



Editorial

# Conclusion: Special Issue on the Visual International Relations Project

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## 1. Overview

This Special Issue of *Social Sciences* has introduced and applied the systemist graphical method of conveying ideas. Systemism emphasizes logical consistency and completeness across levels of analysis when theorizing the social world. The systemist method of visualization is intended as a means toward achieving enhanced communication in an era in which theories and methods have proliferated to a degree that can block mutual understanding and productive debate across sub-disciplines vital to identifying synergies or points of contention. The Visual International Relations Project (VIRP) ([www.visualinternationalrelationsproject.com](http://www.visualinternationalrelationsproject.com), accessed on 20 September 2023) archive of diagrams creates a rallying point for further research and teaching based on systemism and is part of the solution to the problems resulting from this lack of communication between and among various subfields.

This essay unfolds in three additional sections. The second section conveys the value of systemism and the VIRP, as revealed through the six preceding substantive applications exhibited within this Special Issue. Section three applies a technique from systemism—bricolagic bridging—to foster engagement among the diverse set of substantive studies. The fourth section offers several final thoughts about what has been accomplished in this Special Issue, along with the future of the VIRP and systemism within the social sciences and beyond.

### 1.1. Value of Systemism and the VIRP

The applications of systemism in the Special Issue demonstrate its value to the social sciences. International relations (IR) served as a natural starting point in this discussion because of its engagement with many other disciplines, such as psychology (Ben-Nun Bloom and Gregor) and religious studies (Akbaba).<sup>1</sup> It would be easy to expand the disciplines represented beyond those that have been included in this Special Issue, both in tandem with IR and on an individual basis.

All the studies referenced in the preceding six substantive contributions of the Special Issue appear in the VIRP archive. The archive is a resource for both research and teaching. It includes classic works, such as *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965), a text featured in the introductory essay from Gansen and James, along with more contemporary scholarship. The value of systemism and the VIRP for teaching and research are considered in turn.

With regard to teaching, systemist diagrams from the VIRP archive can help at all levels of instruction and even be of assistance beyond the classroom. A professor or teaching assistant can use systemist diagrams to stimulate the recollection of details and save time that would otherwise have been spent re-reading items that have faded from memory. Consider the situation of a doctoral student studying for comprehensive exams: accessing diagrams from the archive—or even creating new ones—could assist in meeting the challenges that accompany such an exercise. In fact, the systemist techniques of elaboration, systematic synthesis, and bricolagic bridging run parallel to what is asked



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of a doctoral student vis-à-vis showing a mastery of the academic literature in one field or another. Systemist visualizations can also assist undergraduates with comprehension and retention of the curriculum. For example, a textbook now exists for that purpose in IR (James 2023). Aside from improved knowledge retention and temporal benefits, the ability to access visual representations is believed to stimulate discussion among a greater share of the student body and facilitate enhanced insights into the subject matter studied.

Research based on the methods of systemism—elaboration, systematic synthesis, and bricolagic bridging—has been presented in this Special Issue and elsewhere across an expanding range of subject matter.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 conveys (a) the systemist methods used; (b) missing links; and (c) a sample of insights from each of the six preceding substantive articles contained in this Special Issue. Each article listed in the table produced a systematic synthesis of ideas found in two publications with closely related subject matters.<sup>3</sup> A study conducted by Ben-Nun Bloom and Gregor also engaged in the systemist technique of elaboration. These processes yielded a range of insights and what appears in the table represents a sample of what each article achieved.

**Table 1.** Articles, Methods, Missing Links, and Sample of Insights.

Article	Method	Missing Links: Environment (E); Macro (M); Micro (m)	Sample of Insights
Parmentier	Systematic synthesis	Smith et al. (2021): $E \rightarrow M; E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow E; m \rightarrow E$	Achieve more enlightened (and potentially de-colonizing) active learning via principle of co-design—between faculty, students, and community members where groups might visit
		Parmentier and Moore (2017): $E \rightarrow M; E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow ; m \rightarrow E$	Allow students to reflect deeply on cultural values, ethical guidelines, and assumptions
Genna	Systematic synthesis	Genna (2020): $E \rightarrow m; m \rightarrow E$	States join and further develop regional international organizations for their self-interests and design them to increase institutional value
		Genna (2010): $M \rightarrow E; m \rightarrow m$	States play different roles depending on their economic size; availability of alternatives via one large state can impact upon willingness of small state to cooperate with another  Role of status quo as preferred condition in a region is significant
Kugler and Rhamey	Systematic synthesis	Urdal (2006): $E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow E; M \rightarrow M$	Youth bulges create instability with consequences for broader questions of conflict over territory
		Braithwaite (2006): $M \rightarrow E; E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow M; M \rightarrow m; m \rightarrow M$	Degree of conflict contagion likely is related in part to internal political demography

Table 1. Cont.

Article	Method	Missing Links: Environment (E); Macro (M); Micro (m)	Sample of Insights
Redd	Systematic synthesis	Redd (2002): $E \rightarrow M; M \rightarrow E; M \rightarrow M; M \rightarrow m;$ $m \rightarrow M$  Özdamar and Erciyas (2020): $E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow E; M \rightarrow M$	Expand poliheuristic theory by incorporating role of advisers into model of decision-making  Demonstrate how poliheuristic theory can account for decision-making in international crises for Turkey
Ben-Nun Bloom and Gregor	Elaboration; systematic synthesis	Graham and Svolik (2020): $E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow E; M \rightarrow M; m \rightarrow M$  Ben-Nun Bloom et al. (2020): $E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow E; M \rightarrow M$	Morality aids in both creation and reinforcement of partisan animosity that can become self-reinforcing  Increasing resentment and repeated difficult moral choices can widen the divide between opposing groups and make reconciliation more difficult
Akbaba	Systematic synthesis	Fox and Akbaba (2015): $E \rightarrow M, m; M \rightarrow E; m \rightarrow m; m \rightarrow M;$ $M \rightarrow m$  Fox et al. (2021): $E \rightarrow M, m; M, m \rightarrow E; M \rightarrow M$	Religious discrimination is a layered concept constituted through governmental and societal factors  Identity of religious minority matters in accounting for its treatment

The identification of missing links can help to set the agenda for research. Possibilities are identified for every study, with some patterns emerging with regard to levels of analysis. Links are missing in much greater numbers across as compared to within levels of analysis: 17 versus 7.<sup>4</sup> This difference recalls a point from the introductory essay (Gansen and James), where it is emphasized that systemism guards against either holism or reductionism, approaches which zero in on the macro and micro levels, respectively. The greater likelihood of missing links across rather than within levels of analysis is in line with that observation, allowing for the fact that the assertion is based on a small number of studies.

Among the studies represented in Table 1, one example—the work of Parmentier on education—will be used to illustrate how insights are gleaned via systematic synthesis. Parmentier focused on global development pedagogy (Smith et al. 2021) and the cross-cultural learning classroom (Parmentier and Moore 2017) as systems in respective studies. Table 1 reveals that the diagrams based on each system had yet to address connections with the world beyond (i.e., missing  $E \rightarrow M; E \rightarrow m; M \rightarrow E; m \rightarrow E$  in both cases). Research in that direction stimulates a pragmatic turn in the questions that might be asked. For example, it can be inquired how global development pedagogy and cross-cultural learning classroom should engage with priorities that emerge from the private sector, government and academe with regard to employment-related skills that are deemed desirable? In other words, what might be the points of intersection between the intellectual priority of decolonizing the curriculum and the practical needs that students have for jump-starting their careers? Further questions might focus on how instructional formats, such as study abroad or online classes, factor into the practical concerns of learners.

### 1.2. Bricolagic Bridging

The respective studies listed in Table 1 will be brought into dialogue with each other in the search for research questions that might not have been asked otherwise. This exercise in

bricolagic bridging, in an overall sense, builds upon the results yielded from the preceding exercises of systematic synthesis carried out in the substantive studies.

What follows should be regarded more as the starting rather than finishing point for bricolagic bridging. With six substantive studies, there are 30 bilateral points of contact, counting both directions. Many more connections could be made if three or more studies became linked with each other. Due to constraints on space, one study will be engaged with each of the others in a single direction. Given the longstanding marginalization of religion in the social sciences, it is interesting to ponder how the insights from Akbaba might be applied to each of the other studies in the Special Issue. As per Table 1, among the insights attributed to Akbaba are (i) that religious discrimination is a layered concept created through government and societal factors; and (ii) that the identity of a religious minority matters in accounting for its treatment.

Aspects of international education (Parmentier) can be informed through engagement with findings related to religious discrimination. The multidimensional nature of religious discrimination could be recognized in brainstorming about how to decolonize the curriculum in global development. For example, practitioners could ask how study materials might incorporate the vast range of experiences among religious minorities in order to learn more about local context? With regard to the cross-cultural learning classroom, student reflection could thus be informed in a new way. More specifically, we could ask what might be learned from a review of cases that vary in terms of how religious majorities have treated others in their midst?

Regional integration and the political economy of trade could be re-examined through the lens of religious experience under the rubric of institutions (Genna). For example, it might be asked how personal identity, with religion as a prominent characteristic thereof, impact upon views of regional integration? Could religious minority status, in particular, affect the degree of support for entry into, or departure from, more encompassing politico-economic entities? The foundational nature of religion in identity for literally billions of people suggests that paying it further attention in the study of supranational institutions would be worthwhile.

Reflection upon religious discrimination can also inform the study of political demography and geography (Kugler and Rhamey). Consider the instability known to be associated with youth bulges, along with the diffusion of conflict. How might religious discrimination matter, as either a cause or effect, in both of those processes? How could the ensuing insights matter in more deeply understanding or potentially alleviating these conflicts?

Within the interdisciplinary field of foreign policy analysis, the two-step decision-making model from poliheuristic theory is confirmed strongly through both statistical research and case studies (Redd). The theory has recently been elaborated to recognize the important role of advisers in the process of decision making. Following on from that progress, it is worth asking how a factor such as the position of a religious minority might impact upon one or both stages in decision making. For example, at the first stage in the poliheuristic model, which focuses on whether a policy option is feasible, might religion *per se* or the plight of a minority become relevant under some circumstances?

Consider the analysis presented on the issues of morality and partisan animosity (Ben-Nun Bloom and Gregor). Connections involving religious discrimination and minority experiences are perhaps most obvious in this context and already present in the research to some degree, and so many questions arise. Does resentment, for instance, lead to self-reinforcing partisan animosity (at least in part) because of religious identity and involvement with discrimination as either a perpetrator or victim?

While some of the preceding connections might have been made anyway (or already found to exist), it is unlikely that all or even most of them could be categorized in this way. This is a credible assertion because of the silo-like pattern of research encountered virtually across the board in the social sciences. Aside from citation of a few universal theorists, such as Weber or Arrow, very few studies engage with research that is outside of their specific domain in what Kuhn (1962) famously labeled as “normal science”. Bricolagic

bridging provides a mechanism for bringing distant areas of research into contact with each other. In addition to stimulating new ideas, this process can also help to counteract the inevitably narrowing effects of normal science and the progressing isolation between different subdisciplines and/or schools of thought.

### 1.3. Final Thoughts

Why is systemism better than any other alternative that could be put forward as a graphical solution to the communication-related problems of the social sciences? Contributions to this Special Issue have answered that question effectively. Systemist graphics, as it is hoped will be apparent by now, can help in numerous ways with research and teaching. Diagrams in the VIRP archive continue to expand in both sheer number, range of subject matter and diversity of authors and geographic area covered, meaning that more diverse applications are becoming feasible over time.

Systemist methods—elaboration, systematic synthesis, and bricolagic bridging—have been introduced and applied in this Special Issue. Elaboration focuses on a single diagram and consists of (a) adding steps; (b) deleting steps; or (c) extending the exposition to either before its beginning or after its conclusion. Systematic synthesis, in which studies that cover a relatively common subject matter are engaged with each other to obtain a sense of what is agreed upon at a given time, can assist with the logic of confirmation. Bricolagic bridging, where studies with significantly different content are combined to stimulate new ideas and research questions, can help with the logic of discovery.

What of the future of systemism and the VIRP archive? The systemist graphical approach so far has been utilized directly in IR and adjacent fields of study. Systemist methods, however, can be applied to *any* line of argument, regardless of subject matter. Systemist diagrams could also facilitate intelligibility of academic treatises for the policy community.

Moreover, the barriers to entry with regard to the implementation of systemism are virtually non-existent, especially when compared to ‘high-tech’ methods that have entered into the social sciences from disciplines well beyond its conventional boundaries. The ‘sky is the limit’, therefore, when it comes to the further application of systemism and the creation of archives with a mandate well beyond that of the VIRP.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Citations in name only refer to articles within this Special Issue on systemism.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, the introduction of the Special Issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* on systemism (Gansen and James 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> The editors of the Special Issue limited each author to two articles because of constraints on space. Systematic synthesis and bricolagic bridging can be carried out just as effectively on more than two works of scholarship. For example, Gansen and James (2022) produced a systematic synthesis for eight studies in the field of education that focused on the concept of the “flipped classroom”, in which activities normally found inside and outside of school hours exchange places.
- <sup>4</sup> The frequencies are as follows: missing (I) across levels—E → M (4); E → m (2); M → E (3); m → E (3); M → m (2); m → M (3); (II) within levels—M → M (6); m → m (1).

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