
From Materialism to Ideationalism in International Relations Theories

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Section 1: Before Ideationalism	9
Idealism Trends	9
Realist	20
Leninist Materialism	34
Liberalist	38
Section 2: Toward Ideationalism	51
English School	51
Critical Theory	65
Constructivism	83
Cultural Studies	101
Conclusion	117
Epilogue: The Iranian Approach to International Relations	126
Index	159

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H. Salimi

Introduction

Molavi (Rumi), the great Persian mystic poet, in one of his famous poems says: "O' brother, 'thought' is the whole of you, flesh and bones, the rest of you!"

In this verse, Molavi distinguishes between two main aspects of human beings and suggests that the fundamental essence of existence is "thought", i.e., "idea". This important idea is now backing the mainstream of the social sciences and humanities. But, there is a basic question as to which part between the two aspects of mankind plays a more important role in his world life. This is the main issue in understanding the widest area of human life.

From the dawn of "International Relations" as an independent field of study in 1919 in the United Kingdom, there have been some basic debates and arguments forming the mainstream thinking in this field. Some textbooks and coursebooks have mentioned three and sometimes four main debates in international relations theories so far.

According to one of the most common classifications, the first debate arose between the classical idealists, described by E. H. Carr as Utopianisms, and the classical realists proposed by theoreticians, such as E. H. Carr¹. The second debate, which was more methodological, emerged between behaviorism and traditionalism. In this debate, the domination of realism and their scientific methods, notably quantitative methods, found their way into the mainstream of the study of international relations. The next debate, however, being about the essence of international relations, was between realism and liberalism on the one hand, and some critical theories taken from Marxism on the other. Of course, according to another classification, the third debate occurred merely between realism and liberalism to explain the main subject of international relations. Finally, there is another important

2 From Materialism to Ideationalism....

debate, as Darryl Jarvis points out, which is more epistemological and lies between theories like post-modernism and scientific tendencies and objectivist trends, such as realism and liberalism.¹

These classifications help us understand different ways of thinking and also improve our ability to analyze different areas of human life. It happens sometimes that in these understandings, we ignore important aspects of these theories. There are some common specifications between contending theories which are hidden in this sort of classification, while we can find a different flow and specification beyond these classifications. One shall take into consideration that in the above classifications, the main important criteria are the essence as well as the main goal and concern of international relations, but in the new view, the main consideration is the nature of human phenomenon. Therefore, in this book, I would like to elaborate on one of the important hidden flows of international relations theories.

Alexander Wendt has already recognized and posed a very important distinction in his "Social Theory of International Politics" in this regard. In his description of four sociologies of international relations, Wendt writes:

*"In practice, social theorists cluster into two views, materialist and idealist. Both acknowledge a role for ideas but they disagree about how deep these effects go. Materialists believe the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and organization of social forces.... Idealists believe the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and structure of social consciousness."*²

Besides, Yale Ferguson reveals that:

"Alexander Wendt maintains that constructivists like himself share with various critical theorists two basic claims: that fundamental mental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material... and that these structures shape actors' identities and interests, rather than just behavior... by contrast to

*Neo-realists who emphasize 'the distribution of material capacities.'*³

As Ferguson and Wendt emphasize, this division between ideationalism and materialism is a new well-known classification in the field of international theory. Based upon this classification, I would like to elaborate that there is an interesting flow from materialism to ideationalism for understanding international relations. I would also like to explain the core idea here. My argument concerns the theoreticians of social and international relations who eventually have concentrated on the crucial role of ideas and immaterialist aspects of human life, particularly in the international arena. Some theoreticians like Aaron Wildavsky, Gunnar Grendstad and Per Selle have called this new generation 'post-materialism'.

*"Postmaterialism, as Inglehart conceives it, is a new value system that has gained importance in Western industrial countries since the Second World War. It reflects the post-war generations' move away from materialist values, such as political order and economic stability, and towards postmaterialist values, such as political participation and more say in government decisions."*⁴

I will try to answer a specific question in this essay. Of course, I wouldn't follow such a normative view and wouldn't defend a special system of values against another. But, I think they have also discovered a sort of change in the theory and thinking of political life. The main question I am going to discuss here is as follows:

"Is there any essential change in the new theoretical generation of understanding international relations compared with the classical approaches? If yes, what would be the main factor of this change in the area of thought?"

The hypothesis formulated to address this research question would be: "There is a flow from materialism toward

4 From Materialism to Ideationalism....

ideationalism in understanding international relations. Materialism is a common base of the classical generation of international relations theories, and in the new generation, a sort of ideationalism is a common characteristic among different theories of international relations."

By 'new', in my question, I mean the different and innovative generation, not just the latest theoreticians, and by flow, I mean a sort of gradual change in the readings of international relations. To begin with, I need to define the main concepts in my question and the hypothesis. First of all, by materialism I mean the emphasis on the material aspect of human behaviors and world life, that is, the nature of human being and the organizations of social forces. "At least five material factors recur in materialist discourse: (1) human nature (2) natural resources (3) geography (4) forces of production and (5) forces of destruction", as Wendt points out. Additionally, economic abilities and bases both at the internal and international level, military capabilities, and the scale of population are factors that shall be added to the above factors. With these indicators, we may find the operational definition of materialism as "the way of thinking which in its comprehension of international relations takes these factors into account." Secondly, ideationalism may be defined as taking a special notice of the element of 'idea' in the human life and society as well as understanding human behaviors in his world-life through exchange of ideas.

My use of 'ideationalism' instead of idealism is because idealism has a particular normative meaning for some approaches of international relations theories. Some of the most famous thinkers make use of this expression for a kind of utopian seeking for unavailable desires while forgetting the real factors in the real world. Wendt defines idealism as follows:

"Sometimes the structure of social consciousness is shared among actors in the form of norms, rules, or institution; sometimes it is not. Either way, social structure can matter in various ways: by

constituting identities and interests, by helping actors find common solutions to problems, by definition and interests, by constituting threats and so on"⁶.

However, there are some other indicators, such as culture, discourses, and any outcomes out of the inter-subjectivity and interaction between mentalities that I may add. Furthermore, the classical trend in the theories of international relations would mean that the main founders of this discipline in the twentieth century, including theories of realism, either traditional realism or neo-realism, liberalism in twentieth century, and Marxism accept the critical theories such as Frankfurt school. Finally, I have chosen some theoreticians as the leading samples for these trends: E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau for traditional realism, Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin for neo-realism, Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane for liberalism, and Lenin for Marxism. For the new generation of international relations theories including the English School, Critical Theory, Constructivism, and Cultural Studies, I have chosen Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, and some current theoreticians of the English School such as Alexander Wendt, Friedrich Kratochwil, Jürgen Habermas, and Robert Cox as the leading examples of this generation.

Here, I may select the library approach for the research as I intend to work on concepts rather than tangible realities which can be measured by statistical methods. Because of the new interpretation or the changing flow of mainstream in this field, I will express my idea with the help of various examples from the thinkers of each trend of theory. My main data will be derived from the texts of these theoreticians. In short, I would like to first suggest that the idealist trend was dominant on international relations thought for its founders, and until the rise of the new realist flow in the 20th century, materialist approaches were in the margin of thinking.

But now, however, we can consider a new return to a sort of idealism in understanding international relations. At this point, I have to elucidate and stress that materialism does not

6 From Materialism to Ideationalism....

mean the ignorance of the role of ideas and the elimination of cultural and normative factors in the understanding and analysis of international relations. On the other hand, ideationalism does not mean that materialistic factors are not important in international phenomena. Both approaches denote the significant role of ideas as well as material elements. But the issue is the priority, significance and essentiality of the elements. Undoubtedly, there is an interaction between these two categories; however, the question is which one has a fundamental role in human life.

Theories of international relations are not just some statements and explanations of the real material world; to me, they are a crucial part and discursive manifestation of historical political life. As R. B. J. Walker points out, "theories of international relations are more interesting as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained than as explanations of contemporary world politics. As such, they may be read as a characteristic discourse of the modern state and as a constitutive practice whose effects can be traced in the remotest interstices of everyday life."⁷ For this reason, the study of international relations theories will help us to comprehend discursive aspects of changes in international relations.

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