

Chronicle of Higher Education
September 24, 1999

Does International-Relations Scholarship Reflect a Bias Toward the U.S.?

By PETER MONAGHAN

Just as child psychologists try to explain the erratic behavior of children -- playful, polite, peevish, petulant -- so international-relations scholars attempt to make sense of the perplexing interactions of countries at war or peace.

Ideally, their theories predict future events, and perhaps are even noticed in Washington.

Given the focus in international-relations scholarship on political differences and hostilities, and the ideological diversity of its practitioners, it is not surprising that heated disputes break out. Still, not often can a scholar claim that critics of a paper he has published in a leading journal are trying "to make me seem an utter fool."

From an academic foxhole in Texas, Robert S. Snyder is making just that claim. "I didn't really know what to make of it," the associate professor of political science at Southwestern University says of the barrage of criticism that greeted him when he returned from vacation in mid-August. It seemed a lot of people were unhappy with an article he had written, "The U.S. and Third World Revolutionary States: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations."

That article led the June issue of *International Studies Quarterly*, the journal of the 3,200-member International Studies Association.

The dispute has raised some thorny questions, most prominently: Does international-relations scholarship suffer from biases, or blinders, that favor official U.S. policy? Is it influenced too much by the post-Cold War triumphalism of political culture in the United States?

Mr. Snyder's article posits his theory of how American relations with revolutionary states typically break down: The United States starts out as cautiously accommodating of revolutionary regimes, but then the regimes consolidate their domestic political strength by fomenting international crises with the United States, which responds with hostility.

A theory stands or falls on how well it accords with the cases one uses to build it, and on how well it predicts future events. Mr. Snyder's theory fails on the first count, according to several experts on the countries and history he uses to support it -- primarily the Cuban revolution of the 1950s and the revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran in the 1970s.

Leading the charge against Mr. Snyder is David N. Gibbs, an associate professor of political science at the University of Arizona who has written about open and covert U.S. intervention in third-world states. He claims that Mr. Snyder, in arguing that the United States took merely a

defensive stance toward Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran, is "fundamentally distorting" the facts.

The most glaring illustration of that, he says, is Mr. Snyder's claim that the United States was antagonistic to Castro's Cuba only from the time President Eisenhower officially adopted hostility to Cuba as U.S. policy, in March, 1960 -- after Fidel Castro had demanded that American oil companies in Cuba refine Soviet oil.

What Mr. Snyder does not mention, Mr. Gibbs notes, is that U.S. intelligence agents had begun to supervise Cuban exiles making bombing raids into Cuba, and that the Central Intelligence Agency was actively planning the assassination of Castro.

The rightness or wrongness of those actions aside, says Mr. Gibbs, "to me, that's a critically important omission, totally unjustifiable by any standard."

In response, Mr. Snyder claims: "While it is true that the C.I.A. began to develop a contingency plan to destabilize the Castro regime in December 1959, it was just that -- a contingency plan."

The vital fact, he insists, is when the United States adopted such a plan as official policy.

Mr. Gibbs faults most of Mr. Snyder's evidence for making that distinction, saying the Southwestern University scholar repeatedly disregards covert actions that the United States is now known to have taken.

Together with three other international-relations scholars, Mr. Gibbs wrote to the editors of I.S.Q. to protest the article and to itemize their objections. They ended with a challenge: That I.S.Q. publish a correction, and even a rejoinder that Mr. Gibbs and his colleagues would write.

The editors, four political scientists at Iowa State University, declined, saying the dispute involved "theoretical and ideological differences." They invited Mr. Gibbs and his colleagues to submit a response that would, like Mr. Snyder's, have to pass a standard review process.

The war was on.

Mr. Gibbs refused to submit a rejoinder, saying that "the fact that I.S.Q. would publish an article like Snyder's must raise questions regarding the competence of its referees."

He also began skirmishing guerrilla-style, forgoing the conventional theaters of academic warfare by taking his complaint to *The Chronicle*.

"It's a fact that covert actions were a major part of U.S. policy, and were a major part of the cases mentioned by Mr. Snyder," says Mr. Gibbs. At least several experts on the countries and incidents cited by Mr. Snyder agree.

It is impossible to judge whether revolutionary regimes were justified in presuming U.S. hostility toward them without looking at the whole context of U.S. dealings with third-world states, says

Irene L. Gendzier, one of the area specialists who have been drawn into the dispute. She is a professor of political science at Boston University whose books include *Notes From the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945-1958* (Columbia University Press, 1997).

Mr. Snyder, she says, "ignores the contemporary record of the Department of State, of the National Security Council, and of U.S. intelligence." By the time of the Cuban revolution, notes Ms. Gendzier, the United States had tried to undermine independence struggles in the Belgian Congo in 1959, in Guatemala in 1954, in Iran in 1953, and in numerous other countries around the world.

Mr. Snyder's essay, like much international-relations writing, pays too little attention to the nature of "low-intensity conflicts" -- as the Reagan Administration called counterinsurgencies -- involving the United States and revolutionary states, she says. The record "again and again reinforces the dominance of counterinsurgency as part of a U.S. response."

Defending his article, Mr. Snyder says that the significance of many historical events can be debated, and that he is trying to show how some "individual cases ... are related and then provide a theoretical explanation across these cases."

International relations is primarily a field in which historical fact is interpreted, not established. Mr. Snyder's critics are not convinced by his interpretation, but they do credit him with prompting discussion of some broader concerns.

Concerns, for instance, that international relations is one of a number of fields that are so interwoven with the federal government, particularly with military and intelligence agencies, that they cannot avoid aping the political ideology of those agencies. That's what Christopher Simpson and other contributors argue in a volume he edited, *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences During the Cold War* (The New Press, 1998).

"I'm not suggesting there's somebody in the Pentagon who's writing out orders of the day for what they're going to do at M.I.T. in political science," says Mr. Simpson, an associate professor of communication at American University.

"What I am saying is that a combination of academic entrepreneurship, the limited sources of funds, and the extreme inbreeding of old-boy networks combines to put blinders on, or to put boundaries around, what is acceptable to discuss and what is not acceptable to discuss."

Covert operations have almost completely fallen outside those boundaries in international-relations scholarship, he contends, even though they do receive some careful attention in the related field of diplomatic studies.

The authors in *Universities and Empire* examine the emergence and development of international studies, area studies, and development studies, and their origins in and links to U.S. military, intelligence, and propaganda, as well as to corporate and foundation financing. In Project

Camelot in the 1960s, for example, the U.S. military enlisted behavioral scientists to develop propaganda tools to effect social change in the third world.

The authors also look at the more subtle ways in which the dominant political culture can shape scholarship.

In one chapter, Bruce Cumings, a professor of international history at the University of Chicago, borrowing a term from Michel Foucault's writings on the sociology of power, investigates the way power goes "capillary" through such avenues as decisions on who gets tenure, who edits prestigious journals or runs academic associations, and which textbooks are adopted.

The question of whether, in the post-Cold War era, international-relations scholarship flatters official U.S. policy is a no-brainer, argues Mr. Simpson. Everyone knows that the victors write history.

"If we were talking about 19th-century British imperialism, or 12th-century Confucian scholarship, the extent of blinding would not even be a controversial topic," he says. "The extent to which the conditions of the day blinded leading scholars of the day to actual realities of their time is a non-controversial question. It's only today that it's a controversial question."

Illustrating the sociology of international-studies disciplines, Boston University's Ms. Gendzier agrees with Mr. Simpson that savvy scholars in quest of limited funds have had no trouble figuring out how best to frame their requests for money. "You get code words in different periods," she says, "and so, for example, one of the code words of today is 'transition to democracy.'"

That phrase, she says, crops up in grant proposals just as it does in, say, the Clinton Administration's recent statements about the crisis in East Timor.

"There's a crossover between the language that's legitimized in official policy and the language that makes its appearance in academia," she says.

If that is true, one might expect senior scholars in the field to disagree with Mr. Simpson, Ms. Gendzier, and other critics of international-relations theory. Some frankly do; others emphatically do not.

"There are no points for mouthing U.S. policy," says Robert Keohane, a professor of political science at Duke University whose has served as president of the International Studies Association.

"Many people don't focus so much on whether U.S. policy is good, bad, or indifferent," he notes, and "policy-related academics don't get points for saying how clever the government is" -- in fact, it's quite the contrary.

No, actually, the danger of a pro-U.S. bias is "old news," says Bruce M. Russett, a professor of

international relations and political science at Yale University who edits the well-regarded Journal of Conflict Resolution. "People tend to reflect their own cultures and political systems when they write about international politics," he says.

"Presumably we're all aware of that, and presumably we all try to avoid that in limited and varying degrees."

David A. Lake, a professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego who co-edits the journal International Organization, says that biases in part simply amount to differing perspectives and scholarly approaches. "There is a strong strand of conservative nationalism running in some international-relations work," he says. "At the same time, there is a strong tradition of critical theory, or postmodernism, in international relations which seeks to 'problematize' and therefore reveal the 'hidden power' in society and international relations. Much of what goes under the heading of 'feminist theory' in I.R. takes this form."

One point on which several journal editors agree is that Mr. Gibbs and his colleagues are not being stifled. All articles are subject to peer review, and enough outlets exist for virtually all points of view, these editors insist, whether in other journals, journals' forums for dissent, or letters to the editor -- which I.S.Q. doesn't have. Richard W. Mansbach, one of the journal's new editors, says flatly that the policy of requiring that rejoinders be refereed "is a policy that can't be changed. If it were, it would be open season on any article that was published in any academic journal."

Mr. Gibbs says he is now "looking into other possible venues," but contends that the real issue is that prestigious journals should give less room to articles like Mr. Snyder's and more to perspectives that truly dig deep into U.S. foreign policy and into academic flattery of it.

William Thompson, a political scientist at Indiana University and one of the former I.S.Q. editors who accepted Mr. Snyder's article, just doesn't buy the argument that I.S.Q.'s reviewers would be likely to reject Mr. Gibbs's views as too controversial.

Editors look for contributors with something interesting to say, Mr. Thompson argues, regardless of whether they agree with their assumptions and conclusions. As for Mr. Snyder's original article, "Frankly, if I thought you could create a controversy that would get people incensed to talk about it, I would have been willing to entertain the idea of publishing it just for that alone," says Mr. Thompson.

"One of the problems with mainstream social science is, you don't generate much enthusiasm among readers."

<http://chronicle.com> Section: Research & Publishing Page: A20