

Poverty and International Relations Theory

Laura Kelly

Laura Kelly has just completed an undergraduate degree in Political Science from Brock University and is currently an MA student at the University of New Brunswick.

ABSTRACT: World Poverty. Why has this problem persisted through years of unprecedented economic growth throughout most of the world? This paper proposes that the problem is theoretical. The main theories, such as Realism and Modernization rely on fundamental assumptions such as international order through the maintenance of state power, or free market ideology, which serve to exacerbate, rather than solve, the problem of poverty. The result is either the misrepresentation of poverty, or the blatant ignorance of its existence by these dominant theories.

Poverty exists because it has never been dealt with adequately (Yunnus;1998: 47). The question then is why, what are the roadblocks within International Relations (IR) theory that have prevented the thorough examination of the causes and solutions to poverty? Conventional IR theories have either pushed the issue aside or offered solutions to a problem to which the theory itself contributes. Orthodox IR theory contains structural and economic assumptions which prevent adequate theories or solutions from being developed. These assumptions have created a veil whereby the poor are either inadequately addressed or are simply invisible and inconsequential. By ignoring other values attached to different ways of life, orthodox IR theory exploits and undermines those who are conceptualized as “the poor”. The main orthodox IR theories are realism and modernism or liberal institutionalism. They each contain important structural and economic assumptions about world relations and these assumptions have had lasting effects on different peoples throughout the globe.

The measurement of poverty is one example. It is often measured using income statistics, such as Per Capita Gross National Product. This type of measurement and other similar measurements are incapable of providing an adequate basis for proper conceptualization. They cannot measure unquantifiable aspects of life which alleviate poverty; and they cannot measure the negative aspects of poverty which are also unquantifiable. These can include but are definitely not limited to: exploitation, dispossession, malnutrition, lack of autonomy, lack of feelings of self-worth, landlessness, loneliness, leisure, adequate food and shelter provided from the land and not the market, kinship ties and community support, public welfare programs, public health programs, clean drinking water, a free education, etc. Therefore the measurement of poverty should not be limited to economic values and indicators. Ignoring non-economic values in constructing theories of poverty and prosperity may actually contribute to the persistence of poverty.

In order to prevent assigning value using my own cultural or structural biases, I will confine my definition of poverty to the ability to secure adequate nutrition and an adequate level of freedom. It is a luxury to worry about satisfying other needs if you are hungry or subjected to an inordinate amount of exploitation. An adequate level of freedom can be subjectively measured depending on the value system to which one subscribes. This means we should only measure poverty through an individual's own perception of his or her own situation. This eliminates the risk of defining some as "poor" who would not consider themselves to be because they are wealthy in terms of what they deem valuable. Any broader definition on my part may impose values on others or may undermine what could be considered valuable by others.

Realism

Realists begin and end their analysis with the State. Realists believe that states are concerned mostly with their own security and amassing power, which they use for their own purposes. States are rational, greedy and selfish which causes them to compete with one another. The international system is considered an anarchy by realists, however within this anarchy there is order. Realists want to preserve this inter-state order in order to ensure the security of states. According to Welsh, realists are not concerned with the manner in which their theories are created, but instead they want to insure that the status quo in international relations is stable. Their theories explain how to manage and prolong international order without questioning whether or not it should be maintained in its current form.¹⁰ States being the central actor in world affairs, realists will only consider other actors if they have the capacity to affect state behaviour (Welsh; 2003: 169) . Durfee and Rosenau explain that because developing countries do not possess the same power capabilities as most industrialized countries, there is no reason to consider them except in the case of war. They also differentiate between realism and neorealism. Realism will consider factors within the state when analysing the world system, but neorealists confine themselves only to analysing how states behave towards one another (Durfee and Roseneau; 1996: 530). Realists are concerned primarily with power and devising ways that a state can accumulate more power. Therefore, realists are mercantilists when it comes to the economy. They do not consider various other domestic actors or concerns, nor do they consider individual interests or capabilities because these actors are incapable of truly affecting the international system (Durfee and Roseneau; 1996: 541).

It is not difficult to see why realists are not concerned with the plight of the global poor. Their theories are supra-territorial, within a constructed space controlled by power and wealth, both of which are out of reach for most of the poor. Realists are not only incapable of dealing with individual, community, or domestic poverty, they also do not overly concern themselves with entire nations who are poor. Their obsession with order, security and international stability

means that they cannot address fundamental problems which affect billions of their fellow humans. They are so intent on preserving this order that they cannot even question the existence of the order they are protecting. Welsh indicates that realists justify their obsession with international order because they claim that only through this order can the system be just. When there is no order, there is nothing (Welsh; 2003: 170). She further explains that the realist idea of order is achieved through the potential use of force which balances state behaviour and therefore leads to international order (Welsh; 2003: 175).

The poor are unproblematic for realists. The poor are incapable of disrupting the realist system of order and justice. Robertson-Snape points out how realists draw the line of their moral obligations on state borders. The system is anarchy and therefore each state is concerned with its own preservation. This preservation, according to realists, can only be realized through the amassing of power in relation to other states (Robertson-Snape; 2002: 2). Therefore morality is not important for realists, not to mention poverty. The main assumption in this theory that prevents the examination of poverty is the state and its nature. By limiting their analysis to states and their assumed nature, realists are enabling themselves to perpetuate the system from which they arguably derive benefits. This prevents them from examining the realities of individuals and communities who may be facing exploitation in order for their resident state to amass economic, military, or political power. Their blatant dismissal of morality points to the fact that they would be incapable of justifying the current international order if they decided to step outside of their state-structured world order and into the lives of ordinary people.

Modernization

Modernization is a theory of economic development which takes place within the liberal-institutional framework of international relations. It places importance on efficiency, rational individualism, consumption, economic growth, inherent property rights, and competition. Richards indicates that it is based on the idea of rational thought, an international system of states, and the differentiation between state and religion (Richards; 2003: 58). Modernization theorists believe that the process of modernization can improve the conditions of states it considers underdeveloped. It believes that all states can go through the same process of development and achieve development by imitating the path that was taken by developed nations. It advocates education, industrialization, free trade, and urbanization as key factors in achieving development.

A developed state has the characteristics of high living standards, advanced medicine, and lower mortality and fertility rates (Shen and Williamson; 2001: 3). According to modernization theorists, industrialization and cultural modernity are created through economic development which must begin within the state through education and investment. Economic growth, developed institutions for strong social welfare, and a consolidation of society are the results of modernization process. A trickle-down phenomenon happens during this process which is when the growth of the economy benefits the whole society. All economic activity concerning increased investment and trade helps to distribute

technology and know-how, helps to foster increased economic development and finally results in improved welfare for the society (Jenkins and Scalan; 2001: 2). According to modernization theorists the process of modernity will appeal to all rational individuals. There is no need to question the morality of modernity because it is objective and value-free. Because of its objectivity it does not infringe on cultural beliefs and for this reason it creates a process which policy-makers can easily follow in order to achieve progress (Robertson-Snape; 2000: 3). The state is very central to liberal-institutionalism, (the international framework for modernism) and it is within the state where modernization takes place. Robertson-Snape points out that the system of states contains its own moral code (2000: 5). However, this code does not actually contain any morals except those that apply to behaviour within the society of states. Therefore the state system is the only place where morality can be judged at an international level (Robertson-Snape; 2000:7). Welsh also notes that an international society of states is considered important but is limited to the mutual acceptance of the preservation of order within the international system (2003:180).

In the postwar era realism was the dominant IR theory. States were in control of their own domestic economies and most states that are now developed used Keynesian economic policies to manage and promote economic growth. Counter-cyclical fiscal policies were implemented to even out the business cycle and prevent capitalist crises. Poverty was considered only within the domestic realm and it was the duty of the state to provide welfare supports when the economy could not provide enough jobs. The goal of this policy was full employment, however most states only strived for minimum unemployment levels. When Keynesianism (as implemented by states) could not solve the problems of the OPEC oil crises of the 70s and early 80s the ideology of neoliberalism became the guide for national and international policy in order to sustain economic growth. Neoliberalism touted the ideals of the separation of the economy and politics and the virtues of a marketplace free from state intervention and state regulation. Therefore by separating economics and politics poverty had once again been cast further from international relations. Not only was poverty considered a domestic issue during the postwar era, the rise of rational individualism and free markets meant that poverty could not be a systemic problem but an individual one. This is relevant for international relations theory because modernization and its policy directives are being exported from developed countries along with neoliberal ideology.

Stienstra says that state policies may influence individual conditions but these conditions are inconsequential within the realm of international relations (Stienstra; 2002: 113). She further states that this is caused by the individualist ideology propagated by the globalizing force of neoliberalism (Stienstra; 2002: 115). Durfee and Roseneau agree. According to neoliberalism, poverty is caused by the laziness of the individual and in order to escape poverty the individual must actively participate in the economy (1996:526).

Within modernization theory is the belief that traditional societies should strive to imitate the policies, institutions and value structures of the United States. The US is the model that each country should emulate in order to escape its tradition-

alism, or underdevelopment (Gereffi; 1983: 5). According to modernization theorists, all nations are moving towards the same goal, the same destination which resembles the developed countries of Europe or North America (Richards; 2003: 57).

Colas indicates that liberal institutionalists view the economic order of capitalism through international market exchanges. They believe that a state can be exploited by unequal terms of trade with other states but they do not examine the area of production where there is a tension between classes (Colas; 2003: 199). The free marketplace is protected and developed within the international state structured system of global capitalism. This international marketplace structure is deemed to enable stable global relationships (Lehman; 2002: 422). Political and economic wrongs will be made right through the participation of individuals within the free marketplace (Lehman; 2002: 423). Therefore, modernization theorists would claim that they do make reference to poverty by providing a solution to it, which is the free marketplace.

Durfee and Roseneau indicate that this allows modernization theorists to ignore problems of distribution and fairness. The ideology that the free market will solve all inequalities in time and that common individual interests and efficient resource use will create a climate where all people and states will have the chance to reap the benefits of modernization exemplify the ideology's ignorance (Durfee and Roseneau; 1996: 528). Jenkins believes that this is a way to make poverty and inequality seem natural. She states that capitalism profits from the social and economic inequalities within society, and justifies it by creating the idea that poverty and inequality are natural and inevitable (2003: 67).

Not only does IR economic theory provide a means for adherents and advocates to benefit from poverty and inequalities, Tooze and Murphy state that the value system of the theory is not capable of measuring the economic activities of the poor. The poor may not spend much money, if any, and international institutions and macro-economic policies would not view the money that is spent by the poor as something worth measuring, that is, it is inconsequential. Their economic activity does not appear on their radar of significance and their resources and consumption habits do not influence demand or consumer profiles (Tooze and Murphy; 1996: 687).

Economic Growth, Production and Property

Economic growth can be found in both realism and modernization theories. While realism will only consider economic growth as a means for the state to amass power and wealth in the mercantilist sense; modernization theory believes economic growth is the way out of traditional backwardness and into a more developed ,civilized way of life for a nation and people. Trainer indicates that economic growth is implicit in all development theories as a necessary factor for development. The trickle-down effect is what actually causes development through indiscriminate growth brought forth by what capitalists want to develop instead of distribution being dependent on social and environmental outcomes (Trainer; 2002: 56). He later states that a decrease in social welfare is

directly related to an increase in economic growth within wealthy nations (Trainer; 2002: 60).

Juhaz believes that it is the economic model which causes economic growth to fail the poor. She states that the model allows global corporations unrestrained access to accumulate human, natural and capital resources (Juhasz; 2002: 408). Jenkins and Scanlan would argue that the problem lies with control over economic resources. They state, A...economic growth may improve aggregate food supply, but because of unequal control of economic resources the poor and disadvantaged remain hungry (2001: 2). Sen would view this as a problem which concerns the inherent value of property rights (1992: 226). He writes about entitlements and how a person owns endowments such as labour. When a person lives within the system of exchange (the market) that person must live from the exchange value of his or her entitlements. If the entitlements a person has will not provide enough resources through market exchange to purchase food, then that person must go hungry (Sen; 1992: 225). Without specifying the problem of property rights Trainer explains Sen's perspective using the tenants of modernization or liberal economic theory. They are efficiency and productivity. He says that in Haiti where many people do not have enough to eat, land could be efficiently used in a productive manner to grow flowers for export (Trainer; 2002: 9). Although Trainer does not explicitly say that inherent property rights are to blame for this ironic situation, I think he could have taken his point further by examining the issue of property rights and how this kind of injustice is not viewed as unethical given their inherent value within economic theory.

Sen writes that this situation is not inevitable if the alleviation of hunger and poverty were given a higher value than property rights. If this were the case, property rights could be violated and it would not be considered unjust. He then goes on to explain the present situation where property rights cannot be violated without the violation being considered immoral. In this case although millions of people will die but could be saved, the morality of private property rights is stronger than the morality of saving innocent lives (1992: 225).

Richards believes that the theory of modernization is simply an ideology which is used by the strong to justify their arbitrary use of power over the weak, it allows for the exploitation of others without any feelings of guilt (2003: 59). Juhasz illustrates this point by indicating that multinational corporations are making record profits while billions of people live in abject poverty, they now cannot afford to buy the food they used to grow for themselves (2002:417).

Trainer points out that the dominant economic theories are not about the entirety of economics, but only theorize about the capitalist economy. Economies that are pushed aside and made invisible are the A...household economy, a commune or monastery, or ... tribal economy (2002: 9). Streeten explains that an increase of production, commodities, or high growth levels may leave the poor lacking in what they need to live, while many other important aspects of life that may be valued by the poor may be achieved in other ways (1998: 31).

Shiva indicates that if modernization was inherently justifiable and its values were universal then its spread would be welcome and free from violence.

However, violence and misrepresentation are characteristic of relations between modernization, the dominant knowledge structure, and traditional forms of knowledge. The dominant knowledge structure objectifies the traditional one by labelling it unscientific or primitive which causes it to disappear. Modernization considers itself scientific and acceptable by all, but modernization is not real knowledge, instead it is a vehicle for power (1993; 10). She further explains that because of this labelling and misrepresentation, natural resource use is only viewed in terms of productivity and exchange value. The local people who have lived with this natural resource which has been sustaining them, are ignored by commercial interests because their knowledge is not considered useful by powerful actors (Shiva; 1993: 26).

Modernization theory is spread by wealthy countries to poorer countries. Arguably modernization is spread to the benefit of those who are already rich. Increases in the economic growth of a nation are celebrated as decreases in poverty and increased development. International relations theory must deconstruct how development paths are spread or dictated to nations and nations within nations. The success of modernization also must be analyzed by theorists in qualifiable instead of quantifiable terms. A person who grew their own food, had clean water and adequate shelter but no income would be considered poor. In contrast if that person's land is contaminated by industry or is dispossessed by the government, they could be forced into a city slum where there is no clean water or food. This person must then work for a wage which will not necessarily provide enough nourishment for her and her family, but international indicators would show an increase in economic growth and a decrease in poverty. International relations theory should be carefully analysing this, because these statistics are published through respected international organizations who because the theories contain preconstructed ideas of value, cannot grasp what actually happens in the ordinary lives of the poor.

The poor within international relations theory are instead relegated to citizens of some state which is responsible for their welfare. The idea of the state is problematic in both modernization and realist ideologies. The state, for realists, is where wealth and power are contained and the characteristics of this wealth and power cause the state to behave in certain ways which realists try to understand. They assume the state exists and do not question its legitimacy. They want an international system of order and this order is more important than people's lives or how that order affects the lives of ordinary people around the globe. The realist goal of preserving the system of states allows a certain type of power distribution throughout the globe and also helps the spread of modernization theory.

Modernization theory is concerned with development within a state, change from traditional society to modern, and increased trade and economic flows between states. The state is used to protect and propagate the ideals of modernization. Modernization displaces people and cultures by imposing its system of values. Private property rights and economic growth can each create or exacerbate the problem of poverty. Individualism, consumption, and competi-

tion are values which are not universal but instead transform cultural norms and local environments and inhibit finding real solutions to the problem of poverty.

The problem with orthodox IR theory and its analysis of poverty has been either invisibility or misrepresentation and the imposition of dominant values. I have argued that these theories should consider alternate ways of viewing poverty, however if there was a sudden change in how the theories were explained, they would not be the same theories. Perhaps then, these theories should become a relic of the past because they have not helped to solve the most basic aspect of human suffering at a time when its resolution was possible. Instead the theories have served only the interests of powerful cultures, actors, and economies.

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