

Applying International Relations and Political Economy Theories to the Internationalization of Education

In a course on International Education Policy, I did not expect to see connections or parallels to my previous undergraduate and graduate studies, which focused on International Relations and the International Political Economy. In those years, I spent ample time analyzing political and economic theories or paradigms, from Liberalism to Realism to Marxism, as well as concepts like hegemony, power struggles, dependency, regional alliances and the emergence of non-state actors. I considered international education as a completely separate field, in which such ideas or issues would be irrelevant. But, since beginning my studies in international education policy, I've noticed stark similarities from day one. There are many connections between these fields and the internationalization of education.

The internationalization of education can be seen through the same theories or paradigms as international politics and economics. These theories act as lenses through which we observe processes in order to better explain them and predict them. In the area of international relations, such a process could be the rise and fall of empires or the bipolar stability of the Cold War. In international economics, it could be the relations between the first- and third-world or the effect that an international market has on state sovereignty. But we can also use these paradigms to observe processes or trends in international education at the national and international level. Such theories are not meant to be perfect laws but rather guides

to understanding. To better understand the internationalization of education, we can attempt to make use of these theories or paradigms, borrowed from other fields of study.

One such paradigm is dependency theory, which contains some of the same ideas as Marxism. Dependency theory notes that, in the world-system, there is a “core” of wealthy, developed states and a “periphery” of poor, undeveloped states. World Systems Theory, founded later, also notes a “semi-periphery,” which exists in between. As far as the world political economy goes, the theory claims that resources flow from the periphery to the core in the form of natural resources and cheap labor while the core then uses the periphery as a market for their goods, manufactured with these resources. This creates a system in which the core continues to live at a high economic level while the periphery remains undeveloped and dependent on the core (Ferraro 2008, p 58-64).

Although this theory refers primarily to economics, resources, and divisions of labor, it could be applied to international education as well. We discussed international student mobility in a different class and there is a clear flow of students from the periphery to the core. A study of student mobility, done by UNESCO in 2007, showed that the two largest destinations for internationally mobile students were Western Europe with 41% and North America with 24%. On the other hand, Sub-Saharan Africa hosted only 2.6% of internationally mobile students (Macready 2011, p 15). Although a great deal of this mobility is from core

countries to other core countries, this movement to the core far exceeds movement towards the periphery. This is understandable because the core offers better institutions and more reputable degrees, but this trend does show a degree of dependency, inequality and several ways in which the core benefits from the periphery.

This process shows a movement of resources from the periphery to the core in the form of students, most likely wealthy, high-skilled students, as well as the periphery's dependency on the core for its education. The core then benefits from this dependency in several ways. First, these international students will pay a higher tuition and bring money to the hosting country. For example, education is Australia's 3rd largest export and brought in \$13 billion in 2008 (GAO 2009, p 7). Second, international student importing also benefits the host in that it adds to the long sought-after idea of internationalized and diverse campuses. And third, these international students add skills to the host country's workforce during their studies or after, if they choose to stay, and often strips the periphery country of their best and brightest citizens.

Another concept of international relations that is relatable to the internationalization of education is the idea of actors. Political theories, such as Realism, have long promoted the idea that states are the primary actors in the international system and international education policies at the national level do show that states are major players in this field as well. For example, they adjust

immigration laws to encourage international students to enter and they establish programs like Fulbright to further international education goals. And as Realism also notes, they do this to better themselves or create advantages over other state-actors through workforce development, nation-building, the formation of alliances with other countries, and competition for international student tuition.

But unlike Realism, theories like Liberalism note the emergence of non-state actors that can be either under or above the state level. Regionalization, such as the creation of the European Union, shows that there can be actors beyond the state, supra-state actors. The Bologna Process is an example of this in the realm of education. Policies regarding education have long been made at the local or national level, but the European Union is expanding its policies over borders. One could also make examples out of the “clustering” or “alliances” in education amongst countries that are geographically or culturally close, such as countries in the Commonwealth or the former Soviet Union. These examples show how reaching beyond one’s sovereign borders in the name of power or economics can also be applied to education. The emergence of non-state actors below the level of the state, or sub-state actors, is another important point made by Liberalism Theory. Such actors include entities like companies, terrorist organizations, religious groups, and NGOs. But apply this to international education and we get international education institutions and organizations that act beyond state boundaries. International Baccalaureate is such a sub-state actor that works across national borders. Middlebury College also has campuses in several countries in is a sub-state actor.

The last concept that transcends these fields, and many others, is globalization. These paradigms, Dependency Theory, Realism and Liberalism, all exist in the context of a process of globalization, and this process affects international education in the same ways it affects politics and economics. While globalization has affected the way that various actors depend on each other economically, i.e. a financial crisis in one place has the potential to affect another, it has also had this effect in international education, i.e. an increase in Chinese seeking a higher education has led to many Chinese students enrolling in American universities. Globalization is also responsible for the emergence of supra-state and sub-state political actors, just as it is responsible for the emergence of these actors in international education, from regional educational institutions to transnational study-abroad companies. Using these theories as tools, we can see that globalization has made our political, economic, *and* educational world much more connected, interdependent and complex in the same ways. And although they are not foolproof, these theories at least offer a lens to look through and better understand the overall processes and trends of international education.

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