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International Relations Theory: A Critical introduction by Cynthia Weber

Review by Matthew Johnson¹

In many respects, I am a fairly unsuitable reviewer for the third edition of Cynthia Weber's *International Relations Theory*, having never studied the subject. As such, I shall not (because I would not properly be able to) focus on examination of the accuracy and cogency of the accounts of the various theories outlined in the book. Rather, given that this is intended as an introduction to the field, I shall focus on its pedagogical value to those, particularly postgraduate seminar leaders/tutors, teaching IR theory at an early stage of their careers.

My only experience of IR theory came whilst teaching the MA module Advanced International Studies at the University of Queensland. This conceptual and theoretical course focused on such things as examination of Wight's 'three Rs' of IR as well as certain 'critical', often anti-foundationalist, approaches. What I required while teaching was an 'idiot's guide' to the field by which to elevate my pedagogical effort slightly above the 'flying by the seat of one's pants' level. While there are plenty of texts (the ubiquitous Baylis and Smith's *Globalisation of World Politics*, for example) which outline the basics of the caricatured and simplified versions of realism, liberal institutionalism, Marxism the neo-neo debate and certain aspects of vulgar constructivism, it seemed that there were few which sought systematically to deconstruct the various approaches and even fewer succinct, tangible and comprehensible accounts of 'critical' approaches – particularly of the post-structuralist variety.

Given the widespread enthusiasm for post-structuralist or post-modern thought in IR, I found it strange that there were so few clear accounts of these paradigms in particular. This may be, in part, due to the incomprehensible style of certain primary texts and the ham-fisted efforts made to demonstrate their applicability to international relations. However, I was also often left with the distinct feeling that poststructuralist or postmodernist IR theorists, in particular, wish to develop an aura of sophistication by maintaining bizarre and unnecessary levels of abstraction, by creating new and esoteric terms, and by arguing through ever increasingly pretentious forms of analogy. Having read the summary of Cynthia Weber's *International Relations Theory*, I was extremely optimistic that I would find a textbook which would offer systematic critique of the core concepts, issues and debates within IR theory as well as clear examination of, at the least, postmodern approaches.

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International Relations Theory begins with the post-structuralist premise that ‘If the world is made up of “facts” and stories organise 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 organisation of “the facts”’ (p. xxii). In order to achieve this aim in each chapter, Weber first outlines the nature of the ‘myth’, selecting ‘a classic IR text that uses the myth’, situating ‘the IR text in its particular IR tradition (like realism or idealism)’, summarising ‘the text’ and, finally, exploring ‘how the IR text makes use of the IR myth’. She then examines the functioning of the myth by selecting a ‘film that illustrates the myth function in a particular IR myth’, summarising ‘the film’ and then relating ‘the film to the IR myth’ asking how the film makes ‘sense of the world’ and what the film says ‘is typical and deviant in that world’. Her focus on film is driven by a desire to use cultural contrast (‘the world the film presents is not “our” world, for we do not occupy this cinemascap’) and reflexivity in order to enable students to examine the functioning of apparent truths. Having examined each paradigm, Weber asks, in the conclusion, ‘What does this critical analysis of the myth function in IR theory tell us about IR theory culturally, ideologically, and popularly?’ focusing on how ‘IR theory make[s] sense of the world’ and what ‘IR theory say[s] is typical and deviant in that world’ (pp. 8-10).

The book presents, in essence, a ready made introductory course on IR. The theories are effectively and succinctly expounded, examined and deconstructed. Box summaries of key points and tables outlining different theories’ positions on key issues (see p. 69 on realist, idealist and constructivist accounts of international anarchy) more than match in pedagogical value those in *The Globalisation of World Politics*. By focusing on intensive examination through a single key text, Weber enables tutors to provide students with tangible and intelligible reading with which they can engage critically in class. The clarity and simplicity of this approach, in particular, makes a mockery of the notion that breadth of reading is essential to comprehension of core claims and tenets. Her *short* lists of sensible suggested additional reading in each chapter are much more likely to induce comprehension in students than the ridiculously long and esoteric lists found in some module guides.

Her supplementation of intensive reading with allegorical films also does much to challenge the pretension that extensive reading has some miraculous additional value. The films chosen provide students with different – particularly affective – learning styles with precisely the sort of material to aid comprehension and critical, reflexive consideration of a range of cherished tenets. The examination of transcribed dialogue is effective and pertinent and adds much to what can otherwise appear to those practice oriented students enrolled on conceptual or theoretical modules to be dull subject matter. This all combines to make the work of tutors rather easy – should they wish, or be allowed the scope, to follow aspects of Weber’s method in their seminars. Each chapter contains a plethora of stimuli for discussions, debates and role plays.

As for the content, I can say simply that most of the key approaches are represented, along with what might better be described as perspectives on issues, such as globalisation, which arise from certain paradigms (in the case of globalisation

liberalism and Marxism). Appropriately included in the third edition is coverage of environmentalism, in which Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* is examined partly through the use of *WALL-E*. Throughout, the content seems, from the perspective of a relative outsider (my work having focused mainly on political theory/philosophy), to be coherent, succinct and accurate. However, while coverage of approaches is extensive there is a glaring omission from the list of those examined – post-structuralism.

For someone who is clearly influenced by post-structuralism and who employs a post-structuralist pedagogical method, it seems almost hypocritical not to subject the approach to examination as a myth. Given that post-structuralism has such contemporary vogue status, and given that it is one of the more difficult approaches for tutors effectively to teach and students accurately to grasp, it is extremely disappointing to find it absent from this third edition. A book which expressly aims to subject IR as a field to deconstruction must necessarily be deficient if a key aspect of the field is left untouched. Indeed, this seems to be part of a wider deficit in post-structuralist works, where every truth is derisively placed in inverted commas except for the truth of deconstruction. Why is this? One reason is apparent in the following paragraph:

By disrupting the *apparent truth* of IR myths, opportunities arise for new theories of IR to be written. Yet these, too, will be myths. So why bother interrogating the myth function in IR theory if we will never escape it? The answer to this question is in the question itself. *Because we will never escape the myth function in IR theory, we had better interrogate it.* We had better prepare ourselves to be the best critical readers of IR myths we possibly can be. Otherwise, we will just be repeating cherished stories about IR without grasping what makes these stories *appear* to be true, without appreciating what makes them function. We will be circulating a particular way of making sense of the world without knowing how to make sense of that sense. That would make us look pretty naïve. (p. 8)

If naivety is the greatest concern for a paradigm then we must examine its claims to 'critical' status. Unless there is, at the bottom of things, some conception of the good around which to base critique, then critical inquiry is reduced to aimless nay-saying. What is 'critical' about demonstrating, for example, relatively apparent power relations if there is not a conception of the good upon which to regard those relations as harmful? This is the problem faced by Foucauldians who, imbued with a method of analysis, have to import meta-ethics from the inner realms of their (invariably, but not necessarily, broad leftist) intuitions to make sense of the normative implications of their findings. Post-structuralism does not provide us with any meta-ethical device by which to examine power relations and their products. Post-structuralists do not have to become, overnight, Platonic or Aristotelian foundationalists in order to do this. Fellow anti-foundationalists, such as pragmatists like Rorty, who view norms as ethnocentric conclusions to particular human conversations, engage fully and consciously in discussions regarding the way in which we should live.

By not subjecting post-structuralism itself to examination, post-structuralists appear to actually accept and, perhaps unconsciously, articulate their own myths as truths – the truth of deconstruction and power-relations. Placing post-structuralism alongside the other ‘mythical’ approaches through examination using Weber’s clear and systematic method would not only aid those teaching and learning IR theory for the first time; it would also enable and demonstrate reflexivity among post-structuralist thinkers.

A final note must also be made regarding the absence of serious consideration of post-modernism. Despite claims on the back and inside covers declaring post-modernism’s inclusion, and despite it being confusingly indexed as the whole chapter on neo-marxism and the whole conclusion, there is no chapter devoted to the approach. As my fellow editor, Mark Edward (who is far more knowledgeable than me on such matters) suggests, a chapter examining Jean-Francois Lyotard’s view (expressed, among other places, in *The Postmodern Condition*) that post-modernism is an ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ through the film *Bladerunner*, may add much to comprehension of this often misconceived approach.

It is due to these omissions that, while the third edition of *International Relations Theory* is an improvement on the second, it must surely be expanded into a fourth.