International relations’ first great debate: Context and tradition

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Abstract

According to International Relations (IR) orthodoxy, the story of three Great Debates accounts for the most important theoretical developments in the discipline. Over the last decade, critical historiographers have established that the story of a First Debate, which tells of a struggle between idealism and realism between the 1920s and 1940s, is a misleading caricature of early academic international thought. This article adds to this critical literature by tracing the manner in which the story of a First Debate became a part of disciplinary orthodoxy between the 1950s and 1980s. Our analysis reveals that a myth of a First Debate was produced when more recent scholars detached the concept of a struggle between idealism and realism from both the unique historical milieu in which this dichotomy was conceived, and the rhetorical purposes for which it was employed. We use these findings to make the case for a contextual approach to disciplinary historiography, and to illuminate the historical contingency of contemporary notions of scholarly purpose in IR.
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DARSHAN VIGNESWARAN¹ AND JOEL QUIRK²

INTRODUCTION
The academic analysis of international relations (IR) has been characterised by a wide range of shifts, contests, dialogues and discoveries. Over the last two decades a popular way of accounting for this matrix of intellectual development has been the notion that the field has evolved through a chronological sequence of Great Debates. The three ‘stories’³ that comprise the Great Debate narrative each describe seminal periods of intellectual change by outlining the manner in which an entrenched orthodoxy was challenged by the rise of a new scholarly approach. In recent years a number of scholars have challenged the veracity of the first contest in this debating sequence. The First Debate tells a story about the history of international thought in the 1920s and 1930s when a homogeneous category of nameless idealists engaged in an intellectual struggle with a new generation of realists. In this article we move beyond existing critiques of a First Debate by exploring the manner in which the story became part of disciplinary orthodoxy. We contend that IR theorists have collectively substantiated misleading images of historical development in international thought by incorrectly incorporating the interwar years into a developing tradition of internal debating.

Our interest in this topic was originally sparked by the observation that prominent misconceptions of the history of international thought have

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³ For the most part we will refer to the historical account of the First Debate as a ‘story’ or ‘narrative’, our use of the pejorative term ‘myth’ will be limited to those instances when we intend to indicate the misleading characteristics of the concept.
persisted *despite* the existence of a substantial body of historiographical work in the discipline. IR has a rich literature in the history of ideas that offers a diverse range of concepts and classificatory schemes with which to interrogate past work. Most important aspects of the discipline’s history have been subject to some form of critical analysis. Yet misleading or mythical notions of the discipline’s history persist. We were particularly perturbed to discover that the ‘First Debate’ concept has been repeatedly used as an image of past IR scholarship with little more than a cursory reference to the work that the story purports to explain, and despite its blatant contravention of a substantial body of critical literature dating back to the 1950s. We hope that our investigation into the practice of myth-making will both illuminate the manner in which IR scholars have indirectly contorted history in the service of their present rhetorical intents, and reveal how a contextual approach can help us to avoid such mistakes.

This article is organised into four sections. In the first section we summarise recent critical scholarship on the First Debate. This review suggests that existing work has yet to analyse the way in which this story was incorporated into disciplinary orthodoxy over the last fifty years. The second and third sections aim to fill this gap by outlining the manner in which an invented fiction became accepted truth. The second section traces the construction of the story of a First Debate in IR works published between the late 1930s and early 1950s. The third section considers the retrospective commentary on this literature. We argue that while early post-war scholars were responsible for the invention of a realist/idealist dichotomy, more recent scholarship is to blame for the ‘myth’ of a First Debate. The myth of a First Debate was engendered when various scholars sought to portray the intellectual past as an analogue of more recent developments in IR theory and in so doing, casually applied a new chronology to the idealism/realism contention. In the fourth section we use these findings to advocate a contextualist approach to the history of ideas. We argue that the myth of a First Debate was developed by scholars who perfunctorily used a story about the past to ‘contextualise’ later intellectual developments. This strange glitch in the collective understanding of the history of ideas could have been avoided if IR theorists had been more attentive to the fact that the texts that the story of a First Debate refers to are embedded in a specific sequence of historical events. Finally, we conclude
with some further observations about the limitations of historiographical knowledge in contemporary IR.

**THE MYTH OF A FIRST DEBATE: RECENT CRITICAL APPRAISALS**

The story of a First Debate presents the triumph of the realist school over the interwar idealists as a catalytic turning point in the history of a nascent discipline. Providing a detailed account of the key constitutive ideas of the story of a First Debate is a problematic exercise because it has never assumed the form of a thoroughly researched, and formally presented argument about ideational change. The concept of a ‘First Debate’ is not a detailed historical narrative that can be traced to a single authoritative source, or group of sources, but rather an ‘anecdote’ that has been briefly recounted by a wide variety of authors. Despite these problems, we can still identify three contentions about the history of ideas that feature in most accounts of this narrative. Scholars recounting the story of a First Debate have usually discussed a) an idealist orthodoxy in international thought during the interwar years which b) was challenged and defeated by a new school of realist thinkers c) during or around the years leading up to and including, the Second World War. Sections two and three will explain how this story was incorporated into disciplinary orthodoxy. For the moment, we will focus on explaining how our account builds upon existing critical scholarship dealing with this historical claim.

Over the last decade a number of authors have problematised various elements of the story of a First Debate. These critics have collectively

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substantiated three interrelated, but nevertheless distinguishable, problems with disciplinary orthodoxy. They have argued that the story (1) sustains misleading conceptions of the past, which reflects (2) a retrospectively constructed tradition that in turn (3) disciplines contemporary scholarship. Before we outline these points in detail, it is important to account for why we have adopted a specific interest in the notion of a ‘First Debate’ in this piece, yet neglected some important related issues. Most critical scholarship takes issue with the concept of a ‘First Debate’ at the same time as it problematises a dominant scheme for understanding the major phases of academic international thought, according to which interwar scholarship is labelled idealist and post-war scholarship, realist. While we acknowledge the importance of, on the one hand, challenging existing schemes for understanding the evolution of the IR discourse, and on the other, providing new narratives for the early period of intellectual development, in this work we take an exclusive concern with the First Debate as an empirical claim about the discipline’s past, and consider questions about the appropriate interpretation of the various phases of intellectual history only insofar as they impinge on this primary issue. This exclusive concern is a product of our own unique disciplinary bias. We sit within a critical theoretical tradition, and are specifically interested with investigations that open up the purposive dimension of scholarship to discussion and debate. We have


In most of these works the idea that realist and idealist schools faced off in a heated intellectual exchange prior to the Second World War is not distinguished from the theory of phases in IR. Smith and Schmidt distinguish between the two claims but then treat them as part of the same flawed mythical understanding about the discipline. Schmidt, *The political discourse of anarchy*, pp. 22–3; Smith, ‘The self-images of a discipline’, pp. 13–14. It is important to recognise that each of these concepts constitute very different types of historical claims. Whereas claims about a First Great Debate hypothesise the occurrence of a specific ‘event’ in the history of international thought, the periodisation argument posits that a certain form of thinking, whether it be a paradigm or school, is an appropriate way of characterising a discrete compartment of time. The latter claim refers to the entirety of work in the discipline, and therefore has a much higher burden of proof. It also feeds into more general questions about the propriety of intellectual periodisation and the theories of intellectual progress or development that we use to delineate periodic differences. For an attempt to reconstitute the paradigmatic shift occurring during this period see Andreas Osiander, ‘Rereading early twentieth-century IR theory: Idealism revisited’, *International Studies Quarterly* 42(3) 1998.
focused on the story of a First Debate because it illuminates the historicity of contemporary notions of appropriate scholarly purpose.\(^6\)

The first point of critique raised by recent historiography relates to the accuracy of the story of a First Debate. Peter Wilson was the first to develop a detailed version of this line of argument. His main critical contentions were that an idealist/utopian ‘school’ never existed, a ‘debate’ never occurred, and realism did not emerge from this period victorious. According to Wilson, the ‘idealist/utopian’ label is better understood as a construct developed by E. H. Carr for the purpose of polemic.\(^7\) Carr used the term ‘utopian’ to refer to a broad category of thinkers that stretched so wide as to be untenable as a school of like-minded scholars.\(^8\) Unsurprisingly, none of Carr’s contemporaries accepted the label of ‘utopian’ thinker. Perhaps more importantly, Carr himself was not decisive regarding the relative merits of realism and utopianism.\(^9\) He presented international thought as a dialectic in which elements of, and an equilibrium between, both realism and utopianism were necessary for successful policy. While Wilson documented a number of critical responses to Carr’s work, he also noted that Carr never

\(^6\) Gerard Holden has recently argued that all scholars who engage in the exercise of (re)interpreting their intellectual past must be explicit regarding the origin and limitations of their own perspective. His work also outlines the purposive dimension of the critical tradition in IR. Gerard Holden, ‘Who contextualizes the contextualizers? Disciplinary history and the discourse about IR discourse’, *Review of International Studies* 28(2) 2002. A range of work within a broad critical–theoretical tradition has interrogated the purposive nature of critical theory. Andrew Linklater has offered a version of this work that sustains an independent role for normative reflection while Christian Heine and Benno Teschke have argued in favour of a materialist notion of purpose. Christian Heine and Benno Teschke, ‘On dialectic and international relations: A reply to our critics’, *Millennium* 26(2) 1997; Christian Heine and Benno Teschke, ‘Sleeping Beauty and the dialectical awakening: On the potential of dialectic for international relations’, *Millennium* 25(2) 1996; Andrew Linklater, ‘The problem of community in international relations’, *Alternatives* 15(2) 1990; Andrew Linklater, ‘The question of the next stage in international relations theory: A critical–theoretical point of view’, *Millennium* 21(1) 1992; Andrew Linklater, *The transformation of political community: Ethical foundations of the post-Westphalian era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

\(^7\) Wilson, ‘The myth of the “first great debate”’, pp. 10–12.

\(^8\) Peter Wilson and David Long’s edited volume provides texture and meaning to the work of interwar idealists. Their work offers an impressive collection of essays devoted to recovering the ideas of this group of scholars that have so often been casually dismissed. David Long and Peter Wilson, eds, *Thinkers of the twenty years’ crisis: Inter-war idealism reassessed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

\(^9\) See Booth, ‘Security in anarchy’.
issued a rejoinder to these critiques.\textsuperscript{10} Although he appears to have used these criticisms in his subsequent work, there was never any major interlocutory ‘debate’. Finally, while Carr’s targets regarded their assailant as a scholar of great merit, and his book \textit{The twenty years’ crisis}\textsuperscript{11} as a significant work, they appear to have been unperturbed by his realist ‘onslaught’.\textsuperscript{12} Carr’s critique did not dishearten a group of scholars, convince them of a new way forward, or make them pack up and go home.

The concept of a ‘First Debate’ is best regarded as a ‘half-truth’, rather than a complete fiction.\textsuperscript{13} Wilson labelled the First Debate a ‘myth’ because his research exploded the popular notion that an argument between realist and idealist schools had dominated international thought in the interwar years. However, even as Wilson emphasised the flaws in this story he also, somewhat paradoxically, helped to establish the First Debate as a \textit{partially} valid tale. His work proved that \textit{The twenty years’ crisis} had indeed sparked a controversy, and had also led to a volley of responses from some of the scholars that he had associated (albeit inappropriately) with utopian thought. Since none of the scholars who have endorsed the story of a First Debate have provided any detailed research to support it, Wilson’s work provided the strongest case to date for considering the First Debate to be a valid account of past work in the discipline.

Lucian Ashworth has recently expanded upon the notion of the First Debate as a partial truth. While his work reiterated Wilson’s argument that the association between the First Debate and the interwar years is highly inappropriate, he also identified the two separate points at which a contention between realism and idealism could be said to have existed in the interwar years, and conceded that a controversy vaguely replicating the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Edward Hallett Carr, \textit{The twenty years’ crisis, 1919–1939: An introduction to the study of international relations} (London: Macmillan, 1939).
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Schmidt notes that the post-war generation of scholars identifying themselves as realists continued to share a great deal with scholarship of the interwar years. Schmidt, \textit{The political discourse of anarchy}, chapter 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Booth advanced the notion of considering the debate a half-truth in his discussion of a particularly famous, albeit unpublished, episode of the ‘First Debate’, that is, the Carr versus David Davies dispute at Aberystwyth. Booth, ‘75 years on’, p. 328.
\end{itemize}
realist/idealist divide occurred ‘within’ the realist camp in the post-Second World War era.\textsuperscript{14} Given this conditional acceptance of the concept of a realist/idealist controversy, we contend that the story ought to be regarded as mythical in the sense that it refers to a real set of academic events and texts while both exaggerating the usefulness of the realist/idealist dichotomy as a classificatory device for intellectual history, and misrepresenting the chronology of the events that it purports to explain. In our work we build upon this notion of the First Debate as a ‘half-truth’ and identify the way in which historical errors have been incorporated into disciplinary orthodoxy.

The second critique is that the First Debate is not an accurate account of the tradition of IR. Ole Wæver claimed that the story was produced via the post hoc self congratulatory ruminations of realists when they came to dominate the discipline of IR in the post-war era.\textsuperscript{15} The works of Ashworth and Cameron Thies have fleshed out this claim, and explored the way post-war scholars constructed the idea of a debate in service of their own interests.\textsuperscript{16} Thies’ work, in turn, relied upon an earlier critique by Brian Schmidt which distinguished between two types of tradition, ‘historical’ and ‘analytical’.\textsuperscript{17} According to Schmidt, an ‘analytical’ tradition is a retroactively developed concept that is imposed upon the past by individuals who are primarily concerned with contemporary issues. This form of tradition ‘is an intellectual construction in which a scholar may stipulate certain ideas, themes, genres, or texts as functionally similar. It is, most essentially, a retrospectively created construct determined by present criteria and concerns’\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast, an ‘historical’ tradition accords with the common sense understanding of the term, as a cultural phenomenon that is handed down

\textsuperscript{14} Ashworth, ‘Did the realist–idealist great debate really happen?’
\textsuperscript{16} Ashworth, ‘Did the realist–idealist great debate really happen?’; Thies, ‘Progress, history and identity in international relations theory’.
\textsuperscript{18} Schmidt, \textit{The political discourse of anarchy}, p. 25.
from one generation to the next. This form of tradition may be defined as ‘… a preconstituted and self constituted pattern of conventional practice through which ideas are conveyed within a recognizably established and specified discursive framework’. One of the most significant problems with knowledge of the history of ideas in contemporary IR is that we tend to confuse analytical traditions like the story of a First Debate, with the historical traditions that we inherit. Schmidt’s argument rests on the claim that IR scholarship is constituted by an enduring set of conventional practices and ideas that can be defined and accurately characterised. His work took up the task of detecting and narrating the history of the American tradition of IR during the years that the story of a First Debate puports to explain.

The third challenge to the story of a First Debate has been directed at its disciplining role in IR discourse over subsequent years. Critical scholars have made note of the way in which the story has shaped the actions and outlooks of subsequent generations of IR scholars. Steve Smith contended that the idea of a sequence of Great Debates has helped to validate new orthodoxies by awarding ‘a winner’s medal to the dominant voice’. Wæver concurred with this characterisation, briefly noting that the accep-
tance of the notion of a First Debate has meant that ‘[p]ositions critical of realism could be dismissed as reincarnations of interwar idealism’. Wilson has provided the most detailed version of this critique. According to his work, the scholarship of the interwar years can be best characterised in terms of a distinctive linkage between scholarship and progress: ‘... if there is anything which binds these views and beliefs together into what remotely might be called a paradigm or a school of thought it is the assumption that

19 Ibid.
20 Booth contended that this set of half-truths had helped to ‘discipline the discipline’. Booth, ‘75 years on’, p. 328.
21 Although there is ultimately no way in which one can gauge the ‘degree’ to which contemporary scholars believe in this story, the critics all assert or imply that acceptance of this concept is widespread. Ashworth has offered the strongest version of this claim: ‘[i]n the history of international relations, no single idea has been more influential than the notion that there was a “great debate” in the 1920s and 1930s’. Ashworth, ‘Did the realist–idealist great debate really happen?’, p. 33.
conscious, progressive change is possible in international relations’. In this reading, the myth effectively taboos progressive approaches by linking them with idealism, a school that has been widely associated with various forms of ‘woolly’ thought:

... because of the loaded nature of the terms ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’, purposeful, progressive change automatically becomes associated with unworldliness, impracticality, and untruth (and fatalism, international stasis, human impotence, with worldliness, practicality, and truth).

Hence, the myth is not only responsible for the ossification of two major traditions of international thought, it should also take some of the blame for the paucity of progressive scholarship in the discipline.

Wilson’s critical point is suggestive of, but does not adequately flesh out, an important argument about the role of a First Debate in the construction of disciplinary orthodoxy. It suggests that the form of the story has changed over time. Somewhere along the way, the analytical construct that had been developed to categorise past work and legitimate more recent literature, has been transformed into a core feature of disciplinary orthodoxy, that is, a set of practices, concepts and beliefs handed down from one generation to the next. One way of expressing this would be to say that while this story may have begun as what Schmidt identified as an analytical tradition, it is now a core component of our inherited, historical tradition. Unfortunately, Schmidt himself is reluctant to acknowledge that such a transition has occurred.

Wilson, ‘The myth of the “first great debate”’, p. 9.
Ibid., p. 10.
Wæver makes note of this dual role of the concept but treats it as a consistent feature of historical images rather than a process of historical change:

[f]he ‘debates’ operate as a dialectic between implicit pictures and articulate self-representations of the discipline. In part, they are implicit operators in (and thereby shape) actual academic practice, in part they are constructed and artificially imposed upon much more diverse activities. In the second capacity they are selective readings amplifying the elements that fit into their story. But in the first, they are distinctions involved in the work of the discipline (and thus real and effective) (Wæver, ‘Figures of international thought’, p. 9).

Wæver made note of this shortfall in Schmidt’s work: ‘… he does not explore why and with what effects this myth has been established and thus misses how it has become socially real, even if it is historically false’. Wæver, ‘The sociology of a not so international discipline’, p. 692.
maintains that the First Debate is an analytical construct, and that it is an error to confuse it with our inherited conventions.28

In his more recent article Thies presents an account of the transition from analytical construct to historical tradition. He argued that post-war realists were responsible for contorting interwar scholarship into the imaginary school that we now recognise as idealism, and for presenting this artifice as the antithesis of a unified realist school. Realists abstracted ‘world federalism’ and the ‘anarchy/sovereignty’ dichotomy from the many strands of academic international thought during the interwar years, and inappropriately presented these themes as the defining interests of two contraposed traditions of IR scholarship, idealism and realism. According to Thies, they did so in order to establish their paradigm as dominant, and to represent it as progressive.29 Thies also suggests that this move was made in two stages, by two different groups of early realists: utopian realists and modern realists.30 Both groups are implicated in the process of constructing the First Debate, and in the final analysis both acknowledge that power politics is the definitive principle of the ‘real’ in international relations. However, they differ in the extent to which they utilise idealist thinking in their own work. Carr, John Herz and Quincy Wright are counted amongst the utopian realists for their recognition of the place of an idealism alongside realism in international relations theory.31 The early signs of a less conciliatory, modern realism are said to be found in the works of Hans Morgenthau, William Fox and Arnold Wolfers who heap scorn upon a hypothetical idealist paradigm.32

28 Schmidt holds this line despite the fact that he considers belief in the ‘First Debate’ concept to be the most common assumption in IR historiography:

[...]there is no more commonly accepted assumption about the history of academic international relations than that the field experienced an intellectual controversy in the late 1930s and early 1940s that pitted the scholars of the interwar period and their predecessors against a distinctively new group of scholars who were conspicuous by their advocacy of a ‘realist’ approach … The controversy between the ‘idealists’ and the ‘realists’ has been accepted as marking the field’s first ‘great debate’ (Schmidt, *The political discourse of anarchy*, p. 191).

30 Ibid., p. 162.
31 Ibid., pp. 162–5.
32 Ibid., pp. 165–7.
Thies used these findings to dispute Wilson’s claim that the First Debate is responsible for a paucity of progressive work in the discipline. While the First Debate has had a defining impact upon the broader IR discipline, post-war realists were ultimately unsuccessful in their disciplinary agenda, because they made serious historical errors, particularly with regard to the notion of a unified idealist interwar paradigm. Hence, shades of an idealist/realist debate continue to resurface in the discipline. Thies argued that the persistence of unacknowledged goals in realist theory, and the recurrence of the tensions between idealism and realism in the neorealist–neoliberal debate was evidence of the failure of the First Debate concept to garner acceptance for the modern realist version of the past.

Thies is yet to fully substantiate his argument because his analysis of the development of the First Debate concept remains somewhat incomplete. Having identified early signs of a modern realist identity in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he concluded his study of this construct. Our findings suggest a set of conclusions that differ from those of both Wilson and Thies. First, while our analysis concurs with Wilson’s claim that the First Debate has been partially responsible for the paucity of progressive work in the discipline, we do not believe that this was the result of the mistaken branding of interwar scholarship as idealist. Instead, we contend that the tendency of more recent authors to ignore or misconstrue the connection between contextual factors and theory in their historical accounts has shut them off from the public policy component of IR scholarship produced in the years surrounding the Second World War. Second, while we agree with Thies’ argument that post-war scholars were largely responsible for constructing the debating concept, we disagree with his decision to discuss the perpetuation and reconstruction of this myth purely in terms of the preservation of a realist paradigm. Our argument emphasises the use of this myth in the construction of a unique disciplinary identity based upon the notion of an intra-disciplinary academic purpose.

33 Ibid., p. 173.
34 Ibid., p. 170.
35 Thies acknowledged that ‘[a] more careful examination of the writings of modern realists with regard to “idealism” is an area of future research that should eventually flesh out this argument’. Ibid., p. 174. We take this as grounds to believe that he is currently working on a more detailed account of the role of the First Debate in the construction of realist identity.
Our diagnostic account of the construction of the ‘First Debate’ also suggests a remedy for the problems associated with the construction of analytical traditions in the field. Existing critical scholarship has tended to respond to these issues with an inherent scepticism for dominant narratives, and have reacted by making the elaboration of accurate historiographical accounts an empirical imperative of their work. This position is epitomised by both Schmidt and Thies, who seek to overcome particular flaws in contemporary understanding through detailed analysis of past texts. Their accounts, and other attempts to rewrite the disciplinary conversations that have constituted IR discourse, have provided scholars with new ways of understanding their intellectual history. However, what is lacking in many of these approaches is a methodological imperative to incorporate contextual factors into historiographical analysis. This is a side of interpretive method that scholars like Schmidt and Thies, who adopt an ‘internal’ discursive method of analysis avoid at their peril. As we suggested earlier, the main flaw with the contemporary representations of the realist/idealist ‘debate’ is the inappropriate chronology that has been attached to this axis of discussion. Yet, Thies’ attempt to explain the development of the concept of a First Debate using an exclusively internal method, also lacks a clear chronology. As a result, his argument about the transition between utopian

36 Holden has argued that ‘internal’ historians have misinterpreted the significance of Quentin Skinner’s contextualist methodology. Holden, ‘Who contextualizes the contextualizers?’ For good examples of Skinner’s methodological arguments see James Tully, ed., Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). For a good example of Skinner’s use of this method in an empirical project see Quentin Skinner, The foundations of modern political thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Thies does not explicitly exclude the merits of a contextualist approach. He only eschews the need to employ one with the somewhat obtuse claim that context both ‘mutes’ and ‘amplifies’ internal factors. He also argues against the significance of context in his conclusion by contending that ‘the argument that contextual factors completely determine interdisciplinary conceptual and theoretical shifts seems weak’. Thies, ‘Progress, history and identity in international relations theory’, p. 171. As Holden has already shown, such claims about causality do not challenge the validity of Skinner’s contextual method.

37 At one point in his argument Thies appears to excuse himself from the need to obey the constraints of chronology by arguing that time itself is a social construct. He uses John Gerard Ruggie’s work on the concept of ‘social time’ to sanction this particular approach. As Stephen Krasner’s critique of Ruggie’s attempts to periodise the modern state system make clear, Ruggie’s elastic notions of social time have been connected to some debatable contentions about the history of ideas. Stephen D. Krasner, ‘Westphalia and all that’, in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds, Ideas and foreign policy: Beliefs, institutions, and political change (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); John Gerard Ruggie, ‘Social time and environmental policy: Conceptualizing global population and resource issues’, in Margaret P. Karns, ed., Persistent patterns and emergent structures in a waning century (New York:
realism and modern realism loses much of its historical weight. For example, Thies presents Wright as the primary ‘precursor’ to modern realism, despite the fact that this work was published several years after the only example of modern realism that Thies identified. Hence, it is difficult to see how utopian realism can be an historical precursor of any realist identity-making project. The other main flaw that existing critics have identified with respect to the First Debate is that it is a jaundiced perspective on history. Thies’ work also remains open to this same problem. Most of the authors responsible for developing the notion of an idealist/realist divide in the post-war era discussed this concept as a classificatory scheme for understanding contemporary events. Yet Thies’ account of the use of the idealist/realist dichotomy in the post-Second World War era argues that these works are primarily focused on the retroactive construction of the past. Hence, it is debatable whether the very critique that Thies and others have levelled against the realists, i.e., that of writing history to conform with a specific disciplinary agenda, also applies to his ‘critical’ agenda, in this case, that of displacing realism. In this work we explain how a contextualist approach helps historians of ideas to avoid these two interpretive traps by forcing scholars to acknowledge an appropriate chronology of ideational change, and making them aware of the historicity of their own understanding of disciplinary purpose.

THE AUTHORS OF A FIRST DEBATE: ORIGINS OF A REALIST/IDEALIST DIVIDE

Our account of the development of the story of a First Debate is necessarily limited. At a general level, we acknowledge that a final or ‘true’ interpretation of the history of ideas is both unrealistic and
unobtainable.\textsuperscript{39} However, we also recognise that academic tradition, our chosen subject matter, presents its own sorts of empirical problems. Our brief genealogy of this myth is dependent upon those instances where the story of the First Debate has been documented in key IR journals and texts. Although this published material is a prominent, accessible source of disciplinary lore, we suspect that this account only captures a portion of the process of myth-making and story-telling that we seek to understand. Tradition is often passed down through hearsay, gossip and speculation: in offhand statements made between colleagues; in perfunctory references during seminars and conferences; and in didactic generalisations delivered in lecture halls. It is highly likely that the construction and ritual reproduction of this story has partially taken place in non-published, and therefore, largely inaccessible, academic discourse.

Carr serves as the starting point of our analysis because his book \textit{The twenty years’ crisis} is widely acknowledged as the first major work to popularise the notion of a conflict between realism and utopianism.\textsuperscript{40} Carr believed that this theoretical dichotomy was the product of ‘natural’ developments in an immature discipline.\textsuperscript{41} The nascent ‘science of international politics’ had been formulated in response to the demand for greater public understanding of international affairs after the First World War. Carr argued that the antagonism between utopianism and realism in the study of IR was a necessary stage in the maturing of a scholarly tradition.\textsuperscript{42} The broader social purposes that had instigated this form of study, and in particular, the desire for international peace emerging out of the Great War, had been particularly influential in the early years of academic IR. Scholars had devoted themselves to the construction of visionary projects designed to

\textsuperscript{39} Skinner has compellingly argued that it is futile to attempt to produce a conclusive story of this kind: ‘We must certainly be careful to avoid the vulgarity … of supposing that we can ever hope to arrive at “the correct reading” of a text, such that we may speak of having finally determined its meaning and thereby ruled out alternative interpretations.’ Quentin Skinner, ‘Motives, intentions and the interpretation of texts’, in Tully, ed., \textit{Meaning and context}, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{40} Of course, Carr’s work did not ‘invent’ the notion of an antagonism between realism and idealism. Thies has recently noted that Herbert Spencer made use of a contrast between idealism and realism. H. R. Spencer, ‘International politics and history’, \textit{American Political Science Review} 17, 1923; Thies, ‘Progress, history and identity in international relations theory’, p. 157.

\textsuperscript{41} Carr, \textit{The twenty years’ crisis}, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 7–13.
address the dilemmas of international conflict. Carr believed that the tendency to construct scientific endeavour in service of such ends had fostered an utopian imbalance in their work. Alfred Zimmern, Arnold Toynbee and Norman Angell, contributors to a burgeoning literature on international affairs in these decades, were all criticised on these grounds. He questioned their shared belief that the conflictual tendencies of interstate relations were the result of a certain form of ‘wrong thinking’, whether it be wickedness or mere ignorance, and the subsequent contention that international politics could be reformed through the correction of such mistaken views. His work showed, amongst other things, that the problems that these scholars had sought to define were the product of an inescapable reality of international politics, the conflict of interests amongst states.

Carr’s polemic against utopian extremism was not simply, and indeed not primarily, directed at his colleagues. He attacked a broader set of Anglo-American thinkers. The work branded a range of authors and practitioners with the label ‘utopian’, including both the supposed intellectual progenitors of the utopian tradition, such as eighteenth century liberal economic theorists like Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, as well as practitioners held to be responsible for utopian foreign policy mistakes, like Lord Cecil and, more regularly, Woodrow Wilson. Carr appears to have been particularly keen to convince this last group of thinkers, who operated in the broader policy realm. According to his brief history of ideas, the utopian orthodoxy in Allied foreign policy making had been slammed up against the brutal coalface of ‘reality’ during the 1930s. Events like the Manchurian Crisis and Hitler’s ‘annexation’ of Austria had forced many to contemplate a more pragmatic realist approach. Carr preached the virtues of a balance between utopian and realist thinking so that future proponents of principled pacifism would not be similarly disillusioned. He dedicated The twenty years’ crisis, including his detailed exposition of a realist approach, ‘to the makers of the coming peace’, in the hope that utopian extremism

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43 Ibid., pp. 31, 35, 56.
44 Ibid., pp. 48–53.
would not bedevil the construction of solutions to an incipient post-war problematic.\textsuperscript{45}

The twenty years’ crisis was a widely read publication that naturally won the critical attention of Carr’s contemporaries. Over the next few years, a range of critics and reviewers published responses to his work.\textsuperscript{46} Carr’s opponents were unconvinced that the realist approach sustained an appropriate framework for dealing with practical questions of the day, or those of the recent past. In particular, his support for a policy of appeasement came up for attack. Leonard Woolf was amazed at the fact that Carr could dismiss the League of Nations as fanciful because it was formulated through abstract principles, at the same time as he sanctioned an appeasement policy that had been proven by hard reality to be palpably wrong.\textsuperscript{47} William Maddox noted that Carr’s appeasement prescription did not specify the degree of concessions that should be made to a rising power, or show whether a new hegemon would acquire a moral attitude.\textsuperscript{48} While Richard Coventry expressed whole-hearted support for Carr’s radical wake-up call to the ‘airy’ thinking in foreign policy circles on both the Left and the Right, he also took issue with Carr’s supposedly ‘realistic’ sanction of an appeasement policy.\textsuperscript{49}

The main reason that Carr’s critics felt compelled to publish their disagreements was their fear that Carr’s philosophy was becoming increasingly popular. Norman Angell, a scholar who had won notoriety for his attempts to dispel the popular illusion that nations could gain through war and conquest, was one of the first to enter the fray. Interestingly Angell, a reputed pacifist, wrote in fear of what he saw as Carr’s disparagement of the

\textsuperscript{45} A decade later Morgenthau argued that Carr’s contributions to international politics had to be read against the errors of policy makers in Great Britain and the United States. Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The political science of E. H. Carr’, \textit{World Politics} 1(1) 1948.


\textsuperscript{47} Woolf, ‘Utopia and reality’. Woolf’s book on the subject challenged Carr to prove whether a political framework based upon a conflict of interests would be superior to one conceived around the concept of a harmony of interests. Leonard Woolf, \textit{The war for peace} (London: Labour Book Service, 1940).

\textsuperscript{48} Maddox, ‘Twenty years’ crisis’.

\textsuperscript{49} Coventry, ‘The illusions of power’, p. 762.
principles behind the British war effort. Angell was particularly disturbed by Carr’s work because, as Director of the Foreign Division of the Ministry of Information, Carr was responsible for the formulation and publication of the British case for war, and was in a position to popularise his ‘defeatist’ views abroad. He labelled Carr, along with a list of other prominent figures in British policy making circles, as an ‘intellectual ally of Hitler’ for suggesting that the British had not been acting in pursuit of a generalisable set of moral concerns.\textsuperscript{50} Friedrich Hayek was similarly worried by the linkages between Carr and the German cause. He believed that Carr was representative of a new totalitarian, and characteristically German way of thinking about politics that had become prevalent in British policy circles. He attacked Carr in order to defend the liberal tradition which, in his words, ‘used to be the common basis of most English politics’.\textsuperscript{51} Woolf veered away from the emotive German analogy, but nevertheless belittled Carr’s form of thinking as an instance of a morose ‘temporary social psychology’ of the time.\textsuperscript{52} He believed that Carr’s work was dangerous because it provided an academic veneer for the widespread wartime sense that conflict in the international realm was endemic.\textsuperscript{53}

Both Wilson and Schmidt have persuasively argued that Carr’s disagreements with his colleagues cannot be plausibly considered a ‘Great Debate’.\textsuperscript{54} However, Ashworth and Thies have shown that the interwar and wartime period was not the primary source of the story of a First Debate.\textsuperscript{55} This construct was primarily developed in a set of works published after Carr appeared to lose interest in the conceptual framework he had developed. In the late 1940s a similar dichotomy to that outlined in \textit{The twenty years’ crisis} became a significant axis of discussion and debate amongst an emerging group of IR scholars in the United States of America.

\textsuperscript{51} Hayek, \textit{The road to serfdom}, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{52} Woolf, ‘Utopia and reality’, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., pp. 181–2.
\textsuperscript{54} Schmidt, \textit{The political discourse of anarchy}; Wilson, ‘The myth of the “first great debate”’.
\textsuperscript{55} Ashworth, ‘Did the realist–idealist great debate really happen?’; Thies, ‘Progress, history and identity in international relations theory’.
In a forum entitled ‘The National Interest and Moral Principles in Foreign Policy’, Morgenthau took the side of the national interest against Fox’s case for a moralistic approach. While their disagreements appear to have been situated around a realist, anti-realist divide, neither author raised the notion of a distinction between idealism/utopianism and realism in international thought. Two years later Morgenthau reiterated much of Carr’s wartime critique of the Western utopian tradition in the provocative *In defense of the national interest*, which explicitly took issue with utopian forms of foreign policy. As with Carr, Morgenthau believed that the major challenge confronting policy makers was not simply the nature of contemporary politics, but the ingrained traditions of thought in their respective nations. Morgenthau contended that over the past fifty years a utopian brand of thinking, epitomised by Woodrow Wilson, had been responsible for the neglect of the vital concept of the US national interest. To make matters worse, Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman continued to espouse these utopian illusions in their attempts to construct a post-war international order.

For the most part, post-war scholars chose an alternative, less derogatory anti-realist moniker than the label ‘utopianism’. Various authors began to refer to ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ as alternative, and competing, philosophies.

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56 William T. R. Fox, ‘The reconciliation of the desirable and the possible’, *The American Scholar* 18(2) 1949; Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The primacy of the national interest’, *The American Scholar* 18(2) 1949. Thies includes a piece by Fox published the same year amongst his list of modern realists. We have not included this piece here because, despite the fact that Fox scripts the eras of IR in a way that most scholars have been critical of, he makes no reference to an idealist school, or to the concept of a ‘debate’. Also, as we later point out, his later article with Annette Fox explicitly challenges the notion of a ‘Great Debate’. William T. R. Fox and Annette Baker Fox, ‘The teaching of international relations in the United States’, *World Politics* 13(3) 1961.


58 Despite the fact that Morgenthau’s academic work was devoted to explaining the primacy of the national interest over moral principles, he did not categorically associate his work with an amoral version of IR. Morgenthau criticised Carr’s attempts to marry utopian and realist thinking in his publications since 1939. Interestingly, Morgenthau did not believe that this was an impossible marriage, but that Carr had simply failed to establish a transcendent standard of ethics from which he could judge changes in the balance of power. As with the earlier critics of *The twenty years’ crisis*, Morgenthau believed that the main problem with Carr’s work was that it was an inappropriate form of advice to be giving to Western leaders. He concluded his critique with the pithy warning: ‘[i]t is a dangerous thing to be a Machiavelli. It is a disastrous thing to be a Machiavelli without virtù’. Morgenthau, ‘The political science of E. H. Carr’, p. 134.
of American foreign policy. The notion that a controversy between realism and idealism constituted a ‘Great Debate’ was first raised in a published debate between Morgenthau and Frank Tannenbaum. Tannenbaum’s article presented the dispute as an argument between Morgenthau’s work on the balance of power and his neo-federalist concept of a ‘coördinate state’. Tannenbaum developed a similar anti-realist position to that advocated by several of Carr’s critics in the early 1940s. The problem with the realist school was that it sought to dissolve the foundations of ‘what has always been the American philosophy of international relations’.

Tannenbaum’s article, and Morgenthau’s reply of the same year, both dubbed their dispute a ‘Great Debate’. For Tannenbaum, this controversy was ‘great’ because the moral purpose of American internationalism was at stake, and this debate would help to determine its future. In contrast to the long standing argument between ‘interventionists’ and ‘isolationists’, this new struggle threatened to transform the foundations of the American foreign policy tradition. In contrast, Morgenthau believed that the new debate was a peculiar event because it had established philosophical rather than policy prescriptive camps. In previous debates participants had had a choice between two separate policy options: intervention versus expansion debates in 1793; expansion versus the status quo during the Mexican War; international cooperation versus isolation in the 1920s; and intervention versus abstention in the late 1930s. No equivalent choices existed in the 1950s foreign policy dispute. Neither side of the ‘utopian versus realism’ schism corralled around a clear policy prescription; they were divided according to their commitment to particular schools of thought.

While Morgenthau and Tannenbaum’s discussion suggests that there was a significant controversy in international thought during these years, the primary aim of this new group of scholars was usually to discover an appropriate balance between opposing philosophical positions on foreign policy matters. Reinhold Niebuhr complained about the polarisation of

59 Frank Tannenbaum, ‘The balance of power versus the coordinate state’, Political Science Quarterly 67(2) 1952, p. 175.
60 Ibid., pp. 174–5.
international relations thought between idealists and realists. While the majority of his article lambasted the idealist side, his main argument was that both forms of thinking were a necessary component of a coherent foreign policy approach, and he set out to discover an alternative third way.\textsuperscript{62} Arnold Wolfers noted that the current dispute between idealist and realist schools had reformulated a persistent philosophical struggle within modern scholarship. This piece made a more concerted effort to chart a course between the theoretical poles of idealism and realism by establishing a ‘realistic theory of peace strategy’. The main purpose of his work was to ‘discover policies and practices which offer most promise of turning nations away from goals that point toward power competition and violence’\textsuperscript{63} John Herz provided the most comprehensive account of the two strands of international thought. After having been convinced that the general feeling of optimism in the early years after the Second World War required a dose of realist thinking, Herz noted that the demand for his detailed comparison of these two traditions now sprung from the need for more liberal principles to balance out the prevalence of power political thinking in both policy making and public opinion circles.\textsuperscript{64}

Quincy Wright’s review of Herz’s work agreed that both a realistic idealism and an idealistic realism was required. However, he challenged Herz’s usage of the terms ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ as monikers for alternative philosophical positions in international relations. He argued that Herz’s work suffered ‘from an effort to treat practical problems in terms of absolute categories’ and that Herz had only succeeded in demonstrating ‘that the distinction between “realism” and “idealism” is of doubtful value in either political analysis or political philosophy’.\textsuperscript{65}
reiterated these suspicions a couple of years later. He noted that the divide between realism and idealism was a ‘fashionable’ way of discussing international thought and opposed this dichotomous view of international relations on the grounds that it tended to polarise work that rarely fit neatly into either of these categories.\textsuperscript{66} He argued that the works of Carr and Morgenthau ought to be seen as an attempt to discuss the ‘relationship between theory and practice, idealism and realism’.\textsuperscript{67}

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MYTH: RETROSPECTIVE STORYTELLERS**

In this section we move beyond the work of scholars using the idealist/realist dichotomy as a device for discussing contemporary theory, to focus on scholars who have explicitly, or self-consciously, referred to a ‘historical’ dispute. Dwight Waldo published the first retrospective look at the concept of an early Great Debate.\textsuperscript{68} Having documented the shift between idealism and realism, which occurred over the interwar years, Waldo spoke of this dyad as a defining feature of the debate over the national interest. He cited Morgenthau’s 1952 article as a principal contribution to this intellectual controversy. However, Waldo was more circumspect than Morgenthau on the issue of whether the lines were clearly drawn between the two brands of thinking. He argued that the ‘so-called’ idealists were a particularly difficult bunch of theorists to identify. More importantly, he specifically differentiated between the anti-realists in the post-war years from the idealist scholars of the interwar years:

> [t]hose who have taken the idealist position in the debates are not persons who were leaders of institutionalist-legalist studies in the interwar years, but (on the whole) younger scholars who themselves represent newer currents of thought and activity.\textsuperscript{69}

At the end of the decade, Robert Good argued that while the self-proclaimed ‘realists’ had been united in their opposition to idealist

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 191.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 60.
‘illusions’, this dichotomous view of international thought revealed a great deal more about differences within realism. His article put Morgenthau and George Kennan’s ‘relativist’ and ‘transcendental’ ethics into a hypothetical ‘debate’ with Niebuhr’s ‘superior’ position of a ‘dialectic’ between ‘love and self-love’.70 In 1961 William Fox and Annette Fox expanded on Waldo’s earlier suspicions about the ‘Great Debate’ by questioning its significance in the historical development of the field. They argued that the key realist concept of power had been a significant component of international thought in the United States in the early 1930s, well before Carr had published The twenty years’ crisis.71

In the late 1960s and early 1970s this ‘Great Debate’ over the national interest began to morph into the story of a ‘First Debate’. In this period scholars began to use the framework of a sequence of Great Debates as a history about the early years of IR.72 In 1972 William Olson referred to the debate as one of several instances of major change in the discipline. He listed four key debating divides: precision/eclecticism, realism/idealism, generalist/specialist and traditionalist/scientific behaviouralist.73 Despite the fact that the scholars who had coined the term ‘Great Debate’ in the 1950s had believed that their argument was an example of a long tradition of foreign policy debates, a number of authors in this period began to refer to new intellectual events as an analogue of an original ‘Great Debate’. Morton Kaplan’s seminal World Politics article heralded ‘The new great debate: Traditionalism vs. science in international relations’.74 This twenty-page piece did not deal explicitly with any old Great Debates, but when

72 Peter Wilson dubs this era the dawn of ‘disciplinary self-consciousness’. Wilson, ‘The myth of the “first great debate”’, p. 8.
74 Morton A. Kaplan, ‘The new great debate: Traditionalism vs. science in international relations’, World Politics 19(1) 1966. Kaplan’s article appeared alongside Hedley Bull’s defence of the classical approach. Hedley Bull, ‘International theory: The case for a classical approach’, World Politics 18(3) 1966. This pair of articles constitute the most recognisable instance of a formal ‘Second Debate’. In subsequent discussions of a Second Debate some IR scholars have spoken of traditionalists as realists and/or scientists as behaviouralists.
Kaplan’s article was reprinted in an edited volume three years later, Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau’s introductory chapter provided a more detailed comparison of IR’s Great Debates. They introduced the tradition versus science divide by contrasting it with realism versus idealism.75

Knorr and Rosenau used the concept of an earlier debate to characterise international relations works published between 1939 and 1960. According to their account, the important participants in the first of these debates were Carr, Morgenthau, Thomas Cook, Malcolm Moos, and Kenneth Thompson.76 Their relevant works were published between 1939 and 1960. An Arend Lijphardt article also argued that the idealist/realist argument had begun in the 1930s, and continued for the decade following the Second World War.77 Although Olson’s piece is evidence of the fact that understanding about significant debates in international thought was far from settled during the 1970s, the majority of works in this period thought of the realist/idealist divide as a new academic tradition, rather than the latest edition of a longstanding form of public quarrel.78

Between them, Knorr, Rosenau and Lijphardt devoted only three paragraphs to discussion of a First Debate.79 In their brief surveys these authors were keen to emphasise the differences between these two important academic contests. For Knorr and Rosenau the first debate had been about the substance of international politics, whereas more recent events were concerned with its mode of analysis. According to Lijphardt the earlier debate was not as ‘great’ as the traditionalism/science divide

76 Ibid., p. 12.
78 None of these scholars referred to Morgenthau’s earlier attempt to define the Great Debate sequence in IR.
because, according to Kuhnian ideas about disciplinary progress, it did not constitute a potential paradigmatic shift.80

Despite the fact that scholars in the 1970s had been sceptical with respect to the similarities between the two early debates, several 1980s articles recounted the tale of two prior Great Debates in their description of the important intellectual events of their decade. In this period various authors portrayed several different axes of theoretical contention as the successor of previous ideological contests in IR. Ray Maghroori scripted a new contest between realist and globalist schools as the third in a historical sequence.81 Michael Banks categorised the first two debates as the most significant periods of transformation in disciplinary orthodoxy. He then classified arguments between pluralists, realists and structuralists as the most recent Great Debate.82 Yosef Lapid briefly referred to ‘realism versus idealism’ and ‘history versus science’ as precursors of the intellectual struggle tearing at the heart of IR. He chose to title clashes between positivists and post-positivists the Third Debate.83

The Third Debaters provided a new chronology for the idealism/realism divide. All of a sudden, the First Debate was transported further back in

time. Despite the fact that Tannenbaum and Morgenthau, the first two participants explicitly acknowledging their participation in a Great Debate, had published their works in the early 1950s, and despite the fact that the ‘Second Debaters’ had referred to the period between the 1930s and 1960 as a Great Debate, the chronology used by this new set of scholars did not extend past 1950. Maghroori’s introductory chapter offered a four page potted history of the three debate sequence. The only work that Maghroori referred to explicitly as a paragon of the period, Morgenthau’s *Politics among nations*, was first published in 1949. However, Maghroori’s version of the story located the debate that Morgenthau was ostensibly involved in, *prior* to the Second World War.\(^84\) Like Maghroori, Banks spoke of the earlier clash between realism and idealism as an interwar academic event. He briefly mentioned Carr’s masterly critique of utopianism in 1939, but not the supposed debaters that had preceded him.\(^85\) Meanwhile, Lapid’s discussion of a positivist/post-positivist Third Debate referred to an original schism in the 1920s and 1930s. Lapid provided no evidence of any historiographical work that he had done on this period of ideational change. He also cited Maghroori and Banks as authorities on the Great Debate concept, even though their understanding of the relevant participants in a Third Debate was inconsistent with his own.\(^86\)

A misleading way of talking about the scholarship of the interwar years accompanied this chronological transplant. In the 1980s scholars began to use the term ‘idealism’ to refer specifically to the *interwar* period. Several scholars developed this association by presenting the idealist dominance as a logical outgrowth of the First World War. For example, Banks argued that ‘idealist or liberal views dominated the field, fuelled by the horrors of the Great War’.\(^87\) Meanwhile, Maghroori recounted the process whereby ‘[a] new school of thought arose that called for the renunciation of war as a national policy, the institutionalisation of an international order, and the replacement of balance-of-power politics by collective security’.\(^88\) These

\(^86\) Lapid, ‘The third debate’, p. 236.
\(^87\) Banks, ‘The evolution of international relations theory’, p. 10.
scholars appear to have been unusually unperturbed by the lack of scholarly work that explicitly identified with an idealist tradition in this period. They also appear to have been unaware of the pre-existing critical stance of commentators such as Waldo, Good, Fox and Fox towards the concept of an idealist school of IR.

The Third Debaters had not only fabricated an inappropriate interwar theoretical category, they had also exaggerated the distinction between realism and idealism. Scholars now referred to this period of intellectual development as if scholars worked solely from either side of a controversial ideational dichotomy. Maghroori referred to the period as ‘... clash between the realists and idealists’ which involved ‘... a fundamental disagreement about the nature of the international political system and the motivations behind state behaviour’.89 Kalevi Holsti labelled the period as ‘Realism versus Idealism’, and argued that during the First Debate ‘the sides [were] drawn up, the issues neatly dichotomized’.90 Lapid dubbed it the ‘“idealism versus realism” schism’.91 This notion of a fundamental split overlooks Carr’s own attempt to achieve a balance, contradicts the majority of work on the subject during the early 1950s, and flies in the face of much of the retrospective IR literature in the late 1950s and beyond.92 It is important to note how recently the notion of a settled divide became an uncontested truth. In 1972 Hedley Bull had written a brief, but compelling history of the period which was sceptical about whether anyone actually belonged to the camps of realism and idealism. Indeed, he shied away from the use of the terms ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’, and held the monikers ‘idealist’ and ‘realist’ in inverted commas throughout. His discussion of realism emphasised the important commonalities between ‘realist’ thinkers of the time and ‘idealist’ philosophy.

These writers all present the case against ‘moralism’ at least in partly moral terms ... Stated in this way, the defense of the national interest has more in common with the ‘idealist’ views against which it is directed than

89 Ibid.
90 Holsti, The dividing discipline, p. 4.
92 Compare with Booth’s contention that Carr’s distinction between utopianism and realism was fundamentally ambiguous; at times suggestive of an incompatibility, and at others indicating an essential harmony. Booth, ‘Security in anarchy’.
with the strict ‘Machiavellian’ doctrine that anything is justified by reason of state.\(^\text{93}\)

Lijphardt had also voiced uncertainty about the categorical nature of the First Debate divide. He noted that after the Second World War the debate between realism and idealism consisted largely of conversations amongst realists.\(^\text{94}\)

In stark contrast to the recent critical histories written against this scheme for understanding international thought, none of the authors involved in condoning this story attempted to make a formal case for its existence. This perfunctory approach to disciplinary history continues to be found in the most recent instances of scholars passing on the idea of a Great Debate sequence. Despite the fact that Yosef Lapid devoted no more than a paragraph to detailing the history of the Great Debates, his article has been the most commonly cited reference on this subject in the last decade.\(^\text{95}\) When recent scholars have used the term ‘Third Debate’ they have all referred directly to Lapid’s article.\(^\text{96}\) This group of scholars have been primarily interested in the most recent divide in IR rather than the details of the historical development of international thought. While these scholars

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94 Lijphardt, ‘International relations theory’, p. 11.
95 This is primarily due to the fact that Lapid’s work has become the designated source of the ‘Third Debate’ label. Knud Erik Jorgensen notes that Lapid’s article ‘has become a marker of a significant turn, which in the late 1980s, took place within IR’. Knud Erik Jorgensen, ‘Continental IR theory: The best kept secret’, European Journal of International Relations 6(1) 2000, p. 16.
have evoked the concept of a series of great debates they have not sought to document this narrative. Indeed, when this group of authors have referred to a ‘Third Debate’, they have not raised the term ‘First Debate’ at all. It seems as though the primary remaining vestige of the history of a conflict between idealists and realists in IR parlance is the intuitive logic that a first debate must have preceded a third.

THE TRADITION OF GREAT DEBATES: SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

Our account of the construction of the First Debate in the literature offers vital material to assess and refine the key claims of critical historiography in IR. As Thies has already shown, several authors identifying with the realist tradition in the late 1940s and early 1950s were responsible for producing the realism/idealism divide. However, unlike Thies, we are less inclined to place blame upon this group of ‘realists’ for the transition from analytical to historical tradition. Most of the authors in the period Thies has discussed had either directly cast suspicion on the notion of a categorical successor in this debate, or had preferred to opt for some sort of balance between two philosophical poles. While Carr’s attempt to help broker the coming peace, and Morgenthau’s directives for policy in the post-war era, may have been responsible for the production of an inaccurate debating construct, later scholars attempting to validate new meta-theoretical contests were responsible for incorporating a myth into disciplinary orthodoxy. The misleading components of the story of the First Debate were produced by later scholars who transposed this analytical tradition into a perfunctory account of past events. In contrast to the critical scholarship on the realist/idealist schism in the 1950s and 1960s, these scholars did not investigate the literature which surrounded the issues to which they referred. Indeed, they engaged in the practice of espousing tradition regardless of whether their claims flew in the face of existing critical scholarship. The most egregiously deceptive components in the story were produced when subsequent theorists picked up this narrative scheme and inappropriately transported it back in time.

Our work also differs from the positions of Smith, Wilson, Wæver and Ashworth, who have argued that the disciplinary role of the myth consists

97 Thies, ‘Progress, history and identity in international relations theory’.
of a lesson, or set of lessons that scholars inherit about the nature of their tradition. While we accept that scholars have used the notion of a series of Great Debates to provide authoritative weight to later theoretical contributions, we are not convinced that there is unanimity with respect to the morals that have been drawn from this story. Carr and Morgenthau appear to have concluded that the realist tradition deserved a privileged place in modern international relations scholarship. However, subsequent authors condoning this history have yet to make this case in print. Indeed, opinions regarding the specific lesson to be drawn from this debating cycle have varied according to the interests of the specific author employing the rhetorical device. Mark Hoffman used the debating ritual to infer that critical theory might be ‘the next stage in the development of International Relations Theory’. Lapid reflected on the theme of conflictual debate to emphasise the way in which IR was being ritually tossed on the winds of grand change in the social sciences. Banks appeared to emerge with the lesson that protagonists of the Third Debate had to get their act together because there was a clear need to unseat realism, and the first two debates had failed to do away with this dominant paradigm. We are therefore hesitant to make claims about the truths or morals that more recent scholars draw from this story about the past.

Our account of the First Debate suggests that, rather than the past being used to develop lessons for the present, the images of the present have been imposed upon our understanding of the past. During the behaviourual and post-modern revolutions that instigated the ‘Second’ and ‘Third’ debates in IR, argument about the international realm occurred around meta-theoretical axes of debate. Scholars set about confirming or denying the validity of a particular way of approaching the ‘international’ as an object of study because in each of these struggles the definition of what constituted appropriate academic practice was at stake. In many cases, these profound and unsettling questions of intellectual propriety sent scholars in search of the fundamentals of their profession. The story of a sequence of Great Debates established present conflicts as contemporary variants of a traditional

98 Hoffman, ‘Critical theory and the inter-paradigm debate,’ p. 244.
process of academic endeavour, and thereby served to verify such conflicts as a meaningful form of scholarly dispute. As scholars began to ritually recite this potted history of international thought, the early period of academic IR was gradually accepted as an analogue of later philosophical controversies, and the new version of the story became accepted as fact. It was repeatedly cited as a story of disciplinary development in perfunctory and superfluous references to tradition made at the margins of a range of academic works.\footnote{This reading concurs with Eric Hobsbawm’s work on the invention of tradition. He has suggested that invented traditions are ‘responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition’. The First Debate may be seen as this same sort of response to the new. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds, \textit{The invention of tradition} (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 2.} At the same time, the ‘history’ of these events, that is, the contextual factors which provided much of the meaning to these rhetorical expositions, was either forgotten, or simply disregarded.\footnote{Wæver noted that the tendency to ignore context is linked to the assumption that work within the discipline is defined by a transhistorical problematic. Wæver, ‘Figures of international thought’, p. 690.}

Contemporary critical historiography in IR is devoted to overcoming this sort of dramatic flaw in our understanding of the past. We believe that contextualism is a useful method for this ongoing project because it exhibits the inconsistencies in the stories that simplistic historical schemes tend to paper over. We have been able to show how a contextual approach helps avoid a tendency to either abstract ideas from their historical setting, or provide stories of intellectual development that transgress the constraints of accurate chronology. We do not want to suggest that contextualism per se will help to rid the discipline of these tendencies.\footnote{We agree with Schmidt that crude forms of contextual argument pose equally significant problems for our ability to understand and narrate the history of the discipline. In several of the stories of a First Debate, ‘real world’ events in the period leading up to, and during, the Second World War are presented as the key background for this story. However, none of these authors have combined their understanding of contextual factors with a detailed textual reading in order to develop the sort of historical narrative that we have offered here. Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf, \textit{World politics: Trend and transformation}, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1989); Lijphardt, ‘International relations theory’; Maghroori, ‘Introduction’.} Our claim is that the pursuit of a rigorous contextual method forces scholars to consistently reconcile meaning with historical context, and to move their attention away from analytical constructs, and toward what the ‘internal’ historians visualise as an ideal, that is, a more accurate appreciation of the historical tradition.
Adopting this method of reading past work has provided us with a new perspective on our scholarly tradition. This study has illuminated the differences between, on the one hand, the purposive dimension of contemporary scholarship, and on the other, the academic agendas of past work. This method has rescued a defining, and largely forgotten, feature of early intellectual discussions, that is, the policy-driven conception of international thought adopted by scholars of several persuasions during and around the Second World War. There is a qualitative difference between the motives which provoke today’s scholars to venture into theoretical debate, and the academic purposes of the wartime and post-war era. Prior to 1950, the cause of defending a particular theoretical approach, or paradigm, against that of an alternative, or competing school did not appear to be the main priority for scholars engaged in discussing the conflict between idealist/utopian and realist ideas. Carr and Morgenthau’s separate assaults against utopianism were only partly concerned with the works of contemporary academics, and primarily directed towards the transformation of the broad tradition of international thought in their respective countries. Both authors feared a dominance of utopian thinking because of their particular interpretation of the failures of the interwar years and their respective prescriptions for contemporary foreign policy. They were intimately concerned with the post-war peace process, and specifically, the contribution of Britain and the United States to the construction of a new international order. Those authors who were critical of the anti-utopian position, like Angell, Woolf, Hayek, Tannenbaum and Fox, were primarily concerned with the consequences of accepting a narrowly conceived notion of interests as the basis of Anglo-American statesmanship, and more broadly, of democratic rule altogether. Finally, those authors, like Niebuhr, Wolfers, Woolf and Herz, who explicitly sought to challenge the dichotomous view of international thought, were intent on showing that if scholars adopted either approach, to the neglect of the other, rational approaches to international dilemmas became impossible.

When Morgenthau first coined the term ‘Great Debate’ in his reply to Tannenbaum, he was struck by recent developments in international thought, because ritual conflict in American foreign policy circles usually centred on policy options. In this new discussion scholars tended to corral around alternative ‘philosophies’ or ‘standards of thought’. In later decades IR would gradually develop into an academic discipline that was marked by
conflicting, and sometimes mutually exclusive approaches to the subject. Argument that validates a particular school at the expense of another is now the dominant style of rhetoric in the field. The changing character of disciplinary discussion during the late 1940s and early 1950s period that Morgenthau bore witness to goes generally unnoticed by recent theorists because the version of the story of a First Debate in common currency in contemporary IR is Lapid’s brief notation of a dispute in the 1920s and 1930s. This process, whereby disciplinary discussion began to occur in isolation from public affairs of the day, has also not been readily noticed by scholars adopting an internal approach because they are methodologically predisposed to viewing IR as if it existed in isolation from its constitutive contextual factors. We believe that the tendency to ignore these issues will help to foster myths about the disciplinary past.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Studying the construction and reproduction of the story of a First Debate has substantially changed our own perspective on the IR tradition. At the beginning of this research process we took an interest in the concept of a First Debate because we were inclined to think that it was an outright furphy which members of the prevailing orthodoxy had consciously, and inappropriately, imposed upon the past. Wæver’s claim that ‘[t]he First Debate … was not so much a discussion as a heroic post-hoc self-presentation by the (self-proclaimed) realists’ appeared to support this hunch. However, our subsequent investigations have revealed that the making of the tradition of IR has been less fantastic and conspiratorial than we originally supposed, but perhaps more relentlessly problematic than we had first suspected. The First Debate is a story that refers to a real set of developments in the history of academic IR, and we are yet to be convinced that a scholar, or group of scholars, has consciously constructed this story to create boundaries within the discipline. Instead, the problem with the story is that a set of scholars concerned with defining recent events have clumsily attached an entirely inappropriate chronology to this past set of texts in the face of a significant store of contradictory historiographical evidence. While our fears of scandal within the discipline have been allayed by these findings, they have also been replaced by

a more sombre dissatisfaction at the remarkable complacency of our discipline with regard to the intellectual history that we share.\textsuperscript{105} Our disappointment is particularly acute because the most personally rewarding feature about this research has been the critical perspective on the purposive dimension of our profession that we have acquired by going back and investigating the contours of discussion on international affairs in an entirely different historical setting. In particular, our surveys of scholarship in the interwar and post-war era introduced an alternative, more socially oriented, way of thinking about the reasons for engaging in a core practice of our discipline, the formal debate. Since making this discovery we have been less interested in the obvious inconsistencies of the myth itself, and more concerned with the tendency of scholars to endorse orthodox history without interrogating the texts to which they refer. It appears to be this common predilection for perfunctory traditionalism, rather than any underhanded obfuscation of historical fact, that perpetuates dubious orthodoxy in contemporary IR. We hope that our article has successfully exposed the serious implications of casual references to invented tradition.

\textsuperscript{105} One of the most common responses to our critique of the First Debate has been that it serves as a useful teaching device. Despite his criticism of the myth of a First Debate, Wilson is willing to concede that it has merit as a pedagogical device. Meanwhile Chris Brown’s text book for students of IR narrates the story of a First Debate in full. Given our belief that myths like these thrive off a casual attitude to the way in which historiography is handed down we are wary of any attempt to perpetuate this myth, and particularly sceptical of its use as a way of inducting scholars into the discipline. Chris Brown, \textit{Understanding international relations} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), chapter 2; Wilson, ‘The myth of the “first great debate”’, p. 1.
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