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## Chapter 1

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# Introduction: Defining International Relations

This book is an introduction to the discipline of International Relations; ‘International Relations’ (with initial capitals – here frequently shortened to IR) is the study of ‘international relations’ (lower case) – the use of upper and lower case in this way has become conventional and will be employed throughout this book. But what are ‘international relations’? A survey of the field suggests that a number of different definitions are employed. For some, international relations means the *diplomatic–strategic* relations of *states*, and the characteristic focus of IR is on issues of war and peace, conflict and co-operation. Others see international relations as being about *cross-border transactions* of all kinds, political, economic and social, and IR is as likely to study trade negotiations or the operation of non-state institutions such as Amnesty International as it is conventional peace talks or the workings of the United Nations (UN). Again, and with increasing frequency in the twenty-first century, some focus on *globalization* – studying, for example, world communication, transport and financial systems, global business corporations and the putative emergence of a global society. These conceptions obviously bear some family resemblances, but nevertheless, each has quite distinct features. Which definition we adopt will have real consequences for the rest of our study, and thus will be more than simply a matter of convenience.

The reason definitions matter in this way is because ‘international relations’ do not have any kind of essential existence in the real world of the sort that could define an academic discipline. Instead, there is a continual interplay between the ‘real world’ and the world of knowledge. The latter is, of course, shaped by the former, but this is not simply a one-way relationship. How we understand and interpret the world is partly dependent on how we define the world we are trying to understand and interpret. Since it is always likely to be the case that any definition we adopt will be controversial, this presents a problem that cannot be glossed over. Some of the difficulties we face here are shared by the social sciences as a whole, while others are specific to International Relations. The arguments are often not easy to grasp, but the student who understands what the problem is here will have gone a long way towards comprehending how the social sciences function and why IR theory

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is a such complex and difficult, but ultimately very rewarding, subject for study.

It is generally true of the social sciences that their subject-matter is not self-defining in the way that is often the case in the natural sciences. An example may help to make this clear. Consider a textbook entitled *Introductory Myrmecology*. This will, on page 1, define its terms by explaining that myrmecology is the study of ants, which is unproblematic because we know what an 'ant' is. The classificatory scheme that produces the category 'ant' is well understood and more or less universally accepted by the relevant scientific community; anyone who tried to broaden that category in a dramatic way would not be taken seriously. There is a scientific consensus on the matter. Ants do not label themselves as such; the description 'ant' is given to them by scientists, but since everyone whose opinion counts is of one mind in this matter, we need have no worries about forgetting that this is so. We can, in effect, treat ants as though they did, indeed, define themselves as such. By contrast, there are virtually no areas of the social sciences where this kind of universal consensus can be relied upon to define a field. Perhaps the nearest equivalent is found in economics, where the majority of economists do agree on the basics of what an 'economy' is, and therefore what their discipline actually studies – however, it is noteworthy that even here in the social science that most forcefully asserts its claim to be a 'real' science, there are a number of dissidents who want to define their subject-matter in a different way from that approved of by the majority. These dissidents – 'political economists' for example, or 'Marxist economists' – are successfully marginalized by the majority, but they survive and continue to press their case in a way that somebody who tried to contest the definition of an ant would not.

In the case of most of the other social sciences, even the incomplete level of consensus achieved by the economists does not exist. Thus, for example, in political science the very nature of *politics* is heavily contested: is 'politics' something associated solely with government and the state? We often talk about university politics or student politics – is this a legitimate extension of the idea of politics? What of the politics of the family? Much Western political thinking rests on a distinction between the public realm and private life – but feminists and others have argued that 'the personal is the political'. This latter point illustrates a general feature of definitional problems in the social sciences – they are not politically innocent. The feminist critique of traditional definitions of politics is that their emphasis on public life hid from view the oppressions that took place (and still take place) behind closed doors in patriarchal institutions such as the traditional family, with its inequalities of power and a division of labour that disadvantages women. Such critiques make a more general point; conventional definitions in most of the social sciences tend to privilege an account of the world that reflects the interests of those

who are dominant within a particular area. There are no politically neutral ways of describing 'politics' or 'economics' – though this does not mean that we cannot agree among ourselves to use a particular definition for the sake of convenience.

What does this tell us about how to go about defining international relations/International Relations? Two things. First, we have to accept that if we can find a definition it will be a matter of convention; there is no equivalent to an actual ant here – 'international relations' does not define the field of 'International Relations'; rather, scholars and practitioners of the subject provide the definition. It should be noted that this is not to endorse the post-structuralist position that there is 'nothing beyond the text'; needless to say, there is indeed a real world, with real people acting in it – the point is that which actions we take to be the subject matter of International Relations is not something that is self-evident, but rather requires a contribution from the analyst. Second, while it may make sense for us to start with the conventional, traditional definition of the subject, we should be aware that this definition is sure to embody a particular account of the field – and that the way it does this is unlikely to be politically neutral. Instead, what we can expect is a definition of the field which, while purporting to be objective – simply reflecting 'the way things are' – is actually going to be, perhaps unconsciously, partisan and contentious. It follows that, having started with the conventional account, we shall have to examine its hidden agenda before moving to alternative definitions; which, of course, will in turn have their own hidden agendas.

There can be little doubt that the conventional definition of the field is that given first in the opening paragraph of this chapter, namely that IR is the study of the relations of states, and that those relations are understood primarily in *diplomatic*, *military* and *strategic* terms – this is certainly the way in which diplomats, historians and most scholars of IR have defined the subject. The relevant unit is the *state*, not the *nation*; most states may nowadays aspire to be nation-states, but it is the possession of statehood rather than nationhood that is central – indeed, the term 'interstate' would be more accurate than 'international' were it not for the fact that this is the term used in the United States to describe relations between, say, California and Arizona. Thus the United Kingdom fits more easily into the conventional account of international relations than Scotland, or Canada than Quebec, even though Scotland and Quebec are more unambiguously 'nations' than either the United Kingdom or Canada. The distinguishing feature of the state is *sovereignty*. This is a difficult term, but at its root is the idea of legal autonomy. Sovereign states are sovereign because no higher body has the *right* to issue orders to them. In practice, some states may have the *ability* to influence the behaviour of other states, but this influence is a matter of power not authority (see Chapter 5 below).

To put the matter differently, the conventional account of international relations stresses the fact that the relationship between states is one of *anarchy*.

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Anarchy in this context does not necessarily mean lawlessness and chaos; rather, it means the absence of a formal system of government. There is in international relations no formal centre of authoritative decision-making such as exists, in principle at least, within the state. This is why stress is placed traditionally on diplomacy and strategy; while the term ‘international politics’ is often used loosely in this context, international relations are not really political, because, again for traditional reasons, politics is about authority and government, and there is no international authority in the conventional sense of the term. Instead of looking to influence government to act on their behalf, participants in international relations are obliged to look after their own interests and pursue them by employing their own resources – we live in, as the jargon has it, a *self-help* system. Because it is a self-help system, *security* is the overriding concern of states; and *diplomacy*, the exercise of influence, exists in a context where force is, at the very least, a possibility. The possibility that force might be exercised is what makes the state – which actually possesses and disposes of armed force – the key international actor. Other bodies are secondary to the state, and the myriad of other activities that take place across state boundaries, economic, social, cultural and so on, are equally secondary to the diplomatic–strategic relations of states.

What is wrong with this *state-centric* (an ugly but useful piece of jargon) definition of the subject? Placed in context, nothing very much. There is indeed a world that works like this, in which diplomats and soldiers are the key actors, and there are parts of the world where it would be very unwise of any state not to be continually conscious of security issues – in the Middle Eastern ‘Arc of Conflict’, for example. Moreover, it is striking that even those states that feel most secure can find themselves suddenly engaged in military conflict for reasons that could not have been predicted in advance. Few predicted in January 1982 that Britain and Argentina would go to war over the Falklands/Malvinas later that year, for example; or, in January 1990, that an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would lead to a major war in the Gulf in 1990–1, but it is the nature of the international system that it throws up this kind of surprise.

For all that, physical violence and overt conflict are nowhere near as central to international relations as the traditional description of the subject would suggest. Most countries, most of the time, live at peace with their neighbours and the world at large. Transactions take place across borders – movements of people, goods, money, information and ideas – in a peaceful, routine way. We take it for granted that a letter posted in Britain or Australia to Brazil, the United States or South Africa will be delivered. Using the internet we can order a book or a CD from another country, confident that our credit card will be recognized and honoured. A cursory examination of the nearest kitchen, wardrobe or hi-fi rack will reveal goods from all around the world. We plan our holidays abroad without more than a passing thought about the

formalities of border crossing. What is truly remarkable is that we no longer find all this remarkable – at least not within the countries of the advanced industrial world. These developments seem, at least on the surface, to be very positive, but there are other things that happen across borders nowadays that are less welcome, such as problems of pollution and environmental degradation, the drugs and arms trade, international terrorism and other international crimes – these factors pose threats to our security, although not in quite the same way as war and violent conflict.

What implication does this have for a description of the discipline of International Relations? There are several possibilities here. We might well decide to remain committed to a state-centric view of the discipline, but abandon, or weaken, the assumption that the external policy of the state is dominated by questions of (physical) security. On this account, states remain the central actors in international relations. They control, or at least try to control, the borders over which transactions take place, and they claim, sometimes successfully, to regulate the international activities of their citizens. They issue passports and visas, make treaties with each other with the intention of managing trade flows and matters of copyright and crime, and set up international institutions in the hope of controlling world finance or preventing environmental disasters. In short, national diplomacy goes on much as in the traditional model, but without the assumption that force and violence are its central concerns. Most of the time, ‘economic statecraft’ is just as important as the traditional concerns of foreign-policy management – even if it tends to be conducted by the ministry responsible for trade or finance rather than external affairs.

A problem with this account of the world of international relations is hinted at by the number of qualifications in the above paragraph. States do indeed try to do all these things, but often they do not succeed. Too many of these cross-border activities are in the hands of private organizations such as international firms, or take place on terrain where it is notoriously difficult for states to act effectively, such as international capital markets. Often, the resources possessed by non-state actors – non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – are greater than those of at least some of the states that are attempting to regulate them. Moreover, the institutions that states set up to help them manage this world of *complex interdependence* tend to develop a life of their own, so that bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organization (WTO) end up out of the control of even the strongest of the states that originally made them. Frequently, states are obliged to engage in a form of diplomacy with these actors, recognizing them as real players in the game rather than simply as instruments or as part of the stakes for which the game is played. For this reason, some think the focus of the discipline should be on cross-border transactions in general, and the ways in which states and non-state actors relate to each other. States may still be,

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much of the time, the dominant actors, but this is a pragmatic judgement rather than a matter of principle and, in any event, they must always acknowledge that on many issues other players are in the game. International relations is a complex, issue-sensitive affair in which the interdependence of states and societies is as striking a feature as their independence.

For a diplomat of the 1900s this would have seemed a very radical view of the world, but in fact it stands squarely on the shoulders of the older, traditional conception of the discipline; the underlying premise is that separate national societies are relating to each other just as they always have done, but on a wider range of issues. Other conceptions of international relations are genuinely more radical in their implications. Theorists of *globalization*, while still for the most part conscious of the continued importance of states, refuse to place them at the centre of things. Instead their focus is on global political, social and, in particular, economic transactions, and on the new technologies that have created the internet, the twenty-four-hour stock market and an increasingly tightly integrated global system. Rather than beginning with national states and working towards the global, these writers start with the global and bring the state into play only when it is appropriate to do so.

The more extreme advocates of globalization clearly overstate their case – the idea that we live in a ‘borderless world’ (Ohmae 1990) is ridiculous – but more careful analysts can no longer be dismissed by traditional scholars of IR. The more interesting issues nowadays revolve around the *politics* of globalization; are these new global trends reinforcing or undermining the existing divide in the world between rich and poor? Is globalization another name for global capitalism, or, perhaps, in the cultural realm, Americanization? One radical approach to International Relations – sometimes called *structuralism* or *centre-periphery analysis* – has always stressed the existence of global forces, a world structure in which dominant interests/classes largely – but not entirely – located in the advanced industrial world, dominate and exploit the rest of the world, using economic, political and military means to this end. From this neo-Marxist viewpoint, rather than a world of states and national societies, we have a stratified global system in which class dominates class on the world stage, and the conventional division of the world into national societies is the product of a kind of false consciousness that leads individuals who make up these allegedly-separate societies to think of themselves as having common interests thereby, as opposed to their real interests, which reflect their class positions. Clearly, this vision of the world has much in common with that of globalization, though many advocates of the latter have a more positive view of the process, but ‘structuralist’ ideas have also fed into the somewhat confused ideology of many of the new radical opponents of globalization who have made their presence felt at recent WTO meetings. One further consideration; what is sometimes referred to as the first globalization took place at the end of the nineteenth century, but collapsed with the

outbreak of war in 1914 – will the second globalization end in the same way, perhaps a casualty of the events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’?

These issues will be returned to at various points later in this book, but by now it ought to be clear why defining International Relations is a tricky business, and why no simple definition is, or could be, or should be, widely adopted. Each of the positions discussed above has a particular take on the world, each reflects a partial understanding of the world, and if any one of these positions were to be allowed to generate a definition of the field it would be placed in a privileged position that it had not earned. If, for example, a traditional definition of International Relations as the study of states, security and war is adopted, then issues of complex interdependence and globalization are marginalized, and those who wish to focus on these approaches are made to seem unwilling to address the real agenda. And yet it is precisely the question of what *is* the real agenda that has not been addressed. On the basis that there must be some kind of limiting principle if we are to study anything at all, we might agree that International Relations is the study of cross-border transactions in general, and thus leave open the nature of these transactions, but even this will not really do, since it presumes the importance of political boundaries, which some radical theorists of globalization deny. Definition is simply not possible yet – in a sense, the whole of the rest of this book is an extended definition of international relations. However, before we can approach these matters of substance we must first address another contentious issue, namely the nature of ‘theory’ in International Relations.

### **Perspectives and theories**

This is a ‘theoretical’ introduction to International Relations. We have already seen the difficulty involved in defining the latter term – can we do any better with ‘theory’? As always, there are both simple and complicated definitions of theory, but on this occasion simple is best – unlike defining ‘international relations’, where simplicity is misleading. Theory, at its simplest, is reflective thought. We engage in theorizing when we think in depth and in an abstract way about something. Why should we do this? Simply because we sometimes find ourselves asking questions we are not able to answer without reflection, without abstract thought. Sometimes the question we are posing is about how things work, or *why things happen*. Sometimes the question is about *what we should do*, either in the sense of what action is instrumental to bringing about a particular kind of result or in the sense of what action is morally right. Sometimes the question is about *what something or other means*, how it is to be interpreted. Different kinds of theory are engaged here, but the root idea is the same – we turn to theory when the answer to a question that is, for one reason or another, important to us is not clear. Of course, sometimes when the

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answer is apparently clear it may be wrong, but we shall not be aware of this until something happens to draw our attention to the possibility that a mistake has been made.

Most of the time things *are* clear – or at least it is convenient for us to live as though they are. There are many questions we do not try to answer theoretically – though in principle we could – because we regard the answer as being obvious, and life is too short to spend a great deal of time thinking in depth and abstractly about things that are obvious. Instead, very sensibly, we concentrate on questions where the answer is not obvious, or, better, seems actually to be counter-intuitive. To extend an example used in a brief discussion of the role of theory by Susan Strange, we tend not to waste too much time asking ourselves why people characteristically run *out* of a burning building (Strange 1988: 11). If we wanted to theorize this, we could; a theoretical explanation would refer to phenomena such as the effect of fire on human tissue and smoke on human lungs, the desire of humans to avoid pain and death, and so on. The point is that this is all pretty obvious, and there is no need to make a meal of it. On the other hand, if we wish to explain why people might run *into* a burning building, some kind of theorizing may be necessary. Again, the answer might be readily to hand – they may be members of a firefighting service who have contracted to do this sort of thing under certain circumstances – or it might not. It might be the case, for example, that the person running into the building was a private individual attempting a rescue. In such circumstances we might well wish to think in some depth about the circumstances under which one person would risk his or her life for another – asking ourselves how common this kind of altruism is, whether it is usually kin-related and so on. It is interesting that even this simple example is capable of generating a number of different kinds of theory – examples might include explanatory theory, normative theory, interpretative theory. However, rather than follow up this artificial example, it would be better to move to an example central to the discipline; an example of a difficult question which, Strange suggests, only slightly overstating her case, is the formative question for our discipline – namely: why do states go to war with one another?

In the nineteenth century there was not a great deal of theorizing on the causes of war in general, because most people thought that the causes of war, at least in the international system of that era, were obvious. Historical studies of particular wars might discuss the cause of the war in question, but only as a prelude to an account of the course of the war, not as a major focus. It was taken for granted that states went to war for gain, or in self-defence because they were attacked by some other state acting for gain. A premise of the system was that wars were initiated by states that hoped to be the victors, and hoped to reap benefits in excess of potential losses. War was sometimes a rational choice for states, and a legitimate choice too, because a majority of international lawyers believed that the right to declare war without any exter-

nal approval was inherent in the nature of sovereignty. Wars were what states did; sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The self-evidence of this interpretation seemed supported by the historical record of nineteenth-century wars – successful diplomatists such as Bismarck, and imperialists such as Rhodes, fought wars of conquest which did, indeed, seem to bring results.

Now, if war is initiated on the basis of a simple cost–benefit analysis, it follows that if potential costs rise disproportionately to potential benefits, then there should be fewer wars – indeed, there should be none at all if costs were to rise very steeply while benefits stayed steady or actually fell. In the early years of the twentieth century, it seemed that just such a transformation was taking place. For modern industrial societies, the benefits from conquest seem trivial by comparison with the costs that war would bring – large-scale death and destruction made possible by new weapons, the collapse of an interdependent world economy, political instability and turmoil. This was a commonplace of the early years of the century, well caught by a best-seller of the day, Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (Angell 1909). It seemed obvious that war would no longer be a profitable enterprise. Moreover, these economic realities were reinforced by increasing moral disquiet over the idea that states had a right to go to war whenever they wanted to.

Then came 1914, and the greatest war the European system had seen for 300 years inaugurated a century of warfare. Of course, Angell had been absolutely correct. War was indeed disastrous to its initiators, and to many others too. Millions died pointlessly, regimes fell, economic chaos prevailed, and the seeds of a new war were sown. How could something so obviously and predictably counter-productive happen? Twentieth-century theorizing about international relations begins here. Something seemed to be wrong with the 'obvious' answer, and early students of international relations felt the need to think more deeply about the causes of war in order to answer a question that previously had not been thought not to demand a great deal of theoretical consideration. A vast literature was produced on the causes of the First World War, stimulated by the 'war-guilt' clause of the Treaty of Versailles, which attributed blame solely to Germany. More generally, over the twentieth century and beyond a number of theories of the causes of war have been elaborated, ranging from the role of special interests to the psychological profile of particular countries or leaders. At the end of the day, it may be the case that such work in fact vindicates the 'common sense' of the 1900s by showing, for example, that both sides believed themselves to be acting defensively rather than deliberately initiating a war – indeed, the dominance of rational choice theory in, especially American, political science today means that cost–benefit accounts of war are as privileged today as they were in the nineteenth century – but the point is that nowadays this is a conclusion based on theory (a version of the 'security dilemma' – see Chapter 5 below) rather than common sense, even though it confirms the latter.

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Remaining with this example, we can see that there are various kinds of theory, various different circumstances in which abstract reflection is required. There are *explanatory* theories, which attempt to explain why, and under what circumstances, wars happen; and *normative* or *prescriptive* theories, which try to tell us what our attitude to war ought to be – whether, for example, we should volunteer to participate in a conflict or conscientiously object to it; to this pairing we can add theories that *interpret* events, attempting to give meaning to them – something that the carnage of the First World War seemed especially to require. In principle, these kinds of theories are interrelated – we cannot explain an occurrence without simultaneously interpreting it and orientating ourselves towards it – although, in practice, it may often be convenient for us to adopt the working practice of taking them in isolation.

As well as there being different kinds of theory, it is also the case that each kind of theory comes in a plurality of versions – there always seem to be different, competing accounts of why something happened, or what we should do, or what it means. There is rarely one single answer. Authorities differ; each offers apparently compelling reasons why their account is right, but each offers a *different* set of compelling reasons. Some students of International Relations find this rather scandalous, largely because it contradicts what our society regards as the most important exemplar of theory, the model of the natural sciences. In subjects such as physics and biology, students have ‘proper’ textbooks telling them what is right and what is wrong in no uncertain terms. Obviously, there are major debates within these subjects, but these are conducted at a rarefied level – textbooks generally convey the consensus prevalent among those who are qualified to have an opinion. Out-of-date theories are simply not taught, and advanced controversies are reserved for the professionals. As we have seen even in as basic a matter as the definition of the subject, this is not true in International Relations. Authoritative figures dispute with one another in public in what seems to be a very undignified way, and no idea ever really dies – though some do get close to the point where resuscitation is difficult.

Is this a matter for concern? Partly, this will depend on why we have so many theories. It might be the case that we have many competing theories because none of them is in reality very satisfactory. In the case, for example, of the causes of war, there are theories that lay stress on the personality characteristics of leaders, or on the political characteristics of regimes, or on the anarchical character of the international system. Each seems to explain some aspects of war, but not others. We might well feel that we do not really want to have so many theories in this case, but that we cannot afford to discard any of them because we are not sure which (if any) is right. Since any reduction in the number of theories might eliminate the correct answer (assuming that there *is* one correct answer), we have to keep them all in play. We cannot

simply kill off the wrong answer, because we do not know which one *is* the wrong answer.

If this were the only way of looking at the multiplicity of theories and perspectives in International Relations, then the discipline would be in rather poor shape. However, it should be noted that, even from this pessimistic account of the discipline, it does not follow that there are no rules of discourse or that any single argument is as good as any other. The various competing theories of the causes of war each has its own account of what a good argument looks like, and the number of perspectives available, although multiple, is not infinite. There are some bad arguments, and a plurality of theories does not cover all possibilities, or validate all positions.

However, and in any event, it is possible to put another, rather less depressing, colouring on the existence of a plurality of theories. It may simply be the case that International Relations is not the sort of academic discipline where we should expect or welcome consensus and the absence of competing accounts of the world. In the first place, in International Relations, as in other branches of political science, we are dealing with ideas and concepts that are ‘essentially contestable’ because they have political implications. As we have seen above, in the natural sciences it is often possible to ‘stipulate’ a definition; that is, to employ a definition of a concept that will be accepted because it is clearly set out in advance. In politics, this is much more difficult – and some would say impossible. As we have seen, even the attempt to stipulate a definition of the subject-matter of the discipline, International Relations itself, runs into difficulties. If we attempt to stipulate a definition of a key concept such as *power* we run into even greater problems. We might describe power in operation along the lines of the popular formulation that ‘A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do what A wants B to do’, and for certain purposes this might work, but we would be open to the objection that this does not cover, for example, structural power – the ability to shape issues in such a way that outcomes are restricted before they reach the point of decision. What is crucial here is that this is not simply an intellectual objection to this stipulated definition. It is also a political objection. The people, groups or classes who hold structural power in a society may well be different from the people, groups or classes who hold the kind of relational power envisaged in our definition, and by defining power in this way the power of the former group will be overlooked (to their considerable advantage).

This is a case in favour of pluralism in theory that applies to political science in general, but there is a further point that applies with particular force to the study of International Relations. One of the reasons why International Relations is an interesting field of study is because it attempts to produce theory on the widest canvas available to us – not simply a theory of politics in one country or continent, but a theory of global relations. This means that any worthwhile theory of international relations is going to have to be able to

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work with a multiplicity of cultures, with the aim of providing an account of the world that is not ethnocentric. What this involves in practice is the ability to keep in play a number of competing conceptions of how things are. We have to understand that politics often seems very different in the Middle East from the way it seems in Western Europe or Latin America. Even within these broad cultures there are significant differences that block understanding.

It may be helpful to illustrate this point with a couple of examples; first, as we shall see in Chapter 2, one of the formative diplomatic experiences of the century was the sequence of disasters that befell the international order in the run-up to the Second World War. In fact, so formative were these calamities that, some seventy years later, ‘appeasement’ is still a term of abuse, and new dictators are routinely compared to Hitler and Mussolini. How do we account for these disasters? Incompetence played a role, but it is also clear that a major factor was that the leaders of Britain and France thought that their view of the world was shared by all leaders, including Hitler, when in fact it was not. The most striking example of this phenomenon is supplied by the Soviet Union under Stalin, because, as is often forgotten, in this case appeasement of Hitler continued long after the outbreak of war had demonstrated the failure of this strategy in the West. Why did Stalin think that appeasement would work for him when it had failed for Chamberlain?

The answer seems to be that Stalin believed National Socialist Germany to be a capitalist state, and, as a good Leninist, he believed that the behaviour of capitalist states was driven by material needs – in particular, at this time, the need for raw materials to pursue the war. Between mid-1939 and mid-1941, Stalin acted on this belief, appeasing Hitler by helping him to pursue his war against Britain and France. He believed this would prevent Hitler from attacking the Soviet Union; since Hitler was getting what he really wanted from the USSR without war, to engage in war would be irrational, especially in the context of an unfinished war in the West. As perhaps twenty million Soviet citizens discovered, this perception was a mistake. Stalin’s logic had been impeccable, but Hitler was marching to a different drum. Hitler’s vision of the future was of the vast Eurasian plains populated by ‘Aryans’, which meant that the Slavs, Jews and other alleged undesirables who currently lived there simply had to be ‘eliminated’ – killed or driven into Asia. Moreover, Hitler wished to achieve this himself, and since it seems he believed (correctly as it happens) that he was destined to die relatively young, he was not prepared to wait until the end of the war with Britain before undertaking the conquest of Russia. Stalin seems genuinely to have been unable to grasp that this bizarre and evil concoction of ideas could have been seriously held by Hitler; even after the start of Operation Barbarossa – the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Stalin initially instructed his troops not to resist, on the principle that this could not be a real invasion, but must be a ‘provocation’ (Weinberg 1994: 186–205). We should be wary of drawing too many conclusions from such an

extreme example of miscalculation, but the basic point is that Stalin's theoretical account of the world led him badly astray because it was monolithic rather than pluralist. He was wedded to the idea that there was always *one* right answer, *one* right strategy; what let him down was his unwillingness to grasp that alternative conceptions of the world might be equally powerful in the minds of other decision-makers.

Consider, for a second and more recent example, the various different readings of US foreign policy to be found nowadays. In the USA, while there are many differences of opinion on foreign policy issues, most Americans, and certainly nearly all prominent Democrat and Republican politicians, agree in characterizing US policy towards the rest of the world as essentially benign in intent. America protects its interests in the world, but it also sees itself as promoting democracy and human rights, which are taken to be universally desired; in promoting these goals, the USA is simply acting in the global interest. Sometimes, and perhaps too frequently, mistakes are made and the USA certainly does not always live up to its own values – the human rights violations in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq come to mind – but the USA basically means well, even when things go wrong. America is a 'city on a hill'; an example to the rest of the world. Given this perspective – a version of what is sometimes known as 'American exceptionalism' – Americans find it difficult to understand why their attempts to be helpful in the world are so often misunderstood, and why their policies are misinterpreted as being self-serving and imperialistic. The obvious answer is that those states that oppose US policy are either behaving irresponsibly or, worse, are rogue regimes.

In truth, of course, there is nothing particularly surprising about the fact that peoples and governments want to define their own approaches to world affairs, and defend their own interests, and there is no guarantee that these definitions or interests will coincide with those of the USA. Disagreement on such matters is part of the normal give and take of world politics, but rather too many Americans today interpret the world through such a narrow ideational frame that any opposition comes to be defined as essentially wrong-headed or worse. Ironically, this attitude promotes anti-Americanism, which is often set off not by the overt pursuit of American interests by American governments, but by the reluctance to admit that this is what is happening, the cloaking of interest in the language of altruism. There are echoes here of attitudes towards Britain in the days of British power – *Perfidious Albion's* reputation was based on a not dissimilar unwillingness to admit that the British power served British interests. Continental diplomatists such as Bismarck were not irritated by a Palmerston or a Disraeli – both unapologetic wielders of British power – but by the liberal Gladstone, whose every foreign policy move was covered by a miasma of moralizing rhetoric and appeals to the interests of 'Europe'.

## 14 *Understanding International Relations*

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In fact, while the underlying attitude remains, events since 2001 have understandably instilled a certain degree of scepticism in many Americans, and a greater willingness to admit that the USA can sometimes get things badly wrong. Occasionally this tips into a kind of ‘reverse American exceptionalism’ which blames the American government – or sometimes the American people – for everything that goes wrong in the world. This attitude is often exemplified by radical Americans such as Noam Chomsky or (from the sublime to the ridiculous) Michael Moore, but also by figures such as John Pilger and Harold Pinter, who have become so convinced of the absolute evil represented by the USA that whenever anything bad happens it has to be interpreted to show that, essentially, America is to blame; conversely, whenever the USA does something that looks, on the face of it, to be a good thing, this cannot really be the case. Apart from leading to absurd arguments – the US-supported Australian intervention in East Timor in 1999 being designed to preserve Indonesia for exploitation by world capitalism being a personal favourite – this position is also profoundly patronizing, assuming as it does that national leaders elsewhere in the world would be unable to do wrong unless their alleged US puppet-masters pulled the strings. Alternatively, it leads to a frame of mind that excuses brutalities when they are committed by leaders who are reliably anti-American; the opposition by some parts of the left to intervention to prevent the genocide in Darfur on the grounds that this would be an act of imperialism comes to mind, or perhaps Michael Moore’s lyrical scene in *Fahrenheit 911* of children playing happily in Saddam’s Iraq until the arrival of the Americans.

The key point about American exceptionalism in both its positive and negative versions is not that it can lead to morally vacuous or obnoxious positions, though this is true, but that it presents a distorted view of the world. Theories that close down debates and attempt to impose a single view on the world will almost always mislead. In the recent documentary film *The Fog of War*, Robert McNamara states as his first rule for a successful war ‘empathize with your enemy’ – one might make this the first rule for a successful peace as well. In short, if we are to be successful theorists of IR, we must resist the tendency to define success in terms of simple models; instead, we must be prepared to live with quite high levels of ambiguity – if you want black and white, buy an old television, don’t be an IR theorist.

On the face of it, this may seem to suggest that the study of International Relations is likely to be a frustrating business. On the contrary, the need for this kind of openness to ambiguity is a reflection of both the importance and the intrinsic interest of the subject. As students of international relations, we have a grandstand seat for some of the most exciting developments of our age, both in the ‘real world’ and in the social sciences. We are well placed to observe and comprehend what is sure to be one of the key themes of the twenty-first century, the working out of the clash between global social and

economic forces on the one hand, and local cultures and political jurisdictions on the other. International Relations could be more than just an academic discourse; it could provide one of the most important languages for the peoples of the world to use in order to come to some understanding of what is happening to them. The danger is that this language will be impoverished by too ready a willingness to close down debates and reach premature conclusions, by too firm a commitment to one particular way of looking at the world – especially since that way is likely to be that of the advanced industrial countries, the rich and powerful West.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to discourage the notion that the theory of International Relations can be studied via an initial stipulative definition, the implications of which are then teased out and examined at length. Instead, the process is, or should be, almost exactly the other way around. What is required is that we explore the world of international relations from a number of different perspectives, taking each one seriously while we are examining it, but refusing to allow any single account to structure the whole, denying a privileged position to any one theory or set of theories. If, at the end of the day, we are still interested in definitions, we shall then be in a position to construct one, and in so doing identify ourselves with a particular theory or paradigm. Perhaps, instead, we shall find that this kind of identification does not help, and we shall resist the tendency to enrol in any particular theoretical army. Either way, this is a decision that ought to come at the end, rather than the beginning, of a course of intellectual study.

Still, it is necessary to start somewhere – and just as there are no innocent definitions, so there are no innocent starting-points. The approach adopted here will be to begin with the recent, twentieth-century history of theorizing of international relations, and with the theories that have underpinned this history. This starting-point could be said to privilege a rather conventional conception of the field, but in order to introduce new ideas it is necessary to have some grasp of the tradition against which the new defines itself. In any event, the approach here, in the first five chapters, will be to begin with traditional, ‘common-sense’ perspectives on international relations before opening up the field in the second half of the book.

### Further reading

*Full bibliographical details of works cited are contained in the main Bibliography after Chapter 12.*

Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (2004), is a very useful collection of original essays that help to define the field. Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (eds), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (2002), does the same for political science as a whole, with good essays on our sub-field. The special issue of *International Organization* (1998) on the state of the discipline, edited by Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane and Stephen Krasner and published as *Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics* (1999), is a good mainstream collection on different theoretical perspectives. The *Millennium* special issue on 'The Theory of the International Today' (2007b) is an excellent and diverse collection probing at the limits of IR as a discipline.

Readings for the different conceptions of international relations described above will be provided in detail in the individual chapters devoted to them in the rest of this book. For the moment, it may be helpful to identify a small number of texts that set out the relevant differences quite clearly. Tim Dunne *et al.* (eds), (2007) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, is a good, up-to-date collection that uses case studies to illustrate varied IR theories. Jennifer Sterling-Folker's *Making Sense of International Relations Theory* (2006) applies various theories to Kosovo, as a common case study. Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen's *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 3rd edn (2006) is excellent. Richard Little and Michael Smith (eds), *Perspectives on World Politics: A Reader*, 3rd edn (2006), is still a good collection of essays organized around state-centric, transnationalist and structuralist approaches. Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi, *International Relations Theory* (1999), is organized on similar lines, providing brief extracts from important authors as well as a very extensive commentary. Scott Burchill *et al.*, *Theories of International Relations*, 4th edn (2009), is a collection of original essays on each of the major theories. Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (1997) is an outstanding general study. Of the big US textbooks, Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (2004) is the most sensitive to theoretical pluralism. Each of these books is listed above in its most recent incarnation: second-hand copies of earlier editions are still valuable.

William C. Olson and A. J. R. Groom, *International Relations Then and Now* (1992), gives an overview of the history of the discipline that is more conventional than Brian Schmidt's *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* (1998). In contrast, Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds) *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (1996) is a very rewarding but more difficult collection of essays celebrating the range of approaches current in the field, and particularly interesting on methodological and epistemological issues, as is Booth and Smith, *International Relations Theory Today* (1995). John MacMillan and Andrew Linklater (eds) *Boundaries in Question* (1995) is an accessible collection on similar lines. A. J. R. Groom and Margot Light (eds) *Contemporary International Relations: A Guide*

*to Theory* (1994) is a collection of bibliographical essays on different approaches and sub-fields, wider in scope than Katzenstein *et al.*, but rather dated. A recent *Millennium* exchange between Schmidt and Smith on theoretical pluralism in IR (2008) is a useful introduction to the issue.

A basic introduction to the philosophy of the natural sciences is A. F. Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?*, 3rd edn (1999). More advanced debates over ‘paradigms’ and ‘research programmes’ – of considerable relevance to the social sciences – can be followed in the essays collected in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (1965/2008). Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (1995), is a good introduction to its subject, but students of International Relations have the benefit of his *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (1991), co-authored with Steve Smith, which is the best survey of methodological and philosophical issues in the field, though not without its critics – see, for example, Hidemi Suganami, ‘Agents, Structures, Narratives’ (1999). Kathryn Dean *et al.* (eds), *Realism, Philosophy and Social Science* (2006), is a useful introduction to ‘scientific realism’ and ‘critical realism’ as emerging perspectives in IR and the social sciences.

The view that the social sciences can be studied in the same way as the natural sciences is often termed ‘positivism’, and positivists draw a sharp distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘normative’ theory – a classic statement of this position is by the economist Milton Friedman in his book *Essays in Positive Economics* (1966). A firm rebuttal of this distinction is offered by Mervyn Frost, *Ethics in International Relations* (1996), especially ch. 2, while the more general position that most key concepts in politics are ‘essentially contested’ is put by William Connolly in *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 3rd edn (1993). The essays in Smith, Booth and Zalewski (1996) and Booth and Smith (1994) (see above) are largely anti-positivist in orientation, in stark contrast to the current, rational choice-orientated orthodoxy examined in Chapter 3 below; the latter is probably best described as neo-positivist – Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba (KKV), *Designing Social Enquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (1994) is the bible for this kind of research.

Michael Nicholson, *Causes and Consequences in International Relations: A Conceptual Survey* (1996), demonstrates that not all sophisticated positivists are realists. Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (1992a), is a survey of normative theories of international relations; more up to date are Brown’s *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (2002) and Molly Cochran’s *Normative Theory in International Relations* (2000); Mark Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory* (1995) is a good brief introduction to ‘critical’ international theory, and Richard Wyn Jones’s excellent *Security, Strategy and Critical Theory* (1999) has a wider range than its title would suggest. The latter’s collection *Critical Theory and World Politics* (2001) is equally good. Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (1994), covers so-called ‘postmodern’ approaches to the field; Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations* (1999), is equally good, and more recent. A relatively accessible, albeit controversial, introduction to constructivism is Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999).

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