

The Queer Art of Failed IR?

Abstract:

What is missing from the debate about the “end of IR theory” or the rejection of the now-infamous “isms”? Queer theory. Those who declare that IR theory is over and those who see it as making a comeback; those who reject the “isms” and those who champion them *seem* like they are on opposite sides of a very wide spectrum. This article argues however, that all is not as it seems. Instead, the various ‘sides’ of the debates about the futures of IR *all* take for granted a common set of understandings of what research is, what research success is, *that* research success is valuable, and how those things predict the futures of IR. Their only significant *disagreement* is about how they see the story unfolding. *We disagree* on the result as well, but the root of our disagreement is in the terms of the debates. We see IR as failing in two ways: failing to find a self-satisfactory grand narrative, and failing to achieve its necessarily-impossible goals. The current state-of-the-field literature fights the failing of IR theory – even those who see it as over memorialize its successes. We argue that failure is not to be fought, but to be celebrated and actively participated in. Analyzing IR’s failures using queer methodology and queer analysis, we argue that recognizing IR’s failure can revive IR as an enterprise.

In the wake of the enduring popularity of the argument that there might be an “end of IR theory,” (Dunne, Hansen, & Wight, 2013) we see a world in which IR theorizing is alive, even if only in repetitive fantasy, and key to disciplinary identification for whatever ‘IR’ is. Some of the responses to the “end of IR theory” argue for a retreat from grand theory to middle-level theory (e.g., Lake, 2013); others warn of a “cacophony” that needs categorization to be comprehensible (Jackson & Nexon, 2013, p. 543); still others call for either re-termining schools of IR (Michelson, 2020) or combining analytic approaches (Grieco, 2019). While we see theory’s continued importance even in scholars’ confusion about its appropriate role, we recognize, with those who declare theory’s end in the discipline, that *something has changed* in the structure and function of theorizing among scholars interested in global politics. That something, we argue, is the simultaneous recognition of and denial of the failure of IR theorizing. We contend that IR theorizing is both failing and necessarily failed, but that does not make it over. Instead, we argue, drawing on queer theory, that failure in/of grand IR theory is something to be celebrated and actively participated in. With many queer theorists (e.g., Halberstam, 2011), we argue that failure, rather than a normative bad, can be a necessary corrective to the intellectual and disciplinary stagnation implied by and implicated in practiced and accepted standards of success.

We argue that overwrought debates about the state of IR theorizing could learn from queer methodology (e.g., Weber, 2014a) and queer theorizing (e.g., Weber, 2016a) not only about global politics but also about the nature of knowledge and disciplinary politics. Queer IR has asked how cultural ideas about gender and sexuality shape global politics and how heteronormative, homonormative, and cisnormative frameworks have shaped the ways the world works (Richter-Montpetit, 2018). It has also turned its lenses

inwards, asking why queer scholarship has had as little influence on IR theorizing as it has (Weber, 2016b), and how queering IR could change IR's methodological (Weber, 2014a) and theoretical (Weber, 2014b) landscapes. This article looks at a small but in our view important piece of that puzzle – how taking queer work seriously might provide insight about the (sometimes endless) state-of-the-field debates.

We see these state-of-the-field assertions, arguments, and debates as first and foremost recursive. Sometimes they are romances, explaining the breaking developments that provide hopeful next steps for a blooming field (e.g., Acharya, 2014; Berenskotter, 2017). Sometimes they are tragedies, spelling gloom and doom for IR as an enterprise (if not academia as a whole) or even global politics itself (e.g., Stevens & Michelsen, 2020; Aistrophe & Fishel, 2020). Other times they are dramas with various players and various arguments taking various starring roles in sparring matches (e.g., Parashar, 2013; Jackson & Nexon, 2009). Sometimes they are histories, tracing the past into the present or the present into the past (Alekseyeva, 2016; Schmidt & Guilhot, 2019). Sometimes they are sociologies, explaining how this and that theory relates to this and that other theory (Aris, 2020; Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019). Sometimes they are serials, explaining how particular approaches ebb and flow or evolve (e.g., Epstein, 2013; Guzzini, 2013). Sometimes they are sports reports, talking about which side wins what when (e.g., Legro & Moravcsik, 1999; Acharya, 2005). Most state-of-the-field evaluations make the various protagonists and antagonists (theories or theorists) seem *so* at odds, *so* different, and the stakes of the debates *so* dire.

We argue that, with few exceptions, these stories, despite their different forms, different characters, and different plotlines, are all the same. They are more often than not the product of gender, sex, race, sexuality, national origin, education, and

employment privilege that produces a narrow view of what is and what should be, based on the practices that have provided the success from which the privileged writer writes. As Cynthia Weber (2014b, p. 29) argues, “disciplinary IR’s commitments and standards are as much the performative result of the so-called ‘mainstream’ agendas of learned societies, universities, independent funding agencies, and governments ... as they are the performative outcome of so-called ‘dissident’ practices” (citing Ashley & Walker, 1990; Soreanu, 2010). In fact, Weber suggests that the radical critical edge of IR and its mainstream ‘foes’ are really “intricately intertwined positions” which “produce a Disciplinary IR that claims to speak for the whole of the discipline” out of *power* rather than *legitimacy* (Weber 2014b, p. 29). In concrete terms, we argue that the current ‘state’ of state-of-the-field stories and debates is intimately and necessarily tied not only to heteronormative, traditionalized rules and norms of scholarly practice but also to heteronormative, traditionalized understandings of success, failure, and their value.

In this article, we argue that the things that the state-of-the-field literature *agrees* on betray a narrow and problematic approach to what knowledge is, how it works, who has it, and how it can be. We suggest that IR on these terms is always and already a failed enterprise, no matter what spin the state-of-the-field literature puts on it. IR fails to reach *any* expected or desired end of the enterprise of IR theorizing. It fails to achieve coherence, or fails to approximate some measure (citations, downloads, publisher quality) socially understood as failure’s opposite. It fails to find clarity or directions. It fails because it must – its idealized goals are unachievable and require it to be something that it cannot be, and remain its seductive unquestioned/unquestionable ends, despite an obvious need for reevaluation and, possibly, the embrace of failure (Halberstam, 2011; Baudrillard, 1979). Rather than arguing that IR’s success and failure

need to be redefined, we contend that IR's success and failure need to be *normatively* reinterpreted. We argue that seeing IR as a failure, and embracing its failings, provides a realistic and intellectually grounded path for IR's 'futures,' putting to bed the state-of-the-field fairy tales and encyclopedias once and for all.

The Dramatization of IR's State-of-the-Field Debates

There are as many stories of the state of the field as there are scholars appraising it. Whether they rehearse great debates, highlight victors, engage segmented isms, reject grand theory for mid-level theory, look for camps, argue for mid-level approaches, pull towards other disciplines, or argue for transformation, approaches to disciplinary sociology are proliferating – and their stories differ. At first look, these evaluations have a lot of disagreement among themselves about the make-up, constitution, and futures of the field.

We see that disagreement as surface-level, and argue that underneath that surface-level disagreement, IR's state-of-the-field evaluators *agree* on more than they *disagree* on, especially when it comes to the ways that their positions are manifested in the substantive literature. Take, for example, the similarities between self-descriptively post-positivist work (work that *defines itself* by opposing a perceived disciplinary hegemony of positivism) and the positivist work that it criticizes. A significant amount of post-positivist work still engages in grand-narrativizing and mimics neopositivist standards of research success.

As post-positivist work of many stripes eschews the perceived positivist neo-neo synthesis (ironic not least because many neorealist and neoliberal works are not

themselves positivist),¹ many scholars have constructed new grand narratives of how their approaches work, and provide leverage for understanding global politics, with the implicit or explicit claims that those narratives should replace the neo-neo synthesis in disciplinary histories and sociologies.² This is a pathological practice that Disciplinary IR³ has rehearsed, performed and rehearsed some more. Even scholars who participate in state-of-the-field debates have, in that capacity, identified these performances as pathological.

Our previous engagement of the constructivist-critical theory synthesis (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019) is useful for making this argument. We characterized the constructivist-critical theory synthesis as “net destructive to the enterprise of theory-building in IR” as it “actually confuses and limits both constructivism and critical theory” (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019, p. 123). In this case, it “obscures the productive political promiscuity in constructivisms and the productive methodological and ontological promiscuities in critical theorizing” (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019, p. 123). The mimicry of the tendency to try to cohere, synthesize, and/or aggrandize theoretical approaches makes them individually less precise and collectively less than a sum of their parts – it “undermines the potential of both” (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019, p. 145). We argue that there is intellectual value in disagreement, modesty, and distinction – ethical commitments that get lost in grand narratives about futures, announcements of the novelty of contributions, and each new attempt to synthesize, relate, or bridge another gap. While

¹ See, e.g., Desch’s (2015) critique of methodological sophistication.

² For an anti-neo-neo synthesis argument see Price (2008). For a grand categorization see Jackson & Nexon (2013). For an attempt to translate the neo-neo synthesis into positivism see Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell (2016).

³ Weber (2015) capitalizes this, signifying both the discipline in an academic sense and disciplining in a Foucauldian sense.

professionally indicative and predictive of success (see, e.g., Whyte, 2019), categorizations can stymie creativity and straightjacket thought (Sjoberg, 2017).

Take, for example, the combination of attempts to find a center or identity for critical theorizing and to declare ‘turns’ within that critical theorizing which are meant to identify/produce its key directions. Some ‘in’ ‘critical theory’ have attempted to unify the enterprise, from the C. A. S. E. Collective trying to pull together a common identity for critical theorizing loosely linked by an interest in making the world a better place (C. A. S. E. Collective, 2006) to Nicholas Rengger and Ben Thirkell-White’s identification of four “core strands” of critical IR theorizing (Frankfurt School critical theory, neo-Gramscian theory, feminism, and various strands of post-structuralism), characterizing critical theorizing as both an amalgamated enterprise and a precursor inspiration for constructivism (Rengger & Thirkell-White, 2007). Some scholars have tried to join critical theories with constructivisms in problematic ways – either by assigning a critical-theoretical politics to constructivisms (e.g. Price, 2008; Barder & Levine, 2012; Hoffmann, 2009; Price & Reus-Smit, 1998) or by assuming the appropriateness of constructivist epistemology and methods for critical theorizing (e.g. Duvall & Varadarajan, 2003). Still others point to trends: declaring ‘turns’ or identifying futures, including the “practice turn” (Adler & Pouliot, 2011), the “aesthetic turn” (Bleiker, 2001), the “temporal turn” (Hom, 2018), the “queer turn” (Richter-Montpetit, 2018), the “aesthetic turn” (Simon & Koivisto, 2010), “Global IR” (Acharya, 2014), post-Western IR (Shani, 2008; Nayak & Selbin, 2013), or practical utility (Duvall & Varadarajan 2003). These are all practices of declaring similarity, influence, and success which “constitute a position-enhancing move for scholars seeking to accumulate social

capital, understood as scientific authority, and become ‘established heretics’ within the intellectual subfield of critical IR” (Baele & Bettiza, 2020).

We suggest that there is significant diversity in critical approaches to IR, and even doubt as to what constitutes the class of critical theorizing (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019). We argue that this diversity and doubt is rich, powerful, and valuable, and should neither be quashed nor streamlined. None of the diverse approaches to critical theorizing, much less a mashing together of them, should be ‘the’ Critical IR, and critical IR (like any other grouping of IR work) should not have a grand and coherent narrative. Trying to find a quick punchline or single direction for critical IR does what the neo-neo synthesis did to theories in its day – undermine intellectual acuity, sociological productivity, and political productivity in theoretical enterprises. And yet that is exactly what happens in state-of-the field debates.

Whether as declarations of new trends or set-up oppositions, state-of-the-field debates tend to stake out the comparative advantage(s) (or disadvantages) of particular approaches at the expense of careful, philosophically rigorous delineation of the epistemological and methodological commitments of diverse approaches to theorizing. This staking-out often mimics neopositivist-inspired, ‘progressive’ research standards (see, e.g., Elman & Elman, 2003). There has developed something of a formula for presenting a grand theoretical approach to how global politics works: present the theory, citing the work that it relies on, in as broad a way as possible; present case-study and/or quantitative evidence that supports the generalization inherent in the theory, and then present as wide-ranging a case for the theory’s impact on the field as possible (even if any of those elements are exaggerated or even disingenuous). This is the case even in work that explicitly critiques the disciplinary association of positivism and

quantitative methods with successful research. This work often lays out its case *against* positivism and quantitative methods in similar formats and wordings as the work that *uses* those tools makes its arguments about global politics.⁴ Particularly, the terms that identify ‘good’ research and other markers of success look *strikingly similar* in grand theory work *outside* of ‘mainstream IR’ as they do *inside* of it. As a result, rejecting grand narrativizing is only a partial step, so long as implicit reference to the structure of grand narratives remains.

A fair amount of constructivist research and most critical research creates some distance between itself and traditional neopositivism – whether it is questioning the possibility of a separation between the researcher and the researched (e.g. “monism” in Jackson, 2010), questioning the possibility of apolitical knowledge (e.g. Alker, 2005), or questioning the quantifiability of particular concepts (e.g. Kavalski, 2015). Yet, for all of the questioning of the norms of neopositivist research that is done in the IR academy, the research-identifying terminology (and therefore the ghost) of neopositivist practices and standards remains. This research-identifying terminology includes references to ‘debates,’ ‘turns,’ methods, and/or disciplinary histories and futures.

For example, it is relatively common to see poststructuralists refer to their ‘data’ and ‘analysis’ of that data (see, e.g., Epstein, 2013; Kurki, 2006). While we are not arguing that these scholars are using the words to mean the same thing, we do believe that their very use constitutes a mimicry of neopositivist standards of research success. While context matters, so does the existence of the repetition. Similarly, we frequently

⁴ For an example of this in advocates for post-positivism, see Biersteker (1989), discussing the positive contributions of post-positivist work. For an example of this in advocates of qualitative methods, see, e.g., Brady & Collier (2010).

hear nontraditional IR scholars refer to ‘research programs’ (e.g. Tickner, 2005; Milliken, 1999) in the same way that traditional IR scholars do, which recalls the language of Kuhnian and Popperian debates about what IR knowledge is and how it is furthered (Kuhn, 2012 [1962]; Popper, 2005 [1934]). Staking out that you have/are a ‘research program,’ much like unifying your subfield or claiming a ‘turn’, is a claim to disciplinary success, progress, and distinction.

The use of these traditional signifiers of success is tied to a mimicry of traditional standards for measuring success in many, if not most, critical circles. Those standards include, but are not limited to, the perceived quality of the journal or publisher which publishes the work, the citation count of the work, and the reaction of prominent scholars to the work (Baele & Bettiza, 2020; Whyte, 2019). For example, constructivist and critical work published in *International Organization*, such as Alexander Wendt’s agent-structure discussion (Wendt, 1987) or Vincent Pouliot’s practicality analysis (Pouliot, 2008) is often judged as better by virtue of its publication outlet than comparable work published in journals less well-known to the traditional mainstream of the field which might be even higher quality work on other, more relevant metrics. Like mainstream scholars, “dissident” scholars “mainly publish peer-reviewed articles in American academic journals, and the differences in their publishing records for the particular format are not significant” (Hamati-Ataya, 2011, p. 389).⁵ This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, where that work receives more attention, and then scholars

⁵ Hamati-Ataya (2011, p. 389) continues to suggest that, despite similar publications in mainstream journals, “Dissidents are systematically more involved than others in alternative publications,” suggesting that they do *more work* than mainstream scholars, mimicking mainstream “success” and then *adding* projects that work outside of those metrics.

strive to be published in such journals, even if it means changing the shape of their work.⁶ It also becomes what Baele & Bettiza (2020, p. 20) describe as a “potentially symbiotic win-win move for both scholars and journals” where publishing so-understood “cutting edge thinking” enhances a journal’s positionality in the field, and publishing in a journal which is at the forefront enhances the scholar’s relative place in disciplinary hierarchy. This symbiosis entrenches ‘mainstream’ standards.⁷

If a figuration of ‘positivist IR’ and a figuration of ‘post-positivist IR’ have so much in common, where do state-of-the-field debates find distinction? We argue that they do not. Instead, while they propose different groupings, different mechanisms, and different futures, state-of-the-field debates regularly reify tendencies to aggrandize theoretical contributions and mimic neopositivist research standards. This argument, and our other arguments about performances of research ‘success’ are *not* intent-based – while scholars *intend* (or do not) to varying degrees to seek success or acclaim, and *intend* (or do not) to varying degrees to purport to knowledge cumulation, mimicry is neither about intent nor effort – it is instead about reification, repetition, and through them the constitution and reconstitution of the discipline.

These mimeries, while they might seem harmless or remediable, presume two things that are deeply problematic: that success is desirable, and that success should be measured in a particular way that was inherited and imposed on contemporary IR theorizing rather than grown organically from it or even adapted for it. These two

⁶ See Nicols et al (2020) for an account of how we believe this happens, if in a different discipline.

⁷ For example, Holthaus (2020) suggests that mimicry of mainstream standards of ‘science’ for IR makes prestige in practice theory research associated with empiricism, and makes the field less accessible to graduate students.

presumptions, in turn, involve what we suggest are at worst unjustified and at best underexplored assumptions about “what knowledge is, how it cumulates, what knowledge cumulation is for, and who has the authorial voice to engage those questions and/or produce the (assumed producible) knowledge” (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2019, p. 140). They imply that IR theorizing both can and ought to have a progressive direction, creating a particular commonality of knowledge-building politics where intellectually it might not exist. They also constitute belonging to a theoretical paradigm as valuable. This allows for the association of paradigmatic membership, progressive direction, IR knowledge-building, and knowledge cumulation with the success of *any* research enterprise, while associating success with desirability. We argue that each of these steps can and should be questioned as a part of interrogating Disciplinary IR’s fantasies of knowledge cumulation.

Fantasies of Knowledge Cumulation

We argue that knowledge cumulation in IR is a fantasy reified by paradigmatic clusters and the mimicry of research standards and practices in the natural sciences (e.g. Elman & Elman, 2001; Elman & Elman, 2003). The ‘evidence’ of ‘knowledge cumulation’ in IR comes as much from the ritualized practice of research behavior as it does from any ‘true’ or genuine notion of knowledge cumulation. One has ‘succeeded’ in the enterprise of IR by cumulating knowledge, and the work of ‘successful’ scholars is by definition cumulated knowledge. Cumulation of knowledge as a standard of success is a condition of possibility for the desirability of success in the field. That ritualized practice at once is institutionalized as success and institutionalizes the need for research success, reified and reproduced by hiring, tenure, merit raise, and promotion standards.

This ritualization is a signifier that what counts as knowledge in the field, in particular research programs and more generally, is performative (Butler, 1990; Barad, 2003; Weber, 1998) – where standards are set by their utterance and repetition rather than by some external ‘objective’ standards of (narrowly) good science or (more broadly) good research (Baudrillard, 1991; Williams, 2003; Shepherd, 2008). Scholars iterate and reify standards of measurement of knowledge in each piece of scholarship which ‘succeeds’ in the field, and these iterations make it a paradox for scholars to both occupy the methodological, epistemological, and political space that falls outside of inherited standards *and* succeed. Outside-the-mainstream work’s underrepresentation in the places understood to be publishing ‘success’ is overdetermined, and the correlation between mimicry of traditional scholarship and ‘success’ of critical scholars a given.

We mean ‘performative’ in the sense that Judith Butler uses it (Butler, 1990; 1993), particularly as she talks about it going hand-in-hand with a Foucauldian notion of disciplining,⁸ where “performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability – a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” which resonate as “ritualized production” (Butler, 1993, p. 60). This frames performativity as a “specific modality of power as discourse” (Butler, 1993, p. 139) where the politics of the signification and the politics of the sign meet, an act of territorialization, of production, of installation – which does not have to be alone, singular, or unidirectional. Since performatives are their own referent (Butler, 1993, p. 159), they proliferate as manifestations of the power underlying them, and interact relatively on the basis of that

⁸ See Foucault (2004), where discipline is the operation of power which regulates individual behavior within a social body through the regulated organization of activity, time, and space. See also discussions in Edkins (1999) and Steans (2003).

relative power. In this context, ‘performances’ are actions and events, iterations and reifications, context-specific, which “bring a subject into being” relationally.⁹

To escape the recursive, performative loop of ‘disciplinary success’, we argue that it is important to see the possibility that knowledge cumulation is not, and should not be, a given in IR research. Instead, we argue that the idea itself is an inherited empty signifier with unspoken content which governs the production of what we understand as disciplinary IR. Traditionally, the idea of knowledge cumulation is firmly grounded in a neopositivist understanding of social science, in which the role of theory is to collate observed empirical regularities across cases, or what Waltz calls laws (Waltz, 1979). While this interpretation is critiqued in most critical IR, “cumulation,” in that work, becomes a term without clear conceptual content. The paradigmization of IR theorizing distracts from a particular theory’s internal conditions of possibility by introducing incompatible conditions of possibility drawn from an inherited disciplinary sociology of what knowledge is and how it works. As such, any acknowledgement of the idea of cumulativeness from within specific exercises in reflexive IR creates the grounds for necessary failure within those exercises.

The simultaneous rejection of traditional ‘cumulation’ and continued performance of acts of cumulation can be understood by seeing the ways that silence frames cumulation in critical IR. We learn from feminist theorists that the unspoken is as important as if not more important than what is spoken (Charlesworth, 1999; Kronsell, 2006), coming from attention to how IR’s others are omitted, excluded, kept

⁹ This references a short piece by Judith Butler on performativity on a site collecting keywords related to performance:
<http://intermsofperformance.site/keywords/performativity/judith-butler>

out, and not mentioned (Tickner, 1988; Agathangelou & Ling, 2004). We argue that IR's silences tell us more about the state of knowledge cumulation in the discipline than looking for standards that tell us what we do know. Accordingly, we ask on principle what any given research program does not take account of and how accounting for those omissions could change analysis. We focus on both *visible* omissions (like the concepts that a research program fails to incorporate), and *invisible omissions*. Invisible omissions are those that are unhearable by a research program – normally left out or ignored by *both* the researchers that form the core of the research program *and* their critics (Hansen, 2000; Edkins, Shapiro, & Pin-Fat, 2012; Butler, 2001). By 'unhearable,' we mean either that the omitted content falls outside of the boundaries set for dialogue, or is assumed by all stakeholders to be by definition irrelevant (for deeper analyses see Spivak (1988) and MacKinnon (2006)). Unlike its visible omissions – variables that its scholars and their critics have added to, re-operationalized, expanded on, or suggested the inclusion of – invisible omissions are often not treated as omissions at all within particular scholarly boundaries.¹⁰

The discipline's 'collective' standards for knowledge production, then, can be understood as constituted by social performances of dominance rather than founded on some given or objective notions of what science should be. Rather than being objective judgments of quality, statements like 'this is good science' and 'these results are robust' are signs without referents used to discipline (Baudrillard, 1995). The invisible disciplining nature of the performative standards of knowledge cumulation is part of the

¹⁰ See analyses of invisibility in global politics, e.g., Prugl (1999) and Peterson (2003) on household economies and Gentry & Sjoberg (2015) on politically violent women. The danger of not being able to see something is that we do not know what it is that we do not see.

story of Butler's understanding of performativity (Schmidt, 2016). The other part is attention to who is excluded by claims to knowledge cumulation (generally as well as in specific paradigmatic situations), what is left out, and on what axes. These disciplinary standards (both in the conventional and Foucauldian sense) make invisible their own impossibility and their related necessary failure.

For example, a submission to a traditional IR journal in the United States or Western Europe which makes an interesting argument, but is not in the format of, methodologically acceptable to, inclusive of the same forms of evidence traditionally used in, and good science to that journal's traditional reviewers is unlikely to succeed in getting published.¹¹ This will generally be justified with reference to the 'quality' of the piece, and rarely if ever will questions of sex, race, gender, class, and other axes of exclusion be discussed as *producers* of the standards that then exclude on 'quality' where 'quality' has been set up in a way that excludes all performances of scholarship which are not mimicry of a particular Western, liberal model (Paolini, 1999).¹² Even editors and reviewers who note the exclusionary *effect* of these standards will often mourn that and move on, imagining the only possible alternative being *lacking standards*, and seeing such a lack of standards as more insidious than the exclusionary

¹¹ For example, *International Organization's* information for authors specifies that the journal publishes "articles that contribute in some way to the improvement of general knowledge or empirical theory" and that "constitute a substantial advance of knowledge." This statement explicitly assumes that knowledge is cumulative and generalizable, and that empirical theory is distinct from normative theory. *International Organization*, "Information for Authors," <http://iojournal.org/information-for-authors/>.

¹² Recently, scholars (e.g., Alter et al, 2020; Vitalis, 2015) have associated these trends specifically with reputation of scholars.

effects of using certain sets of standards. ‘Knowledge cumulation’ then becomes a set of reified and artificial standards rather than a journey for truth or interest.

The answer to this quagmire is sometimes a liberal politics of inclusion (e.g. Nedal & Nexon, 2018) – how do ‘we’ get more women, more minorities, more people from underrepresented places in the world to be *able to meet* the standards of good scholarship in the field? That liberal politics of inclusion, while well-intended, can be read as a (subtle, perhaps accidental) expansion of the violence it (formally) seems to abate. It fails to question the utility of the existing standards of good scholarship and assumes that those currently excluded would be happy to change the form, shape, and/or nature of their scholarship to fit within the (unquestioned/unquestionable) mold of good scholarship, either loosely or strictly understood. As Jasbir Puar (2006) argues, neoliberal “inclusion” to absorb the other-within can be as violent as if not more so than exclusion even as it appears progressive. That violence is the reproduction of naturalized, bounded identities when identities are liminal and messy when not policed (e.g. Agathangelou, 2013; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Posocco, 2013; Scott, 2013). The bounded nature of IR inclusion excludes liminality, messiness, and outside-ness (e.g. Malksoo, 2012).

Expanding the boundaries of IR to include any given *particular* excluded work maintains an illusion of stability, hiding what is unstable; it maintains an illusion of certainty, hiding what is in doubt; it maintains an illusion of coherence, hiding the rebellious, the failed, and that which remains outside (e.g. Sjoberg, 2017). Queer theorizing of the liminality involved in unstable sex/gender identities shows that even that which is presumed to be the most primordial (sex identity) is really liminality hiding under supposed definition (e.g. Weber, 2016a). Translated to thinking about

inhabitability, this theorizing suggests that the apparent safety of (constituting then occupying) inhabitable space hides liminality and uncertainty, and perhaps danger, under its supposed (empirical and normative) clarity (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Posocco, 2014). Therefore, “all the repressive and reductive strategies of power systems are already present in the internal logic of the sign,” such “that violence is an inevitable byproduct of signification” (Baudrillard, 1981).

In this way, not only do traditional standards of knowledge make invisible their own impossibility, they hide the violence of IR’s denials of failure and continued insistence on travelling failed paths despite the condemnation of failure and the privileging of success. IR’s continued recursive enactment of its settled ‘standards’ despite their obvious failure and exclusiveness makes invisible the raced, classed, and sexed impacts of those standards and their apparent objectivity. Baudrillard’s work provides a path for navigating this disjuncture between signs (IR’s ‘standards’) and referents (the fantastic notion that ‘good scholarship’ exists objectively) (Baudrillard, 1975). He argues that “only ambivalence, as a *rupture* of value... sustains a challenge to the legibility, the false transparency of the sign... questions the evidence of the use value of the sign (rational decoding) and of its exchange value (the discourse of communication).” This ambivalence, Baudrillard argues, “*brings the political economy of the sign to a standstill*; it dissolves the respective definitions of symbol and referent” (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 150).

Endorsing the inclusion of non-traditional perspectives, classifying and categorizing them, and assuming inclusion’s possibility may all have violent impacts (for discussions of the violences of inclusion see Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Posocco, 2013; 2014; Mbembe, 2019). Moving of the signification ‘knowledge’ from any referent to

which it was originally tied makes method and research performances of scholarship, rather than (the illusive) scholarship itself. If ‘research’ is a performance of scholarship, ‘standards’ for research serve to disguise the fantastic nature of knowledge cumulation. As such, there is no space for liminality, uncertainty, change, inadequacy, and failure in structural rather than passing senses. Yet looking beyond the discourse of certainty, those pervade IR. A Baudrillardian ambivalence towards research programs and their truth statements can reveal the recursivity of IR’s standards of knowledge cumulation. This is because *condemnation* or *rejection* of any given research program and its truth statements *endorses* its assumptions about truth, as well as some of its assumptions about what the international arena is and how it works.

As such, the idea that IR knowledge cumulation can be nothing but fantasy is straightforward. If the reification of standards of knowledge cumulation is a signification divorced from a referent, where the recovery of the referent is conceptually and practically impossible, then knowledge cumulation is and will always remain an empty signifier. The only question is how that empty signifier directs and is directed.

We suggest that, in IR, more often than not, it directs and is directed by seduction. In Baudrillard’s words, seduction is “that which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from its truth” (Baudrillard, 1991 [1979], p. 54). What makes discourses of knowledge, of science, and of progress seductive “is its very appearance: the aleatory, meaningless, or ritualistic and meticulous, circulation of signs on the surface; its inflections, and its nuances. All of this effaces the content value of meaning, and this is seductive” (Baudrillard, 1991 [1979], p. 54). Therefore, if there could be an interpretive discourse of knowledge cumulation that reached truth value, that truth value would be self-defeating, since “the meaning of an interpretive discourse, by

contrast, has never seduced anyone” This is the fundamental contradiction, in Baudrillard’s terms, that makes standards for knowledge cumulation in IR internally impossible. He explains that “every *interpretive discourse wants to get beyond appearances*; this is its illusion and fraud. But getting beyond appearances is appearance, and is hence subject to the stakes imposed by seduction, and consequently to *its own failure as discourse*” (Baudrillard, 1991 [1979], p. 54). As such, what is left in/of the failed discourse can only be the fantastic, and pretensions to success hollow.

Inhabiting a Failure of a Discipline

The need for success and the denial of failure depend on two things: first, both success and failure *existing* and being identifiable; and second, presuming a particular normative relationship between success and failure. In IR, as we discussed above, scholars are thought of as successes or failures according to a complicated metric of disciplinary prestige based on publication outlet, ‘scientific standards,’ and perception of the change that they have caused in the discipline. Work is characterized as successful or failed based on whether it contributes to knowledge cumulation. The discipline itself is understood as successful or failed based on the aggregation of those measures. On these terms, the emptiness of disciplinary standards and the impossibility of knowledge cumulation makes every piece of scholarship and every scholar in IR a failure, and the discipline along with them.¹³ To us, the identification of success/failure is impossible.

Still, we focus our approach to ‘disciplinary IR’ around questioning the second assumption, that the normative relationship between success and failure is such that

¹³ See, e.g., discussion in Wilcox (2017).

success is good and desirable and failure is bad. Failure has been insufficiently explored in Disciplinary IR, both in thinking about the disciplinary enterprise and in thinking about the world ‘out there’ which we purport to study.¹⁴ Here, we look to theorize the ‘upside’ of the failure of the disciplinary enterprise of IR. It is, after all, failure that Baudrillard called for, in different words – a willingness to drop commitment to and passion for a certain end in the recognition that both that end and its opposite are empty signifiers. Queer theorists have suggested that this sort of failure – failure to live up to expectations which were messy, detached, or *a priori* untenable – might be worth celebrating (Halberstam, 2011). We build on these two understandings to embrace failure in IR.

Often failure is thought about as either a final end (something has failed), as a stumbling block on a path to success (if at first you do not succeed, try, try again), or as a miscalibration (we thought this was success, but really it is failure instead). With Jack Halberstam, we suggest a normative reinterpretation. Rather than seeing failure as an end point, or as a stopping point on the way to success, it can be seen as itself a politics, “a category levied by the winners against the losers” and “a set of standards that ensure all future radical ventures will be measured as cost-ineffective” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 184). Halberstam uses the example of reproductive success. Inherited wisdom has suggested for a significant amount of time that people *should* have children – that a heterosexual marriage with biological offspring is the ideal of success in one’s personal life. That could be taken at face value: success (measured in biological offspring to still-

¹⁴ There are some exceptions, especially recently. For example, about the world ‘out there,’ Gabay (2020) makes an argument to reimagine the failure of utopias as the potential for transformation. Sjoberg (2019) makes the argument that the (inevitable) failure of critical security studies and the impossibility of critique shapes that field.

married heterosexual, cissexual parents) is to be valued, and failure (measured in some other reproductive result) is to be devalued. *Or* the very normative value attached to reproductive success is itself a weapon, where associating failure with non-reproduction is a category levied against the losers by the winners. Redefining all reproductive results as successful or changing which reproductive results are measured as successful does not change the weaponized, normalizing character of the concept of success. This is a metaphor for IR's disciplinary sociology, but it is also directly applicable to IR's epistemological and methodological engagement with non-heteronormativity.

Applied to IR, the normalization of 'success' as the thing to which all (researchers) should aspire reifies membership in the categories of 'successful' and 'failed,' and provides the 'successful' with a powerful weapon to continue to exclude, put down, and delegitimize the 'unsuccessful.' The 'winners' are *by definition* in a normatively superior position compared to the 'losers' despite the emptiness of the signification of each category. Understanding individual pieces of work, individual scholars, or research paradigms as *failed* (a foil to successful) is a categorization wielded by those who have already been classified as successful to achieve and perpetuate the exclusion of those who they can constitute as inferior. In this way, research success is a category IR's winners wield against its losers to perpetuate their position as winners, *consciously or unconsciously*, against a background of a Disciplinary IR where the standards for research were created largely by white, heterosexual cis-men and remain largely undisturbed despite the intellectual and representational diversification of IR research and IR scholars.

Failure as a category in IR scholarship serves to "reinscribe and renormalize standards of 'research success' which remain unchanged, unchangeable, and regressive"

(Halberstam, 2011). The scholarship that makes unconventional claims to knowledge cumulation (or no claim to knowledge cumulation) not only *fails* but constitutes its researchers as *failures* – which becomes recursive when “we tend to blame each other or ourselves for the failures of the social structure we inhabit, rather than critiquing the structures... themselves” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 35, citing Kipnes, 2004). In Halberstam’s view, it is the system that privileges success that is the problem, and failing within it is an emancipatory possibility which “dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2).

Realizing the caging nature of the boundaries of disciplinary success, it is possible to think that failure might be perceived as something to celebrate and strive towards rather than something which should inspire shame. Halberstam suggests that “under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 2-3). In Halberstam’s view, it is only when the norms and metrics by which we aspire to success become both politicized and problematized that freedom becomes possible. It is not *failing* that we as scholars or as people need to learn to do – we fail all the time. As Halberstam notes, failure is endemic in life and work, as “to live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately die,” despite denial, resistance, and constructs of success (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 186-187). Instead of needing to learn to fail, we argue, we need to learn to embrace failure, particularly the collective failure of the enterprise of ‘disciplinary IR’ to achieve or approximate ‘knowledge cumulation’ generally or the aspirations of particular research programs specifically.

“Rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment,” Halberstam contends that it is important to recognize, embrace, incorporate, and legitimize failure (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 186-187). Lee Edelman suggests that pretenses of success and the ‘failure to succeed’ that is their foil are actually both on the *same* side – “committed to futurism’s unquestioned good,” aspirational to success, and committed to a perceived normative value of success (Edelman, 2004). Edelman envisions another ‘side’ – “the ‘side’ where narrative realization and derealization overlap, where the energies of vitalization ceaselessly turn against themselves; the ‘side’ outside of all political sides” (Edelman, 2004, loc. 97). We argue that it is in this ambivalent ‘side’ that IR scholars should see, experience, and live IR as such.

Halberstam’s account of this ‘side’ (or ‘anti-side’) is “the queer art of failure.” Halberstam explains that “the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 187). If “winning has become a byword for greed, arrogance, profiting from others, conformity” (Halberstam, 2012), losing can be the art of rejecting those things, and, with them, the normative value of the win itself. The queer art of failure wields negative affect and anti-futurity as a tool of political resistance (Ruberg, 2015, p. 114), suggesting that active rejection of not only the standards but the idea of success constitutes the space of failure as habitable. In this view, “every experience of annoyance, anger, sadness, and hurt comes with its own value, its own message, its own transformative potential” (Ruberg, 2015, p. 115). As Ruberg urges, there is space in the willingness to “see willful self-destruction not as pathological behavior from which queer subjects need rescuing but as an ecstatic rejection of mainstream power structures” (Ruberg, 2015, p.

115). Embracing Disciplinary IR's failures, then, has two potential advantages: recognition, and resistance.

Failure and Grand Theory in IR

And they lived happily ever after. The end.

No, really.

If IR's state-of-the-field debates are alternatively narrativized fairy tales, we have a replacement. We suggest that the fairy tales' idealized end can be found not in success, but in failure; not in agreement, but in controversy; not in aggrandized claims, but in careful thought; not in stability, but in liminality.¹⁵ It is hitching our wagon to a failure of a Discipline *and* acknowledging that failure that constitutes and creates the possibility of a happily ever after for IR theory.

We see the answers to many of these questions bound up in a Disciplinary IR that has racist, sexist, heterosexist, and cissexist intellectual orientations and remains silent about them and often the assumptions that prop them up. But even work which decenters or critiques these exclusions in IR, in our view, is positioned *compared to* or *in opposition to* the discipline's existing structure. Rather than being disappointed that IR theories are exclusive, cannot be reduced to a single theory, cannot *account for*

¹⁵ It is from conversation with the late Hayward Alker that we take the idea that the substance of inquiry (to the extent that it might have it) is in the argument and contention rather than its resolution.

global politics as a whole, and cannot present grand narratives of their competitive advantages vis a vis other approaches, we suggest highlighting and inhabiting these failures. Questioning the terms of disciplinary success as lying in a tightly choreographed dance (peer review in elite journals) or a popularity contest (citation count), or even in the ‘science’ of knowledge cumulation, we ask why empty signifiers continue to dictate value in a wide variety of channels in IR. But we do not think redefining success will ‘solve’ this ‘problem,’ no matter how well-intended or radical the redefinition is. Note that we are *not* denying the existence or importance of significant transgressive work within IR, work that rejects grand narrativizing, or other explicit or implicit attempts to embrace failure. We are under the impression that authors critiqued here might actually agree with our critiques, either placing themselves within them or taking exception to them. We are not looking to signal virtue or to exclude, simply to suggest an *explicit* alternative approach.

Instead of looking for an alternative, emphasizing some of the ‘good’ transgressions, finding another way to succeed, or recasting success, we look to deconstruct IR’s logics of success and failure, and, with them, its mimicry of reified standards and its fantasies of knowledge cumulation. We see rewards in embracing IR theory’s failure to live up to IR theorists’ expectations of it. With Halberstam, “perhaps most obviously, failure ... disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between...winners and losers” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). Declaring, and embracing, knowledge cumulation *failure* (and thus, IR’s intellectual failure) “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). The relevant norms in IR are the fetishization of science, the fetishization of progression and progress, and the establishment and reification of boundaries of what ideas matter to the field. In

embracing failure, and escaping those punishing norms that are as violent in their *inclusion* (e.g. Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Posocco, 2014) as they are in their *exclusion*, “queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 89). It “can be a potent form of critique,... a refusal of the norm, an indifference to assimilation, and a route to other ways of being in the world” (Halberstam, 2012). Here, the alternative to the hegemonic system of claims of knowledge cumulation is *the queer*, understood as both liminal and anti-heteronormative, as a foundation for theorizing more nuanced understanding of knowledge than success or failure at cumulation.

If scholars find their affirmation in (hollow) confirmations of their claims to knowledge cumulation, a queer politics of failure suggests a different direction. As Halberstam recommends, “rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in... all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 187). Reveling in fantastic failures, in terms of a queer critique of the fantasy of progressive knowledge cumulation, has two elements: celebrating research-as-failure, and confronting the future given that embrace.

Queer theory suggests guidelines for embracing failure; “failing is something queers do well” – not (only) in the self-deprecating sense of laughing at (one’s own) flaws, but in the more fruitful sense of exposing the ridiculousness of norms by failing to live up to them. In this sense, queer failure is “a map of the path not taken” (Weber, 2014). As such, “queerness offers the promise of failure as a way of life...but it is up to us whether we choose to make good on that promise in a way that makes a detour around the usual markers of accomplishment and satisfaction” (Halberstam, 2011, loc 3281). ‘Failing’ to meet expectations and being fine repudiates the salvation narrative that

accompanies the ‘right’ rules and norms, and lifts the often terrible consequences of falling outside ‘the norm’ while removing the privileges of ‘belonging’ to the category of success.

The exposure and analysis of queer failure denaturalizes the coherence of knowledge-production performances to show the vapidness inside. We see the replacement of “all-encompassing global theories” with those “subjugated knowledges” which have been “buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systemization” as a key first step, but insufficient by itself (Halberstam, 2011). Turning IR’s ‘losers’ into its ‘winners’ would both serve social justice and unsettle the binary itself, but rejecting the categories writ large would *both* upset the politics of exclusion in those categories *and* discourage the win-seeking behavior that makes state-of-the-field debates.

Celebrating failure instead “provides the opportunity to use [failure’s] negative effects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” where “the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life” (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 3, 4). The ‘toxic positivity’ in IR theorizing is the attachment to the utility of grand theory that cumulates knowledge which makes the inequalities in the discipline *appear* to be organized by some sense of objective quality, where “success happens to good people” and good research while failure happens to bad work or bad people (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). Instead, we see those inequalities as structural, and standards of success in IR as political.

IR’s happily ever after, then, if it is to have one, must be in the failure, in the mess, in rejecting both inherited interpretations of success *and* of the normative relationship between success and failure. It must be not only in *not meeting* expectations of any given state-of-the-discipline proselytizing but in instead realizing

that IR cannot and should not approximate those expectations. It is not a progressive Discipline with a singular end, or an exercise in progressive knowledge cumulation. It is instead necessarily undisciplined – it must put aside the straightjackets of research standards, the ego-stroking of aggrandized claims, and the authorial voice of the *telling* of the discipline’s past, present and future – to embrace liminality and the necessity (and beauty) of failure.

The irony of this argument is not lost on us. Halberstam, in making the queer theory case for celebrating failure, has become a very successful academic by many of the traditional disciplinary standards, and *The Queer Art of Failure* a very successful academic text. Many of the critics and supporters cited here have built on academic success by their engagement with the argument. We are bringing the case to IR, publishing it in a disciplinary journal, through the traditional mechanism of peer review, from the comfort of secure and permanent academic employment. We poke holes where those holes can be seen by those who would police the boundaries between winners and losers. This article does not ‘practice’ as it ‘preaches,’ to itself upend the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in disciplinary IR – it is couched in both necessary and unnecessary hypocrisy. But positionally at the very least, our celebration of failure is itself a failure – implicated in our interest in and Disciplinary IR’s promotion of success. We are not arguing that failure can be made pure, or that it should be – only that it cannot and should not be escaped, especially for the glorification of success as its perceived opposite. As we fail at failure to demonstrate the fantasy of success, we envision a happily ever after of failing, un-discipline, and diversity rather than a faux idealism of synthesis, aggrandizement, ‘science’ and disciplining.

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