Understanding International Relations

ALSO BY CHRIS BROWN

International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches

***Political Restructuring in Europe: Ethical Perspectives* (ed.)**

Understanding International Relations

Chris Brown

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Preface

This is a textbook, an introduction to the discipline of International Relations. The aim is to present within a relatively small compass an overview of the current state of International Relations theory. This book could be used as a text for undergraduate-level introductory courses, but it could also serve as a general introduction to theory for the increasing number of postgraduate students of the subject. It is sometimes assumed that postgraduates need a different literature from undergraduates; this seems to me not to be the case – good students at all levels need to have their minds engaged and stimulated, and this book is written on the assumption that all of its readers will have enquiring minds and be willing to put in the effort required to understand ideas that are sometimes quite complex.

There is sometimes an assumption that ‘theory’ is something that is suitable only for ‘advanced’ students, and that an introductory text ought not to be theoretically oriented. The fear is that students are not interested in theory, that they study International Relations with a practical orientation and become alienated if asked to think conceptually and abstractly, and, most damagingly, that students want to be told the ‘right’ answers and not to be exposed to the scandalous fact that authorities differ even on quite basic issues. These positions must be resisted. All understandings of International Relations and of the other social sciences are necessarily theoretical, the only issue is whether this is made explicit or not and most good students are well aware that this is so. The real danger is that by presenting International Relations Lite as a kind of a-theoretical discourse, ‘current-affairs-with-a-twist’, an adjunct to ‘higher journalism’, we alienate the brighter theorists amongst our students, and attract only those with a more empirical cast of mind. This is particularly galling because International Relations today is a theoretically sophisticated and challenging social science, the location of important debates on, for example, agency-structure, gender, identity, and the further reaches of postmodern and post-

structural thought. Fortunately, this is reflected in the large number of theoretically sophisticated, high quality research students in the subject – what is interesting, and depressing, is how many of these students have discovered the importance of International Relations theory for themselves, and how few have come to the subject via an undergraduate education in IR.

When theory is taught, it is often as an adjunct to practice; its ‘relevance’ is repeatedly stressed on the apparent principle that inviting students to think abstractly is to place so onerous a burden on them that they must be promised an immediate and tangible reward in exchange for their efforts. On the contrary, I think the theory of International Relations is a fascinating subject worthy of study in its own right – fortunately it happens also to have considerable practical relevance, but anyone who pursues the subject solely on that basis is going to miss a lot of the story, and, incidentally, much of the fun.

The following chapters fall into four sections, of unequal size. In the first part, Chapters 1 to 3, after an introductory chapter on the nature of theory, the evolution of International Relations theory is presented; post-1914–18 liberal internationalism, the contest between liberalism and realism in the 1930s, the post 1945 realist synthesis, the debate on method in the 1960s, pluralism and structuralism, and the current orthodoxies of neorealism and neoliberalism along with their critics. This history is necessary if we are to understand current thinking on International Relations; it provides the student with a basic vocabulary and grammar of the discipline, without which reading the current literature will be impossible. For most of the history of the discipline, the state has been the central focus for concern, and realism the most important theory, and Chapters 4 to 6 examine the characteristic topics of realist, ‘state-centric’ international relations: theories of the state, foreign policy decision-making, agency-structure problems, power, security, war and the balance of power. In the third part, Chapters 7 to 10, less state-centric accounts of the world are investigated: the notion of ‘global governance’, the workings of the world economy and its characteristic institutions, and North–South relations. Finally, in Chapters 11 and 12, the impact of the ending of the Cold War on International Relations theory is examined.

Although this may seem to offer a kind of progression of ideas, I have tried to avoid presenting this material in such a way as to suggest that the newer ideas are better because they are newer, or, for that matter, to suggest that *any* body of theory is self-evidently true or false.

I have views on most of the subjects covered in this book, and usually it will not be too difficult to work out what they are, but I assume that the role of the textbook author is not primarily to condemn or praise. My aim is to present as fairly as possible the arguments in question. Thus, for example, I would not seek to hide the fact that I am out of sympathy with neorealist theorising in International Relations, and the conclusion I draw in a number of chapters would, indeed, make this impossible to hide, but I would be disappointed if neorealists were to feel that my presentation of their work was loaded against them. Neorealism is an intellectually rigorous and challenging set of ideas – as are the notions of ‘rational choice’ upon which nowadays it is based. It deserves to be treated very seriously indeed and I hope I have done so in what follows.

At various points in the text I have made reference to ‘post-positivist’ International Relations, in particular to work on postmodernism, gender, and critical theory. However, this is a book about theory, not about methodology or the philosophy of science, and, for the most part, the coverage of post-positivism will be limited to areas where post-positivists have actually contributed theory, as opposed to presenting promissory notes on what post-positivist theory might look like when it actually arrives. This means coverage of these topics is rather more patchy, and less enthusiastic than their adherents would approve of. However, compromises have to be made, and my own area of international political theory is also represented only at a few points. My aim is to give a critical account of the current ‘state-of-the-art’ of the discipline rather than to anticipate its shape in the next millennium – although, naturally, a few markers for the future will be laid down, especially in the final chapter. To deploy in defence of this project an analogy close to my heart, some of the masterpieces of twentieth century music are certainly atonal, or serial, but it is impossible to develop any real appreciation of, say, Schoenberg’s Op. 31 *Orchestral Variations*, or Berg’s *Lulu*, without grasping the principles of *tonality* these great works defy. This book is about the International Relations equivalent of these latter principles, with some pointers as to how they might be overcome. In any event, there are many modern composers who persist with tonality to good effect . . . but I digress.

References have been kept to a minimum to improve the readability of the text; however, a short guide to further reading is attached to each chapter. I have tried to provide a mixture of readings – old and new, books and articles; given the constraints on library budgets, a reference

to an old, but still useful work may be more helpful than one to an up-to-date but unobtainable text. I have tried to provide both. A full bibliography is provided at the end of the book.

All textbooks are, one way or another, multi-authored. I have been studying International Relations for 31 years, and teaching the subject for 26; this has involved exchanging ideas with so many teachers, colleagues and students that I find it difficult to say where my own thinking begins and theirs ends. Listing all the people who have influenced my views on International Relations theory over the years would be impossible; if I single out the rather diverse group of Michael Banks, James Mayall, John Groom, Susan Strange and Steve Smith for special mention, it is in no spirit of disrespect to many others. I have had very helpful comments on this text from an number of anonymous readers for Macmillan. Graham Smith has helped me to avoid making silly mistakes about the environment, but still disagrees with my position on that subject. Susan Stephenson assisted in the preparation of the index. Most of all, I have had the advantage of extensive commentaries from two of the best of the younger generation of International Relations theorists in Britain today; Molly Cochran of Bristol University read Parts I and II, and was particularly helpful in clarifying a number of presentational points; and Tim Dunne of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, read the whole text, improved the argument throughout, and, in particular, forced me to rewrite Chapter 12. With the usual disclaimer that remaining errors of fact and interpretation are all mine, thanks to the above, to colleagues at the Universities of Kent and Southampton, to Steven Kennedy, and to the around 1500 students on S314 (Kent) and PO105 (Southampton) who, over the years, have attended my lectures (or not) and, variously, nodded in agreement, stared out of the window, looked confused, or laughed – sometimes even in appropriate places – all the while keeping me entertained and in gainful employment.

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