Ideas and Materials in IR

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/07/03/ideas-and-materials-in-ir/

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Are Ideas more Important than Material Forces in International Relations?

Introduction

A central debate in the discipline of international relations surrounds the extent to which structure and agency respectively influence change. Are individuals' ideas and actions the main driver of international politics? Or are the structures of the international so constraining that they dictate who does what, when and how? I will consider the question through a case study of Britain's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

However, before further considering the question posed, I will first define the necessary terms. By 'ideas' in international relations I mean two things. Firstly, ideas defined by Craig Parsons as '…subjective claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions'.[i] Such ideas acquire meaning in the empirical realm through actors '…able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs'.[ii] Ideas effect change in international relations because they empower actors through discourse, and because they shape the identities which determine individual and state interests. Normative concerns such as human rights and sovereignty are examples of ideas with particular power in the international. I will elaborate further on a constructivist conception of ideas in international relations below.

The second term requiring clarification is 'material forces'. In the context of international relations, this means those elements of the international that, according to traditional theories, exist independently of actors and are by nature material as opposed to ideational. Some key examples include the balance of power, defined in military or economic terms. These structures enable and constrain particular actions and presuppose particular behaviours. I will elaborate further on this aspect by considering traditional approaches to understanding international relations.

I turn finally to the qualification 'more important' in the above question. What makes one factor more important than another? Is one factor more useful than another in the context of the discipline? I will therefore address the question by taking this phrasing to mean 'better able to account for (an event, theme etc.)'. So, this essay will consider whether analyzing ideas rather than material forces provides a more practical method for understanding the causes of continuity and change in international relations.

Material Forces in International Relations

Material explanations of in international relations tend to be associated with traditional theories that emphasising the ways in which particular structures impact state behaviour. It is not possible within the confines of this essay to elaborate upon the diversity of theories in each of these broad categories, but it is useful to allude to some key material themes within them.

Richard Ashley states that, broadly speaking, theories in the Realist tradition 'portray a politically fragmented world of pervasive insecurity, recurring violence, generalised expectations of war, and self-animating strategic logic against strategic logic'.[iii] States are actors in an anarchical international system, each in pursuit of self-interest and in

competition with other states, constrained by the balance of power. Liberal theories propose that individuals, not states, are the central actors in international relations. However like Realists, they assert that particular structures constrain the range of individuals' possible actions and presuppose certain behaviours conducive to self-interest. For the liberalist, the economy is the material force that structures international relations, and the state emerged historically as the structure most conducive to effective functioning of the market, and best protects citizens' rights.

Marxist theories also emphasise the importance of the market, and suggest that the prevailing economic structure both enables and constrains individual and state behaviour. Andrew Gamble writes that the traditional Marxist theory 'draws together economic, political, and cultural aspects of the impact of capital accumulation and understands capitalism as a global system'.[iv] The material phenomena of capitalism are therefore the key constituents of international relations.

It ought to be noted here that while these theories do conceive of material factors as the primary drivers of international relations, they do not deny the impact of ideas. Crucially though, the empirical 'stuff' of the international forms structures which variously enable, presuppose or deny certain possibilities of action for the individuals existing within it. Hence, material forces supersede ideas.

Constructivist Accounts

Like the traditional perspectives alluded to above, international relations theories categorised as Constructivist have produced breadth of explanations for change in international relations. Most commonly, the notion that ideas drive change in international relations unites these theories, as Alexander Wendt summarises in two tenets:

(1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are determined by these shared ideas rather than given by nature.[v]

Hence, the international is constructed by a process of social interaction. This is not to deny that the state, the market and so on are real, but instead that the stuff of international relations, institutions, norms, the 'rules of the game' and actors' identities and interests 'are not fixed, but change and arise out of a social context'.[vi]

Different Constructivist theorists emphasise particular facets of social interaction which impact affect continuity and change within international society. Ronan Palan highlights a number of different theorists' approaches, each associated with the Constructivist camp but with very different interpretations of the international. He writes that Adler, for example, 'emphasizes the fluidity of the collective sense of identities that (presumably) underpin political action'.[vii] State behaviour in the international system arises from the shared identities of individuals, institutions and organisations interacting within it. Wendt meanwhile posits that '"ideas" are not mere variables but *constitutive* of "brute material forces"'.[viii] Again, ideas precede material forces in international relations, and the products of social interaction become structural.

Palan's article further criticises these Constructivist approaches for a number of reasons, however it is not within the scope of this essay to go into further detail in this regard. What matters most here is that Constructivist approaches by and large take into account the ideational over and above the material, asserting (to differing extents) that ideas constitute the structures and norms of international society.

Britain's EEC Membership

In order to investigate the original question posed, I will investigate the issue of Britain's EEC membership bids through a constructivist lens in order to evaluate whether such an interpretation better explains this episode in European history than a more materially-oriented approach. I note here that given the scope of this essay, this inquiry is not meant to be an exhaustive investigation of the underlying causes of related decisions and actions, but to review some of the key material and ideational factors involved in assessing to what extent the latter factor interacts with the former.

Britain initially made two unsuccessful bids to join the European Economic Community in 1963 and 1967, before being accepted in 1973. In order to better understand the relevant material and ideational factors I will consider two questions specifically: Why did Britain want to join the EEC? And, what changed in 1973 that permitted Britain to join the EEC?

Material Forces: Economy and Security

Being an economic organisation it makes sense to first analyse the economic factors surrounding Britain's membership bids. When considering the first two bids for EEC membership, the economic reasons why Britain might want to be a part of the community, and why the community might not want Britain's admittance, are fairly straightforward. Throughout the 1960s Britain's economy was in decline, and the British-led European Free Trade Area failed, rendering growth and trade with its former colonies 'sluggish [which] suggested to UK policy-makers that they could not rely upon the Commonwealth for the maintenance of British global influence and trade'.[ix] Under both Macmillan and Wilson, '[g]lobal commitments overstretched the weak economy, pulling essential resources into a world role rather than welfare or domestic economic growth'.[x] Meanwhile, the EEC had flourished, with members' growth averaging 6.5% to Britain's 2% during the latter years of the 1960s.[xi] It is fairly obvious then, that for economic reasons, the British perception might be that membership of the EEC would be beneficial to the national interest. However, when Britain eventually joined the community in 1973 it did so,

…at the worst possible moment, when the basic institutions were set to its detriment, and when economic recession minimised both the chances of institutional reform and also the opportunities presented by the enlarged common market.[xii]

Given the timing of Heath's final, successful bid for EEC membership in a period of continental economic decline and in the context of unfavourable policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy, his decision cannot be explained entirely in terms of rational economic considerations. Conversely, Britain's economic situation experienced further decline when compared to its first two membership bids, so the EEC's change of heart cannot be satisfactorily explained by economic factors either.

Realists offer another possible explanation: security. Although billed as an economic community, after two cataclysmic wars and in the context of the Cold War, efforts at any form of solidarity between western European states would be welcomed as a means of balancing regional power against the expansionist Soviet Union. The Macmillan and Wilson administrations believed that European security relied both on a continuing American military presence on the continent, and upon Britain's nuclear deterrent. There was no uncertainty about the fact that Britain's part to play in securing American support for both was related to its joining of the EEC. For example, a circular telegram sent from the United States Department of State to the embassy in London at the time of Britain's first EEC application expresses America's belief that British membership would,

…presage a Europe united to achieve increased economic well-being for all its citizens and the democratic ideals which are our common heritage. With these goals in mind, the Govt of the United States of America can only express its profound hope for a successful outcome.[xiii]

So there were certainly material forces in terms of security involved in Britain's desire to join the European Economic Community. The British perception was that membership would strengthen the special relationship, securing an American commitment to security in Western Europe and to Britain's nuclear capacity which was considered to be vital as a deterrent.

Can security concerns explain why Britain's application was accepted in 1973 following its two prior rejections? As noted previously, the six founding member countries viewed the community as primarily economic; NATO was the means by which Western Europe was secured, and Britain's role in the organisation, though important as a nuclear power, was not linked in any way to its membership or otherwise of the EEC. However, one might feasibly explain the change in the European attitude towards Britain in terms of the increasing power, particularly military capability, of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Reynolds writes that by the time of the successful British bid to join the

EEC,

…German economic muscle was being translated into military might. By 1964 German armed forces exceeded Britain's by 430,000 to 425,000. On the crucial Central Front in Europe Germany's troop contribution of 274,000 outstripped America's and was over five times that of Britain.[xiv]

Furthermore, Germany's policy of Ostpolitik meant that '[f]ears of possible German reunification intensified, not least in Paris'.[xv] These fears were also felt in the Soviet Union, according to the Foreign Secretary who, in a letter to the British Ambassador to Moscow, expressed his concern that, '[d]eep-rooted Soviet fear and distrust of Germany will continue to play a central part in Soviet policy'.[xvi]

A militarily resurgent West Germany in pursuit of rapprochement with the East thus posed a threat to a distrustful Soviet Union and a wary France. It could feasibly be argued then that Britain was allowed into the European fold in 1973 as a counterbalance, alongside France, against Germany, with the objective also of allaying Soviet fears through the perception of Franco-British restraint. But do these security considerations alone explain Britain's entry into the EEC? After all, the FRG did not actually express any ill intent towards its allies and it would be a further 16 years before German reunification. In fact, what these security fears came down to in reality were a misinterpretation of German intentions based on the state's identity as perceived by its peers, and constituted by its recent history.

The Importance of Ideas

In my conclusions about the economic and strategic explanations for why Britain joined the EEC when it did, I highlighted a number of ways in which such interpretations fail to fully account for why this episode of European history unfolded as it did. What these explanations overlook is the pivotal role of ideas, particularly in terms of identities. Why did Britain want to join the European Economic Community? Reflecting on changes in the British perception of its global role provides important insights that may help answer this question. With the decline of its economy and empire Britain's global influence waned, yet such realities did not significantly change its identity. In a speech in 1961 for example, Macmillan summed up his foreign policy ambitions:

In our Colonial territories we seek to place new nations on the true course. In Europe and the Commonwealth, we seek to add a new relationship to old ties and to find a greater common strength in the face of the greatest common challenge. In all the world, we seek to help poorer nations, to preserve freedom and to promote peace.[xvii]

Macmillan wanted Europe to preserve Britain's capacity to be an influential world power but both he and the orchestrator of the second bid, Wilson, 'went as a suitor to Brussels not out of positive enthusiasm but because there seemed no other option'.[xviii] So, while it is clear that material forces had substantial bearing upon the British decision to apply to join the community, it is important to note that the rhetoric of the Macmillan and Wilson administrations revolved not around the European project itself, but around how the project could support Britain's global ambitions and its relationship with America.

Key to understanding why Britain's membership bid initially failed is to understand the burgeoning identity of the EEC itself and, perhaps most crucially, that 'Wilson's "voyage into Europe"', Reynolds writes, 'foundered, like Macmillan's, on the rocks of de Gaulle's intransigence'.[xix] The European Economic Community had achieved a remarkably successful but sensitive balance of compromises between its six founding members, and de Gaulle in particular feared that introducing Britain would radically alter and potentially unhinge the character of the institution. The French President vetoed the first two British membership bids because he questioned its commitment to Europe (as exemplified above), and believed that it would act as a '"Trojan horse" for U.S. geopolitical designs'.[xx] The Anglo-American 'special relationship' also influenced de Gaulle's opinion and decisions, since, for example, he perceived both as having too strong an influence in NATO and he resented France's omission from the Polaris nuclear agreement.

When considering the second question then, perhaps one of the most fundamental differences that made the British bid successful in 1973 was that de Gaulle resigned in 1969. Also important was that the Prime Minister leading the

bid, Heath, was genuinely committed to the European project. A record of a conversation between Heath and Pompidou in 1971 reports that:

For the Prime Minister this was an occasion not only of historical importance but of particular personal importance. Throughout the 20 years of his political life, following on his war time period in Europe, he had worked for the concept of a wider Europe as President Pompidou had proposed at The Hague*.[xxi]

Hence, although material factors would appear to make Britain a less attractive European prospect in terms of its struggling economy and, as I have shown, security factors were in fact also ideational, Heath's European outlook and a new French President more inclined to accept this were pivotal to the success of the United Kingdom's third EEC membership bid.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn above suggest that in this case, both ideas and material forces had a bearing on the actions taken and the decisions made by the individuals, states and institutions involved in Britain's EEC membership bid. Ideas alone cannot drive international relations since they exist within particular material structures, and it is interaction with these which lends ideas substance and power. Conversely, structures are not independently active, but emerge through the actions of agents within them. So, a better way to understand the interplay of ideas and material forces than as one being more or less important than the other, is to understand them as mutually interactive. Structures enable and constrain actors to act, and these actions inform the shape of material forces in the international.

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[i] Parsons (2002) p. 48

[ii] Giddens (1984) p. 14

[iii] Ashley (1981) p. 205

[iv] Gamble (1999) p. 135

[v] Wendt (1999) p. 1

[vi] Palan (2000) p. 576

[vii] Ibid. p. 587

[viii] Ibid. p. 589

[ix] Kandiah and Staerck (2000), p. 143

[x] Parr (2006) p. 404

[xi] Dorey (1995) p. 75

[xii] Reynolds (1991) p. 246

[xiii] Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Missions in Europe, 5 September 1961, FRUS, VXIII, p. 38

[xiv] Ibid. p. 239

[xv] Ibid. p. 240

[xvi] Letter from Mr. Stewart to Sir D. Wilson, 15 May 1969, DBPO, S3 V1, No. 31

[xvii] Harold Macmillan (1961) Leader's Speech, Brighton, http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=110 (Accessed 15 March 2013)

[xviii] Reynolds (1991) p. 232

[xix] Ibid.

[xx] Moravcsik (2000) p. 7

[xxi] Record of a conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the French Republic, 20 May 1971, Elysée Palace, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/heath-eec.asp (Accessed 15 March 2013) p. 2. *Hague Conference, December 1969.

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Date written: March 2013