

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #9

ROBERT KEOHANE ON INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEED FOR INNOVATION IN THE FIELD

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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ROBERT KEOHANE ON INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEED FOR INNOVATION IN THE FIELD



Theory Talks proudly presents a *Talk* with Robert O. Keohane, probably the most influential scholar in International Relations since the seventies. While he is especially known for his work on the puzzle of realism vs. cooperation, he has made influential contributions to a big number of debates in the field of international relations. In this comprehensive *Talk*, Keohane explains amongst others how information affects power, how it is to be a theorist working on policy issues and discusses the nature of institutions.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge/principal debate in current IR and what is your position on this challenge/debate?

Like [Alex Wendt](#), I am hesitant to name a specific debate, and I also think that the rationalist-constructivist debate is not only old but mostly false. A coherent approach to the study of world politics must take into account rationalist, institutionalist, liberal domestic politics, and constructivist insights. The trick is how to synthesize these ways of looking at the world in a coherent way, not to run some sort of phony competition among them. Alex and I and John Mearsheimer were on a panel at the American Political Science Association in 2007 at which we all agreed on this point. So addressing the “isms debate” is *not* the answer.

By the way, I much prefer “world politics” to “international relations,” since transnational and transgovernmental relations are, in my view, increasingly important; and because so much that is important for world politics takes place domestically, in interaction with what happens elsewhere in the world. “Globalization” is a much broader phenomenon than “international relations” defined as relations among states.

I think that the challenges of change in the world are much richer than the current debates in IR. For the first time in modern history, large and formerly poor countries are undergoing rapid economic development that will inevitably enhance their political power: think of China, India, and Brazil. How will these changes reshape multilateral institutions, the world political economy, and interstate relations? To take another topic, we struggled in the 1970s to understand the implications of changes in the demand-supply relationships in the oil market. Now we face even more rapidly rising prices, but there has been little political analysis of their implications. If I had to choose a purely conceptual and theoretical topic, however, I would agree with my close friend and collaborator [Joe Nye](#) and focus on how information affects power. My perspective on this issue stems from Hannah Arendt’s definition of power as “the ability to act in common.” Historically, such communication has been very difficult except through formal organizations, including the state, and all but impossible across state boundaries except with the aid of states. This formerly constant reality has been changing with incredible speed during the last two

decades, but we have hardly begun to understand the implications of this momentous fact. One implication may be that collective action on a global scale, for good or ill, is easier than it has ever been before. In this sense, there is *more power* in the system than in the past.

I am now working on policy issues for the first time in my life. In particular, I am trying to understand how multilateral institutions could be designed to be more effective. I have studied multilateral institutions for most of my career, and I think I have a pretty good idea of why states establish them and how effective, or ineffective, they are. But we do not have very precise explanations of effectiveness and, partly as a result, we cannot say enough that is sensible about how they should be designed, or not designed. I am trying to make some progress on that issue.

With respect to advice for graduate students, I agree entirely with Alex Wendt, when he says: “The most important thing to do, and maybe the hardest, is first to tell us something we don’t already know, and secondly to tell us something that makes people think about the world differently” (otherwise, what’s the point?) In my view all of us in this field are trying to do this every day. It is hard work, and most of us do not succeed most of the time; but it is meaningful and important work.

How did you arrive at your current ideas on how the world works?

Does one ever “arrive?” I think this is instead a continuous journey. I believe with Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos that science is propelled by anomalies – things that happen that *don’t* fit our pre-existing theories and ideas. Lakatos says that science proceeds “on a sea of anomalies.” And in our field, anomalies keep proliferating, probably faster than answers.

I wrote my Ph.D thesis on politics in the UN General Assembly, because I wanted to understand how effective influence differed from the nominal one-state-one-vote rules. Then, along with Joe Nye, I sought to understand what was political about the international economic relations of the late 1960s and early 1970s – which did not seem to fit either straight economic logic or the “high politics” political science of that day. Nye and I particularly sought to understand how power was related to asymmetrical interdependence, and how international regimes (a term first brought to the field by John Ruggie) operate.

Shortly after publishing *Power and Interdependence* with Nye, I started to think about the puzzle of institutionalized cooperation: if states are, as prevailing theory emphasized, so concerned to maintain their autonomy, why do they establish international regimes? The answer I eventually came to was to show how even rational and egoistical states could find it in their interest to join multilateral institutions, insofar as those institutions reduced the costs of making and enforcing agreements and therefore facilitated cooperation that was beneficial to the society and to its political leadership. This is the essential argument of *After Hegemony*, published in 1984. But if you look at chapter 7, you will see that I only accepted the rational premises conditionally, as a way of showing that even on these assumptions institutionalized cooperation could be explained. Bounded rationality and even empathy may also be part of the story. These two research projects did construct two basic premises of my view on how the world works: economics and politics profoundly affect one another through the relationship between interdependence and power; and institutions are both generated by state strategies and have impacts on those strategies.

In the 1990s I became increasingly interested in the role of ideas – what the constructivists emphasize as the “social construction of reality.” Judith Goldstein and I edited a book on *Ideas*

and Foreign Policy in 1993, which emphasized the close connections among interests, institutions, and ideas. These are not opposite but rather complementary ways of looking at the world. As Max Weber said, ideas are like “switchmen,” that determine “the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.” We looked at ideas as “road maps, focal points, and glue” and at how ideas become institutionalized. The insights from this volume made me very skeptical of sheer materialism – of which there is still a great deal in the international political economy field – and intent on synthesizing ideas and material interests.

From the study of ideas it is a short step to normative theory: if ideas matter, maybe changing our ideas about what should be done is a worthwhile endeavor. In a sense, this is a move back to my first love, political theory. I studied political theory most avidly in graduate school, with Judith Sklar, and I married a political theorist, Nannerl Overholser Keohane. What I regard as some of my best work in the last decade is essentially political theory: my presidential address to the American Political Science Association, which is reprinted in my 2002 book, *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*; my 2005 article in the *American Political Science Review* with Ruth W. Grant on accountability and abuses of power in world politics; and a forthcoming paper in *International Organization* with Stephen Macedo and Andrew Moravcsik, “Democracy-Enhancing Multilateralism.”

That’s where I am on my journey. V. S. Naipaul writes of the “Enigma of Arrival.” I suppose for me it is the journey that is full of anomalies, and perhaps an enigma itself.

What would a student need to become an IR theorist like yourself?

Again, Alex Wendt puts it so well that all I need to do is to refer readers to [his answer](#) to this question on this website.

Do you think it is possible for a theorist who has conceived a “big idea” to change his stripes?

Sociologically and psychologically, it would be too much to expect a theorist to renounce a view that he or she had considered seriously over a period of years and come to after much reflection. Scientists become invested in their ideas; this is why Kuhn emphasizes the need for new generations. I do think that progress is largely made by graduate students “voting with their feet” – going where the interesting new problems are. However, I think it is possible for theorists to engage in continuous growth. The best way to do this is, as Alex Wendt says, to move onto to new problems. The reason that I worked with Peter Katzenstein to produce *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* is that I thought I would get stale if I continued to work on institutions, and I wanted to try out a set of arguments that focused more on the individual level, drawing on social psychology, and that took a more constructivist orientation – since it is difficult to understand attitudes, or prejudices, simply on the basis of a rationalist set of premises. I am working now on normative issues, and on policy, partly because they are new to me and I think perhaps I can avoid simply repeating myself. But I suppose that if, as Mark Twain said, history “rhymes,” my choices of topic probably rhyme as well.

You have said that institutions help states keep their promises but they also help to legitimize action. Which prevails?

Neither prevails: it is not a question of either/or. Institutions do both things. They also reflect power realities, institutionalize distributional equalities, tend to freeze the status quo, generate distinctive symbolism, and create bureaucracies with standard operating procedures and some power base of their own. A key to understanding institutions is to see how power and legitimacy concerns interact: they are in tension, but both are necessary. Any genuine understanding of institutions needs to be multidimensional.

In Spain, academics argue that no international institution can overrule powerful states if the states don't want them to. Is that still true in the 21st century?

If the question is put that way, the answer is surely "yes." But I think that this is an uninteresting way to frame the important issues. The more important question is whether, and how, institutions change state strategies. Multilateral institutions are constructed by states and maintained by states, and are weak relative to states. They do not overrule powerful states – and rarely if ever try to do so. But they can change how states act.

You have written about qualitative research methods, and how qualitative and quantitative investigation should be guided by a shared use of the method of inference. Does that make you a method-driven scientist and how would you reply to Wendt ([Theory Talk #3](#)) who asserts that method-driven science leads to the exclusion of interesting questions?

Anyone who looks at my career can recognize that I am not a method-driven scientist. My work is driven by interesting changes in the world and the puzzles, or anomalies, that they generate. I co-authored *Designing Social Inquiry* because I wanted to understand, and then help explain, how we could do more scientific research on important problems – precisely to avoid a dilemma of either working on important problems or working scientifically. So I conclude this "Talk" where I began, in agreement with my friend Alex Wendt.

Robert O. Keohane is Professor of International Affairs, Princeton University. He is the author of *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (1984) and *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World* (2002). He is co-author (with Joseph S. Nye, Jr.) of *Power and Interdependence* (third edition 2001), and (with Gary King and Sidney Verba) of *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994). He has served as the editor of the journal *International Organization* and president of the International Studies Association and the American Political Science Association. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences.

Related links

- [Robert Keohane's faculty profile at Princeton](#)
- [The American Political Science Association \(APSA\) Homepage](#)
- Watch the Conversations With History 2004 interview with Keohane [here](#) (realplayer)
- Read Keohane's article *The Globalization of Informal Violence* (2002) [here](#)
- Read Keohane & Nye's article *The Club Model of Multilateral Cooperation and the World Trade Organization* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Keohane's 2006 article *The Contingent Legitimacy of Multilateralism* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Keohane & Martin's 1995 article *The Promise of Institutional Theory* [here](#) (pdf)