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INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY: the state of the art

Ralf J. Leiteritz¹

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El autor ofrece una revisión del campo de la economía política internacional (EPI) a partir de sus lineamientos metateóricos. Las comunidades de EPI en Estados Unidos y Europa exhiben más diferencias que aspectos comunes en sus supuestos ontológicos, epistemológicos y metodológicos. Mientras que la perspectiva estadounidense se basa en una ontología materialista y el individualismo metodológico, y tiene como fundamento epistemológico al neopositivismo, la comunidad europea de EPI es más heterogénea en sus aproximaciones teóricas, epistemológicas y metodológicas. El artículo termina planteando tres posibles escenarios para el futuro de la sub-disciplina de la EPI.

Palabras clave: Economía política internacional, filosofía de la ciencia, Estados Unidos, Europa

The author provides an overview about the field of international political economy (IPE) along metatheoretical lines. The IPE communities in the United States and Western Europe exhibit more differences than commonalities in their ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. While the U.S. perspective is solidly based on a materialist ontology, methodological individualism, and neo-positivism as its epistemological foundation, the European IPE community is considerably more heterogeneous in its theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches. The article ends with a view towards the future introducing three possible scenarios for the IPE sub-discipline.

Keywords: International political economy, philosophy of science, United States, Western Europe

The discipline of International Political Economy (IPE) is one of the most recent entries into the curricular canon of International Relations (IR). While the term ‘political economy’ has of course a formidable intellectual pedigree, IPE scholars came to associate themselves with this new label only during the 1970s, when a group of political scientists defined IPE as an autonomous field of research apart from economics. The volume by

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye “Power and Interdependence” (1977 [2001]) emblematically signaled the arrival of the new sub-discipline within International Relations. Scholars increasingly realized the multiple interactions between politics and economics on the international level (as discussed by Keohane and Nye studying the political implications of the oil shocks during the 1970s) which required an integrated perspective between the two professions.

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This brief overview about the “state of the art” in International Political Economy will introduce the field along metatheoretical lines. Any substantial theory in the social sciences in general and international relations in particular is built upon a specific philosophy of social science or metatheory. Metatheory includes ontological claims – claims about existence of the form ‘what is the world made of’. Epistemological considerations are claims about what would constitute a valid knowledge claim, and the grounds for such claims. Epistemology is closely related to methodological implications. Methodology is focused on the specific ways – the methods – that we can use to try to understand our world better (Smith 1996: 18). Taken together, ontology, epistemology and methodology form a tripartite system of acquiring knowledge along the following lines: “if you believe in X (ontology) and wish to ground the claim X in Y (epistemology) then you should follow method Y (methodology)” (Wight 2002: 41, fn 4).

Metatheoretical differences matter for social science research, since different ontological and/or epistemological positions lead to different theoretical approaches in terms of what and how to investigate (in) the social world. In other words, depending on what you believe the world (of IPE) mainly consists of, you have a preference for the objects of your investigation. Likewise, virtually all IPE scholars approach their research questions with the help of specific methodological understandings. While these metatheoretical decisions remain mostly implicit in theoretical and empirical research, the

purpose of this paper is to make them explicit and visible. After discussing what IPE is all about, I will separate the research tradition in the United States from the one in Western Europe in order to highlight the different trajectory that the sub-discipline has taken in both regions. I conclude with a brief consideration of possible scenarios for the future.

What is IPE?

The U.S. scholar Robert Gilpin provided the – still widely used – standard definition of IPE along the cleavage between the state and the market:

The parallel existence and mutual interaction of ‘state’ and ‘market’ in the modern world create ‘political economy’(...) In the absence of the state, the price mechanism and market forces would determine the outcome of economic activities; this would be the pure world of the economist. In the absence of the market, the state or its equivalent would allocate economic resources; this would be the pure world of the political scientist (Gilpin 1987: 8).

Both spheres – state and market – are supposed to operate separately, with different functional logics. While power politics dominates the political realm, market processes are driven by economic or efficiency imperatives. However, the increasingly complex links between developed countries described by Keohane and Nye and more recently the onslaught of globalization in all its different forms, including the rise of new actors such as multinational corporations and social movements across borders, have

challenged the treatment of states and markets as separate and contesting units of analysis, reinforcing the political and scientific significance of their mutual interconnectedness (Strange 1988)². We now live in the era of a truly global economy reaching virtually all parts of the world and making economic integration a fact of life. On the other hand, we are still confined by a fragmented political system of states, which are desperately trying to keep control of economic globalization. The resulting tensions and constant interactions between politics and economics make for the 'bread and butter' of analyses in IPE.

Rather than thinking in terms of separate spheres, contemporary IPE can be defined as the analysis of the interaction between the political and the economic sphere involving state and non-state actors on the national and the international level. Politics and economics have transcended their traditional disciplinary anchors and their fusion has given rise to numerous theoretical research agendas and empirical analyses. The main topics in contemporary IPE are either specific issue-areas such as international trade, international finance, and (economic) development, or questions of political regulation under the term governance (of the international economy). Examples for specific research areas are the political and institutional determinants of foreign trade policy, the effects of foreign direct investment on domestic political processes and institutions, the amount of economic 'development space' granted by multilateral economic

institutions to developing countries, and the political effects of economic globalization on states.

The conventional view separates the field in three major paradigms: realism/mercantilism, liberalism/pluralism, and Marxist structuralism (Gilpin 1987: 25–64). Yet recent theoretical and empirical developments have superseded these hermetical divisions between the three schools of thought. First, realism and liberalism have converged on many important points. While the debate between neorealism and neoliberalism characterized the theoretical discourse in IPE during the 1980s, it ended with a pragmatic fusion of sorts (Baldwin 1993). Sharing important ontological and epistemological assumptions, realist scholars increasingly embraced the rationalist, 'scientific' methodology derived from neoclassical economics, while liberals came to appreciate the relevance of power and structural anarchy for the analysis of international (economic) co-operation. The result has been the hegemony of a specific metatheoretical approach to IPE in the United States (see below).

Second, while Marxist analyses experienced a significant decline after 1990 vis-à-vis the two other traditional schools of thought, it has undergone a remarkable theoretical diversification. While most textbooks focus on the capitalist world system theory of Immanuel Wallerstein as the main protagonist of this paradigm (Wallerstein 1979), recent contributions in the Marxist literature challenge its overdeterministic, structural analysis of history. More nuanced approaches have

² To be fair, the more historically informed tradition of classical political economy, e.g., Adam Smith, Thorstein Veblen and Karl Polanyi, has long ago challenged the conventional distinction between 'states' and 'markets' (Watson 2005).

emerged that try to 'bring the capitalist state back in' and to transcend the class-based exploitative politics of traditional Marxism. Especially neo-Gramscian scholars have contributed a new theoretical vocabulary and a new empirical focus to study the multiple, often hidden dimensions of exploitation, including the various discursive techniques seen as expressions of power relations (Gill 1993).

A related aspect of the relative decline of Marxist structuralism has been the virtual disappearance of genuine 'Latin American voices' in mainstream IPE. The comparative advantage of Latin American scholars as the originators of the dependency theory dissipated with the end of Cold War and the triumph of neoliberal ideology in economic theory and practice in the developing world. Latin American IPE scholars – a rare specie in any case – have largely shied away from subscribing to the emerging dominance of the liberal-institutionalist paradigm in the United States and have instead pursued a strategy of theoretical eclecticism in their writings (Tickner 2003: 344–5)³. Yet, the lack of diversification in both theoretical approach and research method has limited the visibility and influence of Latin American writers in the contemporary IPE discipline, at least beyond the region itself⁴.

Third, many contemporary IPE scholars do not define themselves as

followers of one of the three paradigms. The main reason is that each school presents a coherent but largely self-contained interpretive framework that focuses on one aspect of the international political economy but neglects many others. A significant amount of IPE students is unwilling to make the trade-off between paradigmatic consistency and engaging the infinite range of processes and actors in IPE. Studying the complexities and inherent contradictions of the international political economy requires leaving behind the "either-or" mentality suggested by the paradigmatic division in the search for (better) explanatory theories⁵.

The U.S. perspective

One defining trend over the last fifteen years in the IPE field has been the growing distance between the United States and (Western) Europe in discursive terms. Liberal or rational institutionalism has established itself as the undisputed metatheoretical orthodoxy in the U.S.. IPE in the United States has so many commonalities with neo-classical economics, both from an epistemological and a methodological point of view, that the latter clearly serves as the 'lead discipline' in U.S. IPE. As a result, a wide range of substantial causal theories have been derived under this common framework for various aspects of the international political

3 However, this eclecticism draws only on a rather limited sample of available IR theories, namely structural dependency theory, Morgenthauian realism, and interdependence theory. Newer theoretical developments such as social constructivism or post-rationalist approaches have yet to be incorporated into contemporary IR/IPE research in Latin America (Tickner 2003: 344).

4 While theoretical homogeneity around dependency theory might have been a formula for success in earlier periods, changing political circumstances as well as internal contradictions have contributed to the relative decline of this research tradition (Velasco 2002).

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economy. The convergence around major ontological, epistemological and methodological issues and problems in U.S. IPE takes the following form.

The majority of U.S. IPE scholars accept the *ontological* premise that human interactions have a material foundation. Actors are essentially driven by material interests, not norms or ideas. As a consequence, depending on the position in the domestic political economy, different actors will pursue different goals, yet all of them with a material substance. The goal-oriented, utility-maximizing behavior of rational, self-interested individuals is the ontological baseline from where substantial theory-building is supposed to start. For example, while domestic economic groups strive for additional wealth, policy-makers are primarily interested in reelection.

The concepts and methodologies of neoclassical economics and especially its inherent methodological individualism constitute the *epistemological* backbone of the IPE mainstream in the U.S.. The strategic choice framework has been particularly influential in tackling research questions in IPE, where individual behavior is aggregated into group behavior (Lake and Powell 1999).

A (neo-)positivist, empiricist research strategy aimed at uncovering causality and empirical regularities with the help of scientific inference reflects the *methodological* core of contemporary IPE in the United States (King et al. 1994). This often comes in form of using quantitative or statistical methods in order to allow for law-like

generalizations and parsimonious theoretical arguments⁶.

Major publications outlets for the IPE mainstream in the U.S. are *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *World Politics*, *the American Political Science Review*, and *the American Journal of Political Science*.

The concept of ‘Open Economy Politics’ (Bates 1997) can be used to illustrate how these metatheoretical foundations have led to the development of an influential analytical framework in recent years. ‘Open Economy Politics’ (OEP) is aimed at the analysis of domestic economic policy-making with reference to the international context. The chain of deductive reasoning is captured in a three-stage process:

Scholars in the OEP tradition begin with firms, sectors, or factors of production as the units of analysis, then derive their interests over economic policy from each unit’s position within the international economy. They also attempt to incorporate the impact of domestic political institutions, conceiving of institutions as mechanisms that condition the bargaining of competing societal interests; and (finally) they introduce interstate bargaining at the international level (Frieden and Lake 2005: 149).

The first step involves deriving material interests of aggregate societal interest groups (firms, sectors, classes) vis-à-vis specific economic policies. Due to their different locations in the

⁶ See Woodruff (2005) for a lucid criticism of the search for universal “laws” and in favor of uncovering context-specific “causal mechanisms” in light of the empirical record.

domestic economy, these groups have different policy preferences resulting in political cleavages, e.g., import-competing vs. export firms and industries. In a second step, these societal interests are aggregated, potentially modified and finally transferred through formal political institutions on the way to ultimate policy choices. Examples for these institutions as the intervening variable between societal interests and policy outcomes are the size of electoral districts, the number of veto points in the political system, and the form of the specific electoral system. The final step in the framework looks at strategic international bargaining and the influence of international institutions over the domestic bargaining structure, e.g., as captured in the well-known two-level game metaphor of Robert Putnam (Putnam 1988).

The primary advantage of having a metatheoretical consensus in the national community of IPE scholars is the possibility of creating cumulative scientific progress within clearly defined boundaries of research. The rigorous empirical testing of theoretical propositions also allows U.S. scholars to contribute to contemporary (international) policy discussions and problems. An often-cited example for this double achievement is the political economy of trade policy. The overarching goal of the flourishing theoretical and empirical studies of trade policy during the last twenty years or so has been to uncover the forces behind the variation in trade protection between and within countries. The crucial theoretical take-off came with the import

of conventional trade models from neoclassical economics into IPE in order to distinguish potential losers and winners from trade liberalization (Frieden and Rogowski 1996). Subsequent analyses then converged around the political impact of organized special interests in the formulation of trade policy, later enriched by institutional economics and mostly applied to the context of U.S. foreign trade policy.

The primary drawback of having a common metatheoretical foundation in U.S. IPE is the effective exclusion of non-positivist or non-rationalist approaches from the mainstream discourse. A partial exception from this exclusionary practice concerns constructivism. While the so-called 'modernist' or 'neo-classical' wing of this relatively new theoretical tradition is given ample representation in mainstream publications, in particular in the premier IPE journal in the United States (International Organization), protagonists of 'radical' or 'critical' constructivism in IR⁷ have been effectively sidelined. Even though modernist constructivists in the U.S. such as Martha Finnemore, Peter Katzenstein, or John Ruggie diverge from the ontological consensus by emphasizing norms and ideas instead of material interests as crucial elements for the study of international (economic) relations, they nonetheless share the epistemological and methodological pillars of the rationalist-positivist mainstream (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). The result is an acclaimed constructivist 'middle ground' between rationalism and inter-

7 See Adler (2002: 97-98) for these categories

pretivism or post-structuralism (Adler 1997), albeit one that has much more commonalities with the former than with the latter.

The conventional justification for the exclusionary politics of U.S. IPE is the charge that non-positivist theories are “unscientific” due to their mostly postmodernist stance. As Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane, and Stephen Krasner, in their review of the U.S. IPE discipline as reflected in the journal *International Organization* (IO), make clear:

IO has been committed to an enterprise that postmodernism denies: the use of evidence to adjudicate between truth claims. In contrast to conventional and critical constructivism, postmodernism falls clearly outside the social science enterprise, and in international relations research it risks becoming self-referential and disengaged from the world, protests to the contrary notwithstanding (Katzenstein et al. 1999: 38).

Yet, denying interpretive, hermeneutic, or post-structuralist approaches visibility and serious, unbiased discussion in mainstream journals as well as university curricula in the U.S. leaves the IPE discipline in a somewhat problematic, parochial state (Breuning et al. 2005; Peterson et al. 2005). Put simply, some relevant topics are not studied and some important questions do not get asked as a result. Where are significant, theoretical contributions by mainstream

U.S. scholars to the informal (international) economy or the ‘dark’ sides of globalization? What about everyday, recurring phenomena which imply that the world is not a rational order driven by a set of universal rules, iron laws, or systemic logic? For example, Foucault’s empirical studies of power and discipline have demonstrated that historical change comes about at least in part through collective agencies that cannot be defined as institutions or classes, but are contingent forms of alliances and identities emergent in discourse. What is ultimately at stake is the ‘opening up’ of IPE in the United States from its economistic and material base to broader questions of history, culture, identity, gender, and the role of language. The European IPE discipline has been significantly more attentive to these kinds of questions and problems.

The European perspective

Instead of an accepted hegemonic approach, the European IPE landscape is characterized by the heterogeneity of theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches (Wæver 1999). Against this background of a ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’ situation, it is not surprising that European scholars have a preference for using the term “Global” rather than “International” Political Economy in order to highlight the multi- or transdisciplinary background as well as the variety of actors and concepts involved in contemporary and historical political economy⁸. In addition, sociology and history rather than neo-classical eco-

⁸ In contrast to the established IPE discipline in the United States, only a few national political science communities in Europe (United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, and Scandinavia) have actually developed a similar identity. In the majority of countries (e.g., France, Spain, and Italy) IPE topics continue to be studied within separate professions such as economics, political science, geography, sociology, business administration, etc.

nomics serve as the primary inspiration for theoretical work in Europe.

Major publication outlets for European IPE research are *Review of International Political Economy*, *Millennium*, *Review of International Studies*, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, *New Political Economy*, and the *European Journal of International Relations*.

Besides an always visible, yet only more recently also influential liberal-rationalist school, contemporary European International Relations in general and IPE in particular have been especially shaped by the Foucauldian, post-structuralist theory and the resurgence of Marxism in form of the neo-Gramscian/transnational class alliance approach⁹. The common characteristics of these self-labeled 'critical'¹⁰ approaches to IPE include a concern for different, not just state or private business actors such as labor or the family as well as broader questions such as the formation of global order and transnational hegemonies. Naturally, not all IPE work in Europe can be described as 'critical' in the above sense. Hence, I am hesitant to label the IPE mainstream in Europe in such a way. Yet, what distinguishes European from U.S. scholars is the primary use of historical and sociological methods of

investigation across all epistemological divisions¹¹.

Post-structuralists challenge rationalist, ostensibly 'scientific' discourses and the traditional mode of explanations of truth and their relationships to (colonial, racist, gender, etc.) hierarchies and exclusionary practices (DerDerian and Shapiro 1989). While post-structuralist empirical work in IPE has been relatively scarce, some scholars see a great potential in applying discursive analysis – the method of choice in post-structuralism – to IPE. They point out that central material structures of capitalism such as money, credit, profit and capital do not exist independently of discursive practices enmeshed in social power relations, which bring these concepts into being in the first place as well as constitute their contested and contingent nature (De Goede 2003).

Neo-Gramscian scholars, on the other hand, maintain the class-based level of analysis of traditional Marxism. The overall aim is to identify coherent historical structures ('historical blocs') – consisting of different patterns of social relations of production, forms of state, and world order – that have existed within the capitalist mode of production (Cox 1987). Classes or in Robert Cox's terminology 'social forces' are the

9 However, there are important differences between national IR/IPE communities in Europe. For example, German IR/IPE scholars tend to be much closer to the U.S. mainstream than, say, British scholars (cf. Wæver 1999; Friedrichs 2004).

10 The 'father' of neo-Gramscian theory in IPE, Robert Cox, emphasizes that theory is always developed in concrete historical contexts and that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Cox 1981: 128). Cox contrasts 'problem-solving theory', which contributes to the maintenance of existing social and power relationships, including their inherent inequalities, within the features identified as constant, with 'critical theory'. The latter, by contrast, "does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and whether they might be in the process of changing" (Cox 1981: 129). For Cox, critical IPE must focus on the historically constituted structures of the international political economy. In particular, critical IPE analyzes how existing world orders emerged and how dominant norms, institutions and practices were established. Historical dialectics provides the tool for critical IPE to understand change and transformation. The ultimate political goal of such an analysis is to serve as a starting-point for the identification of those forces that are able to develop an emancipatory project for a new and more just world order.

11 My thanks to Markus Lederer for this point.

main collective actors engendered by the social relations of production. They operate within and across all spheres of political, economic and social activity. Through the rise of contending social forces, linked to changes in production, mutually reinforcing transformations in forms of state and world order may occur.

Innovative theoretical work in the neo-Gramscian tradition has focused on the emergence of new global disciplinary forms of neoliberal politics. According to Stephen Gill, the notion of 'new constitutionalism' involves the narrowing of the social basis of popular participation within the world order of disciplinary neoliberalism. 'New constitutionalism' results in an attempt to discipline states along a neo-liberal restructuring policy by disseminating the notion of market civilization based on an ideology of capitalist progress and exclusionary or hierarchical patterns of social relations (Gill 1995). Empirical studies in the neo-Gramscian tradition in IPE have, amongst others, analyzed transnational class formations in Europe (Bieler and Morton 2001; van Apeldoorn 2002), the institutionalization of mass production in the United States and its expansion as the basis for American hegemony throughout the world after the Second World War (Rupert 1995) and the global politics of intellectual property rights (Sell 2003) as well as novel phenomena of the contemporary 'globalization age' such as tax havens (Palan 2003) and private bond rating agencies (Sinclair 2005).

What unites these 'critical' scholars from both the post-structuralist and the neo-Gramscian camps is a visceral suspicion about universal vali-

dity claims of rationalist approaches based on methodological individualism. Instead they pursue holistic interpretations of social relations where "there are totalising processes driven by a predominant logic which we call capitalism, and that such totalising processes manifest themselves in all aspects of social life" (Palan 2000: 16). They also have in common a rejection of the positivist assumption that the aim of social science is to identify causal relationships in an objective world. These perspectives neither accept that it is possible to separate the subject from the object, nor to distinguish between normative enquiry on the one hand and empirical scientific research on the other. Instead they search for alternative theories and explanations in the wider range of approaches in the social sciences, e.g., structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, cultural studies, historical sociology, etc. highlighting the specific aspects and actors of IPE that have been deliberately neglected or downplayed by the dominant rationalist-positivist perspective. Methodologically, 'critical' IPE scholars show an inclination for discursive and historical analyses revolving around the notion of power in all its possible forms and expressions and with a focus on different levels of analysis, e.g., transnational class relations, a different conceptual vocabulary (e.g., capitalism, neoliberalism, labor, hegemony, exploitation) and a different epistemological interest (challenging and potentially changing the status quo).

One problem with 'critical' IPE approaches is their inclination for debates about concepts and metatheory rather than substantial, cumulative theory-building. While mainstream IPE scholars perhaps engage in too little

reflection about the metatheoretical foundations of their research, 'critical' scholars sometimes give the impression of an obsession with those questions. In addition, there is rather little dialogue across ontological or epistemological boundaries. Together with the much smaller size of the European IPE community compared with the one in the U.S., the metatheoretical fragmentation has contributed to the lower visibility and impact of the European IPE discipline¹².

Outlook

Given the divergence between developments within the U.S. and the European IPE field, how will the future of the discipline look like over the next five to ten years? For me, three possible scenarios are conceivable.

The first scenario is the perpetuation of the discursive split between the two continents. We will witness an increased homogenization of epistemological, methodological and theoretical approaches in the United States around the rationalist-positivist mainstream, while the 'let a thousand flowers bloom' situation continues in Europe in the absence of a dominant approach. This scenario does not, however, exclude transatlantic dialogues on particular, contentious issues, based on a shared epistemological or theoretical framework. A good example is the contemporary debate on globalization and state. Both U.S. and European scholars have made important theoretical and empirical contributions to the debate from a rationalist-positivist

standpoint¹³. On the other hand, neo-Gramscian analyses have already bridged the transatlantic divide. In fact, its 'founder', Robert Cox, is a Canadian scholar. Important theoretical and empirical contributions in this research tradition have been equally provided by European-based as well as American – U.S. and even more so Canadian – scholars.

The second scenario implies that the rationalist-positivist hegemony reaches Europe and, in turn, establishes a truly global IPE discipline defined by common standards of empirical research and a limited amount of accepted theoretical approaches. The 'International Political Economy Society' (IPES), whose inaugural meeting will be held in November 2006, could serve as the appropriate vehicle for this endeavor¹⁴.

The third scenario suggests an extension of the 'perestroika' movement in U.S. political science (Monroe 2005) beyond the focus on methodological pluralism and diversity to push for a more complete representation of the epistemological universe in the social sciences in both IPE journals and relevant undergraduate and graduate courses in the United States. As of now, Marxian political economy, neo-Gramscian theory, historical sociology, the evolutionary institutionalism of Karl Polanyi as well as the whole range of non-rationalist or post-structuralist approaches are given short shrift in U.S. IPE. This scenario thus envisions an equal footing of these approaches in teaching and writing

¹²My thanks to Andreas Nölke for this point.

¹³See Keohane/Milner 1996 and Garrett 1998 for U.S. and Hall/Soskice 2001 for European contributions, respectively

¹⁴For details on the IPES, see the homepage at <http://polisci.ucsd.edu/ipes>.

with the extant rationalist-positivist mainstream. In essence, it would be an emulation of the European situation, yet with the important difference that rationalism or positivism never constituted the mainstream on the 'old continent'.

Which, if any, of these three scenarios will actually materialize is up in the air. The spaces to watch are two-fold: first, the overall development of the global economic discourse. Will there be any significant movements away from the normative pillars of economic liberalism in economic theory and economic practice, especially in the developed core countries?

Second, as a result of external and inner-disciplinary processes, will there be a redistribution of epistemological and theoretical approaches in the leading journals on both sides of the Atlantic? Stay tuned!

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