
Culture in International Relations and Foreign Policy: Over-emphasising the Obvious?

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The turn towards culture and/ or identity in IR is fast becoming visible as an alternate paradigm in International Relations theory. This is not to say that the constitutive elements of culture-centricity were of recent origin or that there was some kind of a cognitive hiatus or epistemological rupture signifying any fundamental change in favour of an identity-oriented political order emerging around the world.

In every age, collective identity has had a role to play in politics and it is only recently that we have sought to project it as an important marker in national and international politics. This paper seeks to explore the reasons of the so called 'cultural turn' in IR Theory and the impact of culture on the foreign policy of nations.

IR Theory and Constructivism

Martin Wight once asked himself and others "Why Is There No International Theory?". Wight and Butterfield of the English school advocated a heuristic approach which facilitates interplay among contending but interdependent traditions of thought rather than confine to the two broad methodological approaches, i.e., positivist and post-positivist. Such conceptual eclecticism has also been the marked feature of the social constructivist and universal pragmatist schools as well.

The school of social constructivism that has evolved in the post-cold war international arena has sought to interpolate competing systems of analyses, in a way that will bridge the hiatus between Quine and Kripke, the Ptolemaic-Aristotlean

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and the Copernican-Newtonian, neorealistic structural materialism and ideational and 'identitarian' post-structuralism, arrogant "analyticity" and lay essentialism and also fuse the intra-school departures and differences in a creative and 'discursive' continuum, linking up staccato exercises in a brilliant synthetic fusion. This school has aroused tremendous intellectual interest worldwide. Scholars like Alexander Wendt, Peter J. Katzenstein, Michael Barnett, Kathryn Sikkink, John Ruggie, Martha Finnemore, Nicholas Onuf, Friedrich Kratochwil and others have, within a relatively short period of time, established constructivism as one of the major schools of thought in the field of IR.

Emphasising the point that ideational elements supervene on the material base one of the leading propounders of the Social constructivist school, Alexander Wendt has argued: "The question is not whether culture exists in IR; the question is how significant cultural superstructure is in governing state behavior." Taking a departure from such a position, the role of culture(s), as constructed and institutionalised tradition(s), in IR has been investigated in recent years by different scholars.

The Cultural Turn

"We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances (to them)." Edward Sapiro

It is interesting to note that there were over 200 varying definitions of culture as it was compiled by Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952). Most recent and most reasonable is the definition offered by the UNESCO in 2002 which states that "culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs". It built upon Edward B. Taylor's 1871 definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". It is useful to study the way the study of culture has evolved during the last two centuries.

Franz Boas started the study of culture from an anthropological perspective in the 1870s, based on the arguments by Kant, Herder and von Humboldt. According to this school, human beings are not capable of unmediated knowledge and their

experiences are mediated by social, cultural structures. It follows from this that culture limits individual perception. This argument entered the discipline of sociology in the 1960s with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann raising the issue in their book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). The basic purpose was “to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived reality”, and the argument they made was that “all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted common sense knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from and maintained by social interactions”.

This basic thinking has had an abiding impact on sociology of knowledge, sociology of science and post-modernism. The advocates of these different schools use “the ideas of social constructionism to relate supposedly objective facts to processes of social construction, with the goal of showing that human ‘subjectivity’ imposes itself on those facts we take to be objective, not solely the other way around.” If reality is socially constructed, then the autonomy of individual in interpreting the reality has to be considered an ‘over-obsessive myth’, one will be tempted to argue. But gradually it has been accommodated

within social constructionism that reality is perceived through an interactive process, where socially constructed reality (as opposed to ontological reality) mediates individual perception and in turn refracted through it.

The turn towards culture or identity in IR, in late 1980s and early 1990s, sought to take a departure from the overemphasis on the ideological “axiality”, as Karl Jaspers would have called it, of the cold war years and take note of the obvious surge in an assertive brand of ethnic politics across the world. Much of the scholarly arguments as to how and why the world labouring under ideological bipolarity could suppress such a volatile factor in international politics were contaminated by either the “fill-in-the-vacuum” hypotheses or “costly scholarly oversight” hyper-theses. Against this backdrop one noticed the re-adaptation of social construction theory in IR seeking a ‘dynamic balance’ between the materialism of the neo-realists (anything prefixed with ‘neo’ is under-socialised, Wendt would say.) and the post-positivists.

The emphasis of the social constructivist school is on the one hand a deposition of crass materialist structuralism of the neo-realism and the consecration of the ‘inter-

subjectively constituted' ideas, which constitute interests and identities in the international sphere. These ideas are products of ongoing processes of inter-state interactions rather than the state structure. Thus, it is process, rather than structure which determines the nature of international politics. The constructivists hold that 'culture' (which encompasses norms, identity and ideas) is self-fulfilling because it defines situations and through the actors' actions tends to reproduce itself. Katzenstein (1996a) would define norms, identities and culture in following way: "“norms are collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity,” “identity is a shorthand label for varying constructions of nation- and statehood,” and “culture is a label that denotes collective models of nation state authority or identity carried by custom or law”.

While realism is obsessed with issues relating to security and material power, and liberalism emphasises on issues relating to international economic order, constructivism introduces the role of ideas in shaping the international system. The goals, threats, fears, identities, and other elements of perceived reality that influence states and non-state actors within the

international system are primarily ideational in orientation, they would argue.

The enthronement of culture as a socially constructed (and perpetually under construction or re-construction) variable was followed by an enthusiastic leap forward in the direction of re-culturing IR theory in its entirety—the conceptual hive and its honeycombs, or what Dawkins would say its “extended phenotype”. It is in this context that foreign policy is being re-studied from a cultural perspective.

Theories of Foreign Policy?

Foreign policy of a state is basically understood as the way in which it interacts with other countries of the world. These externally directed policies are aimed at protecting a country's (national) interests, security, ideological goals, and economic prosperity. There are different ways in which these goals can be achieved, i.e., through peaceful cooperation, through offensive-defensive principles of deterrence and power or threat balance, war, and even ideological pre-eminence. Foreign policy is usually designed by political executive/ruling elite of a state subject to formal oversight by

legislature or informal approval by the people. There is a bewildering multiplicity of factors informing as well as influencing the process of foreign policy making in different states and in view of the diversity of structural and cultural contexts from which foreign policies originate, many neorealist theoreticians disregard the endeavour to theorise the process of foreign policymaking.

In fact there has been a great debate within the school of neorealism (Colin Elman for example) regarding the whole question of evolving a neorealist framework to study foreign policies of different states. Suspecting the intrusion of "constructivist" and "critical" thinking behind the effort Randall Schweller (1999) would argue that "practitioners of international politics... understand that foreign policy is too serious a business to entertain utopian ideas about dramatically reconstructed social relations." In fact Randall goes to the extent of calling critical theory advanced by Andrew Linklater as "fantasy theory". In a rebuttal to Elman, one of the foremost advocates of the neorealist school, Kenneth Waltz (1996), claims that "under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the making of unambiguous foreign-

policy predictions." They are averse to the unit-level studies which will aim at analyzing state structures, elite psyches, cultural dynamics or ideological preferences of states, which they consider outside the domain of IR discipline.

Kenneth Waltz would admit that states "are at worst adaptive learners" and rather behave like "preprogrammed amoebas", which would suggest that state behaviour in international affairs is immensely predictable. But such predictive capacities should not encourage IR theory to venture into the domain of foreign policy or conversely it is unwise to seek to explain foreign policy through IR theory. He would argue that foreign policy is the "black box" (Fearon, of international politics (like firms in a neoclassical theory of economics) and perhaps implies that they should better not be opened unless there is an accident.

He would rather argue that the "theory of international politics bears on the foreign policies of nations while claiming to explain only certain aspects of them" and go on to argue that there cannot be a realist theory of foreign policy. "My old horse cannot run the course and will lose if it tries", he replied to Elman's attempt to convince the fellow

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advocates of neorealism that their theory could at least “run the race” against other theories attempting to describe, explain and predict foreign policy. Even if many neorealists would like to keep the complex process of foreign policy beyond their radar, there are many who would take up the challenge to conceptualise the process. Among them Gideon Rose (1998) for example would classify four distinct approaches to foreign policy, i.e., Innen-politick realism (emphasis on internal political dynamics), offensive realism (emphasis on a Hobbesian anarchical order and need to maximise security), defensive realism (innocuous anarchy tackled through power balance, reaction to the systemic) and Neoclassical realism (goals and preferences more important than security and unit level studies matter). Methodologically, neo-classical realists do not shun systemic studies, but add unit-level influences on the systemic forces. In fact, neoclassical realism demands expertise in the history and culture of the units under consideration before one can make foreign policy analysis. They echo Morgenthau and claim that power shapes the generalities if not the specifics of foreign policy. Morgenthau (1985) had over-claimed that “the government must realize it

is the leader and not the slave of public opinion.” The neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy is therefore “loose enough to make mid-range theorizing practicable”, Rose would argue.

Others (like some of the constructivists) would differentiate between separate approaches to foreign policy and identify them as modified neorealist, constructivist, and Liberalist. They would argue that state actors framing foreign policies will seek to internalise one of the three major cultural frameworks—Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian, and respond accordingly. Smith (2001) would borrow the argument of Wendt and argue that foreign policy is what the states make of it. Actors internalise different norms in different degrees. It is possible that states share their identity regarding certain aspects, such as democracy; have only common interests in other issues, such as trade; and have hegemonic or counter-hegemonic ambitions in other issues, such as foreign investment. In other words, according to the theoretical framework here proposed, it is not expected that all foreign policies of a specific state are better explained by the same approach. Since different policies are decided by different

actors and under different contexts of action, each policy may follow a different logic. They would argue in favour of a hybrid approach to foreign policy analysis.

There have been others like Robert D. Putnam who would say that foreign policy makers situate themselves between two tables or levels of influence— domestic and international. In this 'two level game', at the national level (Level II), "domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, while at the international level, (level I) national governments seek to maximise their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimising the adverse consequences of foreign developments". Both games have to be considered by decision makers, because countries are "interdependent yet sovereign". (Putnam, 1988)

Neorealist Overstretch

In September 2002, 32 neorealist scholars including Kenneth Waltz, John J. Mearsheimer, Jack Snyder, Stephen Walt bought an ad in the New York Times to make their case against the Bush administration's strategy" towards Iraq. They called

for "vigilant containment of Iraq," but said US should not wage war against it for that would not advance US national interests. In the fall of 2003, some of these scholars founded the "Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy," united "by (their) desire to turn American national security policy toward realistic and sustainable measures for protecting U.S. vital interests."

Some critics (Rodger A. Payne, 2004) argue that such neorealist attempts signify the importance of the processes of foreign policy decision making and the need to look at foreign policy from a "process-based perspective". It has also been argued that neorealists quietly admit the necessity of study of foreign policy and the influences that go in to the making of such policies. Like in the above mentioned case, realists may not refer to values yet in the guise of their demand for better protection of interests they were seeking to influence the dominant norms and values operating behind the foreign policy making in the US.

It is in this context that one is tempted to observe that the real dynamic of foreign policy making may continue to elude the scholar even in countries where there is better mobility between academic

institutions and corridors of power. One is reminded of the advice by the ex-academic and current US Secretary of State, Ms. Condoleezza Rice (Rice, 2000) to the contending schools of thinking in International Relations: "In fact, there are those who would draw a sharp line between power politics and a principled foreign policy based on values. This polarised view—you are either a realist or devoted to norms and values— may be just fine in academic debate, but it is a disaster for American foreign policy", she later (in 2002) told academics in John Hopkins University. They may be enlivening conferences or classrooms but they obscure reality for a policy maker", for "in real life power and value are married completely", she reiterated in her lecture in the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research in 2002. For policy makers the intellectual rigours of the ongoing discourse and their competing worldviews hardly makes any sense other than providing them with different systems of logic and rhetoric to pick up from in times of their need and adorn and embellish their policy defences. The change in perspective that overtakes the scholar when he or she enters the corridors of power— or as many in US would say "the city on the hill"— could be an important point of

reference for researchers all over the world.

The discussion as it winds through arguments and counter-arguments above makes one conscious of the enormous intellectual efforts from the western thinkers and theoreticians that have gone into the making of intellectual traditions. Even then, the line of division that obtains between the seekers of knowledge and managers of power is there for all to see. Across cultures and civilizations this is a commonality we may chance upon— partially this may assuage the sense of irreverence with which the scholarly community has been treated in our societies and cultures. In our own scholarly tradition one kept hearing about the tradition of rajrishi close to the philosopher king that Plato envisioned. But the role of the academic community in decision making is grossly undervalued partially because of the lack of any innovative approach and the willingness to labour under borrowed premises. It is another thing that some of our scholars, neglected at home, have flourished elsewhere.

Culture and Foreign Policy

How do culture and foreign policy impact each other? It is an issue that

has generated lot of interest among scholars and academics studying international politics and behaviour of states. Those seeking to reintroduce lay philosophisations (the neo-Aristotleans) would argue that it is an obvious thing and ought to be discussed and separate cultural bases, the characteristic reflexes, the historical civilizational or systemic inertia of states or state systems operating at the international level can be isolated and studied. Only then the impact of culture on foreign policy can then be easily understood, analysed and predicted.

Haven't we heard of Bismarck categorising Englishmen as "a nation of shop keepers" or for that matter Pakistanis generalising Indians as crooked banias? Aren't we aware of the symbols we employ at times to connote different states? — Yankee American or Uncle Sams, the Russian Bear, the Chinese dragon, the Indian elephant. More recently haven't we seen an eminent political scientist like Huntington (whom Edward Said would call an "inelegant thinker" and "clumsy writer") identifying (for him distinct) civilizational fault-lines at the international level. All this suggest that at a certain level, through informal communication, images about different cultures and their influence on human psyche are created.

But these are largely external images and imply how cultures and civilizations are perceived by outsiders. Do they influence and condition behaviour of collectivities regarded as states/societies and cultures? Almost like transplanting Cooley's theory of "looking glass self" in the international context. Do they also determine interests, aspirations, ideological inclinations of states and nations (without implying any necessary co-terminality between these two conceptual categories)? Are they susceptible to external influence—like globalisation, change in international security environment, hegemonic impositions? Can we explain state behaviour from cultural perspective? Why in spite of the image of India as "pacifist" and "inscrutable", India and US could come together ignoring domestic opposition in both the countries? How can one explain the bilateral attempt at peace between India and Pakistan in spite of the sense of reflexive hostility between them? These are questions that one needs to ask to add rigour to theorisations in this field.

One has to ask also whether the power elite in different states consider it in their interest to preserve national culture and identity. How

do they define them? How do national cultures change over time and how it impacts the identity formation? Whether there are alternative identities competing for attention? How does one situate peripheral identities within multicultural societies in such a theoretical framework.(Hudson, 1997)

Similarly, the role of “epistemic communities” in setting foreign policy agenda, the role of individual in defining cultural identity, setting national agenda, the interaction between of power and cultural ideology etc need greater attention to understand the dynamics of cultural development and its impact on policy making within and between nations.

Conclusions

It has been observed, especially since the Westphalian order made its presence felt in international political horizon, that states have pretended to be cultural communities or nations and sought to project their cultures externally. This process of “advertising” one’s cultural essence across state frontiers gathered momentum in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The post war years saw the rise of many

states, thanks to decolonisation, who borrowed the post Westphalian, Weberian state structure and, along with this, the superstition that every state has to be a nation (in fact ‘national’ became the adjective of state). The very concept of inter-“national”, instead of inter-‘state’ is afflicted by that superstition. In this context, such post-colonial plural and multi-national or multi-cultural states have projected the dominant culture as the culture of the state. This has led to gradual decimation of many cultures and even extinction of many linguistic communities. It is imperative then to ask whether by sanctifying a culture-oriented social-constructivist framework one is really embarking upon a universalistic emancipatory politics.

At another level, it is useful to ask whether such a framework reduces the possibility of the evolution of an international civic or civil culture by compelling nationalistic-cultural manifestations. Does the rise of cultural internationalism (Iriye, 1997) with its legitimation of national cultures not impair the good work done by certain international agencies like UNESCO, Red Cross in the direction of an individual centric world order?

Another major weakness in the constructivist paradigm is its reliance

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on the neorealist state structure (if not structuralism) and its statist outlook. In fact even 'cultural pessimists' like Huntington would argue that the reigning model of nation-states as repository of legitimate coercive will survive the assault from cultural assertion and even it would strengthen the concept of state as the only available model of political and administrative organisation.

Aren't we over-anticipating the influence of culture in international politics and political discourse? Or is it necessary at least to have a prognosis of the shape of thing to come? Many pragmatist and social constructivist theoreticians (like Richard Rorty, Jurgen Habermas, Alexander Wendt and many others) may be readying themselves to usher

in an emancipatory humanistic universal social and political order. But what awaits them remains to be seen.

The ship of culture is in the harbour and we are fast preparing an inventory of its cargo. (Jepperson and Swidler, 1994). The exhaustive list that scholars have drawn up has already complicated research agenda everywhere, in every discipline. In the coming days we will measure the impact of it on the socio-political and economic landscape and check whether the enthusiasm in favour of a culture-mediated discourse is misplaced.

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