Student Feature – Theory in Action: 'Isms' Are Evil. All Hail the 'Isms'!

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ALEX PRICHARD, AUG 8 2019

This is an excerpt from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

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.

A brief introduction to Marxism

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.

Crash Course: The end of the Cold War

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.

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Written by Alex Prichard

Francis Fukuyama explains his 'End of history' thesis

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 indispensable 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.

19th Century Isms

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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