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International Relations Theory: A Critical introduction by Cynthia Weber

Review by Andrew Hammond¹

“To practise criticism”, declared Michel Foucault “is to make harder those acts which are now too easy”.² Whether a Foucauldian or not and whether agreeing with this definition or not, an increasing number of International Relations (IR) scholars – often working under the leitmotif ‘critical’ – have attempted to make harder those disciplinary acts – conceptual, methodological, and meta-theoretical – which had hitherto been ‘too easy’ for the rationalist mainstream. For example, Robert Cox’s seminal article; ‘Social Forces, States and World Order’ questioned the theory/practice, subject/object, fact/value bifurcations posited by much ‘traditional theory’, famously noting that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose”.³ In ‘The Poverty of Neo-Realism’, meanwhile, Richard Ashley thoroughly problematized Neo-Realism, characterizing it after E.P. Thompson as: “an orrery of errors”, a self-enclosed, self-affirming joint of statist, utilitarian, positivist and structuralist commitments”.⁴

As telegraphed by the title – *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* – Cynthia Weber’s first-rate and innovative textbook, now in its updated and extended third edition, works in this ‘critical’ vein. It aims to answer the question Weber posed to herself in the original preface: “How could I both stick to the brief of what an introduction to international relations or international relations theory is generally supposed to be while at the same time presenting the IR theories and topics in ways that allow for their genuine critical reconsideration?”⁵ Weber’s answer was to use popular movies, a medium where students already had highly developed critical and analytical sensibilities, as a vehicle to look at another medium where they more often than not did not: IR theory. The use of popular movies, moreover, had the

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² Michel Foucault, “So is it important to think?” In J. Faubion (ed.). *Power The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984. Volume Three*. New York: New Press, p. 456.

³ Robert W. Cox, ‘Social Forces, States and World Order’, *Millennium*, 10/2 (1981), p.128

⁴ Richard K. Ashley, ‘The Poverty of Neo-Realism’, *International Organization*, 38/2 (1984), pp. 225-286.

⁵ Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction (Third Edition)* (London: Routledge, 2010), xxi.

additional purpose of breaking down a common misperception among students that IR theory is a rarefied field of practice, somehow above and beyond politics and culture. On the contrary for Weber, “IR theory is a site of cultural practice in which conscious and unconscious ideologies are circulated through stories that appear to be true”.⁶ For Weber, “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’”.⁷ Indeed, “analyzing how these transformations from cultural meanings into naturalized facts occur in everyday encounters with IR theory is the purpose of this book”.⁸

For Weber ‘conscious ideologies’ are those stories that we recognize and hold consciously – for example ‘realism’ (or alternatively ‘socialism’). ‘Unconscious ideologies’, meanwhile, are the “common sense foundation of our worldviews”, stories that are “beyond debate”⁹ – or as Weber calls them ‘IR myths’. These ‘IR myths’ function by making the “particular, cultural, and ideological” appear to be “universal, natural and purely empirical”, they “take the political out of the ideological” – for example Neo-Realism’s slogan ‘international anarchy is the permissive cause of war’ (or alternatively ‘America has a classless society’).¹⁰ In other words, by suspending an interest in the ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ of an IR theory, Weber aims through the medium of film to bring to light the unarticulated assumptions that buttress them. IR theories, then, rely on ‘IR myths’ to appear to be true; the ‘conscious ideologies’ rely on the ‘unconscious’. She asks instead, after choosing an IR text emblematic of a particular theoretical approach (e.g. Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*),¹¹ how does this ‘IR theory make sense of the world?’ and ‘what does IR theory say is typical and deviant in that world’?

After outlining her problematic in the preface and introduction, this schema is applied to relate the following movies to the following IR theories in an accessible, engaging, yet challenging way: *Lord of the Flies* to Realism; *Independence Day* to Idealism; *Wag the Dog* to Constructivism; *Fatal Attraction* to Gender; *The Truman Show* to Globalization; *Memento* to Neo-Marxism; *East is East* to Modernization and Development Theory; and, *Wall-E* to Environmentalism. The respective ‘IR myths’, meanwhile, are: ‘international anarchy is the permissive cause of war’ for Realism; ‘there is an international society’ for Idealism; ‘anarchy is what states make it’ for Constructivism; ‘gender is a variable’ for Gender; ‘it is the end of history’ for Globalization; ‘Empire is the new world order’ for Neo-Marxism; ‘there is a clash of civilizations’ for Modernization and Development Theory; and finally, ‘human made

⁶ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 6.

⁷ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, xxii.

⁸ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 7.

⁹ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 5.

¹⁰ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 6-7.

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

climate change is an inconvenient truth' for Environmentalism. The analysis is brought together in the conclusion and there are also excellent suggestions for further reading at the end of the eight substantive chapters.

All in all Weber's book is an excellent antidote to what Paulo Freire called 'narration sickness'; where a passive patient imbibes the IR theory that is prescribed by a narrating all knowing subject and where "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling and storing the deposits".¹² Readers are encouraged to question the world around them, to break through the "crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness",¹³ and to think *critically* about IR theory and world politics: in other words to 'make harder' that which is now 'too easy'. Indeed, I know this from personal experience; as a second year undergraduate I utilized the critical thinking techniques I encountered in a previous edition to interrogate the *US National Security Strategy 2002* and to unpack the notions of American exceptionalism embedded therein. The book also facilitates an accessible first engagement with the important role culture, the ideational, and subjectivity play in world politics. On the whole, then, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* is a thought-provoking textbook that deserves a wide readership at the undergraduate level and beyond.

By way of conclusion, however, I would like to raise a number of issues that my close engagement with various editions of the text have necessitated. Firstly, and most obviously, it seems that a stand-alone chapter on post-structuralism/post-modernism is a glaring omission; especially as it is an approach with an increasing number of adherents, particularly among UK based postgraduate students and early career scholars. I also kept thinking, would it not be really interesting, if not to say balanced, if post-structuralism/post-modernism were subjected to the same insightful analysis as the other theories/approaches:¹⁴ a text is chosen, situated, summarized, interrogated for unconscious ideologies, related to a film to see how the myth functions, and finally asked the following questions, 'how is sense made of the world?' and 'what is typical and deviant in that world'? Perhaps this is testament to Professor Weber helping me become a better reader and interpreter of stories, but I kept thinking what is "deferred" and "displaced" in this text and within post-structuralism/post-modernism in general?¹⁵ Surely post-structuralism/post-modernism

¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 2, 1970, (<http://www.marxists.org/subject/education/freire/pedagogy/ch02.htm>, 17 May 2010).

¹³ John Dewey quoted in Maxine Green, 'Teaching as Possibility: A Light in Dark Times', *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism & Practice*, 1/1 (1997), (<http://www.lesley.edu/journals/jppp/1/jp3ii1.html>, 17 May 2010).

¹⁴ It is recognized that most post-structuralists/post-modernists would not see it as an overarching theory of international politics like, say, Neo-Realism. However, neither would most constructivists upon whom there is a chapter: see, Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (1997), 323; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Politics and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001), 393.

¹⁵ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 224.

is a ‘story’ too, told in “cultural sites” where “political struggles take place?”¹⁶ and therefore amenable to the same type of analysis? While post-structuralism/post-modernism is favourably mentioned several times,¹⁷ it never receives any sustained analysis. Indeed, on the whole, even for someone who utilizes post-structuralist insights in his own work, post-structuralism/post-modernism seems to get rather an easy ride. This leads on to a final and relatively minor sub-point, post-structuralism and post-modernism are used interchangeably throughout the text. However, in an undergraduate text of this nature it could be worth drawing attention to the fact that they are problematic terms – as Foucault sardonically noted “What are we calling postmodernity? I’m not up to date?”¹⁸ – and that for some authors they might not be seen to be coterminous or synonymous with one another, particularly out with IR.¹⁹

Secondly, it seems that constructivism is not adequately or accurately represented by Wendtian constructivism or by his single seminal article ‘Anarchy is What States Make It’.²⁰ While Weber notes that “several theorists have adopted and adapted constructivism” since Onuf’s path-breaking *World of Our Making*;²¹ a, if not *the*, major bifurcation within constructivism that is elided in *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* is that between conventional and critical constructivists. For example, the latter would accept Weber’s criticisms of the conventional approach and of Wendt: state reification limited constructivism, and the missed “opportunity to restore a broad focus on process and practice”.²² In contradistinction, they problematize language and look at narratives, framing, history, culture, and identity to highlight contingency and the struggle for control over meaning.²³ Indeed, it seems that post-structuralism/post-modernism comes off best in a rather one-sided encounter with a particularly narrow reading of Constructivism. It could also be argued that this is true of the chapter on Neo-Marxism too: for example, “as we saw in chapter 7, Hardt and Negri’s myth ‘Empire is the new world order’

¹⁶ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 228.

¹⁷ For example, see Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 81-82, 155-6.

¹⁸ Quoted in David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 271.

¹⁹ For example, as used in David West’s, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

²⁰ Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make it: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, 46 (1992), 391-425.

²¹ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 81.

²² Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 80.

²³ See for example: Matt McDonald and Matt Merefield, ‘How Was Howard’s War Possible?: The War of Position Over Iraq’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 64 (2010), 186-204; Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall, ‘Introduction: Constructing Insecurity’, in Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall, eds., *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities and the Production of Danger* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jutta Weldes, ‘Constructing National Interests’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2 (1996), 275-318;

must exclude by selectively remembering what postmodern theorists say about ontology/agency and resistance in order to appear to be true”.²⁴.

Thirdly, Adam Jones article ‘Does gender make the World Go Round: Feminist Critiques of International Relations’ seems to sit rather awkwardly in the chapter on Gender given that it is more of a critique of feminism than an espousal or elaboration of it. While I would agree with Weber’s critique of Jones – where gender is taken implicitly and rather curiously – to be a ‘variable’; one can’t help but think that something is being ‘deferred’ and ‘displaced’ in choosing Jones who on the whole is pretty marginal within gender/feminist IR literatures. For example, surely Cynthia Enloe’s landmark *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of World Politics* would have made a much better, if more uncomfortable, choice for this chapter.²⁵ On the whole the impression is left that Weber has shied away from problematizing the conditions of her own claims.

Finally, Weber rightly critiques the “ethnocentric, racist, classist, sexist” biases of mainstream IR.²⁶ However, while noting that “alternative approaches to international politics depend on their own mythologized understandings of the world”²⁷ this point is never fully elaborated – particularly apropos post-structuralism/post-modernism – and alternative ‘critical’ approaches are not fully critiqued with reference to the aforementioned inter-sectional social cleavages. For example, it seems to me that given the way the whole political economy of education plays out most scholars who label themselves critical, although of course not all, come from relatively privileged social groups – call them classes, class fractions, socio-economic quintiles whatever – and in turn from the privileged core of the global system. This point it seems is rarely raised or problematized in much, although again not all, of the critical literature.²⁸ Weber rightly notes that “an author’s own subject position does not doom him or her to write from that position alone”.²⁹ However, one cannot help but wonder what questions would be asked, what answers would be given and what theories/approaches would be constructed and adopted if those in the most disadvantaged positions vis-à-vis the global political economy – whether at the national or systemic level – were given a ‘critical’ voice: which raises the following questions – whose IR? whose theory?

²⁴ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 222.

²⁵ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

²⁶ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 221.

²⁷ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 222.

²⁸ See John M. Hobson ‘Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphalian Towards a Post-racist Critical IR’, *Review of International Studies*, 33 (2007), 33, 91–116.

²⁹ Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 221.

