

Building Theory Through History

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, AUG 1 2012

One of the reasons I love e-IR is the multiplicity of different issues from the international and the global that it brings together. I really think the variety presented on the site exemplifies just how expansive the field has become, and it also brings together unique perspectives from great minds.

No, I am not being paid for saying such things, but I emphasize this point because after reading a blog post by my colleague Peter Vale, I was reminded of one of the most important issues facing the field today, that is worthy of mention.

A common question that comes my way from students is: what is the best way for me to become a better IR scholar?

In some cases, the answer is for them to drop my course and move on; for the vast majority, however, the answer is simple – read more history.

In the midst of an ever-expanding field of international relations, we now pay attention to power and security dynamics, domestic preferences, ideologies, economics, social norms, discourse, rhetoric, gender, law, philosophy, sociology, and many other areas, but IR scholars typically fail to pay close enough attention to history.

Ignorance of history has impacts on both the theoretical side of the field and the empirical, and is extremely evident when IR scholars focus almost exclusively on global events since the fall of the Soviet Union. Of course, the years between 1989 and 1991 were pivotal in a number of ways, but there is a plethora of IR scholarship that treats the end of the Cold War as the foundation of the field. There is no doubt that the field has taken its current form, whatever that form may be, because of realism's decline, but liberal and critical theories find their roots well before 1991.

As a self-proclaimed realist, it is difficult for me to admit that realism is among the guiltiest schools of thought for constantly perverting history. It is one thing to say that a theory has ahistorical elements, but it is quite another to selectively present historical cases as timeless truths. Almost every realist can cite 1648 as the Peace of Westphalia, 1914 as the outbreak of WWI, or 1945 for the first use of nuclear weapons; but selective history does not a theory make. On the other hand, liberals tend to refer to 1919 and the creation of the League of Nations, 1945 and the formation of the UN, and post-1960 as the start of democratic peace. Regardless of the theory, each school of thought has its own token dates and events.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with verifying a theory with historical proof; in fact, I would argue that a theory should have to stand the test of good theory-making and empirical verification, but what is often lost in this quest is the latter half of that equation and just how well a theoretical model stands the test of time (pun intended).

In order for a theory to hold water after the model is created, it must be tested, and tested continually. Being applicable in one historical circumstance is not the birth of a new theory. When tested, the most important conundrum that faces theorists is what happens if the theory is somehow falsified. Is it dead at that point, as Popper would suggest? If it does not lead to a paradigm shift as Kuhn argued, is it still useful?

I would contend that falsification in one instance is bound to happen, as history is not perfectly predictable. If it was,

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chances are we would have become better at not destroying the world around us so effectively for so long.

Theories are meant to evolve and become better when aspects are falsified. If one's theory does not apply to 1 out of 3 situations, does majority win?

In order to best answer these questions, I find value in two very different, but incredibly useful, sources – one is the work of Imre Lakatos; the other is history. Lakatos tried to find a middle-ground between Popper's views on falsification and Kuhn's ideas on paradigm shifts, and contributed an essential point to comprehending methods of theory building – there are a number of essential elements in theory building, but theory is about evolution, not revolution. It is impossible to be right every time, but a theorist must demonstrate an ability to accept an instance of falsification and adapt. To say, for instance, that every tenet of human nature has been constant since Thucydides is almost laughable; to say that humans continue to demonstrate certain characteristics fundamental to their behavior, like self-interest, is entirely plausible and can be verified empirically.

The latter allows us to falsify ourselves at times before we get to the point of believing we are onto something. History is so incredibly complex, but for IR scholars (and all political scientists), it should be a prerequisite. The biggest shortcoming of modern IR students is their lack of historical background. If this problem was corrected, it would greatly help their efforts at understanding the world around them.

After all, if you do not understand where you came from, how can you understand where you are going?

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Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality.

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.