

The Rise of Popular Culture in IR: Three Issues

Written by Kyle Grayson

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KYLE GRAYSON, JAN 30 2015

As a discipline, IR operates with a very constricted notion of what politics is and where it takes place. It is largely relegated to formal institutional environments that constitute governments and relations between these bodies, other actors that are recognised as being significant (e.g., NGOs, corporations), and sometimes disagreements—or dysfunctions—within this sphere that then spill over into the streets. And within this configuration, culture is a variable to be turned to as a last resort when other forms of explanation fail. At the same time, culture is a site of suspicion. It is diffuse and not readily amenable to quantitative measurement. Similar to anthropologists of the Victorian age, IR continues to treat culture as a black-box of affect, primitivism, mystification, and irrationalism while being drawn to its political utility as a means of marking difference. Thus, to paraphrase the great existential philosopher Homer J. Simpson, 'culture is the source of, and solution to, all of IR's problems.'

But, the relegation of culture within IR has always struck me as a curious but fatal oversight. IR positions itself as a discipline that understands power and its effects on a global scale. Yet its two dimensional instrumentalist view of power cannot account for how power works through normalisation, discipline, alienation, mythologisation, affect, control, representation, performativity, production, and/or the processes of constructing political imaginations that are central to world politics. Thus, in my own work, I refuse to artificially impose boundaries between politics and culture, amongst identities and texts, between power and sensation, or amongst artefacts and the practices of order. And one of the most important sites for the production, circulation, and contestation of relations of power is popular culture.

There is a lineage of other IR scholars who have long ago reached the same conclusions (e.g., Debbie Lisle, David Campbell, Francois Debrix, James Der Derian, Michael J. Shapiro, Roland Bleiker, Marianne Franklin, and Cindy Weber). And over the past five years, it has been great to see that the study of popular culture in IR has gained considerable momentum outside of the usual suspects. But at the danger of sounding like someone who laments that their favourite band has sold out once they begin to enjoy a modicum of success, there are three issues that I want to flag with respect to the study of popular culture in IR.

First, as this area gains in popularity, we are seeing the replication of readings of cultural artefacts as a means of reinforcing a very orthodox vision of what IR and politics might be. To use Jacques Rancière's terms, too often what we get are accounts of policing—that is ways of perceiving things and people from within the parameters of the status quo—not the political. While allegories can certainly be entertaining and/or useful for pedagogical purposes, they are not sufficient. It is important to understand how the sites and artefacts of popular culture may reproduce existing understandings, representations, and affects that help to maintain forms of hegemony as well as to examine the ways in which they critique, provide alternatives, or even ask very different questions about what politics is, what it does, and where it is located. To put it another way, what do artefacts in popular culture present as being natural, common, or deviant? In what ways do artefacts engage us? What do they allow us to sense, feel, and articulate? What do they foreclose?

Second, too much of what is being done not only assumes a prior notion of what IR 'is', but it also fails to engage with what popular culture itself might be. There is a reflex to equate pop culture with what a rather small and particular community of IR academics happen to find entertaining. There is little investigation of what has been commercially successful—where and with whom— or how imagined worlds become embedded into a shared global lexicon. Failing to investigate popular culture de-historicises the concept, transforming a contingent contextual phenomena

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into a universal analytic that will struggle to identify the particularities of politics.

Finally, there is a tendency in recent work to treat popular culture as being constituted by things: mainly television series and film. But as Stuart Hall has argued, culture “...is...a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings—‘the giving and taking of meaning’—between the members of a society or group...Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world in broadly similar ways.” If we take Hall seriously, we must be upfront (and reflexive) about our own interpretative practices and what is shaping them. Too often work on popular culture in IR is premised on an erstaz version of New Criticism—and I also suspect that those who implicitly adopt this method would have no idea what New Criticism was and its conservatism—where a text means what it means without any socio-historical consideration of its producer or audience or context of reception.

In sum, it is really important not to pretend that the study of popular culture in IR is *terra nullius*. Colleagues across the arts, humanities, and other social sciences have been engaged with the intersections of culture and politics for a long time. We need to be aware of their significant accomplishments and accept in many cases that what has already been done provides us with compelling accounts of both the political and of culture. Thus, as colleagues at Newcastle have argued elsewhere, if popular culture makes world politics what it is, we need to be prepared to question the assumptions that underpin our understandings of both while seeking to analyse what is at stake when one is rendered in the terms of the other.

About the author:

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