

PARISIAN PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES

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Abstract: *The author reviewed the volume *Théories des relations internationales*, published by Jean-Jacques Roche (9th edition, 2016, LGD), Issy-les-Moulineux Cedex, 160 p.). The main aspects analysed by this author, the concepts he proposed and his interpretations are critically presented.*

Keywords: Jean-Jacques Roche, Book review, International Relations Theories.

Rezumat: *Perspective pariziene privitoare la teoriile relațiilor internaționale. Autorul recenzează volumul *Théories des relations internationales*, publicat de Jean-Jacques Roche (ediția a noua, 2016, LGD), Issy-les-Moulineux Cedex, 160 pagini). Principalele aspecte analizate de acest autor, conceptele și interpretările propuse, sunt prezentate de o manieră critică.*

Although the first Department of „International Politics” was established in 1919 at the University of Aberyswyth (UK), International Relations have seen strong assertion as a result of research across the Atlantic. The abundance of works published in English obscures the consistency of interrogations, methodological approaches and perspectives generated by academics and researchers from other geographical, cultural and academic areas. Despite the importance and originality of the reflections on International Relations in the French-speaking world, the specialized bibliography in French is much less known.

The volume of the French political scientist Jean-Jacques Roche is a very useful tool for students and teachers alike, designed to familiarize (or deepen) a more analytical field, oriented towards conceptual articulation, wide methodological openness, interdisciplinarity, such as the theories of International Relations. It is, in other words, a good quality university textbook that can be used as a study guide. Finally, another motivation that was the basis for the elaboration of this review is given by the extremely original perspective offered by its author, an aspect on which we will return below. If we add the clarity of the writing and the precision of the style, we can say, right from the beginning, that we are in front of a work that deserves to be known and read by as many scholars concerned with International Relations.

Jean-Jacques Roche's book *Théories des relations internationales* has already reached its ninth edition, proof of the appreciation it enjoys among a wide range of French and French-speaking readers. Throughout this book, the author highlights the biunivocal influence between theory and international upheavals. The theory remains arid, if not continuously related to real experiences. Aspects such as the interdependencies between Domestic Politics and International Relations, the implications of geopolitical, geostrategic, geo-economic and geo-cultural aspects of International Relations must be considered, both in theory and in political practice. The role of institutions, procedures and information must also be studied, without neglecting the wealth of knowledge, principles and experience gained over centuries of experience. Jean-Jacques Roche shrewdly uses theoretical tools to overcome analytical inaccuracy and the conformity of fashionable ideologies.

A few remarks on this volume are necessary and - hopefully - useful. In the introductory part of the book (pp. 9-16), the author questioned the possibility and finality of a theory of International Relations. Questions of this kind are not superfluous, as the specialized works can prove. The end of the Cold War was a turning point in the field of Theories of International Relations, revealing the limitations of the discipline and its problematic nature.

In fact, the introductory part of the book refers to the discussions related to a "great theory" in the field of International Relations, which was given a first expression by the American Kenneth Waltz, with his *Theory of International Politics* (1979). The French political scientist discusses at length the arguments of Raymond Aron, expounded by him in an article published in 1967 in "Revue française de science politique": *Qu'est-ce qu'une théorie des relations*

internationales? Based on the difficulties he encountered in writing *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (1962), the French political philosopher concluded that there could be no general theory of International Relations due to the “indeterminacy” of diplomatic-strategic conduct and the impossibility of discrimination between endogenous variables of the international system (configuration in power poles) and exogenous variables (economic power relations or internal regimes of states). According to him, only the sociological approach makes it possible to understand in depth the diversity of international systems and to study the behavior of actors in the way they define problems and find solutions to the problems they face. Thus, the scientific approach in International Relations varies not only depending on the idea we have about theory, but also depending on the level of analysis we retain to explain or understand the world.

The architecture of the work is as original as possible. The author organizes the vast material into three main parts, the titles of which may arouse the confusion of the ordinary reader with the Anglo-Saxon bibliography: *L’hégémon réaliste*; State-centered approaches; Non-state-centered approaches. Each part of this triptych comprises several chapters, organized in sequences (or subchapters) that expose, specify, detail, nuance, briefly comment on various theories of International Relations. Representative schools, theories and thinkers are reviewed, arguments, concepts, methods of analysis and their impact on science and on political reality are presented. Everything in a succinct manner, without sacrificing the essential or the significant detail.

The contents of the volume amply illustrate such an assertion. In the first part, dedicated to the “realistic hegemon”, the “disciplinary matrix” is outlined, in the first instance, due to realistic reflection, based on four fundamental paradigms: the state of nature, interest, the central role of the state and the impossibility theorem. After exposing this theoretical armor, essential not only for realism but also for other approaches (even if some of them deny the legitimacy of arguments and the realistic conceptual and methodological framework), various realistic lines of thought are briefly presented, starting with classical realism and assumptions constructed by American or European doctrinaires (Hans J. Morgenthau’s “balance of power”), assuming thegnoseological limits of a young discipline, whose disciplinary outlines still seem uncertain (see the discussion of “sovereignty equivocations” in Raymond Aron). Various “avatars” of realism are then reviewed, generated by a normal interdisciplinary evolution, but also by the need to respond to attacks from

various directions: Kenneth Waltz's neorealism and the creation of the first "great theory" in International Relations; structural realism; liberal realism (oxymoronic formula, which deals with the theory of regimes and the concepts of the best-known author of the "English School", Hedley Bull); neoclassical realism, with its various concerns and accents, ranging from "offensive realism", illustrated especially by John J. Mearsheimer, to "defensive realism"); hegemonic realism, a sequence that considers, for illustration, the argumentative series developed by Robert Gilpin on the Political Economy of International Relations and by Joseph Nye, with his well-known theory of "soft power", a phrase predestined to arouse interest not only among specialists, but also among statesmen with responsibilities in international politics.

The second part of this triptych is intended for theoretical approaches focused on the role of the state in International Relations (*Les approches stato-centrées*). It presents to the reader a melting pot very interesting, perhaps debatable, in places, as long as they are associated and grouped here not only very different theoretical lines, but even schools of thought seemingly distant from each other, not only from an ideational perspective, but also from a methodological point of view. Thus, behaviorist theories are presented alongside the liberal school (with an emphasis on the Kantian tradition and the concept of democratic pax, to which the French political scientist dedicated, as mentioned above, a book), neoliberal institutionalism (focused around Robert O. Keohane's school of "complex interdependence") and theories of cooperation and integration (contractual tradition, functionalism, neofunctionalism, participatory federalism, or intergovernmentalism). Finally, "weak state theories" are also presented in this context. The contribution of the European tradition is revealed by the exposition of the thinking of two remarkable European theorists, Pierre de Senarclens and Samy Cohen.

The last part, *Les approches non stato-centrées*, reveals the same disconcerting juxtaposition of various theoretical strands. Of course, it no longer raises the same doubts on the part of the specialist, because, this time, the challenge of the central role of the state in International Relations is unreservedly shared by exponents of various theoretical trends, ranging from constructivism to various avatars of critical theories. But these are not considered primarily by the author. The cut-out made by the French professor is an original one, even by comparison with textbooks or similar syntheses, elaborated by other scholars of the field. Both the accents and the absences are in the highest degree

representative of the vision projected by the Parisian political scientist regarding the coherence, the extension, and the relevance of the various theoretical schools. Globalism is illustrated by John W. Burton's vision of "world society" or by the allegations of the great sociologist Norbert Elias about a relevant "society of individuals" on the horizon of International Relations. Transnationalism, presented in the same chapter, examines the role of interdependencies in a world in which "networks" or various other representations of International Relations offer theoretical alternatives of great intellectual refinement (such as James Rosenau's specific approach, which starts from the metaphorical concept of "Turbulence", to emphasize the continuing dialectic between continuity and change in world politics). A first part of the next chapter summarizes the approaches of classical imperialism (insisting on its anachronism) and the theory of dependence.

A kind of perplexity may arise in the second part of this chapter, in which under the generic title *L'économie politique internationale* are amalgamated various contributions as invoice, style, content, but - significant fact - and as ideological and ideological expression: the reflections of Robert B Reich, a professor of economics at Harvard and former Secretary of Labor during President Bill Clinton's first term, on the global economy, British author Susan Strange's theses on structural power and "state withdrawal" or the research program of French-speaking political scientist Zaki Laïdi about the detrimental impact of globalization, which generates a loss of meaning and a territorial and ideological uprooting, which projects humanity into a planet less space without relief, in the post-Cold War era, which inaugurates a new "world time"). Finally, in a final chapter, different approaches are added, some of which are of particular interest to historians concerned with International Relations (Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle), others generated by interest in image and imagination, inspired by behaviorism and indebted to the sciences. (Kenneth Boulding, Michael Brecher, R. Jervis), as well as neogramscic approaches (Robert Cox), perhaps more appropriate in the sequence devoted to the imperialist school, to conclude with "middle ground theory", of some constructivist inspiration, but situated by the author at the intersection of reflexivism and constructivism.

This original organization of the material presented by the French political scientist, his insistence on lesser-known authors, his arguments throughout the book, his particular vision of the relevance of theories of International Relations in today's world, and his statements its specific character.

The overall value of this manual also contributes to the good systematization of the subject, the short and clear sequences, the additional explanations (rendered in smaller characters and framed in order to be easily identifiable and, at the same time, not to diminish the coherence and fluency of an easy to read and understand the text). The material thus organized and hierarchized can be much more easily “metabolized” by the reader of the book. Perhaps debatable from the perspective of a different paradigmatic framing, some theoretical affiliations may receive new valences in the light of the arguments put to work by the French scholar. Equally intriguing is the lack of recognition of the specificity of the so-called “English School of International Relations” or the lack of interest in resonant approaches in our age, such as feminism. Instead, bringing to the fore some less assimilated European contributions to the American academic environment (see the chapter *La tradition stato-centrée européenne*, pp. 104-108 or the subchapter *La globalization comme program de recherche*, pp. 133-134, in which discusses Zaki Laïdi’s very provocative theories) should be welcomed with all openness.

But is one theory (or more) possible in the field of International Relations? Under what conditions? How else to end this presentation, if not by resuming the implicit questions that open the book of the French political scientist, during which he tries to justify nuanced, with remarkable professional probity and analytical balance, the usefulness of theoretical approaches.

Jean-Jacques Roche eloquently demonstrates to us that it is possible and desirable at least to judiciously systematize different theoretical approaches. The political scientist from the University of Paris 2 expresses his conviction in the usefulness of systematizing the theories developed so far. Proposing alternative reading grids on the international political reality, the theoretical approaches cannot claim a universalist vocation, they succeed each other quickly and sometimes transform even from within. (Plural) readings of International Relations can, however, the French professor tells us, provide useful help in understanding a changing world: “It will only be a matter of making a quick inventory of the research pursued since International Relations more or less autonomous discipline, to identify the lines of force separating the different currents, to study the evolutions within the same school of thought in order, perhaps, to succeed in suggesting possible bridges between more complementary than truly competitive work” (*Introduction*, p. 16).

But it is not a triumphant reply. With lucidity, the author concludes, in the short summative chapter, on the epistemic precariousness of the theories of International Relations. Echoing the criticisms and reservations he tries to systematize in the Introduction, he reveals, in the Conclusions of the volume, the major divergences that hinder the academic and social acceptance and validation of the discipline. One of the causes lies in the mistrust between the university establishment and the political decision-maker: a mutual contempt undermines the normal tendency to accommodate the theory with political practice. However, the continuous and the paradoxical evolution of the discipline itself is more dissuasive: while the course of world events tends to calm down and simplify, by mitigating antagonisms, theoretical representations seem to take advantage of these periods of calm and endlessly reproduce disciplinary approaches.

Political logic is challenged in the name of economic, social, cultural or religious arguments; state-centered approaches are thus replaced by those that favor new actors, emancipated from any state tutelage. Conversely, in times of political upheaval and strong international tensions, the theoretical framework is greatly simplified, reconsidering the role of approaches that highlight “classical” concepts and visions in the field of International Relations, reassessing the importance of the state, balance of power, concerns for the security sphere, etc. In this way, Theories of International Relations turns out to be a Uroborus devouring its own tail. It is a “Newtonian” movement, in the terms of Jean-Jacques Roche (p. 145), which, starting from the critical requirements, specific to the academic spirit, wanting to go beyond appearances, ends up drowning the records.

Should we see here an act of impiety of the author towards the discipline he serves? Presumption or - worse - passivism or defeatism? Unjustified mistrust regarding the validity of the theoretical field of International Relations? No, not at all. Rational, balanced, lucid, the Parisian political scientist fully understands the turmoil that pervaded the disciplinary field in the post-Cold War period, when the very relevance of such a concern was questioned. But rejecting the fantasies and utopias of an “end of history”, Jean-Jacques Roche understands that a reconsideration of theoretical paradigms in the field of International Relations, a conceptual and methodological rethinking, a renewal of perspective, a strengthening of the credibility of the discipline, an agreement of the exigencies of the international policy with the answers offered by the theoretical reflection.

In fact, concludes Jean-Jacques Roche, “there is a certain pacification of the academic field and the beginning of a process of accumulation of knowledge that

could easily produce areas of consensus and result in the launch of inter-paradigmatic research programs” (p. 148).

It is a tonic conclusion, which highlights a cautious optimism. The French political scientist is probably right. The Cassandras who heralded the end of “great theories” and the emptiness of conceptualization in the field of International Relations were wrong.