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Making Sense of International Relations Theory

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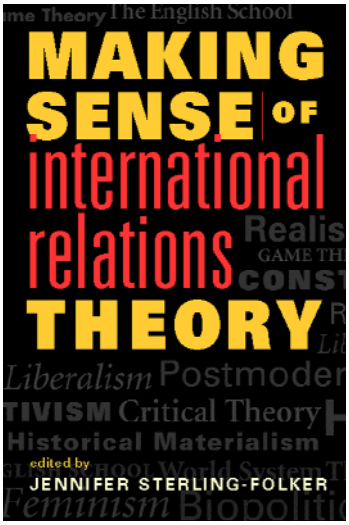
Jennifer Sterling-Folker



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telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

chapter 1

Making Sense of International Relations Theory

Jennifer Sterling-Folker

This book is about making sense of international relations (IR) theory. It does so by making sense of a particular topic through the lens of IR theory. Rather than describe what IR theory is, then, the book demonstrates IR theory in tangible action and practice. By doing so, it reveals the core assumptions, differences, and similarities of various IR theoretical perspectives. This, in turn, provides an understanding of how IR theory can be applied to other historical and current events. By the time you have finished reading the book, you should be able to deduce what a variety of IR theoretical perspectives would have to say about any international or transnational topic or event. You will also understand why there are multiple and equally legitimate interpretations of and perspectives on the same topic or event. Thus, by allowing IR scholars of various theoretical stripes to make sense of one subject, this book is ultimately about making sense of IR theory.

The topic addressed by each theorist involves the events that transpired in Kosovo in 1998–1999. Most people know of Kosovo as a place in the former Yugoslavia where, during that period, there was escalating violence between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which was demanding independence from Serbia, and the Serbian police and military, which were randomly targeting the province's indigenous Albanian population in retaliation for KLA activities. In an effort to deter further violence, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) issued a series of ultimatums to the Yugoslavian president, Slobodan Milosevic, demanding that the Serbs cease their harassment of the Kosovar Albanian population and withdraw military troops from the province. When the Serbs refused to comply, NATO initiated an air campaign known as Operation Allied Force (OAF) against Yugoslav targets in March 1999. The flood of ethnic Albanian

Yugoslavia, 1991

refugees from the province simultaneously reached crisis proportions, as the Serbian military attempted to ethnically cleanse the province of 90 percent of its inhabitants, and international relief agencies scrambled to provide for more than 800,000 displaced persons. In June 1999, Milosevic agreed to NATO's cease-fire terms, which involved Serbian military withdrawal and the imposition of a NATO peacekeeping force, known as Kosovo Force (KFOR), on the province. The status of Kosovo under NATO's terms was peculiar, as NATO insisted that Yugoslavia retain sovereign control over Kosovo, even as NATO forces occupied the province and a United Nations–mandated mission, known as the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), sought to rebuild it.

These are the elements that make Kosovo an event of interest to scholars of international relations.* It is an event that is ripe for multiple theoretical applications, since it involves a myriad of topics of interest to IR scholars, such as ethnic violence and war, identity politics, massive human rights violations, national sovereignty, cooperation among great powers, and international institutions, to name only a few of the more obvious. Because, as Sergei Medvedev and Peter van Ham have observed, "'Kosovo' symbolizes and exemplifies the relevance of many 'end'-debates and 'post'-debates within the academic literature," it also allows for diversity in focus and emphasis (2002: 2). It is for this reason that contributors to the volume were asked simply to write "about Kosovo," with no specific questions or puzzles assigned, so that what they chose to focus on would be a reflection of their theoretical perspective. And IR theorists, whose analytical perspectives are as divergent as those of game theorists and postmodernists, had something substantive to say about Kosovo. For most scholars it also appears to be a confinable event, with specific start and end dates as well as documents and memoirs now available for analysis that would not be accessible during the unfolding of a current event. Of course, as you will see, where one draws the boundaries of an event such as Kosovo, just how "confinable" it is, what aspects of it are puzzling, and what data are necessary to understand it, are all open to a great deal of interpretation and disagreement.

However, it is important to underscore that although Kosovo has some obvious pluses as a subject for comparative IR theoretical application, the subject of this book could just as easily have been another event or topic. Indeed, alternative events and topics, such as World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations and globalization, Afghanistan/Iraq and terrorism, Rwanda-Burundi and genocide, the UN system and international law, were

*A detailed overview of events in Kosovo is provided in the appendix to this book.

all discussed as possible subjects for the volume. As the empirical focus of this book, Kosovo is actually secondary to its primary purpose, which is to demonstrate how IR theory makes sense of the world. In this regard, IR theory is not about any one particular event or topic. It is instead about what goes on in international and transnational realms, and involves placing any particular event within these larger contexts. In other words, it is not, as Michael Doyle and G. John Ikenberry observe, "a recipe" or "a replacement for strategy" (1997a: 10). Rather it is about contextualizing specific events or topics, revealing how they are part of larger patterns (with regard to both IR events and how we as IR scholars tend to explain them), and exposing the underlying factors that produce either events such as Kosovo or our interpretations of them.

International Relations Theory: A Brief Overview

Before we proceed, it is important to address what IR theory is. Because the book provides introductory material for each theoretical section and examples of most of the major theoretical perspectives in IR at present, an overview of those perspectives will not be provided. Nor will a history of these perspectives and their disciplinary development in relation to each other be recounted, as excellent sources already exist on this subject (see Further Reading at the end of this chapter). Instead, we will deal here with the more fundamental questions of what is meant by IR theory and why it is useful for understanding what goes on in world politics. Not unexpectedly, different scholars provide different answers to these questions.

James Dougherty and Robert Pfaltzgraff define theory as "systematic reflection on phenomena, designed to explain them and to show how they are related to each other in a meaningful, intelligent pattern, instead of being merely random items in an incoherent universe" (1997: 15). Similarly, Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi define theory "as a way of making the world or some part of it more intelligible or better understood," by going "beyond mere description of phenomenon observed and engag[ing] in causal explanation or prediction based on certain prior occurrences or conditions" (1999: 3). In both definitions there is a common assumption that there are patterns to international events and that IR theory is about revealing those patterns. This assumption is given expression in James Rosenau's oft-quoted advice to students of IR: "To think theoretically one must be predisposed to ask about every event, every situation, or every observed phenomenon, 'Of what is it an instance?'" As Rosenau goes on to observe, we often "have a hard time building up this habit," due to an inclination "to probe for the special meaning of an event, to explore it for what sets it apart from all other events, rather than to treat it as an instance of a larger pattern" (1999: 33). IR theorists are scholars who have broken this

habit. While it is not the case that all IR theorists speak in terms of causality or prediction, all IR theorists do interpret particular events or subjects as instances of some larger pattern, phenomenon, or theoretical proposition and expression.

One way to think of IR theory is as a set of templates or prepackaged analytical structures for the multiple ways in which an event or activity that is international or transnational might be categorized, explained, or understood. These templates may be laid over the details of the event itself, allowing one to organize the details in such a way that the larger pattern is revealed and recognized within and through the event. Another useful analogy is to think of IR theory as a set of perspectives equivalent to the alternative lenses one might use on a 35mm camera. The subject may be an elephant in grasslands, but an alternative lens will reveal different aspects and details of the elephant and its surroundings so that, as Barry Buzan says, "looking through it makes some features stand out more strongly while pushing others into the background" (1996: 56).[1] The basic lens provides a shot of the elephant and its setting immediately to its front, back, and sides. A panoramic lens suddenly makes the elephant seem smaller in relation to its surroundings, which are now more expansive and more important to the image. A series of close-up lenses draw attention ever nearer to the elephant, enlarging it until its surroundings no longer seem relevant and details that had escaped attention before are noticeable. Tinted lenses of yellow, red, or blue highlight different shadows and features that had not seemed pertinent or particularly noteworthy with other lenses. And so on.

In much the same way, it is possible to see an IR topic or event from multiple perspectives and to view it as an instance of more than one pattern in world politics. Just as camera lenses are developed, produced, and prepackaged for use, so too are IR theoretical perspectives, many of which have rich analytical and interdisciplinary lineages. Each IR perspective consists of various assumptive building blocks, some of which are shared across perspectives but which are put together by each in specific ways in order to identity and highlight particular patterns in IR. Each perspective thereby illuminates slightly different elements of a given topic or event and hence patterns relevant to it, revealing aspects and details that were not obvious or particularly pertinent in other perspectives. The advantage of studying and understanding IR theory as an analytical domain distinct from any particular empirical event or topic is that it acquaints you with the multiple ways of seeing and understanding the various contexts for any particular event or topic, whether it is a historical, current, or future scenario. These contexts are the "bigger pictures" that, in the camera analogy, would involve an understanding of how 35mm cameras operate, the principles of photography (including color, lighting, and perspective), and the techniques of film development. While an amateur photographer does not need to

know these things in order to take a picture, a professional photographer does.

It is important not to push the camera analogy too far, however, since one does not need to subscribe to a particular worldview, ideological perspective, or philosophical position in order to be a photographer or produce a zoom lens or use it in one's own photography. While the type of camera lens you use might depend on why you are taking the elephant's photo in the first place, whether you should use a zoom or panoramic lens to photograph it is usually not a matter of heated debate or the source of sharp divisions among your colleagues. IR theory, however, is premised on alternative philosophical, ideological, and normative commitments, many of which are antithetical to one another and hence diverge sharply over how to understand IR. These commitments undergird the assumptive building blocks and analytical frameworks of IR theory. They typically involve disagreements over the nature of being (referred to as ontology), how we know and acquire knowledge about being (referred to as epistemology), and what methods we should adopt in order to study being (referred to as methodology).

One of the most common ontological and epistemological divides you will encounter in the pages that follow is whether "a fact is a fact" and hence whether it can be objectively known and measured. A scholar's judgment on this question determines how he or she will conceptualize, study, and write about a subject such as Kosovo and what types of templates he or she will utilize in order to categorize it. Those scholars who insist that there is an objective state of being, an objective "reality," that is relatively obvious and can be accurately known and measured, are commonly referred to as positivists. For most positivists, the primary activity of an IR theorist is to test IR theoretical perspectives against one another. This is done by collecting data and by devising methods that would be the equivalent of an experiment in the hard sciences (no easy feat in a subject area that does not allow for controlled experiments in order to isolate causal variables). The goal of the IR theorist from a positivist's perspective is to weed out those theories and hypotheses that consistently fail to account for data, although one of the primary sources for diversity within particular theoretical perspectives is also theoretical revision in response to empirical anomalies. In undertaking such activity, the positivist hopes to produce more explanatory theories, which in an ideal world would make both prediction and better foreign policy making possible.

Positivists would tend to define the nature and purpose of IR theory in scientific terms as a result. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff claim, for example, that theory is "a series of propositions or hypotheses that specify relations among variables in order to present explanations and make predictions about the phenomena," with its purpose "the discovery of laws that govern

how people and collectivities . . . act under specific circumstances" (1997: 21–22). Similarly, Viotti and Kauppi state that, "'If *A,* then *B*' as hypothesis may be subject to empirical test—that is tested against real-world or factual data," so "the stage is set for making modest predictions about the nature and direction of change" (1999: 3). While positivists disagree among themselves over a variety of substantive theoretical issues, there is a shared consensus among them regarding the objective accessibility of reality and our ability to discover universal laws that are amenable to causal explanations and prediction. This consensus also provides the basis for common methodological and analytical tools, with the best known of these being levels of analysis.

Levels of analysis involves identifying where causal variables are located and categorizing them according to a micro-macro spectrum for the purposes of explanatory organization. Although there is variety in how many categorizing levels may be utilized, IR scholars have typically relied on three primary levels: the individual, the nation-state, and the system.[2] The individual level is the most micro, where causality is traced to the individuals who make foreign policy and the psychology of human decision-making. The nation-state level is a middle level and involves the examination of government structures, bureaucratic politics, interest groups, media influences, and other internal factors that might influence or account for a nation-state's foreign policy behavior. The systemic level is the most macro level, involving not only the examination of state-to-state relations but also environmental or structural factors, such as geography, relative power, or capitalist interdependence, that might influence or direct the behavior of all nation-states. Disagreements among positivists often involve which level of analysis, and particular factors therein, are responsible for and hence best explain a given outcome or event. Variants within a particular theoretical perspective often evolve as, in their quest to test and modify their theories against the empirical evidence, IR theorists pit levels of analysis against one another as if they were competing explanations (rather than useful heuristic, organizing tools).

Postpositivism, on the other hand, refers to IR scholars who are skeptical that "a fact is a fact" and that it can be objectively known and measured.[3] Postpositivists observe that all events are subject to interpretation, with the interpreter's own situation, context, and language often determining how an event is characterized and explained. Since neither language nor the act of communication is ever unproblematic or value-free, postpositivists challenge the notion that we could objectively know or access reality by relying on methods drawn from the hard sciences. Such methods are based on an erroneous conviction that, as Marysia Zalewski puts it, "what gets included and what gets excluded" in the theory and practice of IR is due to "'natural' or 'obvious' choices, determined by the 'real' world,

whereas they are instead *judgements*" about what should be taken seriously and what can safely be ignored (1996: 34, emphasis original). Such judgments are never neutral or innocent. They are instead made by those who hold relative power, both among nation-states and within the IR discipline where positivism dominates. This means that certain equally important topics, perspectives, and choices are marginalized by the very theories and methods to which positivist IR scholars subscribe. Zalewski notes, for example, that war has been a central concern of IR theorists and policymakers, yet it is poverty, which receives very little attention among IR scholars, that is the leading cause of death in the world today (1996: 351).

For most postpositivists, the primary activity of an IR theorist is to reveal how policymakers and positivist IR theorists describe international events, act upon those descriptions as if they were natural, and then justify their actions and arguments in a self-fulfilling circle of codetermination. Revelation is accomplished by examining the texts of policymakers and fellow IR theorists, with the goal being to reveal not only the philosophical commitments, biases, and commonly subscribed to social realities that ground the activity of IR (in both its policymaking and theoretical forms), but also what has been excluded or marginalized by such activity. Postpositivists do this by providing alternative readings and interpretations of how policymakers and theorists have characterized and justified events and topics. Critics often disparage postpositivist methodology as mere "interpretivism," which lacks any standard of judgment and could lead to "a form of epistemological anarchy" in the discipline (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1997: 36).[4] Yet from a postpositivist perspective, such counter-interpretations, whether they are of a policymaker's speeches or of a fellow theorist's articles, play an essential role in revealing the ideas that we take for granted, that shape the way we see the world, that we rely upon to justify the actions we take, and that reproduce the world we take for granted.

Postpositivists would define the nature and purpose of IR theory very differently in comparison to positivists as a result. Testing competing hypotheses, developing causal explanations, and making predictions are seen as the dominant and relatively destructive ways in which we have come to interpret the world, impose meaning, and continually re-create particular patterns of knowledge and behavior in IR. According to Zalewski while most positivists think of IR theory as merely a tool or critique, a postpositivist would define it as "everyday practice" in which "theorizing is a way of life, a form of life, something we all do, every day, all the time," which means that "theorists are global actors and global actors are theorists" (1996: 346, 348). Similarly Steve Smith argues about IR that "what we think about these events and possibilities, and what we think we can do about them, depends in a fundamental sense on *how* we think about them. In short, our thinking about the 'real' world, and hence our practices, is

directly related to our theories" (1996: 1, emphasis original). Although postpositivists eschew the notion that there are universal laws that are objectively discoverable with scientific methods, they do see patterns to the way positivists describe and theorize IR. Such patterns could derive from the values of eighteenth-century European Enlightenment (which promotes a faith in science) or the politics of identity within IR (which is dominated both in practice and in theory by men).

It might help to return briefly to the 35mm camera analogy in order to summarize the fundamental divide between positivists and postpositivists in the discipline of IR. If both were photographers, then positivists would be those who shared a dominant consensus that tinted lenses captured the reality, being, or essence of the elephant. The quarrel among them would be over which of the colors on the spectrum best revealed the true nature of the elephant. Much of their activity would be devoted to photographing the elephant with various shades of whichever color they preferred. Alternatively, postpositivists would be photographers who asked why positivists were so convinced that tinted lenses best captured the nature of the elephant in the first place. They would be concerned with revealing both this shared preference for tinted lenses and how it ignored and denigrated other types of lenses that would be equally legitimate for capturing an image of the elephant. Both types of photographers would be engaged in revealing larger patterns and in answering Rosenau's "of what is it an instance?" Yet positivist answers would involve a conviction that they were documenting the patterns of reality itself, while postpositivist answers would involve revealing, as a pattern in itself, the positivist's conviction that reality was being documented.

While this book does not disparage positivism, neither does it make an attempt to evaluate alternative theoretical perspectives according to their explanatory abilities. Instead it reflects a belief that all IR theoretical perspectives capture a reality of sorts, that there are multiple realities to and readings of IR, and that all of them are "true" in the sense that they give us some purchase on and understanding of IR events and topics. This does not mean that no standards have been applied and that what is presented here is "epistemological anarchy." Each chapter has been read by multiple groups, including IR scholars, undergraduates, and graduate students. The authors revised their chapters after each of these readings in order to address questions and misunderstandings, fix empirical mistakes or deductive errors, and refine incomplete or unclear readings. Those revisions were not undertaken in a competitive spirit, and so they do not involve arguing whose theoretical perspective is the "correct" perspective for understanding the events in Kosovo. This may be implicit in some of the positivist selections, but it was not a goal of the book or the individual chapters. Instead, each author attempted to address more fundamental questions, such as why you,

the reader, should be acquainted with their particular theoretical perspective and what it will help you see or understand that you had not been aware of before reading it.

Of course, as the reader, you are free to make judgments regarding what you find most and least compelling. As you do so, keep in mind that one of the most important intellectual steps you can take as an analyst of IR events and topics is to recognize *your own* philosophical and ideological commitments, about which you may be entirely unaware. Because the book has been designed to present IR theories impartially, it can assist you in discovering these commitments. As you read, consider which perspectives you find most compelling or convincing, which you find most repellent or least convincing, and why you have these responses. Answering such questions and identifying what it is specifically about an approach that you find convincing or offending should help you to recognize your own normative commitments and ideological biases. Such recognition is the first step in gaining some distance from those commitments, which is necessary for fairly assessing alternatives you might otherwise initially dismiss or ignore. It is also necessary for seeing international events and topics other than Kosovo in these larger contexts and theoretical patterns.

Of what is Kosovo an instance then? In the pages that follow, you will find differing interpretations, explanations, and understandings of the same basic events, as IR scholars attempt to answer this question according to their particular theoretical perspectives.

Further Reading

Two of the better-known texts that provide detailed descriptions and discussions of the most popular IR theories are Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1997 and Viotti and Kauppi 1999, both of which have been revised and reprinted several times. The Viotti and Kauppi source contains textual examples from seminal scholars in particular theoretical perspectives, and includes a reprint of the "Thinking Theory Thoroughly" piece by Rosenau (which was subsequently developed into a 2000 book with Durfee). Another text that reprints seminal pieces for the purpose of juxtaposing alternative theories is Der Derian 1995a. Alternatively, Neumann and Wæver 1997 provides original essays that summarize and analyze the writings of particularly seminal thinkers in each of the major theoretical perspectives.

Doyle and Ikenberry 1997b is an edited collection on the subject of new thinking in IR and provides original essays from scholars of different theoretical perspectives, all of whom discuss the nature of change in IR. A special issue of *Foreign Policy* titled "Frontiers of Knowledge" (1998) has original essays that summarize research in each of the main IR theoretical perspectives. It also provides lists for further readings on particular per-

spectives (as do the theory introduction sections of this book). Other texts that provide overviews and extended discussions of IR theory include Baylis and Smith 2001, Booth and Smith 1995, Burchill et al. 2001, Ferguson and Mansbach 1988, Ferguson and Mansbach 1991, Groom and Light 1994, Holsti 1985, Morgan 1986, Thompson 1996, and Weber 2001.

A number of texts have overviews of disciplinary history and describe the ways in which theories developed in relation to one another. These include Alker and Biersteker 1984, Kahler 1997, Olson and Groom 1991, Rothstein 1991, Schmidt 1998, Wæver 1997, and Wæver 1996b. For works that compare US IR as a discipline to the study of IR in other countries (and the difference this makes for theorizing about IR), see Crawford and Jarvis 2000, Jørgensen and Knudsen 2006, Smith 2002, and Wæver 1998b.

On the subject of positivism and postpositivism in IR theory, a number of texts could be consulted, including Smith, Booth, and Zalewski 1996 (Smith's chapter in particular provides numerous citations on both subjects), Booth and Smith 1995, Hollis and Smith 1990, George 1988, George 1994, and *International Studies Quarterly*'s "Exchange on the Third Debate" (1989), which contains several articles devoted to the subject of the "third debate" (as it is sometimes called) by T. Biersteker (1989), K. Holsti (1989), and Y. Lapid (1989). Other citations on this subject are provided in the overview chapter on postmodernism and critical theory.

Notes

1. The subject of an elephant in this analogy is intentional, as it recalls the story of the blind men who each touch a different part of an elephant and believe they have sufficiently grasped its reality, though none can grasp the whole. The analogy was used earlier by Robert North (1969) in a plea for greater tolerance and research pluralism in the discipline. The lens metaphor has also been utilized elsewhere; in particular see V. Spike Peterson and Anne Runyan (1999: 1–3).

2. Extended discussions of the levels-of-analysis issue in IR theorizing can be found in Singer 1969, Waltz 1959, Waltz 1960, and Buzan 1995. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff also provide a description of alternative levels of analysis beyond the standard three (1997: 26–33).

3. *Postpositivism* is an umbrella term for those theoretical perspectives that are skeptical of the positivist project in general. It should not be conflated with postmodernism, which is but one variant of this skepticism, and other postpositivist approaches represented in this book, such as critical theory and critical feminist theory. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff use the term "postempiricist" for postpositivism (1997: 35), and the terms "rationalism" and "reflectivism" are sometimes used for positivism and postpositivism respectively, but the latter are more common in the literature (see Smith 1996).

4. Since this book seeks to impartially provide both positivist and postpositivist applications, it may give the misimpression that there is rapprochement between positivists and postpositivists within the discipline. In fact, however, the exchanges between scholars of these two perspectives are often heated and nasty. As Ole Wæver observes, "there is no such repressive tolerance" between them, because

"they rather see each other as harmful, at times almost 'evil,' definitely not as a legitimate parallel enterprise." This is because the postpositivists believe that "the mainstream is co-responsible for upholding a repressive order," while the postpositivists are viewed by the positivist mainstream as "subversive, anti-scientific, and generally a bad influence on students" (1997: 22).