

Roundtable: Between the Theory and Practice of Democratic Peace – Introduction

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Introduction

The stated aim of the 2010 International Studies Association Convention in New Orleans was to examine the relationship between theory and policy, in order ‘to assess the current state of the divide between scholars and practitioners.’¹ This roundtable sought to address the issue in relation to Democratic Peace (DP) scholarship, a prominent strand of International Relations (IR) theory that has seemingly narrowed this gap between academics and policymakers.

In the last three decades a flourishing research program has swiftly developed around the core dyadic DP finding, namely, that modern democracies have rarely, if ever, fought one another. One major conclusion quickly drawn from this body of work was that it potentially offered a strong foundation to guide the foreign policy of the United States and other liberal democracies in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, it was not long before references to the peaceful-ness of democracies could be found in the public pronouncements of American presidents, United Nations secretary generals, and a wide range of other prominent international figures. There was a simultaneous expansion and embedding of democracy promotion practices within international politics,² which held out the possibility of being able to broaden and deepen the existing democratic zone of peace. In this regard, DP research appeared as a particularly successful case

of how IR scholars could have a direct and positive impact on the policy world. Any early celebrations were distinctly premature, however, as ideas related to DP soon emerged as a central justification – and potential motivation – in the ‘freedom agenda’ of the Bush administration, which manifest itself most explicitly in the coercive democratisation of Iraq. Rather than being a ‘force for peace’, DP scholarship has become implicated in a deeply divisive and costly war. While none of this *per se* disproved the vast majority of DP work, which has been probabilistic in nature and emphasised the much more robust dyadic finding, it has raised important questions about the political consequences of the DP research program, and whether theorists are responsible for the way their scholarship was appropriated and employed by the Bush administration and the neo-conservative movement.³

Examining the role DP findings may have played in the 2003 Iraq War, and the related issues that arise, offers an important case study for considering the more general relationship between the theory and practice of international relations, as well as more specific concerns about how the DP research program has developed and presently operates within academia and policymaking. The roundtable contributors have all been involved in existing debate on these questions; here they seek to refine, extend and further develop their arguments. While the tone is broadly critical, there has been a conscious attempt to incorporate perspectives from different theoretical traditions and a range of academic settings. Despite these diverse starting points, a number of common questions and themes can be found across the papers:

1. How much of an influence (direct or otherwise) has DP research had on the formation of United States foreign policy and other international actors? In particular, did DP findings play a role in motivating and/or justifying the decision by the United States to invade Iraq in 2003?
2. If it is the case that DP scholarship did play a role in the Iraq war, are DP scholars at all responsible for the manner in which their findings were used? Did the Bush administration and its neo-conservative backers hijack DP scholarship for its own ends, ones at odds with DP work? Or is it that DP theorists were not simply innocent bystanders, but active participants in this process, and thus partly culpable?

3. How should DP scholars respond to the current state of affairs? Should they remain in the academic realm or venture into the political sphere? Is there a need to rethink or change the manner in which DP is studied and discussed?

In exploring these questions, Tony Smith opens the roundtable in provocative fashion, strongly arguing that ‘the utility of DP theory in the study of international relations is ... easily outweighed by its flaws in construction and what have turned out to be its destructive policy consequences’. Building on the powerful claims of his recent book, *A Pact with the Devil*, Smith proposes that DP scholarship played an important role in giving shape to the imperial foreign policy that defined the George W. Bush presidency. In sharp contrast, John Owen sees DP scholarship as operating within, and partly emerging from, America’s liberal foreign policy tradition. The United States has a long history of regarding republics, and later democracies, as more peaceful, and non-liberal regimes as more warlike and dangerous. For Owen, responsibility for the Iraq war lies much more with this deeply embedded, and Janus-faced, liberal tradition, than the recent social scientific claim. In reflecting on the role of DP in United States academia and foreign policy, Anna Geis extends her focus to consider how it operates within the different context of Germany. Geis suggests that in America there has been a tendency to focus on the positive aspects of ‘democratic distinctiveness’, which has made it particularly ‘seductive’ to policymakers. In contrast, the political and intellectual history of Germany has helped to foster a much more uncertain and cautious appreciation to democracy. In this regard, American DP scholarship could benefit from adopting a more humble and self-reflexive approach to considering democracy and DP. In his contribution, Christopher Hobson argues the way DP was researched and presented to policymakers left it vulnerable to political actors to utilise in pursuing their own ends. Even if the coercive democratisation of Iraq went against the spirit and normative underpinnings of most DP scholarship, Hobson suggests that this is not enough to absolve DP theorists of all responsibility, as they should have been more aware of the potential uses and consequences of their findings. Concluding the roundtable, Piki Ish-Shalom reaches a different judgment from Hobson, proposing that DP scholars should not be praised or blamed for the real world consequences of their work. Once it leaves the academic realm and enters into political discourse and policymaking, scholarship transmogrifies into something that theorists can no longer control. For Ish-Shalom, scholars still have a responsibility to leave the ivory

tower and be engaged with the political world, not primarily through engaging with policymakers, but by being ‘theoretician-citizens’ that foster more informed public deliberation.

To date, most DP scholars have been reticent in explicitly addressing the way their work interacts with politics. While the contributors differ over whether the social scientific research program is partly responsible or culpable for the way its findings have been employed in the political realm, a common thread through much of the roundtable is the suggestion that DP scholars need to more directly consider the relationship between theory and practice, and to be more reflective about the way DP claims operate in the political sphere. In this regard, one of the main aims of this roundtable is to provoke further discussion on the theory and practice of DP, as well as what role scholars can, and should, play in these processes.

¹ ‘2010 ISA Convention Call for Papers’, <<http://www.isanet.org/neworleans2010/call-for-papers.html>>, (12 August 2010).

² Michael McFaul, ‘Democracy Promotion as a World Value,’ *The Washington Quarterly* 28(1), 2004-05, 147-163.

³ These issues have been considered in: Michael Desch, ‘America’s Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy’, *International Security* 32(3), 2007/8, 7-43; 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); Anna Geis, Lothar Brock and Harald Müller (eds), *Democratic Wars: Looking at the Dark Side of Democratic Peace*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; Christopher Hobson, ‘Democracy as Civilisation’, *Global Society*, 22(1), 2008, 75-95; Christopher Hobson, ‘Towards a Critical Theory of Democratic Peace’, *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming); Piki Ish-Shalom, ‘Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism: The Democratic Peace and the Politics of Democratization’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(4), 2006, 565-598; Piki Ish-Shalom, ‘The Civilization of Clashes: Misapplying the Democratic Peace in the Middle East’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 12, 2007-08, 533-554; 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, ‘The Rhetorical Capital of Theories: The Democratic Peace and the Road to the Roadmap’, *International Political Science Review*, 29, 2008, 281-301; Jeremy Moses, ‘Liberal internationalist discourse and the use of force: Blair, Bush and beyond’, *International Politics*, 47, 2010, 26–51; John M. Owen IV, ‘Iraq and the Democratic Peace: Who Says Democracies Don’t Fight?’ *Foreign Affairs*, 84(6), 2005, 122-27; Bruce Russett, ‘Bushwhacking the Democratic Peace’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 6(4), 2005, 395-408; Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise*, New York: Routledge, 2007; Brent Steele, ‘Liberal-Idealism: A Constructivist Critique’, *International Studies Review*, 9(1), 2007, 23-52; Brent Steele, ‘Of “Witch’s Brews”

and Scholarly Communities: the Dangers and Promise of Academic Parrhesia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23(1), 2010, 49-68.