

Theories in Global Politics

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Drawn from: Nossal's International Relations, Goldstein & Whitworth's International Relations, Sens & Stoett's Global Politics, and Peterson & Runyan's Global Gender Issues, in addition to Steans, Pettiford, et. al.

Lenses = Theories

- Anne Runyan & Spike Peterson: lenses help us bring some things into focus and can blur others -- even eliminate them
- What is a "Theory"?
 - A set of assumption, propositions, and ideas which organize facts, ideas, events, and explanations
 - Created from experience, formulas, or imagination
- Theories provide context for:
 - Explanations, arguments, ideas, history
 - What is most important
 - What we can see, understand, and conduct analysis
 - Reality
 - Our thoughts & actions
- Theories are always . . .
 - For someone (audience) [Cox]
 - For some purpose (goal, message for audience, action) [Cox]
 - By someone (author) [Nig]
- All IR is written from some theoretical approach BUT is IR a 'science' or an 'art'?

Elements of All Theories

- Meta-theory = interrogating a theory → what are the assumptions? why those assumptions?
- Ontology: theory of being – objects, categories, subjects of study?
- Epistemology: theory of knowledge – what can we know? what counts as knowledge?
- Methodology: data, evidence, proofs, cases – what methods or tools for validating or invalidating knowledge?
- Claims to Tradition: past scholars or authors who give the approach continuity, salience, depth, etc.

Four Debates in IR

- 1. Idealism vs. Realism
 - Idealists = 'ought to be world'

- Realists = 'way it is world'
- 2. Historicism vs. Behaviourism
 - Historicism: patterns in history, analysis of decisions of leaders, interpretation and conceptualization
 - Behaviourism: collecting observable data, codifying, measuring and correlating data for patterns to be turned into 'laws' of international behaviours
 - Positivism generally agreed upon as approach
- 3. Interparadigm
 - Realism, Liberalisms, Marxisms
 - Incommensurability: cannot agree on the ontology, epistemology and methodology ← following Kuhn: need a paradigm to be agreed upon or to dominate for science to move forward
 - Lakatos: research programmes
- 4. Disciplinary diversity
 - Explaining vs. Understanding (Weber)
 - Explaining: scientific approach; identify causes through
 - Understanding: heuristic / interpretivist approach; meanings, beliefs, reasons, language
 - Positivism vs. Post-positivism
 - Both are empiricist = knowledge based on data gathered by human senses
 - Positivism: systematic observation; sufficient data through repeated observation = regularities and laws; observable realities; observer and observed are separate, and observer can objectively assess the observed
 - Post-positivism: reject positivism; non-observable data is important; language, meaning, beliefs; observer determines and interprets what is observed, and the observed and observer are not separable
 - Rationalism vs. Reflectivism
 - Rational choice theory: positivist; all actors are utility-maximizers; deductive; simplify reality to analyse it, and to provide predictions
 - Reflectivist: post-positivists; reflexivity (self-critical, challenging assumptions); knowledge is *not* politically or socially neutral; challenge rationalist theories at meta-theoretical level
 - Scientific Realism: each 'science' (set of knowledges, etc.) must develop own methods, etc.; epistemological relativists; methodological pluralists
 - Constructivism, Critical Realism
 - What is the correct balance between materialist and ideationalist approaches?

What do Theories in IR tell us about (mainly):

- Power:
 - Definition?

- Goals/uses?
- Actors:
 - Who acts?
 - Why do they act?
 - Which actors are most important and why?
 - Are certain actors missing?
- Structures:
 - Processes, ideas, etc., which are bigger than the actors
 - Actors are stuck inside (embedded) in structure
 - Actors interact with structures
 - How much freedom do actors have?
 - How powerful is the structure?
 - Can the structure be overcome?
- Levels of analysis:
 - Does the theory have a level of analysis?
 - If not, it is a holistic theory (every level is interconnected and inseparable)
 - International? State? Individual? Group? Region? Etc.
 - What is the 'level' at which a theory is focussed on?
 - How does it assess interaction between these levels
- We will try to compare as much as possible, but each theory emphasizes different points
- Read the works using these questions, but don't expect all of them to be answered

Nig's Theory Classification:

- There are two types of theories in IR (drawing on Robert Cox):
 1. Dominant: Postivist, Rationalist, *Problem-solving theory*
 2. Challengers: Post-positivist, Reflexivist, Interpretivist, *Critical theory*
- Issue of "power" among theories -- some are more 'powerful' than others

Dominant Theories in IR

- Theories and observations are separable
- Value-free knowledge (no judgements made on knowledge, just in analysis)
- The world, as it is, gives a framework for action and solves problems which arise with a focus on particular variables and specific solutions
- Conservative: simplifying for management, not change
- Scientific' approach:
 - Assume "all other things being equal"
 - Theorize general laws and axioms of relations, processes, etc.
 - Create models for predicting
 - Mathematical formulas of behaviour
- Actor focus:

- Actions of states
- Market processes
- Some NGOs
- Main approaches: realism, neo-realism, neo-liberalism, constructivism

Challenger Theories in IR

- Theories and observations are linked
- Not value-free, but ideology or theoretical tradition stated up front
- Questioning how the present world(s) came about and how it can be changed yet again
 - Questions institutions & ideas and understand their origins
- Problems are part of bigger political, social, and economic processes
 - complexity for social change (large-scale or small-scale)
 - Interaction between the 'whole' and its 'parts'
- No laws or general theoretical axioms, but some patterns in history
 - history is always open and changing
- Radical: seeking to change or to overthrow the existing order
- Importance of normative issues in global politics: justice, equality, poverty, gender, identity
- Some argue problem-solving theories are sub-sets of critical theories
 - Today's dominant theories = conservative theory of global politics, but in 1920s, was considered radical
- Actor focus:
 - Classes, genders, identities, and others
 - State is one of many actors, and may or may not be the most dominant actor in global politics
 - Non-state-centric approaches
- Main approaches: Marxism (Structuralists & Critical Theorists), feminism, postmodernism, ecologism, post-colonialism

Conclusion

- All IR is written from some theoretical approach or lens
- In the readings, focus on:
 - Assumptions
 - Power
 - Actors/Agents
 - Structures
 - Level(s) of Analysis
 - What is important according to each theory and why?