

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Cynthia Weber



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Note to teachers

After a sabbatical from Purdue University a few years ago, I couldn't wait to get back into the classroom. I had missed my interactions with students and had a renewed appreciation for the practice of teaching. But I had a number of problems. Like many teachers, I had intellectually outgrown my well-worn way of introducing international politics and international relations (IR) theory to students, but I never had the time to do more than tinker with examples or simulation exercises in an attempt to remedy this. Also, as at many other universities, the introductory course I taught in international relations was a prerequisite for later courses. As such, it was expected to familiarize students with key themes from long-standing IR traditions like realism, idealism, historical materialism, and their neo's, and introduce them to new perspectives like constructivism, postmodernism, gender, and globalization. This could be done by opting for an approach that narrated the historical development of IR traditions and debates or, alternatively, for a more topical approach to the subject and the field. Beyond these two standard options, there were no others.

My experiments in the classroom with these teaching techniques left me feeling both fulfilled and disappointed. I was pretty good at narrating the traditions of IR theory, situating them historically, and bringing them into lively conversation with one another. This allowed me to explore some exciting topics in the field as well, which students seemed to enjoy. All this was fulfilling. But I was disappointed with how students interacted with IR theory. Despite my best critical intentions, students would find a particular aspect of IR theory they could identify with, attach themselves to it as 'the way things are', and evaluate every other IR theory they would hear in relation to it. Most often, this theory was realism. Occasionally, it was idealism. And in some cases, it was historical materialism or gender. It wasn't that I cared which theory students attached themselves to. I didn't prefer them to believe one theory over another. My aim was to get them to critically rethink *all* the theories. And I failed miserably.

Why did I fail? If a theory is presented to students as if it narrates just the way things are in international politics and if this way of making sense of the world taps into students' own preconceptions about the world, then it is extremely difficult to get them to think critically about the theory. So I had to do better. But how? How could I both stick to the brief of what an introduction to international relations or IR theory is generally supposed to be and at the same time present the IR theories and topics in ways that allow for their genuine critical reconsideration?

International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction is my answer to this question. Its approach is both traditional and non-traditional. It is traditional because it is organized around the major traditions of international relations theory – realism, idealism, historical materialism, constructivism, gender, and globalization. It is non-traditional because it reexamines these IR traditions by asking the critical question, what makes the stories these IR traditions tell about international politics *appear* to be true? What, for example, makes realism's story about sovereign nation-states locked into a battle for survival or idealism's story about the possibilities of international cooperation so compelling? In this book I suggest that what makes these IR stories appear to be true are the IR myths upon which they are based.

IR myths are *apparent truths*, usually expressed as slogans, that IR traditions rely upon in order to appear to be true. The 'truth' or the 'falsity' of an IR myth is beside the point. Examining how an IR myth functions to make an IR tradition appear to be true is the point. So, for example, the IR myth 'international anarchy is the permissive cause of war' is the *apparent truth* that realism and these days neorealism depend upon. Similarly, 'there is an international society' is the IR myth that makes the stories told by idealism and neoidealism appear to be true.

None of this should come as a surprise to IR theorists. We know that different IR traditions rely upon very different IR myths in order to appear to be true. So how do we make sense of these contradictory ways of seeing the world for our students? The usual strategy is to 'test' the validity of the IR myths against the 'facts' of international politics to determine which IR myth (and therefore which IR tradition) offers the most accurate description of international politics. Proving that an IR myth, tradition, or theory is wrong so that it can be replaced by another one which is 'true' is usually what we mean by doing 'critical IR theory'.

But what if we push our analysis just a bit further? What if we unpack not just IR traditions but the IR myths upon which they are based? What if we ask of IR myths (as we do of IR traditions), what makes the story they tell about international politics appear to be true? What makes international anarchy *appear* to be the permissive cause of war, or why does there *appear* to be an international society?

If we pursue these questions, then we not only push our analysis of IR traditions further. We push what it means to do 'critical IR theory'. Why is this the case? Because the alternative way of doing critical IR theory proposed in this book allows us to examine not only how one 'truth' replaces another 'truth' but also how 'truths' get constructed. This is beyond the scope of most traditional critical IR theory which concerns itself only with evaluating which 'truth' appears to be most 'true'. By declaring one theory 'true' and another one 'false', traditional critical IR theory cannot then go back and examine what makes the 'true' theory *appear* to be true. For example, realism critiques idealism by 'proving' that its IR myth, 'international anarchy is the permissive cause of war', is 'more true' than idealism's myth, 'there is

an international society'. But, in so doing, realism cannot ask what makes its IR myth about international anarchy *appear* to be true. And, without critically analysing its own IR myth, realism ultimately proves nothing.

Asserting the 'truth' of one IR myth over another in no way guarantees the 'truth' of an IR myth, no matter how much empirical evidence is amassed to support the 'truth' of the myth. This is the case because the 'truth' of an IR myth depends as much upon *how* empirical evidence is organized into a coherent story about international politics as it does on the evidence alone. This is a central problem with how critical theory is usually practised in the discipline of international relations.

International Relations Theory takes this problem seriously. How it takes it seriously is by shifting its analytical emphasis away from looking for 'empirical evidence' to support the 'truth' of an IR myth towards an investigation of the *organization* of the 'facts' that make an IR story about international politics *appear* to be true. Doing critical IR theory in this way means we have to suspend our usual preoccupation with getting to the 'real truth' about an IR myth, tradition, or theory and ask instead, what makes a particular story about international politics *appear to be true*? Or, to put it somewhat differently, how does the 'truth' function in a particular IR myth?

It is not accidental that this book as my answer to how to teach IR theory better should focus on stories and how they are told. If the world is made up of 'facts' and stories that organize those 'facts', then there is no more important skill to pass on to students than to make them better readers and writers of stories, better interpreters of not just the 'facts' but of the organization of the 'facts'. With this in mind, *International Relations Theory* does not try to be a comprehensive textbook crammed with every 'fact' about international life or even international theory. By focusing on the major IR traditions of realism, idealism, historical materialism, constructivism, postmodernism, gender, and globalization, it attempts to help students to read and write their world better by arming them with the ability to critically ask, how does the 'truth' get told?

Hopefully, all this takes me far along the critical road to teaching IR theory. But it leaves me with one more major problem. How do I get students interested in doing alternative critical IR theory? What could possibly motivate and engage students who are so often bored with reading and writing and who are likely to find IR theory incomprehensible at first?

Good teaching means starting where your students are and bringing them to where you want them to be, rather than always expecting them to know how to come to where you are. Over the years, I have found that students enjoy engaging with visual media. Students are into television and film. And, what's more, they tend to be excellent readers and writers of visual media. To get students to be better readers and writers of IR theory, the place to start is to get them to apply what they already know about reading and writing visual media to international politics.

How do I do this? By teaching them IR theory through popular films that they know about and like. That's why this book uses *Lord of the Flies* to teach students about how the anarchy myth works in realism and neorealism, *Independence Day* to teach them about how the international society myth functions in idealism and neoidealism, *Wag the Dog* to introduce them to the debates around social constructivism and postmodernism, *Fatal Attraction* to make them aware of the political stakes

of thinking about gender as a variable, and *The Truman Show* to reconsider the myth that history is over and how this myth supports neoliberal stories about 'globalization'.

As this brief synopsis illustrates, I use popular films as vehicles through which students can rethink IR theory and IR myths. The films are used not only to illustrate a particular IR myth but to show students something more besides, and this something more is how the IR myth functions. Put differently, popular films not only illustrate IR myths and the IR traditions they support. Popular films provide students with answers to the question, how does an IR myth *appear* to be true? In so doing, popular films point to how politics, power, and ideology are culturally constructed and how the culture of IR theory might be politically reconstructed.

Again, this should not surprise IR theorists, especially those who are attentive to the current debates concerning IR theory and popular culture. For my starting point is to think about IR theory as a site of cultural practice, and this book is a critical reconsideration of what must go without saying in order for the traditional cultural practices of IR theory to function.

It is written with undergraduate students in English-speaking universities in mind. It can be used on its own to structure an introductory course on international relations or IR theory, or it can be used to supplement either historical/theoretical or topical presentations of IR. Each myth is accompanied by 'Suggestions for further thinking'. These suggestions make the book adaptable to lecture- or seminar-style teaching and extend and upgrade the material from the undergraduate level to the graduate level.

It was also written with my colleagues in mind. I hope it will offer them insights about innovative ways of teaching as well as about the disciplinary culture of IR theory.

I have many people to thank for their intellectual generosity towards me and this project. The sage advice of Jim Rosenau, who encouraged me as I prepared for my first teaching post to combine my teaching and my research by being theoretically imaginative in the classroom, and of Cynthia Enloe, whose challenge to us all to write accessibly and for a general readership, oriented me as I undertook this project. At Purdue University, I benefited enormously from conversations with colleagues, including Bob Bartlett, Pat Boling, Berenice Carroll, Ann Clark, Rosie Clawson, Keith Shimko, Mark Tilton, Michael Weinstein, Linda White, and Lee Wilson. While I may not have discussed this project directly with some of these colleagues, they contributed to the project nonetheless by providing a supportive intellectual environment and a place for me to experiment with my teaching. Graduate students in my 'IR Myths' course, especially Julie Webber, Deems Morrione, and Maartin Rothman, and undergraduate students in 'Alternative IR', provided invaluable insights for this project.

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Yale Furguson and Barry Jones provided me with my first forum in which to experiment with the mixing of film and international theory – on the New Frontiers panel at the 1998 European Consortium for Political Research meetings in Vienna. Taking a chance on this unusual form, Walter Carlsnaes published the resulting paper as 'IR: The Resurrection OR New Frontiers of Incorporation' in the *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(4): 435–50 (1999), which forms the basis for arguments presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

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Dialogue quoted from the following films are transcripts made by the author:

Lord of the Flies (1963), directed by Peter Brook, based on the novel by William Golding.

Independence Day (1996), directed by Roland Emmerich, screenplay by Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich.

Wag the Dog (1997), directed by Barry Levinson, screenplay by Hilary Henkin and David Mamet.

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Fatal Attraction (1987), directed by Adrian Lyne, screenplay by James Dearden.

The Truman Show (1998), directed by Peter Weir, screenplay by Andrew Niccol.

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Culture, ideology, and the myth
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