

Should the (or a) Purpose of IR Theory be to Promote Better Futures?

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TIM MOONEN, MAR 9 2009

"We see things not as they are, but as we are" Anais Nin

Theory can never be detached from situational context. Far from even contemplating the possibility of bias-free analysis, I argue that any knowledge claim must always be inherently political in nature, capable of stimulating or withholding change in the social context in which the claimant is embedded. If this (admittedly divisive) assumption is correct, it seems the theorist, including the IR theorist, has two somewhat polar options. He can concentrate on and develop theory that 'leads to analysis that is pro-status quo and amoral'[1], or alternatively he can concentrate on the critical evaluation of how we come to see a certain range of possibilities in the international arena.

In arguing from a Gramscian strand of critical theory, I posit that the purpose of theory should be to "not simply eliminate one or other abuse", but to identify and replace the social structures that reproduce the multiple abuses.[2] Because of the unavoidable context of the theorist, it is precisely when his academic work becomes disconnected from the support of emancipatory projects that it risks becoming an adversary of such projects. A major charge I make against IR theory has been its generalised inability to recognise the anti-progressive and anti-emancipatory histories of the very Western state apparatuses which have facilitated the development of the field. Initially I will outline why I am unconvinced by arguments, traditionally advanced by positivists, that theorists can or should be neutral. I will then examine more modern branches of IR theory, concluding that critical theory is most persuasive in its implication that IR theory must ultimately be normatively aligned to projects that undermine oppression.

Positivism

Positivist theory functions by examining the world's social and political relationships as if objective value-free knowledge of these relationships is possible. This approach, often classified as 'problem-solving' theory, constitutes an implicit acceptance of the present structures and defines the urgent tasks as the more efficient operation of the international political order. In this sense theory mimics that of the physical sciences, where practitioners seek to find the best solutions given the pre-existing nature and behaviour of constituent elements. Realist positivists, such as Hans Morgenthau, argue that scientific analysis of IR is required because it "imposes intellectual discipline upon the observer, infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics, and thus makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible." [3] The task of theory then is to develop a framework that can be repeatedly fine-tuned by returning to the "theoretical drawing board" [4]. Within the spectrum of positivist theory there is a widespread scepticism of the epistemological status of openly subjective value statements which do not aspire to become intersubjectively verifiable data or social facts. This extends even to key figures of EH Carr, Hedley Bull and Barry Buzan who all reject value-freedom and would admit to the hazard of theory reproducing the world as it 'is'. They would argue that theorists need to accept this tension and also the unpalatable 'realities' of international affairs, because only then can regularities be detected and policies constructed to address them.

To adopt either a weak or strong positivist position, I maintain, represents a value in itself. There are strong normative assumptions embedded within any claim to objectivity. Attempting to grasp the deeper systemic patterns of the existing order, as many realists and neo-liberals do, serves to "neglect marginal groups and subordinate

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interests”[5] in that order. Although Wallace sees this sense-making activity as a precursor to the ‘a duty of constructive and open criticism: to speak truth to power, not...in secret only to each other’[6], he means it only so far as to assist the policy-making process. This limits the role of the IR theorist to only those matters that power is concerned with, whereas it seems that theory should instead be preoccupied which “how and why some issues are made intelligible as political problems and how others are hidden below the surface.”[7] The prioritisation in mainstream international theory of some concerns (e.g. causes of interstate war, institutional effects on state behaviour) over others (e.g. economic disenfranchisement, state terrorism, racism) is by no means obvious nor without implication. Certainly if we were to preoccupy ourselves with issues according to what extent they directly impact upon human life chances then IR theory’s dominant themes might look very different. As Cox suggests, IR is in many senses an “inadequate and misleading” term that itself tends to preoccupy the thinker with certain concepts.[8]

I wish to go slightly further and argue that such preoccupation and ultimate reification of key concepts, most notably the state, risks resulting in the rationalisation of behaviour that a normative lens may interpret as unacceptable. In my view one of the central aspects which undermine liberal IR theory is the imputation of ethical motives on states in the international arena when confronted with strong evidence to the contrary. Herring has shown how Dunne and Wheeler, two leading theorists of the English School, have maintained an indivisible ethical dimension underlies British foreign policy under New Labour.[9] Rather than interpret the supply of arms to a regime guilty of ‘genocidal acts’ with the knowledge that they would be used for highly repressive activity (in the case of Indonesia against the East Timorese between 1997-2000) as a case for outright rejection of ethical foreign policy practice, Dunne and Wheeler prefer to explain the events as “the darkest episode” of otherwise principled state behaviour. This is just one example of what seems a general malaise; because the possibility that the framework of the international system has been produced from highly specific and contingent historical circumstances is neglected, the dominant institutions of the system are assessed according to their own standards rather than those set by an emancipatory project. Because positivist theory in general “does not question the present order [it instead] has the effect of legitimising and reifying it.”[10] Given the conditions we find ourselves in, this is a difficult position to defend, and it seems alternative epistemologies needs to be explored.

Challenges to IR Theory Orthodoxy Since the 1980s

The fields of constructivism and poststructuralism have gone some way to address the limitations of traditional liberal and realist IR theory, but I argue that both are restricted by a failure to outline an explicit promotion of better futures. The emergence of constructivism has created space for those theorists who seek to explore the development of identity in IR without needing to make explicit normative commitments. Those who praise constructivism remark on its success in moving beyond the ‘meta-theoretical’ concerns of critical and postmodernist thought, and actually managing to “produce the goods” in terms of empirical analysis. Certainly constructivist thought has enabled the prospects for peace and a just international order to be considered in terms of social construction developed through how actors *perceive* the system, rendering current conditions alterable. This is a major achievement, but it seems to be weakened by a commitment to achieving an objective account of reality, divorcing personal values from the research process. The aforementioned concern that theory is *for* policymakers enabling them to better administer the (statist) global system also applies to constructivism. Although leading constructivist thinkers understand their work as “promoting social change”[11], they (particularly in the mainstream) do not have much to say about the normative orientation of their work and indeed constructivism “contains no philosophy of the good life or the ideal political order *per se*.”[12] I therefore concur with Neufeld that constructivism’s shift of IR theory towards a critical position is diluted by its problematic adherence to objectivist problem-solving.[13]

Although frequently condemned for its supposed obsession with language and reference instead of substantive analysis[14], poststructuralist thought has also made valuable contributions to IR theory; revealing hierarchies of knowledge and politics of difference that underpins much positivist theory. In highlighting the ambiguities of modernist thought, poststructuralists are well-equipped to challenge the pretensions to rationality that abound in IR theory. That said, and without wishing to diminish their contribution, poststructuralist theory seems to me rather too entangled with processes of deconstruction to be sufficiently concerned with a constitutive politics of emancipation. Its narratives of foreign policy are often guilty of deemphasising the differential role of social actors in decision-

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making and severing discourses from any institutional basis.[15] Power is presumed to be located in discourses themselves, not “in the ability on the part of those who own and control the means of social reproduction to manipulate dominant social and political discourses and deploy them institutionally and strategically.”[16] While encouraging vital reflection on the implications of our interventions into IR discourse, its theoretical dimensions risk forestalling any attempt to engage with the social world.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is distinctive among the major theories of IR because, despite its heterogeneous composition, it is centrally concerned with emancipation. I wish to advance the more Gramscian and Adornoesque uses of critical theory; it seems to me that in the actual examination of IR, Habermasian critical theorists tend to produce work that ‘reflect a general left-liberal sensibility rather than any specific or conscious attempt to apply a critical theory perspective’.[17] Although some basic principles of emancipation ought to be articulated (eg. economic justice, humane governance, non-violence), it is not essential that these be operationalised or developed into a coherent societal vision. Foucault is correct to warn us that a globalising or totalising critical project has the potential to be utilised for dangerous and ultimately illiberal ends. This does not mean we shouldn’t ‘explore alternative possibilities’ or ask the question: ‘What modes of being and forms of life could we or should we adopt?’.[18] I am not saying that IR theory should immerse itself in abstract ideas about emancipation, but rather that it should expose hypocrisies and inconsistencies in the use of power with the aid of an evolving and reflective framework of emancipatory principles.

Critical theory has come under fire for failing to contribute much empirical analysis of contemporary inter-state politics, and failing to engage in the central normative debates of political philosophy[19] (e.g. role of the state, balance between freedom and equality etc). It furthermore is apparently unable to offer an explanation of international relations or provide clear guidance for policy. Stephen Krasner has expressed profound concern that alternative epistemological foundations constitute an abandonment of the quest to “discipline power with truth”. [20] What I think he misses here is that his understanding of what rules are required for producing ‘truth’, namely rationalism and reason, are the result of particular power structures which have developed a particular (ie. non-neutral) consensus on what are the agreed and acceptable rules. One does not need to detach oneself from the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment to recognise this, nor does one need to abandon wholesale the ground rules of rational enquiry. It is true that, having attempted to “demolish the philosophical foundations of the rationalist project”[21] the nascent body of critical IR thought can now go further in the study of human practice. I argue that its articulation of the theorist’s inevitably normative commitments endow it with a distinctive capacity to do so.

Conclusion

Almost every IR theorist would argue that his work is in some way helpful to development of better futures. Many positivists would argue that an attempt to make sense of the world is a forbearer to preventing negative outcomes. This essay has attempted to demonstrate the misconceptions of this project. Despite the intellectual headway made by post-positivist theory, the majority of IR theorists remain reluctant to make explicit their ethical preferences, instead entrenching their positions unconsciously. I argue that given their comparatively extensive freedoms, theorists are advantageously located to discover and disclose the history and appurtenances of power. Most pressingly these take the form of exposing state fraudulence, and grasping more nuanced motives than the grand public declarations of state representatives. Over the past quarter century critical IR theory has played an indispensable role in making the discourse more aware of its own implication in social processes, “even if there continue to be problematic silences”. [22] The boundaries of what is considered relevant in IR need to be opened up yet further as powerful interests continue to be reified.

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