

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

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*That old sorcerer has vanished
And for once has gone away!
Spirits called by him, now banished,
My commands shall soon obey.
Every step and saying
That he used, I know,
And with sprites obeying
My arts I will show.¹*

For all the sometimes overblown talk by critical theorists and post-structuralists about the role theory plays in creating and reconstituting the social world, Democratic Peace (DP) research offers a powerful example of how the work of political scientists can directly contribute to the world they are observing. Admittedly, the core idea of democracies being more peaceful can be situated within a long American foreign policy tradition that dates back to Thomas Paine, as Owen notes in his contribution to this roundtable.² Nonetheless, the ‘discovery’ of a zone of peace between democracies by social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s did result in these ideas having far greater currency in political discourse and policymaking. Combining with the end of the Cold War, and the related weakening of realist approaches, liberal claims about the peace-bringing nature of democracies quickly became remarkably prominent and influential in academic and policymaking circles.

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), one can witness two dominant trends that have shaped DP research. The first is a continuing expansion of its focus: the success of the original, much more limited claim – that democracies rarely, if ever, fight one another – has become the basis for much wider study on the ‘unique’ behaviour of democracies in international politics, what Geis and Wagner usefully refer to as ‘democratic distinctiveness’.³ Second, the key points of contestation within DP scholarship continue to be around questions of correlation and causality, resulting in the research becoming increasingly narrow – if not trivial – in scope. Indeed, one must question how big a divide separates many DP proponents from sceptics, given that the vast majority of work commences from common ontological, epistemological and methodological starting points.⁴ When these two trends are combined the resulting situation is rather odd: the DP research program marches on, somewhat oblivious to the contemporary belligerence of prominent democracies, as well as the role their findings may play in motivating or justifying this behaviour. Responding to this state of affairs, the central question addressed here is: to what extent, and in what ways, are DP theorists responsible for the manner in which their work has been subsequently employed by political actors? In so doing, my observations are not concerned with specific theoretical and empirical propositions, and are instead focused on the consequences of these claims: on what DP theory *does*.

The failure of DP proponents to fully consider and engage with the potential political uses of their research has become all too evident in light of the way DP claims were used to justify – and potentially motivate – the 2003 Iraq war. In this context, to equate contemporary DP scholars with the foolish sorcerer’s apprentice in Goethe’s poem may not be particularly charitable, but the comparison is not wholly unjustified. War in Iraq was not what the vast majority of DP proponents advocated or wished for; but in itself this is not enough to absolve them of all responsibility. The manner in which DP findings were generated, presented and promoted helped enable their subsequent use – and abuse – by the Bush administration and the influential neo-conservative movement. By strongly advocating the policy relevance of their research, and helping to introduce DP claims into the realm of policymaking, DP scholars – much like Goethe’s apprentice – unleashed powerful (political) forces that they could not subsequently control. While acknowledging my fellow contributor’s cautioning about getting caught up in the

‘blame game’,⁵ I would argue that it is still important to properly assess to what degree scholars are responsible for the way DP findings have been utilised. Doing so is a necessary step in trying to prevent the repetition of tragic decisions such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It also offers the prospect of encouraging a much more pluralistic and reflexive DP research program.

Flow, flow onward

Stretches many,

Spare not any

Water rushing,

Ever streaming fully downward

Toward the pool in current gushing.

The historical precursors of contemporary DP research, the way it has developed and flourished in the last three decades, its major claims, and how it was transferred and translated from the ivory tower to the Beltway, have all been examined elsewhere, and need not be reiterated. It is necessary to highlight a number of points, however. First, a defining characteristic of the research program is that it has been largely developed by scholars working within the deductive-nomological model of positivism that has dominated mainstream IR.⁶ One consequence has been the adoption of a ‘dualist’ understanding of the relationship between object and subject, which has left proponents unwilling – or unable – to fully deal with feedback loops, whereby their research may impact on what they are observing. Failing to consider reciprocal interactions between DP scholarship and the phenomena it seeks to account for has encouraged the aforementioned tendency of insufficiently engaging with how DP claims have been utilised by political actors. Second, the key conclusions of DP research tend to foster a thoroughly optimistic prognosis: through the growth of liberal democracy, a more peaceful and progressive international order can emerge, and the Kantian vision of perpetual peace can come closer to reality. Based on the widely accepted empirical observation of a dyadic peace, it can be expected that a growth in liberal democracies will lead to an increase in interstate peace. This logic is even more pronounced in the monadic version of the thesis. The third point closely follows: a defining characteristic of the majority of contemporary DP scholarship has been a clear identification of the foreign policy relevance of their findings. For example, Russett notably concluded his book

with a chapter on this issue. He argued that, ‘understanding that democracies rarely fight each other, and why, has great consequence for policy in the contemporary world... It should affect the kinds of military preparations believed to be necessary, and the costs one would be willing to pay to make them’.⁷ Unsurprisingly, the peace bringing nature of democracies suggests the virtues of pursuing a policy of democracy promotion, for both principled and pragmatic reasons. Rummel is emphatic: ‘the implications of this [research] are obvious. If democracy is a method of nonviolence, if it is a solution to war, domestic collective violence, and democide, then we should foster democratic freedom.’⁸ DP research was pregnant with foreign policy implications, and this is something scholars have been acutely aware of, and actively accentuated.

Stop now, hear me!

Ample measure

Of your treasure

We have gotten!

Ah, I see it, dear me, dear me.

Master's word I have forgotten!

DP research has an inherently expansive quality: if liberal democracies are the key to a more peaceful international order, this form of government should be encouraged, it is just a matter of how. The findings are obviously compatible with peaceful and limited forms of democracy promotion, and to be clear, this is what has been almost exclusively advocated by DP academics. Nonetheless, it is not the only conclusion that can be drawn from this research. The worldview encouraged by DP scholarship can facilitate the perception that non-democracies are threatening to the existing zone of peace, while also being an impediment to the progressive reformation of international politics. From this perspective, coercive democratisation appears as *one possible solution*.⁹ It is not the only – or even likely – outcome, but latent within DP findings is the potential for it to legitimate more forceful and violent means at bringing about democracy. In the case of Iraq, this is what unfortunately happened: when combined with ‘new liberal’ scholarship in political science and international law,¹⁰ the DP thesis was taken to one logical extreme by the Bush administration and its neo-conservative supporters.

The question that immediately appears is: how determinative were DP claims in the Iraq war? This issue will be debated for years to come, and it is unlikely there will ever be a conclusive answer. My own position is that it did play a role, one of a confluence of factors that brought about the mistaken choice to invade. The war was not just about democracy, far from it, but the logic of coercive democratization was compatible with, and fed into, other strategic motives that ultimately led America and a motley ‘coalition of the willing’ to Bagdad. The exact role of DP claims in motivating the Iraq war can be somewhat of a red herring, however. Regardless of any role they played in causing the war, ideas derived from DP scholarship have subsequently served as powerful justificatory tools. This point is much harder to contest: the references made by Bush and his backers to ideas related to DP are legion. And in this sense, the question of responsibility remains relevant: should DP scholars be held accountable for the way their findings have been utilised in attempting to legitimate war?

Brood of hell, you're not a mortal!

Shall the entire house go under?

Over threshold over portal

Streams of water rush and thunder.

Broom accurst and mean,

Who will have his will,

Stick that you have been,

Once again stand still!

The overwhelming response by DP proponents to any suggestion of a relationship between their scholarship and the behaviour of the Bush administration has simply been one of silence. It is worth noting, however, that after gaining more adherents in the late 1990s, recently there has been a significant – but largely unannounced – shift away from the monadic thesis. Reviewing the literature in 2001, Russett and Oneal confidently pronounced that, ‘the emerging view seems to be that democracies are more peaceful *overall*’; by 2009 Russett’s position was much more cautious, deciding that there is *not* ‘strong and robust evidence that democracies are especially peaceful monadically’.¹¹ Indeed, Russett – arguably the most prominent DP scholar – has been one of the few to directly tackle this uncomfortable relationship in his widely cited article,

‘Bushwhacking the Democratic Peace’. Immodestly comparing himself and other DP theorists to the scientists that invented the atomic bomb, Russett complains that their work was ‘hijacked’ by the Bush administration for purposes at odds with their original intent: ‘our creation too has been perverted.’¹² Such protestations, however, do not allow for the possibility that DP theorists might have (inadvertently) contributed to this undesired outcome. As noted, a common thread through most DP literature – including Russett’s work – has been the explicit references to the policy relevance of their conclusions. Countless articles and books have finished with reflections on the significance of DP findings for American foreign policy, with a common suggestion being that it pointed towards continuing and extending support for democratization and democracy promotion efforts.

It was not simply that politicians and foreign policy pundits picked up DP claims; scholars played a clear role as policy entrepreneurs in this transmission process. As such, it is insufficient for DP proponents to simply wash their hands of the matter once the neo-conservatives and the Bush administration subsequently employed DP claims in a way at odds with what they hoped for or perhaps expected. Of course, academics cannot be held completely responsible for how their work is utilised and distorted by political actors; once it enters the public sphere they lose full control over it. Nonetheless, these scholars are *political* scientists and should understand better than most the power of ideas and words, as well as the reality that political actors regularly operate strategically in the pursuit of their own interests. Simply put, when DP proponents were so busy announcing the policy relevance of their findings and directing it towards the Beltway, they should have been far more cognisant about the dangers of doing so, and the possibility that their work might be used in ways different from what they intended. It is in this sense that DP scholars are *partly* culpable for the manner in which their findings were subsequently used to justify war.

Sir, my need is sore.

Spirits that I've cited

My commands ignore.

An excessive concern with further illustrating the ‘distinctiveness’ of democracies, while defending the theoretical and empirical validity of core claims, has contributed to the blinding of DP scholars from the significance of how their research has been adopted, interpreted and utilised by political actors. Regardless of the validity of DP, either as an empirical observation or an explanatory theory, a distilled and simplified version of the thesis has become a *social fact*. Many political actors in the United States, and the West more generally, talk of DP *as if* it exists. This tendency to adopt ‘as if’ reasoning is highly consequential:

Thanks to *paradigmatic fictions* such as the presumption of the existence of some ideals or values or facts, a set of principles can serve as a guide to action for the achievement of what they command or claim. They can be transformed into maxims that our reason devises in order to create a pattern of behaviors or theories that will allow our actions to flow in accordance with principles (the principles that the reason proposes).¹³

Democracies may, or may not, be more peaceful, but insofar as actors understand and incorporate DP claims *as if* they are real, they can actually be said to be ‘real’, even if not quite in the manner that DP proponents normally talk of. This is an important reason DP scholars have a duty to extend their remit to incorporating the political consequences of their research.

The question that hangs over these observations – and arguably the roundtable as a whole – is: where next? How should DP scholarship respond to these problems? An important starting point would be developing far greater reflexivity and pluralism in the way these issues are studied, as Geis proposes in her contribution. The high degree of homogeneity across DP research has directly contributed to its current predicament. Obviously there are differences between dyadic and monadic accounts, institutional and normative explanations, quantitative and (less frequently) qualitative studies, and so on. The vast majority of this scholarship rests on similar ontological and epistemological premises, however. The result is an increasingly stale and narrow discussion, reminiscent of the dead-end that the neo-neo debate reached. Meanwhile, there exists a much smaller body of critical scholarship, which has been more attuned to the political consequences of DP findings, but this work has been generally ignored by the dominant mainstream and has tended to suffer from being overly reactive in nature. The result has been a bifurcated discourse: the majority continue business as usual; a small minority repeat the same complaints to little effect. It is time for this divide to be addressed. Mainstream neo-positivist DP

scholars should adopt a much more open attitude and a greater willingness to properly engage with other approaches. The tendency to simply ignore critique is not good enough; as Steele notes, this practice has a powerful disciplining effect.¹⁴ Meanwhile, critical scholars have to continue developing a substantive research agenda. To date, this scholarship has been better at critique than it has been at offering alternate readings and accounts of these processes.¹⁵ Reus-Smit has argued that an important aspect in the rise and acceptance of Constructivism in IR was that it demonstrated its value by moving beyond theoretical debate and engaging in sustained empirical research.¹⁶ Critical DP scholarship could benefit from this example, utilising critique as a starting point for further developing a non-positivist research program focused on democracy, war and peace in international politics. Simply put, greater engagement on both sides is needed.

Goethe's poem about the sorcerer's apprentice is often read as a cautionary tale. Likewise, one hopes that some lessons will be taken from the recent travails of DP scholarship. Despite the battering DP work may have taken due to the behaviour of the Bush administration, the core ideas that democracy are more peaceful and more legitimate continue to circulate and be supported in academic and policy circles. It is unlikely this will drastically change in the near future. DP remains a powerful social fact that influences political behaviour. Precisely for this reason DP scholars have a responsibility to engage and reflect on these issues, and in doing so, work towards a more pluralistic and reflexive research program.

¹ All quotations from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', in Edwin H. Zeydel (ed), *Goethe, The Lyrical* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 103.

² See also: Felix Gilbert, *The Beginnings of American Foreign Policy: To the Farewell Address* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965).

³ Anna Geis and Wolfgang Wagner, 'How Far is it from Königsberg to Kandahar? Democratic Peace and Democratic Violence in International Relations', *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming).

⁴ Christopher Hobson, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Democratic Peace', *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming).

⁵ Piki Ish-Shalom, 'Theorization, Harm, and the Democratic Imperative: Lessons from the Politicization of the Democratic-Peace Thesis', *International Studies Review*, 10, 2008, 680-692; Piki Ish-Shalom, 'Theorizing Politics, Politicizing Theory, and the Responsibility that Runs Between', *Perspectives on Politics*, 7, 2009, 303-316.

⁶ This is a generalization and there are obviously exceptions, most notably Michael Doyle. It is worth noting, however, that in Doyle's seminal article, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs', he still sought to validate his claims empirically, using a quantitative approach.

⁷ Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 135

⁸ Rummel is clear that that 'this does not mean democracy should be spread by force or imposed'. R.J. Rummel, *Power Kills* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 9. It should also be noted, however, that Rummel offered very strong and consistent support for the Bush administration's 'Freedom Agenda', as evidenced by many of the entries in his 'Democratic Peace Blog', <<http://democraticpeace.wordpress.com/>>, accessed 29 June 2010. For a particularly clear example see: R.J. Rummel, 'Was The Democratic Peace Killed? – Part V, President G.W. Bush's Forward Strategy Of Freedom', <<http://rudyrummel.blogspot.com/2009/09/was-democratic-peace-killedpart-v-prs.html>>, accessed 12 January 2011.

⁹ Hobson, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Democratic Peace'.

¹⁰ Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Piki Ish-Shalom 'The Civilization of Clashes: Misapplying the Democratic Peace in the Middle East', *Political Science Quarterly*, 12, 2007-08, pp. 533-554.

¹¹ Emphasis added. Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001), 50; Bruce Russett, 'Democracy, War and Expansion through Historical Lenses', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:1 (2009), 13.

¹² Bruce Russett, 'Bushwhacking the Democratic Peace', *International Studies Perspectives*, 6:4 (2005), 396.

¹³ Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 124.

¹⁴ Brent Steele, 'Of "Witch's Brews" and Scholarly Communities: the Dangers and Promise of Academic Parrhesia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1 (2010), 57-59.

¹⁵ There are notable exceptions, however. Two particularly good examples are: Anna Geis, Lothar Brock and Harald Müller (eds), *Democratic Wars: Looking at the Dark Side of Democratic Peace* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003).

¹⁶ Christian Reus-Smit, 'Constructivism', in Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd edition (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), 194-95.