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Theory development in Canadian Foreign Policy: comments on David Black and Heather Smith's "Still notable."¹

I was surprised to be asked to write a review article of "Still notable: Reassessing theoretical 'exceptions' in Canadian foreign policy literature" by David R. Black and Heather A. Smith. This article that introduces the 2014 annual John W. Holmes issue of the leading Canadian journal *International Journal* is itself a review article on the field of Canadian foreign policy. It is conceived as an update of a similar article written by the two authors in 1993 and published by the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*.² I was asked to write a review of a review article inspired by a review article. And yet, not only did I enjoy very much reading the piece – which is not surprising as it is written by two seasoned and prominent scholars in Canadian foreign policy – but writing that review proved itself to be a fascinating and exciting opportunity to discuss important issues facing the field.

¹The author is grateful to David Grondin for his comments and suggestions.

²David R. Black and Heather A. Smith, "Notable Exceptions? New and Arrested Directions in Canadian Foreign Policy Literature," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (December 1993): 745-774.

The article is a broad-minded, thoughtful, and convincing review of recent research produced by Canadian foreign policy scholars. The objective of the authors is to assess the place of theory and theorization in the field. In their 1993 article, they found that a plurality of these scholars had produced promising theoretically-informed works, but that the field was still marked by a lack of ‘cumulation,’ which they define as the conduct of “empirical research designed to test and refine theoretical and analytical propositions” (135). Twenty years later, they revisit the field around three broad categories – critical approaches, feminist contributions, and a ‘return’ of a mainstream kind of analysis – and draw a somewhat similar picture. Their conclusion provides a series of reflections about current factors hindering theory development, with a particular focus on Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Conservative government policies. There is no doubt that this unique article is a must-read for any person interested in Canadian foreign policy, both as a field of research and as the object of study of this field of research.

To complement these analyses, in this article I focus on three issues linked with theory development and cumulation in Canadian foreign policy. Each time, I start with what Black and Smith themselves say about them. My hope in raising these issues is to contribute to an even more cumulative and progressive field of research.

My first point is linked with the issue of language. The important contribution to Canadian foreign policy by Francophone scholars is recognized and positively assessed by the two authors. Yet, they miss an essential aspect here: in their broad review of the field, the two authors do not cite *one* work in French, which is a significant omission.³ This consequently silences even further some of the voices and perspectives that do contribute to the field in French. In that respect, their article is not about the Canadian foreign policy literature as a whole, as the title claims, but only on the part of it produced in English. But my point here goes beyond this. The fact that anglophone Canadian foreign policy scholars do not read works in French/are not able to read French *is* a problem. Francophone societies in Canada are constitutive of Canadian reality. Because they do not read/understand French, anglophone scholars ignore an important part of Canada, and the fact that it is not recognized as a problem makes it an even bigger problem.⁴ As I contend in articles co-written with Stéphane Roussel,⁵ it is common to expect that specialists of a country speak the language of that country. Such is not the case in Canadian foreign policy, and this must be questioned.

³ The special issue of the *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 20, no. 1 (July 2014) on Canadian foreign policy under the Harper government edited by David Morin and Stéphane Roussel and published in French is, however, indirectly referred to (150).

⁴ For the field of critical security studies in Canada, David Grondin similarly illustrated the disparity in doing security studies in French and in English in Canada and the inherent problems associated with one linguistic production superseding if not plainly ignoring the other. Significantly, the editors of the journal who published his piece were so convinced of the importance of giving a voice and space to Francophone voices that they published both the original piece and its French translation in the issue. See David Grondin, “Languages as Institutions of Power/Knowledge in Canadian Critical Security Studies: A Personal Tale of an Insider/Outsider,” and “Les langues comme institutions de savoir/pouvoir dans les études critiques de sécurité canadiennes: le récit personnel d’un initié/profane,” *Critical Studies on Security* 2, no. 1 (2014): 39-58 and 59-80.

⁵ Jérémie Cornut and Stéphane Roussel, “Canadian Foreign Policy: A Linguistically Divided Field,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (September 2011): 685-709; Jérémie Cornut and Stéphane Roussel, “Un champ et deux univers ? Les francophones dans l’étude de la politique étrangère canadienne,” *Politique et Sociétés* 30, no. 1 (2011): 139-164.

This is linked with theory development in an important way. The number of Canadian foreign policy scholars is limited. The two authors regret “the limited size of the field” and its consequences on the cumulation of knowledge (148). The work of francophone scholars in French could partially make up for this limitation. By ignoring it, anglophone Canadian scholars overlook some works that could feed their own research and create new opportunities for dialogue, debate, and cross-fertilization. In other words, the ignorance of the works in French is a problem for the whole field and not only for francophone scholars. The question that should be asked now is what can be done to overcome that ignorance.

How the issue of language is framed in the article is particularly questionable. The authors are glad that “francophone scholars are [increasingly] inserting themselves into core debates in the field – mostly by publishing in English and participating in English-Canadian forums” (147). Such framing of the issue that only looks at how Francophone scholars (should) cross the linguistic divide is deeply problematic. It says a lot about where the core of the field is, and hence where the periphery is. When the issue of language is addressed, at least two other points should be emphasized. First, francophone publications in French and in English are often different because of the politics involved in the publication process and its cultural aspects. As a consequence, anglophone scholars do not have access to francophone scholarship when they read works by francophone scholars written in English. Second, the fact that anglophone scholars do not publish in French, and do not participate in French-Canadian forums is also an issue. Because they do not look at that side of the linguistic divide, the two authors put the burden of bilingualism on francophone scholars only, without any critical attention to the hegemonic nature of such a view.⁶

My second point has to do with the definition of theory. The definition adopted both in the article and, more generally, in the field is problematic for two reasons. What is usually called theorization is often the application and adaptation of theoretical frameworks produced elsewhere. The two authors consider that “theorized approaches” contribute to “theoretical developments” (134). This overlooks the fact that the application and adaptation of existing theories represents limited theoretical contributions. Theory development should first and foremost refer to the elaboration of innovative theoretical tools. That the field is now (partially) theory-influenced is a good thing; yet Canadian foreign policy scholars who support theory development should aim at a more ambitious endeavour, one that produces genuine theoretical contributions. These contributions would use Canada as an example – possibly in a comparative perspective – and could potentially be cited, discussed, and adapted by other scholars in other national and disciplinary contexts. In this way Canadian foreign policy scholars would contribute even more to the global discipline of International Relations.

The definition of theory in the field is problematic for a second reason. In their discussion of the liberal-constructivist approach, the two authors contend that liberal-constructivist scholars often value positively “Canada’s role in promoting the human security agenda”; something that critical scholars have criticized because that might “mask underlying behaviours [...] that reinforce the structural conditions underpinning community dislocation and human *insecurity*” (144). The constructivist liberal appreciation and the criticism raised by critical scholars mixes up two different things.

⁶ Anne-Marie D’Aoust, “Accounting for the Politics of Language in the Sociology of IR,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15, no. 1 (2012): 120-131; Anne-Marie D’Aoust, David Grondin, and Paul Racine-Sibulka, “La discipline francophone des Relations internationales au Québec et au Canada: Pistes de réflexions sur les enjeux et dilemmes linguistiques liés au marché du travail,” *Politique et Sociétés* 31, no. 3 (2012): 9-37.

Conducting a theoretical analysis means using theoretical lenses to analyze a phenomenon. Liberal-constructivist lenses will look at a human security agenda as the result of the diffusion of shared norms and understanding between state and non-state actors, and Canada's role in this diffusion. This says nothing about whether this agenda is positive or not.

I want to make clear that my point here is not that theories do not have normative claims or that there is no place for normative approaches in the study of Canadian foreign policy. My point is rather that liberal-constructivist scholars are not necessarily supporters of a human security agenda. There are many instances in which scholars study things they dislike. It is possible to study the diffusion of human security norms *and* be critical of it. Those are two very different questions and each of them deserves a theoretical discussion on its own. Not making this distinction clearly is a great impediment to sound theoretical debates and cumulation. It contributes to (re)produce a paradigmatic field where scholars talk past each other. They end up discussing issues (like whether the human security agenda is a positive thing or not for liberal constructivist scholars) that have almost nothing to do with theory development.

My third point investigates the growing importance of problem-solving analyses. The two authors point to "evidence of creeping instrumentalization and pressure toward policy-relevant work" (149). They note that "emerging 'professional' and policy studies schools" (147) reinforce mainstream and policy-relevant scholarship at the expense of cumulation. More generally, to what extent does the growing number of former diplomats and retired practitioners hired as sessional instructors or senior fellows even outside the policy-studies schools influence the field? They undoubtedly provide an amazing perspective on Canadian foreign policy, but could it be possible that their teaching and research hinder theory development? These practitioners-turned-teachers-and-researchers have usually no training or interest in any kind of theoretical endeavour. Most of them are even sceptical of it. Yet, their extensive experience and networks give them a strong legitimacy to contribute to Canadian foreign policy teaching and research.

This phenomenon was probably less influential in 1993 but today has real consequences on the field. It blurs the distinction between research and policy-relevant works. It diverts limited resource towards non-academic activities. Because former practitioners are not explicit about their theoretical commitments, they propagate the idea that it is possible to analyze Canadian foreign policy with no theoretical lenses. Most importantly, they influence generations of students: most students (some of whom will become researchers) following courses given by former diplomats will receive no theoretical training in Canadian foreign policy whatsoever. This cannot be without consequences in the long run.

The two authors also consider that there is a growing "emphasis on media profile through blog posts, op eds, social media, and the like" (149). In that regard, it would be interesting to investigate other questions not directly linked with cumulation but still relevant for the field: why do heterodox or critical scholars rarely contribute to public political debates? How is it that the expert on Canadian foreign policy issues is almost always a mainstream scholar? There are undoubtedly important structural forces that produce such outcome, but critical interventions in the media are possible. The almost total absence of critical scholarship in the media is particularly surprising and problematic when in the field "those championing [...] mainstream resurgence are fewer in number than their critical counterparts" (147). Moreover, critical scholars emphasize the need to engage with the world, and try to change it – whereas neutrality and detachment is (supposedly) a defining characteristic of mainstream scholarship. As a community, it is our responsibility to transfer into the public sphere the debates that we have between us. This might lead to better collective decisions.

In these three brief comments, I have tried to complement Black's and Smith's study. The sociology of knowledge often leads to pessimistic conclusions about our always-imperfect scholarly endeavours. Yet, there are many reasons to remain optimistic. The publication of review articles such as the one by Black and Smith further substantiates the claim that Canadian foreign policy is to some extent reflexive, progressive, and, in the end, cumulative. The authors analyze very well many works produced in the field and emphasize several crucial questions that scholars of Canadian foreign policy need to discuss more often. This review article has identified blind spots and omissions, yet it has not exhausted all that could still be done –and done better – by Canadian foreign policy scholars.

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