

Contested Social Orders And International Politics

Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in International Relations Theory: A Possible Synthesis?
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Abstract

Much has been written about the field of International Relations (IR) in both substantive and methodological terms. One of the most contentious aspects of the IR as a scholarly discipline revolves around one deceptively simplistic query: what is IR about? A number of so-called "Great Debates" have played out in the field yet few have assumed as prominent a position as the foundationalism (F)/anti-foundationalism (AF) debate. A considerable point of friction can be identified between competing theories responding to interpretations of the nature of IR. Some assert that common ground enabling academics to critique rival "truth claims" does exist. That same ground facilitates, however, an understanding that there can be none beyond a theory acting as a neutral arbiter between them. This article depicts this what Smith (1995) referred to as a "most exciting debate." It presents a possible solution provided by Monteiro and Ruby (2009), showing the problematic arising from their solution of post-foundationalism.

Keywords: Contestation, traditional, principles, post-foundationalism, interactionism

Do not worry if you have built your castles in the air. They are where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.
—Henry David Thoreau

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory chapter of Ken Booth and Steve Smith's *International Relations Theory Today* (1995), Smith provides readers with a concise overview of how the discipline of International Relations (IR) is described and categorized within its own discourse. The question driving his research revolves around the very nature of IR and precisely what it is about. His response treats the discipline as being shaped and constituted by the various debates (he describes 10 main debates) having played out in the field of IR, such as the so-called "Great Debates." Smith (1995) concludes his overview with the foundationalism (F)/anti-foundationalism (AF) debate, which is as he states, the "[m]ost exciting debate within constitutive theory" (28). For Smith, this intellectual exchange takes place beyond the boundaries of explanatory theories and is, indeed, the most important interaction for the future of the entire discipline. In Smith's (1995) words:

[f]or too long, under the shadow of positivism, international relations has been on an outdated and fundamentally contested view of both the content of international theory and the nature of social science inquiry (30).

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