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## **International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction By Cynthia Weber**

*Author's Reply by Cynthia Weber*

Every project emerges from with an historical context. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* is no exception. Two particular contexts defined my approach to writing this textbook. One was that I had just received tenure at a major US research university, which meant I had job security and, with that, a measure of academic freedom that I had never experienced as an Assistant Professor. While there were many ways to exercise my academic freedom through my research, there were far fewer ways to exercise it through my teaching, notwithstanding the often vast control I as a US-practicing academic had over what I presented in the classroom. This is for several reasons.

One reason is that academics are still asked to deliver standard knowledge and skill sets to students on standard introductory courses. So, for example, if you are asked to teach 'Introduction to International Relations Theory', university and student expectations are that students will be taught about Neorealism, Neoidealism, Constructivism, etc. A second constraint is that class sizes are extremely large in the US, generally ranging from 100-400 students in each classroom with no supporting seminars. Therefore, you have to find a way to engage large groups of students through the lecture format, which is not always an easy thing to do. A third constraint is that students expect to be assigned a textbook that neatly sums up the main arguments of the course. And a final constraint is that, whether you have tenure or not, you will still be teaching the same student body. These students are bright and inquisitive, but they generally don't follow the news (much less the international news), don't read widely beyond classroom assignments, and don't think IR theory does or should have anything to do with their daily lives.

All this presented a problem: How could I exercise my academic freedom in the classroom in the case of such material constraints – constraints that define the US system and that (in light of current plans to reorganize UK academia) are coming to define the UK system as well? I wasn't at all sure how to answer this question. But I decided to tackle it by thinking from scratch what it might look like to teach a course in IR Theory. And where I started my rethinking was by asking myself what my students already knew, what my students skills already were, and how I might mobilizes these knowledges and skills to get my students to think critically about IR Theory inside and outside of the classroom.

I concluded that my students already knew quite a lot of IR Theory because IR Theory was constantly being presented to them through popular culture, albeit as if it weren't IR Theory at all. I realized that my students brought their abilities to read and critique popular films both visually and narratively to the classroom. And I decided that my challenge as a teacher would be to mobilize these knowledges and skills into a critical dialogue with the more mundane exposition of IR theories that are the

backbone of any IR Theory course. I also concluded that the best way to do this was to give students one key idea from each IR theory that they could easily grasp and therefore hopefully hold onto (e.g., the Neorealist idea that international anarchy is the permissive cause of war, the Neoidealist idea that there is an international society, the Wendtian constructivist idea that anarchy is what states make of it). I did not mean to suggest that this was the *only* relevant idea from each of these theories, but that it was a starting place from which students could begin to learn about IR theories. This would give them a point of access into upper-level IR Theory classes which would necessarily complicate these key ideas.

As I identified these ideas, I began to think of them as IR myths – not as statements that are true or false, but as statements that *appear to be true* so much so that IR theorists and practitioners engage with them as if they are facts. What interested me – and what I wanted my students to understand – is that there was nothing natural about these IR myths. Rather, I wanted them to understand the huge amount of cultural work – both within the discipline of IR and within public culture more generally – that goes into naturalizing these IR myths into ‘just the way the world is’. To help my students understand precisely how this works, I decided pair each of these IR myths with a popular film that could do two things – illustrate what the IR myth said and then serve as a vehicle through which to critique how the IR myth functioned (e.g., *Lord of the Flies*, *Independence Day*, and *Wag the Dog* respectively).

Because I was teaching US students, I had to find them a textbook to support their classroom work. But there wasn't such a textbook. Yes, Robert W. Gregg's book *International Relations on Film* was available then, but this book used films only to illustrate IR themes and concept, not critique them. And it wasn't a book about IR Theory as such. I needed a textbook that was about IR Theory and that I could use to help develop my students analytical and critical skills. Even when I looked at the more traditional IR textbooks at the time – those that strove to comprehensively survey the discipline theoretically and thematically like Charles W. Kegley, Jr. and Eugene R. Wittkopf's *World Politics: Trends and Transformations* or Joshua S. Goldstein's *International Relations* – what I found was these textbooks did not promote an analytical much less critical engagement with most IR theories. And so eventually, I wrote the textbook I needed, which my publisher grandly entitled *IR Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Like my course, the textbook explores IR myths through popular films as a way to illustrate and critique IR theory and the discipline of IR.

As the reviewers here rightly point out, this textbook is far from perfect. It is partial in that it critiques only those IR myths that have come to be adopted by many in the so-called mainstream as true, like Neorealism and Neoidealism, while neglecting to critique those IR myths that the mainstream has yet to accept (or accept in the form that their advocates promote), like poststructuralism or feminism. In so doing, the reviewers regard this textbook as ‘political’ because of the choices it makes about inclusion, exclusion, and (its lack of) self-critique (as I am someone who uses poststructuralism and feminism in my work).

These are fair criticisms, but for me they are tempered by another historical context that defined my approach to writing the first edition of this textbook. This is that in the 1990s, Kenneth Waltz' Neorealism still defined the mainstream of the discipline of International Relations, while contenders like Charles Kegley's Neoidealism and Alex Wendt's Constructivism were on the rise. And while other

traditions like poststructuralism and feminism challenged Neorealism, these traditions were usually either shunned or ridiculed by the mainstream, even if selected aspects of them were disciplined and incorporated into mainstream debates. What this means is that at the time I was first writing this textbook, there were ample critiques available of poststructuralism and feminism, and there was no sustained undergraduate textbook that critiqued IR Theory from a poststructuralist and feminist point of view. Later editions of the textbook carry this historical legacy within them, without ever suggesting that poststructuralism and feminism do not rely upon their own myths. So, yes, I made a political choice in writing the textbook in this way. Yet I have to say that I always find it worth remarking that when one writes from a perspective that is outside of the mainstream, it is marked by IR theorists as ‘political’. Yet if one writes from a mainstream perspective, it is marked by IR theorists as ‘neutral’ or ‘balanced’. Taking on how ‘natural’ those demarcations appear to be was one of the (political) points of my textbook.

To me, though, the most political choice I made in writing this textbook was to argue – and indeed to demonstrate how – popular films are a powerful form and forum through which IR myths are circulated and made palatable to the general public. This move is important because it has the potential to effect three changes in relation to IR. First, it might affect what counts as ‘doing IR’ vs. being beyond the pale of IR by deconstructing the ‘high theory’/‘low culture’ dichotomy. Second, it might change what counts as good pedagogical practice in the classroom, by foregrounding what is usually excluded from IR Theory as the main event. And third (and as a result), it might change the relationships of powers between undergraduate students of IR and their professors because it demands that professors recognize that their students are probably more highly knowledgeable about and skilled in reading popular expressions of IR Theory in popular films than they are.

What this means is that this textbook was written to be dialogical rather than monological, as it requires IR Theory (and the IR professors teaching it) and popular culture (and the IR Theory students who grasp it and work with it so well critically) to always be in a conversation about what IR theories mean and do, what popular cultural expressions like popular films mean and do, what the discipline of IR means and does, especially when reconsidered through popular films, and even what this textbook means and does. In so doing, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* attempts to place the ‘critical’ of IR Theory not only within IR Theory or within popular films, but in the pedagogical encounters between students and professors. For all its flaws, this I believe is the textbook’s practical pedagogical achievement, and this is the reason I keep revising it edition after edition.

## References

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