

The uses of theory in the study of international relations (By Ngaire Woods)

Final version published in Ngaire Woods (ed), *Explaining International Relations since 1945* (Oxford University Press, 1996)

[BACK TO INDEX](#)

Introduction

Theories of international relations greatly improve the ways in which we understand and explain phenomena in world politics. The term 'theories' however covers a wide range of different enterprises: from loose conceptualization to formally modelling particular events or testing correlation between variables. This chapter distinguishes five uses of theory. The first section discusses the basic yet crucial business of defining terms and concepts. Theory is used to define what we are studying in international relations, our purposes in studying it, and categories within which we might go about analyzing the behaviour of international actors. The second section of the chapter discusses 'perspectives' or the exercise of conceptually 'mapping' the international landscape. Four particular perspectives are discussed: 'world capitalism', 'power-politics' (realism), 'law, collective security and international society', and 'economic interdependence'. Each perspective highlights a different set of core actors, preferences and interactions. Such perspectives are crucial for generating hypotheses about the forces which drive international relations. The third part of the chapter discusses model-building or formal theory. Formal theory permits of better explanation, testing and prediction in international relations. At the same time, the section highlights the ways in which formal theory must depend for strength upon the two previous types of theorizing. The fourth section of the chapter looks at quantitative analysis. Statistical analysis and the rules of inference lie at the heart of quantitative analysis and, some would argue, such rules should also apply to qualitative analysis (a claim that is discussed and endorsed only in a limited way). Finally, the fifth section of the chapter discusses the contribution of reflectivism or theories of knowledge to the study of international relations. This final section distinguishes post-modernists, critical theorists, and constructivists, highlighting the different levels of challenge that each pose to the other types of theory discussed in the chapter.

1. Definitions, purposes and categories

One of the first functions theory performs is to define the terms and concepts which we invoke in order to describe, explain, or predict, in the study of international relations. Definitions and categories (or taxonomies as Gaddis mentions in chapter two) are crucial to social science, as they are to all science, for we can not study 'war', or 'states' unless we first know what falls (or does not fall) into such a category. Useful definitions will specify both what a term is, and just as importantly what it is not and what its opposite or a contrasting term might be. The more closely connected any two terms are, the more useful it is to specify and distinguish them.

In international relations we use both the terms 'international system' and 'international society' to describe what we are studying. These terms are distinguished by Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society*. An international system comprises two or more states which have sufficient contact between them and sufficient impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole. In an international system, states behave 'strategically', making their decisions on what they think other states will do. By contrast, an 'international society' is a group of states which knowingly share common interests and values and 'conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions'.⁽¹⁾

If we choose to define international relations as the study of the 'international system', our study becomes one highly amenable to game theory and to formal theorizing about strategic interaction among players. On the other hand, if we define international relations as that which goes on in an international society, we would want to draw on much more traditional tools of analysis including history, philosophy and traditional political science. The definitions we use do not simply clarify but also reflect the purposes of our study. So too, definitions crucially shape what we study and the methods we use to study it.

Our purposes in studying international relations are often described by either of the terms 'explaining' or 'understanding'. Yet, these terms, as Martin Hollis and Steve Smith point out, are worth distinguishing, for each embodies a very different purpose. 'Explaining' is concerned with identifying what caused a particular event or state of affairs. For example, the origins of the Cold War might be 'explained' by pointing to the new global balance of power that prevailed after the second world war. Scholars who seek to 'explain' will prefer to use theories which generate causal hypotheses such as 'a change in x caused y'.

By contrast 'understanding' involves a search not so much for the cause of an event but for its meaning. The early Cold War might be 'understood' by examining the perceptions, aims and beliefs of Stalin, Truman, and other decision-makers. Scholars seeking to 'understand' will prefer to investigate an event or a state of affairs, rather than focusing on a theory which purports to explain it. The 'understanders' will delve into history not as a set of information which might falsify a theory, but as a narrative which permits a greater understanding of the origins, evolution and consequences of an event.

The 'understanders' however may well be prone to drawing out conclusions about the causes of an event without subjecting such conclusions to the more rigorous appraisal of the 'explainers'. At this point in research both understanding and explanation become complementary.

Most scholars seek both to explain and to understand. However, by distinguishing explaining and understanding we can identify the aim to which a scholar is giving priority and what an alternative goal might be. In chapters two and three of this book, John Gaddis and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita debate the respective strengths of the more historical 'understanding' approach and the more scientific 'explaining' approach.

Concepts and categories, no matter how carefully defined, will always be subject to modification and 'reinvention'. Levels of analysis, for example, are created by scholars of international relations to categorize and conceptually to separate at least three different arenas of politics: individual decision-makers; domestic political factors; or the influence of the workings of the international system on states' behaviour. The conceptual separation is useful for it allows a scholar to ignore two (or more) arenas of politics and to focus in on one. Put another way, the scholar can hold a large range of variables constant whilst focusing on a group of variables at one level. At the individual level, the role of ideologies, ideas and the psychology of decision-makers can be examined. At the level of the state, bureaucratic decision-making structures and procedures, interest groups and coalitions of interests can be analyzed. And, at the systemic level the distribution of power among states and its impact on their behaviour can be assessed.

Three levels of analysis are useful but most outcomes in international relations are not be amenable to explanation, let alone understanding, at one of the three levels of analysis. This argument is made by Avi Shlaim in chapter thirteen which analyses the origins of wars in the Middle East. Although the three levels of analysis provide useful checklist of factors, whether we seek to explain or to understand, there are several problems we must face if we use categories defined in this way.

Perhaps the most simple and pervasive problem with levels-of-analysis is choosing at what level to start research. In the first place, one's starting point will inevitably influence one's final explanation. In the second place, skipping from one level of analysis to another risks producing a rather ad hoc mixture of causes. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that there are only three levels of analysis. One could equally argue that there are more levels. For example, groupings between the level of individuals and that of state structures may be crucial, or alternatively, the regional level between state structures and the international system. A guide to defining levels of analysis might be to ask whether a particular level captures an arena which has a distinct logic of its own.

The general problem raised is that levels of analysis, no matter how carefully defined, cannot be used as a fixed conceptual tool. Rather, researchers need to re-examine and perhaps reinvent the categories for any particular piece of research. The question then is: How much research do you have to do in order to define how it is that the research will be best undertaken?

One way around this problem is suggested by Larson. In her excellent analysis of the individual level factors which influenced the origins of the Cold War, Larson suggests that we use a 'composite strategy'. The strategy involves using all levels of analysis as a check against each other, with the result that we can more effectively fill out historical explanation. [\(2\)](#)

The composite approach is perhaps satisfactory for scholars aiming better to understand, but it is not adequate for those wishing to explain. Scholars wanting to identify causal relationships need to be able to identify for a given issue, that level which embodies the most important cause. Here, alas, there is no easy solution. As expressed above, the research itself needs first to identify the 'right' level of analysis.

Finally, a third problem with separating levels of analysis is that

`units' (whether individuals or states) can only very artificially be separated from the `structure' (the international system). In fact, the two are in constant interaction with each other.⁽³⁾ Where states interact at the international level, their interactions affect decision-makers' beliefs and attitudes, domestic political pressures and conceptions of national interest. For example, once Reagan and Gorbachev started to negotiate disarmament, the two leaders engaged in a process which not only changed their own aspirations and perceptions but also those of interest groups, political institutions and public opinion in their own countries.

A different way to negotiate the relationship between `structure' and `units' is to focus on bargaining or negotiations among states and analyze their impact on all levels of analysis. This approach has been taken in recent research on international negotiations and bargaining. Researchers using a `two-level game analogy' or what is now called `double-edged diplomacy' assess the ways in which inter-state negotiations affect both the individuals at the bargaining table and the domestic politics of the states involved in the negotiations which in turn affect outcomes. This strategy produces interesting insights into the possibilities for both domestic and international outcomes.⁽⁴⁾

The problem with 'double-edged diplomacy' is that it only addresses the decision-making process. Neglected are the questions of how states come to form their preferences in the first place and how they go about implementing policies they have agreed on. These questions are not just questions of `understanding', they also bear on what it is that scholars set out to explain. That is to say, using the two-level game analogy, scholars will analyze particular negotiations, perhaps to the neglect of equally or more important wider processes.

Levels of analysis, along with other categories and definitions in international relations, assist scholars in identifying what they are analyzing and distinguishing what they are holding constant or choosing not to analyze. Academic debates about categories and definitions are crucial in ensuring that important parts of the picture are not neglected. Definitions and categories must be subject to continual scrutiny not just for precision but also so as to check the purposes and ambit of the research.

2. Perspectives or mapping the international landscape

Theory is used in international relations not only to define concepts and categories but also to draw concepts together so as to outline perspectives or build up 'maps' of the international arena. The 'international system', as defined above, is the basis of one such map: the 'international society' is the basis for an alternative map.

Maps, of course, do not just depict a given terrain, they offer a simplified depiction of the terrain with a specific purpose in mind. A map of the London Underground is of little use to a tourist wishing to walk from Trafalgar Square to Buckingham Palace. Similarly, a realist map of the international system is of little use to a scholar wishing to trace the rise of pacifist ideas in Europe. The realist map was drawn to trace out power relations not the rise of ideas. In using any map, one must first ask for what purpose it has been drawn.

Competing maps offer very different specifications of: the *core actors* in international relations; how it is that core actors *formulate their preferences*; how it is that actors *interact*; and which *capabilities* affect the implementation and achievement of preferred outcomes. It is worth noting here that although the term 'map' is used, in fact so-called maps do much more than reflect a given terrain. By focusing on particular actors, actions and motivations, and neglecting others, so-called 'maps' in fact construct the terrain of international relations (more on this in the final section of this chapter). For this reason the term 'perspective' better carries the use of theory in conceptualizing international relations.

Below, four perspectives prominent in international relations are laid out. These are not post-1945 inventions. Each has long historical roots and each was used to inform debates in the aftermath of the first world war about why states go to war, what might prevent them from doing so, and more generally about the nature of international relations. The different views are captured by the labels: 'economic

interdependence' (or liberalism), 'world capitalism' (or radicalism), 'law and collective security' (or international society) and 'power politics' (or realism).

(i) 'Economic interdependence'

A first perspective focuses on the web of interests which lie behind the state in its foreign policy. Hence Norman Angell argued in *The Great Illusion* (1911), that economic interdependence reduced the likelihood of war by reducing the gains to be made from war. Any government wanting to undertake a war for gain or conquest faced severe pressure from bankers and business men not to do so. Bankers and businessmen would know that in the new "complex financial interdependence of the capitals of the world" any warlike activities which affected banking and business in another major country risked bringing about financial collapse which would affect their own economy. In other words, domestic interests would ensure that governments did not undertake actions which might jeopardise their capital or bring about a financial collapse.

The general argument is that growing interdependence creates similar economic interests across all states and thus a community of interests which will facilitate cooperation among states. From this perspective, states' *preferences* in international relations are strongly influenced by domestic economic interests. States will *interact* with an eye to their own potential economic gains and losses and will seek to maximise their own economic gains. Implementation of state policies is assumed to be assured by the rational interests that underpin them.

The concept of economic interdependence was revived in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as global capital markets expanded and international trade and investment increased. US scholars such as Cooper, Morse, Keohane and Nye theorized that growing economic interdependence would alter the agenda and behaviour of states.⁽⁵⁾ As economic interdependence grew, so too, the utility of military power among states would be reduced. Coinciding with the end of the Vietnam war and detente, concepts of economic interdependence provided the language of linkage and economic incentives which came to shape US

foreign policy in this period.

In contemporary debates, economic interdependence is still an important vantage point from which work is undertaken on cooperation among states and on the dynamics of economic and political integration. Theories have been enriched by a variety of methods including rational choice, collective action, interdependent decision-making and game theory. However, the basic purpose of the economic interdependence map has remained the same: it was drawn in search of forces that might lead states away from war and into more cooperative relations. To this purpose it is still put. At the same time, the economic interdependence perspective not only reflects a growing interdependence among states but also constructs a view of international relations which focuses on this element of change and produces a language and a set of justifications for policy-makers to pursue particular policies.

(ii) 'World capitalism'

Like the economic interdependence perspective, the focus of the world capitalist perspective is economic relations, yet a very different map is specified for a very different purpose. In the interwar years 'world capitalism' was powerfully invoked by Lenin and other scholars to explain the outbreak of the first world war. Whilst others focused on poor diplomacy and a lack of cooperation as causes of the war, for Lenin the war of 1914-18 was imperialist (that is, an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder) on the part of both sides; it was a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance, capital, et.'⁽⁶⁾ Far from facilitating cooperation, economic interests forced states into conflict.

World capitalism focuses on ownership and control of the means of production in the world economy. The core actors are the owners of productive capital (whether states or multinational enterprises), the core dynamic is capitalism. States in which owners of capital do not reside (sometimes called 'the periphery' or 'the South') are weak and vulnerable to the core states. The preferences of core states are

dictated by the exigencies of economic capitalist competition. Powerful states use strategies to maximize the possibilities for the expansion of capital for these core states implement and achieve outcomes which embody the interests of the economically powerful within the state. In the periphery, the state will have little capacity to act except in the interests of capitalists in the core. In many ways, the influence of economic interests on the behaviour of states is similar to that specified in the economic interdependence perspective. Here, however, the purpose is altogether different. The world capitalist map was not drawn to highlight the possibilities of cooperation among states but to examine the sources of world inequalities.

In the 1950s and 1960s three theories sprung up within the world capitalist perspective to challenge the optimism of modernization theory. The modernizers argued that capitalist forces would positively transform the Third World. The world capitalist perspective offered analyses as to why this was not so, focussing unlike Lenin, not on the centres of capital but on the countries to which capital was being exported. 'World systems' theorists argued that the world capitalist system perpetuated underdevelopment in the South.⁽⁷⁾ 'Dependency theorists' focused on the distortionary consequences of world capitalism in the South, and examined the dynamic of change within the South.⁽⁸⁾ 'Structuralists' searched ways to reform the international economic system so as to overcome the obstacles to development being faced by developing countries.⁽⁹⁾ All three theories highlighted the collective and disadvantaged position shared by all countries in the South. The world capitalist perspective then constructed the 'South' as a group with a shared interest - as was expressed in the early 1970s when developing countries passed a Resolution in the United Nations General Assembly calling for the adoption of special measures so as better to enable countries of 'the South' to overcome structural barriers to development.

In the 1990s, the world capitalist perspective has declined as various competing perspectives depict diverging possibilities and interests in the countries of the South (and so too the cohesiveness of a 'Southern coalition' has diminished). Two central themes which run through the world capitalist perspective have been re-examined. First, the role of the state in development has been reassessed by scholars who now focus on the differences in experience among countries of the 'South' and

ask questions about: the distribution of benefits of development; the consequences of economic change for political regimes; and the relation between industrialization and political democracy. Secondly, the question of how the international capitalist system constrains development is being reassessed. The influence of the international system on the South is now analyzed by assessing the different impact of international constraints, pressures and shocks on countries. Countries such as Korea are examined by economists, anthropologists and political economists in search of an explanation of how one state overcame the barriers to growth and rapid development in the world economy. Furthermore, scholars have started to apply theories developed in analyses of the North to developing countries: be it comparative historical analysis⁽¹⁰⁾; the application of a rational choice approach to politics in Africa⁽¹¹⁾; or the application of 'Northern' economic theory to Africa.⁽¹²⁾

The world capitalist perspective was drawn up to highlight the processes of capital expansion across the world and came to be used as a framework to highlight the negative impact of world capitalism on developing countries. The perspective constructs a world divided into the North (where capital is plentiful) and the South (where development is hindered). In the 1990s the world capitalist perspective is no longer fashionable, however, it remains the only perspective in international relations which highlights questions of inequality and development.

(iii) 'Law, collective security and international society'

A wholly different map of international relations is provided by the law and security perspective. The preferences of states are assumed to be influenced by public opinion which given free expression, will oppose war and support institutions for collective security. Hence, US President Woodrow Wilson argued that the first world war broke out because of there was no effective and openly accountable diplomacy and no appropriate laws and institutions among states to ensure peace. In Wilson's view, the League of Nations was the type of institution that could ensure peace. States would give up some of their sovereignty to the League which would derive its strength from public opinion in member countries. Here was a 'map' of international relations drawn up to find ways to ensure peace among nations. The failure of the US

Congress to ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations and the failure of the League more generally, discredited the law and collective security for many decades.⁽¹³⁾

One of the implications of the law and collective security view of international society is that democracies are unlikely aggressively to cause wars (a proposition which has been much studied since 1918 and subjected to ever more formal theorizing and investigation).

The international system is conceived as a society both of states and of the citizens they represent so that agreements reached among states reflect the preferences of their citizens. In states' interactions with other states it is assumed that states mutually recognize and respect certain international norms. States exist not so much in an anarchic system but in a society in which they recognize and constrain each other. This proposition has been developed in a body of literature on regime theory where 'regimes' are defined as 'sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Finally, on the question of 'implementation', the law and collective security perspective does not ask whether states are capable of implementing what they promise other states to do. It is simply assumed that leaders will not be hindered by domestic institutions.

There are two areas in which the law and collective security perspective has continued in international relations. In the first place, advocates of world order and world government have developed a view of 'ground-up' world order based on the premiss that world politics must be rooted in public opinion.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the second place, both regime theorists and constructivists have developed the notion that rules and norms constrain international relations.⁽¹⁶⁾ Perhaps the most prominent reemergence of the law and collective security perspective occurred in 1990 when the end of the Cold War brought forth arguments astonishingly similar arguments to those made by Woodrow Wilson in 1918. For some, the US/UN intervention in the Persian Gulf in 1990 spelt out the possibilities of a 'new world order' based on international law, an effective system of collective security, and democracy. Such a system would be based on the increasing number of democratic governments in the world and their openness to public opinion.

The law and collective security perspective traces out ways in which international institutions might be used in order to draw states and peoples of the world into a community of peace and cooperation for collective mutual gain. Unlike the economic interdependence view, cooperation among states is not conceived as reliant on specific economic interests across nations but rather on enlightened world opinion expressed through the actions of states. This perspective constructs a new, additional dimension in international relations - the society of states which exists beyond the domestic politics of the state and outside of the world capitalist system. Within the international society, states as representatives of their peoples are capable of forming norms and laws which constrain their foreign policies.

(iv) `Power politics'

Power politics or realism describes a fourth and final perspective on international relations. This perspective emerged with a critical purpose on the eve of the second world war, when the war loomed in spite of Wilson's League of Nations, in spite of the rationality of Angell's economic interdependence, and in spite of Lenin's Third International. In this context E.H. Carr wrote a trenchant critique of the idealism of collective security and economic interdependence. In *The Twenty Years Crisis* Carr presents international relations as a struggle among states for power. He debunked the proponents of the League of Nations for their belief that international law and order were in the interests of mankind. Such beliefs, according to Carr were the `unconscious reflexions of national interests at a particular time'. Supporters of the League or of free trade were simply clothing their national interests (as `satisfied powers') in internationalist rhetoric. [\(17\)](#)

Several aspects of Carr's views were later to be picked up by scholars in the United States such as Hans Morgenthau in order to attack four categories of idealists who were, at the end of the second world war, offering advice for US foreign policy: `Utopians' who were wrong in conceiving the United Nations as the foundation for a new world order; `legalists' who were wrong in assuming that the UN could be a foundation of international law; `sentimentalists' who framed prudent

and necessary policies, such as intervention in Greece and Turkey, in wide moralistic terms (ie the Truman Doctrine) and were dangerous since they left no room for the distinction between what is desirable and what is possible (a lack of distinction which led the United States into Vietnam a decade or so later); and the 'neoisolationists' who overestimated the omnipotence of the United States and wrongly disparaged traditional diplomacy, believing that the US could deal with the rest of the world on its own terms. [\(18\)](#)

More modern theorists have projected the assumptions underpinning classical realism into a more formal conceptualization of the international system in which states are depicted as functionally alike within the international system. The system itself is defined by stable ordering principles and an unchanging specification of functions of formally differentiated parts. What changes in the anarchic international system is the distribution of power. Changes in the distribution of power produce ever-changing balances of power. [\(19\)](#)

Three crucial assumptions about international relations underpin the power politics perspective. First, the 'international system' is the level of analysis which determines state policies. Second, states are rational, unitary actors who have stable, power-maximizing preferences. Third and finally, the balance of power is the ordering mechanism in the international system. In other words, the preferences of states are formulated by state leaders on the basis of their perception of the national interest. The national interest is shaped by the state's power relative to other states. Successful decision-makers act prudently in their relations with other states, at all times using strategies that maintain or extend their power relative to other states. That is to say, foreign policies are dictated by the logic of the international system and the distribution of power among states. In implementing foreign policies, it is assumed that leaders are relatively unhindered by their domestic political systems.

The power political map constructs international relations as a continuous struggle for power by states. States' ultimate ends are not discussed. Rather, states are assumed to seek either to maintain power, to extend their power, or to demonstrate their power (in the pursuit of maintaining or extending it). Only power, it is assumed,

can restrain power. Hence, the only mechanism which provides some modicum of order in international relations is the balance of power. The only effective way to manage the balance of power is through a developed and sophisticated diplomacy. Diplomacy is something for decision-makers and is presented as a virtually autonomous sphere of action. Public opinion and domestic constraints on foreign policy are virtually ignored.

(v) The weaknesses of 'perspectives'

The four maps of international relations depicted each focus on different actors, different motivations and different outcomes in international relations. Each has been created for a given purpose and each constructs a different terrain of international relations. Although these perspectives are often described as 'theories', they are not theories in the formal sense of the term. Rather, the perspectives are conceptualizations which assist us in defining actors and formulating hypotheses about international relations.

Maps or perspectives can only suggest generalizable patterns which might seem to be confirmed by history. They do not, on the whole, present us with hypotheses that are falsifiable.⁽²⁰⁾ Furthermore, analysts propounding perspectives are sometimes accused of interpreting history so as always to confirm their theory. Morgenthau is explicitly guilty of this. He defines his theoretical enterprise as to "bring order and meaning to a mass of phenomena which without it would remain disconnected and unintelligible".⁽²¹⁾ His own test of a theory is simple: do the facts lend themselves to this interpretation?; and do the conclusions of the theory follow logically from its premises? Not for Morgenthau concerns about whether or not his theory might be falsified.

An alternative approach is to be more 'scientific'. This means two different things in international relations. On the one hand, the term 'scientific' is used to refer to rigorous deduction in international relations: formal modelling and the use of theoretical tools such as game theory. On the other hand, 'scientific' is used to refer to inductive methods in international relations: quantitative methods. It

is to these other approaches that we will now turn.

3. Model-building or formal theory

Formal theorizing in international relations makes use of tools such as game theory and expected utility theory to build models which explain and predict outcomes. This method contrasts both with historical methods such as those discussed above, and quantitative methods which will be discussed below. Both historical and quantitative approaches are inductive in the sense that they build generalizations from the evidence. Historical methods use case studies, looser theories and intuition. Quantitative methods use data sets and regression. Formal models, on the other hand, are deductive and use logic to develop generalizable hypotheses.

A formal model is developed from a simple, abstract depiction of some aspect of the real world. A set of theorems or statements are then logically derived from the abstract depiction. From these theorems, predictive statements are then constructed which can be tested against empirical observations. In a good theory, predictive statements will correspond with observations based on an identifiable universe of cases in the real world. To give an example, a model may posit the proposition that 'if X increases by a particular amount, then Y will change in the following way'. This proposition can then be tested against the real world. If actual events belie the claim, then the theory is refuted and clearly needs rethinking. If events support the theory, it is not 'proved right' because we still do not know whether the theory holds for all cases. Nevertheless, each time a theory is supported by the evidence, the case for the theory is strengthened.

Formal models are not intended to make sense of or to supply details about the 'rich details and texture of events'. In the words of Bruce Bueno de Mesquita in chapter 3, they 'sacrifice details for breadth, specificity for generality'. In this sense, as defined above, formal models are wholly aimed at explanation and not at understanding. In the post-war period, models have been used in international relations to deal with a number of issues.

Game theory has been variously used to analyse the arms race between the super-powers, nuclear deterrence and brinkmanship, arms control, trade negotiations, and cooperation among states. [\(22\)](#)

Theories of games assist in structuring the theorems and hypotheses which form the heart of the formal models described above. The main insight of game theory is that actors do not make decisions independently of one another. Rather decisions are made *interdependently*. That is to say, a leader (or a state) will take into account what he or she believes other actors will do before deciding to pursue a particular policy.

The implications of game theory for international relations are important both for analysis and for prescription. The abstract logic of game theory adds hypotheses to our analysis of international relations some of which are counter-intuitive. The analysis forces us to consider the possibility that states' motivations may be strategic (based on a perception of what other states will do), or that outcomes are the unintended consequences of policies undertaken either without considering other parties' actions or by mistaking their intentions. A second implication of game theory is prescriptive. Game theory suggests what states should do, highlighting the rational strategy for any particular situation, given probabilities about what other parties may do. For example a game theoretic analysis may prescribe defecting from an agreement where there is a probability that other parties may defect.

Expected utility theory is another tool which assists in formulating hypotheses in a formal model. [\(23\)](#) Drawn from microeconomics, the theory propounds that in choosing among alternative policies a decision-maker will choose the policy which carries the highest expected utility. In order to understand what is meant by expected utility, we need to clarify that it is assumed that decision-makers have preferences which are stable and transitive. In other words, we assume that a policy-maker will always prefer A to B and B to C and hence they will also always prefer A to C. On the basis of these preferences, policymakers are able to rank potential strategies in order of desirability. The value they assign to a particular strategy is described as the utility of that strategy. *Expected utility* is the utility associated with a particular strategy designed to achieve an

outcome multiplied by the probability that this outcome will be achieved. As stated above, policy-makers in an expected utility model will always choose a strategy will the highest expected utility.

The implications of both expected utility theory and game theory in international relations are manifold. In the first place, formal theories, by shedding all complex historical and social details from the analysis, enable us to conceive of a wider range of outcomes including those which are counter-intuitive. For example, game theory does this by offering a framework within which not just the individual choices of a state are analyzed but rather the way in which any one state's decision will be influenced by its perception of what another state will do. A second strength of formal theory is that assumptions, 'intuitions' or 'judgement calls' are not buried within the analysis but rather, are brought forward and laid out as a priori assumptions, enabling others to assess or alter them. A third strength of formal theory is that it enables prediction. International relations has traditionally been concerned with understanding and explaining events, yet formal theory permits an attempt to go one step further towards science and to attempt to predict outcomes. Finally, because formal theories attempt prediction, they permit us more rigorously to adjudicate among competing theories. That is to say, the results of formal theory can be readily and transparently tested against actual outcomes which they are supposed to have predicted.

Although there are many advantages to be gained from using formal theory, it is also worth stating that formal theories can not achieve any of the above tasks without relying heavily on the other types of theorizing which are discussed in this chapter. At the most fundamental level, it is not possible to formulate hypotheses about particular events, such as wars, without adequately defining the event or the categories of events. Furthermore, both game theory and expected utility theory are theories of *decision*. They rely upon an *a priori* knowledge of what the preferences and the goals of actors are. The theories themselves do not tell us how states or decision-makers formulate preferences or about the difficulties of implementing strategies. In this respect formal theories rely heavily on broader conceptualizations of international relations such as those discussed above. It is the broader 'perspectives' or 'maps' of international relations which specify core actors, how it is that core actors formulate their preferences and which capabilities affect actors' implementation of decisions.

Finally, a further limitation of formal theories lies in their predilection towards particular types of perspectives and assumptions. It is unsurprising that most game theorists and expected utility theorists have used the power politics or realist perspective on international relations as their starting point. As we saw above, within the power politics perspective core actors are states whose pursuit of self-interested goals is defined as rational within an anarchical international system. Power politics lends itself easily to models of rational decision making. It is important, however, to recall that the power politics perspective has a particular purpose and, furthermore, 'constructs' a particular terrain for international relations. Formal theorists who build from this perspective both inherit the purposes of realism and the limited terrain it has constructed for international relations.

4. Statistical methods

We have seen that formal theories use logic to deduce propositions about international relations. By contrast, statistical methods or quantitative analysis derives general propositions about international relations from the aggregation of particular instances. Quantitative research is inductive in that it starts with the data, analyzes it using the rules of statistical inference and then offers us statistical probabilities about the correlation of particular events.

Quantitative methods became particularly popular in international relations in the 1960s as behaviouralists argued that it was wrong to deduce grand theories from intuitive beliefs about human nature. Rather, scholars ought first to collect data, and then frame and test scientific hypotheses, and only then to construct theories. The behaviouralists were able to tap into several collections of data which dealt with the causes of war. [\(24\)](#)

In the 1990s quantitative research continues. Furthermore, some scholars have extrapolated the methods of statistical testing and have

suggested that the rules applied to quantitative analysis should be equally applied to other types of research.⁽²⁵⁾ The argument is made that applying the rules of statistical inference to other forms of research will force scholars to be more rigorous and self-conscious about the conclusions they draw from case studies and history. Furthermore, it is argued that research which follows the methods of quantitative analysis will be both more transparent (initial assumptions will be clearer) and more replicable: in brief, other scholars will be able to pick up and work with the same hypotheses.

Several problems and caveats arise in respect of both quantitative research and the application of the rules of statistical inference to other research. In the first place, simplification is a problem. In order to aggregate data one has to simplify vastly complex human interactions so as to create classes of 'identical' events such as wars or revolutions. In spite of the assurance by Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba that 'this method [conceptualizing each case as a member of a class of events] often works well for ordinary wars or revolutions'⁽²⁶⁾, it is not so easy to define and quantify such things as 'revolutions', no matter how 'ordinary'. Such simplifications suggest two important caveats for quantitative analyses of international relations. In the first place, simplifications or biases inherent in definitions, categories or hypotheses can become all too easily forgotten or set aside in the pursuit of rigour in the more formal parts of analysis. At worst, there is a temptation to define concepts so as to fit data, creating from the start a biased analysis. In the second place, statistical analysis requires a very large number of cases or events in order for any finding to be significant. However, at the same time, statistical analysis requires that all events within a sample be as identical as possible. In international relations the two requirements are impossible to satisfy. One either finds a very small number of events which are highly similar or one is forced to define a broad class of events in which similarity is sacrificed.

Aside from problems which lie within statistical analyses, it is also the case that quantitative research cannot be undertaken without relying on the other types of theory discussed in this chapter. In the first place, the strength of quantitative research will depend upon the quality of its initial concepts, definitions and data. Furthermore, quantitative analysis relies on other types of theory to provide hypotheses and explanations. Statistical analysis will tell us

to what extent X and Y occur together. Obviously we first need a method for choosing X and Y. We then also need an explanation as to why it is that they occur together. Whilst statistical testing tells us about correlation it does not explain causation. For generating both initial hypotheses and explanations other types of theorizing such as broader 'perspectives' and formal theories are crucial.

5. Reflectivism and theories of knowledge

One major criticism levelled at virtually all the above forms of theorizing is that they neglect the relationship between language, knowledge and power. Definitions, categories, maps, formal theories, and data sets are not just ways of representing 'the facts'. Rather, as was mentioned in the first section, definitions and theories are also ways of constructing 'facts'. In international relations the term 'reflectivism' has been used to cover at least three different critiques of the way in which explanations of international relations are constructed: these include post-modernism, post-structuralism, and critical thinking or critical theory. Although all share a concern with the language and discourse of international relations and with the bases upon which we interpret the world around us, the three strands are worth separating carefully for in international relations each has something distinctive to say about the questions we ask and how we might set about answering them.

(i) Post-Modernists

The post-modern approach to international relations is perhaps the most radical challenge to the approaches that have been discussed in this chapter. Attempts to theorize, to define, and to create taxonomies are all deprecated as modernist throw-backs. Post-modernism draws on the discourse analysis, genealogy, deconstructionism and textuality, predominantly of French thinkers such as Foucault, Lacan, Barthes, Lyotard, Derrida, Kristeva and Baudrillard, in order to challenge our most fundamental premises about 'meaning' and 'knowing'.[\(27\)](#)

At the core of post-modernism lies the assumption that all social reality is constructed: just as we interpret texts in literature so too texts create social and political realities in international

relations.

The implication of post-modernism is that the definitions, perspectives and theories used both to identify subjects and objects in international relations, as well as to frame particular questions and hypotheses, are misleading. They do not lead us closer to understanding or explaining the 'real world', so to speak. Rather than using texts to try to research the world we should be examining texts so as better to understand the historical, cultural and linguistic practices which lie behind our construction of the world.

The post-modern challenge is a powerful and instructive one when deployed to question the way in which our categories and perspectives 'construct' and 'define' identities, peoples and political processes. It is this challenge, for example, that Edward Said laid down in his influential exposure of the extent to which 'orientalism' has perpetuated a particular type of understanding of identity and politics in the Middle East. 'Orientalism', argues Said, is a construction which echoes the mindset of colonialism and domination and which has shaped most Western scholarship about the Middle East. Silenced in this so-called 'understanding' have been identities or processes which the variety of peoples who have been defined as 'orientals' themselves describe.⁽²⁸⁾ In theories of international relations, post-modernists remind us that although the assumptions underpinning as realism and neo-realism are deemed timeless and unchanging, it is in fact our way of understanding which is fixed. Concepts of sovereignty and diplomacy are in fact contested, and change over time.⁽²⁹⁾

The strength of post-modernism lies in its critical voice: it is a rebellion against hegemonic ways of thinking which reflect structures of power. Yet post-modernists do not offer international relations much beyond this rebellion. The logic of post-modernism undercuts the validity of virtually any other form of academic research: no category of knowledge is stable enough to yield knowledge. Yet, if we were all to take on the post-modern agenda, post-modernism would have nothing left to feed on. International relations would become nothing more than the study of texts and discourses: ultimately a barren research agenda, not to mention a somewhat indulgent one. In the end fruitful critical research must return to examining the origins of the

inequalities of power which underpin the texts they expose. Indeed, although some post-modernists invoke the political theorist Gramsci as their source for thinking about cultural and linguistic hegemony, they would do well to recall that material inequalities were Gramsci's own starting point.

(ii) Critical Theorists

Like post-modernism, critical theory challenges the way in which international relations is 'constructed' by the language, concepts and categories we use. Critical theory, however, is based on critical sociology (from Marx to Horkheimer), not on linguistics and deconstructionism. [\(30\)](#)

The core of critical theory comes from the interwar scholars at the Frankfurt School of Social Research who declared that knowledge was not about *explaining sets of facts* but rather about *understanding that the so-called 'facts' are social and historical products*. Critical theorists set out to uncover the social and historical origins of our 'knowledge' of international relations, and to move beyond it - with an explicitly normative purpose. Critical theorists believe that social theory is a vehicle of social and political emancipation. Through social theory, humans can come better to understand and to counter the ways in which the dominant culture constrains their autonomy.

Critical theorists attack realism, neo-realism and other state-centred perspectives on international relations by highlighting that the questions they pose automatically limit the types of 'knowledge' we might acquire about international relations. For example, realists and neoliberal institutionalists ask questions such as: How can there be cooperation under anarchy? This question 'constructs' the world as anarchic, and as a world in which states, first and foremost, must protect themselves and interact strategically. An alternative world, such as one in which societies concerned about their own identities interact, is excluded by the very way in which the question is formulated. By 'silencing' other depictions of the world, the dominant state-centred depictions of international relations bolster the structure of power that exists: that is to say, they reinforce the elites within states who control foreign policy and justify existing

policies.⁽³¹⁾ In order to move to a more just international system, critical theorists argue that we must uncover the power and interests behind dominant forms of 'knowledge' and move beyond them.⁽³²⁾ However, this is where we find a real weakness in critical theory: How exactly do we move 'beyond'? A rather fuzzy set of assumptions connect *theorizing* about the world (in a new way) and *changing* that world. Ultimately the critical theorists make a Kantian assumption, focusing on the individual's potential to change in the light of new reason - an assumption far easier for political theorists to proceed from than it is for historians to prove.

(iii) Constructivists

A third and final category of reflectivism is sometimes labelled constructivism. This strand of thinking draws on social theory and does not so much attack the foundations of mainstream international relations but rather builds on the view that world politics takes place in an international society - not just in an international system. This society, constructivists argue, is constituted by rules and norms. By examining these rules and norms, these scholars examine in a more practical way than either post-modernism or critical theory, how it is that the social and political worlds of international relations are 'constructed'.

Other so-called mainstream approaches to international relations (discussed earlier in this chapter) treat norms and rules as reflections of the rational interests of states. Constructivists argue that rules and norms are the parameters *within which* interests are formulated. Rules and norms *constitute* the international game by determining who the actors are, what rules they have to follow when they wish to connect certain consequences to their official acts (whether a treaty or an act of surrender) and how titles to possessions, ranging again from territory to other goods, can be established and transferred.⁽³³⁾ In other words, norms do not so much *cause* a state to act in a particular way, but rather norms *provide reasons* for a state to do so. Language is important for the constructivists, not for textual analysis but because language is action, which is to say it does not reflect meanings but *is* in fact practice and behaviour. For example, when a state threatens another state, it is not just using words but is committing an act.

Constructivists, like the other reflectivists emphasize the changing, contested nature of the bases upon which international relations proceed. They stress that one cannot separate international relations from domestic politics, for the two are interacting processes of contestation and change which construct international society. Our theorizing itself is a product of history and of our own position in the world and shapes (or excludes) future possibilities for change.

The challenge of the constructivists is the least threatening of the reflectivists for they do not set out completely to undercut existing approaches and methods of study into international relations, nor are they completely committed to producing an emancipatory social theory. Rather, they point to a wider range of possibilities for change in world politics than more state-centred perspectives on international relations. Hence, constructivists provide a bridge between those who treat international relations as a set of facts and those who argue that social and political life in the international arena is entirely constructed.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the different ways theories are used in international relations. Definitions, concepts and taxonomies are as crucial to the natural sciences as they are to the social sciences. Yet in international relations the challenge is not just to seek clear and unambiguous definitions, it is also to analyze the extent to which concepts and categories do more than define a group of events or processes. As reflectivism reminds us, definitions both reflect but equally 'construct' the terrain of international relations.

So too, the various dominant perspectives on international relations reflect not only different assumptions but different purposes and puzzles. Whilst interdependence theorists set out to find reasons and processes which enhance cooperation among states, the realist purpose is a critical one: to expose idealism. Before taking up categories, perspectives and assumptions we should be sure to examine the context within which they have been created and the interests and purposes

which lie behind them. *Caveat emptor!* (or beware the buyer!)

Taken deeper, the distinction between defining the facts and reflecting on their meaning separates distinct purposes in the study of international relations: some express this as the difference between 'understanding' the processes of international relations and 'explaining' outcomes. Different types of theory give higher priority to one or other of these aims.

Whilst some scholars of international relations are engaged in constructing theories which will forecast events in the international arena, others carefully sift through historical documents in order to piece together an understanding of events gone by. Hence, some inquiries are labelled "social scientific" whilst others are labelled "historical".

In certain phases in the study of international relations, exponents of social scientific approaches have claimed a higher status. Following theoretical economists who claim the higher rungs of the hierarchy of social science, the more scientific scholars of international relations have at times made claim to doing a more difficult and 'more rigorous' type of theory. Yet, these claims are misguided. As this chapter has shown both formal theories and quantitative approaches to international relations, rely heavily on the other types of supposedly 'softer' theorising. The so-called 'soft theory' produces the concepts and typologies upon which any more rigorous theory must proceed. Yet, of course, the looser forms of theory, must be used appropriately. Most particularly, these forms of theorizing are not amenable to 'testing' and 'falsification' as are the more formal theories: hence, to speak of 'testing realism' is to misunderstand both 'realism' and the notion of 'testing'. Testing, prediction and modelling require more rigorous specifications of variables and it is here that both formal theories and quantitative analysis come into their own.

The challenge for scholars of international relations is critically to examine the way in the various types of theory which inform their approach fit together. Particular methods or approaches will tend to draw on particular perspectives. An obvious example is the way in which most formal theorizing tends to rely upon state-centred and

realist perspectives in order to define rational actors (states) and to generate assumptions upon which their behaviour can be hypothesized. However, once transformed into a formal theory, stripped of its rhetoric, the basic purposes and normative outlook of realism are all too easily forgotten. Yet, still they will shape the world as seen and depicted by the theorist. The lesson here is that although theories can improve the ways in which we understand and explain phenomena in international relations, they can also be deployed as unlabelled ingredients in rather potent yet anonymous brews. Here to the recipients, we must repeat: *caveat emptor!*

Diagram

The Uses of Theorizing

Type of theorizing	Uses	Example
concepts and definitions	defining the objects and subjects of study, creating taxonomies of events and processes, reflect but also construct the terrain of international relations	the international system versus the international society, explanation versus understanding, different levels of analysis
maps or perspectives	highlight actors, explain relations among variables	economic interdependence, world capitalism, law, collective security and international society, power politics (realism)
formal theories	provide deductive explanations	game theory, expected utility analysis
quantitative methods	deductively constructed models, used to predict	rules of statistical inference
reflectivism	induction and testing correlation	post-modernism, critical theory, constructivism
	to challenge the idea that the above forms of theory set out and explain 'facts' about the world, to demonstrate that the so-called 'facts' are actually 'constructions' based on our own theorizing, language, culture and power.	

Further Reading

E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis*

Michael Nicholson, *Formal Theories of International Relations*

Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba

Footnotes

1.1. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, 1977), p.13.

2.2. Larson Deborah Welch, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (PUP, 1985).

3.3. This argument is particularly clearly discussed in Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (Columbia University Press, NY 1993).

4.4. Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam, *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (University of California Press 1993).

5.5. Edward L. Morse, 'The transformation of foreign policies: modernization, interdependence and externalization', *World Politics* 22, 3 (1970): 371-392; Richard Cooper, *The Economics of Interdependence* (NY, McGraw-Hill, 1968); Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (1977, Boston: Little, Brown).

6.6. V. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow, 1968).

7.7. Paul Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1957); Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York: Montly Review Press, 1967); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). See John Darwin's discussion in chapter 12.

8.8. Fernando Henrique Cardoso & Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). See Andrew Hurrell's discussion in chapter 11.

9.9. Raul Prebisch, *Change and Development: Latin America's Great Task*

(New York: Praeger, 1971).

10.10. Such as Wallerstein's work, cited above.

11.11. Such as Robert Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

12.12. [Collier and Bevan].

13.13. See Adam Roberts' discussion of collective security in chapter 4.

14.14. This now 'classic' definition is Stephen Krasner's, expressed in the very useful reader: Stephen Krasner (ed), *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) p.1.

15. See Richard Falk,

16.16. Constructivism is discussed later in this chapter. See Krasner, *International Regimes*, cited above in note 14.

17. E.H.Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis: 1919-39* (London: Macmillan, 1946). First printed in 1939.

18.18. Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (1951).

19.19. See for a critical discussion of this view: Robert Keohane (ed), *Neo-Realism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

20.20. See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's discussion of 'falsifiable hypotheses' in chapter 3.

21.21. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, reprinted 1993), p.3.

22.22. See chapter 3 by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, and chapter 9 by George Downs and Peter Barsoom. On the arms race between the super-powers see Steven J. Brams, *Superpower Games: Applying Game Theory to Superpower Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). On nuclear deterrence and brinkmanship the classic is Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960]. On cooperation among states the classic is Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York, Basic Books, 1984].

23.23. See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *War and Reason* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992) and 'The Contribution of Expected-Utility Theory to the Study of International Conflict' in Manus Midlarsky (ed), *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 143-169. See also Irving Janis and Ralph Mann, *Decision Making* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

- 24.24. Such as Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), Lewis Fry Richardson, *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* (Pittsburgh: Stevens, 1960). A major later work collecting data on war is David J. Singer (ed), *The Correlates of War: Testing some Realpolitik Models* (New York: The Free Press, 1980).
- 25.25. Gary King, Robert Keohane, & Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
26. King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, p.10.
- 27.27. A useful reader is James Der Derian & Michael Shapiro, *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, MA, Lexington Books, 1989).
- 28.28. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For a post-modern critique of Said see Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 29.29. See on sovereignty, Robert B. J. Walker, *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge, CUP, 1993); and on diplomacy, James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
- 30.30. See for an overview, Mark Hoffmann, 'Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate', *Millenium*, 16(2)(1987): 231-250.
- 31.31. See Richard Ashley, 'Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique', *Millenium* (Vol 17, 2, 1988): 265.
- 32.32. Hence the title of Andrew Linklater's book, *Beyond Realism and Marxism Critical Theory and International Relations* (Macmillan, London 1990).
- 33.33. See Friedrich V. Kratochwil, *Rules, norms and decisions: On the conditions of practical and legal reasoning in international relations and domestic affairs* (Cambridge, CUP 1989).