

the links among actors and peoples and have tended to reduce the earlier emphasis on the sovereign prerogatives of states. Most of these perspectives also emphasize the dynamic elements in global politics, and several no longer maintain the pretense that facts and values are separable.

Where, then, does this leave us? In the following chapter, we shall try answer that question, suggesting some of the ways changing premises and methods make us less gloomy about the field than when *The Elusive Quest* appeared, while others are extremely disheartening, notably the flight from empiricism on the part of some theorists.

Yale Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, *The Elusive Quest Continues: Theory and Global Politics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

## CHAPTER 9

### The End of the Elusive Quest?

By the late 1980s, when *The Elusive Quest* appeared, the quest for theory in global politics was becoming, if anything, increasingly elusive. Those embarked on that quest stood as in the midst of a maze, with the paths they had elected to pursue leading nowhere. There was no longer widespread confidence that the maze even had an entry or an exit, certainly no consensus as to what the objective was, and growing doubt as to whether what might be found would be worth the effort of continuing to look for it. Disappointed by the failure of science to realize its promise, political practitioners, some of whom (perhaps mistakenly) in the 1950s and 1960s had looked to the academic world for guidance in matters like deterrence, found little of interest or relevance in international relations theory and made little attempt to read it.

#### DEAD ENDS

The 1980s witnessed a decline in academic interest in the subject of theory. Many graduate students and professionals seemed to conclude that it was hardly worth trying to penetrate the turgid prose and jargon of many theoretically inclined books and journal articles because they had little of use to say. More and more academics turned to policy questions in journals like *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* or to purely descriptive analyses of current events and issues, without attempting to explore the theoretical implications of their work. The resulting analyses were often journalistic or at least were soon overtaken by events. Without a coherent body of theory, the field of global politics existed but was not by any stretch of imagination a genuine discipline.

The absence of theory has serious consequences across all our concerns. McGowan and Shapiro, for example, acknowledged in 1973 with regard to the study of foreign policy:

Without theory we cannot explain the relationships we 'discover' and we can only make predictions of the crudest sorts based upon projections from empirical trends, not upon a profound understanding of foreign policy behavior. Without theory to guide our research we must depend upon luck and educated guesses to come up with worthwhile research hypotheses. Without theory research becomes ad hoc in the extreme, with no justification provided for the selection of cases, with no system to the definition and measurement of concepts, and with no consistency in the use of research techniques and data-processing routines. In brief, a field without theory is hardly an area of disciplined scientific inquiry. Since the comparative study of foreign policy lacks both middle-range and general theories of foreign policy behavior it fails to meet the basic objective of any science: a body of theoretically organized knowledge that is based on cumulative empirical research.<sup>1</sup>

When the 1980s came to a close, we were far from meeting even the less ambitious vision advanced in 1961 by Morton A. Kaplan before the idea of science had captured the field's imagination. Gloomily Kaplan predicted:

[O]ur explanations or theories can never have the authority of theory in physics, or its explanatory or predictive power. The important problem is whether they can be stated in ways that permit additional analysis and investigation. Whether they are tautological dead ends or fruitful aids to historical and scientific imagination, whether the statements in them permit at least reasonable analysis and investigation or whether they are dogmatic fiat, the science of the discipline does not lie in absolute certainty but in reasonable belief, in definite canons of procedure and investigation, and in the attempt to permit confirmation or falsification even though of an imprecise order. The object is not to seek a certainty or precision that the subject matter does not allow, but to reject a dogmatism that the subject matter does not make necessary. The very difficulties of theory building and confirmation in global politics demand sincere dedication to scientific canons of procedure.<sup>2</sup>

Why were we so far short of our goals? Kaplan was right up to a point, that the factors inhibiting the development of a powerful, predictive, theoretical social science are fundamental and . . . it is not merely a matter of waiting for a Galilean breakthrough.<sup>3</sup> First, global politics deals with matters that are exceedingly complex. The distinguished physicist Sir Brian Pippard remarks:

In olden days a prince of the church would employ a chaplain to remind him of his mortality. It would be no bad custom if at prize-giving ceremonies it was whisp[er]ed in the ears of mathematicians and scientists, in their hour of triumph, that they had succeeded because they had chosen to tackle relatively straightforward problems, and that if politicians and social reformers [surely we might add persons studying global politics] are not so obviously successful it is because they have challenged problems of enormously greater complexity.<sup>4</sup>

In Pippard's view, the latter problems, "when represented by physical models, seem to belong to that class of problems that physicists find most difficult to reduce to order—problems of instability and chaos."<sup>5</sup>

The physical scientist, by contrast, normally focuses on problems in which only a relatively few number of major variables are relevant. Moreover, as Kaplan

stressed four decades ago, the physical scientist "carries on his studies and experiments in a laboratory that is closed to outer-world or historical forces." On the other hand, "each science gets less theoretical as we move from laboratory generalizations to engineering applications and to the complexities and uncertainties of the real world."<sup>6</sup> Advocates of science did not ignore this, but they did underestimate the problems it posed.

Theorists of global politics not only have a staggering number of potentially relevant and often linked variables with which to wrestle outside of a closed laboratory setting; but also, unlike the physical scientists, they must proceed with little agreement as to how variables should be labeled and defined. One would be hard-pressed to find very many physical science terms as vague as social science concepts like personality, power, state, anarchy, identity, interdependence, democracy, globalization, and so on. When concepts such as these require separate definition by theorists, it seriously undercuts the persuasiveness of generalizations resulting from their application. Any agreement regarding definitions would be illusory at best because, as we have seen, meanings shift in time and place in reaction to changing human norms and commitments.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that in our effort to comprehend the world around us there is no alternative but to build theories or models that inevitably oversimplify whatever reality they model. "Pure empiricism," as Robert Jervis argues, "is impossible: facts do not speak for themselves."<sup>7</sup> Adopting a theory or model, then, has the effect of channeling perceptions so as to filter out contradictory evidence in the name of parsimony, which in turn leaves the theory or model open to the charge that it has neglected an important part of the picture:

The world is not so cleanly constructed that all the evidence supports only one theory. There are so many variables, accidents, and errors in observations that [in Thomas Kuhn's words] "There is no such thing as research with counter-instances." No parsimonious explanation for any actor's behavior in a complex set of cases will be completely satisfying. Some aspects of the truth simply do not make sense. . . . Because it is rare that all the facts are consistent with the same conclusion, the closer one looks at the details of a case the greater the chance that some of them will contradict the accepted explanation.<sup>8</sup>

For Kaplan, an advocate of system-level explanations, "as we come closer to reality . . . we lose generality." Parsimony, then, becomes very important but involves costs:

If we want to apply our models to concrete cases, we must choose just those factors and just those factor values that we have some reason to believe operate in the particular instance we wish to understand and explain. In the endeavor, as our analysis gains in richness of relevant detail, we face a continuing loss of generality and a growing vagueness and lack of specification concerning the weight that each factor contributes to the total event or situation. This is the price we must pay when we deal with actual history.<sup>9</sup>

An optimist might note that fragmentation in theory building is a reflection of the fragmentation of world politics itself and that a proliferation of perspectives is a necessary prelude to later coherence. But one must not hide behind complexity alone, in the sense of numbers of variables. Marion Levy is probably correct in asserting that "the level of complexity that faces one varies as an inverse function of the state of one's theory."<sup>10</sup> We have no way of knowing in advance just how many variables are relevant to our concerns. But there is a more important sort of complexity that becomes apparent in efforts to isolate and study specific variables: Such reductionism isolates selected factors from their context when it is the context itself in which we are interested. Thus, empirical elements are sifted and viewed apart from the normative yeast that animates them and lends them meaning.

Were we advancing along the path outlined by Thomas Kuhn, the general-versus-specific dilemma and other issues would be resolved through a gradual refinement of models in the progress of normal science. When a model proves inadequate, the usual and proper reaction is not to abandon it entirely but, as Pippard puts it, to "modify it if we can or, at least, recognize its limitations—I don't really understand so-and-so," we say.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the replacement of even a dominant paradigm with another is possible and may be necessary if too many anomalies are observed and problems of major importance, remain unsolved as a result.

Kuhn's analysis of the process of scientific progress, as we have seen, greatly encouraged a post-World War II generation of scholars who were determined to make the study of global politics more scientific. Many still hold that the theoretical fragmentation and ferment which ensued offer substantial evidence of real progress in Kuhnian terms. Such an interpretation is a misreading of Kuhn, however, because it obscures the reasons for the field's plight at the time. Kuhn insisted, in the first instance, that scientific progress must start with a genuinely dominant paradigm. Retrospectively, realism seemed the nearest thing to such a paradigm in global politics, but it was far from a genuine one. In fact, it was less a theory than a set of normative emphases that shape theory, a self-contained syllogism that closes off further analysis and sustains a particular theology. Second, Kuhn stressed that an existing paradigm is discarded only when an alternative is available and that, meanwhile, progress is achieved through the process of normal science within the accepted framework.

In contrast to Kuhn's description, the self-styled scientific revolution in global politics was mainly methodological, and there was little agreement from the outset on a common research agenda. Theorists started off in any number of different directions, with no consensus as to the basic puzzles to be addressed or the concepts and methodologies to be employed. Hence, lines of research were essentially idiosyncratic, without the kind of convergence that seems to make for cumulative knowledge in the Kuhnian sense. Knorr and Verba recognized in 1961 that "in the long run, progress will be made in theories of the international system only if various approaches begin to converge and move in the same direction. Only in that way will our work, both theoretical and empirical, begin to be cumulative."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, after a fairly long run, theory in the field appears more divergent and consequently less cumulative than before. Perhaps we have seriously misunderstood the enterprise itself.

## THE FLIGHT FROM EMPIRICISM

By the 1990s, the pessimism that permeated *The Elusive Quest* book had spread throughout the field. Others had concluded, as we had, that part of the problem was the failed effort to separate facts and values, with the latter *largely being ignored*. Unfortunately, in some circles what followed was a wholesale flight from empiricism, an aesthetic and intellectual relativism, and on the whole, a further retreat from reality. Some scholars abandoned facts and focused only on values.

In an article published in 1989, a year after *The Elusive Quest* first appeared, Yosef Lapid announced "the demise of the empiricist-positivist promise for a cumulative behavioral science." In consequence, declared Lapid, "some of the most highly prized premises of Western academic discourse concerning the nature of our social knowledge, its acquisition, and its utility—including shibboleths such as 'truth,' 'rationality,' 'objectivity,' 'reality,' and 'consensus,—have come under renewed critical reflection."<sup>13</sup> Whereas we bemoaned the breakup of the field into a multitude of quarreling coteries, Lapid welcomed such pluralism as a way of opening "thinking space" and reducing the dominance of the field by American academics.

Lapid saw the field of international relations as engaged in a third debate—the first two having been "idealism versus realism" and "history versus science." Just as "history versus science" marked "the ascendancy of positivism in Western social science," so the third debate was connected "to the confluence of diverse anti-positivistic philosophical and sociological trends."<sup>14</sup> Lapid believed there was reason to "celebrate" this new debate in contrast to the despairing words of others he cites, such as Waltz, who grumbled, "Among the depressing features of international-political studies is the small gain in explanatory power that has come from the large amount of work done in recent decades. Nothing seems to accumulate, not even criticism."<sup>15</sup>

Having identified the debate as taking place between positivists and postpositivists, Lapid admitted that postpositivism "is not a unitary philosophical platform" but rather "a rather loosely patched-up umbrella for a confusing array of only remotely related philosophical articulations." Three themes seemed to him to underlie the debate: "the preoccupation with meta-scientific units (paradigmatism), the concern with underlying premises and assumptions (perspectivism), and the drift towards methodological pluralism (relativism)." The first referred to a shift away from "the positivist choice of the empirically corroborated law or generalization as the fundamental unit of scientific achievement" to the "relatively long-lived, and multi-tiered constructs—such as 'paradigms' (Kuhn, 1962), 'research-programmes' (Lakatos, 1970), 'research traditions' (Laudan, 1984), 'global theories' (Hooker, 1987), and 'Weltanschauungen' (Wisdom, 1987)—[as] knowledge-producing, knowledge-accumulating, and knowledge-conserving units."<sup>16</sup>

The rethinking of assumptions or "perspectivism" was most "audible" among a small but vocal group of 'postpositivist,' 'post-structuralist,' and 'post-modernist' critics of mainstream international relations. "These had in common the claim that 'meaning and understanding are not intrinsic to the world but, on the contrary, are continuously constructed, defended, and challenged.' Their main purpose is to 'problematize' answers, make 'strange' what has become familiar, and reverse the process of construction in order to reveal how problematic are the