Abstract: Recent research on prejudice and cognitive psychology demonstrates the immense power of symbolic predispositions (SYPs)—people’s values and biases—in driving individual and group behavior. Additionally, research on terror management theory has demonstrated how physical threat drives people to be more aggressive, ruthless and nationalistic. Combined, these three strands of psychological theory can be used to build a symbolic politics theory of war that offers persuasive answers to a wide range of questions. This includes variation in international conflict and cooperation across time and space; why “enduring rivalries” cause most international conflict; why ethnic violence is common among some groups but not others; how to understand the democratic peace; and how to think about who the actors in international relations are. At the same time, these insights explain how SYPs—biases—are the basis for most disagreements among IR theorists, and how competing realist, liberal and constructivist approaches can be reconciled by sorting out when the insights of each approach are accurate.
The fundamental problem with international relations theory is that it functions to empower theorists’ biases instead of constraining them. Though I.R. theorists pretend to have transcended foundational questions of human nature, their analysis actually depends on simplistic assumptions about human nature. Neorealists do not explicitly assume that human nature is evil, but they do assert that the only rational behavior in an anarchical international system is based on states’ assuming just that—i.e., that all others are potentially aggressive and must be opposed. Liberals, similarly, do not write explicitly about the perfectibility of man (and woman), but they insist that the international system is characterized by pervasive opportunities for cooperation. Constructivists generally support the liberals, arguing in circular fashion that the international system is perfectible, as long as everyone is nice to each other.

What these theorists are actually doing is projecting their own biases onto the international system. Realists assume that power-seeking is always rational, and therefore assume that everyone else feels the same. Liberals and constructivists believe that cooperation yields better results than confrontation, and therefore assume that that is how the international system typically works. None of them bother to test systematically whether their assumptions about people’s values and orientations actually hold up; instead they focus on selected evidence supporting their points of view.

The only way for international relations theory to move forward is for scholars to agree that simply assuming one’s biases to be true is not only poor scholarship; it is not scholarship at all. It is tendentious ideological warfare, as leaders in the field are beginning to realize.1 Obviously realists are right some of the time, liberals are right some of the time, constructivists add some insights the other two overlook—and some events do not fit well with any of these perspectives. The question is: how can we systematically determine which logic should apply to which situations in international relations? Recent calls for theoretical eclecticism signal a growing acknowledgment of the problem in the field, but also the absence of any unifying vision of how to overcome it.2

I argue in this paper that findings in psychology offer a way for I.R. theorists first to remove their own blinders, and then to move forward with a deeper understanding of international dynamics that shows the compatibility of apparently competing insights. The focus of this paper is on the causes of war—both civil and international war. The central concept to use in doing all of this is the notion of symbolic predispositions, which I define as stable affective responses to specific stimuli. First, I argue, realism and liberalism are primarily projections of two key clusters of symbolic predispositions—the Machiavellian and cosmopolitan clusters. Put differently, liberal theorists (including most constructivists) are simply ideological liberals who are fooling themselves about their objectivity, while realist theorists are a certain kind of ideological conservatives who are also fooling themselves about their objectivity.

Both groups are nevertheless right some of the time about international relations, because some international actors think the way each camp assumes all actors think. Both groups are wrong much of the time, however: not only is the other camp sometimes right; but sometimes neither is right. There is a third cluster of symbolic predispositions, those I term the
traditionalists or nationalists, who are neither liberal cooperation-seekers nor realist power- or security-seekers, but are rather defenders of traditional values and seekers of status. Nationalists are typically understood in realist terms, but in fact they often engage in conflictual behavior that realists consider unnecessary or unwise—as illustrated by American realists’ opposition to George W. Bush’s nationalist assertiveness in Iraq and American triumphalism elsewhere.

The first step in building a more comprehensive theory of war is to recognize that international actors’ goals and causal beliefs are established by their own, internal symbolic predispositions—variously cosmopolitan, Machiavellian or nationalist—and not by any single systemic logic. The second step is to recognize that these categories of actors react differently to threat. Nationalists, psychologists know, are especially reactive to threat, and are at the same time especially likely to perceive a threat if it comes from an already-distrusted rival. Cosmopolitans are less likely to see ambiguous behavior as threatening, and more inclined to experiment with trusting even rival actors. Machiavellians are, like nationalists, highly reactive to threat and are also strongly disinclined to trust others in cooperative efforts.

A symbolic politics explanation of war would begin by mapping areas of the world dominated by one or the other of these actor types. Presumably such mapping would find a predominance of cosmopolitans in most of Europe, Machiavellian warlords in much of Africa, nationalists in northeast Asia, and so on. This mapping would be done largely using constructivist methods, as discourse analysis is the only plausible way to assess the orientations of key leaders. Survey research allows for in-depth assessment of the popularity of different orientations in public opinion. The key logic of symbolic politics theory is that discourse and values (symbolic predispositions) interact: discourse shapes values in the long run, while in the short run audience values determine which discourses will resonate, and therefore be influential, with that audience.

The results of such mapping are theoretical expectations: liberals should be right where cosmopolitan values dominate; realists should be right where Machiavellian values dominate; and a somewhat different analysis is necessary where nationalist values dominate. Those who fuse nationalist and Machiavellian orientations should be most conflict-prone: defining status in terms of power and influence, they seek domination as a path to glory rather than security, so they are hard to deter or to appease. More moderate nationalists, in contrast, may be content through seeking status in symbolic ways—through cultural assertion, for example, or international respect.

While symbolic politics logic is compatible with constructivism in some ways, it departs from common forms of constructivism in others. Along with constructivism, symbolist logic recognizes that the international system is socially constructed, and that anarchy is what actors make of it. Thus international processes may follow realist patterns, and they may follow liberal ones, depending on state practice. However, symbolist theory is more culturally sensitive, siding with the Katzenstein-style contention that internal culture drives external behavior, and against the Wendtian assumption that states become socialized into the values of the system. It is nationalist status-seeking that has prevented Russia from being socialist into European norms, for example, and that is driving post-Cold War Chinese assertiveness. Finally, symbolist theory is at its foundation psychological, asserting the primacy of prejudice, values and biases over discourse.
A weakness of the constructivist approach to I.R. theory is that it is purely ideational, based on the assumption that international relations is a function of “ideas almost all the way down”. What gets lost is the material basis of realist and liberal theorizing. Realism, of course, begins from a singular focus on power and the distribution of power. Liberalism argues for the importance of a broader conception of interest—usually material interest—which enables cooperation especially on positive-sum economic relationships. Constructivism, with its overwhelming focus on the social interpretation of material facts, overlooks the degree to which the effects of material forces are partially independent of interpretation. For example, the brute facts of the material abundance of late industrial society, and of the explosive power of nuclear weapons, fundamentally change the international agenda. They are subject to multiple interpretations, of course; but in its focus on the interpretive trees, constructivism tends to overlook the material forest. Symbolic politics theory addresses this shortcoming by focusing not only the symbolic predispositions, but also the stimuli—especially potential physical or economic threats—that may trigger them.

This paper pursues this argument as follows. The main section surveys the dual systems theory of human decisionmaking, noting the overwhelming evidence for the dominant role of symbolic predispositions and feelings of threat in driving preference formation. The second section builds the symbolic politics theory of international relations on this foundation. The key variables in this theory are the clusters of ideological predispositions: cosmopolitanism, nationalism and Machiavellianism; specific prejudices against particular adversaries; and the powerful but variable effects of threat perceptions. The distribution of these predispositions across time and space is what explains the variation in international behavior and outcomes, including the variable effect of security dilemmas. The final section applies the theory’s logic to explain a series of specific issues related to war, including the causes of enduring rivalries, the democratic peace, and how to identify the key actors in world politics.

**Dual Systems in Decision-Making**

According to most neuroscientists, the human brain uses at least two different processes of decision-making based on different neural systems: the intuitive system and the deliberative system. Neuroscientists consider the intuitive system so much more powerful than the deliberative system that psychologist Jonathan Haidt analogizes the relationship as one between an elephant and its rider, with the deliberative rider often acting not as the intuitive elephant’s controller but as its “public relations firm”.

Rational choice theorists and economists focus all of their attention on the rider. I think it is wise to listen to the neuroscientists and consider the elephant first.

**Intuitive Reasoning**

The intuitive system is powerfully effective, and dominates most human decision-making, for a variety of reasons. First, the human senses collect a million times more information than is registered consciously, and the intuitive system considers it all; the reflective circuits, in contrast, rely mostly on the tiny fraction of information that is consciously noticed.
Second, the intuitive system is fast, reacting in some cases within one-tenth of a second.\(^8\) The power of the emotionally-charged intuitive circuit means that experiences that involve emotional content produce stronger and more vivid memories than emotionally neutral ones.\(^9\) The intuitive system also uses emotion to evaluate experiences: if something feels good, then it is evaluated as good.\(^10\) The intuitive system therefore steers our most basic actions: it guides our attraction to food and good-looking potential mates, while preparing us to react to danger, and so on.

Some intuitive abilities are almost universal: people in every culture learn to read emotional expressions on other people’s faces within a few months of birth, and many of these expressions are recognizable by cultures all over the globe.\(^11\) Others are the result of training or education: art experts, for example, can often spot a forgery immediately, long before they can articulate how they can tell.\(^12\) This is why Haidt refers to the reflective system as the “public-relations firm” for intuition: people often do not know the reasons for their decisions, though they are usually good at rationalizing whatever decision they make after the fact.\(^13\)

The way the intuitive system works is through “networks of association, bundles of thoughts, feelings, images and ideas that have become connected over time”.\(^14\) Again, emotions are critical: as Drew Westen explains, “The fact that someone or something holds any significance to us at all means that it has emotional associations”.\(^15\) New networks of associations can be created in two ways, either by repetition or as the result of some traumatic experience. Either way, “neurons that fire together, wire together,” so once a network of associations is created, evoking one image in the network tends to activate others as well.\(^16\)

These considerations lead to the basic axiom of symbolic politics theory: **decision-makers make choices intuitively, not rationally.**

**Symbolic predispositions and foreign policy attitudes**

These networks of mental associations create “symbolic predispositions,” which David Sears has defined as “stable affective responses to particular symbols”.\(^17\) In American politics, he found, some of the most powerful and enduring symbolic predispositions (SYPs for short) are ideology, party identification, racial prejudice and religiosity. Most SYPs are learned, at least in part, but many are also partly innate. The aversion to danger may be instinctive, for example, but the identification of a speeding car or a gun as a danger has to be learned.

In politics, certain basic values underlie the liberal-conservative divide in many cultures: people who place a high value on “universalism” and “benevolence” tilt left, while those placing a high value on power and security prefer the right.\(^18\) A second cluster of values inclining people to the right defines “traditionalists,” people who emphasize the values of “tradition,” “conformity,” and “sanctity;” traditionalists tend particularly to support the religious right, and are deeply concerned with status and the respect accorded to their beliefs.\(^19\) Also tending to support the religious right are those identified as “right-wing authoritarians” (RWAs), people who tend to see the world as dangerous place, and who therefore support authoritarian leadership as protection against those dangers.\(^20\) Yet another symbolic predisposition on the political right
is ethnocentrism, which like RWA strongly predicts prejudice, nationalist bias against outgroups, and support for aggressive action against outgroups.21

Some parts of one’s political orientation go deeper than these specific values, and are rooted in basic personality traits. For example, one of the “Big Five” personality traits identified by psychologists is “agreeableness,” which includes a tendency toward being cooperative; the opposite end of this spectrum is competitiveness and suspiciousness. Brian Rathbun has shown that non-liberals can be distinguished from liberals strictly on the basis of willingness to trust: those on the right tend toward suspicion, not trust.22 Believing that interpersonal (like international) cooperation is unstable, the suspicious rightists tend in experiments to choose to defect in iterated prisoners’ dilemma games, even when they understand that mutual cooperation yields better payoffs. Yet another personality-related cluster of symbolic predispositions is what Sidanius has labeled a “social dominance orientation” (SDO)—essentially the belief that the world is a competitive place in which it is best to be on top; it is associated with tough-minded personalities. 23

When it comes to views on international relations, these values can be assembled in three basic clusters. The leftists are easy: emphasizing universalism and benevolence, and inclined to trust rather than distrust, people with this set of symbolic predispositions can be labeled “cosmopolitans,” and would tend to be international relations liberals. Cosmopolitans seek absolute gains, with an inclination toward collective rather than individual utility maximization. The second cluster would include those who value power and security, and SDOs who see the world as competitive—and want to seek dominance in it. People with these SYPs can be labeled “Machiavellians,” and can be associated with international relations realism; they, of course, are power and security maximizers. The social conservatives or “traditionalists” are the third group, including right-wing authoritarians, the ethnocentric and those who emphasize traditional values. People in this group are neither realists nor liberals, but have an orientation to international relations that might be labeled nationalist. Because the nationalists are status-seekers, they may seek power not for security reasons but simply for reasons of status, making them even more inclined to seek relative gains—and more likely to enter into conflict—than the Machiavellians.

What makes SYPs so important is that they create a range of biases in intuitive judgment. In politics, one of the most important SYPs is prejudice, defined as a negative attitude toward another group with three components: negative stereotypes, negative feelings, and inclinations to behave in a negative way. In one illustrative study, participants were shown a photo of a black or a white face—flashed for only 0.2 seconds—followed by a photo of either a handgun or a tool (such as a pair of pliers), also flashed for 0.2 seconds. Participants were more likely to mistake the tool for a gun if they had seen a black face first.24 This bias was linked to negative stereotypes about blacks. This is the intuitive mind at work: it draws on the associative memory to draw lightning-quick conclusions that are often valid but sometimes unreliable. More broadly, research shows that prejudiced people tend to distrust the target of prejudice, perceive that target as hostile, and prefer hostile action against that target.
The Reflective System

Though the emotional and intuitive “elephant” is faster and more powerful than the reflective “rider,” rationality still plays a role. For example, it can temper racial bias. One experiment showed, for example, that if given time, people can largely overcome the impulse to see even unarmed black men as threatening.25 On the other hand, the reflective system works just as often to rationalize bias instead of counteracting it. Another experiment found, for example, that mock juries given identical evidence about black and white defendants ended, after deliberation, in proposing harsher sentences for the black defendants than the white ones.26

Indeed, even when the reflective system is fully engaged, it is subject to a host of biases, mostly bubbling up from the intuitive system. One source is motivated bias, including a range of ways in which people tend to believe what they want to believe. For example, Admiral Kimmel, the naval commander at Pearl Harbor in 1941, believed that his equipment could not stand to be kept on high alert, so he and his staff distorted intelligence information to convince themselves—with disastrous results—that a low state of alert would be good enough.27

These considerations lead us back to the basic axiom of symbolic politics: as a first cut, people tend to make decisions intuitively; rational considerations play only a secondary role.

Threat

Another influence of prejudice is on threat perceptions: people are more likely to perceive a threat from a group if they hold negative stereotypes about that group, especially if the outgroup is seen as lower in status.28 Thus, for example, a major reason why the Bush Administration was able to persuade Americans in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks that Iraq was an imminent threat was that most Americans already had a stereotype of Saddam Hussein as aggressive and dangerous. Pre-existing prejudice did much of Bush’s persuasive work for him.

Threat, furthermore, comes in many forms. First, since ingroup favoritism leads to discrimination against the outgroup, group dynamics can lead to “realistic group conflict” over access to resources.29 In other cases, such as opposition to affirmative action in the U.S., the outgroup is seen as a threat to traditional values such as hard work, resulting in “symbolic threat”30. In yet other cases, what is at stake is status, as denial of respect to a traditional leader, or a verbal insult to the ingroup, can result in strong and even violent reactions against the outgroup.31 These threats are most likely to be detected by traditionalists who are particularly intolerant of difference. Multiple studies have shown that all three kinds of threat, which I will call collectively “social threats,” are significant in affecting attitudes toward outgroups.32

Those effects are powerful. A perceived social threat—whether a threat to power, wealth, values or status—raises the salience of group identity for the threatened group, and at the same time increases hostility and prejudice.33 A key implication of this logic is that while tangible interests such as wealth matter, their defense is simply another symbolic predisposition, no more important than the defense of intangible values such as status or ideological beliefs.
When a threat concerns people’s physical safety, the effect on political attitudes is especially powerful. According to studies of “terror management theory,” priming people to have thoughts of their own mortality in the back of their minds drives political attitudes toward conservatism and ethnocentrism. People become more respectful of their own national and religious symbols, more favorable to those who praise such values, more unfavorable toward those with different values of any sort, and more punitive toward moral transgressors. At the same time, people become more physically aggressive toward those who differ politically, and less concerned with incidental harm to innocents. In sum, when they are worried about death, people become more nationalistic, ruthless and intolerant.

One result is that people who are anxious about death also become vastly more likely to support a nationalist leader like George W. Bush and his policies, as one study dramatically showed. In this experiment, some participants were asked to think about watching television, and then asked whom they supported in the 2004 presidential contest; others were asked to think about death, and then asked for their political views. The study was done in New Jersey, a liberal state, so those who first thought about TV expressed their baseline views, backing Kerry over Bush by 57% to 13%. However, those who had been thinking about death preferred Bush over Kerry by 46% to 20%. Background thoughts about death caused support for Bush to go up by more than 30%, and support for Kerry to go down even more.

Strong fear, in contrast, can have the opposite effect, leading to feelings of intimidation and submissive behavior if people feel their position is weak. One study found, for example, that feelings of anxiety or fear led people to want to avoid risks, and therefore to lower support for George Bush’s antiterrorism policies.

Reactiveness to threat, however, is variable. One study, for example, measured reactivity to threat physiologically, by the size of the startle reflex (the amplitude of blinking) and skin conductance (to measure perspiration). The study found that those with the greater reactivity to threat tended to be both more Machiavellian and more nationalistic—more supportive of defense spending, capital punishment, patriotism and Iraq war (in a study done during the second Bush Administration). On the other hand, those less reactive to threat tended to be cosmopolitan, more supportive of foreign aid, immigration, pacifism and gun control.

A key implication of these findings is that the terror management effect is the psychological mechanism underlying the security dilemma, which realists assume as the basic logic of international relations. When a “state”—that is, those making security policy for the state—perceives a threat, confrontational policy options are the ones that come immediately to attention. The related insight is that both the tendency to perceive a threat, and reactivity to threats, are variable: in any given situation, some people may perceive a threat while others do not; and some will favor a strong reaction to the threat while others do not.

These tendencies are also important for international relations. As noted, those who place a high value on power and security—Machiavellians—will tend to think like international relations realists. In contrast, those who emphasize conformity and sanctity will be provoked by ideological or religious disagreement. The U.S. soldiers in Iraq who wrote, “Jesus kills Mohammed” on the side of their tank—an action that was neither likely to help them achieve their mission nor plausibly connected to Jesus’s recorded views—illustrate this second tendency,
which reflects the traditionalist value cluster. The cosmopolitan value cluster generates the opposite tendency: a tendency not to feel threatened, a disinclination to react strongly to threat, and a preference for seeking mutually beneficial bargains with rivals on the assumption that rivals can be trusted to keep bargains from which they themselves benefit.

Applying these insights to any sort of politics, however, requires making the jump from individual psychology to social behavior. Any political psychology, in short, requires a sociology. Political scientists rarely make the connection, but in fact sociologists have fairly well-developed answers to the puzzle in two related theoretical traditions: framing theory and social mobilization theory. Framing theory focuses on leaders’ use of frames as a way to define political issues—and proposed policy responses—in ways that resonate with the audience’s symbolic predispositions. A key insight of this approach is that the credibility of the leader him- or herself is a significant independent variable: a resonant frame has no political impact without a credible leader to articulate it. Mobilization theory adds that to move from even a focused public opinion to any political action requires organization, whether formal or informal, in either case built on social networks that must be responsive to the leader. This explains how one can have war—ethnic war, for example—when at least one side lacks a state: a variety of social networks can be leveraged to turn a group into a political or even a military actor.

Symbolic Politics Theory and International Relations

The argument above can be reduced to the general claim that three key variables drive individual decision-making: symbolic predisposition, environmental stimuli (events), and threat perceptions. Political responses are a function of the interaction between SYPs and the events that trigger those SYPs to generate emotional responses. Narrowing the logic to key issues in IR, we can identify three specific variables that are crucial: two different kinds of symbolic predispositions—ideological orientation and prejudice—and threat perception, with the first two also influencing the third. Leadership and organization are then required to turn individual decision into group action. Discourse is at the center of these processes, as the key tool leaders use is the narrative frame, and the key way popular SYPs influence behavior is by influencing followers’ response to such narrative frames.

At the elite level, the key influence of SYPs is to define what leaders see as “rational,” even in strategic interaction. As noted above, trusting cosmopolitans tend to cooperate in iterated prisoners’ dilemma games, while suspicious Machiavellians tend to defect—and generally perform more poorly as a result. The 2014 crisis in Crimea provides a real-world illustration: an Obama Administration composed mostly of liberal cosmopolitans restricts itself to economic and diplomatic tools in response to the Russian incursion, while opposition politicians such as Lindsey Graham and John McCain reflect the social dominance orientation, criticizing Obama for showing weakness and recommending as counteraction security measures such as emplacement of missile defense sites in Poland.

President Obama’s decision-making process regarding the troop “surge” in Afghanistan further illustrates the dominance of intuitive over deliberative policy making. Obama is
commonly perceived as a hyper-deliberative decision-maker, a “President Spock” who was if anything too deliberative on this issue. Yet for all the long, drawn-out deliberations, the pivotal decision was made before any deliberations started. Obama reportedly opened the first meeting on the “surge” issue by asking, “Does anyone think we should not be in Afghanistan at all?” This question was obviously structured rhetorically to elicit the groupthink effect—that is, to mobilize peer pressure to prevent anyone from taking that stand. In the event, no one did.

Yet the testimony of then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggests that Obama himself essentially believed just that. Obama, Gates felt, had no faith in Afghan President Hamid Karzai or in the U.S. military leadership, and he showed no enthusiasm for sending troops into the war zone. Obama, in short, moved forward with the surge deliberations reluctantly—he did not want to order it, because he believed or at least feared that it was doomed to failure. He short-circuited any discussion of the matter, however, almost certainly on the basis of a judgment that the political cost to him of “losing” the Afghan war would be too high to bear. Thus the most important decision regarding Afghanistan—whether to stay or leave—was not made by the deliberative President Spock; it was made immediately, intuitively, and with no discussion by Obama the instinctive politician. All the deliberation was about the details.

These considerations suggest that the notion of rational decision-making should be thrown out of serious discussion. Only the emotionally-driven intuitive system enables decision or action; the deliberative system alone cannot. One psychologist found that in patients with brain lesions that interfered with their intuitive processes, the behavior pattern involved “rational” deliberation about alternatives—but it resulted not in sensible decisions but in a dithering inability to make any decision at all, even on so trivial an issue as the date of the patient’s next appointment.

However, most political scientists are irrationally wedded to the idea that people are rational. Such scholars can in any case still use the key insights outlined above. All that is necessary is to posit a “boundedly rational” process driven by these particular biases: ideology, prejudice, and threat. The first specifies which values the decision-maker wants to maximize, and the others code assumptions about likely allies and adversaries, inter alia. Such a model is still false, because it omits the emotional wellsprings of action, but it still has some hope of getting some of the results right.

Back, then to the application of these insights to international relations. I will begin by applying these ideas to the thinking of international relations theorists themselves, to improve understanding of the nature of IR theory disputes. I then turn to consideration of grand theoretical issues, in particular how to reconcile realism, liberalism and constructivism. Finally, I move to explaining some specific puzzles related to the causes of war to illustrate the value of the symbolist approach.

*Theorist, Analyze Thyself*

International relations theorists are part of the world they study, rather than detached from it, in two pivotal ways: they are themselves subject to the same kinds of biases as the
policymakers they study, and they are exposed to the same threats as everyone else. The first point, about bias, is probably the more pervasively important. Consider first the cluster of symbolic predispositions that we labeled “Machiavellian”—primarily a concern for maximizing power and security—which was identified with the realist tradition in I.R. theory. On the other hand, consider that two other orientations also exist, the cosmopolitan and nationalist ones. Why do realists essentially assume that everyone acts like a realist? The best hypothesis is that the theorists’ own symbolic predispositions are acting to create bias, causing them to attribute their own inclinations to everyone else. In other words, realists may simply be people with a Machiavellian orientation who happen to be doing I.R. theory, and who therefore attribute a Machiavellian orientation to most international actors.

Being a realist, in other words, is probably not a matter of choosing a pertinent theoretical lens; it is instead likely to be an expression of basic aspects of the individual’s values and personality, quite possibly a social dominance orientation, and the sort of disinclination to trust that leads the tough-minded to defect in iterated prisoner’s dilemma games. Similarly, those who are more reactive to threat have also been found to be more inclined to Machiavellianism.

I.R. liberals of all stripes (probably including most constructivists, post-structuralists, and others) are, of course, equally biased in the other direction. They are, first, more inclined to trust: since they are themselves inclined to cooperate in prisoners’ dilemma games, they attribute the same inclination to most actors in the international system. They are, second, cosmopolitans: more inclined toward benevolence and universalism and so, as noted above, inclined to favor joint gains over unilateral ones—and therefore to attribute that preference to foreign policy decision makers. They are, third, probably less reactive to threat—which, according to the study cited above, means that they tend favor cosmopolitan values; and which would lead them to expect security dilemmas to be avoidable.

The implications of these facts should be explosive for I.R. theorizing: “being” a realist or any kind of I.R. liberal should be understood as merely an expression of a priori bias rooted in personality and ideology, and therefore ruled out of bounds for any serious scholarship. Such bias should be struggled against and overcome, not indulged as an acceptable foundation for scholarship. Since it is indisputable that actors in the international system sometimes act like realists, sometimes like liberals, and sometimes like status-seeking nationalists, the foundational question of international relations theory should be discerning the circumstances under which actors behave in one or the other fashion.

One of the costs to the universal indulgence of theorists’ biases is the lack of attention to the traditionalists, who in international relations behave not as realists but as status-maximizing nationalists. The early 21st century debate over Russia-NATO relations illustrates the way theoretical commitments—i.e., scholars’ symbolic predispositions—act as blinders rather than useful analytical lenses. Liberals tend to characterize Putin as a misunderstood I.R. liberal, prepared to cooperate with the West but alienated by the West’s patronizing attitude and aggressive moves into Russia’s backyard. Realists tend to see him as essentially a realist seeking to re-establish Russian power in the “Near Abroad” of former Soviet states. Both overlook the degree to which the relationship is among nationalists, with status-seeking prompting the US to spread its values—and NATO—toward Russian borders; new NATO nations like Poland to seek missile defense installations precisely because they antagonize the hated Russians; and Russia
frequently to deploy its diplomatic nyet simply to prove that it has great-power status, rather than to use that status for any constructive purpose. A few scholars have pointed out the status-seeking nature of Russian foreign policy; but because this insight fits neither into the realist nor the liberal weltanschauung, it tends to be noted but then politely ignored.

In principle, constructivism is the one strand of I.R. theorizing that can help theorists overcome their biases, because as articulated by Wendt, it can account for the possibility that an international system might be Hobbesian/Machiavellian/realist, or Lockean/liberal, or Kantian/cosmopolitan (though it cannot distinguish Machiavellianism from traditionalist nationalism). Most IR scholars fail to exploit this opportunity, however, with most realists equating constructivism with an assumption of Lockean or Kantian systems, and therefore rejecting it; and most constructivists indeed focusing on the emergence of Lockean or Kantian elements in the contemporary international system. Even given a theoretical framework in which they can expand, too many IR scholars cling tightly to their personality-driven biases.

My argument is that pairing constructivism with political psychology allows us not only to diagnose the problem, but also to cure it. The first step, as suggested above, is to move beyond theories of rational action.

The Futility of Rationalist International Relations Theory

I noted above that as a matter of decision-making process, the assumption that people decide rationally is usually wrong. People usually decide intuitively on the basis of symbolic predispositions. International relations theory nevertheless generally starts by assuming rational behavior by states. The typical justification for this starting point is the economic one: assuming that people behave as if they went through a process of rational deliberation. As Andrew Bennett has pointed out, this is an epistemologically weak starting point. It allows only a superficial “covering law” sort of theory, aiming only to identify regularities rather than finding a deeper explanation for them. The alternative is a theory firmly founded on a scientific demonstration of the mechanisms by which theorized processes occur. Bennett is certainly right that this “mechanistic” approach leads to better social science, and one benefit of the symbolic politics approach is that it encourages attention to mechanisms. Instead of hypothesizing as-if logics, symbolist theory begins from psychological and sociological processes that have already been well-established in previous psychological and sociological studies, then posits additional mechanisms influencing international relations.

Epistemology aside, assuming rational behavior also fails to generate coherent theory because theorists differ in their assumptions about what counts as rational behavior. Thus for Morgenthau, Thucydides’s notion of human nature is accurate: “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that it is a necessary law of their nature that they rule wherever they can”; he therefore understands “international politics as a struggle for power,” requiring rational actors to join in that struggle. Waltz argues, in contrast, that states seek security, not untrammeled power, and that in the quest for security, they form balances of power. Rational behavior for Waltz, therefore, is to maintain a state’s security by maintaining a balance of power, not by seeking hegemony. Mearsheimer adjusts Waltz’s logic to reach Morgenthau’s conclusion: if
states seek security, he argues, they can best achieve it by making themselves hegemonic in their region of the world. These are all versions of “realism,” assuming that international politics is inherently dangerous and conflictual.

The opposing camp of rationalists, the liberals, notes that rational international behavior is often cooperative rather than competitive, primarily because of interdependence. States can often gain wealth and even improve their security cooperatively and, as rational actors, they often do so. They sign and abide by treaties that promote trade, with widespread benefits; they engage in arms control, dispatch peacekeeping missions, provide humanitarian aid, and collaborate to reduce pollution, in each case doing more to restrain the competition for power than to pursue it. One result, as Mueller has noted, is “the obsolescence of major war”: great powers fought each other with horrific regularity for millennia, but none have done so since 1953. To liberals, then, rationality means more cooperation than competition for power.

We have, therefore, three arguments against the assumption of rational behavior. First, the dual systems model of decision-making shows that most decision-making is not reflective or “rational,” but rather intuitive and driven by symbolic predispositions. Second, assuming rational behavior on an “as-if” basis is epistemologically weak, preventing recourse to more rigorous mechanistic explanations of events. And third, the rationality assumption has not, in practice, proved a coherent basis for theory; it has merely yielded multiple, competing arguments about what constitutes “rational” international behavior.

The best way of making sense of this debate over rationality is therefore to note again that theorists are simply expressing symbolic predispositions of their own. Thus realists, as noted above, will tend to be tough-minded Machiavellians—disinclined to trust, highly reactive to threat, and probably inclined toward social dominance—who impute their own symbolic predispositions to virtually all international actors and call that behavior “rational”. Liberals will be kind cosmopolitans—inclined toward benevolent and universalism, less reactive to threat, and relatively willing to trust others—who similarly attribute their own inclinations to most international actors and call that behavior “rational.”

An additional complication for realist theory is that few people are pure Machiavellian realists. Many non-liberals are right-wing authoritarians, who value not only security but also authority and traditional values, so while they sometimes behave like realists, they are not; they are nationalists. And while those with a social dominance orientation are less interested in traditional values, they, too, are status-seekers, perfectly willing to engage in conflict over status symbols even if the tangible goods at stake are unimportant even to them. Thus defensive realists ironically underestimate the sources of conflict in the international system, because traditionalist/nationalists can be more dangerous than Machiavellians/realists. Able to distinguish power interests from status concerns in their own mind, realist theorists assume—probably too optimistically—that international actors typically do the same.

Recognizing these effects—and recognizing that politicians as well as political scientists vary in their symbolic predispositions—we reach the apparently tautological conclusion that realist theory should work when leaders are competitive, reactive to threat and distrustful but not too nationalistic; and liberal theory should work when leaders are more egalitarian, less reactive to threat, and more trusting. But how do we know when each applies?
As noted above, the constructivist approach articulated by Wendt suggests a way forward. Wendt’s classic formulation is that the international system “is what states make of it”. Essentially, Wendt argues, if states act aggressively, then they will create a realist world; and if they act cooperatively, then they will create a liberal world. They create these worlds through their patterns of behavior: for example, repeated cooperation creates a “social identity” as a cooperator, making it easy for others to cooperate.

Still, if the question is, “when is international politics likely to be cooperative rather than conflictual?” each of the three approaches offers a different answer. Realists typically deny that it ever is, repeating their nostrums about the omnipresence of international violence and the irrelevance of international institutions. The trouble is that they are wrong, as international war has decreased dramatically in recent decades, while cooperation has led to a vast increase in international economic links and broader effectiveness of international law in many areas. Liberals led by Bruce Russett argue that these trends are all connected, providing evidence that the world is more peaceful because more countries are governed by democratic institutions, and because they participate more in international trade and international organizations. The trouble with that argument is that there is also evidence against it: massive economic interdependence in 1913 did not prevent World War I, and a potent (on paper) League of Nations utterly failed to prevent World War II. And while it is true that democracies rarely if ever fight each other, they do have a propensity to fight non-democracies.

Constructivists try to settle this dispute by referring to international norms and identities which emerge from international communication or “discourse”. For example, Tannenwald has shown that one reason nuclear weapons have never been used in war since 1945 is the emergence of a global “nuclear taboo” that causes leaders to feel revulsion at the idea of using nuclear weapons, and to believe that doing so would be incompatible with being a “civilized” state. John Owen applied a similar argument to explaining the “democratic peace,” arguing that democracies do not fight each other because of the ways that liberal (including antiwar) values work together with democratic institutions to restrain conflict when liberals on each side see the other side as also a liberal state. This kind of sophisticated combination of liberalism and constructivism offers some of the best explanations available of specific puzzles like the democratic peace, but it does not offer a general answer to the question of when international politics looks more “realist” or more “liberal”. It does not, for example, explain why even non-democracies do not fight foreign wars very often in recent decades. What explains when states follow international norms and when they do not? The short answer is: the leaders’ symbolic predispositions and portfolio of fears, and (to varying degrees) those of their populations.

The Material Preconditions for Liberal Outcomes

A survey of world history reveals little evidence before the nineteenth century of the kind of mutual cooperation that liberals write about. The typical premodern pattern is an uber-realist international relations in which the existence of the state or tribal unit and the lives of its inhabitants were very much at risk. The ancient Middle East was successively conquered by the Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians and Romans, followed by the medieval Arabs. Around the same time as the rise of Rome, international systems in India and China were replaced by the
Mauryan Empire and the Qin Dynasty, respectively. Brutality was the norm, with the Assyrians erecting towers of heads to deter rebellions, Caesar slaughtering an estimated one million Gauls in his conquest of that territory for Rome, and the Qin routinely massacring surrendered armies as a way to weaken their enemies. Ancient democracies could be just as aggressive as authoritarian states: democratic Athens tried to conquer all of Greece, and republican Rome did conquer the entire Mediterranean basin, becoming an empire only after most of those conquests.60

Even as late as eighteenth century Europe, great power war was ongoing about 75% of the time.61 Thus the pre-nineteenth century world generally was a place in which war was an ever-present risk, if not a reality; and international cooperation was contingent, fragile and rare—that is, precisely the world described by realist theory. The relatively peaceful, stable and cooperative post-1945 international system must therefore be understood as a notable historical anomaly. Past bipolar systems typically played out the way the Roman-Carthaginian confrontation did, in a series of devastating wars ending in the destruction of one of the antagonists, not in anything like the Soviet Union’s peaceful submission.

Given this past pattern, is it likely that what Buzan and Lawson (2013) have called the “Global Transformation” of the nineteenth century, with the industrial revolution at its center,62 was a necessary condition for the stability of the post-1945 international system. Before the industrial revolution, land was the main source of power and wealth, and so competition for both was necessarily zero-sum. After the industrial revolution, both power and wealth became primarily the result of industrial capacity, so that it became possible for the pursuit of wealth, at least, to become a positive-sum game in which cooperation benefited all. The combination of the industrial revolution and the “green revolution” of the 1960s also fundamentally changed the economics of scarcity: if even World War II was in large part a war for the means of food production—i.e., for arable land63—modern agriculture enabled the reliable production of enough food for all, at the same time that industrialization enabled the mass production of other goods such as clothing and means of transportation. The result of these material changes is that scarce resources are now much less scarce than they used to be: everyone can now have, and most people usually do have, everything they need to survive. These changes removed some of the major material incentives for war, just as the invention of the atomic bomb vastly increased the costs of great power war.

None of this is to deny that the post-1945 international system is also the result of ideas and institutions, as constructivists would have it. If the technological advances of the industrial and green revolutions were necessary to reduce conflict over scarce resources, so too was the Bretton Woods system of international trade and finance, which allows secure access to those resources through trade instead of necessitating wars of conquest. Furthermore, even wealth and institutions together are still not sufficient to explain the post-1945 interstate peace: it was relatively well-fed, industrially-advanced and commercially active Europe that nevertheless led the way into both world wars. As Mueller pointed out, the “obsolescence of major war” was also the result of an ideational shift, from the militarist ideas common worldwide before World War I to the post-World War II international glorification of peace.64 Hence the argument of Buzan and Lawson is that the “Global Transformation” of the nineteenth century was the result of the combination of industrialization, social organization (especially the rise of the modern state), and liberal norms. This tripartite argument was foreshadowed three decades earlier by Cox, who
similarly argued that international processes must be understood as a result of the interplay of material facts, institutions and ideas.\textsuperscript{65}

Any constructivist or symbolist argument, therefore, must be proposed only on the understanding that it takes as given a particular constellation of material factors. The kinds of fundamental material conditions discussed here are relatively stable over the short term of months and years usually examined in constructivist analyses. It must, however, be stipulated: it is much easier to be a liberal amid the abundance of the twenty-first century developed world than it was in the zero-sum pre-industrial world. Even today, the correlation generally holds: wealthy countries exist in zones of peace; poor ones are the locations of wars. To some extent, symbolist or constructivist analysis can explain these patterns, but first it must admit the material facts into consideration.

\textit{Symbolic Politics as International Relations Theory}

Recognizing that international politics does have a material basis, how can symbolic politics theory contribute to progress in international relations theory? Symbolist theory, whether focused on domestic politics or international relations, concentrates on examining the interaction between individuals’ symbolic predispositions, the narratives and discourse emphasized by constructivists, and the symbolically significant stimuli people are exposed to. Over the long haul, discourse creates symbolic predispositions such as prejudice, and shapes ideological orientations such as cosmopolitanism, Machiavellianism and traditionalism. These symbolic predispositions of course vary widely both across and within populations and over time; thus one can say that due to decades of nationalist propaganda, interwar Germany was more nationalist than is post-Cold War Germany, which had been exposed to decades of anti-nationalist propaganda. Though of course both contained some intense nationalists and some cosmopolitans, the former were much more numerous in the 1930s, while the latter were much more numerous in the early 2000s. Germany’s peaceful foreign policy is thus explained: absent an overwhelmingly obvious threat to Germany, the cosmopolitan symbolic predispositions of most Germans constitute a sufficient condition for a peaceful foreign policy.

Turning such logic from a theory of foreign policy into a theory of international relations requires a degree of foundational rigor that realism and liberalism do not bother with. Again, realists and liberals respectively assume that states are always inherently competitive or generally prefer to be cooperative. This makes as much sense as a debate between chemists between those asserting that gaseous mixtures are generally volatile, and those asserting that they are generally inert. The obvious answer is that it depends on the gases in the mixture and their proportions.

In parallel fashion, symbolist theory-building requires surveying any given international system empirically, from the ground up, to determine what kinds of states are in the international mixture. Thus the analyst must search for evidence of politically important tendencies toward cosmopolitanism, Machiavellianism and traditionalism. If post-Cold War Germany is a largely cosmopolitan society primed for a cooperative foreign policy, to what extent does this tendency generalize to the system? The only possible answer must start with a survey of the most
powerful states to assess the strength of cosmopolitan, Machiavellian and traditionalist attitudes within each of them and across them all collectively. How many states are, like Germany, dominated by cosmopolitan sentiments; and how many, like Russia and China, are more nationalistic?

Posing the question this way offers another important insight: the most important poles of state behavior may be not from realist power-seeking to liberal cooperative benefit-seeking, but from nationalist status-seeking to liberal cooperative benefit-seeking. Realists actually occupy intermediate points on the spectrum, with restrained defensive realists essentially liberals in a tough mood, and domination-seeking offensive realists more like aggressive nationalists without the flourishes, interested more in the substance of power than the trappings of status. Another intermediate position, especially important for medium powers, is symbolic nationalism: the pursuit of status through cultural assertion, Olympic medals, economic achievements or other markers distinct from military power.

The benefit of such a survey of orientations is that it takes IR theorizing beyond the fruitless debate between liberals, who assert that the system is mostly white; and realists who insist that it is mostly black. This cannot be determined a priori, but only empirically. More importantly, it allows us to take seriously the variation across space and time, distinguishing blotsches of white and black from different shades of gray. Thus one would expect to find cosmopolitan regions, like most of Europe, which should be peaceful and cooperative; and increasingly nationalistic and potentially conflictual regions such as Northeast Asia.

Since symbolic politics theory considers not just symbolic predispositions, but also the stimuli that people are exposed to, it is also better-suited than constructivism to consider the role of material factors in influencing these patterns. For example, Collier and Hoeffler find that the average state entering a civil war between 1960 and 1999 had a per capita GDP of $1645; the average state at peace with itself had a per capita income of $4219.66. Rationalists agree that this is the pattern—poor countries are much more likely to experience civil wars than rich ones—but they disagree about why.

Symbolist theory would offer several hypotheses to explain this pattern. First, richer states are likely to be better-educated than poorer ones, and prejudice declines with education. Collier and Hoeffler’s data support this hypothesis: states entering civil wars averaged 30% of their male populations with a secondary-school education; states remaining at peace had educated 44% of their men. Second, symbolist theory would suggest that poor people are more likely to worry about economic threats than are the affluent. Feelings of economic threat tend to boost prejudice, which in turn increases the likelihood that people will also perceive physical threats—and react aggressively in response. At the same time, as Fearon and Laitin point out, poor states tend to be weak ones. Thus the prospects of rebellion against poor states will seem less threatening than rebellion against richer, stronger states would appear.

The next insight of symbolic politics theory is the crucial role of leadership and organization. Ethnic civil wars typically require deeply prejudiced populations primed for conflict by hostile nationalist narratives; but they always require extremist leaders to galvanize both sides to fight, and organizational structures than enable them to transform the inspiration into mobilization. Similarly in international relations, stable cooperative relations require
stable leadership by cosmopolitans, while violent conflict usually requires aggressive leadership by Machiavellians or extreme nationalists. In political systems that are not responsive to popular will, or in states including a balance of competing SYPs, leadership is decisive. Thus parts of Africa are playgrounds for Machiavellian warlords, regardless of popular will (partly because state organizations are overshadowed by militias); while the U.S. oscillates between cosmopolitanism and relatively assertive nationalism depending on its President. On top of the map of popular sentiment, we therefore place an overlay of more-changeable but still critically important leadership sentiment.

Much of this logic is compatible with constructivism, or at least with a certain kind of constructivism. On the one hand, there is a rich tradition of international relations constructivism that focuses on the importance of such cultural narratives, values and leaders’ rhetoric in explaining political outcomes. To this perspective symbolic politics adds the interplay between those discourses, symbolic predispositions, and stimuli from the material world, positing that narratives will resonate and gain popularity only to the extent that they accord with the symbolic predispositions of the audience and seem relevant to ongoing events. Thus symbolic politics theory differs with those constructivists who argue that rhetoric’s power comes from its grammatical structure; instead, it asserts, rhetoric’s power comes from its emotional appeal deriving from its resonance with symbolic predispositions. Symbolist theory also differs with certain constructivist theorists of I.R. who search primarily for dominant narratives. Narratives always resonate with some but not with others; examining symbolic predispositions allows us to examine cases in which competing actors promote competing narratives, and to predict which narratives will resonate with whom.

The focus on the distribution of symbolic predispositions among populations and leaders allows us to build a theoretical picture of the international system more useful than the false parsimony of realist or liberal assumptions. Stable peace and cooperation should exist within and between those areas dominated by cosmopolitan values. Regions dominated by Machiavellians should be more violence-prone. Regions dominated by nationalists should be conflictual, with the type of conflict dependent on the type of nationalism: symbolic nationalists will prefer diplomatic and symbolic contestation; power-seeking nationalists will be more likely to resort to force.

The next key consideration in symbolic politics theory is the terror management effect: it matters whether a state’s or a group’s leaders and people perceive a physical threat. The threat may be an obvious one, like a military buildup; but if there is an ambiguous threat from another state or group that is already seen as an enemy (that is, if one side is predisposed to see the other as hostile), the result will be the same. In either case, if leaders feel threatened, the terror management effect will cause them to react aggressively. The effect works at the level of public opinion as well. For example, because Americans were feeling generally threatened after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, they were more inclined to support hostile action toward another outside target seen as hostile—Iraq—even though Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. The terror management effect, in other words, is the psychological process that causes the security dilemma. It also explains why the security dilemma is a general one that tends to expand beyond any specific bilateral relationship.
But this same logic also explains why the security dilemma is a variable, not a constant as realists assume. First, some are more reactive to threat than others. The more common nationalist and Machiavellian predispositions are in a state’s or a group’s population, the greater will be the pressure on national leaders to respond aggressively to perceived threat. Similarly, the more nationalistic or Machiavellian the leader is, the more inclined he or she will be to react aggressively. The second point is that states are more reactive to some stimuli than to others. Populations of states with mutually hostile national narratives (such as Pakistan and India) will be symbolically predisposed to feel threatened by ambiguous behavior from the other; while states with mutually friendly narratives and SYPs are unlikely either to threaten or to feel threatened. Leaders, again, are likely both to share these nationalist predispositions, and to be responsive to public pressure to act accordingly.

The international atmosphere is also important: since the terror management effect is a general one, states or groups feeling threatened from one source are more likely to be reactive against another. On the other hand, if the international environment is peaceful, states are less likely to react aggressively to potential threats. This logic also explains why international crises increase the danger of war: the terror management effect pushes both leaders’ and citizens’ preferences toward aggressive action on both sides, creating an intense security dilemma where there was not one before. Additionally, this logic explains the regional variation in the security dilemma: peaceful Europe exists in a low-threat environment that allow a low level of reactivity when potential threats arise; but neighbors of nationalistic China increasingly conclude that they do not have the same luxury.

**Enduring Rivalries**

The above point about the Pakistan-India relationship can be generalized. As Huth and others have shown, most international conflict comes in the context of “enduring rivalries,” which is just the sort of situation in which prejudices are likely to be created. For example, Americans and Soviets saw each other as enemies in part because each nation subscribed to an ideology that defined the other as hostile: Americans hated and feared Communism, and Soviets hated and feared capitalist “imperialism”. American ire was directed specifically against Iraq after 9/11 because Saddam Hussein had been a prominent American adversary for more than decade.

The symbolist hypothesis is a simple one: enduring rivalries endure because national narratives on at least one if not both sides define the other state as a rival. These narratives, in turn, would be hypothesized to have resulted in specific prejudice: those exposed to the hostile narratives should specifically dislike and distrust the target of those narratives. We could further hypothesize that the more prominent (operationalized as familiar) hostile narratives about a particular adversary are in a population, the more likely that population is to support initiation of a rivalry in response to even ambiguously threatening behavior by the disliked state or group.

The implications for processes of conflict resolution are profound. Given that hostile symbolic predispositions are at the core of conflicts like the Arab-Israeli conflict, symbolist logic explains why the actors find it so difficult to reach a compromise even though outsiders widely
consider their security interests to be compatible. The key to resolving such conflicts, then, is not just a change in the national narratives both sides use, but also—and much more problematically—in the symbolic predispositions that make those narratives resonate. In other words, the two sides have to stop hating and despising each other. Relatedly, this logic explains Kupchan’s finding that while rival states may achieve a shallow rapprochement on the basis of compatible geopolitical interests, such rapprochement turns into stable peace only when domestic values are compatible and the relationship results in the “the generation of new narratives and identities.”

The Democratic Peace

A symbolic politics explanation of the democratic peace follows from this last point. Democracies would be expected to be hostile toward non-democracies because the latter are inherently symbolic threats: they threaten democratic values by challenging them. The U.S. is likely to be particularly reactive to such threats, because its national identity is based primarily on those values rather than on ethnic nationalism. On the other hand, democracies—especially in the context of the Cold War—would tend to see a fellow democracy as part of a common ingroup: not only inherently non-threatening, but one of “us,” due the psychological benefit of the doubt that common ingroup membership affords. After four decades of the Cold War, this common ingroup identity was well-enough established that it outlived the context of the rivalry with Communism that had created it.

A symbolist argument would also second and expand on Owen’s point about liberal values, and combine it with constructivist logic to explain the contemporary power of the international norm against aggression. Discourses create norms, but the norms are only accepted to the extent that they resonate with existing symbolic predispositions. Modern democracies, of course, only work if their populations accept liberal values such as the rule of law and nonviolent conflict management—that is, if their people are symbolically predisposed to accept a norm of nonaggression. Thus people in democracies embrace the international norm of nonaggression because it resonates with the symbolic predispositions that democracies cultivate for domestic interactions; autocrats reject the norm as a principle for their own behavior, and ignore it when they can.

The Dilemma of Statism

Conventional international relations theory is hobbled by the dilemma of how to define the key actors in international politics. Realists and most liberals generally assume a priori that the state is the most important actor—realists because they tend to have the most military power, and liberals because they tend to be the most capable institutions. This statist assumption, however, leaves realists unable to explain one of the most important twentieth-century trends in warfare: the increasing predominance of civil war over international war as the most common and costly kind of fighting. Realism simply cannot grapple even with security problems when the actors are not states. Liberals, less married to the reification of sovereignty, have less
difficulty admitting the importance of international or even domestic institutions, but they still have no in-principle answer to the question of how to identify the most important actors in world politics.

Symbolic politics theory suggests a way out. Originally designed to explain how ethnic war begins, symbolist theory starts from the question of when ethnic or nationalist groups mobilize. In other words, it provides a practical way of starting from the assumption proposed by Gilpin that groups, not states, are the main actors in world politics.75 What kinds of groups? Obviously, nation-states will be very potent because they combine the symbolic power of nationalism with the institutional power of the state to mobilize the national population. States that are not nation-states lack the power resource provided by nationalism—i.e., they cannot call upon popular symbolic predispositions in favor of the state to gain public support for national goals. They should therefore be weaker than nation-states, though they may still function as institutions able to mobilize populations. On the other hand, non-state nations—i.e., politicized ethnic groups—are important actors, because they can become separatists or even belligerents in ethnic wars if conditions are right, turning non-nation states into battlegrounds instead of independent actors.76

Non-national and non-ethnic groups can engage in symbolic politics as well. Organized-crime groups and greed-motivated warlords (such as those who exploit “blood diamonds”) use a very simple sort of symbolic politics. The relevant SYPs are greed and brutality (that is, these organizations tend to recruit greedy thugs, and to socialize their recruits into those values), and their terrorizing creates a politics of submission for those under their control. At the other end of the spectrum, NGOs that promote human rights are pure players in symbolic politics, using their organizational networks to appeal to and reinforce the humanitarian SYPs of their audiences, and using the resulting resources of money and political support to pursue their causes. MNCs are in the middle of this spectrum, relying primarily on greed like the warlords, but using legal and nonviolent methods like the NGOs.

**Conclusion**

For both international relations actors and international relations scholars, the key differences between realists, liberals and nationalists are their symbolic predispositions and threat perceptions. Leaders with cosmopolitan values behaves as liberals would expect; leaders with Machiavellian value clusters such as social dominance orientation behave as realists would expect; and leaders with nationalist values seek status rather than wealth or power, potentially behaving in more conflictual ways even than the Machiavellian realists. IR theorists tend to project their own orientations onto statesmen, so cosmopolitan liberals expect a great deal of international cooperation, while suspicious Machiavellian scholars expect leaders to behave as they themselves do, defecting in iterated prisoners’ dilemma-type games because they do not expect cooperation to be reciprocated.

The first step in building a sensible international relations theory is therefore to put aside our own biases, and recognize that leaders do in fact vary in their orientations. Some leaders are cosmopolitans, some are Machiavellians, and some are nationalists (and some combine these
orientations), so they should be expected to behave differently when confronted with the same incentive structures. As the dual systems theory of decision-making affirms, these deep-seated symbolic predispositions drive behavior to a much greater degree than rationalists will admit. Even strategic behavior is a function primarily of the SYPs decision-makers bring to the situation: their propensity to trust potential rivals, their inclination to seek power either as a means to security or as an assertion of status, and so on.

Symbolic politics theory provides a way to account systematically for these differences, by focusing attention on those varying symbolic predispositions. Mapping the SYPs of world leaders provides a first cut at predicting which states are likely to behave cooperatively and which are not at any given time. Adding an underlay of data on the distribution of SYPs within these societies enables longer range predictions: we should expect cosmopolitan societies to choose cosmopolitan leaders, and nationalist societies to choose nationalist leaders. Variations in threat perception (and in leadership) explain the variation over time in the cooperative or conflictual behavior of international actors. Symbolist theory goes beyond constructivism most of all by examining the interplay between discourse, symbolic predispositions, and stimuli from the material world, generating the expectation that an audience will respond positively to a particular discourse primarily to the degree that the discourse resonates with the symbolic predispositions of the audience and is relevant to salient issues.

Beyond suggesting a way to get past the realist-liberal-constructivism debate, this symbolic synthesis suggests answers to a host of other conundrums facing international relations scholars. At the simplest level, it explains the durability of enduring rivalries—in particular, their insensitivity to efforts to change discourses—by reference to hostile predispositions that the populations involved have toward their rival. Even cosmopolitan leaders cannot resolve these rivalries without great difficulty because their followers are simply too prejudiced against each other to risk trust. Symbolist theory also offers a way to deepen the values-plus-institutions explanation of the democratic peace, noting that the effect of “values” results from the interaction between symbolic predispositions of the populations and the discourses employed by elites. Symbolic politics also explains some anomalies in the democratic peace, such as the frequently-aggressive behavior of democracies toward non-democracies, by noting the basic pattern of outgroup rivalry that is inherent in even relatively liberal nationalisms.

Digging deeper, symbolist theory also provides a solution to the dilemma of theoretical statism. Symbolist theory suggests that political mobilization is a function of a specific cluster of variables: symbolic predispositions supporting that mobilization, threat perceptions (i.e., fear) or other emotions impelling it, and leadership and organization harnessing those popular energies. From this perspective, states are important because they generally have effective institutions and capable leaders; and if they are nation-states, they can also draw on their population’s nationalist sentiments, which are powerful symbolic predispositions in favor of supporting the state. At the same time, we can say that other groups are important in international relations to the extent that they, too, have organizations and leaders to direct their efforts, and can appeal to their audiences’ symbolic predispositions to elicit emotional responses in their favor. Thus human rights NGOs appeal to humanitarian SYPs, multinational corporations appeal to greed, and non-state nations or ethnic groups appeal to frustrated nationalism to pursue separatist or nationalist goals.
Symbolic politics theory, in sum, can offer a way to integrate most if not all of the competing strands of international relations theorizing within a single logic, without essentially compromising the integrity of any of them. This is a great promise for a relatively new theory.

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1 See, for example, the contributions to *European Journal of International Relations* vol.19 (September 2013).
11 Gladwell, *Blink*.
13 Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.
15 Ibid., p. 62.
36 Ibid.
37 Devos et al., “Experiencing Intergroup Emotions.”
46 Rathbun, Trust in International Cooperation.


