International Theory and the Problem of Sustainable Critique
An Adornian-Biblical parable

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Surveying recent developments in the discipline of International Relations, I argue for sustainable critique: a mode of theorizing about world politics that is both responsive to real world-events, and deeply self-reflexive vis-à-vis its normative commitments. Using Genesis 34 as a parable, and drawing on the work of Theodor W. Adorno, I show why sustainable critique is needed in IR, and what work it would do; I then indicate those normative commitments needed to advance it. Finally, I survey recent theoretical innovations in IR in light of the challenge that sustainable critique poses.

Estragon: I can’t go on like this.
Vladimir: That’s what you think.

— Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (Beckett 1976, p. 476)

The academic study of politics—in particular, world politics—embraces an odd series of paradoxes. Since at least Machiavelli, the essential contingency of political life has cast a long shadow on those who would attempt its translation into theory: either as an immutable fact to be accepted, or as a challenge to be overcome (Honig 1993). Neither of these positions ‘floats freely’ (Risse-Kappen 1994). Both, that is, rest upon broad, normatively charged, narratives about the potentials and limitations of human thought and agency; the possibility of progress; the essential shape of the human condition.

It should not therefore be surprising if particular developments in International Relations (IR) theory—that scholarly discipline concerned with the use of violence by and against political, social or
economic collectivities—track with larger movements in culture, economics and politics. The ‘relationship between individuals and the different social milieus in which they are situated’ affects theorists no less than it does citizens or policymakers (Katzenstein & Sil 2008, pp. 114-15). By way of example, ‘eudemonist’ visions of world politics would, on this account, likely be tied—albeit in complex and stochastic ways—to moments when theorists must explain their own surpassed expectations; ‘tragic’ ones, when it is frailty, hubris or collective folly that must be accounted for (Lebow 2003).

So it was, for example, that many leading American IR theorists in the 1990s embraced notions of a ‘liberal’ or ‘democratic peace’—theories that suggested a causal link between a commitment to liberalism and/or democracy within states and the absence of war among them—even as examinations of the datasets and coding norms upon which such ‘links’ relied revealed rather obvious, and perhaps even self-serving, normative-ideological commitments (inter alia, Ish-Shalom 2006, Layne 1994; Oren 1995; Smith 2010). So it is too that contemporary theorists have struggled to make pragmatic policy-relevant recommendations for the ‘global war on terror’. The assumptions upon which such recommendations must rely—that terrorism is not a tactic but a disposition, that terrorists (and in particular suicide terrorists) are guided not by strategic thinking but by a blend of blind ignorance and implacable fanaticism—do not sit well with a pragmatic sensibility. While such assumptions are easily challenged, this is beside the point (inter alia, Azam 2005; Berman & Laitin 2008; Crooke 2009; Davis & Cragin 2009; Enders & Sandler 2006; Gambetta 2005; Keefer & Loayza 2008; Krueger 2007; Merari 2010; Mishal & Sela 2006; Pape 2003). It is the assumptions themselves—regardless of their substantive content—that are the problem. As Max Weber warned some nine decades ago, such assumptions risk conflating a scheme of ‘utopian’ and highly simplistic ideal-types with a reality that is relentlessly more complex and nuanced. It is the act of conflation itself that has potentially dangerous consequences, regardless of the particular policy ‘upshots’ that may follow from it (Weber 1948, 1949).

These dangers will be at their greatest when events pose, or seem to pose, clear and present dangers to a community’s collective survival: in the hours and days after airliners have been used to shatter buildings, or ‘shock and awe’ campaigns have dazed and decapitated whole civilian populations. At such moments, scholarly-reflective reserve—positions that strive to preserve measured complexity and nuance—is needed most acutely. Yet it is at these moments, too, that it is hardest to sustain: both the political atmosphere, and the scholar’s own fears, will militate against it. Little wonder that IR can seem least relevant precisely at those moments when, arguably, it is most needed (Jackson & Kaufman 2007).

Students of IR might yet do better. As the present paper will show, a growing cadre of theorists is considering how to try. With an eye to
deepening and furthering such efforts, the present paper suggests a guiding critical framework. Drawing on the traditions of Biblical hermeneutics and the Frankfurt School, it sets out a parable by which to outline that framework. It then uses that parable to show how existing efforts are unlikely to succeed on their own, laying the foundation for deeper engagements between students of IR and critical theorists working across the social-scientific and humanistic disciplines.

International Relations and the Need for Sustainable Critique

Two relatively recent developments have pluralized the scholarly discipline of International Relations. The first is its gradual globalization. Though the predominance of North American scholars in IR is still considerable, and though the field's reliance on English still presents starkly unequal barriers to entry, US dominance of the field is not nearly so total as when Stanley Hoffmann, some thirty years ago, pronounced it an ‘American social science’ (Hoffmann 1977; Crawford & Jarvis 2001). The second is a new reflexivity, evident in recent disciplinary histories and textbooks, which link the field's evolution to both academic trends and ‘real world’ political events. The two developments may be related. As IR has expanded beyond a small club of theorists sharing knowledge practices and commitments, a common dowry of background understandings can no longer be assumed. The field’s new reflexivity reflects the need to render the links between methodological turns and political commitments explicit to a wider audience.

These developments cast the discipline’s established traditions in a new light. In particular, they reveal those shared commitments which have united it across time, and across ostensibly divergent schools of thought. IR scholars of a certain age will recall what was, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, referred to as the third ‘great debate’: the attempt (at the time, hotly contested) to expand traditionally materialist studies of power and its role in world politics to include what fell broadly under the heading of ‘discourse’ (Lapid 1989; Keohane 1988). Less significant than the substance of that debate for the present argument is the name itself: to speak of a third debate implied an earlier two. That is, it implied a broad consensus as to the origins of the discipline and its constitutive boundaries. The first ‘great debate’—also called the ‘realist-idealist’ debate in IR circles—is generally understood to have followed on the events of the Second World War (Morgenthau 1952). At issue here was said to have been a disagreement over the core ‘stuff’ of international relations: were interactions among states essentially political (mediated through power and difference) or social (mediated through norms and laws)? The second debate, by contrast, was more formally methodological and followed the behavioral revolution that swept political science in the 1960s. At issue was the potential of formal social-scientific methods to produce better or more useful theory about the actions of states, regardless of what ‘paradigm’ (realism, liberalism, Marxism)

one parsed them through. Some variant of this three-debate narrative—even if only as pedagogical shorthand—provided the basis for how most IR theorists understood and transmitted their discipline in the last decade of the twentieth century.\(^3\)

Whatever the merits of this disciplinary self-understanding, it reflected consensus on a number of key issues. Of these, the most important was a common sense of hopefulness surrounding IR as an academic project. The scholarly study of world politics had emerged in the wake of the Second World War: a means to sound the depths ‘of the crater which is yawning beneath our western society’, and to bridge or fill it (Mannheim 1940, p. 5). If international politics was a sphere of anarchy and violence, international theory reflected the hope that theory could ‘steer’ it, moderate its vagaries (Wendt 2001). Notwithstanding the links between ‘third debate’ methodology and a radical tradition with roots in post-structuralism and the hermeneutics of suspicion, this optimism took on increased vigor in the decade following the end of the Cold War. New innovations in communications technology, a new political consensus surrounding liberal democracy, and the ‘death of distance’, seemed to provide a post-ideological basis for it: an ‘end of history’, a world ruled by ‘soft’ power alone (Fukuyama 1992; Friedman 2005; Nye 1990 & 2004; Bialley Mattern 2005).

IR’s newfound pluralism—along with its jarring rediscovery, post-2001, of what one senior scholar has called ‘the human desire to dominate or to hate’—has since brought this hopefulness into question (Keohane 2002, p. 272). For scholars like Stefano Guzzini, Ned Lebow, Ido Oren, Nicolas Guilhot and Martti Koskenniemi, IR’s ‘great debates’ seem to be less about progress or cumulativity than about repetition and reification: a periodic oscillation ‘between the scientific and the metaphysical, the normative and the factual, the descriptive and the prescriptive’ (Guilhot 2008, p. 301). Theorists like Dvora Yanow, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson have picked up and expanded upon the notion of a ‘hermeneutic circle’, first introduced into IR by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2006; Jackson 2006; Hollis & Smith 1991). The idea is that all forms of thinking contain their own implicit potential both for insight and for oversight: that this potential lies in the very nature of theory, and its relationship to politics. If discourse is power, then ‘soft’ power is not, in fact, soft; moreover, there is no clear distinction between academic discourses and partisan policy debates (Bialley Mattern 2005; Lukes 2007). In failing to recognize this, one leaves open new pathways for ideology and interest to be ‘smuggled in’ to theory (Wendt & Friedheim 1995). Such realizations oblige the scholar of world politics to effect a ‘double hermeneutic’, in which one must devote as much attention to the political agenda embedded in one’s own theory as to the empirical complexities of the issues one is studying (Jackson 2006; Pouliot 2010).
In other words, the pluralization of IR carries with it a need for a deeper, more sustainable form of reflexivity: what I shall here call sustainable critique. IR, that is, needs a mode of reflexivity that can both contribute meaningfully to essentially contested policy debates on the one hand, and yet be deeply self-reflexive on the other: its hermeneutic ‘circle’ must become a ‘sphere’. Such a mode of critique would build on the recognition that all knowledge is ultimately self-interested, despite—or indeed, because of—theory’s idealistic tendencies. It would affirm that there can be no ‘progress’ in theory as such, only progress in particular theories, and it would attempt to divorce problem-solving from larger claims about the ‘rationalization of the lifeworld’ or ‘the public and its problems’. It holds that theory relies on concepts which have natural (and often invisible) linkages to both larger normative traditions and partisan political agendas. Sustainable critique recognizes that both positive and critical theory can reify into exclusionary ideology, world-abnegating moral resignation, or self-congratulatory ‘radical chic’, and therefore seeks tools, methods and commitments that would help the theorist check these tendencies in real time. Given the discipline’s newfound pluralism, the ability to develop such a mode of reflexivity will largely determine IR’s future as a social-scientific enterprise distinct from international public policy, moral philosophy, or ‘activism with footnotes’.

The challenge posed by sustainable critique is not, in the first instance, one of methodology. To be sure, methods matter, and contemporary IR has proven extremely productive in this regard. Antecedent to them, however, lies a particular kind of normative-ethical affect that must be rendered explicit. Sustainable critique requires a deeply chastened understanding of theory: one in which the theorist’s sense of vocation derives from—but never despairs at—the enduring paradoxes of late-modern political life. It views practical theory and existing social forms as always already ‘yet another form of domination’ in the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and strives to be vigilantly skeptical toward all claims of right and justice (Price 2008, p. 38). It is aware of its own potential role in helping constitute partisan political discourses, and seeks to ‘do no harm’. Without that affect, no set of methodological innovations can suffice on their own—even if it is not itself a substitute for such methods.

Yet sustainable critique must also learn to control that affect, lest it overshoot itself: curdling into either nihilism or into its own repressive counter-orthodoxies. Theorists of world politics, as Price and Reus-Smit have noted, ‘cannot help making truth claims about the world. The individual who does not do so cannot act, and the genuinely unhypocritical relativist … will struggle for something to say and write’ (Price & Reus-Smit 1998, p. 272). Sustainable critique takes this point seriously, even as it rejects any apologetics for reification that might follow from it. It knows that forsaking any kind of writing or thinking is no solution to the problem of evil in politics. A world of radical dangers and inequalities requires stewardship, even if no consensus as to the shape of that stewardship exists. Even in the shadow of genocide, sustainable critique recognizes—albeit with fear and
trembling—that politics may sometimes involve the parsing of essential differences. Like Waiting for Godot’s Estragon and Vladimir (in the epigraph to this essay) it feels the full weight of this dilemma. At the same time, it hopes to avoid jejune existentialism or fashionable cynicism. It holds that humanity has no world but this one, and sets about caring for that world with simplicity, humility, and directness (Tronto 1995). It views academic prose as a kind of indirect political action, and thus tries to maintain awareness of its responsibility and fallibility.

With that delicate balance in mind, the goals of this paper are threefold: first, to illustrate the need for a sustainably critical sensibility in IR. Second, to begin to sketch out how that need might be met. Third, to discuss recent efforts that reflect some of the commitments of sustainable critique. I shall use a biblical parable—the story of Genesis 34—to meet the first goal. For the second, I shall draw on Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics (Adorno 1973). For the third, I will briefly survey recent developments in the field.

Sustainable critique would need to preserve reflexivity along at least three distinct ‘levels of analysis’. At the ontological level, states, institutions and nations are historical constructs whose unity cannot be unproblematically assumed. At the epistemological level, however, remembering this can be difficult; for theoretical approaches to IR, grounded as they are in static conceptualizations, will necessarily reify dynamic actors and forces. This limitation cannot be done away with, given that IR deals with situations which are typically tense, time-bound, and in which direct knowledge is limited. This in turn forces us to consider problems at the ethical-normative level: for we are guided in the use of deadly force by historically contingent, tendentious theoretical constructs whose character imparts to particular worldviews a patina of permanence or legitimacy by the very epistemological-ontological tension just described. Hypothesis testing and falsifiability cannot, on their own, be counted upon to reveal these tensions; the relations of responsibility between theory and action transcend the limitations of what Richard Ashley, following Jürgen Habermas, has called ‘technical knowledge’ (Ashley 1981).

The remainder of this paper proceeds in three main sections. First, I will recount the story of Genesis 34. Following this, in section two, I will tie the Genesis story to the notion of sustainably critical IR theory, using the ontological, epistemological and normative lines of discussion developed above, and connecting them to Adorno’s theoretical work. In section three, I will survey the prospects of recent critical turns in contemporary IR. I shall argue that they do not go far enough; they are not anchored in the balanced shift of affect needed for sustainable critique, given the challenges of late modern politics: those illuminated by Genesis 34 and explicated by Adorno.

Two provisos. First, parable is a particular rhetorical form: more evocative than methodologically fine-grained. I mean to give a voice
and a name to an emerging scholarly project: sustainable critique. My
parable serves that project in much the same fashion that Thucydides’
Melian Dialogue serves IR’s realist school—that group of theorists
who see power and interest as the essential elements of world
politics.4 It is meant to illuminate a sensibility, which I hope in time will
gather new and existing ways of reading and knowing around itself.
But it is not yet—at least as given here—a fully-fledged method of
reading and knowing in its own right.

A second proviso: in reading the parable offered in section two, I rely
on the Hebraic-Biblical tradition, read in the original. This tradition
accords privileged access to those who can so read it. While I shall
not attempt to impose a particular positive reading of this text, my
claim as to its indeterminacy of meaning—a negative reading in the
fashion of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics—is one which I shall assert
strongly. What matters, I shall argue, is not what the words say, but
what they do not say; what they must be made to say. Seeing this
requires understanding particular ambiguities which are inherent to
Biblical Hebrew. I have sought to make these as transparent as
possible to the reader; to reduce as much as possible my own role as
a linguistic ‘gatekeeper’. But this cannot be completely done away
with, and it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise. The present
interpretation is neither the only possible reading of Genesis 34, nor
necessarily the best; where space permits, I allude to others in the
footnotes.5 Nor do I intend grander claims regarding the radical
openness of the Rabbinic-hermeneutic tradition; of myself as an
authority in that tradition; or of this reading as representative of it. It is
simply a means: to illustrate a critique of what Adorno called
identitarian thinking; following Roland Bleiker, ‘a practice of reflection
that ignores the desire for control and the will to power entailed in all
thought claims’ (Bleiker 2000, p. 140). It is toward such a practice of
reflection that sustainable critique aims.

**Genesis 34: The Story of Dina**

We begin with a story of new neighbors:

Dina, the daughter of Leah who was born to Jacob, went out to see
the daughters of the land. (Gen. 34:1)

Why has Dina gone out to meet the daughters of the land? We may
suppose that it is because Jacob and his house are new to the area.
They have, we learn earlier in Genesis, recently migrated to an area
near the city of Shechem, where they have settled on a plot
purchased from the city’s king, Hamor.

Dina is met along the way by Hamor’s son, Shechem—he bears the
same name as the city. What passes between them is unclear:

And Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region
saw her [Dina]; and he took her, lay her and caused pain unto her
And his spirit cleaved to Dina, Jacob’s daughter—he loved the girl, and made appeal to the girl’s heart. Then Shechem spoke to Hamor his father, saying ‘get me this girl for a wife.’ (Gen. 34:2-5)

What happened? Shechem ‘took’ Dina: was it a courtship, or a kidnapping? The traditional reading is that Shechem forced Dina down onto the ground and compelled her sexually. The prince of a great city, Shechem may well have thought nothing of this: that the women of the small, surrounding tribes were his to take; that his father’s wealth and power gave him the freedom to act on any whim he desired (Kass 1992 and Scholtz 1998; but see Gravett 2004; Fewell & Gunn 1991; Van Wolde 2002; Bechtel 1994). And yet the text does not unambiguously say this; nor is it the necessary reading of the original. Another possible reading is that ‘he lay with her, and hurt her”—that is, that the encounter was not a forced one. By this logic, the act was consensual, and Dina’s pain was that of a first sexual encounter. Rashi, the medieval Biblical exegete, tries to split both ends against the middle, suggesting that the encounter began consensually (in part, impugning Dina’s chastity), and then became coercive.6 But then what of the desire for marriage—could it not have been mutual? All of these readings are conjectural; moreover, none of them fully reconciles the text.

For there is no single text, nor a single event, to reconcile. Biblical Hebrew had no system of recording vowels or punctuation; the reader intuits these through context and grammar. In the most immediate sense, therefore, reading is logically subsequent to interpretation: one first decides what the text means, and only after that what it says; the partial Biblical text is completed by the act of reading it. Sometimes—as in this case—more than one pattern of completion is possible. In the present context: we may read the relevant phrase as either ‘vi-yishkav itah, vi-ya’aneha’ (‘and he lay with her, and caused pain unto her’, perhaps implying a consensual act) or as ‘vi-yishkav otah, vi-ya’aneha’ (‘and he laid her down, and caused pain unto her’, perhaps implying a forced act). The belief that Dina was forced is hegemonic, and not without reason; but the text as written quite simply contains a constellation of latent possibilities. One cannot read it without choosing, and thereby imposing something of oneself onto the events depicted.

But the parable given here does more than simply assert that reality is plural or that particular accounts of it are mutually incommensurable. It asserts that neither the event, nor those observing it, nor the text itself, can be ‘identical with themselves’: all are in a constant state of mutual constitution. In the moment of reading, the grammatical lacunae within the text force the reader to impose meaning. Yet the relationship also works in reverse, for the text is canonical. Constantly read and re-read, the truths that derive from and are imputed to it form what Adorno called a ‘force-field’, within which they appear to possess harmonious universality and permanence: they become ‘the facts of life’, to be accepted and learned by those who wish wisdom (Jay, infra
Bernstein 1992, p. 9). Through such texts, we constitute ourselves. Hence, the ‘Roshomon Effect’ (à la Akira Kurosawa’s well-known film) works in multiple directions, with readers, events and texts creating and sustaining one another. Where the Melian dialogue, surveyed above, is often construed to reveal a political world made of and mediated through power, Dina’s story reveals a world that is constructed through interpretation. If those acts of interpretation then guide the use of deadly force, then certain ethical obligations fall upon those students of world politics who engage in them. For does not, following William E. Connolly, ‘identity require … difference in order to be, and convert … difference into otherness to secure its own self-certainty?’ (Connolly 1991, p. 64). Our responsibility is therefore to uncover ‘the forces beneath the surface of … seemingly unanimous didactic opinions’ and show the artifice through which they are brought together (Adorno 2000, p. 8).

Jacob and his sons are not concerned with this ethical problem or its ramifications. Their concerns are more immediate:

Jacob heard that he [Shechem] had defiled Dina his daughter while his sons were in pasture with his cattle, and kept silent until his sons returned. [...] Jacob’s sons came in from the fields … and assembled; they were hotly indignant, for he [Shechem] had committed an outrage upon Israel; to force himself upon the daughter of Jacob – such a thing is not to be done. (Gen. 34:6-8, italics mine)

Jacob’s reading, and that of his sons, is absolutely unambiguous: Dina was defiled; Shechem has violated her. It is not merely a crime against Dina, but an outrage upon Israel, an affront to the nation, one that demands a collective response. From the first, Jacob displays a strategic sensibility: developing a worst-case scenario, keeping his own counsel until his sons have returned to his side. Perhaps he seeks their advice; perhaps he simply does not want to face Shechem and his father alone.

But Hamor, the boy’s father, casts the matter in a very different light: this is a love in bloom. He appeals to Jacob and his sons for Dina’s hand in marriage:

Hamor spoke to them, saying ‘My son – his soul desired your daughter; give her, please, to him for a wife. Marry unto us: give us your daughters, and take our daughters yourselves. You can settle with us, and the whole land will be open to you: settle, trade, and establish yourselves in it.’ Shechem [also] spoke to her father and brothers, saying: ‘Let me find favor in your eyes; whatever you say to me, I will give.’ (Gen. 34:9-11)

Shechem does not seem to be acting out of guile. It is, we must remember, absolutely possible that his and Dina’s was a moment of mutual union, one that seeks only to be blessed post facto by the goodwill and good wishes of family.
Even so, at no point is Dina consulted. This is suspicious. Perhaps when Shechem ‘took’ her, he removed her to some distant location: his and Hamor’s apparently unguarded speech might belie what is in fact a thinly veiled ransom negotiation. We cannot ignore the enormous imbalances in power here: between the chiefs of an itinerant tribe and the princes of a great city; between the men of that tribe and an unmarried daughter. Perhaps no-one cares: her feelings simply do not matter, even to her own kith and kin, save for the commodity-value of her lost virginity. Perhaps Dina refuses to speak. Whatever the reason, the fact of Dina’s silence is unmistakable. Perhaps Jacob and his sons know something we do not. Perhaps not. Perhaps intentionally complicit in this silencing, the narrative presses onward, leaving us sure neither of what we know nor of what the other parties to the story know nor of what ‘really happened’.

Nor does the text dwell on such matters. Jacob’s sons have a plan; they answer Shechem and Hamor beguilingly [or as Rashi glosses it, cleverly], laying a trap:

Jacob’s sons answered Shechem and Hamor his father beguilingly, and spoke — for he had defiled Dina their sister. They said to them: ‘We cannot do this thing — to give our sister to one who has a foreskin; for it is shameful to us. Only thus shall we agree: that if you would become like us, and if each of your males would be circumcised. Then would we give our daughters to you, and would we take yours, and then would we settle with you, and be one people.’ (Gen. 34:13-16)

Each side has offered union with the other. Shechem and Hamor accept these terms; the men of their city are circumcised. Now, at the point where they are all ostensibly one people, Jacob’s sons’ trap springs shut:

And it was on the third day [after the circumcision], while they were all [still] in pain, that two of Jacob’s sons, Simon and Levy, brothers of Dina, took each his sword, and came into the city in safety, and killed all the males. They put Hamor and Shechem to the sword; then they took Dina from Shechem’s house, and they left. [...] They took their flocks, their herds, their ass; they took what was in the city and what was in the field. They took their wealth, their children, their women, and ravaged everything. (Gen. 34:25-9)

What has happened here? Simon and Levy have used a combination of deception and violence to enforce their particular reading of a specific event. They imposed a reading onto events: they gathered up details, and made them fit together; they shaped indications into estimates, and then formed them into a policy. They then used a tactical ruse—circumcision, under the guise of unification—to obtain an operational advantage, and carried the policy out.

This, it may well be argued, is what policymakers do; like Machiavelli’s prince, they must be both foxes and lions. The text does not give Jacob, Simon and Levy unambiguous ground for their actions; but
events in world politics seldom do. The reading they make is not one that can be justified by any apparent necessity in the reality which the narrative sets out. That reality must be 'enhanced' by the reader; indeterminate events must be pressed into narratives, just as social science presses real-world phenomena into the constrictive frame of concepts and narratives. No one party bears the blame for this.

If there is ‘tragedy’ in power politics, it lies here (Lebow 2003; Mearsheimer 2001). Lacking certain knowledge of the world, and given that world’s nastiness and brutishness, princes are forced to make ‘tough calls’ quickly, and then follow through on them zealously. The prince’s duty is not to truth or justice, but to prudence. And it is only on that point that Jacob takes his sons to task:

And Jacob spoke to Simon and Levy: ‘you have troubled me, to make me thus hateful to the inhabitants of this land: the Canaanites and the Perrizites; and I am few in number; they shall gather themselves upon me and smite me, and I shall be destroyed – I, and all my house.’ And they said: ‘shall one make a whore of our sister?’ (Gen. 34:30-31)

An argument has thus broken out between the prince and the generals: was this military operation wisely considered? Should the Israelites have allowed a defiling of one of their daughters to go unpunished? Such an action offends the honor, and might encourage future outrages. But can the Israelites withstand the ensuing blood feud? Perhaps Simon and Levy’s actions were unauthorized by their father—their action was, after all, undertaken without the cooperation of their brothers. But then, perhaps this was intentional—undertaken like a modern-day ‘black op’, designed to leave Jacob with plausible deniability. Or perhaps, like a poor leader, Jacob simply cannot control his own troops.9 At any rate, he must now deal with the possible fallout of his sons’ actions. Despite having only recently settled in the area, they flee. Unable to risk the possibility of revenge attacks by larger settled cities, they retreat under the cover of a divinely sent ‘godly terror’ (see Gen. 35:5), which deters would-be avengers.

_Dina as a Parable for International Theory_

It would be easy enough to deny the essential complexity and contestedness of this story. Traditional exegetical narratives do this through apologetics: Jacob’s descendents wish to place their forefathers’ actions in a favorable light. Nothing would be easier than to do the reverse: to press the story into a familiar counter-narrative of patriarchy and exclusion, in which Dina is a commodity to be possessed, traded, or ‘securitized’: converted from a subject in her own right into an object of ‘state’ policy (inter alia, Waever 1995; Buzan & Waever 2003, Williams 2003). Dina, by this counter-narrative, is either merely a commodity whose exchange value has been diminished with the loss of her virginity, or a site for Jacob’s sons to ‘protect what’s theirs’. All that resonates well with
contemporary ‘radical’ sensibilities in which monotheistic religions are sites of patriarchal exclusion, and in which pre-modern society is innately unreflexive and misogynist (Galtung 1999).

And yet the text offers us none of these simple certainties, and to impose them breaks faith with it. One can, of course, impute any number of motives and intentions onto the characters. Indeed, as was noted earlier, even to read the story one fairly well has to do so: the story cannot be told without imposing a logical-communicative structure onto it. That, in turn means imposing one’s own desires and understandings onto the text: smuggling in, as it were, the political lifeworld in which that logical-communicative structure is nested. Some practice would therefore be necessary to mark the distinction—the essential non-identity—between the story as it is read and the text through which it is given. Only then can the act of reading be something other than a vehicle for readers trading in exclusionary acts of reification. This is extremely difficult, for the very quality which makes the text important—its canonical status—participates in concealing the need for it.

The ‘reading’ of events in world politics presents precisely the same imperative. If IR is to be more than the encoding of events into a normative-political framework, some comparable mode of marking would be needed. That mode of marking would use critique not as a machete—i.e., as a means to hack away at other views one does not like, perpetuating the oscillation in IR theory to which the opening paragraphs alluded—but as a mirror, by which the insufficiency of one’s own thinking is kept constantly, sustainably, in view.

International Theory and the Critique of Identitarian Thinking

In the opening pages of this essay, I argued that IR was in need of a particular kind of reflexivity, which I called sustainable critique. The Dina story helps elucidate the particular qualities of such critique: it demonstrates the particular kinds of indeterminacy which IR must sustain if it is to tread the balance that will allow it to engage with political debates but not be appropriated by them. These can be grouped as follows:

- **At the ontological level.** Who is who? The Shechemites and Jacob’s house begin as strangers; but each offers union with the other. The men of Shechem are circumcised, that is, they are ostensibly made one with the Israelites. But this is a ruse; it is what makes it possible to exterminate them. To speak more broadly: while on the one hand, identity is the basis of security (for it defines that which we would seek to secure), it is held in constant dynamic tension by cross-cutting political, social, historical and contingent forces. Political ontologies are ‘in play’; the actors are not unambiguously ‘identical with themselves’.
At the epistemological level. Incomplete knowledge of the core event is the defining fact of Genesis 34. Both the actors in the story and readers of it cannot make the events cohere without imposing meanings onto it; in effect, transforming it by fiat. Dina was raped; revenge must surely follow. Dina is the beloved of my son; a bride-price must be negotiated.

At the normative level. There is a normative responsibility that inheres in imposing conceptual thought, owing to what that thought excludes or imposes. To be sure, we can offer a reading to justify any number of actions; but in all cases, we impose retrospectively facts on the story which are not there. Not only do we intervene in the story and re-write it, but such stories also form the basis upon which we constitute ourselves as knowing, feeling and thinking political and scholarly actors. Theorists are ‘obliged’ to remember what they cannot ever know: the ‘objectivity’ to which their thinking aspires, and upon which it relies—even if it does not, in fact, exist.

Revealing the precarious nature of such exclusions and impositions is a central concern of critical theory’s engagement with world politics: showing how understanding follows from the imposition of interpretations that rob the real world of its true content, vibrancy and complexity; of its inherent ontological inconstancy. Once formed, these understandings eclipse things in themselves; what we are defending is not what is, but our conceptions of what is.

To appreciate this, one need only think of contemporary moments of collective political uncertainty. A group of terrorists crash a series of passenger aircraft into an iconic building or buildings, killing thousands. What has happened; or rather, into what pre-existing narrative or paradigm shall these acts be inserted, in order to give them sense and meaning? Is this the work of radically evil killers and nihilists? Of misguided young men whose frustrations must be ‘understood’ in socio-economic terms? Is this a ‘double movement’ against global capitalism? Is it ‘Islam’ organizing itself against the depredations of the ‘West’? Or has the hegemon merely reaped her pre-ordained harvest of hubris, ‘the chickens coming home to roost’? The problem is not ascertaining what the event is; it is rather preserving all the possibilities as to what it could be.

All of these pre-existing narratives—and others besides—were used by Americans seeking to make sense of, and plan policy in the wake of, the attacks of 11 September 2001. Each narrative line unlocks certain possibilities and makes valuable insights plain. Each is also comfortingly simple, and exerts an emotive appeal, as well as an intellectual one. Thus are different lines of rational thought adopted by different affective and partisan-political dispositions. The process by which this happens is complex. Its effects, however, are straightforwardly perceived: the unbearable ease by which conceptual knowledge hypostatizes the complex indeterminacy of material reality,
reducing people and things into objects of thought (Adorno 1973, pp. 52-3 and 56). Morton Schoolman summarized this perfectly:

In every instance thought and speech ineluctably entail the imposition of form, of identity, on difference, that suffers violence through cognitive acts that are necessarily inadequate to the task of representation. Thought cannot escape ... a 'universal delusive context'—the prison that thought constructs and carries with it in every attempt to move beyond its limitations. (Schoolman 1997, pp. 59-60)

Jacob’s sons seem to bump up against the bars of Schoolman’s prison. They ‘must’ kill the Shechemites. Must they? Jennifer Mitzen’s apt phrase, ontological security, seems to capture the nature of this ‘must’: ‘the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time—as being rather than constantly changing—in order to realize a sense of agency’. It is, she asserts, ‘security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice’ (Mitzen 2006b, pp. 342 and 344; also Kinnvall 2004; Manners 2002; Mitzen 2006a; Zarakol 2010). Mitzen’s logic is a perfect fit: Simon’s and Levy’s mass killing solves their existential problem; their agency has been assured. We cannot simply disprove their reading of Dina’s ‘violation’. Nor can we disprove the claim that leaving such a threat unanswered would encourage future depredations. We can only show that those interconnections are not the only possible ones, slowing down thought and perhaps thus creating more possibilities for action. We can use that slowed-down space to mobilize moral arguments (about the imperative not to commit mass murder), epistemological ones (about the uncertain nature of the conceptual analysis upon which such mass murder might be predicated) or prudential ones (finding ways to let ‘cooler heads’ prevail). Theory, in other words, cannot fundamentally change the indeterminacy of the text, or of politics. But it can make the stubborn fact of that indeterminacy known to political discourses that elide or ignore it. In that way, a defense of indeterminacy takes on a positive ethical aspect within a larger discourse: it becomes IR’s vocation, in the Weberian sense (Weber 1948; Barkawi 1998; Keohane 2009; Norton 2004; Wolin 1972).

Adorno understood this vocation. ‘There is simply no thought without concepts ... the demand to eliminate [them] contains a chimerical and, one might almost say, a quixotic element’ (Adorno 2000, p. 79). One has no choice but to rely on deeply flawed thought processes. It was for this reason that, on his account, the thinker had an ethical obligation to chasten herself and her understandings. That is, it behooved the thinker to eschew identitarian modes of thinking: the belief that static intellectual concepts might accurately represent (i.e., be identical to) objects in the real world without some loss or distortion. Identitarian thinking made ‘unlike things like’—sacrificing their uniqueness, and ultimately making them fungible (Rose 1994, p. 157). ‘To think’, Adorno asserted, ‘is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance
and truth of thought entwine’ (Adorno 1973, p. 5). Realizing this, the onus on us is to remember, in effect, what we can never really have known; that what we believe, perceive, or know represents only a fraction of what truly is. It is at this point that our ethical responsibility, drawn from the intractability of the epistemological-ontological problem discussed above, must begin. Our need to feel at home in the world—Mitzen’s ontological security—is not a priori sufficient moral warrant for destroying others (Steele 2008; Steele & Delehanty 2009). Sustainable critique aims to drive that point home: that is the political upshot of the indeterminacy it aims to defend.

To that end, Adorno suggests that thought and nature need to be estranged from one another. Ideas do not reflect reality like a mirror; there is a dialectical process of negotiation between the two. On the one hand, the more carefully honed one’s concepts and categories, the more productively they might be applied to reality. On the other hand, those very qualities lead one to confuse those concepts with reality: to forget that concepts are merely stand-ins for the world that remains beyond rigor. And in good dialectical fashion, the ‘better’ they are at describing the things we wish to know about, the ‘worse’ they are in leaving us with the ability to distinguish them from the real world as such. This inherently mismatched quality is non-identity; that is, Adorno wishes us to assume that our ideas and the world are inherently non-identical.

So read, Dina’s story becomes a parable of non-identity: a cautionary tale of what becomes of those who fail to mark it. Because we can never be certain of what we are, what we know, or what it means—because our thoughts about the world, filtered through concepts, are always at a remove from that world—we are obliged to be extremely careful, considered, and circumspect when it comes to our use of deadly force. Our dependence on concepts adds an extra layer of personal responsibility into political engagements, which sustainably critical theory aims to help discharge.

Non-identity does not mean that there is no real world of actions, things, and events ‘out there’. Such claims turn quickly into nihilistic moral relativism, exactly the opposite of what Adorno intends (Habermas 1981). From the horrors of the twentieth century, we know only too well (and without needing to resort to conceptual thought or scholarly reflection to ‘prove’ it) that violence and suffering are real. We know it viscerally, from grainy photographs taken sixty years ago, and from jumpy, Hi-8 video footage from Rwanda or Yugoslavia. Our obligation lies in what we do with that knowledge; in anchoring it to an ethical worldview that makes every event of human suffering a unique evil in its own right, rather than a brick in a larger normative-political narrative. Suffering is not to be classified or dealt with conceptually, but remembered and felt as a deep empathy for other fellow-beings. Only thus can we preserve it in its fullness, and experience it without rationalizing, conceptual subterfuge. ‘The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy
that would talk us out of that suffering ... the physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different' (Adorno 1973, pp. 202-3). Empathy must remain outside of reason so that it can chasten reason.10

Philosopher Adi Ophir has captured the nature of this empathy in an idiom that fits the present discussion. Against the tendency of thought to erase the particular in favor of the general, and against its use in a political calculus to inform self-interested prudence, thought must take an ethical stand against itself. It is perhaps not a coincidence, Ophir notes, that ‘morality’—in Hebrew, musar—is tied etymologically to both the notions of giving, and of self-submission. ‘The moral (hamusari) is nothing but a type of giving (mesira) and a form of devotion or self-giving (hitmasrut)’ (Ophir 2005, p. 19). If the Cartesian image of thought sees thinking as the mind coming into its own and differentiating itself from others—cogito, ergo sum—morality in this understanding is made possible precisely by affecting something like Ophir’s ‘self-giving’: surrendering precisely that differentiation. The challenge for sustainably critical IR is threefold. First, the theorist must remain aware of this burden for self-disclosure, with all of the difficulties it entails—even as problems in politics appear to disclose themselves to her unproblematically and intuitively. Second, the theorist must be able to do so while also thinking and speaking meaningfully about those problems. ‘When philosophers ... engage in conversation they should always try to lose the argument, but in such a way as to convict their opponent of untruth’ (Adorno 1974, p. 70). It is for this reason that Ophir’s hitmasrut—self-surrender—must be affected, rather than swallowed whole. Sustainable critique recognizes, with Ferdinand Tönnies, the link between conceptual theory and social relations which instrumentalize others for the gratification of oneself (Tönnies 1957, p. 202). But it rejects making a fetish of ‘preconceptual’ thinking with equal vigor. ‘We have no doubt ... that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking’, noted Adorno and Horkheimer, even if ‘the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contain the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, p. xvi). Third, the theorist must carry out this reconfiguration of thought in a fashion that does not assert transcendent authority for herself or the critical position she adopts. It is only in this mode that critique can be sustained: shielded from its own excesses. Sustainable critique admits of no counter-claim that can become its own basis for positive moral authority: there are to be no ‘free-floating intellectuals’, nor promises of an authentic, unmutilated, or immediate reality that will somehow disclose itself when the veil of ‘social illusion’ has been ‘punctured’ by critique (Mannheim 1936; Lukács 1971, pp. 5-6; Adorno 1983, pp. 35-50).

Each of these challenges can be taken in turn. The first of them is addressed through what Adorno called negative dialectics. For Hegel,
it may be recalled, the process of dialectical contradiction and resolution had been an historical engine of progress: the process by which truth was slowly refined out of falsehood, in anticipation for a future in which ideas and matter, values and practices, identities within and realities without would come together in a grand harmonic convergence, an end of history. In Adorno’s hands, such philosophical millenarianism would be turned on its head. Dialectics would be the opposite; a means of systematically chastening such beliefs: negating the universality or timelessness of any particular concept of freedom, identity or faith:

[S]uch dialectics … does not tend to the identity in the difference between each object and its concept; instead, it is suspicious of all identity. Its logic is one of disintegration: of a disintegration of the prepared and objectified form of the concepts which the cognitive subject faces, primarily and directly. (Adorno 1973, p. 145)

Applied to problems of politics, negative dialectics seeks to preserve awareness for how our thoughts and ideas stitch together a coherent view of the world, given the hunger for a sense of ‘ontological security’ alluded to above. In IR, where such analyses turn quickly into justifications regarding the use of lethal force, such remembrance is absolutely essential—in real time, and in highly demanding circumstances. The notion here is an explicit slowing down of thought, of weighing it down in the face of the speed, danger, and urgency of politics and national security:

Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. (Adorno 1974, p. 247)

Elsewhere and more aphoristically, Adorno asserted that ‘the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass’: those tools are to be valued which scatter, disrupt or diffract one’s perspective precisely because of the fact of that scattering, disruption or diffraction (Adorno 1974, p. 50).

The second problem is to find a mode of thought which allows for such ‘weighing down’ to be reconciled to a world that requires practical theory, and to a discipline the primary commitment of which is to supply such theory. Sustainable critique requires that theory be subjected to reflection in the very moment of its conception. In an era of terrorism and mass destruction—Jacob and Shechem’s world, radicalized—this is both a fundamental ethical commandment, and our best hope for survival. For Adorno, this meant using conceptual thought in constellar terms: following Martin Jay and Richard Wyn Jones, an approach that ‘seeks to facilitate the thinking through of relationships between various “elements” that “resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle”'
It denotes clusters of theoretical narratives deployed multiply around a complex problem or phenomenon, in a matter that allows theory to both produce useful knowledge, and to chasten it, pari passu.\footnote{Wyn Jones 2001, pp. 9-10.}

The work of a constellation is, in an important sense, aesthetic: it speaks to how theoretical knowledge is presented to and appreciated by consciousness, given the latter’s tendencies and limitations. Constellations aim to continuously reveal the concepts and theories they bring together as nodes embedded within dense, interactive nets of fact and value. By so juxtaposing them, they retain both their generative context and natural delimitations, checking their potential to identitarianism and reification. ‘By themselves,’ Adorno explained, ‘constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away from within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being … They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking’ (Adorno 1973, p. 162). The goal is explicitly experiential: to ‘challenge … all our instincts as academics’ by interfering with our ability to unproblematically break down ‘text into concepts, logical flows and conclusions’. The aim is to foster ‘digressions and interpretations that, although inspired by the text, often transgress it’ (Pusca 2009, p. 241).

The third challenge speaks to the problem of turning the imperative of Adorno’s negative dialectic inward. It will be recalled that Ophir’s notion of morality and self-submission (musar/hitmasrut) was an affected transformation. The theorist does not undo the ability to think, but rather aims to chasten it: to preserve those faculties that retain appreciation for ways of feeling, knowing and intuiting that thinking may serve to eclipse. The knowledge that one’s theoretical constructions are inherently unequal to the world, and possess as much potential for catastrophe as for a material improvement of the human condition, is meant to evoke a chastening sensibility in the thinker: a sense of directed, controlled despair akin to Vladimir and Estragon’s dilemma in Waiting for Godot. This is a felt commitment, for without such a feeling, why would theorists commit themselves to the difficulty of sustainable critique?

**New Critical Moves in International Relations: Are They Sustainable?**

The search for sustainable critique—in different forms and idioms—is as old as the discipline of IR itself. Friedrich Meinecke’s study of state interest, Machiavellism, provides an especially poignant—and early—example. Historically, Meinecke argued in 1924, the systematic study of state interest had served a regulative and limiting function: a means to wean the political ambition of princes away from personal or dynastic whim. Yet with the rise of mass politics and hyper-nationalism, princely caprice was no longer the central obstacle to peace. A critique of raison d’état was thus inadequate to the challenges facing world politics:
[T]oday the idea of *raison d’état* ... is in the middle of a severe crisis. The natural basis of elemental passions which it possesses and which cannot ... be subdued solely by its utilitarian middle ground, makes a more terrible impression today than ever before; and the civilizing achievements of the modern world tend rather to exaggerate it than restrict it. All the ways in which the modern State has become enriched by successive influxes of liberal, democratic, national and social forces and ideas (and which hitherto we have tended to regard as pure enrichment and increase) have now shown their other face, and have brought *raison d’état* into contact with forces which it is no longer able of controlling. (Meinecke 1957 [1924], p. 423)

In the wake of the First World War, Meinecke the historian and German conservative had already discerned the outlines of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, then still two decades distant: ‘the terrible antinomy between the ideals of rational morality and the actual processes and causal connections of history’, which ‘[w]e, the vanquished ... see more clearly than the victor does’ (1957, p. 432). No solution could be offered: only a change of affect that he, as a scholar, felt was his duty to commend to statesmen. National interest and cosmopolitan values, he suggested, might coexist in constellation: each held in tension against the other by ‘the executive statesman ... together in his heart, if he is not to let himself be overpowered by the daemon (which he is still not quite capable of shaking off completely)’ (1957, p. 433). Sustainable critique *avant la lettre*: a change of affect—here powered by a collective experience of loss and humiliation)—operationalized by a kind of simple constellation.

Of course, things went rather differently. Meinecke assumed a leadership that would wish to control that ‘daemon’ rather than incite it; such a leadership would prove some decades distant. Nor is it clear—almost a century after the Great War—that consensus around a particular historical event can do the work he had hoped. The core impulse is correct. Yet the attempt is still, at bottom, identitarian: for his affect is anchored in a common, defining experience which becomes a political shibboleth, an extension of the crisis inhering (as he would suggest two decades later) in ‘our own German way of being men’. With its haunting, oblique connection to both the extermination campaigns of mid-century Europe and the ongoing wars of the Middle East, Genesis 34 might drive a similar change of affect, while avoiding Meinecke’s identitarian pitfall.

There have been more recent intimations of critique in IR, but serious limitations attend them as well: they simply ignore the changes in affect that attend its sustainability. Consider here the multi-paradigmatism that has emerged to extend and develop ‘third debate’ constructivism—from Legro and Moravcsik’s (1999) ‘two-step approach’ to what Peter Katzenstein, Rudra Sil, Emanuel Adler, and Barry Buzan and Ole Waever have called at turns ‘eclectic’ ‘communitarian’ or ‘regional’ approaches to IR (Katzenstein 2005;
Katzenstein & Sil 2004, 2008, 2010; Adler 2005; Buzan & Waever 2003). Each reflects, in different ways and degrees, the ontological, epistemological and normative problems of non-identity. They recognize that we can never really determine the components of interstate politics for once and all. Social facts are always in flux, and can be viewed only through their local effects or instantiations. This, in turn, means that all characterizations are partial and contestable, requiring a constellation of approaches to hold each one in tension with the others. The principle of non-contradiction must be soft-pedaled, as must parsimony. For these are possible only to the extent we agree, consciously or otherwise, upon fundamental conventions of reference and action: precisely what may be absent in international political transactions (Eckersley 2008; Bialley Mattern 2005). Working from another direction, the Critical IR Theory/Critical Security Studies project of Andrew Linklater, Robert Cox, Richard Wyn Jones, and Ken Booth have sought to anchor dialectics in a positive concept of post-national emancipation.

Whatever their other virtues, however, these approaches do not on their own constitute a sustainable form of critique. ‘Regions’ are certainly ambiguous ontological constructions, but what function do they serve, save to bridge among otherwise incommensurate assumptions about states? As such, regionalism and eclecticism seem to foreclose discussions of diversity, rather than foster them. Likewise, it is certainly a proper beginning to acknowledge that many views of the same set of real-world conditions are possible; but is that enough? Different theories do not simply emerge out of the air; they are constructed for a purpose. It would behoove us both to determine what those purposes are and to chasten our own dispositions to them. Otherwise we are simply engaging in a form of glorified relativism.

Similarly, the Critical IR/Security Studies project can only succeed if emancipation can be given a free-standing, transcendentally authoritative meaning that is somehow insulated from the possibility of partisan political exploitation. Whether this can be done remains unclear (Alker 2005; Rengger 2001). No doubt these scholars would resist valiantly any attempt to so appropriate their theory; but the nature of reification is precisely that the intent of theorists does not suffice to determine the work to which their ideas are put, nor to counter the ways in which ideas of ideological provenance are naturalized into social or political facts. In both cases, what seems like a virtue risks becoming a fault: adopting the tools of weak ontology without considering the ethical problems that they carry in their train. ‘There can be no security of knowledge when it comes to responsibility’ as Maja Zehfuss has observed (2002, p. 261). That responsibility runs to depths that these scholars may not completely suspect. There is no sharp dividing line between the theorist, the theory and what is being theorized; the relativism of such theory comes from the fact that it is immanent to the world which it seeks to describe, part of its ontological instability.
This in turn raises the question of ethics, without which eclecticism cannot but devolve into its own forms of scholarly orthodoxy. The fact that particular theories seem to suit particular problems is not merely a fortuitous happenstance: knowledge is created to serve particular ends, and cannot be divorced from them. The modes and paradigms for studying world politics—IR’s appropriations from realpolitik, Marxism and liberalism—are the distilled and operationalized conceptual precipitates of long-standing normative political traditions (Gunnell 1998, p. 153). Merely molding or shaping these precipitates into new combinations will not change the fact that they are constituted in the shape of interests; it will simply make those interests harder to see. One can paint a new portrait from scratch, or fashion a collage out of existing images; either way, the hand of the artist is always guided by pre-existing sensibilities, desires, and beliefs. ‘The curiosity which transforms the world into objects is not objective’, Adorno argues. ‘It is not concerned with what is known but with the fact of knowing it, with having, with knowledge as a possession’ (Adorno 2001, pp. 85-6).

Concluding Thoughts

So long as critique does not work on ontological, methodological and ethical-normative levels simultaneously, it will prove difficult to sustain; IR will struggle to avoid the ‘oscillating’ tendencies discussed in the introduction as it careens between, on the one hand, the renunciation of politics as such and, on the other hand, over-identification with particular agendas in politics. This ongoing failure, in an age of global terror and nuclear weapons, is not without risk. As IR’s Hans Morgenthau warned in 1961:

It is … the backwardness of our consciousness in view of the possibility of nuclear death, that threatens us with the actuality of nuclear death … An age whose objective conditions of existence have been radically transformed by the possibility of nuclear death evades the need for a radical transformation of its thought and action by thinking and acting as though nothing of radical import has happened. This … has spelled the doom of men and civilizations before. It is likely to do so again. (Morgenthau 1961, p. 234)

Some will protest this as histrionic: Morgenthau’s ‘nuclear death’ was held at bay by nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction (MAD); we too shall find ‘fixes’ for the new nightmares of our own day. Perhaps. To return to the analogy of 11 September: perhaps a combination of constant surveillance and military unilateralism will keep would-be terrorists at bay. Or perhaps American over-extension will provoke political and economic retrenchment, with an attendant reduction or refocusing of global friction or subaltern dissatisfaction. But these are ultimately, as was noted in the beginning of this essay, questions of policy: not of a scholarly discipline which either can, or cannot, ask important questions about such policy even as it seeks to inform it. For Adorno, the vocation of scholarship was not, à la Weber,
to tame freewheeling political discourse by means of ‘rationalized’
social science and thus produce order; it was rather to use the tools of
such thought to generate sustained critique. To make, that is, the
tendentiousness and limitations of thinking apparent even at the
moment of our greatest uncertainty, our deepest crisis. IR cannot
resolve the decades-old crisis in thought, culture and politics which its
newfound pluralism helps reveal. It can only point to that crisis with
sobriety and resolve.

This, for Adorno, was the vocation of thinking after the horrors of
Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Since then, humanity has played at a game
whose margins of error are extremely narrow, and where the costs of
miscalculation are enormous; and all of this under the shadow of self-
annihilation. It demeans all life to ‘play the odds’ in such a situation; it
makes us complicit in the reduction of life to questions of cost and
benefit. For what is an acceptable margin of risk or error? If life has
become untenable except by the suppression of this crisis of thought
and ethics, is that not worth knowing? Is making its immediate
relevance to all aspects of political life not a worthy vocation for the
scholarly study of world politics? In the rush of events, long-term
dangers and consequences remain difficult to see, control remains
imperfect, and the temptation to peremptory decision persists. IR—as
distinct from the practice of policy—offers one way to resist this
temptation. But only if it can sustain a deep commitment to what else
the world could be, outside of our own understandings of it. ‘It lies in
the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself,
as if it were total. This is its form of hope’ (Adorno 1973, p. 406).

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Notes

1 Following the disciplinary norm in political science, the capitalized phrase
International Relations (or IR), refers to the academic discipline. Events in
world politics will generally be denoted as such, or by the phrase
‘international relations’ in lowercase.

2 Inter alia: Bayliss et al. (2008), Buzan and Little (2000), Dougherty and


5 By way of example: I do not directly touch here on how the Biblical tradition intersects with contemporary world politics. The Biblical city of Shechem, where Genesis 34 takes place, is the site of modern-day Nablus. The conflict depicted, between the Children of Israel and ‘the sons and daughters of the land’ could certainly be read into present-day political conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians.

6 On the possibility that the act was consensual, see Nachmanides [Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman]. Though Nachmanides ultimately rejects this possibility, the refutation seems primarily motivated by an outside interest: defending Dina’s honor against the charge of sexual wantonness (Nachmanides 1975, p. 189). For his part, Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki] glosses that Shechem lay with Dina ‘after her way and also not after her way’ (כדרכה ולא כדרכה)—meaning perhaps that what began as consensual did not finish that way (Rashi on Genesis 34:2; from *Snunit Online Archive of Sacred Texts* (Hebrew), viewed 13 October, 2007, http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/r/t0134.htm

throughout the text; by her maternal lineage when her chastity appears to be at issue (Dina, daughter of Leah); or through her paternal/collective lineage when her ‘national’ identity becomes an object of contention (Dina, daughter of Jacob/Israel).

8 Another layer of meaning also exists here: for circumcision (*milah*), is also the Hebrew term for oath or promise; in its now-archaic transitive conjugation (*lehamil*) it also means to destroy or cut down, as in Psalm 118: *My enemies surrounded me, and in the Lord’s name I cut them down (amilam)*. *Milah* can thus be construed as the copula connecting identity and difference, *inracination* and *deracination*.

9 See Jacob’s deathbed rebuke of Simon and Levy at Genesis (49:5-6). Jacob here implies that he had disapproved of his sons’ actions all along. Why did he fail to say so? Perhaps he feared his own ostensible subordinates.

10 Non-identity thus resembles the ‘sense of wonderment’ that comes from preserving one’s difference with the other, as set out in Blaney and Inayatullah (2004, p. 9). But Adorno’s humility is self-directed, not other-directed; it is experienced not in interactions with others, but rather is accepted *a priori* as a kind of negative transcendent moral obligation. On this point, see Honneth (2007, ch. 2), and Coles (1997, ch. 2). My thanks to William E. Connolly on this point.

11 That said, Wyn Jones’ practical application of Constellar thought differs from Adorno’s materially. For Wyn Jones, Constellar thinking is to be understood as means to reconcile ‘rather distinctive approaches, all seeking to illuminate a central theme, that of emancipation’ (2001, p. 4). The present essay seeks to hew more closely to Adorno’s post-war writing, where, as Rengger observed, ‘emancipation was not one of Adorno’s major concerns’ (2001, p. 102). Not, it is to be stressed, because Adorno opposed the idea in principle. Rather because he saw both its conceptual refinement and its practical implementation as impossible, while the pursuit of it opened the door to its own dangers.

12 Meinecke (1954 [1948], p. 156): ‘We Germans live today amid the ruins of state and nation; all that is involved in our culture is gravely threatened. Everywhere new paths must be searched out; everywhere these paths are in darkness … [I]n such a situation we are wanting in that tranquillity of soul and clarity of vision which enable us, by means of the experience of our time, to give new shape to the course of … world history in Ranke’s sense. One thing, however, has remained to us, our own German way of being men. It presents to us unanticipated problems of the most sombre hue. The inner difficulties of establishing a scholarly foundation become more urgent. For that purpose we must rediscover ourselves by throwing light upon the historical transformations of our own character and the interweaving of our guilt and our fate’.

13 The key argument is that realism as an analytical paradigm has been so overstretched as to become meaningless. As a necessary corrective, they argue, ‘monocausal mania’ must be replaced with ‘multicausal, even multiparadigmatic syntheses’ (1999, p. 50). Reducing realism to a set of minimalist core assumptions is the necessary first step. Following this, they
extend Putnam’s (1988) and Christensen’s (1996) “two-stage” or “two-step” logic, which ‘assumes, as any rationalist (or boundedly rational) theory of state behavior must, that in world politics ... preference and belief formation can be analytically separated from the strategic logic of interstate interaction’ (1999, p. 51, emphases mine). ‘[E]ach major international relations theory paradigm enjoys a comparative advantage in explaining a different input into the bargaining game’. In effect, theories must be chosen based not on what’s true, but what’s useful, with usefulness judged ‘by examining what [a given theory] is able to exclude’ (1999, p. 53).

Notwithstanding its perspicacity, Legro and Moravcsik’s argument evades ontology and ethics, to its detriment. Their ‘two-step’ wants to employ different methodologies while ignoring the ontological question entirely: why is it that certain theories enjoy ‘comparative advantages’ in explaining this or that phenomenon? Instead of answering this, they instead call on realism to hypothesize itself still further, asking for ‘a clear formulation of what realism is and is not’. ‘Wouldn’t anyone see this as desirable? Shouldn’t everyone care?’ (Feaver et al. 2000, pp. 192-3). The answer, flatly, is no; what everyone should care about are events in world politics, which are a confluence of ideologies, theories, and material realities; that’s why neo-conservative hawks are content with what the authors correctly identify (Legro and Moravcsik 2001, passim) as ‘faux realism’. While intellectually bankrupt, it takes them where they want to go. Perhaps Legro and Moravcsik think they should not have wanted to go there. Agreed; but that is at bottom a normative claim, not a question of ‘objective’ science.

14 For Katzenstein and his co-authors, methods are secondary; it is problems that must concern students of international relations (Hemmer & Katzenstein 2002, p. 599). Rather than methodological bickering, ‘scholarship should be about the disciplined analysis of empirical puzzles’ (Katzenstein & Okawara 2001/02, p. 154). This is the end which eclecticism is meant to serve; it is advanced by means of mixed methodologies, and weak ontologies. Consider how Katzenstein’s ‘regions’ are defined: their mediated nature is stressed, as is the tangible sense of reality they impart to those who take them for granted; they are ‘cognitive practices shaped by language and political discourse, which through the creation of concepts, metaphors, analogies, determine how the region is defined’ (Katzenstein 2000, p. 354, emphases mine; also idem: 2005, pp. 6-13). It is this ethereal quality—of being there and yet also not being there—which renders communication and culture so significant. This in turn, means that scholarly standards need to change: ‘adequate understanding’ must replace parsimony (Katzenstein & Okawara 2001/02, p. 167). ‘[A]nalytical eclecticism leaves room for disagreement about the shape of particular causal arguments and the sequence in which variables interact’, since ‘the causal structure of eclectic arguments need not be uniform’ (Hemmer & Katzenstein 2002, p. 599). See also Sil and Doherty (2000).

Why these scholarly standards must change is less exhaustively considered. Why is ‘adequate’ knowledge to be preferred to knowledge which is more one-dimensional, but easier to operationalize? And would not his claims about cultural mediation with reference to regions also make sense regarding states and societies in general? On this front, Katzenstein and Sil (2004, 2008, 2010) make a ‘problem-centered’ argument: adequate knowledge is better because it generates better insights for solving problems, and will thus ostensibly contribute to better policy. Yet as the authors acknowledge, this is
at bottom a normative judgment: as to the optimal balance between conceptual clarity and theoretical nuance in light of what theory is for.


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