



I Don't Get No Respect:¹ The Travails of IPE²

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The question of whether IPE journals are boring, in Benjamin Cohen's provocative words, provides us with a useful opportunity to introspect on the state of the field. Briefly, to set the stage, Cohen argues that IPE has begun to mimic the methodological approach of most of the economics field—leading to a focus on mid-level theory—rather than on the big picture that characterized IPE in the early 1970s and 1980s. Cohen argues that journal editors have an important role to play to rectify this lack of imaginative thinking and writing. Specifically, he develops three well-articulated solutions. First, he suggests that the field would benefit from more review essays and that editors should actively solicit such articles. Second, he argues that symposia on various themes could help spice up the debate in the field. And third, he notes that changing submission policies to encourage commentaries and provocative arguments would enhance the prospects for greater creativity.

One might simply dismiss these concerns about the obsession with quantitative techniques and large data sets as just another fad. After all, much of political science (particularly the study of international conflict) was dominated by the “scientific” approach to studying conflict in the 1970s. UN voting studies are an example of obsession with quantification. The Correlates of War (COW) data set and analysis are the most prominent exemplars of this phenomenon in conflict studies. Since then, COW data has been extensively used, but at the same time, there has been backlash against the original statistical approaches. Many alternatives, including formal modeling, qualitative techniques, and critical security studies, among others, have been developed to overcome what was often seen as “mindless number crunching.” So maybe it is just a matter of time before the pendulum swings back. This symposium might then be seen as an effort to give the IPE pendulum a nudge.

Another competing hypothesis that warrants consideration is that the concerns raised by Cohen and other scholars he cites may just be a concern with preserving their own ontological and methodological preferences in view of their skill sets. This might then simply be a matter of the “old guard” that overthrew the previous regime in the 1960s (particularly in the case of the journal *International Organization* with its dramatic board transformation in the 1970s). Thus, the dominance of new methods is just a matter of “out with the old, in with the new.”

Yet although these hypotheses may have some merit, I believe the problem that Cohen identifies is deeper than this. On the whole, I have few differences with the big picture of Cohen's arguments: namely that journal editors can contribute to enhancing the contributions of IPE by being more creative in how

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they manage their journals. Yet although I cannot speak for other journals, the multidisciplinary journal I edit, *Business and Politics*, has attempted to do what Cohen calls for: publish review essays, symposia, and commentaries/cases over the last 12 years of its existence. From the very beginning, we have sought out all three types of contributions. At the same time, it would be difficult to claim that we have had great success in securing such articles. We have been able to secure high-quality review essays that have an impact, but getting them through the review process despite a note from the editor that these *are* review articles always generates a “what is the new theoretical or empirical contribution of this work?” from our referees. Symposia on selected themes are more popular, but generally in the form of special issues on topics rather than debates—as with this current ISQ effort. Finally, securing commentaries or cases has also been difficult, as the same issue of “what is the new contribution?” comes up.

Our newest effort is to publish policy issues; but here, both writers and referees tend to be resistant. Policy submissions tend to be rare in our case—most likely because of the criteria that are used for promotion. And referees often try to judge policy articles we send them on traditional research contribution criteria—despite a note to them indicating the nature of the article. Given that Cohen himself has served and continues to serve on several eminent journal boards, successful pursuit of his recommendations may be more difficult than one might imagine.

So is this just a matter of the need for greater persistence by editors, including myself, and others? Or is there a fundamental problem with how IPE is viewed by other academics and by the policy community? To elaborate on what Cohen has aptly called “peer-us envy” and our relationship to economics, I find that the origins of the field are worth a brief exploration. In the 1970s, IPE became attractive to graduate students (such as myself) because of the clear problems in assuming, as international economists did, that global economic institutions were functioning smoothly and only in need of “fine-tuning.” As the Bretton Woods regime fell apart, the oil crisis of 1973–1974 challenged power relationships, and as the trade liberalization agenda faced political problems, nothing seemed more relevant than IPE. Standard economic theory (and the dominant approaches to international relations and international organization) seemed incapable of answering the questions that were raised by these dramatic changes.

Although Cohen approvingly cites the creativity of this “foundational” work, what has nearly 40 years of IPE research and writing brought to the field of international economics, whether in terms of new ontologies, methodologies, or new empirical research? Whether financial changes, trends in investment, commodity politics, and trade, or regional analysis of economic groupings, it is still rare for economists to actually *cite* any of this work. Maybe their own field has become so inbred that they are reluctant to look outside their own writing—or worse, not cite anyone outside their discipline. To them, IPE barely exists, despite IPE having secured a few strong draft picks from “the other side,” such as Benjamin Cohen and Richard Feinberg.

In my view, the respect that IPE seeks continues to elude us. Moreover, in the policy world and in the journalistic world, it is economists and historians who are sought out. Despite often recycling old ideas that have been a mainstay of IPE (the need for institutions, the role of power in the international economics system, the role of state intervention), when mentioned by economists in particular, these ideas are seen to be startling and original! Just to name a few, the views of Simon Johnson, Paul Krugman, Jeffrey Sachs, and Joseph Stiglitz, particularly in the current crisis, get wide play. The “peer-us” envy, then, is both with respect to academic respectability and policy impact. On both scores, IPE continues to be wanting. Of course, a more cynical view would suggest that being cited by international economists, given their significant failures to anticipate the

global financial meltdown of 2008–2009, is hardly something for which we should strive.

Cohen argues that many academics believe that the road to respectability is to use the high-tech quantitative techniques, large-data set approach, and formal modeling that characterizes much of economics. Yet as he clearly notes, it remains an open question whether such techniques, particularly in view of their relatively narrow focus on mid-level theory, will actually lead to greater academic respectability or policy influence. By contrast, economists may publish highly esoteric academic articles, but they have also been much better at addressing the key policy issues of the day.

A second theme that Cohen raises concerns the issue of standards of tenure and promotion. Here, the rise of globalization may have had a detrimental effect on IPE and political science more broadly. For many years in most countries, publication in “international” (often American) journals had only limited cachet. Whether in South Korea, Australia, Singapore, or even the UK, connections and the “old boys network” often counted for more than citations. Yet while some continue with their old ways (Japan and France come to mind), we have now seen a dramatic transformation in publication standards for tenure and promotion as universities around the world have sought to move up the global rankings. Often based on a hard science and an economics model, citation counts and publication in SSCI journals have become the sine qua non for advancement. Many countries such as Korea have a point system: each type of publication is given a numerical value (with top rated SSCI journal publications, for example, counting for 200 points, but books only 70!). By my rough estimate, some of the leading lights in IPE would have secured insufficient points by tenure time to be promoted—despite their manifestly important contributions. Although this is a welcome change from the old boys in-house approach to promotion, this particular pendulum has clearly swung to the other extreme.

What does such a concern for journal publications at the expense of other types of contributions generate? Simply put, quantitative research using data sets that address narrow issues provide a risk-averse (clearly not rare in untenured faculty) path to tenure. MPUs (minimum publishable units) rule the day. Why risk conceptual or ontological innovation that might not be well received, when plodding along with marginal contributions will raise one’s point count? With such assessment standards, who would risk working on a book for 5 years? Moreover, with university presses increasingly becoming concerned with the bottom line, only commercially viable publications are generally the order of the day in any case (and with some university presses giving a disturbing emphasis to publishing only potential textbooks). The result is worship at the SSCI altar (a private company to boot) that does little to foster innovation and creativity.

This analysis may be unduly pessimistic. Although markets have shown evidence that they are not always self-correcting, it would appear that the type of debate that is being fostered by ISQ may well be the intervention that may be necessary to bring our field of IPE back to a more balanced footing.