

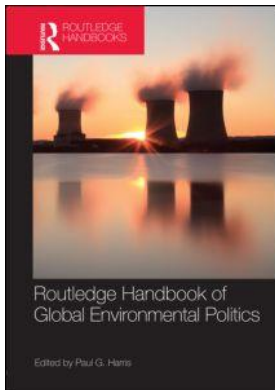
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Mainstream theories

Realism, rationalism and revolutionism

John Vogler

International Relations (IR) as a distinct discipline dates from the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Understandably its preoccupation was, and remains, the problem of war and the achievement of security in what is often described as an “anarchic” system of sovereign states (see Chapter 7). Environmental issues, whether seen as transboundary disputes or the international dimension of managing common resources, were a decidedly minority interest (Stevis 2006). The natural environment provided the context, rather than the subject, of international relations. This situation began to change from around the time of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972. In this issue area, as in others, scholars tended to react to changes in the world of practical politics and policy-making. In developed world societies “green” politics had begun to emerge in response to various environmental disasters and public awareness of the scope of problems, such as air pollution, that were not soluble without international action (see Chapter 30). The probably inevitable response by students of IR was to attempt to frame such novel issues within existing theoretical traditions and to apply the same tools that had been used to analyse cooperation in managing the global economy or negotiating arms limitation in the Cold War (see Chapter 30). It is arguable that this was a mistake, and that something rather more radical would have been more appropriate – something that placed ecology or perhaps green political theory at the centre of theoretical endeavour. Questions might have been asked, for example, about the long-run co-evolution of physical and socio/international systems.

This chapter will review the way in which IR theory engaged with international environmental politics. IR theory may be characterized as a broad, expanding and eclectic church. One way of categorizing its traditions derives from the insight of Martin Wight (1991), a leading exponent of the “English School” of international theory. He made a tripartite division between the three “Rs”: *realism, rationalism and revolutionism*. Realism is very well known as the (then) predominant theoretical approach emphasizing power relations between states in an anarchic and inherently war-prone system. Rationalism denoted a reformist and liberal tradition informed by reason. Under this heading one may find liberals, internationalists and “idealists” – a characterization invented by realist antagonists that has proved remarkably resilient. As far as the study of international environmental politics is concerned, liberal institutionalism really does constitute the mainstream and accordingly will receive most attention below. The third category

contains those whose purpose is to provide a theoretical approach critical of the existing international system with a view to its ultimate replacement (see Chapter 4). Prominent amongst them are scholars working within a Marxist tradition who have developed a distinctive alternative to the liberal mainstream. Inevitably, when confronted with actual scholarship there are many ways in which the categories blur and overlap, but there are also key distinctions that will be explored in what follows.

The first concerns the ontological bases of theory – that which is held to exist. Whether, for example, the state or global class relations constitute the fundamental reality for theorists. In tandem with this we may also pose epistemological questions about how the various theoretical traditions claim to be able to know about reality. Here there are important distinctions between those who follow the disciplines of social science seeking to find regularities and explain variations through the objective study of empirical evidence and those, like social constructivists or members of the English School, for whom interpretation rather than “positivistic” explanation is key (see Chapter 5). In discussions of IR theory this distinction is often presented as being between “positivists” or “rationalists” and “reflectivists”. Positivistic IR remains the dominant approach, especially in the United States, but even from the 1960s it has been subject to attack from various strands of “reflectivist” thought from diverse positions, including Marxist-inspired structuralism, “critical theory” and “post-structuralism”, not to mention the original English School resistance to the behavioural trend in US scholarship.

Finally, there are normative questions that address the purposes of theory. Usually in the study of international relations there is such a purpose beyond a simple commitment to objective scholarship. Students of international environmental politics have frequently aimed to solve or manage problems through international cooperation. For them the ultimate test of effectiveness is whether the institutional or other arrangements devised serve to redress degradation or promote environmental quality (see Chapters 8 and 9). This was the specific intention of many research programmes and of the chairman of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, who spoke of the “inescapable” need for international cooperation and, in advance of more recent discussions of the topic, called for “a world system of governance” (Maurice Strong cited in Haas et al. 1993: 6). In this way the problematic was devised beyond the academy and translated into the following, frequently referenced, formulation: “Can a fragmented and often highly conflictual political system made up of over 170 sovereign states and numerous other actors achieve the high (and historically unprecedented) levels of cooperation and policy coordination needed to manage environmental problems on a global scale?” (Hurrell and Kingsbury 1992: 1). This is, however, by no means a universal preoccupation amongst IR theorists.

Realism

The realist tradition continues to animate popular and academic study of international relations but it has had only limited impact upon the specialism of international environmental politics. One reason for this is that it tended to define the latter’s subject matter out of existence. Environmental issues were for realists matters of “low politics” and the proper subject of IR was constituted by the “high politics” of statecraft, war and peace. Realists assert the primacy of the state which is assumed to pursue its national interest, famously reduced by Hans Morgenthau (1948) to the pursuit of power, but for most writers defined as the protection of its territorial integrity and the achievement of economic security and other central objectives of the state (see Chapter 7). The natural environment is, therefore, significant not in itself, but in terms of resource competition between states. Such competition is conducted within an anarchic

“self-help” system where the resort to force is an ever-present possibility. Thus, the preoccupation of realist thinkers is with the management of power balances and the achievement of some kind of order in a world of conflict. A key realignment of realist thought was inspired by the “structural” theory of Waltz (1979). Neorealism, which shares some important characteristics with neoliberal approaches (discussed below), sought to provide a parsimonious theory of international power politics based upon a rational choice model of the way that any state would behave within an anarchic structure. Realist and neorealist assumptions were often embedded in attempts to provide social scientific and “testable” theories of international relations (Vasquez 1983).

The environment rarely figured as the subject of such analyses, but realism provides one hypothesis that would be relevant to explanations of international environmental cooperation. This is the “hegemonic stability thesis”, developed like much of the literature to account for the circumstances under which international economic cooperation could occur. It followed from realist postulates that self-interested states would only subject themselves to international rules if they were enforced by a dominant “hegemon”. The occupant of this role for much of the twentieth century was the United States and there was much concern from the 1970s onwards as to the future of world economic regulation, once US dominance began to erode. For students of international environmental politics this did not appear to be a plausible, still less a desirable, thesis because from the late 1980s, through the period of major construction of international environmental accords, the USA was either absent or obstructive – having relinquished its earlier leadership role.

Hegemonic stability does not exhaust the potential of realist theorizing. The emergence of climate change as a central concern has demonstrated, through its inextricable linkage to energy production and issues of economic growth, that it is close to the heart of national interests (see Chapter 28); the designation of environmental politics as “low politics” is no longer tenable – if it ever was. Realist thinking about shifting power constellations is clearly relevant (Rowlands 2001) as are the older traditions of geopolitical analysis which centred on struggles over territorial space and resources. Geopolitics, as outlined by such scholars as Sir Halford Mackinder, was usually located within political geography although it had clear associations with the realist power political analysis. In geopolitical writing the emphasis was always on resource conflict rather than the environment *per se* although prominent political geographers Harold and Margaret Sprout (1971) managed to move on to the consideration of international environmental politics. As Stevis (2006: 20) notes, geopolitics was the predecessor of the contemporary environmental conflict and security research agenda (see Chapter 19).

The study of environmental security has produced an extensive literature in recent years (Barnett 2001; Swatuk 2006; see Chapter 19). When environmental security is defined in terms of the relationship between environmental change and armed conflict – whether war or insurgency – it is of interest to governments and the strategic studies community. Major studies have been funded by, for example, NATO (Lietzmann and Vest 1999), with a view to providing possible future conflict scenarios and climate change, in particular, appears routinely in strategic assessments as a “threat multiplier” (European Council 2008). It is not only the military establishment that has become interested but others, whether governments or activists, who wish to raise the profile of environmental problems by “securitizing” them. (The reference here is to the so-called Copenhagen School whose approach to the study of security involved the way in which political “speech acts” served to increase the salience of a particular policy by associating it with the potent idea of security (Buzan et al. 1998). Hence attempts to focus governmental attention and resources on, say, climate change would describe it as a security threat greater than that posed by terrorists (King 2004; see Chapter 28).) In April 2007, for example, the UK government

introduced a UN Security Council Resolution on climate change. All this is despite the fact that, as Deudney (1990) cogently demonstrates, there are significant disadvantages arising from the attempt to bring environmental and military/strategic concerns together. For one thing the mindsets of soldiers and environmental activists are at variance and the employment of military assets is generally more likely to degrade than enhance environmental quality

A prominent research programme into the actual connections between environmental degradation and conflict has been undertaken by Homer-Dixon (1991, 1999) and his associates who isolate three types of conflict that are likely to be causally connected to environmental changes: struggles over diminishing resources, conflict related to migration and insurrections as fragile states fail to cope with the stresses of environmental change. As evident in cases such as the Darfur conflict in Sudan, there are connections between environmental change (desertification and loss of habitats; see Chapters 39 and 37), the displacement of farmers and ethnically structured conflicts. However, the precise causal mechanisms are notoriously hard to pin down (Barnett 2001; Gleditsch 1998). Much of the writing on environmental security is framed within a set of assumptions about conflict and security that align with realism. For example the Pentagon has commissioned studies of not only the threats but also the strategic opportunities opened up by some of the scenarios for future climate change (Schwartz and Randall 2003). Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that a great deal of work in this field is performed within the competing normative enterprise of peace research (Baechler 1999). There is a similar commitment to social scientific modes of explanation but peace research, with its pacifistic and often radical outlook, is in essential opposition to the realist paradigm.

Rationalism

The use of the term rationalism can cause confusion. It does not in this instance refer to procedural rationality of the sort that is to be found in the rational choice models employed by both realists and their opponents. Rather, the sense is that rationalists have a reasoned approach in contrast to the brutalities of power politics or the excessive idealism of those who would overturn the existing system. At the core of the rationalist tradition in IR are conceptions that can be traced back at least to Grotius, founding father of modern international law (see Chapter 10). States do not exist in a perpetual Hobbesian “war of all against all” but are capable of developing shared norms and practices that can ameliorate their condition and even develop the rights of their citizens. Classical rationalist thinkers were preoccupied by the problems of war, but the general approach does comprehend the mainstream of studies of international environmental politics that endeavours to improve the management of common problems by states, without the expectation that a revolutionary transformation of the international system, to provide a sustainable form of world ecological government is a realistic prospect for the immediate future.

Liberalism and neoliberalism

Liberalism as a political and economic theory has diverse roots in the English constitutional and religious struggles of the seventeenth century and in the European enlightenment of the eighteenth. Its appeal is to the rights of the individual, the limitation of government powers and the importance not only of free association, but of free markets. In IR it has been reflected in a progressive belief in reform of the states system. One version is “democratic peace theory” positing that war and peace depend upon the nature of particular states, while another powerful idea, traceable to the nineteenth-century Manchester School, is that there is an equation between free economic exchange across frontiers, high levels of interdependence and a stable

and pacific international system. In the interwar period liberal internationalist thinkers were in the ascendant as advocates of national self-determination and the encouragement of international law and organization as the antidote to a war-prone international system. Variants of this approach included “functionalism” which proposed that integration across national boundaries can be achieved by low-level socio-economic cooperation that will eventually “spill over” into the transfer of political authority beyond the nation-state. Liberals have been suspicious of the state and receptive to the idea of a more pluralist and transnational world system (see Chapter 14). This, coupled with a strong belief in the efficacy of free trade for the production of both wealth and political stability, has meant that, in the aftermath of the Cold War, liberalism became the dominant ideology that both celebrated and justified the spread of economic globalization. The protection of the natural environment did not figure largely in liberal thinking. Indeed, critics will point out that liberal economics, in its encouragement of the rise of consumer capitalism, bears a major responsibility for the degradation of nature associated with economic growth. The liberal response is that free markets will provide the optimal allocation of resources in terms of efficiency and sustainability if only the environmental costs of human activity (externalities) are properly taken into account in transactions (see Chapter 15).

The fact that this does not occur and that state authorities fail to coordinate their activities in a rational way, beneficial to all in the longer term, provides a key to understanding liberal approaches to international environmental issues. Much of the intellectual inspiration for such thinking in IR derives from a preceding concern with running the international economy in the face of counterproductive “neo-mercantilist” behaviour by governments. In fact proponents of liberal political economy admit that markets in themselves would not operate properly without a framework of rules. Thus governments should be encouraged to cooperate in what was assumed to be their underlying collective interest – as they had at the end of the Second World War with an economic settlement that put in place the Bretton Woods monetary order and the global free trade regime – a critical enabler of globalization. When environmental issues achieved wider salience during the 1980s liberal analysts were able to tap into existing work on the conditions required for international economic cooperation. (There were some exceptions, such as Oran Young, who had already begun to study international environmental cooperation in the preceding decade.) They adopted many of the assumptions of neoclassical economics (Keohane 1984) in the study of what were defined as collective action problems. In fact it is quite difficult to distinguish between work that can be classified as IR and that which presents an essentially economic analysis. Economists have performed extensive research not only on the viability of instruments such as emissions trading, but also into the functions of international agreements and the conditions under which they occur (Barrett 2003). Atmospheric quality was, for example, conceptualized as a global public good and climate change was described as “the greatest example of market failure we have ever seen” (Stern 2007: 1). In economic theory public goods cannot be provided by the operation of the market and this affords a justification for cooperation between governments to ensure their supply. Key assumptions of this type of approach included the notion of rational, utility-maximizing actors who would take strategic decisions to cooperate if the incentives were right. Game theory provided a set of relevant models for such bargaining and in particular the “prisoner’s dilemma” game in which actors need to overcome their mutual distrust in order to enjoy the gains available from cooperation.

Associated with this was the need to overcome the “free-rider problem” posed by actors who may profit from agreements without contributing to them. An awareness of this possibility was assumed to be a major disincentive to potential participants in an agreement (Stern 2007). The epistemological stance of these scholars of international cooperation, often referred to as neoliberals, was also closely aligned with mainstream economics. (The neorealist confrontation

with liberal critics is often referred to as the ‘neo-neo’ controversy. Although the term neoliberal is used to denote scholars who adopted many of the assumptions of their counterparts in economics there are definitional problems. Neoliberalism has a conventional political meaning denoting ideas of a reduced state, privileging the private sector and the individual over the collective interest and inspiring the policies adopted by the Thatcher government in the UK and, at the international level, contained within the Washington Consensus. Some of the intellectual underpinnings of both types of neoliberalism may be similar but many of those who might be defined as neoliberal in the IR literature would not hold with the political and economic programme of neoliberalism.)

Neoliberal scholarship sought, in the main, to explain the pattern of incentives under which cooperation was possible for self-interested actors. In some ways neoliberalism represented a simplification because states became the focus of analysis and other liberal preoccupations, for example with a plurality of international actors and with transnational relations (Mansbach et al. 1976), tended to be forgotten. It was often said that the difference between neorealists and liberals had been narrowed to such an extent that all that divided them was a disagreement over whether the gains of state participants were relative or absolute – in line with the long-standing liberal credo (Lamy 2011: 123–5).

Regimes and liberal institutionalism

It is no exaggeration to say that the mainstream position in the study of international environmental cooperation is liberal institutionalism. While sharing many of the economic assumptions discussed above, institutionalists understand that economic activity and international cooperation necessarily occur within a framework of rules and understandings (Young 1989). This had long been the province of international law and organization but institutional theorists in IR developed the new concept of an international regime, initially in the study of the regulation of the international economy. Regimes were seen as institutions in the sociological sense of the word. They were defined as sets of norms, principles, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations and behaviour would converge in a given issue area (Ruggie 1975; Krasner 1983; Young 1989). International law and international organizations (often referred to as institutions in established usage) were only constituent parts of this broader concept which was designed to analyse the less formal understandings upon which cooperation was built (see Chapters 8, 9 and 10). In contrast to realist analysis, regimes were seen to have an independent impact upon the calculations of governments. Also, they provided a means whereby “cooperation under anarchy” was possible without the leadership of a hegemonic power. As so often in IR theorizing, there was a real-world issue driving these concerns: the presumed loss of US hegemony following the ending of the dollar standard in 1971 and alarm at the consequent unravelling of the global monetary order. Liberal analysts argued that cooperation and stability could be achieved “after hegemony” (Keohane 1984).

Regime analysis was readily adapted to the study of international environmental cooperation (see Chapter 9); commencing with the Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution Convention 1979 and the Vienna Convention on stratospheric ozone depletion 1985 and its renowned Montreal Protocol 1987 (see Chapter 29), the production of global environmental agreements boomed. Arguably, even though the origins of liberal institutionalist scholarship on regimes lay elsewhere, many of its major developments have been located within the environmental field (Haas et al. 1993). The approach has been social scientific, searching for patterns in the empirical evidence from numerous cases of environmental cooperation (Young and Zürn 2006) and looking to explain variance and to specify independent and dependent variables. The dependent

variables have been: the setting up of environmental regimes, the extent of agreement and levels of compliance and effectiveness – ultimately in the solution or amelioration of environmental problems (see Chapter 9).

At the beginning of the study of environmental regimes the question most frequently posed was the same as that posed by the economists – under what circumstances can cooperation occur (Young 1997)? From the extensive study of cases there were various answers. Perceived mutual vulnerability and a continuing interest in arrangements that safeguarded rights to use the global commons would provide one explanation. The “geometry” of agreements has been a significant theme with the proposition that small “clubs” of interested countries are likely to make most progress (Victor 2011). The continuing success of the Antarctic Treaty regime with its selective membership and the way in which the Montreal Protocol rested upon agreement amongst a relatively small group of chemical manufacturing companies would lend weight to this proposition. The work of Oran Young (1989 and 1994) has been preeminent in establishing the more precise dynamics of the “institutional bargaining” that underlies regime creation when consensus is required. Young presents a series of hypotheses on the conditions of success, including the absence of a specified zone of agreement and the presence of uncertainty. Other factors include the need to find solutions that are regarded as equitable as well as enforceable. External shocks increase the possibility of success and entrepreneurial leadership is a necessary condition (Young 1994: 81–116). This question of effective leadership has been extensively pursued in the literature (Andresen and Agrawala 2002; Wurzel and Connolly 2011). Leadership that can mobilize far-sighted international action is significant because, despite the construction of hundreds of international environmental agreements over the past decades, most of the indicators show a continuing degradation of the Earth’s natural systems. The underlying problem that students of international environmental cooperation have to address is, not so much the absence of international agreements, but their tendency to revert to the lowest common denominator – as formulated in Underdal’s (1980) “law of the least ambitious programme”. A recent joint paper by many leading scholars in the field calls for “a ‘constitutional moment’ in the history of world politics, akin to the major transformative shift in governance after 1945” (Biermann et al. 2012: 7) The 2012 Rio plus 20 Conference, to which this appeal was addressed, only served to illustrate the unlikelihood of an immediate transformation.

Aside from the question of the determinants of regime formation, an important and problem-focused part of liberal scholarship investigates institutional design. This is also the province of international lawyers and covers such issues as the circumstances under which “soft law” may provide more effective solutions than a comprehensive binding agreement (see Chapter 10). There is much discussion of the future of the climate change regime conducted along these lines. There are related studies of appropriate policy instruments, whether “command and control” or “market based”, such as emissions trading. These can be as fine-grained as explanations of variations of approach within a particular regime (Webster 2009). Finally, there is a significant body of work on the question of compliance with international agreements and their effectiveness. This involves both discussions of the meaning and measurement of effectiveness as well as detailed case studies of particular regimes (Haas et al. 1993; Victor et al. 1998).

In recent years the focus upon regimes has broadened out in a number of ways (see Chapter 9). There has been a – perhaps – ambitious rebranding of institutional studies as “earth system governance” or “global environmental governance” (Biermann 2007). Sometimes in official discourse this can mean little more than a reconfiguration of existing international organizations. Witness the long-running debate on whether to raise the status of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to a specialized agency or to create a UN environment council alongside the Security and Human Rights Councils. However, in the academic world

notions of global governance denote a move away from the state-centric focus of earlier regime analysis and a recognition of the need to consider different levels of appropriate environmental governance and to include transnational actors such as NGOs, which had always received significant attention in the IR literature (Princen and Finger 1994; Keck and Sikkink 1998), and to embrace the possibility that the private sector could provide significant governance alongside or even instead of nation-states (Pattberg 2007). This marks a return to several key themes in liberalism that tended to be crowded out by previous attempts at parsimonious explanation through the assumption of rationally calculating unitary state actors. There is clearly a normative dimension that, in line with classical liberalism, distrusts the state and the possibility that it might be “greened” and seeks more virtuous alternative forms of governance (Vogler 2005). A recent tendency to be found in liberal institutionalist work reflects an understanding that institutions do not stand alone but interact or “interplay” with one another in ways that are significant for their evolution and effectiveness (Oberthür and Gehring 2006). Oran Young has considered not only the fit between institutions but the fit between institutions and their physical setting (Young 2010).

Variations on the rationalist theme: cognitivism and the English School

Mirroring neoclassical economic theory, liberal institutionalist analysts tended not to delve within the state but rather to assume a set of fixed preferences. Recently behavioural economics has questioned this lack of interest in preference formation, but in the study of international environmental politics this has been a long-standing critique. A distinct “cognitivist” approach to the understanding of regimes was evident from around 1990 and the publication of Haas’s (1990) work on the Mediterranean pollution regime. Critical enquiry into the supposed linear relationship between authoritative science and policy formulation began to open up the “black box” of national policy positions, pointing out the significance of shifting discourses (Litfin 1994). Cognitive approaches to regime formation betray the influence of “reflectivist” IR and the rising interest in social constructivism (Wendt 1999). In one respect this was a challenge to liberal institutionalist orthodoxy because of its explicit rejection of the rational choice model of human behaviour in favour of alternative “logics of appropriateness”. Added to this is a critique of assumptions about objective natural “fact” for science too is seen to be socially constructed (see Chapter 17). Such positions must raise questions about the validity of existing liberal scholarship but can also be incorporated into institutionalism. Regimes are themselves social constructs with a shifting ideational and constitutive character. In some versions of constructivism there is no necessary contradiction with the epistemology of social scientific enquiry and therefore with mainstream liberal institutionalism. Alternatively, a constructivism that seeks understanding of normative evolution rather than strict explanation would seem to align both ontology and epistemology in the study of regimes (Vogler 2003). The extent to which rational choice and reflectivist approaches are commensurable remains one of the most disputed questions in contemporary IR theory (Smith and Owens 2008). (This is sometimes referred to as the “rationalist–reflectivist” debate. Rationalist is a shorthand for rational choice and does not refer to Wight’s rationalist category used here in this chapter.)

The English School defines itself in terms of a rationalist approach to international society. Adherents have adopted approaches that are in some ways coincident with more recent constructivist theorists in their concern for the constitution and re-constitution of the institutions, such as sovereignty and diplomacy or, indeed, international society itself (note the distinctive definition of institutions; see Chapters 20 and 9). They early on rejected the epistemological stance of US “behavioural” International Relations scholarship of the 1960s in favour of a more

historically based interpretative approach. English School concerns with the deeper norms of an international society of states would certainly be relevant to global environmental politics but the attention of most of its adherents was elsewhere upon the problems of war, international order and human rights. There are indications that this neglect is now being remedied for, as Falkner (2012: 509) argues, “In contrast to both realism and neoliberal institutionalism, the English School offers a rich account of the institutional phenomena that define the durable patterns of and historically bound character of international society.”

Revolutionism

Alongside realism and rationalism, Martin Wight identified a revolutionist tradition in international thought. Some of those in this category, Marxist and socialist writers, did have an explicitly revolutionary purpose, but others had less developed aspirations for the transformation of the interstate system into a more congenial and pacific world system in which both individuals and communities would live in a greater degree of freedom and harmony. The unifying strand that is present in all of this work is a rejection of the status quo and with it the kind of international order that realists accepted as inevitable and rationalists sought to reform and ameliorate (see Chapter 4). Typically, sovereign states are viewed as part of the problem rather than potential promoters of a more cosmopolitan and ecologically sustainable world (see Chapter 23). To use Cox’s (1981) terminology, problem-solving theory is the domain of realism and rationalism, while revolutionists are “critical theorists”.

During most of the twentieth century the most important revolutionist theorists espoused some form of Marxism. Marxist theorists shared a distinctive historical materialist approach in which the state, far from being the centre of analysis, performed as the agent of a ruling class – “the executive committee of the bourgeoisie”. International politics, and in particular the imperialist struggles that characterized the contemporary epoch, were to be understood in terms of the deeper underlying contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. During the Cold War much effort was devoted to the analysis of imperialism and patterns of economic underdevelopment in the global system. As with other contemporary brands of IR theory, very little attention was paid to the natural environment until the final years of the twentieth century when the relationship between capitalist accumulation, globalization and the degradation of the Earth’s natural systems began to crystallize (see Chapter 22). Because Marxist analysis seeks explanation through the ways in which an ever-changing system of capital accumulation determines economic activity that is fundamentally responsible for excessive resource use, loss of habitats and rising levels of pollution, it provides a powerful account of the global ecological predicament (Paterson 2001). In particular it directly challenges liberal market-based orthodoxies on solving global environmental problems and achieving justice for the dispossessed (see Chapters 23 and 24). In terms of IR theory, Marxist structural analysis denies that environmental issues can be portrayed as a collective action problem between states. International regimes and schemes of global environmental governance are “epiphenomenal”. They may serve a number of functions for the global capitalist system but they are a reflection of it rather than a means to ensuring that it will be less environmentally destructive. Thus, for example, the problem of climate change cannot be dealt with through the elaboration of the UN climate regime but rather through more fundamental alterations in the nature of the capitalist growth model that will provide incentives to de-carbonize the global economy (Newell and Paterson 2011).

Scholarship in the Marxist tradition has often adopted a neo-Gramscian position. Gramsci has been an inspiration because his writings pay attention to the ways in which the material base and the social superstructure combine in a “hegemonic” process to manufacture consent for a

prevailing order even amongst those whose interests would “objectively” be opposed to it (Humphreys 1996; Kütting 2004; Levy and Newell 2005). There is a substantial degree of overlap here with a range of other literature that relocates the ecological problem beyond the structures of the existing international system and examines the implications of incorporating green political thought (Laferrière and Stoett 1999; Saurin 1996; Eckersley 2004).

Conclusion

In the year following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, Steve Smith (1993) took an outsider’s view of the emerging field of international environmental politics. His conclusion was that it remained “at the periphery” dominated by a liberal institutionalist orthodoxy and immune to the theoretical cross-currents so evident elsewhere in IR. In terms of most of the academic research and writing since then, there is still some truth in his observation. The rationalist project is still prominent and is clearly motivated to solve environmental problems through an improvement and extension of international cooperation. The quest is for cumulative, evidence-based scientific knowledge which has policy relevance to the tasks of global environmental governance. A great deal of empirical understanding of the bases and operation of international environmental institutions has been garnered. Such knowledge has been presented within the framework of the International Human Dimensions Programme of the International Social Science Council (Biermann et al. 2012), which forms a small part of a much larger web of international scientific research collaboration. This indicates where the mainstream of liberal institutionalism would wish to position itself.

It is also the case that some participants in this enterprise would not regard themselves as being fully committed to positivistic social science (see Chapter 5). Since the early 1990s the mainstream has expanded to accommodate forms of IR theory that have a more cognitive and reflective character and which reject the rather rigid assumptions of state-centric rational choice analysis. In this respect there has been a major change since Smith’s (1993) review of the literature. Critical “revolutionist” writing has remained a significant presence within the study of international political economy and amongst those who view the mainstream concern with international cooperation as fundamentally misplaced. The realist tradition, so important elsewhere in IR theorizing, has had little to say about global environmental change. This state of affairs may be changing, not only on account of the links between degradation and armed conflict, but also as a consequence of the close connections between climate change and a long-term staple of realist analysis: the politics of energy resources (see Chapter 28).

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