International-relations “isms”

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During the late 1980s and the 1990s academic international relations was dominated by the so-called “paradigm wars.” Scholars argued over — and oriented their writings towards — the major three “isms”: realism, liberalism, and constructivism.[1]

The degree to which arguments about the “isms” enframe and motivate many articles and books in international-relations scholarship creates one of the biggest barriers to entry for students, non-scholars, and scholars from other disciplines (although I’m sure that our often turgid prose doesn’t help matters). I’ve experimented many times with building syllabi around something besides the various “isms,” but each time I give up. One major reason is that if students don’t have basic knowledge of the “isms,” they can’t make sense of a lot of the better articles in the field.

Some international-relations scholars are fed up with the “isms.” Quite a few graduate students actively trash them. The exciting issues, for my cohort, were the twin rise of rational-choice theory and constructivism; I remember many arguments over the costs and benefits of both movements. But I wonder if “post-paradigmism” represents, for many current-generation graduate students, the next big movement.[2]

I, for one, do not welcome our would-be post-paradigmatic scholar overlords.

I’ll explain why by advancing a very stylized story: social-science disciplines tend towards one of two equilibrium points.

1) A particular intellectual framework establishes some sort of hegemony over the field while small groups of scholars establish dissident frameworks. Some sort of hegemonic struggle ensues, with either one of the dissident frameworks or the old dominant “paradigm” emerging victorious. The struggle begins anew.

2) The field fragments into groups of scholars pursuing relatively narrow — but often very important — inquiry into a particular set of topics. At the extreme, the field ceases to be a “discipline” in any meaningful sense. Scholars lack any common ground to relate their findings to one another’s work. New fields and disciplines may even break off from the old one.

We can find aspects of both of these tendencies in any particular discipline or subfield. When I look at American Sociology, for example, I see a discipline that in some sense is hopelessly fragmented between different objects of inquiry (criminal justice, historical sociology, and so forth) but also has a flagship journal, the American Sociology Review, that many criticize for over-representing “trendy” methods and themes.

American Politics, on the other hand, looks to many outsiders like a field with one or two dominant frameworks and very little else going on. I simply can’t get a handle on comparative politics — a field in which scholars wage bitter battles over the value of idiosyncratic area studies versus settling on a single framework (one of the candidates is “rational choice plus statistical analysis”).

One might argue that the state of contemporary social science has much to do with the way these two tendencies “nest” within one another. We have increasing disciplinary specialization and fragmentation — law, politics, and political economy were once a single field of study — but within each specialty we see a tendency towards the emergence of hegemonic frameworks. It may even be that the first process helps drive the second: consider the fragmentation of anthropology in some universities into cultural anthropology and “scientific” anthropology.

The “isms” wars in interantional-relations theory, in this light, accomplish something very important: they allow for the benefits derived from researchers focusing on very narrow areas of inqurity — civil wars, regulatory frameworks, international organizations, and so forth — while, at the same time, giving us a common language to relate our findings to broader common themes. International relations is basically an enormous “area study” that includes everything from intra-state conflict, to transnational activism, to the domestic determinants of foreign policy, to the dynamics of the entire internatioanl system. To the extent that globalization erodes any notion that states, and state boundaries, constitute the only domain of international relations, it follows that the topics we study are likely to grow rather than shrink.

Any number of disciplinary commonplaces might provide for broader conversation, i.e., of keeping international relations a discipline in fact as well as name. We could, for example, adopt some form of flat-footed empiricism. If we all used the same methods — statistical, interpretive, formal, or whatever — we would certainly be able talk to one another. But one of the interesting things about the social sciences, I submit, is that we need multiple methodological perspectives to gain an appreciation of the complexities of social and policial life. It follows that, at least in my view, settling on a single set of methods as a hegemonic intellectual framework will do more harm than good to our understanding of international politics.

The question, therefore, is whether the current “isms” constitute the right focal point for the field. But if we abandon argument about the “isms” we also abandon the ability to discuss such questions. Part of the point of “isms” battles, if they are done well, is to maintain a lively dialogue about what constellation of wagers about international politics constitute key objects of contention.

I believe that realism, liberalism, and constructivism do a reasonable job of capturing enduring debates in the study of international politics. If one goes back to the origins of “international thought” — at least in the European intellectual tradition — one finds debates about the role of ethics in world politics, whether (and to what extent) institutional and normative arrangements constrain “might makes right,” and to what degree patterns of behavior are driven by some form of natural necessity. Patrick Jackson and I have been fleshing out this argument for a few years, and may eventually attempt to publish something about it.

While others may disagree with us about whether the current constellation of “isms” work particularly well, I think none of us should forget that our discipline contains key “political theory” concerns. These core issues — and their associate disputess — may mutate over time, but they serve to link together a plethora of very different studies. The alternatives to “ismatic” wars, at least from my perspective, look pretty bad for the discipline of international relations.

Viva the isms!

[1] If international-relations “paradigms” come in threes, than in the 1970s and early 1980s we might have had realism, liberalism, and Marxism. In truth, however, narrower frameworks often predominate — consider the rise and decline of bureaucratic politics models in the 1970s.

[2] Read this website at your own peril. I find it a rather embarassing statement about attitudes among some of the members of my field. Junior-high school stuff.

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