Conversations in and on IR: Labeling, Framing and Delimiting IR Discipline

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Abstract

Calling for genuine and open dialogues between research agendas and theoretical orientations, this article seeks to put "conversations" at the center of the process of discipline-building. Just as Steve Smith declared: "We construct, and reconstruct, our disciplines just as much as we construct, and reconstruct, our world" (2004: 510), we intend to convene researchers in IR to reflect on the way we build and represent our discipline, our object of study and our community's purposes. Applying discursive analysis and Emanuel Adler's communitarian constructivist approach to the discipline of IR, this article will particularly discuss the use of mechanisms of labeling, cognitive structuring, and disciplinary debates to the framing of IR itself. It will propose some answers to questions such as: "What is the content and appropriate label of the discipline?", "Who constitutes the disciplinary community?", and "What is the legitimate purpose of the discipline?" and finally underlie some questions and contradictions in the way we understand such issues.

Keywords: Discipline; International Relations; debates; labels; disciplinary community; constructivism

Introduction

When I read that *Bridges* was looking for articles on the theme of "Conversations", I thought that it was a good opportunity to present some reflections about international relations as much as on the discipline of International Relations (IR) *per se*. Following what Mark Neufeld called the "reflective turn in IR" in a YCISS Working Paper (Neufeld, 1991), this article will try to instill some "self-consciousness" into the ways we represent, construct and talk about our discipline. It will also try to apply Emanuel Adler's specific constructivist communitarian approach in IR – i.e., an approach that "emphasizes 'epistemic' features of international social reality and takes social learning as an attribute of 'communities of the like-minded'" (Adler, 2005: 3) – to the analysis of the discipline itself. More concretely, this paper is intended as an ideational and principled attempt for renewed dialogue within the IR community on the discipline's object of study, its subjects, labels and legitimization.

Some readers might ask what such a discussion has to do with IR. In fact, it has been more than a decade since our disciplinary community has realized, as Ole Waever argued, that the "discipline [is] the debate" (1996: 155), meaning that the discipline is founded upon debates and conversations as much on objects related to international relations as it is on ourselves as a producing/researching/ teaching community. While such a proposition raises many more questions than it answers, asking questions is, most of the time, a better starting point for a constructive conversation.

This article is based on the idea that the disciplinary conversations that we need to have among the IR "community of the like-minded" should be aimed at clarifying diverse positions, representations and approaches in IR. Unfortunately, the last few decades resembled more of a "dialogue of the deaf", intended to categorize authors and approaches rather than to engage in constructive discussions on the aim of our work, the constitution of our discipline and the essence of our objects of study. As a result, the Third Debate appears to have created growing divisions instead of growing understanding, a situation that is definitively threatening the intellectual and social understanding of our discipline.

Responding to this situation, this article tries to rebuild some disciplinary bridges or, in Bakhtinian terms, to found new disciplinary *dialogue*.[1] In the

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[1] "Bakhtin (…) does not see dialogue only as language assumed by a subject; he sees it, rather, as a *writing* where one reads the *other* (with no allusion to Freud). Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality (Kristeva [1966] 1986, in Neumann, 1999: 14)."

first part of the article, I will discuss some ways to define our common object of study, a task that can simultaneously help us represent the identity of the discipline and, consequently, of our community of knowledge and practices. In the second part, I will review how the question "What is the discipline for?" has been answered in the last decades. Finally, I will try to answer more 'agency-centered' questions such as: "Who is [the discipline] for?" and, "How can a process of dialogue with that audience be initiated (Wyn Jones, 2001: 16)?" These questions will enable us to suggest some alternative legitimating aims and boundaries for the discipline which are departing from the conventional approach to the discipline. I will conclude by reviewing how such reflections and discussions are relevant and essential to the constitution of an academic discipline and a producing community such as ours.

The Object of Conversations: Labeling and Structuring the Discipline

As discussed by many authors in IR over the three last decades[2], an academic discipline such as IR is structured by its material and institutional realities (university departments, chairs, offices, positions, journals, titles, diplomas…). But such structures cannot be understood without referring to the ideational, cognitive and discursive constructions underlying their existence. In that sense, characterizing the legitimate content or object of study in the discipline, and the discipline label itself, has been a privileged theme of debates among authors in IR.

The habit of labeling and the diversity of labels are quite significant with respect to the disagreements about, or to the unsettled nature of, our discipline.[3] Concealed in such debates is the will to construct, on different cognitive and discursive levels, the discipline and its institutional and material realities. Unsurprisingly, the results of such discursive and conceptual debates are very practical, as they influence how we define one's work and position, how such work is legitimated, and consequently, who we perceive as being legitimately part of the disciplinary community.

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[2] See for example: Stanley Hoffman, 1977; K. J. Holsti, 1985; Ole Waever, 1998.

[3] I fully realize that my work also relies on a certain amount of 'labels' that carry some particular perspective. But as having a position is an inescapable situation in a debate/conversation, the best I can do, in my opinion, is to make clear that I'm conscious of this position and of its presuppositions.

The Politics of Labeling

Before going further, it is important to realize how such conversations are conducted in the discipline. While such reflective conversations on our 'collective being' are seldom the main object of analysis in IR, the last three decades have seen a growing number of authors taking a stance on such issues in articles partially or wholly devoted to the disciplinary subject of the discipline itself. Consequently, even if this is a very specific theme of debate, and what we could call a "reflective" object of discussion, authors from very diverse theoretical and epistemological orientations have taken positions on it.

The discursive act of labeling is as much meant to identify authors and approaches as to cognitively structure the discipline. This is what Robert Keohane showed when, in his 1988 presidential address to the International Studies Association, he divided the disciplinary community into the "rationalist" and "reflectivist" approaches (Keohane, 1988). This categorization relied on generally agreed epistemological and ontological differences, but further inscribed this binary theoretical division by creating two 'groupings' that would thereafter structure the discipline, both socially and practically.

On another level, this is the precise effect that the adoption and use of the conventional historiography of IR has had on the cognitive and ideational structure of the discipline. More precisely, I claim that the traditional narrative of IR has – mainly through such labeling mechanisms – over-emphasized the divisions among 'historical groups' of authors and diverging approaches, thus 'discursively creating' such supposedly unified groups of authors and theoretical approaches[4], and marginalizing authors and approaches that do not fit with the cognitive framework presented.

To support our claim, let us recall how the history of the discipline is traditionally narrated. The traditional historiography of IR usually represents the evolution of the discipline as a series of debates between two (or three) main approaches or theories. Those pairs of opposing theories can be synthesized as idealism and realism; behavioralism and traditionalism; (neo) realism, liberal-institutionalism and radicalism; [5] and rationalism and reflectivism. Some particular authors have been identified as representing each of these debates, and each of the different approaches constituting the

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[4] While discussing the existence of the First debate, Wilson for example declared: "[I]n the sense of a cohesive, and certainly self-conscious, school of thought, an 'idealist' or 'utopian' paradigm never actually existed." (1998: 1).
[5] This 3rd 'triadic' debate doesn't receive a 'consensual' recognition in the field.

debates. For example, realism is generally identified with E.H. Carr and other classical realist authors such as Hans Morgenthau, while idealism is personified by the writings of philosopher Immanuel Kant and American president Woodrow Wilson. The traditionalist side of the second great debate is generally personalized by English school authors as Hedley Bull, Charles Manning, Martin Wight and Fred Northedge; and on the other side by (mostly American) behavioralists such as Morton Kaplan, Karl Deutsch and James Rosenau.

In the last decades, this specific historiography has acquired such importance in the discipline that most authors, even critical ones, have recognized this narrative as "the most dominant self-image of the field" (Long and Schmidt 2005: 3). Ole Waever even declared in 1998 that "there is no other established means of telling the history of the discipline (1998: 715)."

It is clear that the representation of the discipline's history in such a (simplistic and binary) way is meaningful. Regarding this self-conceptualization, Long and Schmidt wrote: "Disciplinary history is (…) closely tied to intellectual struggles to determine and legitimate the contemporary identity of the field (2005: 5)." Historiography is also intrinsically tied to actual processes of theory building in the discipline. It seems relevant, therefore, to apply Robert Cox's most famous quote: "Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose (1986: 207)," to the practice of labeling the disciplinary evolution and historic theoretical movements.

To summarize, therefore, I claim that such disciplinary narratives help to discursively privilege the over-categorized approaches while marginalizing approaches which do not fall into these received images. This is more than unfortunate. While recognizing that labels and categories have some utility – especially for teaching – I also believe, following Richard Wyn Jones, that typologies should not replace analysis and engagement in a discipline interested with genuine debates and conversations (2001: 4).

Disciplinary Labels and Disciplinary Objects

In the last decades, we have increasingly seen this 'politics of labeling' being applied to the discipline's label itself. Uses of diverse disciplinary labels are very meaningful in defining what the legitimate objects of study are for an academic community or, in other words, what the appropriate content of disciplinary work and research should be.

For example, authors such as Hans Morgenthau or Kenneth Waltz made discursive statements by naming the object of their (the discipline's)

study "International Politics".[6] Such a move has to be perceived as meaningful as it supports the idea that: "To isolate a realm is a precondition to developing a theory that will explain what goes on within it (Waltz, 1979: 8)." Isolating "politics" from other social spheres of human activity such as economics, philosophy and culture can therefore be seen as part of building a legitimate/scientific object for the disciplinary community.

As Robert Cox explained in the 1980s, this tendency to segment reality is not specific to IR. "[A]cademic conventions divide up the seamless web of the real social world into separate spheres, each with its own theorizing (1986: 204)." But following this statement, Cox opened space for reflection by saying: "Whether the parts remain as limited, separated objects of knowledge, or become the basis for constructing a structured and dynamic view of larger wholes, is a major question of method and purpose."

Those two types of epistemological approaches – segmenting or encompassing social reality – are certainly linked to the emergence, again in Robert Cox's words, of two different theoretical approaches in IR: "problem-solving" and "critical" theories. As Cox explains, the strength of the first category of approaches is linked with:

> [The] ability to fix limits or parameters to a problem area and to reduce the statement of a particular problem to a limited number of variables. The ceteris paribus assumption, upon which such theorizing is based, makes it possible to arrive at statements of laws or regularities which appear to have general validity but which imply, of course, the institutional and relational parameters assumed in the problem-solving approach (Cox 1986: 208).[7]

On the other side, critical theories have sought to include, or to understand, the complexity of the social realities observed while "stand[ing] apart from the prevailing order of the world and ask[ing] how that order came about (Ibid)." As this approach involves considering a constantly changing and wider reality, labels identifying the discipline coming to us from critical scholarship have been undergoing constant transformation.

Following the growing importance of critical theories in the discipline, as well as the profound transformations to which the international/global sphere has been subjected in the last decades, it is clear that the efforts to

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[6] See Morgenthau, 1993 [1948]; and Waltz, 1979.

[7] Problem-solving theories are often used as synonymous with 'positivist' approaches in IR.

define the object of study in IR with any degree of precision have become increasingly difficult. These efforts have also been mixed with a growing confusion on the appropriate label for the discipline itself. As numerous subfields have developed[8], and a growing number of authors of the disciplinary community have introduced new or 'broader' labels,[9] it is increasingly difficult to refer to a unified label for the discipline that would identify a clear and coherent disciplinary content.

Trying to make sense out of this growing (disciplinary) complexity, it can be asserted that while most authors in our disciplinary community, whatever their theoretical orientation, still refer to 'International Relations' as the official discipline 'title' or institutional label, the objects of study are nowadays profoundly diverse, unrestricted by former boundaries and therefore unsettled. I think that through such a distinction between debates over the disciplinary labels and those touching upon disciplinary 'objects of study', we can clearly set apart the polemics characterizing some debates in the discipline from areas of possible settlement and reasoned agreement.

Such a distinction would help us to remember that there exists a community of knowledge, always in (re)construction, within which we can conduct debates and conversations about international/global relations and realities. Such a distinction could also help to preserve a limited degree of understanding in the disciplinary community despite the ongoing debates about the legitimate content of this discipline.

The Aim of Conversations: Framing our Objectives, Framing our Discipline

During the first months of my second year of Ph.D. studies in Ottawa, I submitted a panel proposition for the annual conference of the Canadian Political Science Association under the title "Theoretical Models Used in Teaching IR Theories and Researching in IR". A call for papers was sent to all the members of the association. Not long afterwards, I started receiving answers. Most of the messages were requests for information or paper propositions. One message, however, really attracted our attention and made us reflect, even months later, about the way simple exchanges could be meant

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[8] Among many others, we can list for example International Political Economy, Foreign Policy Analysis, Security Studies, Peace Researches, Developmental Studies, etc.
[9] For example, Jim George referred to "Global Politics" in 1994, Stephen Gill and James Mittelman to "International Studies" in 1997, and Richard Wyn Jones to "World Politics" in 2001.

to frame our discipline and practices. Preserving the anonymity of the sender, I reproduce here the content of this email:

> I read with interest your call for papers and while I probably won't submit a proposal I was curious what your approach was going to be and how it ties into the larger issue of how IR is taught in Canadian schools especially when we are trying to be policy relevant these days. Do you know of such papers that survey the current state of discipline?

The interesting part of this message, at least for the purposes of our discussion, concerns the issue of policy relevance. It is clear, in this case, that 'policy relevance' is a legitimating aim for disciplinary work; in other words, it is seen to be the suggested general objective for the disciplinary community. This example also informs us of the way IR is conventionally framed. Unsurprisingly, this perspective is faithful to realist theory as, in Rosenberg's words: "Historical agency is almost always reducible in Realist writings to policy (Rosenberg, 1990: 286)." In that sense, the choice of the phrase "policy relevant" is not insignificant as it can be situated in the way IR has been traditionally constructed (mainly within realist approaches).

It is clear to anybody who has even a cursory knowledge of political science, that policies are mostly, if not exclusively, enacted by states and their constitutive institutions in our contemporary world. For traditional approaches in IR, the state is an *a priori* reality which does not need to be questioned because it constitutes the founding unit, universal in form and purpose, of the international system. According to this view, IR academic production simply needs to be relevant or useful to the main agent of the field: the state. In the example cited above, failing to justify our panel by reference to this principle was therefore to risk marginalizing our work with respect to the disciplinary mainstream and the assumed legitimate purpose of disciplinary work.

This is a very precise and practical example of the way a discipline is constructed through cognitive framing and discursive moves, which are used in a vast array of situations. Highlighting such structuring discursive moves can also help us to understand how the IR disciplinary community is founded by: "community-shared background understandings, skills, and practical predispositions without which it would be impossible to interpret action, assign meaning, legitimate practices, empower agents, and constitute a differentiated highly structured social reality (Ashley, 1987: 403)."

Numerous authors have been critical of the traditional disciplinary objective as presented by most mainstreams authors, i.e., those subscribing to realism, liberalism, neo-realism, liberal-institutionalism and more recently conventional constructivism.[10] Notwithstanding these critics, however, falling outside of the enterprise of mainstream IR has generally meant, for conventional authors, that one is doing "normative theory" or seeking "knowledge for the sake of knowledge (Waltz, 1979: 4)" – that is, adventuring into the spaces of relativism. I believe that this is a far too simplistic representation of the academic reality and that the field needs to engage in a serious discussion of the possibility of a plurality of legitimate aims in support of IR research.

Considering such a plurality of objectives enables us to de-compartmentalize IR and its diverse theoretical approaches. From such a move, it is possible to put on a discursively and analytically equal footing the policy-centered objectives of conventional approaches and other legitimizing principles put forward by "alternative" approaches. In essence, such a move would permit to start internalizing plural views and perspectives in disciplinary discourses, thereby permitting new types and levels of disciplinary conversation and dialogue.

One example of an alternative principle that can be stated as a general objective for disciplinary "démarches" can be draw from critical IR theory,[11] that is, the principle of "emancipation". This objective has been used, for example, in the area of critical security studies and more specifically by the "Aberystwyth School" of critical security studies. Authors from this school have suggested: "[T]hat realism's military-focused, state-centred and zero-sum understanding of security should be replaced by a collaborative project that would have human emancipation as its central concern (C.A.S.E. Collective, 2006: 448)." Emancipation has also been used, from different perspectives, by diverse feminist and post-colonial authors to reflect on international/global relations and realities.

Until now, it is clear that this legitimating principle has not been thoroughly applied to many concrete case studies in IR. But recognizing the value of such an alternative would help in developing precisely such a more plural, open and innovative view of our work and discipline. Most importantly, such a move could help us (re)affirm the autonomy of our

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[10] Those labels are far from exhaustive and perfectly descriptive of what we call "mainstream IR". This list should therefore simply be considered as indicative.

[11] As used by Richard Wyn Jones, this label serves to characterize: "[A] *constellation* of rather distinctive approaches, all seeking to illuminate a central theme, that of emancipation." (2001: 4)

academic field from social institutions such as the state. IR is a field of social science which seeks to understand social and political activities and relations that are linked to international and global realities. This clearly has relevance for human experience and human evolution. The discipline can therefore refer to a plurality of principles to legitimate its existence. Among these are certainly the improvement of state policies, human emancipation from diverse constraining structures, and enhancement of our general understanding of international and global realities. Finally, such a plurality of perspectives is, it seems, more loyal to the fundamental mission of academia and of what can be understood as science.

The Subject of Conversations: Imagining and Delimiting our Community of Knowledge

Defining the essence of a discipline, as represented by its discursive and ideational frame, is the first stage towards identifying who is part (a subject) of this academic community. While relying on the definitions that are offered in the two first parts, we can propose some type of social boundaries for our disciplinary community. In that sense, it is the object and objectives that we propose for the discipline that dictate who is participating (on the basis of the nature of one's work and activities) in the discipline.

In the last decades, numerous authors have conducted research and produced literature that involves or reflects on the definition of 'who' is the IR disciplinary community. Surprisingly, most of the authors writing directly on this subject use a definition (explicit or not) framing the IR community as mainly constituted by members of academic units, i.e., professors and researchers in universities, colleges and other institutions dedicated to teaching and researching international and global relations and activities.[12]

As early as 1985, K. J. Holsti published a book[13] proposing such an image of the disciplinary community, all the while using a "geographical" perspective to represent it. In this book, he referred to "ideal model of a community of scholars" as one in which there would be "reasonably symmetrical flows of communication, with 'exporters' of knowledge also being 'importers' from other sources (1985: 13)." In a similar vein, Arlene Tickner and Ole Waever, in their recent book questioning the "international" character of IR, identified the IR disciplinary community as "those who are

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[12] See for example Waever, 1998; and Jordan *et al.,* 2009.

[13] Holsti, K. J. (1985) *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory*, Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin.

professionally dedicated to analyzing world politics, that is, by scholars of international relations" (2009: 1).

The comprehensive analysis edited by Tickner and Waever is however one good example of how difficult it is to clearly delineate such an IR disciplinary community. Indeed, in many regional and national contexts – first and foremost in the United States, but also elsewhere – academics and officials are frequently moving back and forth between government institutions and universities, cultivating links between these different institutions, but also building common intellectual and cognitive frameworks. The broader nature of this disciplinary community is also revealed by the frequent use of terms such as "international affairs" and "international analysts" in literature on the discipline. This type of generic term seems to be meant to include the wider sphere of actors involved in international relations such as government analysts (in security, defense, foreign affairs, international trade, development, etc.), researchers associated with private think tanks, diplomats, state representatives, etc. This representation of the disciplinary community is more faithful to the traditional idea of the discipline's role and legitimizing principle, which is to serve and be relevant to state affairs and policies. It is also to be noted that the IR community in the United States is the one where there is one of the highest level of 'mainstream' (realists, liberals and positivists) oriented scholars (Jordan et al., 2009: 7-9).

Following upon our previous discussion on the orientation of conventional labeling and framing of the discipline, we could think that such habits and context – which seem to replicate the idea of a discipline closely linked to state interests – would have constructed a very conventionally oriented academic disciplinary community. Surprisingly, the latest "TRIP survey"[14] shows that: "On many key points U.S. scholars of IR demonstrate remarkable stability: virtually identical majorities across time say their scholarship is more basic – research for the sake of knowledge – than applied (Jordan *et al.,* 2009: 5)." This does not mean that a majority of U.S. scholars agree with "critical" or "reflexivist" perspectives in IR. It nevertheless shows that the discipline might not be as conventionally oriented, with respect to its legitimating principle, as many have tried to suggest, and further, that most scholars do not accept the efforts to trivialize research for the sake of knowledge itself. Rather, this reality suggests that we might find in the

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[14] The Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) project, are biannual surveys conducted among IR scholars. The latest project was "the first cross-national survey of IR faculty in ten countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States." (Jordan *et al*., 2009: 1)

question: "what is the objective underlying the discipline?" a fruitful ground upon which to develop a constructive and positive disciplinary dialogue in IR.

Some preliminary, and somehow problematic, reflections can be drawn from these last points:

- First, many, if not most, critical authors interested in studying the discipline identify the IR disciplinary community as the academic community of IR. However this definition is not consensual as 'larger' terms are often used to include a wider array of actors mainly originating from state-based institutions.
- Second, this (non-unanimous) disciplinary definition/delineation – cor-responding to our own claim for a more autonomous discipline – is the dominant one despite the fact that mainstream theories and approaches in IR are suggesting that the legitimizing principle of the disciplinary work is to be policy relevant, i.e., useful to states affairs. This suggests an implicit contradiction between the 'mainstream' cognitive and discursive frameworks in the discipline, as suggested by the labeling and framing mechanisms discussed in the first parts of this article, and the actual beliefs and practices of a majority of discipline members, i.e., academics.
- Finally, even in a context where it is common to have academics moving to government positions and *vice versa*, and where we see relatively high levels of mainstream-oriented scholars (such as in the U.S.), a majority of IR scholars/disciplinary members do not adhere and do not conduct their work in accordance to the conventional disciplinary frameworks or principles.

Conclusion: Unsettled Debates and Discipline

Through this article, I want to argue for a renewal of the "mutual engagement" (Adler, 2005: 15) necessary to conduct open and genuine disciplinary conversations in IR. Even if they remain unsettled (how could they not?), such reflections and dialogues should permit us to work towards better understandings of the differences between our research agendas, positions and points of view, and ultimately to "bridge" those differences through understanding, adaptation and exchanges.

In the previous pages, I tried to clarify how labeling discursive practices (of the discipline and of the content of the discipline), cognitive framings (of the disciplinary object of study) and representation practices (of the disciplinary community) are used in IR to build the discipline itself. I have also tried to show how those diverse but interrelated mechanisms are

equally working to define this common object of ours, where we are simultaneously disciplinary objects and subjects. In order to do so, our work integrates the constructivist and reflexivist approaches that have emerged in the last decades in IR. In that sense, I genuinely believe that, as Steve Smith declared in 2003, we can: "[C]onstruct, and reconstruct, our disciplines just as much as we construct, and reconstruct, our world" (2004: 510).

Many questions relevant to this paper remain open. For example: How is it possible, as has been shown from the U.S. context, that despite "the continued paramountcy of the classical paradigm in the teaching of international politics (Holsti, 1985: 100)" and the pervasiveness of traditional narratives and conventions on the role of IR, a majority of the disciplinary community members are relying on alternative legitimizing principles to support their work (i.e., "knowledge for the sake of knowledge")? On the other hand, how is it possible that despite the fact that a majority of disciplinary members seems to orient their work towards 'alternative' research objective (rather than a state-oriented focus) the conventional labels and frameworks still remain in such a strong position in the discipline? Such questions show that no simple answers can be found to explain the way knowledge and the discipline are debated and inter-subjectively framed, maintained and contested. But more inquiry into the way 'mainstream' and 'critical' are discursively and cognitively constructed could certainly guide us towards more answers, enable constructive dialogue on the discipline's future, and build new roads beyond the actual stalemates.

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