Review Essay
Some critical reflections on Charles Glaser and the neo-neo synthesis

Ensaio inédito
Algumas reflexões críticas sobre Charles Glaser e a síntese neo-neo

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Abstract

Recently there were some debates concerning Charles Glaser's new book – *Rational Theory of International Politics: the logic of competition and cooperation.* In spite of the pertinence of such debates, some points concerning how Glaser's argument relates itself with IR field were underdeveloped. Hence, the aim of this essay is to review the theoretical debates in US academy since the "neo-neo synthesis", starting from Glaser's book. In this sense, rescuing Bell's argument for a historical ontology as well as an historical meta-epistemology of the IR field, this essay does not attempt to evaluate empirically the theories and research programs involved in such debates, neither develop an exhaustive presentation of Glaser's theoretical arguments and their heuristic; in fact, the purpose is to develop some metatheoretical considerations concerning such debates and some of its consequences to the IR field – and to the US academy in particular.

Key-words: metheory, neo-neo synthesis, historical ontology

Resumo

Recentemente houve alguns debates com relação ao novo livro de Charles Glaser - Rational Theory of International Politics: the logic of competition and cooperation. A despeito da pertinência de tais debates, alguns pontos relacionados à forma pela qual o argumento de Glaser se relaciona com o campo das Relações Internacionais foram pouco explorados. Assim, o objetivo deste ensaio é revisar os debates teóricos na academia estadunidense desde a "síntese neo-neo", partindo do livro de Glaser. Neste sentido, resgatando o argumento de Bell acerca da necessidade de uma ontologia histórica bem como de uma metaepistemologia histórica do campo das Relações Internacionais, este ensaio não busca avaliar empiricamente as teorias e os programas de pesquisa envolvidos em tais debates, nem desenvolver uma apresentação exaustiva dos argumentos teóricos de Glaser e de sua heurística; na verdade, o propósito é desenvolver algumas considerações metateóricas com relação a tais debates e algumas de suas consequências para o campo das Relações Internacionais - e para a academia estadunidense em particular.

Palavras-chave: metateoria, síntese neo-neo, ontologia histórica

Introduction

A lot has been said concerning the processes, dilemmas and possibilities of theoretical syntheses in the IR field and, particularly, in US academy – see the neo-neo synthesis in such context, for example. Hence, the idea of this essay is to see such process starting from one specific contemporary work – Charles Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: the logic of competition and cooperation* (2010) – and discuss some elements concerning such debates. In this sense, rescuing Bell's argument for a historical ontology as well as a historical meta-epistemology of the IR field (BELL, 2009), the aim of this essay is not to evaluate empirically the theories and research programs involved in such debates, neither develop an exhaustive presentation of Glaser's theoretical arguments and their heuristic[1]; in fact, once we see metatheory as a "systematic discourse about theory" (FREIRE, 2011, p. 5), the purpose is to develop some metatheoretical considerations concerning such debates and some of its consequences to the IR field, particularly regarding the theoretical imagination of such debates.

Hence, the essay will be organized as follows: first, a brief introduction concerning the IR production in US academy will be presented, particularly concerning the mainstream production – in other words, the neo-neo debate and its developments will be emphasized; second, it will lay out some aspects of Charles Glaser's book related to such debates; finally, some critical considerations regarding this debates and its consequences will be represented.

1. For a good review of Glaser's book on these terms, see the forum on *Security Studies*, volume 20, number 3 (JERVIS, 2011; MEARSHEIMER, 2011; FEARON, 2011; COPELAND, 2011; LIEBER, 2011; SCHWELLER, 2011; GLASER, 2011)..

IR self-images and the neo-neo debate

As Steve Smith put it more than 15 years ago, there are some possibilities for international theorists talk and see the field (SMITH, 1995). One of such possibilities is the idea of "great debates", which since then have received a lot of critiques (*inter alia*, SMITH, 1995; KURKI; WIGHT, 2007; SCHMIDT, 1998). Nevertheless, in spite of the pertinence of such critiques, we will focus on the debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism – or neorealism vs. neoliberalism – and its consequent so-called *neo-neo synthesis* (BALDWIN, 1993; WEAVER, 1995). Such focus is justifiable because, in spite of the pertinence of the above-mentioned metatheoretical critiques to the "debates", this debate has been a crucial one to understand the evolution of the debates and production in the US academy since the 1990s until today – see, for example, the idea of *rationalism*. Therefore, let's go back to the 1990s in order to understand such debates.

More than 10 years ago, Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner affirmed that the development on the IR theory would be understood "by comparing them with the last cycle – from the intellectual and political openings of the 1970s to the relative syntheses of the late 1980s, which presaged another political and intellectual upheaval beginning around 1990" (KATZENSTEIN, KEOHANE; KRASNER, 1998, p. 650). In other words, since then, it is possible to note in IR – particularly in US international relations – the establishment of what matters regarding IR theory

debates, a construction which goes back to the 1980s – see for example Keohane's presidential address delivered at the 29th annual convention of the International Studies Association in 1988 (KEOHANE, 1988). In sum, attention goes to two poles that present a great potential of dialogue: rationalism and constructivism.

Working with a definition of theory that divides it in *general theoretical orientation* – which presents the "relevant variables and causal patterns that provide guidelines for developing specific research programs" – and *specific research programs* – which "link explanatory variables to a set of outcomes, or dependent variables", such scholars established a clear methodological criteria to understand theoretical discussion in IR and defined, at the end of the 1990s, what would be the state of art in the IR field: for them, rationalism and constructivism "provide the major points of contestation for international relations scholarship" (KATZENSTEIN, KEOHANE; KRASNER, 1998, p. 646).

It is possible to note a kind of "big bang"[2] in the origin of such debate at the end of the 1960s. In such context it is possible to note a convergence of some "driving forces" (SALOMÓN, 2002): empirical transformations – revival of European and Japanese economies, end of Bretton Woods, OPEC oil embargo and the *détente* –, theoretical debates inside the IR field, as well as advances in theoretical reflections outside the IR field. Hence, from such developments emerges a debate concerning transnational relations and its intensification (COOPER, 1969; KEOHANE; NYE, 1972), with Keohane and Nye's idea of complex interdependence being one of the main contributions (KEOHANE; NYE, 1977). Such groundbreaking work is fundamental because for the first time there is an explicit engagement of liberal scholars with the main realist theme: power. In this sense, at this point there is a clear attempt to establish a dialogue, in US international relations academy, between liberals and realists – a process that would continue in the following years.

Neoliberal institutionalism/Regime theories are a clear example of that. After the waltzian critique of complex interdependence (liberal) model and the establishment of a realist systemic theory of international politics (WALTZ, 1979)[3], Robert O. Keohane and other scholars created robust research programs and subjected them to empirical verification. In a methodological sense, one of the main points of such research programs concerns their relation with the (neo)realist research program: they do not challenge the central tenets of (neo)realism, once the assumptions remain the same – international politics was still anarchical, with states being the central actors rationally oriented. The great contribution – and challenge – to (neo)realism was the introduction of important variables in the causal mechanism once established in order to better explain cooperation processes in international politics (*inter alia*, KEOHANE, 1984; STEIN, 1990; AXELROD; KEOHANE, 1985)[4]. According to them, in some contexts, high transaction costs and uncertainty about other's behavior could lead, in some cases, to suboptimal outcomes. Consequently, in some circumstances cooperation through institutional arrangements would be a rational decision.

This point is a very important one. Since the emergence of such debate in the 1980s, a label to cope with such theoretical engagement

2. "Big bang" here refers to Carvalho *et. al.* (2011) and their critique to the idea of "big bang" origin of IR as an empirical object (in 1648) as well as an academic discipline (in 1919). In spite of the pertinence of their argument for those cases, concerning the debate in the US IR academy, it is possible to establish a kind of "Archimedean point of origin" for the above-mentioned reasons.

3. For other realist critiques of liberalism(s) in the 1970s that open the way for Waltz's systemic theory, see Gilpin, 1972 and 1975.

4. "[...] therefore, [they] did not seriously threaten the well-articulated explanatory project of realism based on interests, power, and anarchy" (KATZENSTEIN, KEOHANE.; KRASNER, 1998, p. 660)

between neoliberalism and neorealism has also emerged – *neo-neo synthesis* (BALDWIN, 1993; WEAVER, 1995). As the theoretical advances in the IR field were occurring – as well as the transformation in international politics as an empirical object of analysis (as the end of the Cold War, for example) –, a tendency can be noted: the similarities between (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism increasing over time (particularly since the seminal work of Keohane and Nye in 1977, as above-mentioned). In this process it was noted that (neo)liberalism made more concessions than (neo)realism once it incorporated many (neo)realist assumptions over time; nevertheless, it can be noted that an interesting movement has also been occurring in the (neo)realist field, a movement that is not exclusive of (neo)realist, but a common one to rationalism as a whole.

The end of the Cold War opened up space for a lot of problematic points in the IR field, particularly in US academy. Two of them deserve at this point a close reflection: such event opened up space, on one hand, for sociological and cultural approaches to IR – which have received, since the end of the 1980s, the broad label of *constructivism* – and, the other hand, for debates concerning the impacts of the end of the Cold War on the distribution of capabilities in international politics and the balance of power in such context.

Thus, in this context, there is a movement in rationalism aiming at answering the questions and challenges pointed by constructivism. In this sense can be noted, in the first place, the (neo)liberal intention to incorporate ideas as variables that affect the games between states (GOLDSTEIN; KEOHANE, 1993)[5] and, in the second place, the neoclassical realism, which intends to integrate, in the realist research program, domestic variables as well as some ideational variables. For them, in spite of the pertinence of the parsimonious waltzian model, it had to be complemented with other variables in order to be able to cope with international politics in a more convincing way (RATHBUN, 2008; ROSE, 1998; LOBELL, *et. al.*, 2009; SCHWELLER, 1998). It is in this context that authors like Charles Glaser (2010) can and must be read.

Realist "innovations": Charles Glaser's Rational theory of international politics

Glaser's aim is to develop a rationalist theory of international politics, based on the strategic choice theory. Following the (neo)realist research program, he begins with the assumption that the international environment is anarchic and the state, as a rational actor, acts and makes its decisions in such context of constraint and opportunities. Different from Waltz – and following a tendency in (neo)realist studies in the 1990s – Glaser develops a complex deductive theory which is not a parsimonious one. Such movement is necessary because, contrary to Waltzian (neo)realism, for Glaser "the international system does *not* consistently favor competitive policies" (GLASER, 2010, p. 7). In other words, for him, attributing state behavior only to ordering principle and material capabilities is not enough[6].

5. In fact, the lack of satisfactory treatment of this point from a rationalist and, particularly, (neo)liberal literature is noted by Keohane, in the 2000s: "[…] an under-emphasis on the role of ideas" (KEOHANE, 2002, p. 6).

6.In his words, "[…] simpler theories are suspect" (GLASER, 2010, p. 91).

In fact, according to him, it would be necessary to include three kinds of variables in order to grasp with security policy choices of the state and, in this sense, understand in a better way how states conduct themselves in anarchy: the first variable is *motives*, divided between security and greed. Such division matters "because *why* a state wants to expand matters" and also because the motives of the state are central to understand its reaction to the strategies adopted by other states (GLASER, 2010, p. 37). Hence, it is important to note here that security-seeking and greedy states can also be willing to expand – expansion can, for example, increase the security of the state[7]. The second variable is the *material variable*, related to the "ability to perform military missions" of the state (GLASER, 2010, p. 40). In order to obtain such ability, states depend on three other component variables: a) power – "the ratio of the resources of the state that can be converted into military assets to the adversary's resources" (GLASER, 2010, p. 41) –, a relational concept concerning the potential that a state has to employ a strategy or another[8]; b) offense-defense balance – "the ratio of the cost of the offensive forces the attacker requires to take territory to the cost of forces the defender has deployed" (GLASER, 2010, p. 43) –, a very important variable once there is no direct translation from power (as a potential) to "ability to perform relevant military missions" (GLASER, 2010, p. 43). In other words, offense-defense balance would be a variable able to reflect how a state can convert its power from potential to real capabilities; and c) offense-defense distinguished ability – "enables the theory to address whether states have the option of converting their power into different types of military capability, specifically offensive or defensive mission capability" (GLASER, 2010, p. 45). Such variable is a very relevant one, once it can influence the process of signaling motivations from one state to another. Arms control, for example, would be dependent very much on this kind of variable. At last, the third variable is the *informational variable*, related to the information that the state has about its adversary's motives and the information that the state has about the adversary's beliefs about the own motives of the state. These are independent variables that compose the international environment in which states act. In what concerns the actors, states are seen as unitary actors defined in terms of their aspects that do not depend on the international environment. Thus, there would be two kinds of states: security seeker states and greedy states.

It is curious to note that for Glaser, his theory is, at the same time, "the logical extension of Waltz's structural realism" and "radically different from Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*" (1979, p. 13). This occurs in function of two combined movements: first, his deliberated inclusion, in his analytical model, of material and informational variables; second, his strategy to combine, in such process, the unit and the structural levels of analysis – in other words, transforming his theory into a reductionist one[9]. In this sense, his theory seems close to a synthesis between defensive realism and neoclassical realism[10].

Different from the waltzian argument, Glaser affirms that cooperation, as well as competition, are an important type of self-help behavior. Hence, "by itself, self-help tells us essentially nothing about whether

7. Despite the pertinence of such discussion, as well as Glaser's care in his explanation regarding this point also establishing and recognizing a more nuanced classification from "not greedy to extremely greedy states" (GLASER, 2010, p. 39) and discussing the relationship between motives (security/greed) and intentions (status quo/revisionist) , a failure we can note is the lack of a clear explanation concerning the reason why a state is a greedy or security-seeker entity.

8. For a broad discussion concerning power in world politics, see (BARNETT; DUVALL, 2005).

9. For the waltzian distinction between reductionist and systemic theories, see Waltz, 1979.

10. Nevertheless, Glaser recognizes that, in the end, "including information about motives as a defining component of the international environment of the state" is something very controversial, and, in this sense, see his theory as a realist theory [3]is open to debate[2] (GLASER, 2010, p. 14). See also p.149-152.

states should prefer cooperation or competition" (GLASER, 2010, p. 63). Consequently, informational and material variables have a combined effect in the severity of the security dilemma (GLASER, 2010, p. 72). An interesting aspect of this point is the fact that, incorporating the role of information in the behavior of the state, Glaser is able to explain evolution in the political relationships of the state and, consequently, intends to cope with one of the main critiques to (neo)realism: the problem of interaction and change[11].

In such process it is important to establish the similarities, the possibilities of dialogue and the distinctions between such perspective and the others in the IR field, placing such theory in the theoretical debate – in his words, in the IR theory landscape. In this sense, Glaser dedicates a part of the book to comparing his rational theory with realism(s) – Waltz's structural realism, offensive realism, defensive realism, motivational or neoclassical realism – neo-institutionalism (or neoliberal institutionalism), and structural constructivism. The paragraphs above discuss the relationship between the rational theory and realism(s) in general. In what concerns international institutions, they emerge and continue to exist in function of the policy choices, developing important functions in international politics. However, cooperation in international politics derives not from the international institutions, but from the above-mentioned material and informational variables: the motives of the state and the international environment. Therefore, it is possible to note in Glaser a methodological option very similar to the neoclassical movement (in spite of the differences between them, as noted by Glaser himself): both incorporate more variables than those analyzed by Waltz (1979) and, curiously, an argument that follows an inverse road than that followed by the first generation of neoliberal institutionalists/regime theory in the 1980s (see, for example, STEIN, 1990) reaching a similar result: beginning from a realist starting point (in ontological terms), he tries to understand the process of cooperation between states.

Regarding constructivism, Glaser recognizes that "Alexander Wendt's structural constructivism, although different from my theory in important aspects, shares some striking similarities". Echoing Wendt's argument, for Glaser "anarchy describes the nature of the international environment that states face, not their behavior" (GLASER, 2010, p. 18, 29). Concerning the similarities between his theory and wendtian structural constructivism, Glaser affirms that "both theories explain that non-material factors […] can be the key to cooperation under anarchy and that interaction can lead to the updating of information and robust peace" (GLASER, 2010, p. 149). The great point of contact regards the ideational aspect of the international reality incorporated by Glaser in the rational theory in order to better understand some processes of the international environment. Nevertheless, such incorporation is limited once, as noted before, Glaser maintains a set of material variables as something fundamental to his theory. Also, differently from constructivism, he focuses on strategic interaction, maintaining the interests of the state as something constant. In the end, Glaser's ontology is flatter than the constructivist's. As he recognizes, "while the theory I have developed is not a purely mate-

rialist theory, it is ideationally thin compared to Wendt's constructivism theory" (GLASER, 2010, p. 168)[12]. These comparisons lead us to our last considerations.

Some considerations concerning debates, synthesis and all of that

According to Katzenstein, Keohane e Krasner, there were three forms of constructivism: conventional, critical and postmodern, and all of them differed sharply from rationalists regarding ontological questions. However, there is a possibility of dialogue between rationalists and some constructivists: "on issues of epistemology and methodology, [...] no great differences divide conventional constructivists from rationalists" (KATZENSTEIN; KEOHANE; KRASNER, 1998, p. 675). This position is not an isolated one. In the same year, Ted Hopf (1998) and Stephen Walt (1998) were saying almost the same thing, what in some sense reproduces an important part of Keohane's argument, ten years before (1988). In this groundbreaking article Keohane, intending to cope with the emergence of critical theories (in general) to rationalism, defined two forms of theorizing about IR and international institutions – rationalistic and reflective – and compared both. For him, a positive dialogue between them will occur when reflective approaches begin to develop a research program based on grounded empirical research (KEOHANE, 1988).

It is important to note that such theoretical developments at the end of the 1990s in US academy was not only an endogenous process: some transformations in the international "reality" had a fundamental impact – highlighting, for example, the end of the Cold War: "adequately understanding the end of the Cold War requires a theory that includes both information and material variables and addresses their combined effect" (GLASER, 2010, p. 158) – a position very close to Keohane's one (2002) that, in some sense, is reproduced by other scholars in the 2000s, as Brooks and Wohlforth (2008), for example[13]. In sum, after the end of the Cold War it is possible to note a kind of "epistemic crisis" in IR (and particularly in US academy): concerning rationalism, there is an increasing perception that theories could not ever be complete[14]. Consequently, there is a necessity of dialogue, joint engagement and, at the limit, synthesis[15]. This is a pattern present in the neo-neo synthesis, in Katzentein, *et.al.* and other scholars in the analysis of rationalist vs. constructivist theories, and also in Glaser's analyses in the 2000s – following the paths drawn by Keohane (1988).

Concerning the context of Glaser's analysis, when he established his metatheoretical dialogue, it is possible to see a close and curious relationship between his engagement and a broader entrepreneurship to re-launch eclecticism in IR theorizing. In spite of the differences here – Glaser seeks to develop a general theory through a kind of synthesis and analytic eclecticism avoids synthesis in defense of "pluralism and tolerance", following in this sense a "pragmatist ethos" (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2010, p. 2, 3)[16] – the general idea here is to overcome fragmentation, going beyond theoretical extremisms and reified research traditions to the understanding of the real world (LAKE, 2011). In sum, according to Sil and Katzsentein,

12. Despite the fact that it is not the main point here, it is important to note a relevant metatheoretical aspect omitted by Glaser at this point: the tension between his notion of causation and a constructivist's one, which generates different forms of theorizing. For more details on this issue, see Kurki, 2008.

13. Brooks and Wohlforth intend to understand the international politics after the end of the Cold War, and their main point is to "undertake a systematic evaluation of the external constraints [...] and thereby gain a better understanding of the United States global role" (BROOKS; WOHLFORTH, 2008, p. 3). In this process, they analyze propositions from some theories and their heuristic capacity to cope with the international politics after the Cold War. From another perspective, see Schweller's last comment concerning Glaser's book: "I, for one, have little interest in further debates among offensive realists, defensive realists, classical realists, structural realists, and neoclassical realists. Give me, instead, a realist theory for the twenty-first century" (SCHWELLER, 2011, p. 468).

14. "Neither perspective is adequate to cover all aspects of social reality" (KATZENSTEIN; KEOHANE; KRASNER, 1998, p. 682); "Our approach is theoretically agnostic" (BROOKS; WOHLFORTH, 2008, p. 12). It is curious to note that, since the 1980s, Keohane partakes, in some sense, of the same perspective: "A critical comparison of rationalistic and reflective views suggestshypotheses and directions for the development of better-formulated rationalist and reflective research programs [...] and perhaps even for an eventual synthesis of the two perspectives" (KEOHANE, 1988, p. 379).

15. It is important to note at this point that neo-neo synthesis does not subsume all rationalist debate. In fact, before and after the end of the Cold War there have been a great number of second-image liberal theories explicitly rationalist (MORAVCSIK, 1997; RUSSETT; O'NEAL, 2001) and, particularly after the end of the Cold War, one of the theoretical movements was the development of "mid-level theories of specific phenomena" (LAKE, 2011, p. 466).

16. "Analytic eclecticism is about making intellectual and practical useful connections among clusters of analyses that are substantively related but normally formulated in separate paradigms" (SIL; KATZENSTEIN, 2010, p. 2).

[…] we define as eclectic any approach that seeks to extricate, translate, and selectively integrate analytic elements – concepts, logics, mechanisms, and interpretations – of theories and narratives that have been developed within separate paradigms but that address related aspects of substantive problems that have both scholarly and practical significance" (LAKE, 2011, p. 10).

Hence, more than 20 years after Keohane's ISA presidential address – in spite of the advances over the years in analytical terms inside rationalism – the same perception concerning the possibilities of theoretical dialogue still operate in US academy and, particularly, inside rationalism[17]. The main point here that we can note is the fact that Glaser's rational theory reproduces the same theoretical imagination limits: for him, the theoretical debate that matters is the debate between (neo)realism(s), (neo)liberalism(s) – or known together as *rationalism*[18] – and constructivism – in this case, not constructivism(s) but a very specific and positivist-friendly version of this theory. In fact, positivism and empiricism would be the real condition to establish any kind of dialogue, in a way in which epistemology defines ontology. He simply ignores other theoretical advances and developments – such as the contemporary advances in critical theory (Morton, 2007), poststructuralism (EDKINS *et. al.*, 2004) and postcolonialism (KRISHNA, 2009), for example – which expresses the political imagination limit of such perspective and, consequently, of such debates. Thus, if it is possible to note, on one hand, an aperture to some kind of dialogues and interfaces[19], on the other hand, this process still occurs in a limited context regarding the theoretical richness of the IR field[20].

Rational theory of international politics presents an important contribution to the IR field, advancing in many insights and pertinent arguments from a rationalist point of view – particularly concerning its case studies and the comparison established between rationalist theories (cf., *inter alia,* JERVIS, 2011, p. 423; MEARSHEIMER, 2011, p. 424; FEARON, 2011, p. 431; COPELAND, 2011, p. 442; SCHWELLER, 2011, p. 460). However, it is also important to read it from a broader perspective, beyond its empirical implications; in other words, from a metatheoretical perspective, seen in this sense its relationship with the debates that have been occurring in US academy since the 1980s. Once such posture is adopted, it will be possible to note some concrete elements, concerning specifically the US academy, which Duncan Bell called a historical ontology of the IR field and, consequently, a historical meta-epistemology (BELL, 2009). The point here is to note how the idea of a scientific argument is constructed over time in a specific academic context and, in this process, how the possibilities of theoretical dialogues are established and defined. Hence, despite the fact that this brief review focus only on a specific point of the IR academy as a whole, it concerns to an important moment of the disciplinary history of the field.

17. See, also, Moravcsik, 2003.

18. "there is not a deep theoretical divide between neorealism and neo-institutionalism" (GLASER, 2010, p. 162).

19. "a still richer theory requires integrating the rational theory with other theoretical perspectives" (GLASER, 2010, p. 165)

20. For a contemporary analysis of the dissidence in the US IR today and its practical, political and academic consequences, see Hamati-Ataya, 2011.

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