

# Wager upon wager: Assessing Iver B. Neumann's contribution to International Relations

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## Abstract

A key player in the Scandinavian rise in the International Relations discipline, Iver B. Neumann has made significant contributions to several research programs, from Russian and European identity politics to practice theory and discourse analysis, through *longue durée* analyses of governmentality and diplomacy. At the theoretical level, Neumann has borrowed multiple social-theoretical resources that have allowed him to make a variety of epistemological and ontological wagers as his gaze shifted from one topic to the next. Original and wide-ranging as it is, this scholarship is also full of tensions that illustrate the value and pitfalls of a pragmatic attitude to theorizing. By revealing Neumann as an intellectual fox (in Berlin's sense), we critically assess his scholarship, including the epistemological stretches it contains and the many difficult challenges that it struggles to meet. Overall, Neumann's overarching method, which he consistently follows despite all its internal contradictions, seems to be what anthropologists call to "make strange"—a relentless drive to transform the conventional, habitual, and self-evident into a puzzle, and then make this puzzle relevant to, or have import for, both scholarly debates and contemporary political practice.

## Keywords

diplomacy, discourse, international relations theory, practice

## Introduction

Scandinavian scholarship played a decisive role in the theoretical *aggiornamento* that characterized the discipline of International Relations (IR) in the 1990s and early 2000s. Ole Wæver (1993) introduced the concept of securitization, thus placing the study of security on qualitatively new theoretical footing. Lene Hansen (1997) made important interventions by bringing poststructuralist theories to bear on the nexus between identity and security. Jens Bartelson (1995) provided a genealogy of sovereignty, thereby displacing established ideas about the evolution of sovereignty in international political history. Iver B. Neumann (2013 [1996], 1999) published two important books—on

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Russian and on European identity—that showed how self-other constructions within discourses are constitutive of identity. The key common thread across these landmark contributions is a recourse to broader social-theoretical resources in order to advance IR scholarship and throw new light on its constitutive debates.

To many, the grounding of IR knowledge development in more abstract social theory raises the question of its relationship with, and relevance for, the world of practice and politics. As we borrow and use sophisticated approaches to problematize taken-for-granted structures and make strange discourses and identities, how should we conceive of their ramifications in actual world politics? Here, Neumann stands out among his Scandinavian and international peers for confronting this issue head on throughout his career. Foretelling the post-truth era in many ways, Neumann (1999: 213–214) explicitly wondered from the get-go:

The question is what those of us who would like to combat essentializing representations of human communities should do in the meantime, except for analyzing them and then waiting for them to peter out. The question, put at its sternest, must be: What if the poststructuralist insistence on celebrating “nomadic identities” lays the field open for essentializing narratives of self?

This article provides an in-depth exegesis of Neumann’s scholarship in order to bring to the fore his relentless quest for making social theory relevant for the real world of political practice. Our starting observation is that Neumann typifies Isaiah Berlin’s fox, who contrary to the hedgehog’s dogged approach, feeds on multiple sources no matter the *pirouettes* involved. In IR, Tetlock (2005) borrowed this distinction in his study of expert political judgment. While our focus here is not on prediction and accuracy, the distinction between foxes and hedgehogs remains useful in assessing the intellectual project of grounding IR debates and knowledge in social theory—an intellectual enterprise in which Neumann-the-intellectual-fox has played a central role in recent decades.

Indeed, Neumann’s lifelong scholarship, which spans Russian and European identity formation, diplomacy, practice theory, governmentality, discourse analysis, and the *longue durée* of politics, has made numerous critical impacts on IR as a discipline. In the background, his variegated works also reflect a broader set of issues relating to the purposes of theorizing, including the value—and pitfalls, we shall suggest—of a pragmatic attitude to theorizing. To make our point, we borrow Jackson’s (2016) notion of “wagers,” which are “provisional commitments”—ontological as well as epistemological—that scholars ought to make in order to conduct inquiry. As we seek to show, Neumann’s application of concepts and theoretical tools hailing from outside political science, combined with his continuing effort to engage the mainstream and contribute to policy debates, has yielded many important insights. Yet as Neumann-the-fox made wager upon wager in the creative application and development of theory, his eclectic approach also generated significant tensions and contradictions whose examination throws useful light on IR as an intellectual project.

## Knowledge development in IR and Neumann’s wagers

The turn to social theory that characterized many strands of scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s, including in Scandinavia, is representative of the distinctiveness of IR as a

discipline. IR forms part of political science but evolves to a considerable degree through the import of theories and methods developed outside of it. As Hoffmann (1977) noted, the two foundational works of the discipline—Carr's (2001 [1939]) *The Thirty Years Crisis* and Morgenthau's (1948) *Politics Among Nations*—were written by a historian and a lawyer, respectively. The Scandinavian IR scholarship of the 1990s similarly drew heavily on concepts and theories from outside of political science, notably continental theory and philosophy. Yet for Hoffmann (1977: 50), the formation of IR as a primarily American social science had to do with the “relays between the kitchens of power and the academic salons” in the United States following the Second World War. A high level of demand in government circles to offer advice coincided with growth in universities and funding from foundations.

This path of intellectual development is also characteristic of Scandinavia. For example, Thue (1997) has shown how Norwegian social science developed through direct import from the United States in the formative decades after the Second World War. The more general point is elegantly made by Fourcade (2009) in her study of how the economics profession in the United States, the United Kingdom and France has historically been shaped by its position between the market and the state. According to this perspective, scholarly orientation and developments are shaped by the institutional context, notably funding agencies and established traditions of orientation toward other parts of society. By implication, IR scholars—and not only in the United States—face a variety of career incentives when it comes to balancing theoretical innovation, critique, and policy engagement.

In practice, most scholars end up choosing one primary focus, either straying close to policy debates and contributing with critique and policy advice, or prioritizing theoretical innovation and a different, more fundamental form of critique. Rarely do the two go together. This is not to say that it is impossible, of course. Schelling (1960) arguably did so with his *Strategy of Conflict*, coining terms such as credible commitment and focal point, which have been a staple of foreign- and security policy for decades. But in most cases, there is a tension between the two: the bread and butter of policy advice is mostly in the form of new empirical data suggesting a new policy or applied research of some kind, not theoretical innovation drawn from French social theory. This is particularly so if the theoretical innovation in question has a critical bent to it, in the form of pointing to overlooked features of the constitution of the state, or to how the construction of national identity leads to blind spots in foreign policy.

We see in Neumann's scholarship a rare attempt to combine fundamental critique of political practice drawing on a broad range of social theoretical insights with an interest in translating and making them palatable to a public political discourse that is allergic to such social theoretical critique. It is also marked by an interest in engaging mainstream IR scholarship and contributing to broader discussions with scholars coming at the same set of questions from different theoretical vantage points. The result is a scholarship packed with original insights, but also characterized by tensions and contradictions that—we argue—to a large degree stem from the attempt to draw on a set of theories that are not easily translated to, or compatible with, an orientation toward, and interest in, public political debate.

As Jackson (2016: 37–38) explains, social inquiry inevitably rests on “wagers,” that is, “provisional commitments” about the nature of the real, the way to develop knowledge, or the role of scholarship. Whatever one's intellectual leanings, “commitments of

this sort undergird every instance of scientific research, implicitly shaping what the goals of such research are thought to be and how the research goes about trying to accomplish those goals.” Importantly, Jackson adds, wagers “depend, in the final analysis, on a measure of *faith*, precisely because they cannot be resolved empirically or rationally” (original emphasis). While Jackson is critical of the dearth of discussion around intellectual wagers in IR, he stops short from asserting whether these should be coherent or adaptable, noting that “[i]n principle, IR scholars ought to change their wagers when appropriate, but in practice, few do.” If this observation is correct—that most people stick to the same wagers for their entire careers—then the discipline is overwhelmingly populated by hedgehogs instead of foxes.

Isaiah Berlin (2013 [1953]) used the distinction between the fox and the hedgehog to categorize writers and philosophers. The hedgehog relates

everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance.

Plato, Hegel and Ibsen are hedgehogs. The fox, by contrast, are those who

entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. (Berlin, 2013 [1953]: 2)

Aristotle, Goethe and Balzac are foxes.

Neumann, clearly, is a fox. This we know, given that his scholarship spans as different topics as diplomacy, identity, Russia, popular culture (Harry Potter and Star Trek), early polity formation in northern Europe (yes, the Vikings), kinship and more recently, the political history of the Eurasian Steppe. The breadth and originality of that scholarship is admirable even for the most ambitious scholar out there. Beyond substantive themes, though, we contend that what makes Neumann such a textbook case of Berlin’s fox is the plurality and diversity of wagers that his scholarship contains. We argue that Neumann is methodologically opportunistic: he makes wager upon wager as his gaze shifts from one problem to the next.

Neumann’s intellectual curiosity may come at a price, though, for one is hard-pressed to find in his work a consistent view of the relationship between epistemology and ontology, or any systematic treatment of methods. While foxes thrive on such eclecticism and versatility, there is a risk that the robustness of the claims be reduced in the process, because they are built on incompatible fundamentals. A fox does not care about methods; it is all about squeezing as many analytical insights out of any perspective, case and set of empirical observations. As his vast scholarship demonstrates in spades, Neumann-the-fox turns to whatever scheme works to get on with his changing research questions. The most extreme versions of this eclecticism emerge when Neumann jumps from an explanatory or hermeneutical mode to identifying the political and practical import of his analyses.

The more general question that this discussion raises is whether there is a tension between the wager of world-mind nomism and phenomenalism that is associated with an analyticist position, and the wager of world-mind dualism and neopositivism (Jackson, 2016) that is an unspoken premise of foreign policy advice and political debate. To put it casually, it is not clear how far one can go in providing policy advice premised on a Foucault-style discourse analyses of how the state produces or performs its own sovereignty. As we discuss below, Neumann has at times sought to do this, and in the process, he has juggled with a variety of wagers of all shapes and forms.

## A scholarship made of stretches

Let us start at the beginning, with *Russia and the Idea of Europe* (Neumann, 2013 [1996]). There, Neumann develops the first book-length argument for, and application of, discourse analysis. In so doing, he traces the relational constitution of identity—how “Russia” has developed over time in reflection of, and partly opposition to, “Europe.” Describing how Russian identity has fluctuated over time (from openness to and appropriation of European ideas of identity to nationalism and opposition to it), he then moves on to conceptualize Russian identity as being torn between an inward-looking and a more outward-looking one: “Europe” in the 1980s and beyond, and then toward nationalist Russian ideas in the last 20 years.

Yet this conceptualization of identity does not sit well with the discourse analytical framework on which the argument is premised, as such an analytical framework rejects any notion of historical logic or teleological trajectories. Moreover, there is a tendency to equate Russian discourse, and identity, with the Russian state. As Maureen Perrie put it in an online review:

There is no discussion of the conventional distinction between ethnic and civic Russians (*russkie* versus *rossiiskie*), or between Russians as citizens of “core” Russian territory and Russians as residents of the Empire, the Soviet Union, or post-Soviet space. Rather, Neumann identifies “Russia” as the Russian state in its various manifestations, from the tsarist empire through the USSR to the Russian Federation.

Discourse analysis is thus, for Neumann, primarily concerned with capturing the fixing of meaning that defines, in his words, the “bandwidth” within which actors operate (see also Dunn and Neumann, 2016).

The discussion of identity in these terms, relying on the idea of “bandwidth,” forms the basis for what few, if any, discourse analysts have done before or after, namely to make predictions about the future of Russian politics. Neumann (2013 [1996]) noted, both in the original manuscript and in the revised and expanded edition (2016) of *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, that the direction of Russian politics would be one where the outward-looking identity would give way to the inward-looking one, adding that the (nationalist) idea of Russia as a great power would militate against any long-term copying of or convergence with Europe. That prediction was on the money—and it is all the more telling in the present situation, with Russia’s war in Ukraine. But this move also put on display a certain opportunism, which produces a tension between the idea of identity as constituted by discourse oscillating between two extremes (inward- vs outward-looking identities being

defined by that discourse). Indeed, he notes in the introduction to the second edition of *Russia and the Idea of Europe* that

Marginalisation is a direct threat to great power status, and since Russia's great power status is the very bulwarks of its self-understanding, the threat posed by this dilemma is an ontic one: if Russia is marginalised within the states system, it can no longer be Russia. Historically, the result of this dilemma has been a pendulum movement, where the Russian state has oscillated between embracing and rejecting Europe.

This tension—between a mechanic (pendulum) and the poststructural idea of discourse that Neumann himself takes on-board—emerges at the end of the book, which betrays Neumann's interest in bringing the philosophical and social theoretical insights to bear on current affairs. As we shall see, this very same—and laudable—impulse comes up again and again when Neumann seeks to pull many threads together to make a point that may have political import, or to contribute with commentary that non-specialists can also understand.

In *Uses of the Other* (Neumann, 1999), the empirical gaze is reversed, analyzing European identity as produced through its contrasting with ideas about the eastern "Other." Here too, Neumann draws on a wide swath of theories, from Derrida to Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva and others to show—through six in-depth empirical chapters—how identity is best understood in terms of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue. Having started with an introduction of Bakhtin's core ideas, he cites Said to the effect that Foucault misses a key point with regard to the impact of individual texts and authors. Bakhtin's stress on dialogue, then, serves in part as a platform from which to introduce a dash of intentionality and effect of single authors. When he then seeks to place his core argument in relation to poststructuralist and emerging constructivist theories, he stresses that his is "sandwiched" between them. He argues that because of the reading out of intentionality, post-structuralists' take on the social process of identification is mistakenly defined in terms of the relation between self and order.

This is a problem, Neumann argues, because it means that poststructuralists "do not have an intersubjective take on the process of identification." And it is a problem primarily for political reasons: "it is crippling for poststructuralism not to be able to proceed beyond this limit. Without a take on how to forge politically implementable stories of the self, poststructuralism may bar themselves from constructive intervention into the political field" (Neumann, 1999: 208–209). The main charge is thus that "if poststructural scholarship contents itself with merely proclaiming the death of subjectivity, it condemns itself to a more marginal political position than what I think is its due." This is a curious contention, and especially so when, further down, Neumann reflects on the need for "as-if" stories of identity to try to counter essentializing ones, here referring to debates about Norway and the European Union, and identity aspects of the war in Bosnia.

Having spent the bulk of the 1999 book demonstrating the necessity or inevitability of the other being constitutive, the charge is now that—for practical and political reasons—poststructuralist theory must somehow produce, or make space for, "as-if" stories of identity whose epistemological and ontological basis is at best unclear. In this account,

what is mobilized to explain some features of the political question in focus—the constitution of political subjecthood through discourse—cannot explain (and is incompatible with) the idea of introducing agency to those subjects, who are now no longer constituted by discourse but being able to engineer and change it.

Indeed, a close reading of the book suggests that this is in one sense more about the *uses* of the other, than it is about the constitutive effects of that other. The poststructuralist insight that identity is constituted through discursive practices emerges, in the conclusion, at loggerheads with the claim that for poststructuralist theory to be effective politically, it must abandon some of its core propositions. As with Neumann's first book, we see a scholar pulling insights from many different traditions, not resting content to score points merely on terms internal to disciplinary debates. The result is arguably that the conclusion, as validly concerned as it may be, sits uneasily with the core propositions of the theories on which the rest of the book builds.

Then, in a celebrated piece on "Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn," Neumann (2002) takes issue with how the linguistic turn in IR theory has bracketed the practice-dimension of social life that had always been key to the original proponents of the turn to language, such as Foucault and Wittgenstein. He argues that "culture" is made up of both discourse and practice, suggesting a model where—for analytical purposes—"discourse" and "practice" were distinct. The critique is accurate and important, as many discourse analysts had zoomed in on texts and text alone. But as Neumann has himself argued at length elsewhere, the very idea of discourse for Foucault was precisely that practice was an integral part of discourse. His own analysis of diplomacy—based on participatory observation at the Norwegian foreign ministry—bears this out, showing how, for example, bureaucratic practices structured the production of meaning, as in the case of speech writing for the foreign minister (Neumann, 2007).

Had Neumann taken on-board some of his own work on the workings of power, a case could be made for a slightly different story. The new layer that he adds—that of "stories," taken from de Certeau—makes it unclear whether meaning and identity are now carried and defined by stories, practices or discourses. When Neumann then moves on to apply this to account for power, one is left wondering which is primary: practices, discourse or stories? The overarching argument that attention to practice, and not just text, is of paramount importance; but why add "stories" to complicate the model when it is not clear what it contributes in terms of analytical insights?

When Neumann (2002) moves on to discuss the empirical case of changes in Norwegian foreign policy, the data seem to indicate that decisions (not stories) by the foreign minister—although constrained by established bureaucratic practices—have a performative effect, in the form of new practices being established in the relations between Russia and Norway at the end of the Cold War. While these decisions by the foreign minister can be analyzed in terms of "stories," it is perhaps more adequate to understand this in terms that Neumann himself uses: the *layering* of practices being performed. Whatever the constraining or constitutive power of bureaucratic practice, the foreign minister partakes in, and performs, a range of practices that bureaucrats do not have access to, often overriding them and setting the wheels in motion. Here, we have a case of the data on which the argument is based pointing in a different theoretical direction than the one that revolves around the importance of "stories."

Neumann's analysis of diplomacy thus starts with the premise of (layered) bureaucratic practices and with the elegant example of speech-writing as the best possible illustration of how the "state" is performed or produced as a unity (Neumann, 2007). And it continues in the form of discussion of the separate logic of political communication between state leaders or foreign ministers. In the former, practices are heavy, weighing on the individual and reproducing "Norway." In the latter, there is much more leeway, suggesting that there is a separate logic to political discussions between representatives of states that are much less determined or shaped by diplomatic–bureaucratic practices. Here, Neumann is edging closer to analyses of diplomacy based on psychological theories that emphasize face-to-face diplomacy (Holmes, 2013) and interpersonal trust (Wheeler, 2018). This is not to say that he is on-board with the mechanisms suggested in theories foregrounding psychological factors such as trust. But it is to suggest that he ends up siding with Marx's (2021 [1852]) famous dictum that "men make history, but they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." This, at least, is what is to be taken from Neumann's (2010) assessment of Norwegian foreign ministers over a 40-year period.

In his work on governmentality, Neumann—along with co-author Sending (Neumann and Sending, 2010; Sending and Neumann, 2006)—advances the argument that the international system can be understood in terms of what Foucault dubbed the "conduct of conduct," or what others have called productive power (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). Having described relations between states and non-state actors as one of governmentality, while also highlighting the "pull" of productive power for the concept of the international, Neumann and Sending (2010) go on to argue that sovereign statehood has now become conditional on conformity to a set of liberal norms. If Neumann succeeded in making predictions on Russia at the cost of theoretical inconsistency with regard to Russian identity, here he and his co-author fail to capture the enduring (and productive) power of the principle of sovereignty for statehood. If there was a governmentalization of the state, subject to international standards promoted by international organizations and their rankings and best practices, it was arguably more on the form rather than the content of statehood.

While there are insights to be gained from such a view of statehood, this omission is built into the move of taking a concept developed for the study of the historically changing relations between ruler and ruled domestically to the relations between polities. There is much innovation and novelty to be gained from importing theories from adjacent fields. Indeed—the history of IR as a discipline is defined by it. But we can detect a tension in the effort to apply, and thus stretch, concepts to study something they were not developed to study. This has knock-on effects on methodology: Foucault's genealogy and archeology enable Neumann to identify shifts in governmentality over time, as established modes of political rule changed and new epistemes emerged over (quite long) stretches of time. Such transformations in governmental rationality are of a different kind than those that emerge from a change, for example, in the methods of international organizations (IOs) to govern through benchmarks and standards. While such innovations may very well form part of a more encompassing shift in governmental rationality, the relationship between ruler and ruled in 15th- to 17th-century France is of a wholly different kind than that which concerns the relationship between states and IOs between 1990 and 2000.



## “What works” (and what might not)

At the epistemological level, pragmatism suggests that “truths,” for lack of a better word, consist of “what works.” Valid knowledge is by nature provisional and contextual; it helps cope with the world under a given set of conditions. This epistemology certainly warrants the kind of methodological and conceptual opportunism that has characterized Neumann’s career. The bottom line is that we should be open-minded about all forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. The 1 million question, though, is whether there are inherent limits, including from a pragmatist point of view, to combining insights derived from incompatible epistemologies. To caricature, is knowledge production akin to a Chinese buffet?

The best illustration of this tension comes in Neumann’s inaugural lecture delivered at the London School of Economics in 2013. In it, he defends the need for IR scholars to take on recent findings in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology: “we find among natural scientists debates that are eerily familiar to social scientists: is human cooperation zero-sum or positive-sum?” Neumann’s (2014) approach is “dialogical” (p. 350)—a term he borrows from Bakhtin (Neumann, 1999) to describe the open-mindedness that characterizes the pragmatist search for working truths and the ecumenical spirit of the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 2013 [1960]). In search for what works, Neumann wants to open up disciplinary conversations and invites his peers to consider a variety of findings. This basic principle of open-mindedness provides a useful reminder that IR should never operate in a silo.

Nonetheless, we would like to raise two questions. First, how trustworthy are findings derived from a different epistemology when one subscribes to the provisional and deeply social nature of knowledge development? Of course, it is possible to argue that neuroscientists, for instance, also consider their findings as “best inferences to explanation.” Surely, they are aware of the fact that scientific revolutions happen once in a while, to the point of paradigmatic shifts such as the quantum one. They likely also realize that scientific progress takes place in society and that, as such, it is colored by institutional conditions of production. That said, when they run controlled experiments, test hypotheses and use algorithms to decipher big data, natural scientists enter in a relationship with “the world” that is entirely different from the one that has characterized Neumann’s writings throughout his career. They are dualists and positivists, in Jackson’s (2016) sense.

Take, for example, some of the findings discussed in Neumann’s (2014) lecture, such as Festinger’s on cognitive dissonance: “rather than considering specific factors on their merits, humans are drawn towards understanding the world as whole, and so they will tend to read out stuff that does not fit their preconditions” (p. 342). No doubt this is an important finding in social psychology. But of what import is it for the study of IR—“the social science that specialises in political and social life that plays out in settings where there is a plurality of polities” (Neumann, 2014: 341)? Does cognitive dissonance operate in that realm exactly the way it does elsewhere? If we buy the positivist premise that knowledge is transversal, in the sense that there exist universal regularities in social behavior regardless of context, then surely cognitive dissonance applies to foreign policy-making, just the same as it does to family decisions or economic investments. And yet, pretty much all of Neumann’s writings precisely reject such transversality, insisting instead on the importance of discourse and context.

The problem also shows in Neumann's understanding of "the international" as governmentality or the conduct of conduct (Neumann and Sending, 2007). Here, the IR object of inquiry is specified in deeply interpretive terms. "The international" differs from other social spheres through its discourses, its institutions, its power relations and its rationalities. Surely, it is populated by the same human beings that operate in other milieus, but the context is radically different. If discourse matters so much in setting the conditions of action (see Neumann, 1999, 2002; etc.), why should we expect the same social patterns as in a laboratory experiment? In fact, Neumann is aware of this problem when he notes that the works in psychology that he quotes "do not measure how the brain works. They measure how brains which have been socially shaped in specifically Western settings work" (Neumann, 2014: 342). But this acknowledgment barely scratches the surface of the problem. If cultural upbringing puts limits on the scope of scientific findings, then all other aspects of social context and discourse do as well—possibly to the point of blunting the transversal validity of any knowledge derived from controlled experiments in understanding specific settings.

In other words, cognitive dissonance may be a pattern observed under certain controlled conditions, but generalizing beyond that, and especially making substantive inferences *from* that, is made problematic by the significance of discourse and context. Cognitive processes are likely mediated and thus partly indeterminate. In order to ground them in "the international," one must develop a thick, interpretive understanding of its governmentality, to stick to Neumann's conception. Yet, this piece of knowledge cannot be obtained through experiments or hypothesis-testing. It relies on interpretation and discourse analysis, which both defy dualist and positivist methodology. Conceiving the international as a particular rationality is simply not the same as observing patterns of cognitive dissonance in human beings. Does it make any sense, then, to combine these insights into a single explanation?

The second question that we want to raise is this: what do we stand to gain from such a conversation with natural scientists? The least generous answer, which unlikely applies to Neumann, is credibility and legitimacy in the public eye by subscribing to the scientific method and by coopting some of its successes (the so-called "physics envy"). Since Neumann has always defended the distinctiveness of social inquiry, this can hardly be his agenda. More generously, he may think that biology and psychology have evolved new insights that our methods, theories or frameworks in IR could not yield. This is probably correct. These disciplines can and do provide solid (albeit always provisional) microfoundations for social theory. On the face of it, this is useful. But two problems arise.

First is the danger of replacing one set of microfoundations—"rationalist universalist presuppositions" (Neumann, 2014: 343)—with another that is equally reifying and universal by pretense only, be it cognitive dissonance, groupthink, or else. If discourse is a key force in all its contingency, and if social context frames the conditions for action, then the quest for transversal microfoundations is bound to be stale. Second, as Neumann notes himself, from a sociological perspective microfoundations are often redundant: "if a group of humans consistently act like X in situations of type Y with results of type Z, the point is that we are faced with a social type, not with individuals who 'misperceive'" (Neumann, 2014: 343). This basic Durkheimian point suggests that, useful and enlightening as natural science findings may be, their validity for understanding the world

depends on other, social scientific insights whose interpretive nature often clashes directly at the epistemological level.

To wit, here is a thought experiment: would the neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists referred to by Neumann consider his own interpretation of the international, his understanding of Russia's perennial quest for status, or his ethnographic study of everyday diplomatic practices as "scientific"? Would they recognize the value of his methodology, based on discourse analysis and a monist, interpretivist epistemology? We think not. Natural scientists would likely find Neumann's stories interesting, perhaps even useful for policy-making, but certainly not on a par, in terms of validity, with what comes out of controlled experiments and big data regressions. The epistemological differences are simply too stark. This is no reason not to pay attention to developments in other fields—clearly not. But it does raise doubts about what may be gained from combining an interpretive social science of the international with positivist findings about allegedly transversal human traits.

The pragmatist mantra of "what works," then, does have some boundaries when we reach the point at which the scientific community has to arrive at an agreement. What works for some does not for others; such is the nature of knowledge development and human experience more generally. We are far from the point at which the ideal of a consensus theory of truth would hold. Communities, including scientific ones, cling to distinct understandings of what works. For that reason, epistemological consistency often leads to irreducible forms of incommensurability. As fundamental to knowledge development as dialogue may be, this cannot be done simply by wishing incommensurability away. What works does not amount to "anything goes," and there arguably are moments when Neumann is stretching dialogism beyond its limits.

A final illustration of epistemological inconsistency will help drive the point home. In his ethnography of diplomacy (Neumann, 2002, 2012), Neumann zooms in on everyday practices in order to reconstruct social reality from the practitioners' point of view. He writes, "We need to understand what diplomats and diplomacy do and what they believe they are doing" (Neumann, 2012: 2). In fact, he himself is a practitioner in many of the stories that he tells. As such, his anthropological methodology is deeply inductive and interpretive: he thickly describes patterns of action that he observed firsthand, and he derives broader social effects from them. Speech-writing practices at the Norwegian foreign ministry, for instance, explain the constitution of the national interest (Neumann, 2007).

The question arises; however, just how could practices have constitutive effects (i.e. shape the world) if they are nothing but "models"? (Andersen and Neumann, 2012). How is it possible for social scientific abstractions—models—to change the social world? Neumann's commitment to analyticism would seem to clash head-on with his empirical reconstruction of everyday diplomacy, in which practices are very real from the practitioners' point of view. Of course, he is right that, as we analytically reconstruct practices, we tweak them a bit out of shape and we abstract away from thick social contexts. Such is the nature of conceptualization. But practitioners also tell stylized stories about themselves, yet that does not make their practices any less real, including in their effects. What is more, if practices are "fictional representations of the world," then how can they also be "empirically observable"? (Andersen and Neumann, 2012: 457, 473). In this

account, wampum diplomacy is very real, made of specific moves and patterns that the authors describe at length. Yet if all of this simply amounts to a social scientific model, then in what sense can we conclude that “these phenomena are different as a result of the practices analysed from what they were before these practices appeared” (Andersen and Neumann, 2012: 481)?

As a heterodox methodology, analyticism is a promising but challenging option. As Jackson (2011: 115) explains, “what researchers do is to order analytically the empirical data in accord with a model the worth of which lies *not* in its correspondence to the world, but in its pragmatic consequences for ordering the facts of the world.” What is less clear to us, however, is why Neumann interprets this commitment as one that turns thickly described practices into models, as though they did not exist in the very real world of practitioners. It is also unclear that this analyticist commitment (and the pragmatist epistemology on which it rests) may be reconciled with the transversal and positivist quest for knowledge that characterizes large swathes of natural sciences. Surely, being open-minded and dialogical about what works still requires a minimum degree of epistemological coherence. Neumann’s baseline may at points be a bit too low for comfort.

This is arguably driven home in his latest opus with Wigen (Neumann and Wigen, 2018). A landmark contribution to the development of global historical sociology, *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations* documents the hybridization of political practices that flowed from centuries of contacts between European, Turkish and Russian polities. Macro as it is, the study is extremely rich in historical facts and interpretive details. But the two tensions we have identified above continue to spring up throughout. For one thing, practices are often treated as “things,” for instance, in documenting the “sedimented” patterns of action of Europe’s neighbors. For another, this unacknowledged exoticization of foreign practices, either as “deeply buried political substrate” or more simply as non-Western and thus oriental (e.g. the vertical of power, cults of personality), clearly runs the risk of essentialization and othering that Neumann’s turn to post-structuralism precisely sought to avoid. Without a doubt, hybridization is a tremendously useful concept in the study of practices, but handling it requires a lot of care not to reify what it is that gets combined.

## Conclusion

What can we learn as IR scholars from Neumann’s exceptionally rich intellectual journey? Our exegesis goes to the heart of core methodological debates in the discipline, including the relationship between contending frameworks. On the face of it, it may look like Neumann exemplifies the kind of “analytic eclecticism” popularized by Sil and Katzenstein (2010), which advocates engaging and utilizing different research traditions based on the problem at hand. This pragmatist, problem-driven methodology claims—echoing Neumann’s scholarship in many ways—that “features of analyses in theories initially embedded in separate research traditions can be separated from their respective foundations, translated meaningfully, and recombined as part of an original permutation of concepts, methods, analytics, and empirics” (Katzenstein and Sil, 2008: 110–111).

In practice, however, Neumann’s scholarship does not fit so well with the methodology of analytic eclecticism. Throughout his writings, he exhibits limited patience for the

kinds of tasks advocated by Sil and Katzenstein, such as clarifying causal mechanisms and observable implications. This is a problem for theory combination because, as Cornut (2015) puts it, the “logic of questions . . . intuitively clarifies which aspects of a phenomena each theory purports to explain, as well as the assumption the theory necessarily presupposes” (p. 51). It is not only that Neumann (like most pragmatists) adamantly rejects the so-called “gladiator approach” (Checkel, 2013) according to which different theories face off with one another until a clear winner emerges. In practice, he rarely if ever mentions alternative explanations, or explicitly compares his specific account with other theoretical logics. This would seem to suggest that for Neumann, analytical frameworks are not competing but complementary—that is, wagers are additive over the long run.

We think this is a refreshing and productive way of advancing knowledge development. In order to move forward, however, it is critical to clarify the “contrastive space” of each explanation mustered—an element sometimes missing in Neumann’s scholarship. What are the different wagers “made for” and what do they leave aside? At what point should we revise our starting points and make new analytical bets? As Cornut (2015: 55) continues, “[c]larifying the question answered by an explanation means delineating what an explanation both answers and leaves unexplored.” Since we observe few such clarifications in Neumann’s scholarship, the question becomes whether the disciplining of thought that methodology inherently implies is ultimately compatible with a fox attitude to knowledge.

Indeed, the last thing one should probably try to do in life is try and domesticate a fox. Saint-Éxupéry’s little prince is just the exception that confirms the rule. Foxes are wild animals and that is precisely what makes them so cunning. Let them hunt by whatever means. By showing Neumann in all his fox-like eclecticism and versatility, our point is not to denature his intellectual quest, which is by all means impressive. Yet for the sake of knowledge development and broader debates in the IR discipline, including on the import of foreign concepts, we think it is appropriate to identify possible blind spots and contradictions in his hunting strategy. Making sense of present political practice by marshaling historical evidence and social theoretical insights invariably involve adding some judgment beyond theory itself. This is ultimately a form of political judgment. Making social theory relevant for the world of political practice is a valuable quest, but it is one fraught with dilemmas that ought to be carefully pondered.

In the conclusion of *Uses of the Other*, Neumann (1996: 215) openly confronts one of his own contradictions and, in his typical intellectual honesty, leaves it out in the open for picking. As he puts it: “Where practice is concerned, in order to be effective in the political field, one simply cannot put the self under erasure but must have what I will refer to as an ‘as if’ story to tell about it.” In pragmatist fashion, Neumann thus rushes to fill the political void left by his own deconstruction of prominent discourses by proposing wager-like narratives that he thinks will be less politically damageable than the essentialized identities that usually undergird mobilization and collective action. How this intellectual square gets circled, though, remains quite impenetrable, both in social-theoretical and policy or practice terms.

Berlin’s distinction between foxes and hedgehogs was made primarily for analyzing Tolstoy, who defied that very distinction. Berlin concluded that Tolstoy was “by nature a

fox but by conviction a hedgehog.” Upon reflection, it is quite possible that Neumann is by instinct a fox, but by conviction a hedgehog in his continued insistence that social theoretical insights must somehow be linked to, and have some purchase on, political developments in the present. Behind all the inconsistencies we sought to document may very well lie an overall rationale that has escaped our categorization. Indeed, Neumann’s overarching method, or way of doing things, seems to be what anthropologists call to “make strange.” Being trained as an anthropologist as well as a political scientist, Neumann seeks to transform the conventional, habitual and self-evident into a puzzle, and then make this puzzle relevant or have import for both scholarly debates and contemporary political practice.

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