

Opinion – The Challenges of Theoretical Innovation

Written by Mohid Iftikhar

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MOHID IFTIKHAR, MAR 21 2023

Students of mainstream political science and its subfields such as international relations and international political economy (IPE) strive to answer complex puzzles. It is often that students become perplexed in a black box of theories, methodology and data. What distinguishes every scholar from their peers is the ability to offer new knowledge simply, something one can claim ownership to. This certainly requires endless hours of reading and thinking, and this can make one feel like being part of a time loop. Ultimately, the underlying logic in the social sciences is not only understanding the world (social, economic and political) but placing one's explanations in well-substantiated arguments and data.

I recall participating in the international studies association (ISA) in Toronto, Canada in March 2019 where I, along with many others became fascinated by John J. Mearsheimer's talk. He emphasized the essence of theoretical innovation and why new knowledge in the field required such a direction. It was rightly pointed out by Mearsheimer that theories cannot come to stagnancy as the political world evolves. And, this is where theoretical innovation is a necessity for upholding social scientific norms and values.

It is only tautological to place existing theories and contemporary political issues and rephrase them. Such books, theses and papers lie in abundance on dusty shelves and digital archives. The rapid developments in political science and its subfields remain vast in both time and space. It is an academic normalcy that students, emerging scholars and senior professors all pen a sequence of thoughts and seek to construct new explanations. However, there are times when disappointment plays in.

One of the early pieces of advice that I received from my PhD supervisors was to look beyond and be persuaded to search for wisdom and knowledge in far off places. Simply, as a "scholar in being" one cannot just replicate existing theories of political science in veiled words. Certainly, this persuaded me to think deeper. Despite, the fact there are indeed days when doing so can make one go berserk. However, the very resilience to produce original knowledge has given me the ambition to keep working. I learned this from my supervisor, Seanon S. Wong, as he produced new knowledge in communication in diplomacy – namely "emotions and the communication of intentions in face-to-face diplomacy." This work explains,

When diplomats negotiate, they pay attention not only to what others say, but also to their emotional cues. One's choice of words, tone of speech, and hand and body gestures carry emotive information that reflects how one appraises a situation. Diplomacy is therefore unique as a conduit between states because it enables practitioners to exchange individual-level expressions of intentions — and, by extension, the intentions of the government they represent — that are otherwise lost, attenuated, or distorted if communications were to occur through other impersonal and irregular channels (Wong 2015).

Certainly, while not impossible, it is not every day that progressive theories such as the above come to the fore of mainstream readings in graduate schools and international conferences.

Further, the interlink between the social sciences – such as political science, economics, psychology and sociology – is not coming of age. However, it is the strength of will that leads scholars (such as Wong) to borrow knowledge from psychology and develop new theories and innovate them in the fields of political science.

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I would suggest that the ultimate objective of scholars should be value addition. It is only through strong training in research methodology, alongside having the ability to swallow constructive criticism, which allows a scholar to pass all trials of suffering.

Theoretical innovation allows scholarship to move beyond the ambit of generalizations as cases, outcomes, sequence of events, and state behavior in political sciences vary across space and time. Perhaps, it is the character of a scholar that reflects the choice of words and the resolve to continue writing despite setbacks that may come in the journey.

About the author:

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