The International Studies Association conference, from where I write, is the world's biggest gathering of international relations scholars. Held annually in one attractive American city or another – New Orleans this year – it is typical of the sorts of jamborees that characterise tribal get-togethers in other disciplines too, no doubt.

It is – to borrow a slightly hackneyed and anachronistic metaphor – the Woodstock of IR-types.

What is striking about this conference, and similar events in other areas of intellectual activity, I suspect, is the absence of an undisputed star turn. The field's leading lights are here in abundance, but there in no single figure that everyone agrees is pushing the proverbial boundaries of knowledge in a way no one else is.

At the risk of stretching an improbable metaphor to breaking point, there is no Jimi Hendrix of the IR world – or any other, for that matter.

The parallels are inexact, but anyone with even a passing interest in what we used to call popular music will know that Jimi did things with a guitar that went beyond mere technical virtuosity. It literally hadn't occurred to anyone else that you might be able to do the sorts of things he did with a musical instrument of any sort. He had an originality and creativity that set him apart from his peers.

Even if we ignore the possibility that music and intellectual activity operate in different ways and have different methods of defining excellence and originality, it is notable that big, paradigm-changing ideas seem to have become thinner on the ground over time.

Nobody, it seems, is going to have the sort of truly revolutionary, blinding flashes of inspiration that must have struck Copernicus when it dawned on him that everyone else in human history had been wrong about the earth's relationship to the sun.

Copernicus was also able to discover a truth with a capital T, a possibility that has become

more difficult and contested even in the hard sciences these days. In the social sciences, we can pile up new facts with the best of them, and even develop better understandings of problems and relationships. But nobody is claiming to be able to explain the world in its entirety, much less predict what's going to happen next. "Grand narratives" are out of fashion these days, for generally good reasons.

This is not to suggest that there aren't plenty of awfully clever people around these days. On the contrary, there are more than ever. The ISA is a gathering of the disciplinary greats and their acolytes. I am happy to concede that some of IR's senior figures have many more brain cells than I do – sadly, not such an imposing benchmark these days – and often put them to more imaginative and influential uses than I do, too.

But I have heard nothing over the last few days that I did not understand or recognise, even if I was occasionally left wishing that I had the ability to apply it as cleverly and/or articulately as some of my more illustrious peers. The point is that the gap between being a genius – if there really are such people these days – and being a comparative dunderhead isn't as big as we might think.

The people at the forefront of knowledge, at least when judged by the all-important citation indexes, are not really doing anything startlingly different to the rest of us. There may, however, still be something to be said for being what Isaiah Berlin called a hedgehog – someone who knows one big thing – and a fox, someone who a bit about a lot of things. Having an identifiable brand is one highly effective way of expanding the fan base in the social sciences.

And yet as someone who is undoubtedly at the foxier end of the spectrum, I take some comfort from the idea that one of the more fashionable theoretical developments in my own area of endeavour is something called "analytical eclecticism". Put simply, it argues for the rather commonsensical-sounding idea that combining insights from different approaches might give a more complete picture of an increasingly complex social reality.

But while analytical eclecticism may give a potential veneer of intellectual respectability to those of us who are prone to making rather sweeping generalisations, it is also a telling reminder of the absence of any agreed position among formidably clever people about how or what to study.

One of the more cutting put-downs in academic life is that so-and-so has never had an original idea in his or her life. I fear it may be one that applies to us all. Even when I thought I'd had a vaguely original idea about the potential relationship between environmental catastrophe and political orders, it was subsequently pointed out to me that others had already canvassed this possibility 20 or 30 years before.

Reinventing the intellectual wheel is a problem to which foxes and dilettantes everywhere are especially prone. But even hedgehogs are not coming up with game-changing insights and theories these days. To my untutored and ageing ears, much the same might be said about contemporary music. Where's your Jimi, young persons?

Perhaps we are living in an era when, whether it's intellectual concepts, music, or any of the other creative arts, the big, paradigm-changing breakthroughs and innovations are behind us. You heard it here first – I think.

Mark Beeson does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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