

International Relations Theory

1. Introduction

The Structure and Content of the Course

A principal difficulty when writing a brief introduction to international thought addressed to a postgraduate class is to provide a comprehensible outline for novices without boring those who have already studied the subject as undergraduates. To repeat the conventional catechism of the major text books, from idealism (or utopianism) through classical realism, structural realism, neo-liberalism, constructivism, feminism and post-structuralism (or anti-foundationalism), with sideways glances at Marxism, the English School and post-colonialism, would bore the first of these audiences while intimidating the second.

It is not simply that repetition is tiresome. Worse is the way in which the necessary business of finding those common features

that allow writers to be grouped, each to his or her -ism, unavoidably violates individuality, while the encapsulation of these writers in narratives of a purely academic discipline is all too likely to obscure the original political context of their work and its polemical purpose.

So this course starts with the briefest possible caricature of orthodox text-book treatments of what is conventionally called International Relations Theory and then picks holes in it, perhaps unsettling some of what may have been learned elsewhere. It is this section of the course, extending over the eight weeks of the Michaelmas term, that was covered through formal lectures in the academic year 2008/9; and it is those lectures, lightly revised, which form the remainder of this text.

The remainder of the course was not covered by lectures, and consisted in two elements designed to exercise material surveyed in the Michaelmas term a second and a third time, in distinct ways. The first of these is to examine books by E. H.

Carr and Kenneth Waltz that are as close to classics as this field provides. Each is quite a tough read, and while they are valuable for their arguments, a secondary purpose of recommending them is to counteract the unavoidable reliance in any introductory course on short essays by exposing students to more extended and polemical arguments, seen in their political context. The second element of the Lent Term programme is designed to examine the interface between theory and practice. This is attempted through discussion of some contemporary or recent debates, such as democratic peace, civilizational conflict or humanitarian intervention, in which both the policy and academic worlds have been engaged. These seminars provide opportunities to deploy and exercise the work done during the first two phases of the course, constituting a kind of revision or second chewing of the cud.

How does this course fit in with the rest of the programme?

There is no general agreement among my colleagues about the nature, purpose or value of a theory course. Some regard such a course as the absolutely necessary core of any programme in IR, though they might argue about content and perspective. The theory course in any programme of study in International Relations may be seen as a service course, providing input of abstract ideas and social theory for other more empirical courses. Partly because of this sort of attitude it used until 2001/2 to be compulsory (a requirement for ESRC recognition) and was officially known in the regulations (as it may still be?) by the rather grand title of ‘International Theory and Methodology’.

Others think a theory course entirely unnecessary, either because they see theory and empirical work fully integrated in

their own particular field or because they dislike abstraction altogether.

With the first of those two anti-theory-course groups I have some sympathy. I will almost certainly refer to legal positivism and legal naturalism; I will have some things to say about historiography and the history of ideas; I will talk about the balance of power, war, intervention and the ethics of war; I will have things to say about economic liberalism and mercantilism; but I won't be able to devote the attention to them that some of my colleagues may when teaching law, or economics, or history, or security studies. Nor will I have time to integrate them fully with the empirical content of those subjects.

I have less sympathy with the second group. Of course it's important to know facts about international affairs, current or past. But one way or another the facts have to be ordered or arranged, and this is the beginning of theory. I take the view that there is no such thing as pre-theoretical or neutral description.

(This makes me what is called a social constructivist.) You either get a grip on theory or become its victim.

Finally – and I cannot emphasise this enough – the course is *not* about ‘theory’ proper. There are hardly any theories of IR worth the name, and it is a field where theoretical reasoning is generally inappropriate. There are some things that look pretty much like laws: that democracies do not fight one another or that states will always seek to balance a hegemonic power.

Underlying them are theories (rather too many rival theories, as it happens, and this should arouse our suspicion.) We will take a look at these in Lent. In the meantime, there is also a great deal in the way of abstraction, modelling, interpretation, speculation, taxonomy and so forth; but this is not the same as theorizing in the strict sense. In short, not all science is theoretical.

As I will shortly explain, I stick by the Aristotelean view that politics is an art and is therefore to be investigated and indeed pursued by the exercise of practical rather than theoretic reason.

It is worth dwelling on this ancient distinction, and I will encourage this shortly by quoting some lines from a seventeenth-century English poem that makes this point very nicely, while also setting out what some regard as a central so-called theory of IR, the security dilemma (but which is really a model).

(I should also very briefly make clear that when it comes to theory I incline with some reluctance to the view of Karl Popper. It's not a theory unless it generates testable hypotheses. But I'm with Thomas Kuhn and Ken Waltz in being reluctant to throw away a decent theory just because it is slightly bruised.)

These remarks about theory have been in parentheses, to reassure the *cognoscenti*. There will of course be more to say about it all as term proceeds. But for now, let me just say that a better title for the course would be 'International Thought'. So if you are enthusiasts for rational choice, if you regard yourselves as political scientists, if you are keenly interested in the

statistical analysis of conflict, then this course is probably not for you. Then again, perhaps you are the very ones who need it most.

So this lazily or conventionally named 'IR Theory' course offers some suggestions about how the whole programme fits together, but it doesn't pretend to provide any master-theory that governs or informs all the other optional courses in the programme.

What it does hope to do is provide a birds-eye view of the field of battle; a place from which to survey the academic carnage that goes by the name of 'International Relations'.

Cruising the internet some time ago I came across an essay by Jacques Thomassen, a distinguished scholar from the Netherlands, on the origin of what he referred to as 'political science' in the Netherlands, following the end of the Second World War. The founders were keen to differentiate themselves from their contemporaries in the United States of America, who

were starting to model political science on economics or the natural sciences and were very insistent on its autonomy.

I quote: ‘The new programme was not narrowly focused on political science alone. In its curriculum political science proper was only one of the major fields in addition to economics, modern history, law and sociology. However the professors responsible for these fields had no intention to make any concessions to students in the new programme, and demanded full knowledge of their respective disciplines. As a consequence, the cumulative demands on students were impossible. Less than ten percent of the first student cohorts reached the finish and received the degree ... The few who did so had studied more than nine years on average.’

How, then, can anything be done to introduce students to International Relations in nine months, rather than nine years. The Dutch marathon is out of the question. Instead, the typical British master’s programme is more of a pentathlon, consisting

in a mix of optional courses and dissertation. And theory is, perhaps, the 1500 metres: short enough to be completed in a few months; long enough to be painful.

What is the course all about?

If the course hasn't (much) to do with theory, in the strict sense, then what is it about? – In briefest terms I set out to provide a *very* general sketch of the underlying rationale and methodology of the study of international relations and to relate this to the histories of the European state system and of European thought over the past two or three hundred years, while at the same time providing a *very* rudimentary and minimal philosophical vocabulary that will equip students with *some* kind of platform from which to evaluate the use that has been made of interpretations of the past; of past writings on war, trade and other aspects of relations between states and peoples; and especially of the writings of those who have been trying to

establish a discrete discipline of International Relations or International Politics over the past half century or so.

That is the single sentence-version, enough for an introduction perhaps, but I'll unpack it a bit. A modicum of repetition does no harm.

Over the past half-century or so, a specialist field of academic studies of IR has grown up. Thousands of academics, world-wide, make their living out of it. It has several names: International Studies, International Politics, sometimes War Studies or Peace Studies, but – most common of all – International Relations.

I've very carefully referred to International Relations as a *field*. I already explained that there are some widely differing views about the purpose of any IR Theory course when I explained, a moment ago, how this course fitted into the programme as a whole. These differences have partly to do with what might be

called ‘disciplines of origin’ (economics, history, law, and so on) and partly to do with what I’ll call ‘conceptions of enterprise’, or what teachers in this field have thought they were creating.

My tribe is the tribe of International Studies (plural), and we believe that there is a set of problems, having to do with conflict and cooperation between peoples and polities, to which scholars from many established disciplines can usefully contribute.

Those of the tribe of International Politics take it to be a sub-discipline of political science. The tribe of International Relations take it to be a separate discipline, with its own history, its own clubs and journals, and its own methods. But the tribes have intermarried, so that they – and certainly their offspring – are barely distinguishable from one another to outsiders (and at times to one another). They are no more offended by this than I am at being called English; they flourish their distinctive banners only on certain ritual occasions and seldom fall to fighting. This is too simple, but it’s something like the way

things are. The best analogy might be with the British, some of whom will suddenly become unaccountably and noisily Welsh or Jamaican or English on sporting occasions, while being unproblematically British or – say – Lancastrian the rest of the time.

One way in which it is possible to side-step all this tribalism is by getting a grip on the circumstances in which the ideas were formed and the courses of events that are thought to support them. Many of the most interesting works on international relations have been polemics, intended to influence policy, either directly or through public opinion. Polemics in their turn often rely on convincing their readers of a particular interpretation of events. You may feel that while there can never be a single universally agreed account of history, it is still possible to make rational judgments about the relative accuracy of descriptions, the relative plausibility of interpretations, and the relative consistency of both with one another and with each other. To do this, you need to know at least enough history to

judge what any writer on international relations was up to.

Examples where this is pertinent include E. H. Carr, writing in Britain on the eve of war in the 1930s, Ken Waltz writing in the USA at a moment of relative decline in the mid-1970s, but also Gottfried Leibniz writing at the end of the seventeenth century in defence of an already anachronistic Holy Roman Empire or Tom Paine, surfing the great eighteenth-century revolutions in British North America and France.

A second way of dodging the IR tribalism is by getting enough of a sense of the broader stream of European thought (within which each of the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences forms a mere current or eddy) to be able to take a general view and discount some of the quirks and idiosyncracies of International Relations. Liberalism, Romanticism, Positivism, Anarchism or Marxism may mean different things to sociologists, economists, historians, or political scientists, but not *entirely* different. Each of these movements or tendencies emerged in the context of the same evolving history of European

society and the European states system. Each uses a shared vocabulary of technical philosophical terms. They are cousins marked by strong family resemblances.

But to be able to do this requires a rapid course in the abiding issues and technical jargon of European social and political philosophy and will seem only remotely connected to the contemporary and urgent issues that will have motivated many of you to study International Relations in the first place.

National Poetry Day

Thus far, this introduction has tried to sketch how the optional course in IR Theory works, week by week, how it relates to other taught elements of the Cambridge M. Phil. programme, and what sort of ground it covers.

The introductory lecture for the course, for many years, fell on national poetry day, and this was celebrated by a reading of two

extracts from a lengthy poem by one of England's finest writers of pornographic verse. The move from oral delivery to written text breaks this link, but the poem in question is no less relevant for that,

Those of you who have studied English literature may already have guessed that I am referring to John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, who lived from 1647 to 1680: a brief life, you will observe, cut short by the well-deserved effects of syphilis and alcoholism. You may have seen the film based on his life, starring Johnny Depp and entitled 'The Libertine,' in which Depp exploited to the full the very considerable opportunities for over-acting offered by this extravagant role.

The first of two extracts from Lord Rochester's 'Satyr on Mankind' uses the Aristotelean distinction between theoretic and practical reason to attack those who try to influence behaviour in ways that are inconsistent with nature and instinct. It nicely expresses the core of my own position on the

methodology of the social sciences. The second presents what John Herz, back in the 1950s, called the security dilemma: that fear of the consequences of being defenceless may drive a state that would not otherwise have done so to make preparations which will be interpreted as aggression by its neighbour or rival, setting off a tragic escalation or arms race, possibly culminating in war.

Here is the first extract from Rochester:

‘And ‘tis this very reason I despise
This supernatural gift that makes a mite
Think he’s the image of the infinite,
Comparing his short life, void of all rest,
To the eternal and the ever blest,
This busy, puzzling stirrer up of doubt
That frames deep myst’ries and then finds them out,
Filling with frantic crowds of thinking fools
Those reverend bedlams, colleges and schools,
Borne on whose wings, each heavy sot can pierce
The limits of the boundless universe;
So charming ointments make an old witch fly
And bear a crippled carcass through the sky.
‘Tis this exalted power, whose business lies
In nonsense and impossibilities,

This made a whimsical philosopher
Before the spacious world his tub prefer,
And we have modern, cloistered coxcombs who
Retire to think, 'cause they have naught to do.
But thoughts were given for action's government;
Where action ceases, thought's impertinent.
Our sphere of action is life's happiness,
And he who thinks beyond thinks like an ass.
Thus, while against false reasoning I inveigh,
I own right reason, which I would obey,
That reason which distinguishes by sense
And gives us rules of good and ill from thence,
That bounds desire with a reforming will
To keep them more in vigour, not to kill.
Your reason hinders, mine helps to enjoy,
Renewing appetites yours would destroy.
My reason is my friend, yours is a cheat:
Hunger calls out, my reason bids me eat,
Perversely, yours your appetite does mock;
This asks for food, that answers, 'What's o'clock?'
This plain distinction, sir, your doubt secures:
'Tis not true reason I despise, but yours.

The second excerpt draws a distinction between man and beast.

Rochester's premise is that what distinguishes humans from other animals is reason. At its best it may be consistent with nature and a guide to right conduct. But all too often it is corrupted.

Rochester puts the question:

Which is the basest creature, man or beast?
Birds feed on birds, beasts on each other prey,
But savage man alone does man betray.
Pressed by necessity, they kill for food;
Man undoes man to do himself no good.
With teeth and claws by nature armed, they hunt
Nature's allowance to supply their want,
But man with smiles, embraces, friendship, praise,
Most humanly his fellow's life betrays,
With voluntary pains works his distress,
Not through necessity but wantonness.
For hunger or for love they bite and tear,
Whilst wretched man is still in arms for fear,
For fear he arms and is of arms afraid,
From fear to fear successively betrayed,
Base fear, the source whence his best actions came,
His boasted honour and his dear-bought fame,
The lust of power to which he's such a slave
And for the which alone he dares be brave,
To which his various projects are designed,
Which makes him generous, affable and kind,
For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,
And screws his actions in a forced disguise,
Leads a most tedious life in misery
Under laborious, mean hypocrisy.
Look to the bottom of this vast design,
Wherein man's wisdom, power, and glory join:
The good he acts, the ill he does endure,
'Tis all from fear, to make himself secure.
Merely for safety, after fame they thirst,
For all men would be cowards if they durst,
And honesty's against all common sense:
Men must be knaves, 'tis in their own defence.

Mankind's dishonest; if you think it fair
Amongst known cheats to play upon the square,
You'll be undone.

The Cretan Liar

Why this sudden dive into literature of the late seventeenth century? – Well, it is not just about national poetry day, excellent institution though this is. Its narrower purpose is, in the first place, to make clear from the outset that academic work on international relations is not the only source of wisdom on the subject. Secondly, it offers a reminder that reasoning about international relations should never be allowed to drift far from action, that is from policy (... thoughts were given for action's government; Where action ceases, thought's impertinent.) Thirdly, it makes clear that the persuasive use of language (which is all that rhetoric is), while especially evident in poetry, is seldom absent from any speech or writing, so that the argot of international relations needs constantly to be regarded with suspicion, part of its purpose being to claim a possibly spurious

intellectual superiority over the reader (who is often also the student). A great deal of what is presented as timeless wisdom or statecraft may, on closer examination, turn out to be something much less. So, if you take this course and at any point feel fazed by the abstruse language and complex arguments of the IR theoreticians, take comfort from Rochester and don't let the 'cloister'd modern coxcombs' get you! It doesn't take a Columbia professor to understand the difference between useful and pointless reasoning or to set out a structuralist theory of the causes of war. If a debauched Restoration libertine can do it, I'm sure that you can.

I tell you that there are no pre-theoretical descriptions, that academic writing – for all its pretensions of objectivity – is rhetorical, that international relations is a very odd and ill-formed field, that there's no International Relations theory (though I'm offering a course by that name). But of course I am using language to tell you this – sometimes playfully – and I am myself an academic, specialising in International Relations, and

pretty far from the field of action. So perhaps I am one of the ‘cloister’d coxcombs’? It’s a little like the famous paradox of the Cretan liar. He tells us that all Cretans are liars. But he is himself a Cretan (or so he says!). If we believe him, then we must disbelieve him. If we disbelieve him, then it may be that he is telling the truth, in which case he is a liar and we should disbelieve him, and so on, and so on, ad infinitum.

So if I have made this course seem daunting, it may have been to deter; but it may, on the other hand, have been because I calculate that non-provocative deterrence may be the most effective strategy to bring to the table those of you who will most enjoy the course. It will certainly be difficult, but I hope it will also be fun. It happens that I hail from the northern city of Liverpool, to which my Welsh and Ulster Scots forbears had travelled as economic migrants in the nineteenth century. It will now be for you to judge whether all Liverpudlians are liars. I rather incline to the view that they are, and you can trust me on this one since I know where I’m coming from.

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