Is IR a Force for Good in the World Today?

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/24/is-ir-a-force-for-good-in-the-world-today/

A.C. MCKEIL, AUG 24 2012

I posit the rhetorical question of whether IR is a force for good in the world today in a positive spirit. Its rhetoric is meant to be audacious and inspiring. Yet, it is also a serious inquiry. Raising eyebrows with the implied negative thesis that IR scholarship is amiss is meant, in a bold way, to rattle the status quo. Yet, as a serious question, it means to furrow eyebrows and open hearts to the questions of what and whom IR is for and whether scholarly activity is fully serving those ends. It has been argued that IR is complicit in a violent and oppressive global culture (Smith: 2004). Yet, it is also argued that IR has limited relevance and impact in contemporary world politics (Reus-Smit: 2012). In part, the present inquiry means to square these seemingly contradictory claims. However, substantively I am asking whether IR scholarship can forge against these inauspicious tendencies an academic society able to pursue a more fruitful world. The intuition and point motivating this question is that a public attitude will not only make IR relevant but more contributory to a better world if it is exposed to and forged by the public market of political ideas.

The question of IR's beneficence is important but I do not mean to settle it here and now, since my intuition is that it is most worthwhile as an aporian not utopian destination. Positing a brief exploration of this question into scholarly consciousness will better inform our judgments, as careful and thoughtful scholars, than a pithy witch-hunt or zealous clarion call. I mean to open the door and keep it open. The aporian end-point is of course the question which initiates this present inquiry. Who and what is IR for? It is a question that has haunted the discipline since its first institutionalization at Aberystwyth and inspired it since every growing point in its inter-generational history (see Olson: 1972). The bold contention that I am arguing is that International Relations is not having a public impact in society at large, and yet is nevertheless influencing international society in negative ways.

At the root of this contention is the deconstruction of the theory practice distinction. Steve Smith has pursued this line of argument most explicitly in his contention that mainstream IR scholars are complicit in perpetuating and projecting Western and particularly U.S. power and interests in world politics (Smith: 2004, p.513-514). Positivist questions about great powers derive from the interests of the U.S. political executive and production of such analysis for executive consumption, though it means well, perpetuates our warring and in-egalitarian culture. While many scholars may be well-minded patriots, there is no getting around the dirty hands problem in IR when the theory practice distinction is deconstructed.

Yet, despite the dirty hands problem, IR scholars are also concerned with the public impact of their work (Reus-Smit: 2012; Lawson: 2008). This is a good concern, since the fruits of the academic pursuit of IR should be subject to the international market of ideas not the interests of state power. The paragon of this public engagement is an intellectual with a public profile. John Dewey and Noam Chomsky are examples of such figures. Ken Waltz or maybe John Mearsheimer are perhaps the only figures from the IR community with profiles that approach a public intellectual status. Why has IR produced few public intellectuals? Again, it is because we have written in the interests of the political elites and not the people.

Woodrow Wilson is perhaps the greatest public intellectual with connection to the academy of Political Science and nascent study of International Relations (see Schmidt: 1998, p.194-195). However, he has also been called its greatest failure. McNamara and Blight remind us that, "the ghost of Woodrow Wilson whose presidency encompassed the whole of the First World War and its immediate aftermath, has haunted world leaders from his day

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to ours" (2003, p.3). The promise of Wilson's reforms for peace failed. However, as a public figure, he did not fail entirely to impress the promise of his ideas upon the public imagination and that is why he haunts us today.

From Wilson's declarations the academic study of International Relations was founded with the great intention of it being a force for good in the world. When Alfred Zimmern first set out to justify a discipline of International Relations in his work *Learning and Leadership*, he appealed to the 'possibilities of international intellectual cooperation' (Zimmern: 1928). These were possibilities in the widest sense. With IR education, he worked to produce a new spirit of internationalism in a new generation of professional internationalist diplomats. The literature IR was to produce was intended to be chiefly for the pacific functioning of the League. Yet, Wilson's doctrines failed their promise and as students of IR, we know that Zimmern's internationalist movement withered away in the generations as new problems and ideas came to the surface. Nevertheless, Wilson's ideas of a world without war are still with us.

The later generation of intellectual realists faced with the nuclear dilemma appealed to their expertise so to influence the halls of power directly. However, following the Kennedy administration's staffing of specially trained IR advisers, the average theorist and analyst found themselves left out. Even Morgenthau confessed dejectedly, "Hardly anybody asks my advise now, because the people in government know at least as much as I do, and probably some are convinced that they know much more – and perhaps they actually do" (1995, pp.36-52). The cult of the expert took root in the intellectual culture of IR as specialists clamored for the ear of the Emperor.

In 1967, Noam Chomsky famously critiqued the U.S. political intelligentsia for ideological obsequiousness to the interests of U.S. power in world affairs. The "pseudo-science" ideas that "academic apologists" were propagating, he argued, did not "speak the truth [or] expose lies" and often were complicit in cover-ups (Chomsky: 1967). At the time, Chomsky's critique was generally valid and necessary, though well-minded patriots and good people IR theorists such as Ken Waltz are. The cult of the expert has had excessive influence on the structure of IR knowledge and those trained in the analysis of international politics were not trained in the techniques of intellectual counterculture, like they are starting to be now.[1]

Today, is IR a force for good in world politics? On the whole, much has changed. The interests of the marginalized are increasingly articulated through post-positivist inquiries. The concept of security has been critically re-conceptualized (see Booth: 2007a). Yet, IR still has few public intellectuals and a low public impact despite increased methodological sophistication and political pluralization. What does the person on the street know about IR's issues? Kurki is right to argue that this lack of public relevance means IR's political left should be more self-critical (Kurki: 2011). This suggests the next stage in IR's development is not theoretical but attitudinal (see Linklater: 1992). If Zimmern were to return to Aberystwyth today what would he suggest? Surely, he might revise his internationalist position for the times but surely he would maintain the position that IR should be an educative force for peace.

If power in the world today is diffusing as Keohane and Nye argue, surely IR should be producing and distributing its knowledge for a diffuse readership (Keohane and Nye: 1998; Ney: 2010). Zimmern might argue that IR should not only be educating elite internationalists but the world on the whole. To begin to engage such an enterprise scholars must consider who IR is for. We should reach-out more so we may speak-out. Contributing to a more fruitful world is possible if our content is not only written for elites academic or political, but for the people in the widest sense.

Thinking about who and what IR is for by engaging in a global critical pedagogy that transcends the theory practice dichotomy is what IR needs if it is to be a force for good. We of course have divisions, national and political, and I am not suggesting we must necessarily be cosmopolitan thinkers. Rather, the point is that a public attitude will not only make IR relevant but more contributory to a better world if it is exposed to and forged by the public market of political ideas.

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Is IR a Force for Good in the World Today?
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[1] Moreover, the notion of expertise had hubristic influence upon the experts themselves as Robert McNamara came to realize (McNamara: 1995, chp.11).

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