

## **Introduction: Background Ideas in International Relations**

By Markus Kornprobst and Martin Senn

**Abstract:** The actors we study do not reflect upon their background ideas. They simply take them for granted. Precisely because of this taken-for-grantedness, these ideas are very powerful. They shape world politics in profound ways. The discipline of International Relations has neglected background ideas for a long time. In the last two decades, however, a heterogeneous cluster of research has developed that inquires into what constitutes background ideas, how backgrounds affect politics, and how they come to change. The purpose of this special section is to take stock of the current state of research, make authors embracing different perspectives on background ideas engage with one another's arguments, and, thus, improve our explanatory and normative understandings of backgrounds in world politics.

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### **Introduction**

Background ideas easily elude the analyst. The actors we study take their backgrounds so much for granted that they hardly ever make them explicit. This often makes us, as students of these actors, gloss over their backgrounds, too. Doing so, however, comes at a high price. As Searle (1995: 129) reminds us, the background is ‘the set of nonintentional or preintentional capacities that enable intentional states of function.’ In other words, actors are embedded in backgrounds upon which they rarely reflect but that make reflection – for instance in terms of consequences or appropriateness – possible in the first place. Or, metaphorically speaking, doing research on human action without taking backgrounds into account is something akin to studying trees without their hidden roots.

International Relations Theory has a long tradition of overlooking background ideas. There are two variations of this neglect. First, backgrounds are ruled out because all ideas are assumed to be epiphenomenal. In the 1990s, the rapprochement between Realism and Liberalism (Baldwin 1993) became possible because the two perspectives had come to converge around an ontology that was all about material forces. Most Realists consider the distribution of material capabilities as the key *explanans* of patterns of state behaviour (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). In this reading, ideas do not matter. They are mere window-dressing, employed by leaders to justify their doings. The real forces making world politics move are material.<sup>1</sup> Since rational choice has become widely accepted as the micro-foundation of Liberalism, ideas no longer appear very prominently on Liberal research agendas either. Exogenised preferences and computations about best possible outcomes are assumed to revolve around material costs and benefits (Martin and Simmons 1998; Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal 2001).

Second, backgrounds are neglected because scholars focus on foreground ideas at the expense of background ideas.<sup>2</sup> Constructivists have powerfully (re-)introduced ideas to International Relations since the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup> They have generated more and more nuanced understandings about how ideas are diffused and how they come to make a difference. Yet, initially at least, this did not put an end to the widespread neglect of background ideas. Early Constructivist research conceptualised ideas as norms that are all out in the open. Actors are very much aware of the norms they subscribe to and reflect upon their appropriateness in a given situation (Florini 1996; Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). This line of research is still prominent in Constructivism (Checkel 2005; Tannenwald 2007; Zwingel 2012). The recent turn towards more eclecticism in the discipline links material and ideational forces (Herrmann and Shannon 2001; Petrova 2003; Snyder 2015). But here, too, the focus is on

foreground ideas. There are merely some hints at backgrounds, upon which the actors we study rarely, if ever, reflect.

Since the early 1990s, some scholars have started to counter this long history of neglect. They draw from various schools of thought. Some Liberals goes as far as to write about epistemes (Haas 1992) and world views (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). Both concepts point towards background ideas. Constructivists have turned towards background ideas as well. Adler's work, first focusing on epistemes (Adler 1992) and then on practices (2005), has been particularly influential. Trying to move beyond narrow conceptualizations of deep social contexts, he introduces Searle's broad concept of the background to International Relations (Adler 2005). The focus on backgrounds is a constitutive feature of critical and poststructural scholarship. It uncovers that global exploitation and inequality is deeply rooted in the backgrounds of actors (Ashley 1984; Doty 1993; Gill 1993; Walker 1993).

The purpose of this forum is to take stock of research conducted on backgrounds, make authors embracing different perspectives on backgrounds talk to one another, and, thus, to improve our understandings of the salience and workings of backgrounds in international relations. Our discussions of background ideas are structured by three guiding questions: What constitutes the background? How much political efficacy do agents embedded in such backgrounds have? How do backgrounds come to change?

This brief introduction is organised into four parts. First, we review contending scholarly perspectives on backgrounds. Second, we point out the challenges that lie ahead for studying backgrounds. Third, we provide an overview of the articles that make up this forum. Finally, we summarise our main points in the conclusion.

### **Perspectives on Background Ideas**

In International Relations, five main perspectives on background ideas may be distinguished. First, some political psychologists analyse the backgrounds of individual decision-makers. Much of this goes back to the path-breaking research on operational codes, pioneered by Alexander George (1969). Studies on this kind of deeply taken-for-granted biases have made important contributions to our understanding of how leaders come to reason (Walker 1990; Schafer and Walker 2006). Related research on schemas (Goldgeier 1994), leadership traits (Hermann 1980), and axiomatic ideas held by leaders (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Lee

2014) echo the central finding of operational code analysis. Leaders accumulate a certain ‘heuristic baggage’ over time. These cognitive shortcuts help them make sense and decide. The ‘baggage’ makes reflection possible for leaders. But leaders do not reflect upon the ‘baggage’.

Second, a number of scholars borrow from Thomas Kuhn (1996) and his concept of the paradigm. There is a plethora of studies on policy paradigms (Skogstad 2011; Daigneault 2014; Béland and Cox 2013), which Peter Hall seminally defined as interpretive frameworks that ‘specif[y] the very nature of the problems [policy makers] are meant to be addressing’ (1993, 279). Research on epistemes is, at times, very close to this understanding of policy paradigms (Haas 1992; Legro 2000). These studies remind us that it is not just us as scholars who look at certain deeply taken-for-granted meta-theoretical lenses to make the world we study intelligible to ourselves. The actors we study do this, too. Thus, not only do we need the scrutiny of meta-theoretical claims of scholarly perspectives, we also need to uncover the lenses held by the actors we study.

Third, there are studies on ideology. They understand backgrounds as broad worldviews that connect and mobilise people (Freeden 1998; Berman 2011; Gill 1993; Steger 2008). International Relations scholars studying backgrounds as ideologies have a rich reservoir of social thought to borrow from. Classical sociological texts frequently point to the importance of ideology. At times, they do so in order to explain macro-phenomena. At times, they do so in order to critique ideology. In Max Weber’s work, for instance, we find both. In the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber (1920) writes about how ideologies influenced the advent of capitalism. In his *Politics as Vocation* (1919), he cautions against the influence of political ideologies. Antonio Gramsci (1991) heavily focuses on critique. The Frankfurt School echoes this focus. It, too, dedicates itself to critiquing ideologies that are so deeply seated that they can only be drawn into the open with great difficulty (Horkheimer 1962; Marcuse 1970).

Fourth, scholarship loosely associated with the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ has generated many diverse contributions on background ideas. Some interpretivist students borrow from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1958) notion of language games to inquire into fundamental rules that structure global politics (Fierke 1998; 2010; Kratochwil 1989), while others draw from Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1995 [1981]) and his concept of the ‘lifeworld’ (Deitelhoff and Müller 2005; Deitelhoff 2006). Vivien Schmidt (2008) points to the relevance of background ideas in her theory of discursive institutionalism. Critical scholarship takes inspiration from Antonio Gramsci (1991) and his concept of hegemony (Cox 1983; Ayers 2013) as well as its

interpretation by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; Herschinger 2010; Müller 2011). Poststructural writings in the discipline take many of their insights from Michel Foucault (1970 [1966]; Campbell 1998; 1972).<sup>4</sup> The recent special section on ‘European liberal discourses’ in this journal (Morin and Carta 2014) demonstrates the richness and analytical value of different discourse-analytical approaches on backgrounds.

Finally, the frequently invoked ‘practice turn’ has raised more and more interest in background ideas. Drawing primarily from Pierre Bourdieu (1977), scholars writing in this vein have moved beyond the analysis of representational (background) ideas towards non-representational ideas or skills that enable linguistic and non-linguistic practices (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Neumann 2002). In addition, the ‘practice turn’ has led scholars to inquire into background ideas that establish and maintain social fields. Field theory requires in-depth understandings of social backgrounds. It is these backgrounds that constitute fields in the first place (Adler-Nissen 2011, 2014; Pouliot 2010; Villumsen Berling 2012).

### **Towards More Cross-fertilisation**

This forum takes stock of existing research on background ideas, and encourages dialogue across contending perspectives in order to improve our understandings of background ideas. Difficult (meta-)theoretical questions invite eclectic research (Fearon and Wendt 2002; Katzenstein and Sil 2008; Kornprobst 2009), and there are plenty of such difficult questions to address. In particular, we seek to foster exchanges across perspectives that tend to put more emphasis on agency (e.g. political psychology) and those that direct more attention to the background (e.g. practice turn), as well as approaches that focus on explaining (e.g. interpretivists of the linguistic turn) and critiquing (e.g. critical and poststructural approaches of the linguistic turn).

Three questions guide our discussions in this forum. First, how are we to conceptualise background ideas? For instance, how much of the background is composed of subjective ideas (George 1969; Goldgeier 1994; Lee 2014) and how much of intersubjective ones (Adler 2005; Steger 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011)? Or, equally important, can we make sense of background ideas by distinguishing multiple layers? A number of authors have developed thought-provoking arguments on such layers (Yee 1996, 69; Mehta 2011, 27; Schmidt 2011, 44). Yet

more work is warranted on how to conceptualize these layers. Contending perspectives usually privilege one of these at the expense of the others.

Second, there is the issue of agency. Do actors, who are deeply embedded in backgrounds, still have meaningful political efficacy? Under what conditions can they make a difference, and how? Answering these questions presupposes not only a nuanced scholarly understanding of the background but also an equally nuanced understanding of human creativity (Joas 1996) and interaction (Sewell 1992) to which the background gives rise. The perspectives listed above find it oftentimes difficult to combine a rich conceptualization of the background with a rich conceptualization of creativity and interaction.

Third, and very much related to the previous two questions, there is the issue of how backgrounds develop over time. This requires, on the one hand, making sense of the ‘staying power of the status quo’ (Baumgartner 2013, 255) and the resilience of background ideas in the face of contestation (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). On the other hand, it necessitates outlining convincing accounts of evolutionary and revolutionary change. Again, some perspectives and approaches are better at examining the former while others are better at inquiring into the latter.

## **Contributions**

Borrowing from different perspectives, the contributors to this forum address these three questions for studying backgrounds. The first article deals with war. Needless to say, this is the issue that has pre-occupied International Relations from the very beginning. The discipline has traditionally privileged material perspectives to analyse war, but Neta Crawford makes a strong case that the analysis of background ideas has something important to add. Her analysis reaches deep into the background. She uncovers highly resilient layers of background ideas about the utility and costs of war. These widely shared ideas persist although they are contradicted over and over by empirical evidence. Waging war provides much less benefits and entails much more costs than is commonly presumed. This seriously skews decisions to go to war.

A pair of articles links background ideas to persistence and change of order. Markus Kornprobst and Martin Senn develop a rhetorical field theory. It combines Bourdieuan field theory and its focus on background ideas with rhetorical theory and its focus on argumentative contestation and change. The framework allows the authors to describe and explain recent changes of the nuclear weapons field. They conceptualize these changes as nomic changes, i.e. changes of the

deepest background layer of the field. Continuity and change of the background are also a key concern for Vivien Schmidt in her contribution on the resilience of neo-liberalism in Europe. Schmidt uses discursive institutionalism as theoretical framework to inquire into different layers of (background) ideas and their resilience in times of crisis. She ends her article on a normative note by discussing ways of moving beyond neo-liberal background ideas.

The forum concludes with a pair of articles that addresses normative questions arising out of research on background ideas in depth. Putting under scrutiny diplomatic practices during crises, Corneliu Bjola starts with an important insight. Diplomats routinely draw on pre-reflective understandings to cope with crisis yet also reflect on the practical value of alternative understandings if their pre-reflective repertoire does not deliver viable solutions. Drawing from Martin Heidegger, Bjola does not take issue with these practices in principle. But postulating an authentic world disclosure, he argues for particular practices of pre-reflexion and reflection. Inderjeet Parmar focuses on two architects of post-WWII world order, i.e. Truman and Atlee. Analysing their reasoning and acting during the Korean War, Parmar uncovers racial and imperial background ideas that he contrasts with liberal-institutionalist arguments about the nature of Anglo-American world order. Liberal institutionalism, Parmar asserts, is not a politically innocent theory of international relations. On the very contrary, it is a legitimating ideology.

## **Conclusion**

This forum puts various theoretical angles to use for the examination of background ideas. We do so in order to improve our understanding of an important social aspect that makes political interaction possible in the first place. Human reasoning moves back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Politics is anything but an exception in this regard. Actors constantly resort to knowledge that they have come to take for granted in order to orient themselves in the midst of an ever changing and challenging world. How they come to orient themselves has major repercussions for what they end up doing, and, over time, these orientations sometimes become so familiar that they, too, come to serve as taken-for-granted knowledge. In short, understanding politics requires understanding background ideas.

We also do so in order to improve our grasp of normative issues surrounding background ideas. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1972) discusses in great depth, relying on background ideas is very

much a two-edged sword: On the one hand, it helps actors make the world intelligible to themselves. It is only to be expected that actors do not make elaborate judgments on everything that comes their way. They have to rely on prejudgments in order to make judgments. On the other hand, however, there is a very thin line between prejudgments and prejudices. It is always treacherous to rely on knowledge that is no longer, or has never been, subject to reflection. This temporarily solidified knowledge is anything but politically innocent and may give rise to highly problematic political practices (Chodry and Nair 2002; Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> There were exceptions. Most notably, Walt (2000) writes about perceptions of capabilities. This leaves room for ideas.

<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between background and foreground, see Campbell (1998, 93).

<sup>3</sup> The so-called Third Debate dealt with the ontological divide between material and ideational forces in considerable depth (Lapid 1989).

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, non-poststructuralists do so as well. See, for instance, Adler and Haas (1992) and Ruggie (1993).