The IR Theory Game

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I'm an international relations theorist. While I work mainly in complexity theory and chaotic theories of international politics, and despite a long infatuation with realism, I am a fan of most any attempt to describe, explain, and predict at the international level.

My students, on the other hand, usually find theory the part of the course they enjoy least. It doesn't matter how many times I remind them of the importance of theory, the necessity of adopting a theoretical perspective in their research papers, and the ways in which even they, too, can be IR theorists, students often skate through the lessons focused on theory and wait on the 'interesting' classes later in the semester.

The challenge, then, is to make theory accessible, to give the students something to do, rather than just something to listen to. This week I am spending a lesson on realism and a lesson on liberalism. It's quick, it's pretty basic but it is also an opportunity for me to get them interested in IR theory with some practical activities.

Take realism. I still run through the history, assumptions, and great realist works. I point to criticisms, drop a few names (De Gaulle, Kissinger, Mearsheimer for the students who are reading ahead) and then turn to the first practical activity, a modified game of Prisoner's Dilemma.

It was a book by Jack Donnelly that I read a few years ago now that gave me the idea of integrating the Prisoner's Dilemma into a class on realism. Donnelly argued in that book that the game was much like realism, sharing the same assumptions about trust and relative gains that realists do. The students take a few minutes to play it out, develop their strategies and then we discuss how that game is describing a rather realist world.

We continue on to structural realism and, after laying out a similar foundation and critique, I ask the students to play Tic-Tac-Toe. This they do with a partner and after a few minutes, a few games won and lost, and a few muttered curse words in French, I ask the students to change the game: no longer will the winner be the one who places three X's or three O's in a row; instead, the player who gets three in a row will now be the loser.

It's basic strategy but it reflects the zero-sum world of the structural realists well. Survival is all that matters, you can only survive if you win or draw, and losing is the equivalent of geopolitical death.

I follow up this class on realism with a class on liberalism. Here I use a nice division of liberal theories offered by O'Callaghan, Griffiths and Roach, and discuss commercial liberals, institutional liberals, and republican liberals.

The centerpiece of this class is an examination of the liberal notion of the democratic peace. On the surface, the statistics seem to speak for themselves: either few or no democracies have ever fought another democracy. I like to give the students time to work in groups to attempt to explain why this is the case. The time I allow is long enough that the students quickly realize that the answer is unlikely to be simple. Indeed, they know that if I give them ten minutes to work on something then it will take all of that time to come up with a good answer.

The discussion that follows is usually enough to keep everyone interested, and warms them up for the next two classes on theory – covering constructivism, Marxism and feminism – that follow in the week ahead.

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