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Mind the Gap: Misrepresentation of Comparative Advantage in International Relations Textbooks

The last decades of development in the field of international political economy (IPE) have placed international economic issues in the mainstream of international relations (IR) scholarship. A categorization of international politics into “high politics” of national security and “low politics” of economic issues, as suggested by approaches within the Realist paradigm, is no longer acceptable for many of today’s scholars. Indeed, the importance of exploring interactions between economic and political factors is often taken for granted. Consequently, the boundaries between “economic” and “political” have become increasingly blurred.

Appreciation for and understanding of the significance of economic issues has yet to find its way into teachings for the undergraduate audience. IPE scholars have paid considerable attention to trade models developed by economists and have incorporated many insights from these models into their analyses. At best, undergraduate introductory courses in world politics covering international trade oversimplify these models; at worst, the models are completely misrepresented.

I argue that the way “a typical IR textbook” discusses David Ricardo’s principle of comparative advantage represents this broader trend. The definition of the principle, conceptualization of the principle and examples given in the typical textbook are so general that they could apply to Adam Smith’s principle of absolute advantage as well as to Ricardo’s principle of comparative advantage. However, there is a fundamental difference between the comparative advantage and absolute advantage. To put it simply, comparative advantage suggests there is a reason to engage in international trade even if the absolute advantage suggests otherwise. Hence, ambiguous explanations and oversimplifications of Ricardo’s principle lead to misrepresentation of the principles, as the disregard for details does not allow students to learn what distinguishes comparative advantage from other models of international trade.

If my argument is correct, misrepresentation of the comparative advantages poses a significant gap between academic research and teaching. Bridging this gap is in the interests of researchers and teachers alike. If students fail to grasp something as simple as comparative advantage in the introductory courses, engaging in meaningful debate on international trade in more advanced courses and expecting them to understand more sophisticated arguments at higher levels would be without warrant.

To demonstrate the existence of this gap between research and the teachings of international trade, the paper analyzes the discussion of Ricardo’s principle of comparative advantage based introductory international relations textbooks. Here I am not making a normative claim that the principle should be included in all IR textbooks, nor am I saying the model is the best one for understanding international trade. The unit

of analysis is introductory IR textbook that discusses Ricardo's principle. Hence, the authors have decided to include the principle of comparative advantage. Their reasons for including the principle, whatever they may be, are left out of the paper.

I evaluate the accuracy of the discussion of the principle of comparative advantages on a basis of population of introductory IR textbooks. Since the entire population of the study is relatively small, the sample size will be close to 100 percent. In order to evaluate the accuracy, Ricardo's original discussion as well as research papers by leading scholars are used. In conclusion, the paper offers suggestions to cover the economics behind arguments regarding international trade in a more detailed and accurate way.