

## **Man, Agency, and Beyond: The Evolution of Human Nature in IR Theory**

**International Studies Association Annual Convention, Montréal, 2011 [Workshop Report]**

The following report summarizes the content of the workshop and outlines the direction the project will take with regards to future presentations as well as publications of the findings.

### **Catalytic Research Workshop Conveners**

*Daniel Jacobi*, M.A., PhD Candidate and Lecturer at the Department of Comparative Politics and International Relations, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany.

*Dr Annette Freyberg-Inan*, Associate Professor at the Faculty of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

### **Workshop Participants**

Samuel Barkin, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Florida

Chris Brown, Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics

Mauro Caraccioli, PhD Candidate and Graduate Research Assistant, Florida State University

Annette Freyberg-Inan, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Amsterdam

Siba Grovogui, Professor of International Relations and Political Theory, Johns Hopkins University

Benjamin Herborth, Research Assistant, Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich

Daniel Jacobi, PhD Candidate and Lecturer, Goethe University Frankfurt

Richard Ned Lebow, James O. Freedman Presidential Professor of Government, Dartmouth College

Jennifer Sterling-Folker, Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Connecticut

Colin Wight, Professor of International Relations, University of Sydney

## **Theme, Purpose and Objectives of the Workshop**

The workshop examined the role of human nature concepts in IR theory, their nature, status, relevance, and effects. Human nature concepts, as a working definition, were understood as a set of foundational core assumptions which include ideas about what or how human beings are (normally or ideally), what potentialities they have (powers and limits) and under which conditions they act (historical or situational). Epistemologically, different human nature concepts emphasize different analytical goals (e.g., linking human nature to specific types of political actions or structures).

The purpose of the workshop was to provide the first structured discussion of human nature concepts in IR. This is not only essential in order to successfully confront IR's core challenges of theorizing political agents, processes and institutions but also to enable us to add our disciplinary expertise to ongoing public political debates on the future of human nature (e.g., eugenics) which play out in the international realm. Here, the unreflective use of a vocabulary borrowed from the life sciences has already provided many IR studies with dangerous analytical blind spots.

The core objective of the workshop was to identify implicit and explicit foundational concepts of human nature in various IR approaches that are relevant to the study of international politics. How do they translate into analytic concepts, e.g., into various models of agency? What are the analytical strengths and weaknesses of these concepts? Do they enhance or obstruct intra- as well as inter-disciplinary dialogue? What are their practical political implications?

By doing so, the discussion aimed to contribute to two overarching objectives:

- (1) To provide a detailed overview of the state of the art in human nature arguments and debates in our field by developing a typology of human nature concepts in IR, e.g., for the sake of general reference and use in teaching.
- (2) To avoid a naïve inventory of (competing) determinants of human nature and thus its essentialization, by adding cutting-edge anti-foundationalist as well as novel materialist reflections on the topic as key contributions to the debate in their own right and a source of inspiration for IR scholarship.

The workshop participants represented a well-balanced mix of established as well as up-and-coming scholars of IR from diverse countries as well as cultural and theoretical backgrounds. Together with a few other IR scholars, who could not make the workshop, they are contributors to an edited volume on human nature concepts in IR that the proposers are currently developing. This volume will be the first comprehensive and up-to-date treatment of human nature concepts in IR ever published. Against this background, this workshop was not only catalytic for the necessary exchange of information and views but also for creating the intellectual synergy and sense of co-production that are needed to ensure a coherent and cohesive, high-quality edited volume.

## **The Format and Organization of the Workshop**

The workshop was divided into three rounds. Each round was headlined by one overarching theme, introduced by 3-4 participants with concise introductory statement and followed by a discussion including all participants.

The three individual rounds dealt with (see detailed time-table below):

1. The role of human nature foundations in IR in general and in its classical approaches
2. How we may break open, expand and transcend those foundations with regards to conceptualizations of agency
3. Cutting-edge concepts of agency which open up entirely new views on human nature

All rounds were further guided by more specific questions, such as **(a)** Are the presented concepts of human nature explicit within a particular approach, and how can implicit assumptions be unearthed? **(b)** What are those concepts supposed to achieve? **(c)** Are those views backed up by empirical or philosophical arguments? Which ones? **(d)** Are those arguments logically consistent and translate into a particular analytical perspective, e.g., a concept of agency? **(e)** Does the conceptualization overlap with or exclude other theoretical perspectives? **(f)** Are there any direct or indirect practical/political implications arising out of a particular conceptualization?

Each round began with short statements from the participants based on papers written from their theoretical perspectives and addressing some of the above questions. The papers were guided by explicit written instructions from the proposers and were made available to all other participants in due time prior to the workshop. Each discussion round was moderated by one of the proposers.

The most important findings of the day regarding conceptualizations of human nature and their role in IR theorizing as well as relevant ideas for the publication of those findings (i.e., the structure of the planned book) were summed up in a concluding discussion. A full transcript of the workshop was taken by an experienced assistant. The notes were edited and circulated among the contributors to the planned book project shortly after the conference.

#### *Detailed Schedule:*

09:00 am – 11:15 am Session I: *The role of human nature foundations in IR and the classics*

Moderator: Daniel Jacobi  
 Statement 1 Richard Ned Lebow  
 Statement 2 Samuel Barkin  
 Statement 3 Jennifer Sterling-Folker  
 Statement 4 Annette Freyberg-Inan

11:15 am – 11:30 am Coffee Break I

11:30 am – 01:00 pm Session II: *Breaking open, transcending and expanding concepts of agency*

Moderators: Annette Freyberg-Inan/ Daniel Jacobi  
 Statement 5 Chris Brown  
 Statement 6 Colin Wight  
 Statement 7 Benjamin Herborth

01:00 pm – 2:00 pm Lunch Break

02:00 pm – 3:30 pm Session III: *Cutting-edge concepts of agency & new views on human nature*

Moderator: Annette Freyberg-Inan

Statement 8 Siba Grovogui

Statement 9 Mauro Caraccioli

Statement 10 Daniel Jacobi

03:30 pm – 4:00 pm Coffee Break II

04:00 pm – 5:30pm *Concluding Discussion*

Moderators: Annette Freyberg-Inan/ Daniel Jacobi

### **Workshop Papers**

The following papers were presented at the workshop.

#### *Daniel Jacobi & Annette Freyberg-Inan: The Past & Present of Human Nature in IR*

The presentation summarized the introductory chapter to the planned volume and provided a comprehensive state of the art outline of debates around the role of the first image, agency, and human nature/the human condition in IR. The ambition here is to contextualize the contributions in the volume but also to create a standard reference for other publications in this field. The introduction also clarifies the mission and relevance of the book and provides a very brief chapter-by-chapter outline.

#### *Richard Ned Lebow: The Human Spirit in the Tradition of International Relations*

Following the Greeks, Lebow posits spirit, appetite and reason as fundamental drives with distinct objects or ends. He describes the different characteristics of spirit, appetite and reason-based worlds for individuals, societies, and regional and international political systems. Fear is an equally important motive, and becomes important when reason loses control of either spirit or appetite. All four drives generate different logics of cooperation, conflict, and risk-taking. As the three drives are always present – and often, fear as well – real societies are mixed worlds that combine different mixes of motives in varying degrees. They can also be lumpy, in that this mix differs among the units or regions that make up the system. The chapter examines some of the consequences of spirit for the conduct and theory of international relations.

#### *Annette Freyberg-Inan: Human Nature in Realist Approaches*

This chapter synthesizes the extensive literature on human nature in realist IR theory by drawing particular attention to the centrality of fear and despair as central emotional motifs linking the (implicit) human nature foundations of a great variety of realist approaches. Freyberg-Inan and Guzzini provide an overview linking the political “tradition of despair” via classical realist approaches with their apparently more open psychological foundations to structuralist approaches with the hidden (but no less fundamental) facilitating human nature assumptions bequeathed on them by their forebears. This contribution shows that the

human nature foundations shared by realist theories have had a profound impact on the paradigm and have in fact constituted its identity through the shifting emanations of diverse realist approaches. It also shows that these foundations, while they have arguably served IR theorizing well in other respects, are deeply problematic from a social-psychological point of view.

*Chris Brown: Marxism and Human Nature: From 'Species-Being' to Natural Justice*

Marxism is often thought to be hostile to the idea of human nature, and, indeed, there is a long-standing component of the tradition which stresses the plasticity of humankind, and the notion of a reshaped, post-scarcity human being. There is, however, an equally strong counter to this element of the tradition, which begins with the writings of the early Marx on "species-being", and regards post-capitalist humanity as the fulfillment of human nature rather than a sign of the irrelevance of that notion. Modern manifestations of this position are to be found expressed by those figures on the left who reject the standard 'progressivist' critique of evolutionary psychology, instead using its methods and findings to validate a socialist program.

*Jennifer Sterling-Folker: Disciplining Human Nature: The Evolution of American Social Scientific Theorizing*

This paper traces the way in which human nature assumptions informed the development of American social scientific theorizing. It examines the historical tensions which existed between Darwinian human nature assumptions and the American liberal, academic milieu. It demonstrates that this tension produced a peculiar form of social scientific theorizing, at once subscribing to Darwinism and yet rejecting Darwinian human nature assumptions. It argues that this form of theorizing remains with us today and can be seen in the dominant theoretical perspectives of the IR discipline.

*Samuel Barkin: Constructivism, Realism, and Human Nature*

Constructivism and realism share in common one key assumption about human nature, that it is sociable. Both approaches are built on an assumption that individuals identify with groups, and are likely at least to some extent to behave in a way that reflects group identity or predominant group discourses. Constructivism and classical realism share a second assumption about human nature, that it is variable, that beyond a basic sociability in most individuals we cannot assume *ex ante* what will motivate the behavior of specific people in specific circumstances. This distinguishes both approaches from those that assume particular motivations, particularly approaches that build on economic ideas, ranging from most liberal approaches to IR to neorealism. It is the assumption of variability in human nature that allows the space for political change that is often missing from approaches that build on economic ideas.

*Benjamin Herborth: Images of Man – Images of Society: The Socialization of Man in Critical Theory*

Images of man seem to provide a shortcut to the key choices in international theory. *Homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus* not only inhabit different theoretical worlds, they figure as representatives of what is often portrayed as a schism between rationalism and constructivism, which tends to present itself as an exhaustive menu for choice in contemporary IR. One of the pitfalls of such a dichotomizing view is that it dramatically lowers the bar for what counts as theory. It is through the pre-reflexive image of man (as rational actor, social being, political animal, each others' wolf, etc.) that different accounts of how the social world of global politics works come to be distinguished. The tacit presumption in the plethora of variations of this theme is that, as society is made up of human beings, understanding human beings will inevitably lead to a better understanding of society. Despite Kenneth Waltz's warnings, IR is still very much a reductionist discipline. The problem with reductionism is not only that it tends to render invisible social theory as an analytical enterprise in its own right. Reductionism – and its old-European semantics, as Niklas Luhmann would have it – also misrepresents the question of agency. If by agency we refer to the potential of situated creativity and contingency, the capacity to act otherwise, agency is a property of social processes, not a property of individual human beings. Acknowledgment and recognition as a distinct subject presupposes a social process of subjectivation. Individuation thus occurs only through society formation. Inextricably, the scope of agency, and the structural formation of social sites where agency may manifest itself are two sides of a coin. Against this background, the chapter proceeds in three steps. In a first step, it provides a critical review of the way in which the notion of agency was assimilated to the ontological status of agents in the course of the agency/structure debate; in a second step, it reconstructs attempts at theorizing agency in IR; in a third step, it discusses the relation between agency and emancipation from the point of view of critical theory.

*Colin Wight: Agency, Critical Realism and Emancipation*

This contribution begins from the observation that a view on the "human" –conceptualized here in terms of species being - is an implicit aspect of all social theorizing and, in fact, is a necessary presupposition for any kind of ethical/moral discourse and emancipatory project. It explores the possibility that the universal/particular distinction which divides the field of IR theory might in fact be transcended through the very idea of the "human" by demonstrating that what makes the universality of the human *is* its diversity. In this respect, Colin Wight's contribution is an attempt to transcend the divisions that are presented in part I of the book as structuring mainstream understandings of the field.

*Siba Grovogui: Post-Colonial Views on (Western) Ideas of Man*

In philosophy as in sociology, agency is a concept that refers to the capacity of an agent to act in a world. In principle, the capacity to act does not infer any specific moral dimension, the representativity of the agent, and/or the legitimacy of the action. In practice, however, philosophers, theorists, and sociologists have been unable to establish the agent without reference to biological, psychic, affective, and even cultural characteristics under the rubric of faculties and capacity. Historically, these associations caused a discursive leap from a

general proposition to the singular identity of the white male as representative of the human species. This leap then allowed "Europe" and the "the West" to proclaim themselves legislator and executor of the "will" of the world as well as the ultimate judge of values, desires, and interests. The dependency of disciplinary categories of agency, the human, and nature on the above factor may in the end be the undoing of the discipline of International Relations in the postcolonial era. This dependency is, indeed, one of the principal reasons that the discipline has been able to provide coherent and plausible theories of power, responsibility, and ethics.

*Daniel Jacobi: 'What are we?' On the (Non-)Foundational Potential of a Reflexive Anthropology in IR*

The contribution turns to one if not *the* basic tenet of most constructivist approaches, that "reality is socially constructed". It argues that by too narrowly embracing this rallying call, many constructivists have turned it into an axiom rather than a reflexive methodological notion. If social reality converges towards man, we need to understand how man came to be able to construct his own social and thus political worlds in the first place because, "man's stomach keeps grumbling away even as he is about his business of world-building" (Berger/Luckmann).

Through a reconstructive reading of Philosophical Anthropology, a loose German philosophical movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the article tries to overcome constructivism's oversocialized concept of man. It calls for an additional perspective between culturalism/naturalism and foundationalism/non-foundationalism: a reflexive anthropology with the seemingly paradoxical task of providing "non-foundationalist foundations" for IR theorizing. The chapter concludes by outlining that due to his eccentric "structure of being" (Plessner), "man is capable of eating and theorizing at the same time" (Berger/Luckmann) and translates these implications into a new and innovative methodological approach to the study of the phenomena of world politics.

*Mauro J. Caraccioli: Global Embodiment: Ambiguity, Ethics, and the Human Condition in the Phenomenology of IR*

This contribution aims to broaden our notion of the human condition in the study of international relations. First, it takes stock of key historical debates in phenomenology concerning the question of man, including the geographical and geopolitical dynamics of the movement, and how they parallel debates in the history of IR. Second, it analyzes the territorial ambiguities of both movements by framing phenomenology (through the work of second and third generation phenomenologists) as a method of *inter-national investigation*: already open to the experiences of others in the world, before becoming fully aware of its own situation. Such an openness to the inter-national will reveal phenomenology to be a critical and experiential perspective on the relation between human beings and agency, but also further question the state-centric and bounded definitions of the human so prevalent in IR theory.

### **Future Avenues of Research and Publication**

The workshop helped ensure the coherence and thus quality of a book project on the role of human nature in IR theorizing. The volume will be the first of its kind in the discipline. The

editors are currently in negotiations with a major university press. In the time leading up to the book's publication, we also aim to publish a selection of the best of what comes out of the workshop as a forum in an IR journal. We are aiming for the *International Studies Review*. The proposers are also planning a panel or roundtable on the topic for ISA 2012 in San Diego, by which time the book should be coming out.