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A European  
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Mario Telò

Foreword by R.O. Keohane

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:  
A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

*For the Institute for European Studies (ULB) students  
and colleagues who have taught me.*

*For the global epistemic network who helped bridging  
European Studies and International Relations.*

*And for Alessandro and Andrea,  
European citizens for a world of openness and peace.*

# International Relations: A European Perspective

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ASHGATE

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# Foreword

Robert O. Keohane

As this volume by Mario Telò shows, theoretical analysis of international relations, for the past decades, has centered on contestation among various schools of thought, the most prominent of which have been neo-Realism, institutionalism and constructivism. These schools emphasize different features of world politics and their proponents typically have different expectations about predominant patterns of behavior. In particular, the sources of power and interests, the significant institutions, and the importance of socialization and persuasion are contested among adherents of the various schools.

The debate among these schools has succeeded in identifying key points of difference and in problematizing concepts such as those of “interests” and “power” that may in earlier decades have been taken for granted. Interests are not always rooted in material factors; they can be oriented toward the short-term or the long-term; they can be highly conflictual (“zero-sum”) or assume the benefits of cooperation; they can be altered by institutional context; and they can be changed by ideas about values or about causality. Power can be seen as a resource pertaining to actors or as referring to the quality of a relationship between actors; it can be “hard” or “soft” in Joseph Nye’s terms – depending on force and economic resources, on the one hand, or emulation and persuasion on the other; it can be viewed in zero-sum terms as the ability of one actor to control another or seen as the ability to act collectively, which implies the possibility that the overall amount of power in a system can be a variable.

Despite the value of the debate among schools, it also contains three dangers, which have been apparent in the field of international relations in the United States. First, these approaches are sometimes regarded as “theories”, but none of them is really a well-developed theory, with clear and consistent assumptions and the logical derivation of testable conclusions. Different specific theories can exist within each approach – for instance, about war and alliances and the offensive or defensive orientations of states, in neo-Realism; about the role of objective vs. subjective conceptions of interest in institutional theory; or about the importance of persuasion in constructivist views.

Second, these three schools of international relations are often seen as contradictory – that is, as alternatives to one another. But in fact, each of them only emphasizes aspects of the complex reality of world politics – power and security, institutions, norms and beliefs. Anyone observing world politics should come to understand rather quickly that all of these factors play some role in state behavior

and in the outcomes of action, along with other factors such as the interests and capabilities of non-state actors. The three schools all contain insights that can be applied to real problems of world politics, but they are not antithetical to one another, nor do they constitute alternatives. They indeed emphasize different factors and their adherents may come to different conclusions, but the basic intellectual task is to synthesize them creatively to understand real situations, rather than to set them up as competitors in a race run against one another. It is notable that university-based American students of world politics – neo-Realists, institutionalists and constructivists – were almost all opposed to the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003. There are commonalities that transcend scholarly differences.

Third, the existence of these approaches seems to some students of the subject to suggest that international relations theory is a self-regarding subject: that it should be studied for its own sake. But international relations theory is not intrinsically beautiful or elegant. It is only valuable if it *does work* – that is, if it helps to understand the rapidly changing world of our times. The test of a theory is not the novelty of its terms or its lineage from famous thinkers, but how well it illuminates real problems. Does it help us to understand Chinese strategies as a rising power; how multilateral institutions operate; or the activities of transnational social movements? In the end, worthwhile studies of world politics are problem-oriented. The value of theory depends on whether it provides us with effective tools to understand these problems.

According to Mario Telò and a large international literature, the European construction and regional integration in general, represent more than a mere case study: an example of institutionalization of interstate relations, a multidimensional transnational networking, a supranational political system in the making, addressing relevant challenges to political sciences and international relations theories (regarding the concepts of power, sovereignty, legitimacy, democracy). This laboratory of new ideas is regarded with respect and interest not only in Europe but also elsewhere in the world and namely within the American research community.

To have a sophisticated understanding of contemporary world politics, one needs to have a grasp of the schools of thought discussed in this volume. They provide important concepts, critiques, and questions that can illuminate a variety of issues. I therefore applaud the appearance of this volume and hope it has a wide readership. But as I have emphasized, I also hope that readers will keep in mind that for these approaches to be worthwhile, they need to be used to understand important problems. If theory is treated an ornament to be admired for its own sake, it will be worse than useless – indeed, a distraction. If it is employed creatively to understand major problems, it may help human beings, as a species, to figure out how to survive.

# Acknowledgements

This book focuses on International Relations theories from a European perspective. By underlining this distinctive approach, I refer not only to my particular European point of view about international relations, but also to broad theoretical implications of the European Union experiment as institutionalized peaceful cooperation between previous enemies, consolidated democracy within states and deepening community between states and civil societies.

This work in progress would have been unthinkable without three prerequisites: critical understanding of the legacy and current debates in IR theory, conceptual clarity and empirical knowledge of international and European union political life from inside.

For this reason, I would first like to pay tribute to the theoretical dialogue between European and US scholars that has nourished the extraordinary development of international relations in the USA and Anglo-Saxon world, particularly since the Second World War. However, the present work also focuses on ongoing change and innovation, taking stock of a large and pluralistic body of international research. I'm aware that the search for a new European approach goes largely against conventional wisdom in International Relations theory, and must be underpinned by a broad community of scholars.

Some individual colleagues were particularly proactive in providing me with critical feedback regarding certain chapters and made the first results of my work in progress possible: I would like to express my thanks to A. Gamble (Cambridge), K. Nicolaidis (Oxford), K. Smith (LSE), Richard Higgott (University of Warwick), J. Ikenberry (Princeton University), F. Cerutti (University of Florence), J.-L. Quermonne (University de Grenoble) and V. Schmidt (Boston University). My special thanks are particularly due to Bob Keohane who, between 2003 and 2008 was kind enough to spend time commenting on my previous books and stimulating many of the book's main conceptual guidelines through his invaluable theoretical input.

Regarding the empirical praxis of international relations, I would like to thank the high level civil servants and policy-makers of the three main EU institutions (EU Commission, Council and Parliament) as well as ASEAN, Saarc, Mercosur, Andean Community, UN, WTO, OCDE representatives, national Ambassadors with whom I have partnered in many policy-oriented seminars regarding topics related to the EU and regional associations in the world. I would like to express a special thanks to the DG research, the DG Relex, DG Culture of the European Commission and the presidency of the EU Council, and particularly to Maria Joao Rodrigues, the driving force of the EU "Lisbon Strategy" for a knowledge society.

During the past decade, I have had the opportunity to participate in high level dialogues with outstanding partners abroad – CASS, Beijing; Fudan University, Shanghai; Tokyo and Chuo Universities; IPEA and the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil; J. Nehru University, Delhi and the Indian Institute of advanced studies; the MGIMO and the University of Moscow – where I have held lectures and seminars that introduced several of this book's chapters, or at least some of its main issues. The experience of an evolving practice of international relations was an essential source of empirical knowledge for me.

Thirdly, regarding clarity of presentation of a complex discipline, this book would not exist in its present textbook form without the input of many hundreds of students and scholars who, first at the Brussels Free University (ULB), but also in many other European, American and Asian universities, offered me the unique opportunity to present a relatively new discipline, or some of its chapters. A special thanks to the many dozens of alumni who have attended the international Garnet PhD school seminars, since 2004, from the best universities worldwide and to the Garnet staff and leading group, including L. Van Langehove, F. Ponjaert and other colleagues and Academic Council members. This discipline provides not only useful tools for understanding world politics to master and PhD students – but also conscious and committed citizens, aware of the historical relevance of international change occurring since 1989/91 and of the unprecedented global and regional challenges currently faced by human kind.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the team who have aided in construction of this book. This volume is a revised, updated and expanded version of the French language edition. S. Santander, Liege University and ULB, is the author of Chapter 3 and of the very useful Appendix that provides evidence and details regarding the high degree of multilevel institutionalization in multilateral organizations. Two anonymous Ashgate reviewers kindly provided very useful suggestions for improvements that the book might be both more comprehensive and clearer on its distinctive approach to International Relations. Laura Rose Barr, a brilliant American former student of the Brussels IEE, is responsible for the translation of most chapters. The research council of the IEE–ULB and Mrs M. Mat of the Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles supported this enterprise, in both French and English versions, from the beginning; and of course, K. Howgate of Ashgate, who is a precious and patient partner of more than ten years of my publications in English.

Mario Telò