

IR Field Seminar Week2

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Chapter 8: Robert W. Cox. "Social Forces, States and World Orders."

Two Kinds of Theory in Social Science

1. problem-solving theory: the objective is to find general patterns of social relationships and institutions so that one can find a way to deal effectively with particular problems in society.
2. critical theory: it is critical in the sense that it keeps a distance from the prevailing order. It studies the origin and changing directions of that order as well as the current social relationships and institutions.

-The weakness of the problem-solving theory like neo-realism is the false premise that the social and political order is fixed, whereas in reality history is a process of constant change. This assumption of fixity is "an ideological bias" implicitly accepting the prevailing order as its own framework. This is OK as long as researchers are aware of it, but the problem arises when neo-realists claim their own research is scientific and value-free. "Critical theory can be a guide to strategic action for *bringing about an alternative order*, whereas problem-solving theory is a guide to tactical actions which, intended or unintended, *sustain the existing order*." For neo-realists "the future will always be like the past."

Realism (neorealism) and Marxism (historical materialism)

1. neo-realism sees international politics as states pursuing their own national interests through mechanism of the balance of power under the assumption of "rationality."
-"This idea of common rationality reinforces the nonhistorical mode of thinking" because for neo-realists the nature of human beings, states, and the state system is presented as a rationality assumed to be common to all the competing actors. Therefore, neorealist theory functions as the advocate of this form of rationality discarding other kind of behavior principles like morality.
2. historical materialism sees human nature and social institutions in terms of a continuing creation of new forms rather than unchanging substances. Therefore, they are identical with human history itself and should not be assumed as a priori conditions.

-historical materialism corrects neorealism in four respects: dialectic (confrontations between concepts and the reality as well as between existing order and opposed social forces), focus on imperialism, concern about state-society relationship, and interest in production process as a critical explanation.

Historical Materialism

Three categories of forces - ideas, material capabilities, and institutions - interact in a structure. Ideas are composed of intersubjective meanings shared by almost everyone and collective images of social order held by different groups of people. Institutions reflect the power relations and tend to encourage collective images consistent with these power relations. Material capabilities alone, without these two concepts, cannot be sufficient to analyze international politics - hegemony as an example.

This method of historical structure applies to three different levels of activity - social forces, forms of state, and world orders - and they are interrelated. In Cox's theory, changes in production process generate new social forces which, in turn, bring about changes in the structure of states, and this alters the problem of current world order. (for his theory on hegemony and imperialism, read pp.225-239)

Positivism vs. Historicism

Positivism assumes a separation of subject and object, while historicism views subject and object as having a reciprocal relationship of mutual interaction. The former tries to develop universal laws and theories about society, whereas the latter tries to analyze the interaction between the way people conceive of society and the material world and how this constrains their thoughts and activity. Historicism does this by "seeing the subjectivity of historical action as determined by an objectified historical process." Even research itself contains some ideological orientation and cannot be value-free.

