Thinking Theoretically

What is Theory?

Perspectives & Approaches
Major topics on Thinking Theoretically

- **Theory-building**: what it takes to make the world more intelligible by explaining and anticipating or predicting the phenomena observed.
- **Level of analysis**: individuals and groups, state and society, and international systems or global society.
- **Perspectives, standpoints, or images and approaches**: to understanding international relations or world politics.
- **Interpretive understanding**: challenges to long-established approaches to theorizing about international relations or world politics.
What is Theory?

- A way of making the world or some part of it more intelligible or better understood, offering explanations or predictions.

- Normative Theory – the values or norms that inform judgments about what **ought to be** in international relations or world politics, as opposed to the way things **are**.
Levels of Analysis

- Individual level
  - Human nature and psychology
  - Leaders and beliefs systems
  - Personality of leaders
  - Cognition and perception or misperception

- Group level
  - Government bureaucracies
  - Policy making groups
  - Interest groups
  - Other nongovernmental organizations
Levels of Analysis

- State and Societal (or National) level
  - Governmental
    - Structure and nature of political systems
    - Policymaking process
  - Societal
    - Structure of economic system
    - Public opinion
    - Nationalism and ethnicity
    - Political culture
    - Ideology
Levels of Analysis

International – World (or Global) level
- Anarchic quality of the international or world politics
- Number of major powers or poles
- Distribution of power/capabilities among states
- Level and diffusion of technology
- Patterns of military alliances
- Patterns of international trade and finance
- International organizations and regimes
- Transnational organizations and networks
- Global norms and international law
Levels of Analysis viewed another way

Many influences affect the course of international relations. Levels of analysis provide a framework for categorizing these influences and thus for suggesting various explanations of international events. Examples include:

### Global Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North-South gap</th>
<th>Religious fundamentalism</th>
<th>Information revolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World regions</td>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>Global telecommunications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European imperialism</td>
<td>World environment</td>
<td>Worldwide scientific and business communities</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>Technological change</td>
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### Interstate Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Wars</th>
<th>Diplomacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balance of power</td>
<td>Treaties</td>
<td>Summit meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance formation</td>
<td>Trade agreements</td>
<td>Bargaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and dissolution</td>
<td>IGOs</td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
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</table>

### Domestic Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationalism</th>
<th>Dictatorship</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic conflict</td>
<td>Domestic coalitions</td>
<td>Economic sectors and industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of government</td>
<td>Political parties and elections</td>
<td>Military-industrial complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Public opinion</td>
<td>Foreign policy bureaucracies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Individual Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great leaders</th>
<th>Psychology of perception and decision</th>
<th>Citizens’ participation (voting, rebelling, going to war, etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crazy leaders</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making in crises</td>
<td>Assassinations, accidents of history</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Using Levels of Analysis to Formulate and Test Hypotheses

- Dependent variables – the unit of analysis (what is trying to be explained)
- Independent variables – factors at different levels of analysis casually related to what is trying to be explained
- Intervening variables – other factors which may facilitate or block the effects of independent variables or each other or on dependent variables

Diagram:

- Independent Variable $X_1$ → Intervening Variable 1 → Dependent Variable Y
- Independent Variable $X_2$ → Intervening Variable 1
- Independent Variable $X_3$
Perspectives & Approaches

1. Realism focus on power and balance of power among states in world politics.
2. Liberalism (pluralist perspective) looks at not only states but the roles individuals, international and nongovernmental organizations play.
3. Economic structuralism emphasizes the importance and roles of material factors or structures as capital-owning classes or capital-rich countries in international relations.
4. English School “rationalist” portray international or global society using realist ideas emphasized in writings by Machiavelli, Hobbes, or rules and institutions in writings of Grotius.
Alternative Perspectives & Approaches

1. Constructivism underscores the importance of ideas and in establishing or constituting the world we understand.

2. Feminism focuses on gender to understand not only politics within state and society, but also international relations or world politics.

3. Postmodernism emphasizes the subjective dimensions of what is found in the world around us. This view deconstructs or unpacks spoken or written communication to find underlying meanings.

4. Critical theory probes beneath the cover stories given to reveal underlying calculations of interest or exploitation.
Realists Perspectives & Approaches

1. As the term suggests, this outlook views the world as it is, not as it ought to be.

2. Stability is key in political power, gaining and staying in power.

3. With order, other objectives are possible, i.e. economic and social.

4. In IR, realists emphasize the struggle for power and influence among states and empires.

5. Security may extend to regional or world conquest, a dynamic encouraging competition and violence.
Realists Perspectives & Approaches

6. Competition and warlike conditions in IR result from combined factors:
   1. Human nature or individual psychology and small group dynamics
   2. The nature of states or societies
   3. The structure or distribution of power among states

Structural realists or Neorealists – look at the distribution of power among states of structures as affecting behaviors within an international system (unipolar, bipolar, multipolar).  

Realists Perspectives & Approaches

- Power is important in achieving objectives and interests of states.
- International organizations, alliances, and other coalitions are merely mechanisms used by states to exercise power.
- For some states the pursuit of power is not just a means; it becomes an end in itself.
- Great powers actively construct or change power balances to assure their best position.
Liberals - Pluralist Perspectives & Approaches

1. The term Liberal is more commonly used and is not to be confused with the political ideology found on the left of the U.S. political spectrum.

2. Both share the idea that a complex global society comprises of multiple kinds of actors.

3. Liberalism is a more inclusive outlook, with states as key players but not the only ones in world politics.

4. International organizations, i.e. United Nations and European Union, are both arenas where states compete for influence and independent actors seeking to shape the global issue agenda.
Liberals - Pluralist Perspectives & Approaches

5. View states as battlegrounds for conflicting bureaucratic interests subject to domestic and transnational interest groups.

Neoliberal institutionalists

- View the state as an enduring actor.
- Non state actors (international & no governmental organizations) are important too.
Economic Structuralists
Perspectives & Approaches

1. both Marxists and non Marxists
2. tend to focus on relations of dominance in society in the form of economic structures (national or global) that purportedly also contribute to explaining the conduct of both state and non state actors.
3. divide world between core – periphery, north – south, capital rich v. capital poor countries
English School “Rationalists”
Perspectives & Approaches

1. This school of thought draws on elements of the other perspectives, specifically realism and liberalism.

2. View international politics in terms of interactions within a worldwide or global society.

3. Emphasize global civil society, international law, moral and ethical principles.

4. Associated with the writings on Hobbes, Grotius, Kant, Machiavelli.
Constructivists & Feminists

1. Constructivist or social constructivism argue
   1. that states don’t simply react to their environment, but dynamically engage it;
   2. that anarchy in international politics is what make of it.

2. Feminism
   1. may share an affinity with social constructivism
   2. involves using gender as a category of analysis, focusing on differences between feminine and masculine understandings and actions;
   3. holds that gender permeates social life, has a largely unnoticed effect on the actions of states, and includes conceptions of masculinity.
Postmodernists & Critical Theorists

1. Critical Theorists & Postmodernists assume that facts, concepts, and theories may not be separated from values, as all 3 stem from their observation and construction by human agency.

2. Both may be viewed separately because most critical theorists retain strict methodological criteria to guide their work.
The chapter concludes with a brief overview of normative (value) considerations as they apply to world politics. Much of the theoretical material in terms of specific examples is consigned to boxes.
Review – How much do you understand?

1. A focus on mechanisms of domination in a capitalist world order is most closely associated with

A. economic structuralists.
B. liberals.
C. realists.
D. social constructivism.
Review – How much do you understand?

2. Political scientists who view the world in terms of a multiplicity of different kinds of actors engaged in transactions are called

A. feminists.
B. liberals.
C. realists.
D. economic structuralists.
3. **What are the four theoretical perspectives used to explain why the U.S. invaded Iraq?**

A. Individual level (psychological factors) – individual roles and personalities of president, VP, cabinet secretaries sharing ideological worldview or neoconservative perspective.

B. Group level (collective role of policymakers) – White House, Defense Secretary, and trusted advisers favored preemptive military intervention.

C. International, World (or Global) level – unipolar international system with the U.S. as sole superpower facing no obstacles.

D. All of these answers
Review – How much do you understand?

4. Global civil society refers to
   A. rule of international law.
   B. voluntary institutions.
   C. networks.
   D. All of these answers
Review – How much do you understand?

5. Those in the English School tend to see international politics in terms of

A. class struggle conducted on a global scale.
B. interactions within a worldwide or global society.
C. global ideals that ultimately will displace realist balance-of-power understandings.
D. An almost mechanical system of states.