a favorable scientific light.

[57] This is claimed by our critics. For a response, see Moravcsik and Legro, "Is Anybody Still a Realist? The Authors Reply," in "Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)," *International Security* 25:1 (Summer 2000), pp. 165-193. (Reply to critiques by Peter Feaver, Gunther Hellmann, Randall Schweller, Jeffrey Taliaferro and William Wohlforth.)

B. Theory Synthesis and the Liabilities of Lakatos

Although the Liberal SRP appears to be strongly vindicated by this analysis in this paper, I nonetheless maintain that we must take careful heed of significant limitations inherent in any application of Lakatosian philosophy of science, even as a metaphor, to evaluate IR theory.

Lakatosian theory is designed to explain the resolution of conflict among a small number of very fundamental theories within a uniform field of scientific inquiry. Lakatos and those who have sought to elaborate his approach tend to view theories as having a plausible claim to explain an entire scientific domain. The image is one of a series of discrete conflicts among such theories with expanding empirical scope over time. While there may be extended failures to agree upon a single paradigm, such failures tend to be the transitional consequences of the need to assemble and analyze a large body of ambiguous data, not fundamental uncertainty about the nature of the microfoundations of the phenomena in question. Under such circumstances, Lakatos expects that conflict among theories will eventually result (or, hypothetically, could ideally result) in the vindication of one, which will subsume the loser by explaining all of its content. This image implies heroic confidence the universal applicability of single sets of micro-foundational assumptions—confidence that has been vindicated in some areas of the natural sciences.[58]

The study of world politics, by contrast, often manifestly fails to meet these criteria. Even broad SRPs like realism, liberalism, and institutionalism (let alone specific theories such as work on the "operational code" or "democratic peace") can not make a plausible claim to universality, even within a circumscribed domain. It is next to impossible to find any reputable scholar willing to advance such universal claims for such theories. More importantly, there is no a priori reason to believe that such a universal claim would be valid. By contrast to the claims advanced by

Newton, Einstein, Darwin, and other scientific revolutionaries, which rested what was arguably a unique and exclusive conceptual foundation of basic principles, there is little fundamental theoretical reason is there to assume that war is the result of, say, the non-democratic governance and underlying social conflict cited by liberals, rather than the perturbations in the balance of power cited by realists or underdeveloped international organization cited by institutionalists. It is not difficult to conceive of sociological and psychological microfoundations (say a "rationalist" framework of analysis) that encompass all of these—a point to which I shall return in a moment.

In this context, the tendency of Lakatosian analysis to focus our attention on zero-sum conflict among all-encompassing theories is a distinct liability.[59] It is a liability most obviously because it sets a manifestly unrealistic standard. No one expects any of these theories, including Liberal theory, to supplant or "knock out" its competitors, even within a limited realm. Even if Liberal IR theory, for example, could be shown to be analytically prior, currently underutilized, or even ultimately of greater scope than its competitors—and this is far from clear—I see no reason, therefore, to reject the realist or institutionalist paradigms. A world of international relations theory without either of these major competitors to liberalism strikes me as absurd on its face.

An even more serious, if less obvious, liability is that Lakatosian philosophy, even as a heuristic, inhibits full recognition that international relations is ineluctably multi-paradigmatic. Lakatosian philosophy of science tends to block other trajectories of theoretical and disciplinary development. Two stand out.

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[58] This interpretation of Lakatosian philosophy may seem demanding, but anything less would reduces its core criterion to a pragmatic admonition to seek evidence for competing claims, thereby ridding the approach of almost all its distinctive content.

First, Lakatosian thinking inhibits appreciation of the possibility that Liberal and other IR theories may be differentially applicable across specific empirical domains of world politics. Each may have areas of relative power and relative weakness. Keohane and Nye theorized some years ago, for example, that the worlds of anarchic competition and "complex interdependence" were required different theories. In other words, Lakatosian emphasis on maximal claims about the scope of an explanation may blind us to narrower, subtler, and more nuanced conclusions about the conditions under which particular theories have explanatory power. Such a world of accurate mid-range theories seems closer to our grasp than one with a single dominant theoretical paradigm.

Second and more fundamental, Lakatosian thinking inhibits appreciation of the possibility that theories like realism, institutionalism and liberalism can usefully be deployed as complements rather than substitutes. Lakatos' focus on the comparison of paradigmatic scope between two major competitors tempts scholars to advance "universal" and unicausal claims when it is inappropriate to do so. The central challenge facing IR today may is not selecting the correct philosophy of science most likely to help us develop a universal theory of IR, but may well be he selection among frameworks that permit us to engage in rigorous theory synthesis. The central issue here is: How should analysts combine major theories into testable explanations of classes of phenomena in world politics without permitting the resulting empirical analysis to degenerate into a unicausal approach, on the one hand, or an indeterminate "everything matters" approach, on the other? Each would be deployed to explain different aspects of the same interstate interactions.

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[59] This tendency is related to what Keohane and Martin term the "endogeneity problem" in their contribution to this project.

The potential complementarity of basic IR theories must follow from shared assumptions. Within a rationalist world, for example—and most IR theories remain predominantly rationalist, even if the preferences with which they work ultimately result from socialization—there is little fundamental reason to believe that any single theory of the scope of liberalism, realism, and institutionalism could or should triumph. To see why, one need only consider a basic form of rationalist analysis, say bargaining theory (negotiation analysis) as practiced by James Sebenius, Howard Raiffa, John Harsanyi, Ariel Rubenstein, and Thomas Schelling. In such analyses, it is possible, indeed conventional, to combine tastes (liberalism), coercive resources (realism), and information and norms (institutionalism or constructivism), as well as other factors, into synthetic explanations of bargaining outcomes. For the purposes of empirical analysis, separating them into competing schools may often be counterproductive. A structured synthesis would be far more illuminating.

One application of such a structured rationalist synthesis, taken from recent empirical research on European integration, places theories drawn from major paradigms in a specific sequence.[60] In an analysis of major negotiations to create, develop and amend the treaty structure of the European Union, Liberal theory has been employed to account for national preferences, rationalist bargaining theory (which could be seen as a non-coercive variant of realism, or an extension of liberalism) to account for the efficiency and distributional outcomes of negotiations, and institutionalist theory to account for subsequent decisions to delegate power to supranational institutions. This is only one of competing general models for synthesizing theories, including qualitative frameworks, multivariate equations and formal models. Lakatosian theory inhibits this sort of theoretical innovation.

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[60] For a explication and empirical application of this approach, see Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

C. Ontologies, Paradigms, Theories: The Proper Scope of Research Programs

A final consideration deserves mention, namely that of the proper scope of a paradigm. Some might concede that Lakatosian criteria are inappropriately applied to IR "isms" like liberalism or realism, yet nonetheless maintain that Lakatosian concepts can nonetheless usefully be employed to evaluate smaller or larger theoretical aggregations—narrower theories or broader "ontologies."

Many within this volume maintain that Lakatosian criteria are appropriately applied to narrower aggregations, such as democratic peace theory or theories of international regimes.[61] Without responding to the full argument of these articles, the analysis above suggests that such claims should be treated with the utmost caution. If it is plausible to argue that realism, liberalism, and institutionalism are complements rather than substitutes, would this not be all the more true of narrower hypotheses within these traditions? It is hard to see, for example, why democratic peace theory should plausibly constitute an exclusive theory of war—or even that it can usefully stand alone as an explanation of most real-world cases of potential conflict. Hence it is hard to see what is gained by evaluating its progress and promise within a Lakatosian framework, but any further consideration is properly left to the reader.

Insofar as any theoretical constructions in IR could plausibly advance the type of exclusive claim to explanatory power within a given domain favored by Lakatosian philosophy of science, it would be more appropriately to be a theoretical paradigm at a broader level—such as what Alexander Wendt terms the "ontological" level of "rationalism" or "sociological theory." Ontologies can plausibly make a universal claim across a broad domain, and many believe that

[61] This position tends to be held by those who are uncomfortable with the breadth of the liberal paradigm as formulated here. While it is true that the paradigm is broad in theory, it tends to be narrow in practice. There are relatively few specifications of Ideational, Commercial and Republican Liberalism, respectively—in Lakatosian

such claims are mutually exclusive. One might more reasonably speak, as we have seen, of a weak rationalist research program in IR, with realist, institutionalist, and liberal "paradigms" as leading components.[62] There is firm grounding in fundamental social theory for advancing such a conception of the field.[63] Rationalist theories of social interaction, regardless of their substantive scope, privilege three or four categories of fundamental causal factors, namely resources, preferences, information and beliefs. Hence within a rationalist paradigm, which might perhaps be properly judged using Lakatosian criteria, we should find a theory privileging the international distribution of resources (realism), preferences (liberalism), information (institutionalism), and beliefs (epistemic or constructivist theory). It is regrettable that this project does not contain a broad assessment of such meta-paradigms. Certainly there are many who would see IR debates channeled in the direction of "rationalism" vs. "sociological" (or "constructivist") theory.

Yet even at this very broad level of abstraction, there remains considerable room for doubt. The utility of Lakatosian criteria such as the explanatory scope of a theory—and therefore the utility of the rationalist-socialization dichotomy—remains dubious, for two basic reasons. First, there is no reason to believe that the psychological underpinnings of rationalist or sociological explanation are, in the real world, mutually exclusive. Complex combinations are possible. Accordingly, one is hard-pressed to find a serious scholar willing to assert that only rational choice or only socialization exists. Recent constructivist efforts to reformulate IR theory as debates between "rationalist" and "sociological" theory have been abandoned by many of its

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language, there are relatively few sets of basic concepts and auxiliary propositions—that test out. Accordingly, the resulting research has therefore been quite focused.

[62] Many variants of so-called "liberal constructivism" would be included. See Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community: The Case of NATO," in Peter Katzenstein, ed. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 357-399.

major practitioners. The constructivist challenge is now focused primarily on the need to force a structured synthesis between rationalist and sociological theory, rather than demonstrating the dominance of one or the other. Under such circumstances, it is unclear what is to be gained by structuring academic discourse as a battle among unicausal claims. Second, as Alexander Wendt, Iain Johnston and others admit, there is only a very loose connection, if any at all, between ontology at the level of "rationalism vs. constructivism" and the choice of specific testable theory.[64] Many predictions—including realist ones, Johnston has shown, and including liberal ones, as Wendt has demonstrated—are equally consistent with a constructivist or a rationalist ontology. Once the connection between ontology and concrete hypotheses has been broken, it becomes unclear exactly how could properly might apply Lakatosian criteria to ontologies, or what meaning such an application would have.

In sum, a paradigm can be both too narrow and too broad for Lakatosian assessment to be appropriate. Certainly the strategy of this paper, namely to assess a theory at the intermediate level of existing IR "paradigms," generates useful insights. But there is good reason to believe that the optimal scope for the application of Lakatosian criteria might be significantly broader.

V. LIBERALISM AND LAKATOS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

This paper has advanced four basic arguments. First, *Liberal IR theories constitute a coherent and progressive research program*. Each of the three major variants of Liberal theory—Ideational, Commercial, and Republican Liberalism—is based on the three hard-core assumptions elaborated here. We have seen that liberal theories meet the three most important

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[63] James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Lake and Powell 2000.

[64] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

criteria for excess explanatory content: temporal novelty ($Lakatos_1$), heuristic novelty ($Lakatos_3$), and background theory novelty ($Lakatos_4$).

Second, *the Liberal SRP is at least as progressive as, and arguably more progressive than, major alternative SRPs in the contemporary study of IR*. Recent research has consistently generated novel claims that expand the empirical reach of liberal democratic peace theory, endogenous tariff theory, two-level game theory, and liberal constructivist theories about "embedded liberalism," national identification, theories of transnational interest-group formation, and other forms of collective identity. All these fit comfortably within core liberal assumptions. An even more striking piece of evidence for the progressive nature of the Liberal SRP is comparative, namely the tendency of theories based on other major paradigms to degenerate into Liberal ones, rather than the reverse. This is clearest in the trajectory of so-called realist theories, where the movement from "neo-realism" to "neo-classical realism" marks—even by the admission of the Elmans, who seek to defend realism as a coherent paradigm—a departure from core realist assumptions. In Lakatosian terms, it is theoretically degenerative.

Third, *in applying Lakatosian philosophy to specific IR theories, background theory novelty ($Lakatos_4$) than temporal novelty ($Lakatos_1$) or heuristic novelty ($Lakatos_3$).* One might expect, as the Elmans argue in the introduction to this volume, that it would be a simple matter to adopt auxiliary assumptions that expand explanatory power and account for known anomalies in any paradigm. This presupposition lies at the core of the justification for assessing theories solely in terms of their ability to explain "new" facts unknown at the time of the paradigm's initial development, as the temporal and heuristic interpretations of Lakatos recommend. Yet in fact, as we have seen, it often proves extremely difficult to "fix" theories in this *ad hoc* way—and almost impossible to do so without creating more anomalies than one resolves. Accordingly, the proper

criterion should be background theory novelty ($Lakatos_4$), which measures the overall explanatory power of the theory. The most striking evidence is, again, the trajectory of realist IR theory over the past two decades. Some legitimate changes in auxiliary hypotheses have been employed to explain "neo-realist" anomalies, such as the elaboration of offense/defense dominance and geographical location to enrich a capability-based measurement of power. These mark real progressive advances in realist theory. Yet most "neo-classical realists" conclude that this is insufficient and have invoked exogenous shifts in social preferences, international institutions, and beliefs—thereby abandoning core realist assumptions rather than adjusting auxiliary assumptions.

Fourth, *we should be aware of significant pitfalls in applying Lakatosian conceptual language to IR theory.* This essay has demonstrated, to be sure, many virtues of Lakatosian reconstruction and evaluation of SRPs, as applied to IR theory. Lakatosian theory does not permit theorists to label their theories at will (or on the basis of intellectual history), but instead bases any paradigmatic reconstruction and labels solely on retrospective reconstruction of coherent assumptions underlying empirical research. Lakatosian philosophy thereby highlights theoretical slippage, such as that we see in the case of "neo-classical realist" theory. Lakatosian theory, moreover, focuses the evaluation of paradigms not simply on the coherence of the theoretical claims, but on the overall empirical confirmation of those claims.[65] The conceptual constraints imposed on theory construction and development by Lakatosian criteria are surely a useful reminder—at least a retrospective one—of the need for consistent assumptions, greater rigor, comparative theory testing, and efficient empirical explanation. Realists, for example,

[65] This was overlooked by some earlier applications of Lakatosian philosophy of science to IR theory. A number of analysts have argued for the superiority of realist theory on the basis of its parsimony. Often what was referred to was the parsimony of realist theory in the abstract, rather than the parsimony of realist explanations of empirical domains.

cannot legitimately invoke Lakatos to defend their theory on the basis of its abstract parsimony, but only its ability to explain empirical outcomes parsimoniously.

Whatever benefits the use of Lakatosian philosophy as a heuristic metaphor may offer, however, overly rigorous application is surely inappropriate. The major liability of Lakatosian philosophy is its tendency to frame debates among competing paradigms in universal and unicausal terms—a picture of scientific progress that is unlikely to spur scientific progress in contemporary IR. Most areas of political science, including international relations, are not yet ready for a "theory of everything."[66] If such a theory were appropriate, moreover, it would probably be formulated at a broader level, namely that of a loose "rationalist" paradigm, which would subsume liberalism (inclusive "liberal constructivism"), realism, and institutionalism. We should instead be thinking about employing such theories to define precise and overlapping scope conditions, and to develop testable multi-causal syntheses. For these purposes, the utility of Lakatosian philosophy is unclear. To be sure, all this speaks well for Liberal IR theory, which defines clear scope conditions and is well-suited to play a foundational role in multi-theory syntheses. I conclude, nonetheless, on a skeptical note. Any rigid Lakatosian concept of paradigmatic theory development should be imposed on theories of international relations only with the utmost caution and modesty.[67]

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[66] Michael Wallerstein, "Does Comparative Politics Need a TOE (Theory of Everything)?" *APSA-Comparative Politics* 12:1 (Winter 2001), 1-31.

[67] Overall, the viability of "background theory novelty" criterion and the more pragmatic "problem-solving" approach adopted here suggest the appropriateness of criteria proposed by Larry Laudan, rather than Imre Lakatos—if any strict philosophy of science is appropriate at all. Overall, however, this finding is consistent with existing work on IR paradigms that deliberately employs more straightforward criteria, such as distinctiveness and coherence, rather than explicit philosophy of science.