

Tortured Ideas: The responsibility of IR scholars

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, FEB 17 2011

Early this morning as I was deciding on the topic of this blog my attention was caught up in two self-reinforcing stories. On the BBC I watched Stephen Sackur interview Paddy Hill, one of the Birmingham Six, and about an hour later, I read the interview between Jason Leopold and the former Guantanamo Detainee, David Hicks.

Both are harrowing accounts of a miscarriage of justice and the absolute dehumanisation both of imprisonment and torture – the remarkable thing, if you think about it, is that almost 40 years separates the arrest of Paddy Hill and his colleagues for his alleged bombing of the Mulberry Bush Pub in Birmingham from the Australian's incarceration at Gitmo on the day the facility opened – January 11, 2002.

Here in the foothills, let me declare an interest: in the mid-1980s, as apartheid's noose tightened around this country, many of my acquaintances, my friends and my wife, Louise, were detained under what was dubbed "Emergency" legislation. Many of these folk spent the longest time in (and out) of Apartheid's prisons – the late Johnny Issel, who sadly died a few weeks back, spent the best part of five years inside without being formally charged – luckily, Louise spent four months and happily we both recovered and have managed to live rich and fulfilled lives in the aftermath of the experience.

But what has all this to do with IR?

Well, if you accept the Hegelian notion that "Ideas Matter" – Everything.

The three cases – Northern Ireland, the War on Terror and Apartheid – were each rooted in that lethal IR cocktail which links sovereignty, security and freedom of speech and belief. In each of the cases, the dominant discourse of IR – Realism – gave licence to strong government measures in the cause of restoring order.

Now, it is certainly so that each of these cases faced a test of legitimacy. For many, the British were an occupying force in Northern Ireland; George W. Bush's War on the Moslem world was both fraudulent and illegitimate and apartheid South Africa was ruled by a minority.

Despite this, those eager to advise the prince took the logic of Realist IR into the dark places where these fateful decisions are made.

For me, three things follow: why so few voices in IR raised in dissent? And what must/should happen to those who carried the craft towards those fateful moments? And, most importantly, what's to be done?

IR doesn't encourage questions. As countless authorities in the field have suggested, dissenting voices are not encouraged and those who hold them invariably occupy only marginal space in the great institutions of IR – especially, though not exclusively, its powerful think-tank community. Besides, when the security chips are said to be down and the prince is wanting a policy direction, will anybody whose read Morgenthau say, "Hang on a moment...let's look at this from the people's point of view"?

So, what should we do with those of our number who have advised in moments which have had dark consequences?

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Are they guilty like the politicians they serve or can they, say, “We were only foot soldiers” like those involved in our three cases? But can we settle this without bringing Henry Kissinger to a trial of his academic peers?

So, what’s to be done?

What about a longitudinal and comparative study which looks at the role of individuals and ideas from IR who have been involved in decisions which have led to tragic miscarriages of justice and illegal imprisonment in the three cases under discussion here.

Wouldn’t the publication of that research tell us something entirely new about the discipline?

About the author:

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