1. Details of Module and its Structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	**Political Science**
Paper Name	**International Relations Theory and Politics**
Module Name/Title	**Level of Analysis and the structure-agency problem**
Pre-requisites	**Unit, National, International, Agency, Structure, Politics**
Objectives	**To have an idea about the various levels from which International Relations can be studied and the actors and networks involved therein**
Keywords	**System, Sub-system, Social Theory, Domestic Politics, International Politics**

Structure of Module/Syllabus of a Module	
Level of Analysis and the structure-agency problem	**The identification of levels of analysis problem; the impact of social theory on international relations; the role of structure in the level of analysis; the effect of the agent/actor in the level of analysis; the blurring of domestic-international division**

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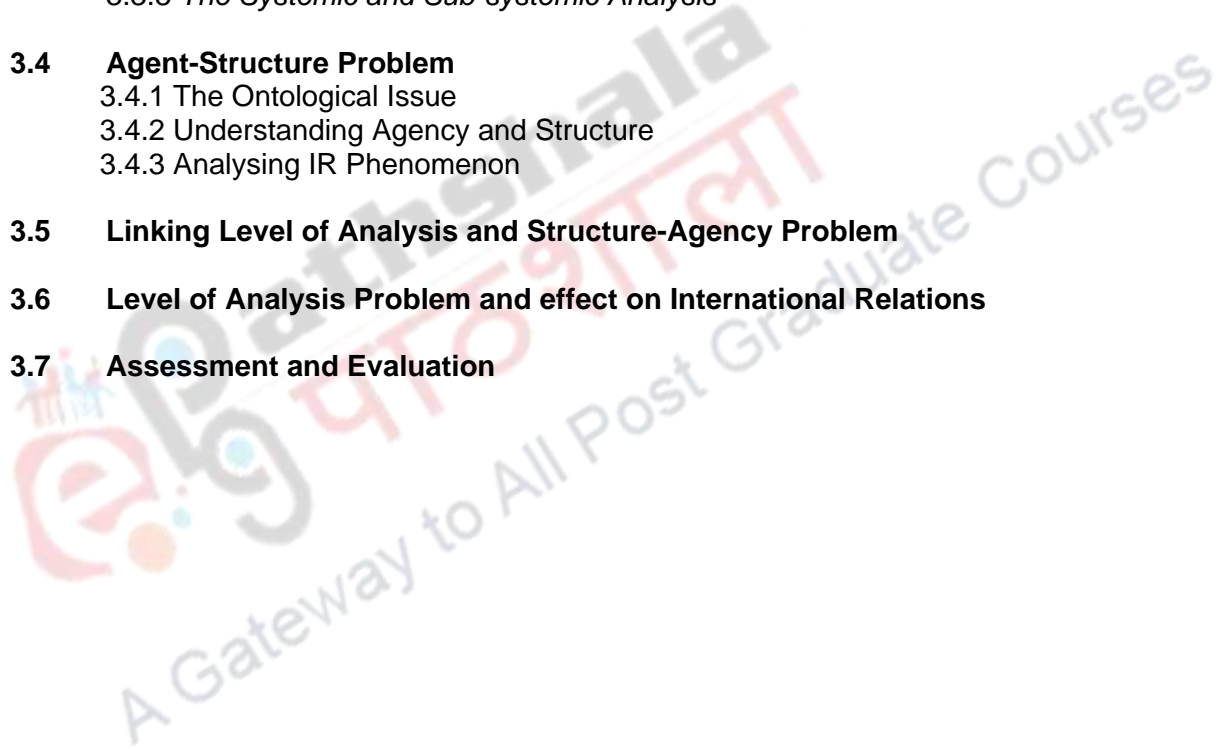
3.1   Objectives
After going through this module, you should be able to:
- Understand the meaning and nature of level of analysis problem
- Trace the various level of analysis of international relations
- Understand the importance of structure and agency in explaining IR
- Appreciate the linkage between the level of analysis and structure-agency problem
- Analyse the effect of level of analysis issue on international relations

Summary

Thinking in terms of levels has been a feature of mainstream IR theory since the 1950s and is particularly associated with neo-realism. The attraction of levels was that they offered a sharper way of focusing debates about cause-effect relations. Not surprisingly it also unlocked an enduring confrontation between purveyors of system theories on one hand and advocates of unit level explanations on the other. It would clearly be a mistake to drop system level theory and focus only on unit level. This would simply repeat in reverse the original effort of putting too much weight on system level theory. To bring things back into balance it is this theory void at the system level that needs to be addressed. Although the language of agents and structures was alien to IR until recently the discipline has nonetheless been forced to grapple with a version of the problem in the guise of the 'levels-of-analysis' problem. This has meant that IR theory, in common with other social sciences, has its proponents of the individualist and structuralist approaches, although these positions are perhaps less explicitly articulated than in social theory. The conflation of the agent–structure problem with the level-of-analysis problem can lead to the mistaken assumption that structure is only relevant to macro-sociological issues.

3.2   Introduction

In the previous module we have discussed in detail the evolution of IR as an academic discipline. Now we have a sufficient understanding about the multidisiciplinary nature of the subject-matter of IR. This module will specifically focus on the problems that IR faces while explaining international political and economic phenomenon. The problem shapes up due to the various levels from which the functioning take place – systemic and sub-systemic. The analytical problem is complicated because of the role of structural factors and individual factors(agency) played in the various levels of conducting the international phenomenon. International relations are often viewed in terms of **levels of analysis**. The systemic level concepts are those broad concepts that define and shape an international milieu, characterized by anarchy. As a level of analysis the unit level is often referred to as the state level, as it locates its explanation at the level of the state, rather than the international system. We have, in our texts and elsewhere, roamed up and down the ladder of organizational complexity with remarkable abandon, focusing upon the total system, international organizations, regions, coalitions, extra-national associations, nations, domestic pressure groups, social classes, elites, and individuals as the needs of the moment required. And though most of us have tended to settle upon the nation as our most comfortable resting place, we have retained our propensity for vertical drift, failing to appreciate the value of a stable point of focus. Whether this lack of concern is a function of the relative infancy of the discipline or the nature of the intellectual traditions from whence it springs, it nevertheless remains a significant variable in the general sluggishness which characterizes the development of theory in the study of relations among nations.

3.3 Level of Analysis

3.3.1 *Nature*

Levels of analysis, in the words of Barry Buzan, refer to "locations or units of analysis where both outcomes and sources of explanations can be found."[1] Given that the human society evolved through various stages with family being the first unit and the international system being the last, it is politics, and politics being all about opinion, that determines the policy at various unit levels. Whenever two or more units are clubbed together in as against a particular unit – a system arises. In other words if family-local-national are clubbed together as against the international, what arises is a national system as against the international system. So any systemic level policy is to be understood not in a vacuum but in connection with the preceding unit level politics. This being an inward view from family to international via local-national, a reverse angle view will suggest that unit level politics and its future direction is to be understood not in isolation but in respect to the policy adopted at the succeeding unit stage. Level of analysis offer a highly accurate *description* of the phenomena under consideration with a capacity to *explain* the relationships among the phenomenon under investigation with a promise of reliable *prediction* about the future course of such phenomenon.

3.3.2 *International Relations*

The study of international relations is often viewed in terms of level of analysis which means to understand the working of various concepts at the systemic and sub-systemic levels. The systemic concepts are those broad concepts that define and shape an international milieu, characterized by anarchy. These concepts are sovereignty, power, national interest, power-blocs, polarity, non-state actors, interdependence and dependency. The systemic level concepts influence the working of international phenomenon- both political and economic. There are certain tools through which these concepts operate which include – diplomacy, sanctions, war, international shaming, and enlargement policy of any organization. The unit-level concepts are essentially the national domestic factors that shape the approach of nation-states towards the international system. These concepts are – regime types, revisionism or status-quoist, religion. These concepts depend on the individual level orientations which are known as unit level concepts that covers psychological factors, bureaucratic politics, cultural and economic background, presence of religious, ethnic and secessionist groups, etc. It is extremely important to understand the various level based concepts to reflect on the complexities of the international phenomenon.

3.3.3 *The Systemic and Sub-systemic Analysis*

Beginning with the systemic level of analysis, we find in the total international system a partially familiar and highly promising point of focus. First of all, it is the most comprehensive of the levels available, encompassing the totality of interactions which take place within the system and its environment. In the words of David Singer, "the systemic level of analysis, and only this level, permits us to examine international relations in the

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[1] Barry Buzan(1998): 'System versus Units in Theorizing about the Third World', p.213, in Stephanie G. Neuman(ed.) *International Relations Theory and the Third World*, MacMillan, London, pp.213-234

whole, with a comprehensiveness that is of necessity lost when our focus is shifted to a lower, and more partial, level."[2] For descriptive purposes, then, it offers both advantages and disadvantages; the former flow from its comprehensiveness, and the latter from the necessary dearth of detail. As to explanatory capability, the system-oriented model poses some genuine difficulties. In the first place, it tends to lead the observer into a position which exaggerates the impact of the system upon the national actors and, conversely, discounts the impact of the actors on the system. Secondly, this particular level of analysis almost inevitably requires that we postulate a high degree of uniformity in the foreign policy operational codes of our national actors. However the systemic orientation should prove to be reasonably satisfactory as a basis for prediction, even if such prediction is to extend beyond the characteristics of the system and attempt anticipatory statements regarding the actors themselves; this assumes, of course, that the actors are characterized and their behavior predicted in relatively gross and general terms.

The other level of analysis is the national state-our primary actor in international relations. Its most obvious advantage is that it permits significant differentiation among our actors in the international system. But just as the nation-as-actor focus permits us to avoid the inaccurate homogenization which often flows from the systemic focus, it also may lead us into the opposite type of distortion-a marked exaggeration of the differences among our sub-systemic actors. Another significant implication of the sub-systemic orientation is that it is only within its particular framework that we can expect any useful application of the decision-making approach. Another and perhaps more subtle implication of selecting the nation as our focus or level of analysis is that it raises the entire question of goals, motivation, and purpose in national policy. There is still another dilemma involved in our selection of the nation-as-actor model, and that concerns the phenomenological issue: do we examine our actor's behaviour in terms of the objective factors which allegedly influence that behaviour, or do we do so in terms of the actor's *perception* of these "objective factors"? Though these two approaches are not completely exclusive of one another, they proceed from greatly different and often incompatible assumptions, and produce markedly divergent models of national behaviour. The first of these assumptions concerns the broad question of social causation. The second assumption which bears on one's predilection for the phenomenological approach is more restricted, and is primarily a methodological one. The sub-systemic orientation is likely to produce richer description and more satisfactory (from the empiricist's point of view) explanation of international relations, though its predictive power would appear no greater than the systemic orientation. But the descriptive and explanatory advantages are achieved only at the price of considerable methodological complexity.

3.4   Agent-Structure Problem

The agent–structure problem is an issue that must be addressed by all approaches and it is the manner in which it is addressed which represents a major point of theoretical dispute. If ever the agent–structure problem were solved, in the sense of requiring no further discussion, then social theoretic activity would come to an end, and along with it political, economic, cultural and ethical dispute. In this sense, the agent–structure problem is political. The inadequacies of structuralist or individualist accounts of IR have formed the background against which the agent–structure debate emerged in IR. In general, the introduction of the language of agents and structures can be seen as part of a broader programme aimed at increasing the range of resources available to theorise international relations phenomena. In the words of Colin Wight, "all adequate resolutions of the agent–structure problem will require a metatheoretical perspective that can

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[2] David J. Singer(1961): 'The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations', pp. 77-92, *World Politics*, Vol.14 No. 1, p.80

elaborate the properties of agents and structures and their interrelationships at the level of social ontology, as well as situating a philosophical account of the social sciences that can allow for the possibility of either a rapprochement between interpretative understanding and structural explanation or perhaps a transcendence of the dichotomy."[3]

3.4.1 *The Ontological Issue*

Put simply, the ontological problems concern the nature of both agents and structures Social action never occurs outside of a social setting, but social settings, or, as more commonly put, social structures, 'don't take to the streets'; that is do not in themselves act. Societies are an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Societies do not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification); but nor are they the product of it either (the error of voluntarism). Science has to construct explanations of causation on several levels without always attempting to make reductions to lower levels. Given that reality consists of these complex structured entities, each possessing its own powers, propensities and forces, the problem of epistemic access takes on a different form to that suggested by positivism. The practising scientist does not search for constant conjunctions of observable events, but rather is involved in a process of modelling hypothetical mechanisms and inferring their necessary existence from their effects within emergent structured systems. Ontologically this re-examination takes the form of establishing three important factors about societies. First, societies are *irreducible* to people; social forms are a necessary condition for any intentional social act. Second, their *pre-existence* establishes their *autonomy* as possible objects of study. Third, their *causal power* establishes their reality. There is an ontological difference between people and structures: 'people are not relations, societies are not conscious agents'.

Any attempt to explain one in terms of the other should be rejected. If there is an ontological difference between society and people, however, we need to elaborate on the relationship between them. Society, as a field of relations, exists prior to, and is independent of, individual and collective understandings at any particular moment in time; that is, social action requires the conditions for action. Likewise, given that behaviour is seemingly recurrent, patterned, ordered, institutionalised, and displays a degree of stability over time, there must be sets of relations and rules that govern it. Contrary to individualist theories, these relations, rules and roles are not dependent upon either knowledge of them by particular individuals, or the existence of actions by particular individuals; that is, their explanation cannot be reduced to consciousness or to the attributes of individuals. These emergent social forms must possess emergent powers. This leads on to arguments for the reality of society based on a causal criterion. A central concern and fundamental problem for any scientist is the issue of conceptualising an object of inquiry. In terms of social inquiry the answer to this problem can seem deceptively simple. Since society consists of people, social scientists should study people. The opposition between these two views has played a fundamental role in structuring all forms of social inquiry, including IR.

3.4.2 *Understanding Agency and Structure*

For Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, the ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments entailed by one position vitiate against any form of compromise or resolution of this problem. It is not that we are unaware of the role of both agents and structures in any adequate social theory, it is that each element requires its own distinctive mode of inquiry. 'The agent–structure problem is not settled by deciding what proportions to put in the blender. Agents and structures do not blend easily in any

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[3] Colin Wight(2006): *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology*, Oxford University Press, p.89

proportions, and the solutions to the problem tend to be unstable.' That these two theorists put forward this proposition in the context of IR testifies to the importance of the agent–structure problem for IR theory. This has meant that IR theory, in common with other social sciences, has its proponents of the individualist and structuralist approaches, although these positions are perhaps less explicitly articulated than in social theory. Kenneth Waltz provides a better-known example of an explicitly structural account of international relations phenomena. Waltz begins by delineating two kinds of theories, reductionist and systemic, which broadly map on to the individualist/structuralist typology discussed thus far. An example of an IR theorist taking a consistent methodological and ontological structuralist approach is Immanuel Wallerstein. For Wallerstein, the main focus of inquiry is not the international political system, but rather capitalism, which he views 'as an entire system. On the other hand, an example of a theorist taking an individualist approach in IR is Hans Morgenthau. The starting point of Morgenthau's analysis is the 'will to power', and the behavioural dynamic that drives this 'will to power' is 'human nature'. The inadequacies of structuralist or individualist accounts of IR have formed the background against which the agent–structure debate emerged in IR. In general, the introduction of the language of agents and structures can be seen as part of a broader programme aimed at increasing the range of resources available to theorise international relations phenomena. Gayatri Spivak argues that: 'Agency relates to accountable reason. The idea of agency comes from the principle of accountable reason that one acts with responsibility that one has to assume the possibility of intention, one has to assume even the freedom of subjectivity in order to be responsible. That's where agency is located.

Arguably, the most influential of these structurationist contributions has come from Alexander Wendt. For Wendt, any solution to the agent–structure problem must begin with a metatheoretical specification of the relationship between agents and structures that avoids reduction of one to the other. Rejecting individualist and structuralist accounts, Wendt's chosen metatheoretical stance is that of Giddens' structuration theory underpinned by scientific realist philosophy. The distinction between unit-of-analysis and level-of-analysis indicates an important point about the treatment of levels within IR. As Wendt has argued, the level-of-analysis problem is 'a problem of explanation: of assessing the relative importance of causal factors at different levels of aggregation in explaining the behaviour of a given unit of analysis'. David Dessler also attempts to move towards a resolution of the agent–structure problem in IR, again primarily using structuration theory underpinned by scientific realism. Another attempt at a resolution of the agent–structure problem is that advanced by Walter Carlsnaes. Once again, the entry point into this debate is his dissatisfaction with both the conventional individualist and structuralist accounts and the resolution suggested by Wendt. Hence whilst the agent–structure problem is not simply an ontological matter, the ontological aspects of the problem take priority. But the problem also encompasses epistemological, methodological and metaphysical issues as well.

3.4.3 *Analysing IR Phenomenon*

Debate surrounding the agent–structure problem within IR theory has become confused because it is not always clear that the participants in discussion of the issue are talking about the same problem. Questions that are considered to be epistemological by one contributor are believed to be methodological by another. Ontological issues are regularly confused with matters of explanation and there is widespread confusion about just what the problem is. In *What is History?* E. H. Carr provides an early and explicit discussion of the issue couched in terms of a critique of abstract individualism. Ontologically, Carr's individuals are social and historical products. Apart from Carr's early treatment of the issues, the origins of an explicit concern with the agent–structure problem within IR theory can be traced to the work of Kenneth Waltz, particularly his 1979 book, *Theory of International Politics.* Alexander Wendt, although broadening the scope of his analysis to include a critique of Wallerstein's 'world-systems' theory, likewise uses Waltz's 'structural realism' as a

counterpoint to his own preferred 'structuration theory. In his 1987 article *The Agent–Structure Problem in International Relations Theory*, Wendt seems clear and unequivocal about his understanding of the problem. The agent–structure problem, he argues, emerges out of two ontological propositions about social life that lie at the heart of all social scientific inquiry. On the one hand, 'human beings and their organizations are purposeful actors whose actions help reproduce or transform the society in which they live'. Yet, on the other hand, we recognise that 'society is made up of social relationships, which structure the interactions between these purposeful actors'. In effect, recognition that there can be no social act outside of a social context, but equally social contexts, in and of themselves, do not act. Recent theoretical accounts of the agent–structure relationship suggest that both agential and structural factors are relevant. But this does not imply that percentages can be allocated to agential and structural factors in advance of concrete research. To suggest as much would be to suggest that theory completely determines outcomes; that is, that having allotted our preferred percentages to agents and structures accordingly, all concrete social situations would be deemed to fit this model. As Martin Hollis and Steve Smith put it, the agent–structure problem is not one of deciding what proportions of agents and structures to put in the blender. The agent–structure problem is not about the relative proportions of agential versus structural factors determining social outcomes, but about constructing theoretical accounts able to guide empirical research that can do justice to the chosen theoretical elements. The empirical, and important, question of whether agents or structures determined a particular outcome and/or how influential each factor cannot be addressed in advance of empirical research of the prevailing structures, and consideration of the particular agents and structures present in any given social situation.

3.5   Linking Level of Analysis and Structure-Agency Problem

The manner in which the discipline understands the level-of-analysis problem suffers from a number of conceptual confusions. This is not an outright critique of Singer, but rather an acknowledgement of the theoretical progress made within the discipline since his piece was first published. The micro–macro distinction differs from the agent–structure problem in that the agent–structure problem is concerned with the character of social reality whereas the micro–macro problem is concerned with a particular aspect of the predefined social reality that is selected for consideration. Again, the agent–structure problem is analytically prior to the micro–macro problem because a consideration of the micro–macro problem can only be made on the basis of some or other social ontology. That is, that unless one has a social ontology that admits of macro- and micro-level phenomena, then the micro–macro issue cannot emerge as a problem. The micro–macro problem differs from the level-of-analysis problem because it is primarily a unit-of-analysis issue, not one of level-of- explanation. It is easy to confuse the micro–macro problem with the level-of-analysis problem, but only if one blurs the distinction between the unit-of-analysis and the level-of-analysis. In a sense the level-of analysis as traditionally understood in IR is something of a misnomer and it is more accurately understood, as Wendt seems to imply, as the 'level-of-explanation'. Although Singer only posited two levels, most treatments of the level-of- analysis problem follow Waltz's three-level typology and add extra levels as required. Hollis and Smith provide a good example of how the discipline typically conceives of these levels. On this treatment of the level-of-analysis problem, the levels are related as agents to structures. This formulation forces/allows the relocation of agency at every move up or down the levels, so that what appears as a structure on one level becomes an agent on another. Hence, what Hollis and Smith call the first debate, the international system plays the role of structure with the nation state as an agent. At the level of the second debate, the nation state appears as a structure with the role of agent now played by bureaucracies. Individuals only appear on this model at the level of the third debate, where bureaucracies now constitute the structure and individuals play the role of agents. What appears as a structure at one level becomes an agent at another level.

The idea of levels is closely related to the notion of emergence. Emergence refers to the relationship between two entities, such that one entity arises out of the other, but is capable of reaching back on the first and is in any event causally and taxonomically irreducible to it. The first use of the term level is that of an 'emergent whole', which is conceptualised as an entity that, in some respects, behaves as a unit. A level, in this sense, is a concrete or ideal whole, a self-contained unit characterised by qualities of its own, and if complex and concrete, by a strong interaction of its parts. The lower-order wholes are the building blocks of the higher-order ones; the latter emerge through the interaction of lower-order individual units. A sense of balance to the agent–structure relationship requires a multi-layered view of agency, wherein agency refers to both individual and social predicates.

3.6 Level of Analysis and Agent-Structure Problem and effect on International Relations

The agent–structure problem cannot be solved in the sense of a puzzle with an answer, but rather represents competing visions of what the social world is and what it might become. As such all theories, practical discourses, ethical injunctions and political practices contain a solution to the agent–structure problem. Perhaps this means that we have too many solutions. If so, this is something we need to address, not cover up with methodological and/or epistemological platitudes. Examining IR theory through the agent–structure problem allows us to concentrate on the deep ontological differences that structure debate, rather than accepting an epistemological framework that hinders constructive theoretical dialogue. Unpacking the varied ways in which IR theories conceptualise the basic elements of international politics can help us assess the validity of their theoretical and empirical claims. This is important.

Given that the human society evolved through various stages with family being the first unit and the international system being the last, it is politics, and politics being all about opinion, that determines the policy at various unit levels. Interesting to note is that unsure of its effect, singular sub-systemic units operating in several domestic political systems unknowingly influences the working of international political system (the shift from the cold war to post cold war period affected the internal policies of all the regions and forced them to act accordingly) and the working of international political system also in turn affects the domestic political scenario (Gulf War I influenced the opposition to criticize the foreign policy of the government of India to provide refueling facilities to the US aircrafts). Scholars would even argue that "Politics is the means by which values or objectives can be injected into analysis at the beginning of the policy process, with the decision naturally emerging from the analysis, is to get the role of analysis in the policy process at least partly back-to-front. A piece of analysis once completed is consumed and injected into the political process, from which a decision will then emerge. The relationship between politics and analysis at its best is iterative."[4] In the study of international relations, this relationship between foreign policy analysis and politics is seen from systemic and sub-systemic level interactions. Important to understand is the role that agent (the domestic decision makers and the transnational institutions) play in the systemic and sub-systemic interactions. Christopher Hill argues that "The idea of politics and agency, however, should be kept in harness. To posit agency in international relations is to imply politics, and to posit politics is to imply agency. Theories of world politics always have to take into account great systemic changes like the 'big bang' of financial services, or the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, but that does not mean that they may

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[4] Brian W. Hogwood and Lewis A. Gunn (1984): *Policy Analysis for the Real World*, Oxford University Press, London, p.267

neglect to explain where agency might be located or the implications for the nature of political argument. This is particularly true given that few members of any school in international relations find themselves able in practice to do without some kind of concept of domestic society, and therefore some form of separation of humanity into distinctive units".[5] Thus politics(structure-directed) and policy(agent-oriented) gets unfolded in any of the system (domestic and international) have a lasting impact on each other to the extent that one may say a dialectical relationship between the two moves human society ahead in all the levels where international relations operate.

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[5] Christopher Hill (2000): 'What is Left of the Domestic? A Reverse Angle View of Foreign Policy', p. 159, in Michi Ebata & Beverly Neufield, *Confronting the Political in International Relations*, McMillan Press, pp.155-180