

Book Reviews

Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity* (3rd edition), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013

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The third edition of *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity* comes with a new chapter on Critical Theory and slightly updated chapters overall. Noteworthy, new examples have been selected to accurately reflect the current developments in world affairs and to prove that discussion about theory remains relevant (for example, the transition from Bush to Obama is discussed in the chapter dedicated to Marxism, the Arab Spring in the chapter on Critical Theory, the intervention in Libya in 2011 is used to make considerations about a Normative International Relations approach etc). There is a lot of introductory literature on International Relations available on the market, with editions updated constantly, (e.g. Charles Kegley and Shannon Blanton, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, Karen Mingst and Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *Essentials of International Relations*, Raymond Duncan and Barbara Jancar-Webster, *World Politics in the 21st Century*, Keith Shimko, *International Relations: Perspectives, Controversies and Readings*, Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* etc.), but they generally only have a limited number of chapters focusing purely on theory, with other theoretical assumptions spread throughout the book. This is not what Tim Dunne and his co-editors aimed to do; *International Relations Theories* is a book devoted entirely to IR theory. The aim of the book is to show 1) that theory is in the centre of the discipline of IR and, implicitly 2) the importance of theory (which many people wrongly dismiss as “a distraction from the real issues” –p. 14) in understanding the world. In my view,

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this goal is fully achieved at the end of this volume, albeit after a serious effort from the part of both editors and contributors.

I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that the authors are very careful in defining what they mean by *theory*, and explain every term that could pose problems. This is certainly an aspect that is missing from other textbooks (and not only), that don't make sufficient efforts to define the concepts they are working with. In *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, the reader is informed from the beginning about the particular elements of a theory: “**ontology** (theory of being: what is the world made of? what objects do we study?), **epistemology** (theory of knowledge: how do we come to have knowledge of the world?), and **methodology** (theory of methods: what methods do we use to unearth data and evidence?)” [emphasis original] – p.15. With the aid of the Glossary at the end, even a student with little prior knowledge of philosophy of science should easily understand that, for example, the difference between realism and constructivism as theories is in the first place in the realm of “ontology”: realists see the world being made of states interacting with each other, while constructivists see the states worth of study **only** in the context of social relations, individuals, values, identities etc. Using the same thinking process, a student will see how neorealism and neoliberalism mainly agree in terms of ontology (they are looking at the same world: an anarchic international system), but disagree when it comes to the international system's ability to improve itself over time – and this prompts differences in both epistemology and methodology. It is thus remarkable that overly complex terms like *ontology* and *epistemology* are used with a high degree of consistency in meaning throughout the book by the 19 (!) contributors. This is possible because the volume is not a collection of previously written texts, but chapters have been written specifically for this book, and each author is careful to coordinate with the overall format of the work and the conventions of the others.

In terms of content, the volume begins with the introductory contribution of Steve Smith, which is a survey of the IR discipline in terms of aims, main questions and main approaches. In the first chapter, Milja Kurki and Colin Wight briefly explain the Great Debates that have shaped IR theory in history: idealists vs realists, behavioural revolution, interparadigm debate and the fourth debate (positivism vs postpositivism, explaining vs understanding or rationalism vs reflectivism). The next 13 interventions belong to respected scholars in various fields of IR, each one ready to “sell” his particular theory, explaining why it works

more accurately than the rival approaches. After Toni Erskine's chapter on **Normative International Relations Theory**, Richard Ned Lebow, John Mearsheimer, Bruce Russett and Jennifer Sterling-Folker present **Realism** and its version of **Structural Realism**, **Liberalism** and **Neoliberalism**, respectively. The chapter on the **English School** is written by Tim Dunne, while Mark Rupert deals with **Marxism**. In chapters 9 to 14 the focus is on less mainstream, more radical approaches: K.M. Fierke deals with **Constructivism**, J. Ann Tickner and Laura Sjoberg write on **Feminism**, David Cambell on **Poststructuralism**, and Siba N.Grovogui and Robyn Eckersley present **Postcolonialism** and **Green Theory**, respectively. Chapter 15 by Colin Hay, about "**International Relations Theory and Globalization**" is different in its approach, in the sense that rather than giving an overview of a particular theory, it tries to evaluate the impact Globalisation has on IR: should the relations between states remain the main focus of theory in a more and more integrated world, populated with a variety of non-state actors? Finally, the last chapter by Ole Waever concludes the book, focusing on questions about the future of the discipline. Waever ends on an optimistic note: IR will continue to be of importance, although the era of Great Debates seems to be gone, because the diversity of the discipline means that "we do not even agree on what to discuss any more" – p. 306.

The most challenging tasks for the authors were (1) to prove that theory is crucial to understanding the world and (2) to deal with so much diversity in the field of IR. I will discuss each of these aspects in turn. (1) The first chapter argues in favour of theory with the following example: If someone was to ask world leaders why they took a decision in a specific situation, they would either lie, or, more problematically, be unable to provide solid reasons why certain things make them react in a particular way. In other words, they might not be sure why they have a certain perspective on how to deal with an enemy, why they have a particular definition of the national interest, of right and wrong etc. Theories make assumptions about how stakeholders are prone to react to specific events, even if they themselves are not aware of all ramifications of their actions. Furthermore, all the other contributors attempt, mostly implicitly but also explicitly, to demonstrate the capacity of their theory to explain reality, by using case studies that have been updated in the present edition. The last chapter expresses the importance of (meta)theoretical approaches in the following words: "the challenge is not to achieve knowledge, but how to understand the multiplicity of it, and this is only

possible when we understand both the world and the processes through which our understanding of it came about. By knowing how we know, we know more about what we know". I was convinced of the legitimacy of this pure theoretical approach.

However, as regards (2) the problem of diversity, the things are more nuanced. The new chapter on Critical Theory in this edition solves some problems that have been signalled before (see the review to the first edition by Frank A. Stengel, published in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* (No.7, 2007), where the reviewer criticises the association of Critical Theory and Marxism in the same chapter). The chapter on the English school is welcome, since this important approach is either neglected or minimised in other works. Nevertheless, although the book opens itself to more uncommon theories (like Postcolonialism and Green Theory), the choice of theories and the importance given to particular aspects is debatable. Half of the chapter on Marxism for instance tries to explain dialectical theory, social relations and processes and Marx's critique of capitalism, failing to explain what any of those have to do with IR theory. Indeed, they don't. It's just towards the end of the chapter that capitalism is explained in terms of "imperialism" – the pressure on a capitalist state to expand: to conquer new markets or export capital and products. An account of Wallerstein's world systems theory is missing altogether from this picture. Also, one might feel that too much emphasis has been put on radical approaches, with Feminism, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism and Green Theory all receiving a separate chapter (total 61 pages). Those approaches are arguably much less influent in IR than mainstream Realism and Liberalism with their "neo" versions (only 55 pages). I am also not convinced that the account of "Normative International Theory" should have been the opening chapter on theories, and I don't really agree that the ethical concerns are central for studying IR, as the chapter claims. Better for the structure of the book would have been to start with Classical Realism and place Normative IR either at the end or at the border between mainstream and radical approaches.

Other than this, the architecture of the book is brilliantly constructed for students. The Introduction extensively answers the question of how to choose between rival theories, a question every IR student asks at some point in the wrong wording of "which is the right theory". The insights provided here by Steve Smith help any beginner overwhelmed by the diversity of the field. A smart chapter format makes it easier to understand the (at times) difficult terminology and

problematic diversity of the field. Each chapter begins with a Reader's Guide, providing a summary of the chapter, has a main body where theory is discussed, and a Featured Book section with a short review of a classic book/article in the field. At the end of the chapter a series of well-formulated questions could be useful for seminar discussions (although outside the seminar I don't find their relevance). Lastly, there is a Further Reading section with important bibliography on the topic and a section of relevant links in the field. The volume ends with a bibliography as well, a glossary and an index. Noteworthy, more online resources, helpful for both students and teachers are provided on the Oxford University Press' website (flashcards, summaries, power point presentations etc.). The authors are very careful to help the student not to get lost in the large number of theories, cautioning him/her in the Preface that every contributor is trying to "sell" his theory, minimizing its weaknesses. No author needs to be taken uncritically, because each of them attempts to prove that his theory works better than the others. Contributors are generally reserved and polite when referring to alternative theories, with the exception of Richard Ned Lebow, who praises his approach (Classical Realism) and calls alternative Structural Realism "a parody of science", "irrelevant", more an ideology than a science – p.59.

Although with some difficulty, even someone with no significant prior knowledge of IR can fully profit from reading *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*. However, basic understanding of IR and philosophy of science are recommended, in order to avoid misunderstandings and frequent journeys to the dictionary. This volume is a must read for IR scholars, since, as the authors put it, "there is no hiding place from theory" – p.V.