

Student Book Feature - IR Theory: A Critical Introduction

Written by Victor Coutinho Lage

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VICTOR COUTINHO LAGE, JUL 19 2014

International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction
By: Cynthia Weber
Routledge, 2014

Cynthia Weber's textbook *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* has reached its fourth edition (the first edition being published in 2001). It remains a major contribution to the thinking surrounding the theoretical perspectives generally associated with the study of international politics. Despite Weber's statement in the preface to the first edition that the book has "undergraduate students in English-speaking universities" and "my colleagues in mind" (p.xxvi), it is a potentially helpful text for a broader audience, including graduate students interested in international politics and International Relations (IR), and people with an interest in popular films in general.

Following an introductory chapter, there are nine chapters, each of them focused on interpreting a classic IR text and understanding how the text makes use of a certain "IR myth", using popular films to "explore the myth function in IR theory". *International Relations Theory* proposes an engagement between the film and the IR text selected, in order to highlight the "connections between IR theory and our everyday lives" and the "everyday connections between 'the popular' and 'the political'" (pp.8-9). The last chapter is dedicated to a conclusion on the main aspects debated throughout the text. As the valuable companion website to this edition states, "it makes no difference whether the most challenging new ideas and new myths about the conduct of international politics and about International Relations theory are generated within the discipline of IR or outside of it".

Weber claims that IR theory is a "collection of stories about international politics" that "relies upon IR myths in order to appear to be true" (p.2). In this sense, these myths are what make the stories possible, which are told to appear to be true and to try to make sense of the world. Weber stresses that calling them myths does not indicate that there is a hidden truth to be unveiled: "they may be true, and they may be false... I call them IR myths because of the 'mythologizing function' or 'myth function' they perform" (p.2). This myth function is the "transformation of what is particular, cultural, and ideological (like a story told by an IR tradition) into what *appears* to be universal, natural, and purely empirical" (pp.6-7). This transformation is a "highly political practice that depends upon all sorts of complex configurations of power" and through which IR theory becomes, in Weber's interpretation, "a site of cultural practice" (pp.6-7).

Framing IR, then, as a cultural practice, Weber's engagement with films enables a series of at least four problematizations: firstly, the films are taken as exemplary narratives of the texts (and their myth functions); secondly, the films also turn out to be a way of questioning what "goes without saying" in the same text; thirdly, the relation between "the popular" and "the political" is brought to discussion; and finally, the lines of demarcation between fiction and non-fiction are constantly displaced, as soon as the reader encounters a series of films that gradually become fruitful sites of political engagement with cultural practices, both in IR theory and in everyday lives.

Within the book, Weber works with three "mainstream IR myths": "international anarchy is the permissive cause of war" (chapter two), "international society" (chapter three), and "anarchy is what states make of it" (chapter four).

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Chapters five to ten, deal with “alternative perspectives on international politics” and their respective myths (p.268). As Weber claims in the conclusion, these “alternative perspectives on international politics depend on their own mythologized understandings of the world, and their myths often employ the same or similar types of exclusions that mainstream IR theory does” (p.268).

Weber frames the separation between “mainstream” and “alternative” theories without providing the reader with the criteria used to trace this line of demarcation. A hypothetical answer that this separation is just following the conventional narrative of IR would be obviously insufficient for the text, since it aims at questioning exactly what “goes without saying” in the field. Ultimately, one reads that the “alternatives” selected by Weber are not “critical” enough; that is, they are different, but also somehow similar to the “mainstream” in this aspect. What one does not get to know is exactly what it means to keep reproducing separations such as “mainstream” and “alternative” or “critical” approaches. This distinction itself can be another of those “IR myths” that constitutes the field. It would be helpful if Weber exposed more clearly the criteria under which this demarcation remains relevant, in case it does.

From chapters two to ten, Weber presents a myth that corresponds to a certain IR approach and can be seen working in specific texts of some authors. Then, a popular film is interpreted, in order to problematize the way the myth and the approach function in the field of IR. For example, in chapter two, Weber goes back and forth from Kenneth Waltz’s uses of the myth “international anarchy is the permissive cause of war” to the film *Lord of Flies*. With this movement – and as the title of the chapter, “Realism”, suggests – Weber aims at questioning more than just Waltz’s texts. The conclusion might reach is that “Realism” of any kind, regardless of author or text, can be criticized in the same way that Weber criticizes Waltz’s texts in this chapter.

This projection from a specific author to a certain theoretical label runs through all the cuts and frames that Weber proposes throughout the book, and undermines, in my view, the critical movements Weber wants to advance. By taking certain texts as sites to problematize general labels, Weber reproduces a move that could be called, if one wanted to keep with the cinematic metaphors, a metonymical projection. Not questioning the interpretation provided to each text and film – and the labels placed upon them by Weber in her analysis – is a much more contestable move than Weber’s text seems to acknowledge.

In a recent interview, the film director José Padilha said that one of the main concerns of Hollywood producers is to make the films understandable for the public at large, thereby avoiding complicated themes and deep philosophical discussions.[1] Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, first published in 1944) had said decades earlier that “Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers. The perception by which public judgment feels itself confirmed has been shaped by that judgment even before the perception takes place” (pp.65-6).[2] Padilha stressed that he had to convince producers to insert some political and philosophical problems into *RoboCop* (2014), and that sometimes the only way to do that in a Hollywood production is through subtle and implicit suggestions throughout the film.

In this aspect lies one of the main contributions of Weber’s text. The interpretation provided in the encounter between academic texts and films turns out to be a challenge to any perspective, which states that Hollywood films simply determine viewer reception, or that a so-called cultural industry predetermines the consumer reception of its productions. Even more than that, Weber has an important point in what is generally called “the aesthetic turn”. An aesthetic perspective can bring problems not only from what would be defined as “critical films” or “critical texts”, but also in what is generally placed “within” the so-called “mainstream” and the so-called “cultural industry”. The encounter between the texts and the films selected, and between “the political” and “the popular”, stimulates a different framing of how the lines between the intellectual debates and the popular culture and visual language are drawn.[3]

On that aspect, it would be helpful if Weber exposed the criteria used to categorize a film as “popular”, since the range of films selected does not make that self-evident. Besides that, Weber’s text stimulates, but does not develop, the unceasing discussion of how this kind of film is interpreted by the “popular” audience that is exposed to the so-called cultural industry. The interaction between a film and its viewers, and the question of how “popular culture”

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works, are perhaps two of the crucial dimensions in the text, even if they are not discussed at length.

Weber states in the preface that the text comes from a failed experience as a classroom teacher, trying to get students to “critically rethink *all* the theories. The experience with which Weber prefaces the text is shared by many professors of “theory”, and not only in the field of IR. One of the challenges of teaching is avoiding an evolutionary perspective in relation to the different approaches (as if they were related to each other in terms of one overcoming a previous one, supposedly less true or less improved) without succumbing to a conception of theories as a toolbox from which one can pick and choose whichever seems more appropriate to be “applied” to the “object” or “case” studied. Weber’s text is a major contribution in precluding these kinds of attitudes towards reading and teaching. The discussion of “myths” can be helpful to strengthen any historical narrative (not only those concerning “theories”) told from an evolutionary or progressivist perspective, as more of a narrative told from an instrumentalist approach.[4]

Much what goes without saying, however, is why one should repeat stories told through metonymical projections relating specific texts to general labels. Labels are categories and, at least since Aristotle, our knowledge is built with and against these types of categories. Doing without labels, as doing without “IR myths”, must not lead one to think that there is a hidden truth behind categories, or a true history beneath the myths. But if critique is to be taken, in Kantian terms, as the reflection on the categories of our thought and on the conditions under which one knows, perhaps it is time to interrogate why – or whether – we should keep telling stories about the production of knowledge based on labels ascribed to specific “theories”, and the political implications of doing that. Perhaps it is also a moment in which we should interrogate whether IR should be taken as a discipline constituted by a theory of its own. One of Immanuel Kant’s main contributions was highlighting how critique is always a critique of the self and the categories of thought at work in the production of knowledge. Weber’s text provides brilliant moments of critical interpretation of much of the material selected. At the same time, it advances a sequence of cuts, frames, and projections that seem to be made uncritically.

Weber’s audience has already been exposed elsewhere to how dangerous the codes of gender, sexuality, and morality associated with neoliberal takes on globalization and with the constitution of sovereign nation-states can be.[5] In *International Relations Theory*, the audience is exposed to the equally dangerous political practices of producing myths, including the myth of label production and projection. This impels the audience to push to the extremes that which Weber says in the end of *International Relations Theory*: “We must interrogate IR theory as a site of cultural practice *wherever* it occurs – in classic IR texts, in classrooms, and in more popular sites of culture like film, literature, art, and television” (p.272). I agree with Weber that it makes no difference whether the most challenging new ideas and new myths about the conduct of international politics and about IR theory are generated *within* the discipline of IR or *outside* of it. The crucial difference is problematizing how certain practices reproduce – by cutting, framing, and projecting – the inside/outside distinctions around “international relations”. Professional careers, and cultural and political practices, are certainly at stake here, even if we do not understand, and perhaps may never fully understand, them.

Notes

* This text is dedicated to Joanna Cordeiro and Bruno Jayme. I would also like to thank Nick Onuf, for having made this text possible – *in many senses*.

[1] Interview with *Roda Viva*, February 24, 2014. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUDzQuXncds>. Last accessed April 15, 2014. Having directed and/or produced films and documentaries such as *Bus 174* (2002), *Elite Squad* (2007), and *Elite Squad: The Enemy Within* (2010), José Padilha’s first Hollywood production was *RoboCop* (2014).

[2] Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

[3] Elsewhere, Weber expresses this in even more precise terms: “contemporary popular visual language might more successfully evacuate political responsibility from politics than textual language now can. This suggests that the

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continued supplementation of the linguistic turn with the visual turn should enable IR scholars to better understand how power and political responsibility function through contemporary forms of global communication” (Weber, Cynthia. “Popular visual language as global communication: the remediation of United Airlines Flight 93”.*Review of International Studies*, vol.34, pp.137-53, 2008, p.153).

[4] Recently, discussing the relation between International Relations and Queer Theory, Weber affirms that “Disciplinary IR’s commitments and standards are as much the performative result of so-called ‘mainstream’ agendas of learned societies, universities, independent funding agencies, and governments that support socially, culturally, economically, or politically ‘policy-relevant,’ ‘useful,’ or ‘impactful’ research as they are the performative outcome of so-called ‘dissident’ practices... that seek to rewrite, resist, or rebel against so-called mainstream agendas... Together, these intricately intertwined positions produce a Disciplinary IR that claims to speak for the whole of the discipline of IR because it wields sufficient power to (de)legitimate IR scholars and their work for many user communities. Because of its power, Disciplinary IR is as often contested as it is assimilated to by IR scholars of virtually all intellectual dispositions” (Weber, Cynthia. “Why There Is No Queer International Theory”.*European Journal of International Relations*, pp.1-25, 2014, p.3). Although it is not the place here to advance this discussion, I think that this performativity of “Disciplinary IR” is a very insightful way to interpret what, in the text I am discussing here, seems most often not problematized in its uses of the expressions “IR theory” and “mainstream”, and in the way the “theoretical” labels are deployed.

[5] Weber, Cynthia. “Flying Planes Can Be Dangerous”. *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, vol.31, no.1, pp.129-47, 2002.

About the author:

Victor Coutinho Lage is a PhD Candidate at the International Relations Institute of PUC-Rio (IRI/PUC-Rio), Brazil, and is a Faculty Member at IRI/PUC-Rio and at Faculdade Getúlio Vargas of Rio de Janeiro (FGV-Rio), Brazil. His PhD dissertation is on the formative process of modernity in Brazil in the XX and XXI centuries. His main research interests are: interpretations of modernity in Brazil, political theory and philosophy, theories of international relations. Email:victorcoutholage@yahoo.com.br