Introduction:

Why a history of International Relations theory?

This book protests the common assumption that the study of International Relations has no theoretical tradition. This assumption is evident in the misconception of students who enter the introductory courses of International Relations, expecting to be informed about current events. It is also reflected in the many textbooks in which most of the theories discussed have been formulated within the life-span of the teacher – and often supported by evidence from a rapidly waning Cold-War world.¹

International Relations theory distinguishes itself in this respect from Political Theory. Whereas the beginning student of Political Theory is introduced to a tradition which begins with ancient Greek authors and evolves continually up to our own times, the beginning student of International Relations is introduced to no comparable chain of classics. The tradition of Political Theory is reconstructed from great works by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to mention only a few; International Relations is considered too recent a discipline to contain any comparable chain of 'classic texts' (Wight 1968, p. 1).

On ‘Theory’

Scholars throughout history have studied the human condition – they have described, assessed and evaluated; they have found patterns in the past and drawn inferences about the future. In order to understand and explain human behaviour, they have developed theories. A theory is a proposition (or a set of propositions) that help explain why events occur the way they do. A theory is an abstract, conjectural or speculative representation of reality. A good theory is a well-reasoned and precise speculation which seeks to answer a clear question.

Theories enlighten. To theorize is to speculate and imagine with an intention to understand. International Relations theories are imaginary constructs which enable us to make some sense out of the apparently disjointed events on the world scene. They help us find patterns in world affairs in general and in the relations among states in particular. They enable us to understand them and explain them. For example, scholars have studied wars for hundreds (if not for thousands) of years. These efforts to explain war (and to identify the preconditions of peace) constitute a thick, red thread in the history of International Relations theory.

Some theories explain; they attempt to account for events and circumstances. Other theories prescribe; they allow ethical principles to guide their account in order to produce guidelines for moral action. In principle there is a stark line which distinguishes explanatory theory from prescriptive theory. On one side of this dividing line are the theories which are anchored in knowledge about the past and the present and which, through the mustering of empirical evidence, account for the way the world works (and why it has come to work that way). On the other are the theories which are informed by value judgements and which describe how the world ought to be (and often explain how we should all act in order the make the world the way it ought to be). In reality, no such dividing line exist.² The distinction between description and prescription is hazy in all social sciences; and in the study of
international relations it is more hazy than in many other disciplines.

With this said, it can be added that the focus of this book is on explanatory theories. It seeks to portray in context some of the main explanatory theories in the field of international relations. This is more difficult than it sounds. For no such separate ‘field’ has existed until quite recently – indeed, the very word ‘international’ first appeared in the late eighteenth century.3 No long, clear and obvious tradition of international enquiry and speculation can be discerned except ‘dimly, obscured and moreover partitioned, partly on the fringe or margin of ordinary political philosophy and partly in the province of international law’ (Wight 1991, p. 1). Before we present the notion of ‘international relations theory’, it is useful to briefly delineate the meaning of ‘international’ and ‘international relations’.

On ‘International Relations’

It has been observed that explanatory speculation about the state goes back to antiquity whereas speculation about relations among states goes back little further than to World War I. This book disputes this observation. It argues that scholars, soldiers and statesmen have, in fact, speculated about the relations between states since the modern state emerged four or five centuries ago. It identifies the major concepts and themes of these speculations, and it sketches the tradition of International Relations theory through modern history – i.e. that part of Western history which is bracketed by the Renaissance and the Reformation on the one hand, and by the Second Industrial Revolution and World War I on the other. It notes that this tradition have often been shaken and altered by large-scale war. World War I is a case in point: this war did not so much give birth to International Relations theory as give the tradition a major jolt, a new emphasis, a higher popular profile, a new self-consciousness, a mission and a new direction of development. This book discusses International Relations theory on both sides of this major jolt.

Where can we find the most salient speculations about relations between states? Most immediately, we find them in the tradition of Political Theory. For while speculating about the state, many political theoretists have also speculated about the relations between states. Sometimes these speculations have been brief ‘asides,’ but other times they have been spelled out in great length – Machiavelli’s book on war, Rousseau’s discussion of ‘Perpetual Peace’ and Hume’s treatise on ‘the Balance of Power,’ are cases in point. Observation of and speculation about international politics are found in other places, as well: diplomatic missives, advice to heads of state, texts of international law, autobiographies and correspondance of statesmen and soldiers all contain much material for a historical reconstruction of International Relations theory.

The chief problem of this study is not that there are too few sources, but that there are too many and that they are diverse and uneven. To simplify the selection and the analysis of the sources, and to facilitate the presentation of the argument, this book reduces the sources to manageable proportions in several ways. First, it defines the topic under investigation – the tradition of International Relations Theory – rather narrowly: its primary focus is the interactions between sovereign states (Holsti 1987, p. 9). Consequently, past speculations which seek to account for such interactions are given priority. Concerns about war and about military and economic capabilities of states are important elements of this discussion.

Second, this definition limits the study in time and space. It makes it natural to begin the study with an account of the evolution of its major constituent unit and its characteristic properties and to follow their evolution over time. This makes the ‘state’ the primary object of the discussion and it makes ‘sovereignty’ the primary concept. The histories of the two are
intimately intertwined through modern history. By the ‘state’ is meant the territorial state: an independent political community 'which possesses a government and asserts sovereignty in relation to a particular portion of the earth's surface and a particular segment of the human population' (Bull 1978, p. 8). This concept of the 'state' emerged out of the tumultuous interaction in Western Europe, and this gives the present study a geographical limitation: it is inordinantly preoccupied with Western events and with European theorists.

By 'sovereignty' must be understood the ultimate source of legitimate authority over the state. This concept of sovereignty has constituted the core concern in the long tradition of Political Science. Whereas Economics has been organized around the problematic of 'wealth,' Philology around 'language' and Medicine around the 'health' of the human body, Political Science has been organized around the problematic of 'sovereignty.'

Third, the book uses the tradition of Political Theory as its primary source for information about speculations of relations among states. Other sources are also consulted. However, to use them in other than a supportive mode as purveyors of historical context and ambiance would have produced a very different (and much thicker) work.

On International Relations Theory

International Relations deal with human behavior in the largest of all social groups: the international society. This society has two characteristic features which distinguishes it from other human groups. First – most obviously but also most overlooked – membership in the international society is obligatory. Most other human societies offer, in principle at least, voluntary membership; an individual member can leave if he wants to, and the ultimate sanction which can be applied to individuals who refuse to obey the rules of sociability is expulsion. It is a peculiar nature of international society that membership in it is compulsory (Carr 1964, p. 95). No state can alter its geographic location; no territory can be made to go away.

Second, international society is governed by no ultimate authority. Many efforts have been made to organize a world government, yet no true world legislature which makes rules and laws that emphasize the solidaric and sociable side of human interaction. Although there exists an elaborate body of international law, there exists no global executive power authorized to enforce these laws. In domestic society, laws and sanctions are devised and applied by controlling political institutions that act in the name of society – domestic society has legislative and executive institutions, represented by a Prime Minister, a President or a king. International society has no such supreme institution. Theories about international society distinguishes itself from other political theories by being preoccupied with human behavior in an anarchical society.

The Evolution of International Relations Theory

The absence of a supreme authority does not mean that human sociability is removed from international society altogether, as some authors maintain. Rather, it means that the sociable nature of humanity is de-emphasized in international actions, and that allowances are made for a larger share of egotistical, unilateral behavior. The traditional way to justify this greater allowance of egotism, is to emphasize the concept of sovereignty. Modern International Relations has been dominated by the twin-notion of the presence and the absence of sovereignty. Applied to relations within states, this involves the belief that there is a final and absolute authority in society. Applied to relations among states, it expresses the antithesis of this belief -- i.e. 'the principle that internationally, over and above a collection of societies, no
supreme authority exists' (Hinsley 1968, p. 58). With the concept of sovereignty as its fulcrum, International Relations has traditionally been preoccupied with the dichotomies of 'war' and 'peace,' 'anarchy' and 'order.'

When did scholars and statesmen begin to speculate about sovereign states and about the nature of their interaction? It is useful to distinguish between two phases in the development of International Relations theory. The first phase involves the emergence of the basic concepts of its discourse. This phase, which is covered in Part One of this book, largely coincides with the 'long sixteenth century.' This was an age in which Renaissance discoveries in space (the Americas) and time (Greek and Roman cultures) altered the traditional precepts of world geography and history. It was also an age in which the Reformation challenged the Medieval outlook upon which these old precepts rested. It was during this crowded and tumultuous era that the key concepts of International-Relations theorising like 'state' and 'sovereignty' found their first secular definitions. Major contributors to this formative first phase were Iberian lawyers like Vitoria and Italian historians and civil servants like Machiavelli and Guicciardini.

The second main phase involves the continued discussion of these concepts and their inclusion in larger, explanatory frameworks or order. This phase is discussed in Part Two of the book. It found its beginnings during the violent, final stage of the Religious Wars; it lasted through the modern ages, until the very end of the nineteenth century; and it can be sub-divided into several shorter periods of about a century each. Each chapter in Part Two is devoted to such a short, particular period. During the first of these periods, roughly covering the seventeenth century, the basic legal and historical concepts of the first phase were synthesized into larger, secular systems of thought. Jean Bodin is among the first of these synthesizers. Not only did he provide a decisive clarification of the key concept of 'sovereignty,' he also initiated a discussion of the interaction between sovereign actors. The characteristic feature of such interaction, Bodin recognised, is that no supreme authority exists above the participating princes. Thus, no legal agent can intervene to arbitrate in contests between them. In such an environment, it is essential that princes keep their promises. A few years later, Gentili, Hobbes and others would refer to Bodin's observation as the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*.

Thomas Hobbes is another great synthesiser. He was not the first theorist to apply the concept of a social contract to describe relations between princes; however, he was the first to use the related concept of a pre-contractual state of nature as an analogy to interstate relations. This analogy was a decisive conceptual innovation. It has since dominated discussions of International Relations. Some social theorists, like Spinoza and Pufendorff, agreed with Hobbes' dismal depiction of interstate interaction; they elaborated on the pessimistic image of international politics as red in tooth and claw.

Other authors developed alternative visions in which international interaction was seen not in terms of relations between sovereign princes, but as interaction between rational individuals –usually between self-interested merchants. Émeric Crucé, for example, optimistically depicted a harmonious condition marked by cooperation and harmony among men. His vision was later pursued by William Penn, Duke de Sully, Abbé St. Pierre, Jeremy Bentham and several others.

Still other seventeenth-century theorists struck a middle position between the pessimism of Hobbes and the optimism of Crucé. Hugo Grotius, for example, another of the great, early synthesisers depicted international interaction as an anarchic activity; however, he held that order could be much improved by the acceptance of a codex of international law built
on human reason, common interest and past habits of peaceful interaction.

These basic visions of interstate interaction were largely maintained in subsequent centuries. However, they were restated in various contexts and coloured by the intellectual outlook of different epochs. Seventeenth-century speculations were built around a basic, mechanical view of human society – reflected most typically in the traditional balance-of-power arguments of the age. Eighteenth-century theories were marked by a pervasive vision of a self-equilibrating properties of human interaction. Nineteenth-century speculations were dominated by a basic image of 'progress' or 'evolution.'

A third major phase of International Relations theory emerged around 1900. This contemporary phase is discussed in Part Three of the book. The transition from the Modern to the Contemporary phase was not marked by a clear rupture. When the study of International Relations emerged as an academic discipline after World War I, it was dominated by the mental furniture of nineteenth-century theorising. However, the orderly arrangements which the old macro-theoretical propensities had imparted to the study of society and politics were waning. In the words of Charles Tilly (1984, p. 17): 'The nineteenth century's legacy to the twentieth century's social scientists resembles an old house inherited from a rich aunt: worn, overdecorated, cluttered, but probably salvageable.'

After World War I, the studies of International Relations were decorated by the Enlightenment meublement from the epochs of optimism and idealism. After World War II, this was replaced by furniture in stern empire. The 1950s and 1960s were dominated by a pseudo-realist perspective tempered by nineteenth-century notions of 'modernisation' and 'development.' But increasingly, postwar speculations were conducted in an atmosphere which resembles that of the sixteenth-century: as a fragmented field, split among various basic principles. Since 1970, the study of International Relations has been torn among an increasing variety of competing approaches. During the 1980s, and especially after the Cold War was brought to a close, the discipline has grown more fractured and fragmented than ever.

The Nature of International Relations theorizing

It is odd, but books which present a history of thought and ideas tend to portray thinkers as lonely figures and theorizing as a solitary activity. Some introductory texts to political philosophy leave the impression of philosophers as distant spirits – autonomous to the point of autism. This is a gross misrepresentation. For theories are social products. And theorizers are, as a rule, not at all the distant and isolated spirits of many-a traditional introduction to political philosophy. Each thinker is a member of a particular society. All thinkers are affected by the society they inhabit. Some of them – the 'great' and most consequential thinkers – affect society in turn; they help (re)form the outlook of their age.

Theorists reflect their times. And their theories help constitute the societies they inhabit. First, because intellectual life in general is social and interactive. Ideas and arguments are formulated in speech and writing and directed at other people. They are expressed in face-to-face discussions, lectures, letters, essays, articles and treatises – indeed, from the Renaissance onwards, political theories were increasingly presented as treatises: With the improvement of print technology, the book became a key vehicle for disseminating ideas and theories. This book, then, is essentially a book on books. But it is also a history book; a large portion of its pages is preoccupied with sketching the various historical settings within which these books were written and within which their writers defined their concerns.

Second, the discussions and debates within which the scholarly theorist is so regularly involved are not byproducts of scholarship; they are the primary sites of theorizing.
Furthermore, these discursive sites are subject to social rules and behavioral norms (Foucault 1972; Goffman 1971a; 1971b). In order to take part in the intellectual life of the age, the individual scholar has to know the fashionable, interesting topics, what the different angles and positions are, how one’s ideas and arguments can be presented in a recognizable way. In order to succeed in this activity, you have to capture attention. The core thinkers discussed in this book – Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel and others – captured the attention of the audiences of their times. And by doing this, they are referred to as ‘voices’ of their times.

Third, theorists network. Most immediately, they relate to each other at the site of face-to-face discussion. However, they also tend to cluster over time. A theorist with an original idea or a pervasive argument may occasion a ‘chain of interaction’ of followers and fans – often held together by comparable chains of opponents (Collins 199.). In extreme cases, such chains may last for generations. They may then deserve terms like ‘traditions’, ‘approaches’ or ‘schools of thought’. In this book, the primary examples of such a long-lasting chain, is the power-focused ‘realist’ approach to interstate politics – whose outlines have been drawn sharper over the last 300-year (at least), by a counter-chain of law-focused ‘idealist’ approach informed by the regulatory promises of rationally created, universal norms. This portrayal of the political theorists as active, social agents belies the old romantic notion of the philosopher as a serene, cerebral and self-sufficient figure. It also suggests some reasons why political theorists reflect the concerns of their age (they must remain acutely informed by current debates), and why they are constitutive of its discourse (they participate actively in the extant discourse while they are pressed by the need to ‘grab attention’ to constantly transcend and renew it). Finally, it suggests a fact which is largely neglected in other books on the histories of ideas: viz., that theorizing assumes certain social preconditions. One of these is order; political theorizing presuppose a reasonable degree of public order which can sustain some infrastructure of leisure and economic support. Another social precondition is ‘openness’; political theorizing assumes some readiness on the part of the wielders of public power to tolerate the quarrels of intellectuals and scholars.

The level of public order need not be very high for significant theorizing to occur – indeed, the greatest age of Western political thought, the seventeenth century, was an age of incessant warfare. Also, the public sphere need not be fully open and free in order for political ideas and arguments to be disseminated and fruitfully discussed. For although priestly and princely rulers rulers have often sought to suppress independent thinking, their dogmas have to be defined and defended, and these are activities which generate creative theorizing – as the intellectual efflorescence of the Middle Ages and the age of absolutism makes evident. Yet, one hardly expects to find creative and innovative claims under absolute regimes; rather one expects to find infinite elaborations on core themes of accepted canons – thus, Leo’s Constantinople, ar Rashid’s Baghdad and Stalin’s Moscow were not devoid of political theorizing; however, the discussions were stale and sterile.

It is one of the claims of this book that International Theory began to develop with the advent of the territorial states along Europe’s Atlantic rim during the High Middle Ages. However, this development did not come into its own until a public sphere emerged for ideas

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and arguments to be discussed in and disseminated through. This sphere emerged in Europe’s urban centres around the fifteenth century. Notably on the Iberias and in northern Italy, where public spheres emerged in the urban-centred systems of information and communication associated with crafts and trade. Horizontal networks were established among producers and traders who were dependent on current and accurate information about supplies, demands, prices, rules and power relations. From such networks the public sphere emerged among peoples whom the sixteenth-century economist González de Collorigo referred to as of the ‘middling sort’ (Elliott 1977, p. 306) – it evolved inbetween the feudal estate of noble rulers and the vast underbrush of ordinary people. Its evolution is suggested already towards the end of the 1400s by the regular patterns of business correspondance across city walls and state boundaries. It involved regular exchanges of information and news about economic and private affairs – for among these business groups of the ’middling sort’ there was no clear distinction between household and business. Together with business-related exchange of economic information, there also emerged exchanges about private, literary, moral and political issues.

The Purpose of the Study
International Relations theory seeks to explain why international events occur the way they do. Most theorists speculate about the relations between sovereign states; their intention is to understand ‘patterns of political interaction between and among states’ (Puchala 1971, p. 1). Some of them want to go further; they seek to tease from these patterns of interaction general principles – laws or lawlike statements – by means of which they can explain past events and predict about events in the future (Waltz 1979).

Aristotle laid the foundation for the study of politics with the proposition that man is by nature a political animal – a *zoon politikon*. He argued that attempts to derive knowledge about politics from the endowments and behavior of man-in-isolation, are misguided. Man, Aristotle emphasized, cannot exist outside of a social context: ‘he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.’

Political theorists ever since have adopted Aristotle’s argument that political actors are influenced by the social context they inhabit. Increasingly, they have also accepted that the same maxim applies to political theorists: they, too, are affected by their time, shaped by their landscape and coloured by their culture. Their discourse is affected by the imagery and the mythology which surround them and which form their perceptions, their experience and their knowledge. As this social context changes – from one culture to another, or from one historical epoch to the next – theorists are moulded in different forms and their speculations are given different modes and flavours.

International Relations theory varies across space and time. And to trace the history of a subject matter which constantly undergoes mutations and transformations, as this book tries to do, is much like hunting camellions. When Robert Heilbroner set out to write a brief history of capitalism, he faced this problem of the constant transformation of his subject matter with the following attitude. ‘It is helpful,’ he observed,

... to approach this daunting task by reminding ourselves that understanding, explanation and prediction are universal attributes of human experience, not achievements of social science – never complete, but rarely completely inadequate. They are attained in varying degrees in different social circumstances. Thus the problem for our consideration is not whether we can

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understand, explain or predict, at all ... but the limits of our capacity to do so (Heilbroner 1986, p. 180).

This brief survey of the history of International Relations theory takes Heilbroner's advise ad notam. International Relations (like other social-scientific disciplines) do not 'evolve' in the sense that it steadily accumulates a body of knowledge about a constantly confined subject matter. Consequently, the purpose of a survey cannot be to depict the evolution of International Relations Theory from its paleological past and arrive at a mature, complete set of explanatory principles. Rather, the task is, simply, to sketch some of the ways in which past observers have sought to understand the nature and logic of international politics.

1 Update the original, long note #1
2 Niccolo Machiavelli (1961, p. 90) was among the first authors to draw this distinction; although David Hume (1955, pp. 26ff) may be the most famous. Hume’s sharp distinction has later been elaborated by others (see e.g. Popper 1963), and the debates which have regularly attended these elaborations have been extremely useful in defining the scientific core of social investigations
3 The word ‘international’ made its first appearance Jeremy Bentham’s Principles of Morals and Legislation [1789]. Bentham was a great innovator of words; however most of his neologisms fell still born from the presses – words like phthanao-paronomic (which referred to the abuse of an officer of the law) or polemo-tamieutic (which denoted sabotage of war materiel) did never catch on. The word international, however, was an instant hit. And Bentham must have sensed that this was a promising term, for he provides a footnote to explicitly mark its arrival. ‘The word international, it must be acknowledged, is a new one’, he writes (Bentham 1948, p. 326). Then he explains how it ‘is calculated to express, in a more significant way, the branch of law which goes commonly under the name of the law of nations’. He also acknowledges that his new term is indebted to the French jurist and chancellor Henri-François d’Aguessau who transcended the old and acknowledged term droit des gens (law of nations) with a linguistic innovation of his own: droit entre les gens (or law between nations). Bentham seems to have seized upon d’Aguessau’s distinction between the traditional notion of the law of nations and a new and different idea of a law among nations or states.
4 However, as the example of Thucydides suggest, it may take som time for attention to be exited
5 Cf. Grotius’ rejection of Carneades’ claim that law is a function of power, and that behavioural norms vary with the customs and fortunes of states. (See Chapter 4, below and Grotius 1853: prolegomena, para. 5ff).