

Goldstein and Keohane – “Ideas and Foreign Policy” (1993)

The Lowdown: Ideas must be incorporated into a successful theory of international politics because purely rationalist explanations are insufficient. But including ideas in a theoretical framework does not, and should not, exclude the use of social science empirical methodologies. Ideas can be parsimoniously categorized as world views, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs, and affect politics in three important ways. Ideas work as road maps toward selected objectives, aid coordination in strategic interaction, and constrain policy once they become institutionalized.

A Theoretical Middle Ground:

Goldstein and Keohane offer their chapter as a challenge to both rationalists and relectivists. While they view rationalist approaches as a good starting point for analysis of international politics, they do not feel it tells the whole story. They present the existence of empirical phenomena inconsistent with purely rationalist expectations as evidence for this view. These can only be explained when theory is extended to incorporate ideas. They reject relectivists’ tendency toward antiempiricism, believing that ideas can and should be studied with the empirical tools of social science. Goldstein and Keohane distinguish their focus on ideas from those taken from psychological approaches. While such approaches are concerned with the implications of cognitive psychology for the interpretation of reality, Goldstein and Keohane are more concerned with the impacts of particular wide-spread beliefs.

Three Types of Beliefs:

- 1) **World Views:** The “big ideas” embedded in the symbolism of a culture that are intertwined with identity, evoking deep loyalty and emotion. Not purely normative, and may concern cosmology and ontology. Tend to have the broadest impact on political life (as with major world religions or sovereignty after Westphalia). Goldstein and Keohane assume that these beliefs are the result of humans acting toward the construction of their own destinies, and thus rule out superstition or fate. They concede that this does not allow us to talk meaningfully about the impact of broad world views on politics.
- 2) **Principled Beliefs:** Normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right and wrong . Examples include opinions on slavery, abortion, or free speech. Usually justified on the terms of world views, but world views might be broad enough to contain opposing principled beliefs. Easier to analyze the impact of these, and changes in principled beliefs have profound impact on politics.
- 3) **Causal Beliefs:** Beliefs about cause-effect relationships that derive their legitimacy from recognized authority (scientists, religious figures, etc). Provide guides for how to achieve desired objectives, though those objectives are defined at the principled beliefs or world views level. Causal beliefs change most rapidly, and are therefore easier to measure.

The Impact of Ideas on Policy: Goldstein and Keohane suggest three casual pathways by which ideas affect policy. In general, though they agree material interests directly govern human activity, ideas form the parameters in which such action can occur.

- 1) **Ideas as Road Maps:** Once an idea is selected, this pathway limits choice because it excludes other interpretations of reality, or at least suggests that such interpretations are not worth serious exploration. Thus the actor remains on the path that the logic of the selected idea dictates.
- 2) **Coordination – Ideas as Focal Points & Glue:** Ideas affect strategic interaction by helping to create Pareto-efficient solutions. Thus they contribute to outcomes in the absence of a unique equilibrium. They may act as focal points that define cooperative solutions or as a glue to keep coalitions together.
- 3) **Institutionalization:** Once ideas are embedded in rules and norms, they constrain policy because they are difficult to dislodge. Thus ideas embedded in institutions specify policy in the absence of innovation by affecting the incentive structures of political actors.