INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS' THEORY AND THE UN: A PRIMER

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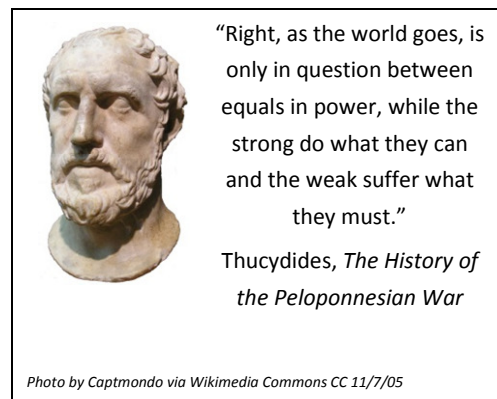## University of Wollongong 2015

International relations theories are useful as they are able to explain and, potentially, predict what will occur within the global order. The predictive record is not that great, but the explanatory power is particularly helpful. This paper offers a brief primer on the key theories of international relations in use today: realism, liberalism, critical/reflectivist theories and social constructivism. There are case studies of each theory in relation to the UN system. Starting to engage with theoretical approaches to international relations is vital because it helps us to do a number of things:

1. To understand the basis of some of the ideas which actually shaped international organisations, like the UN.
2. To decipher the assumptions and worldviews that underpin the analyses we read.

Theories help us to make sense of the world too - they give us a lens through which we can focus on the key actors, events and factors.

Realism

Realism is the oldest and most enduring theory of international relations. One of the first scholars to outline what were to become known as realist ideas was the great Greek general and historian, Thucydides. He wrote about the struggles for power in the Peloponnesian Wars of Ancient Greece, so it is not surprising that a concern with war and the relative power of states are key focuses for this approach. However, at its core there are also assumptions about human beings and their nature - realism posits that people are autonomous and act in an inherently selfish manner. This means that they will do what they can to benefit themselves, above and beyond everyone else.

"Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 laid the foundation for the system of sovereign states which dominate the world today. Sovereignty is another of realism's key organising concepts. Sovereignty is

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a political and ultimately legal doctrine which denotes that a state 'is able to command absolute authority' within a 'discrete area' and that there is formal equality between states, regardless of their size, population or power (Elden, 2014: 224-5). In other words, the state is the highest authority within its territory and is not answerable to any higher authority in international law. The four requirements for an entity to be deemed a sovereign state are: a permanent population; a defined territory; a recognised government; and, the capacity to enter into relations with other states. In realism, sovereignty is taken to mean that states can be autonomous and selfish units, which operate with full legal and political legitimacy. The most important goal of a realist state is to ensure its own survival into perpetuity. For a realist, given that the international order is anarchic – equivalent to a Hobbesian 'state of nature' - survival cannot be guaranteed because there is no higher authority than the state to maintain order. Thus, military preparedness and a willingness to engage in war are key to ensuring states' survive.

Another core element of realism is self-help. This entails that a state's key responsibility is their own survival and interests and this is furthered by the politico-legal unit of the sovereign state. A corollary of this is that there are no obligations for states to assist one another, unless it is within their national interest to do so. At the same time, given the inevitability of armed conflict in an anarchic world, states need to enter alliances and work to balance the power of competing states. Thus, there is a sense in which realism says that international relations are ordered through the balance of powers between states.

This coupling of military power and a balancing of powers allows the state to survive. Realism, without the hard enforcement mechanisms of the military and balancing powers, would not be a particularly good theory of international relations as it would not allow for the protection of the state's own interests. It would be idealistic to think that a state would not need to defend itself from external existential threats.

To summarise, realism is a theory of international relations which is framed around the **unitary sovereign state**. It is primarily based around a view of humanity whereby people are purely **self-interested** and required to guard their interests through **military capacity** and **balancing power**. The realist state is intent on survival and ensuring that its **national interest** is maintained at any cost.

The Security Council: the Realist Heart of the UN

Security Council discussing situation in Ukraine.
UN Photo/Mark Garten 28/8/2014 CC-BY

The failure of the League of Nations to prevent the outbreak of World War II was widely attributed to it being too idealist. It promoted collective action on international disputes but most of its major members did not see this approach was in their national interest. This was a key reason that the US never joined the League.

The UN's Security Council in contrast embodies a more realist approach to efforts international at maintaining international peace and security. Like the League, the Council also has permanent members made up of the big five victors of World War II who are also the major nuclear armed state: the US, Russia, China, France and Britain. Unlike in the League, in the Council the Permanent Five's (P5) vote is needed for any resolution to pass, giving them an effective veto over voted in the Council. This was recognition that the Council could not function without participation and support of major powers, yet it has equally prevented the UN from taking action of almost any issue where the interests of the P5 do not align.

The very business of the Security Council aligns with realism's main concerns – issues of peace and security. For realism, maintaining peace and security comes down to power and the bigger the better. The role of the P5 in the Security Council implies big powers still get to manage global peace and security issues. However, the rise of countries like India and Brazil has led to questions about the composition of the Council. Who should the permanent members be? How should members be elected? The current situation for non-permanent members is that there are ten, elected for two-year terms on a rolling basis.

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism is built upon the classical liberal ideas of the Enlightenment. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Jean Jacques Rousseau greatly influenced this theory. In stark opposition to realism, liberalism believes that people are inherently good and valuable. People also strive for collaboration over conflict. All other principles of liberalism stem from these core beliefs.

"Freedom is the alone unoriginated birthright of man, and belongs to him by force of his humanity." Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Ethics*

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Liberalism is tied to the values of democracy, justice, human rights and peace. Democracy is important because it affords individuals the rights to participate within the process of governance, a process that clearly affects their existence. As a consequence of the impact that governance can have on individuals, the democratic process ought to be transparent and accountable. This is achieved by ensuring that the government is responsible to the people that elect and create it.

Justice and human rights are two interlinked liberal values that both appeal to either a higher authority or concepts of natural laws or rights, for their legitimacy. For liberals, these values are central to ensuring that the individual can flourish within society as an intentional political agent. They were also an inspiration for Immanuel Kant's work, who thought that, over time, republics would produce a cosmopolitan global order as they improve themselves internally and join international organisation to make a "perpetual peace." Kant's work inspired one key current in a contemporary strand of liberal IR theorising, namely that on democratic peace. Democratic peace theory posits that democracies will not enter into war with other democracies because of how difficult and grave war makes the lives of their own citizens and the lives of other people within democracies (Dunne, 2011: 104). This is an important yet very controversial theory; critics argue that it that it is based on a contemporary correlation of peace between vaguely defined democratic (mostly Western) states, who are of course allies, rather than on any direct evidence of democracy causing peace between them.

For liberals, the global order is characterised by interdependence and collaboration. Sovereign states are self-determining and relatively autonomous, but just as naturally, form bonds to help one another maximise their potential. Thus, liberal scholars tend to focus on things like collective security and internationalisation and to emphasise the role of these values in the international system. Collective security is the idea that states form a security alliance pledging to assist any of their members in the event of an armed attack. Pre-World War II, a popular idealist strand of liberalism argued that all states should become party to a collective security arrangement – the League of Nations - and that, through this, conflict would be eliminated. Unfortunately, World War II dashed these hopes and discredited global collective security arrangements, however, they remain a mechanism for arrangements between allies, often at a regional level.

The idea of internationalisation drove the view that multilateral and international organisations can, and should, play a key role in managing global politics (e.g. the UN), regional cooperation (e.g. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN) or specific issues requiring cooperation (e.g. the World Trade Organisation). Liberalism posits that states come together to assist one another in ensuring that their mutual aims and objectives are met in the spirit of interdependence and collaboration.

Liberalism is a very broad church as a theory. We have focused on the liberal institutionalism, which emphasises rights and cooperation. However, other strands of liberalism focus more on markets and individual freedoms. This economic liberalism is association with modern neoclassical economics and neoliberalism too. Scholars who focus more on these economic variants of liberalism emphasise the role of forces such as globalisation and the liberalisation of trade and markets. Globalisation sees the world as becoming more interconnected in a multiplicity of way. The internet, air travel and proliferation of better telecommunications are accelerating this process in many areas of the world. Liberalisation of trade and economic markets are seeing tariffs removed and higher flows of capital across border,s as direct foreign investment takes place in freer market economies.

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In summary, liberal institutionalism is characterised by a belief in the **goodness of humanity**. As a result, human rights, **justice** and **democracy** are values that are crucially important to the proper functioning of the world. If these values are respected, liberals believe that peace will prevail. **Interdependence** and **collaboration** are then the effect of the proper implementation of these values, and are evident through globalisation and economic liberalisation.

The UN System and Liberalism: the General Assembly

The General Assembly is the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the UN – it is quite like the lower house of parliament in a liberal democracy with a couple of *major* exceptions: it has no legislative or law-making capacity and its representatives are states - not individuals. But, it does include representation of all member states – 193 in 2015 – and a forum for multilateral discussion of a broad spectrum of international issues.

UN members may only be sovereign states - a quite realist approach – but the organisation has incorporated non-state actors into many of its committees and bodies, particularly since the 1980s. This role for civil society is another way that liberalism's strong influence on the UN is visible.

Like the Security Council, the UN Charter tasks the General Assembly with promoting international peace and security, but it is also responsible for political co-operation including the progressive development of international law. It is also in control of "promoting international co-operation in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields, and assisting in the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (UN Charter, Chapter IV, Article 13).

The prominence of human rights shows the influence of liberalism on the UN. Just a couple of years after its founding, it promulgated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In recent years, the rights agenda has shaped the creation of the Millennium Declaration and the associated Millennium Development Goals, which were created as a blueprint for ending extreme poverty and hunger. Their target date was 2015 and progress against the different goals varied, thus in September 2015 the General Assembly will meet to agree on the post-2015 agenda, called the Sustainable Development Goals.

Critical International Relations Theories

This section introduces a diverse set of schools of thought in international relations that share, at minimum, a critical take on the theoretical and political approach to the study of global politics. While many have older lineages, they have flourished in international relations from the 1980s, when the discipline started seriously debating theory and the premises of particular theories – in other words, their ontology (theory of being) and epistemology (theory of knowledge). In that sense, they share the maxim of Robert Cox that "theory is always for someone, and for some purpose" (1981, p.128). What Cox is getting at here is that knowledge and theories reflect the time that they were

created, the people they were created by and the power structures of the time; they are not objectives truths.

In this paper, we look at neo-Marxist and neo-Gramscian theories of international relations, postcolonialism and feminism; however there are other critical approaches and other ways to label and group them. Reflectivist theories is one label you might particularly hear for feminism and postcolonialism and also for constructivism, which we've included under a separate heading.

Neo-Marxism and Neo-Gramscian Theories

Neo-Marxist approaches focus attention on the material and economic aspects that underpin the supposed 'high' politics of international relations and diplmocy. They focus not just on economics in general but on the causes and consequences of exploitation and inequality, which has been a hot topic over recent year and not surprisingly given that the richest 85 people in the world now have the same wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion!

Marx's focus was on class rather than on inter-state relations, the most influential theories inspired by Marx's critical social analysis, are neo-Marxist. The most popular of these is Dependency Theory. Dependency Theory set out to explain the failure of 'trickle down' growth in Latin America. It posited that the world trading system, in concert with sections of the indigenous bourgeois, effectively impoverished the poorest in the Third World. It did this by trade that works to transfer wealth from traditional to the modern sectors and then overseas. This impoverishment was said to occur both within developing countries (the periphery) and between them and already industrialised (the centre) countries, producing a process of underdevelopment. In other words, wealth, via exploitation, moves from the underdeveloped periphery to the developed core and, importantly, the core is responsible for the process of creating underdevelopment and impoverishment of the periphery. Dependency theory and the related World Systems Theory are not as popular today as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, nevertheless, their critical analysis of the relations between the developed and developing world continues to inspire scholars today.

For many critically inclined scholars of global politics, the writings of the Italian Marxist theoretician and politician, Antonio Gramsci, have been a key source of inspiration. Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony, meaning not just dominance as per its usage by realist international relations scholars, but as a combination of coercion and consent. Indeed, for Gramsci, building consent for institutions, ideas and systems is the most powerful basis of constructing societies and is what liberal democratic societies have been able to do - though coercion remains as a final arbiter if consent is challenged. Thus, Gramscians are interested in the way socio-economic relations interact with political and cultural ones in different realms. His work was popularised in the field of international relations by Robert Cox (1981). Cox proposed a framework examining the interaction of social forces, states and world orders in shaping international relations. A neo-Gramscian approach thus incorporates a much stronger influence for ideas as well as for institutions and material capabilities.

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The World Bank and Neo-Gramscianism

The World Bank is a specialised agency of the UN that provides competitive and low interest rate loans to low and middle income countries to assist them to develop. From the debt crisis years for developing countries of the late 1970s, the World Bank, and its sister organisation the International Monetary Fund (IMF), became the main source of external financing for many developing countries. They utilised this position to push the adoption a set of ten policies known as the Washington Consensus in developing countries. The name 'Washington Consensus' comes from the fact that the policies were hammered out in Washington between the World Bank, the IMF and the US Treasury. There were *no* developing countries consulted despite the fact that they were to be the main 'recipients' of the policies.

The Washington Consensus policies were what we might call today austerity policies; they can be placed under the heading of neoliberalism. Their social impacts in developing countries were severe, with large increases in poverty, and its feminisation too. By the mid-1990s, the Bank claimed to have stepped away from the harshest of these policies, implementing 'adjustment with a human face.' Susan Engel's book, *The World Bank and the post-Washington Consensus in Vietnam and Indonesia: Inheritance of Loss* (Routledge, 2010)*, used a neo-Gramscian approach to examine the extent of shift in the Bank's practices. She did this by analysing, not just the Bank' policy documents, but the contents of its loans in two countries, Vietnam and Indonesia.

This research found that the shift in the 1990s did not change any of the core Washington Consensus policies. What did occur was the introduction of some new issues to the Word Bank's policy 'reform' agenda, like a degree of concern with poverty reduction and the timing and sequencing of reforms. The addition of these new issues was only tolerated as long as they did not challenge the hegemonic commitments to economic growth, free trade, deregulation and neoliberal governance.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism emphasises an account of international relations from the bottom up, instead of the top down. The main international relations theories all work with states, institutions and economies as their major units of analysis. A postcolonial theorist looks at small communities and individuals instead. In this sense, a large part of their work is about mapping the silences in international relations. In other words, filling in the blanks regarding things that have not been investigated from an international relations perspective. This focus was partially inspired by Gayatri Spivak's famous paper, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

Another dimension of postcolonial theory is a particular concern with the power dynamics and structures that were left in place by colonial powers following their removal, or withdrawal from their colonial projects. Postcolonial scholars spend time and energy advocating on behalf of the underdeveloped states in relation to the inequalities that the international system has dealt to them.

Methodologically speaking, postcolonial scholars use different means for investigating international relations. They conduct fieldwork and use cultural artefacts, stories, plays and artworks as sources. A

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crucial element to postcolonial studies is allowing the subjects to speak for themselves in their own authentic voice.

Feminism

Feminist international relations seek to expand the scope and methodology of the discipline by applying a gender lens to it. It is important to point out that feminism is one of the most contested 'theories' of international relations, as there are numerous feminisms at play in the field (Hutchings, 2000). However, all feminist theory is bolstered by the view that women have been largely absent from mainstream international relations discourse, to such an extent that they have been detrimentally marginalised. Further, gender is commonly understood as a socially constructed attribute of masculinity and femininity, which has often served to reinforce unequal power structures and relations between men and women.

Feminism seeks to expand the scope of international relations through it's now famous catchcry, 'the personal is political.' Accordingly feminist international relations scholars may concern themselves with topics that fall outside of the usual analysis of states, institutions and regimes by looking at things like comparative maternal care, or gendered assumptions and responses to honour killings.

Feminism's greatest impact on international relations has been to uncover the issues and inherent inequalities within the international system, which serve to oppress women. Such issues include the caste system, female foeticide, and pay inequality among many more.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism also developed out of the debate about the ideas on knowledge creation that underpin mainstream international relations theories (discussed above under critical theories). Another way to approach this debate is to come at it from the age old – but very important – debate about the relationship between agents and structure in this case in international relations. This is what Alexander Wendt did in order to unveil the socially constructed nature of meaning in the field. He argued that every agent, structure and institution is situated within a temporal, spatial, and epistemic (social) context, which informs and constructs meaning. Meaning is thus not inherent in the global community, it is moulded and shaped by the forces around it in any given space and time.

Social constructivism views ideas and norms as being central to international relations. Forces such as the theories you are reading about, concepts of race, gender and security, are all really just socially constructed ideas. Ultimately then, constructivism privileges normative structures (values systems) over material structures (concrete, physical and inherent structures). In fact, it holds that material structures are actually socially constructed, based on norms themselves. In other words, the socially constructed ideas behind the forces, events and structures, create and construct the meanings that they hold. These meanings then reinforce those ideas, and seem inherent, but are really just socially constructed.

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Once the nature of meaning is acknowledged as being socially constructed, constructivists argue that insights into the power dynamics of knowledge can be derived. If meaning, structures and concepts of international relations are socially constructed, they have to be constructed by someone or something and through a process. This role as knowledge creator, affords power to that entity. Social constructivism therefore allows for the denaturalisation or deconstruction of concepts that were previously seen as inherent and absolute. It also portrays international relations as self-referential and perpetuating system of ideas and structures.

Constructivism on Norms and the Use of Force

Martha Finnemore, along with Wendt, is one of the foremost constructivist international relations scholars. In her 2003 book, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force*, she analyses of military interventions and in doing this explores dynamics and mechanisms at play in the evolution of the norms and rules that govern international society.

Finnemore looks at different motives for military involvements a key one of which is humanitarian relief provision. On humanitarian intervention, while it has been practiced for centuries, her key point is that the extent and nature of these interventions have changed. For Western governments, interventions were initially a way to protect fellow Christians from hostile regimes and later the British intervened to ensure that the formal outlawing of the slave trade was upheld. Now, however, humanitarian intervention is undertaken largely for non-white, non-Christian populations and it is usually organised multilaterally and authorised by a legitimate international organisation.

For Finnemore, traditional realist and liberal theories of international relations do not adequately explain these changes and to get a better picture of change, evolving norms need to be studied. Especially those regarding the value of war, the growing acceptance of the juridical equality of actors and the decline in value of force. These norms are also supported and reinforced by changing understandings of universal human rights, gender and the expectations upon a state to protect their own civilians. Accordingly it has been the changes of ideas around the acceptability of humanitarian intervention which has catalysed its change over time.

Thus a constructivist, like Finnemore, claims that the changing history of humanitarian intervention is influenced by changes in norms and values within a global society, instead of through meta ideas surrounding the goodness, or otherwise, of humanity.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a snapshot of the dominant theories of international relations that can all provide unique insights into how the world works in a global setting. Each of these theories has their positives and negatives, which can be teased out through analysing the key areas of international relations. Theories are not just useful in providing a framework for studying international relations

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but also because they can influence and shape the behaviour of states, diplomats, international organisations and other international actors. To find out more, there are a range of good introductory textbook that you might be able to borrow from your local library or you can purchase online, we've listed a couple below.

References

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Spivak, G. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds) Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271-313

Finnemore, M. *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force.* (Cornell University Press, 2003)

Useful Textbooks

Most introductory international relations texts will have a sound introduction to the different theories. Two good ones are:

Balylis, J., S. Smith and P. Owens (eds) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (6th ed, Oxford University Press, 2013)

R. Devetak, A. Burke and J.George (eds) *An Introduction to International Relations* (2nd ed, Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Open Access

Theory Talks - this is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues, available from: http://www.theory-talks.org/

The Disorder of Things is a blog on postmodern and critical IR theory, providing case studies of recent analysis of events: http://thedisorderofthings.com/

Constructivism *mini-lecture* by Professor Daniel Nexon (2006): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yQITXWgd8k – this is Part I, there are three parts all up.

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