The 'Isms' Are Evil. All Hail the 'Isms'! A Reflection on IR Theory

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In this concluding chapter I want to explore some of the problems that come with classifying IR theory in the way we do. I want to open up a problem. Why is it we call theories of world politics theories and not ideologies? To answer this question I will engage in a bit of metatheory – that is, theory about theory – to expose some of the complexities and problems that emerge once we think a little more deeply about how the 'isms' can and ought to be used. The point of this chapter is to help you to think theoretically about how the previous chapters in this book hang together. In other words, while you might have already spotted shared characteristics of the various 'isms', in this chapter I want to give you the tools to understand why those commonalities exist at all. In short, the argument is that IR theories should be understood not only as theories but also as ideologies. The proximity and difference between theories and ideologies will become clearer as we progress, but the key point I want to make is that when we understand the ideological element in IR theory, we are better able to think critically about the enterprise of dividing IR up as a set of isms in the first place.

The chapter starts with a quick overview of the rise and fall of the isms in political studies and IR theory. Funnily enough, for many people we live in a post-ideological age, and the fact IR theorists talk about theories and not ideologies is manifest evidence of that. I then discuss some reasons we should reject the isms as a way of compartmentalising philosophical thinking in IR, and show how concept analysis and ideology critique are good alter- natives. But I close by arguing that we need ideologies and our isms not only to help frame explanations of world politics but also as raw material for exposing the political and moral assumptions scholars work with. Hopefully, this final chapter should encourage you to be both playful and experimental with IR theory.

An 'ism' is a suffix that denotes a more or less systematic set of beliefs, opinions, and/or values about the world. The suffix is added when something moves from being quite specific to encompassing more expansive or general views, beliefs and attitudes. For example, Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte may have general views that are unique to him, but until he or anyone else systematises them into a coherent worldview, we are unlikely to start talking about Duterteism in the same way we would of Marxism for example.

The isms become even more expansive when more than one person contributes to or develops the initial set of views. Contemporary Marxism incorporates a vast array of ideas and theories, approaches, epistemologies and ontologies. Indeed, other isms add a large measure of Marxism to their own too, mainly to distinguish them from other sub-types. For example, there can be both orthodox or heterodox Marxism or liberal feminism and Marxist feminism, and so forth. In short, in political science the isms generally denote ideologies and their refinements.

In IR, however, we think of the isms as theories, not ideologies, which is odd. Why do we call Marxism a theory in IR, but an ideology in political science? This is not just a semantic issue. In fact it goes to the core of what IR thought of itself in the period in which it emerged as a stand-alone social science at the turn of the twentieth century. The reason IR scholars spoke of theory rather than ideology at this time was that it was generally held that international

relations were not amenable to the totalising visions of the good life that we find elaborated in the architecture of the main ideologies (Wight 1966). Realists prided themselves on their ability to cut through the moral haze of world politics to the perennial problems of world politics. Realism was not an ideology, but increasingly came to be seen as a simple set of universal truths about politics.

This tendency to distinguish IR theory from ideologies was cemented at the end of the Cold War when almost everyone else also became post-ideological. This had a number of core features. The end of the Cold War galvanised a widespread consensus that liberalism was no longer an ideology, but was instead given in the structures of history, which, according to Francis Fukuyama (1989), were now coming to fruition signifying an 'end of history'. The Soviet Union, the counter-hegemonic power that offered the only existing alternative to Western liberalism, had fallen. For many, such as Fukuyama, this meant that we were entering a post-ideological age, an age in which the dominance of liberalism and the demise of its main challengers – fascism and communism – meant there simply were no other ideologies around, making liberalism the truth revealed at the end of history. Part of this account of liberalism, however, involved a very particular conception of human rationality, one in which maximising your self-interest was said to be both rational and a universal feature of the human psyche.

Institutionalism, methodological individualism and rationalism are all theor- etical concepts. These are concepts that just 'do a job', words that have little invested in them politically, at least on the face of it. Those who deploy such words usually pride themselves on their non-ideological approach to theory development, proposing that concepts like these are scientific tools instead. These tools cut through the fluff of ideology to see what really motivates people. By these 'rationalist' accounts, it was not communism but self-interest that motivated the Soviets. Furthermore, it was not a global genuflection before this or that ideology that would bring order to the world, as the conflict between the Communists and Capitalists suggested, but the rather more mundane claim that 'institutions matter' (Keohane and Martin 1995) in helping interests align (Jahn 2009).

One might think that the left would have persisted in its critique of the covering up of the ideological content of liberal science, but oddly enough, large parts of the left also adopted their own variation of post-ideological thinking, around the same time. Poststructuralist theory took off at the end of the Cold War. One of the most significant criticisms of ideologies developed by poststructuralists cast them as visions of the world and history that were more significant as modes of power than descriptively accurate statements about the world and its history. Liberalism, and neoliberalism, were re-described as modes of (self)governance rather than explanations of how the world worked. Once we accept assumptions about rationality we become the self-interested person the theory was only supposed to describe. Ideologies produce political subjects. In this way, ideologies came to be seen as inherently regulative and dominating; they were not descriptions of the world, but ways of making us act in it.

By the late 1990s these contesting philosophical and world historical changes had broken ashore in International Relations. Here, ideologies were re- described as 'theories', the details of which you can access in the preceding pages of this book. Few if any of the contributors speak of their various theories as ideological. To do so would be to invite all sorts of criticism. To recap only the criticisms above, ideologies are seen to be unscientific, dominating, moralising. In a word: *finished*. Theories, by contrast, are scien- tific, somewhat testable, at least nominally depoliticised, and lack the world historical and totalising visions of the good life we usually associate with ideologies. But, in IR, each ism has developed a cottage industry of its own, with its own specialist journals and degree programmes. In spite of this (perhaps because of it, who knows), almost no one debates between the theories any more. The great debates that were central to the discipline in the past seem to have faded, though there is increasing evidence that they were never really debates, let alone great (Wilson 1998)! Ironically, the isms we are dealing with in this book have never been more entrenched in the field, but nor have they been so little used as weapons by their various protagonists. We have, according to one recent view, come to 'the end of IR theory' (Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013).

If we are not talking about ideologies in IR theory, what are we talking about? For David Lake (2011), we are talking about academic sects that have developed around each of the isms. These sects demand advanced students (usually those embarking on PhD studies) put themselves into a box, adopt an ism for life and then continue to specialise in the rituals and codas of these 'theologies'. Eventually, the ability of advanced scholars to think beyond

or across and between the isms simply falls away. In our attempt to update each ism to meet the demands of the latest 'real world' event, the isms become all the more narrowly defined, or stretched to become so broadly defined as to make them practically ideologies. Either way, they become unhooked from the historical, social and geopolitical context in which they emerged. We then start repeating phrases like 'institutions matter' without understanding how they mattered during the Cold War and might matter in different ways today. This is known as 'reification'.

However, Lake understood theory in a way that made a categorical distinction between ideologies, theologies, philosophising and theory. For Lake, the isms are far broader categories of thought than theories. Theories posit the relat- ionship between variables and generate testable hypotheses, while traditions are messier, unsystematic confluences of ideas that people need to straighten out in order to pull out those hypotheses.

For example, both liberalism and realism come from wider, more long- standing ideological traditions, but to make them theories of IR some core principles had to be identified. In this case, both traditions share the view that anarchy and material interests are key features of world politics, but they add additional variables to generate different theories. In pursuing this general pattern of 1) elaborating general assumption, 2) positing the relations of theoretical concepts, 3) generating testable hypotheses, there is no question that what counts as theory, what counts as evidence and what counts as viable IR subject matter narrows exponentially. Lake assumes that IR theories aspire to be scientific in a very narrow sense of that word (Lake 2011, 470), and then he says that those that don't are not really appropriate for IR. Meta- theoretical questions (again, theory about theory) – such as whether history has an end point or whether history is shaped by material forces or by ideas – are unscientific questions that are without final answers. Rather, we should focus on what he calls 'mid-level theory' – that is, hypotheses that can be tested against the empirical evidence: questions like, which institutions best limit violence? This is how Lake thinks we will come to understand how the world actually works, not through speculative philosophy.

This request for IR theory to ask what appear to be simpler questions is somewhat problematic. Lake's solution asks us to ignore the deeply ideological nature of the concepts we use routinely in IR's theories. Because we can no longer ask speculative questions about the coherence of back- ground assumptions and concepts, like what is capitalism, for example, we end up treating the already existing stock of IR theory as the extent of the material we might need from which to draw testable hypotheses. The fact that there is little consensus on what the state is, let alone whether it is the best institution to constrain violence, is hugely significant.

Paradoxically then, Lake's criticisms make IR theories, particularly the more esoteric ones, sound very much like ideologies, but the point is that all theories are ideologies. What he is unwilling to countenance is that his preferred approach is itself deeply infused with a standard notion of science that is also itself ideological: positiv*ism* (another ism). By this account, true knowledge is knowledge that is empirically verifiable, and only what we can experience counts as true evidence. But we could not know this about Lake unless we had a broad understanding of scientific ideologies too, like positivism and empiricism, such that we would be tooled to expose his underlying assumptions (Jackson 2011). Nothing is gained by exercising the sleight of hand so common in contemporary Anglo-American IR of declaiming everything but science to be ideological.

Before proposing a way out of this problem, let us quickly survey some of the problems that emerge when students do not think clearly about what isms are and what we are using the isms for. One might assume from the above that IR is better off without its isms and in some respects that is probably right. There is nothing to be gained for students or researchers by thinking that the isms are self-contained hypothesis generators. Nor should we welcome theories that purport to be able to explain everything, offering remedies to fix the world as general conclusions. I think anyone would be rightly suspicious of this. But there is a real problem with thinking about isms in this way in the first place – and we don't have to.

What if we change what we think ideologies are? Would this help us rethink the isms in IR too?

Ideologies are wondrous, porous, complex and evolving things that give us a unique insight into the structure of collective thought. Two well-known appro- aches to ideologies should open up what I mean here.

For the first approach, let's consider ideologies as a network of concepts, with the core concepts acting as nodes to which peripheral ones attach and disconnect as they evolve over time (Freeden 1996). So, for example, while liberty might be central to liberalism, peripheral concepts like white supremacy or democracy have receded and advanced in importance over time (respectively). Likewise, we should probably understand that concepts are used in particular historical contexts, which means they might have different meanings to the way we use them now (Berenskoetter 2016). Concepts like the state are themselves generative of isms, while particular meanings of a given concept can only be understood in terms of that ism.

For example, could we really understand what liberalism is without an under- standing of what contemporary liberals mean by liberty? And which comes first, the ideology or the concept? This is not a frivolous argument, because unless we can adequately grasp the historical specificity of the language we use, we will be tempted to simply assume this is how our language has always been used, leaving us 'bewitched' by the present (Skinner 1998).

Once we start to interrogate key concepts, their logic, coherence and their relation to other concepts, we can map the relations of ideologies to one another. For example, both realism and liberalism share core concepts like anarchy, the state, material power and so on. But the relative importance of each can only really be understood once we see how 'peripheral' and other 'core' concepts are deployed in relation to one another, like cooperation or capitalism, institutions or hegemony. Have you ever wondered why you agree with some aspects of an ideology but not with others and agonised about how you can make sense of your split loyalty? This way of understanding the structure of ideologies better shows us the interconnected tapestry of ideologies, something we need to get used to – a worthwhile endeavour for students of IR to do with all the theories presented in this book.

So, ideologies then, like theories, are tapestries of concepts. But, let's take another step back and engage in some ideology critique to explore the second approach. What made it possible to dream up a theory like realism or liberalism in the first place? With the exception of postcolonialism and feminism, most IR theories were, broadly speaking, developed in the West by white men, predominantly from the top 1–2% of income earners, or the upper middle class. In fact, it took the emergence of feminist and postcolonial theorists to point this out. To do this, these theorists had to develop complex accounts of the world and how it hung together that took on the core concepts and assumptions of the mainstream. Contrary to Lake, it was only because feminists and postcolonial theorists (amongst others) probed the existential concepts and categories that theoretical development was possible at all. And, this involved exposing IR theories as ideological. This is how dialectical thought operates. It explores the conditions of possibility of a given way of thinking, whether that is conceptual coherence, historical specificity or what- ever, and then pushes beyond it.

It is not important whether IR theories are true or not. What matters is whether they help shape our thinking such that they can guide action, scholarly, political or theological. It is because they guide action, shape it, constrain it and make sense of it that ideologies and theories should be con- tinually scrutinised. Ideologies are the background cognitive, moral structures that shape societies and reflect their differences, and so understanding how they operate will tell us a huge amount about the world we live in.

Let's try something: turn on your television. Is there not a striking sameness to the stuff that is broadcast in most countries – especially Western ones? It's not just that there are a lot of programmes on cooking and real estate, but that the underlying assumptions behind the programmes have a certain resonance. You don't find presenters of real estate shows lamenting the unjust structures of capitalism or proclaiming that property is theft! Rather, there is a shared sense of the inevitability of the logic of property ownership or that the objective is to secure the highest price possible. Think about the way boys and girls are differently appealed to in the cartoons they watch, with gendered roles almost routinely given rather than questioned.

As Steve Smith (2007, 8) has argued, 'the option of non-theoretical accounts of the world is simply not available'. As such, you need to familiarise yourself with what theory is, how it works and how it shapes the way you see the world. Ideology critique explores the ways in which communication in general is constrained and circumscribed by taken-for-granted ideas, concepts, attitudes and theories, or the way normal language is theory bound and theory dependent. Theories, then, IR theories too, are themselves reflections of ideology. They should be subjected to

critique in the same way.

Conclusion

Think of the isms and a broad understanding of them in three ways:

First, isms are ideologies and IR theories are ideologically saturated too. This is not a bad thing per se. Once we know this we should be able to both interrogate the internal coherence of the ideology and compare its virtues with others.

Second, ideologies themselves shape the society we live in. So, we ought to be able to understand our society and world politics better by exploring the ways in which ideologies shape and structure the ways in which people live and act. In many respects, then, IR theory reflects these ways of living and acting too. Thus, we can think of IR theory as itself an ideological reflection of the world around us. R. B. J. Walker (1993, 6) has made the contentious suggestion that 'theories of international relations are more interesting as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained than as explanations of world politics.' You might not want to go that far, but there is no doubt that there is nothing politically or ideologically neutral about IR theory – and locating IR theories in their historical and intellectual context exposes this irreversibly.

Third, ideologies can be wrong, their values reprehensible or odious, their core assumptions preposterous. This is because they are used by people whose practices and politics we might disagree with. For Robert Cox (1981, 128), theory is not only always 'for someone and for some purpose', but it also inevitably reflects class biases. We need to be aware of this and subject theory to a range of critiques. Understanding Marxism would be the indis- pensable precondition of this. Doing this would be impossible if we were to deny theory-as-ideologies exist, or if we overlook how deeply implicated in ideological structures our modern way of living and thinking are.

Nothing is gained by rejecting the isms unless we at first understand the complexity of what it is we are rejecting. The isms may be evil, but we must pay due homage to them in order to develop the critical reflection we need to move beyond them.

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