Singing Our World into Existence:
International Relations Theory and September 11

Presidential Address to the International Studies Association, February 27, 2003, Portland, OR

STEVE SMITH
University of Exeter

This paper focuses on the relationship between International Relations theory and ethics. It poses the question of the complicity of the discipline in the events of September 11, 2001. The paper begins with a discussion of Weber’s notion of science as a vocation, and links this to the commitment in the discipline to a value-free conception of social science, one that sharply separates facts from values. The paper then examines the role of ten core assumptions in International Relations theory in helping to construct a discipline that has a culturally and historically very specific notion of violence, one resting on distinctions between economics and politics, between the outside and the inside of states, and between the public and the private realms. Using the United Nations Human Development report, the paper summarizes a number of forms of violence in world politics, and questions why the discipline of International Relations only focuses on a small subset of these. The paper then refers to the art of Magritte, and specifically Velazquez’s painting Las Meninas, to argue for a notion of representation relevant to the social world that stresses negotiation, perspective, and understanding rather than notions of an underlying Archimedean foundation to truth claims. In concluding, the paper asserts that the discipline helped to sing into existence the world of September 11 by reflecting the interests of the dominant in what were presented as being neutral, and universal theories.

My title comes from the practice of Australian Aboriginal people who, during their period of “dream-time,” sing their world into existence (Chatwin, 1987), and my main task in this paper is to raise explicitly the relationship between academic study and ethics. This paper was finished on the eve of a probable war against Iraq, and was presented at a conference at which there was little discussion of either that potential conflict or of the significance of the events of September 11, 2001. I want to claim that the discipline of International Relations is complicit in the constitution of this world of international relations; I want to claim that there can be no such thing as a value-free, non-normative social science; and I want to claim that the ways in which the discipline, our discipline, not their discipline or the U.S. discipline, constructs the categories of thought within which we explain the world, helps to reinforce Western, predominately U.S., practices of statecraft that themselves reflect an underlying set of social forces. In short, I aim to place on center stage the relationship between social power and questions of what, and how, we study international relations. This is unavoidably an ethical issue, and to be clear from the
outset I do not see any possibility (or desirability) of separating ethics from academic study. There is no view from nowhere, there are no Archimedean metatheoretical foundations for assessing truth claims, and there is no “purely” academic perspective, secured, isolated, and protected from ethics and power.

I will try and establish these claims by saying something about the events of September 11. Let me be explicit about my ethical stance here. Nothing that follows, nothing, is an attempt to justify or excuse the actions of the suicide bombers, although it may represent an urgent call to understand why they acted as they did, and, possibly more saliently, why those actions were so strongly supported in parts of the world. But I do feel that all of us in the discipline need to reflect on the possibility that both the ways in which we have constructed theories about world politics, and the content of those theories, have supported specific social forces and have essentially, if quietly, unquestioningly, and innocently, taken sides on major ethical and political questions. In that light I need to ask about the extent to which International Relations has been one voice singing into existence the world that made September 11 possible. Please note, I mean all of us engaged in the discipline, not just “them,” whoever they are, not just “the mainstream,” whatever that is, and not just “the U.S. discipline,” however that is defined. Rather, I will take this opportunity to ask each and every one of us about our role in September 11, and thereby to reflect on the link between our work, either in writing or teaching, and international events.

Weber and Science as a Vocation

But before discussing September 11, I need to set the scene by referring to the celebrated argument of Max Weber about the nature of science as a vocation, a position which has underpinned much contemporary social science by virtue of its distinction between the academic and the political (Weber, 1948a:129–156). Weber argues that in subjects such as sociology, history, political science, and cultural philosophy, politics must stay outside the lecture room. As he writes: “To take a political stand is one thing, and to analyse political structures and party positions is another….the true teacher will beware of imposing from the platform any political position upon the student….whenever the man of science introduces his personal value judgement, a full understanding of the facts ceases” (Weber, 1948a:145–146).

For Weber this is not simply an issue of separating one’s role as a citizen from one’s role as an academic, it is also because the realm of “science” (defined broadly) is very different to the realm of practical politics; Weber sees them as occupying different value spheres, with science unable to give answers to the large value-based questions of life. The teacher cannot reconcile these questions, only aid self-clarification and encourage a sense of responsibility. Weber’s position on this “always takes its point of departure from the one fundamental fact, that so long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or, speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion” (Weber, 1948a:152). This position has been influential in much Social Science, and particularly, I would claim, in Political Science and International Relations. Its commonest form is found in appeals to separate facts and values in academic work. Accordingly, scholars can portray themselves as “merely” reporting on the world of politics, rather than taking a normative stance on it, and therefore calling an academic’s work “value-laden” or “normative” is the ultimate academic put-down.

This sentiment has dominated International Relations for the last 50 years or so, certainly since the launch of the behavioral revolution in the late 1950s. Such notions pervade the work of the behavioralists, and were most explicitly raised in the 1960s debate between the “scientists” and the “traditionalists,” and in the
debates between strategic studies and peace research in the 1960s and 1970s. What was at stake was the nature of the academic enterprise, and broadly speaking the dominant view was that academic work should eschew statements about values and should instead concentrate on the “facts.” In recent years, such a position has underlay the reaction to much of the literature of the “third debate,” namely poststructural, feminist, and critical theory work. This reaction has become increasingly phrased in terms of what counts as legitimate “social science,” with this defined by whether or not accounts are open to hypothesis testing against neutral data. This challenge was most famously issued by Robert Keohane in his 1988 ISA Presidential Address, in which he outlined two main approaches to International Relations, rationalism and reflectivism. While he accepted that reflectivism had made significant criticisms of rationalism, “taking their argument seriously requires us to doubt the legitimacy of rationalism’s intellectual hegemony” (Keohane, 1989:172), he nonetheless went on to explain that no social science theory is complete, and thus “limiting the number of variables that a theory considers can increase both its explanatory content and its capacity to concentrate the scholarly mind” (Keohane, 1989:173). In contrast to rationalist theories such as Waltz’s neorealism and his own neoliberalism, he saw reflectivist work as having one main weakness, namely, “the lack of a clear research program…Until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues in world politics, they will remain on the margins of the field, largely invisible to the preponderance of empirical researchers, most of whom explicitly or implicitly accept one or another version of rationalistic premises” (Keohane, 1989:173). For Keohane, what was needed was for reflectivist scholars to develop “testable theories” and detailed empirical studies, without which “it will be impossible to evaluate their research program” (Keohane, 1989, pp 173–4). This challenge was not about the ontological commitments of reflectivist work, but was instead framed in terms of what was legitimate social science.

More recently, Keohane, along with his two fellow former editors of International Organization, Peter Katzenstein and Stephen Krasner, has characterized the current situation in the discipline as one of a new debate between rationalism and constructivism. They see three main variants of constructivism (conventional, critical, and postmodern), and stress the importance of distinguishing between the first two of these and postmodernism: “rationalism…and constructivism now provide the major points of contestation for international relations scholarship…”[this is possible because] critical constructivists [accept the] possibility of a social science and a willingness to engage openly in scholarly debate with rationalism” (Katzenstein et al., 1998:677). Turning to the role of the journal International Organization in this debate, they note that it has published little postmodern work “since IO has been committed to an enterprise that postmodernism denies: the use of evidence to adjudicate between truth claims. In contrast to conventional and critical constructivism, postmodernism falls clearly outside of the social science enterprise, and in IR research it risks becoming self-referential and disengaged from the world, protests to the contrary notwithstanding” (Katzenstein et al., 1998:678).

Similarly, most mainstream constructivists want to differentiate constructivism from reflectivism, and crucially the litmus test is, yet again, a commitment to “the social science enterprise.” The most extensive justification of this position is to be found in the work of Wendt (see Wendt, 1987, 1992:393–394, 422–425; 1994, 1998, 1999). As he put it in a, by now, infamous comment made in an article he co-wrote with Ronald Jepperson and Peter Katzenstein, “The term identity here is intended as a useful label, not as a signal of commitment to some exotic (presumably Parisian) social theory” (Jepperson et al., 1996: 34). In his 1999 book Social Theory of International Politics Wendt spends a lot of time discussing issues of epistemology. One quote gives a flavor of the horse he is trying to ride:
“Epistemologically, I have sided with positivists...our best hope is social science...[but]...on ontology—which is to my mind the more important issue—I will side with post-positivists. Like them I believe that social life is ‘ideas all the way down’ (or almost anyway...)” (Wendt, 1999:90). He is, he states, “a strong believer in science...I am a positivist” (Wendt, 1999:39).

**International Relations as a Social Science**

This raises the question of what kind of social science dominates the academic disciplines of Political Science and International Relations? As the perestroika movement in the American Political Science Association has shown, the U.S. academic community is becoming increasingly centered on a specific approach, namely rational choice theory. This approach is a very powerful one. It is the dominant tool in “successful” social sciences such as economics, and its core assumption is simple to express: rational choice theory treats actors as rational, self-interested maximizers of utility (however that is defined). The rational choice theorist is not interested in the internal workings of actors, that is to say, for states, in their internal political debates, or, for individuals, their psychology. Instead the rational choice theorist models behavior on the basis of fixed, and pregiven identities, and interests. Such a method is incredibly productive, since it is parsimonious. It is uninterested in history or culture or difference, and instead is only concerned with what kind of game the actors are caught up in. In economics, it can predict with considerable accuracy how an interest rate rise will affect unemployment, or growth. It does this without having a second’s concern with the internal workings of the actors involved. It is a black-box model, focused on the correlation between inputs and outputs.

Now, in International Relations this approach is also increasingly dominant. It lies behind the major research programs in the U.S. community, either in hard form (mathematical modeling) or in its softer form (accounts based on assumptions of egotistic rational value-maximizing actors). Whilst I may disagree about its range and assumptions, I consider it to be an entirely legitimate way of analyzing international relations, but, and here is the rub, it is only one such legitimate approach; there are many others, and they commonly involve methodologies and epistemological warrants that are incompatible with rational choice theory. From this two conclusions follow: first rational choice theory is only one way of studying the world, and it should not be seen as the social science enterprise. Second, it has strengths, but it also has weaknesses. The most obvious of these is that it treats interests and identities as given. Thus as soon as you accept the first move in the story you must accept the outcome. Take for example the prisoners’ dilemma game. This yields enormously interesting conclusions about the social world. The point, however, is the ability of the analysts to define a given problem as a prisoners’ dilemma game. Once that is said then there is no way of coming to anything other than the finding that both actors end up in a worse situation than they need be. But reflect for a second on what is omitted from the game: the actors cannot communicate; there is no shadow of the future; we know nothing of their prior relationship; we do not know if they are guilty; we do not know if they know they are in a prisoners’ dilemma. Note also that the academic is claiming to sit outside the world he or she is reporting on. The game is a real one, and there is a clear gap between the observer and what is being observed. The game theorist is reporting on a world “out there.” This last point should cause us to think, since surely it is the game theorist who pronounces that this is indeed such and such a game, and surely it matters precisely if it is that game and not some other game. My point is that the game is at best a framework placed on the social world. So, the logic is not one of “this is a prisoners’s dilemma therefore we can predict the outcome” but rather “because we are able to make the prior intellectually justified but nonetheless
political move of saying that this situation is a prisoners’ dilemma game, then we
predetermine that the result will be the one we expect.” In short, the important
move is the framing of the question, and in International Relations that translates
into being able to make such reifying statements such as “the international political
system is anarchical,” or “actors are self-interested,” or “the real world is so and
so.” Rational choice theory is silent on this matter of the prior conditions for
ascribing to a situation that it fits rational choice theory.

What I am saying is that rational choice theory is technologically very efficient. It
gets results. It predicts behavior. It works. But why does it work? Is it because it is
right, or because it presents itself, and becomes accepted, as the truth? Does it work
because it has indeed captured the way the world is, because it corresponds with the
way the world is, or does it dominate scholarly activity because it serves some
interests; remember, it is an approach located within a particularly powerful
academic community itself based in the dominant power in the world. In essence I
am asking if the discipline of International Relations is marked by any less
hegemonic behavior than the international political system itself.

My point is that the dominant method in the dominant IR academic community
is producing a discipline that is marked by political assumptions masquerading as
technical ones. Note that rational choice theory treats identities and interests as
given, and never enquires into how these come about. As such it buys into a political
economy of the possessive individual, itself a creation of seventeenth century social
contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke. It takes the relationship between
economics and politics as given, whereas in fact they were always taught as political
economy until the nineteenth century. Crucially it treats these features of the social
world, especially as they have unfolded in the U.S., as if they apply throughout the
world and apply for all time, even projecting them backwards into history. But I
want to insist that this is a misleading account of the relationship between
knowledge and the world. The act of any social theorist can never be to report
neutrally on a world preformed and separate to him or her. There is no view from
nowhere; all views make assumptions about actors, identities, and interests, and all
of them mix together statements about what is and what should be. So-called
normative theory, a real no-no for the U.S. academic community because it is “not
scientific,” does this explicitly, but I want to insist that rational choice theory does it
by stealth, by a sleight of hand, by pretending that the world is “out there” whereas
in fact it is a particular reading of that world, a reading influenced by the social
location of the scholar concerned.

This takes me back to Max Weber, and to one of his other most fascinating
essays, “Politics as a Vocation” (Weber, 1948b), which was written as a public
lecture at Munich University in 1918. Speaking about the nature of political
activity, he makes a famous distinction between two ethical positions that might
guide us in these political actions. The first of these is the ethic of ultimate ends,
the second the ethic of responsibility. The ethic of ultimate ends refers to the
notion that the ethical person acts rightly and leaves the results to work out; it is
not the person’s fault if good intentions lead to bad results. On the other hand,
someone acting according to the ethic of responsibility has to take account of the
foreseeable results of one’s actions. Yet neither position can escape the logical
problem that sometimes you have to use morally dubious means to achieve “good
ends.” And, given that the decisive means for politics is violence, then the ethical
dilemma for the political activist is obvious. Politics, for Weber, is “a strong and
slow boring of hard boards,” and the ethical person cannot rely simply on a notion
of an ethic of ultimate ends. Politics involves judgment and choice, which Martin
Hollis called the “dirty hands” problem, namely that there is no neutral place to
decide technically on the “right” way forward. Thus, echoing Luther, Weber voices
his admiration for the person who says “here I stand I can do no other.” That is the
ethic of responsibility in action. And it carries with it the danger that “[w]hoever
wants to engage in politics at all...must know that he is responsible for what may become of himself under the impact of these paradoxes...he lets himself in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence... He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence” (Weber, 1948b:125–126). So, I feel it is in the discipline of International Relations. There can be no equivalent to the ethic of ultimate ends, that is to say there is no possibility of a neutral observation of the world of international relations; all engagement is partial, all engagement carries with it a set of ethical consequences that rest, in the final analysis, on violence.

Weber, then, seems to have one view of scholarly activity (as shown by the statements from “Science as a Vocation,” quoted above), and a very different one of political activity. Academic scholarship should not engage with normative questions, or introduce political perspectives into enquiry. Political activity rests upon the possibilities of violence, and as such can never avoid the ethic of responsibility. Yet, I believe that this draws too sharp a distinction between scholarship and the world of political activity. Specifically, I do not think that academics can avoid the moral and political ramifications of their scholarship, since that scholarship is based in a set of social forces toward which it is either supportive (either explicitly or implicitly) or opposed. In essence, then, scholarship cannot be neutral; it is unavoidably partial, is unavoidably political, and unavoidably has ethical consequences. Crucially, this is the case whether or not the scholar is explicit about these ramifications. Indeed, the pretense of value-neutrality, of using “objective” data, is particularly problematic. As Weber commented in several essays, there is no more effective way of taking a political position than “letting the facts speak for themselves.” In my view, no scholar can avoid the dirty hands problem in his or her teaching of, or research into, international relations.

**September 11 and International Relations Theory**

Although there are obvious and profound pitfalls in making generalizations about International Relations theory, I need to say something about how the discipline links to September 11. My focus is on the core assumptions of the mainstream, and how they are implicated in the events of September 11. Note that this does not mean that every theorist is so implicated nor that all approaches are equally involved; but I do want to insist that the mainstream of the discipline has adopted many of the assumptions and practices that follow. And, to be completely clear, my own work certainly falls into many if not all of these traps. I do not say this lightly, since I have spent much time over the last decade reflecting on my earlier work and on the assumptions it contained, yet never explored, about what international relations were and how they should be studied. In many ways a Presidential Address is a very appropriate place to engage in such public self-reflection, and I would see nearly all of my work in the 1980s as trapped within a set of methodological, epistemological, and thereby ontological, lenses, which answered and settled all that should be contestable by firm statements of academic certainty. In this sense I feel that I have played a very small role in the development of the discipline, one that, despite its insignificance, makes me morally culpable, complicit in the world that led to September 11.

I want to list 10 core features of International Relations theory that I think help to create the world that led to the events of September 11. The first is the focus on the state as the unit of analysis, rather than either humanity as a whole or the individual. The point here is that the discipline has tended to treat the state as the analytical focus of its enquiry, thereby privileging it. It is the security of the state that matters in International Relations; it is the unit of analysis, and, crucially, it is the moral unit, the moral referent point. The security of individuals is seen as a matter
of internal politics, or even of local law and order. It is not as if this is simply an empirical question, since the core moral questions asked by the discipline are questions that accord the state a central role. International Relations theory has almost been defined by its worship of the state-as-actor, and the consequent downplaying of the role, or fate, of individuals or other actors. And, of course, there is a powerful circularity in all of this. The state becomes reified, and its centrality to how the discipline sees the world becomes tautological. There is no space for other actors, except as amendments or additions to the rule that the state is the core actor in international relations.

The second assumption relates to the consequent distinction between the inside and the outside of the state. Just as the state is treated as the core actor, so are the borders of the state seen as the demarcation point between domestic and international politics. The state is thus both accorded moral status and is written, almost hard-wired, into the story of international relations as the necessary unit to manage the relationships within and without its boundaries. Again, this becomes tautological, as the state’s place in world politics is imposed by assumption. Once so imposed or assumed, the role of the state takes on a life of its own, and accounts of international relations that do not deal with “its” agenda and “its” needs are dismissed as irrelevant or as “not International Relations.” The key point to note is that this move, of elevating the state and erecting its boundaries, not only produces separate disciplines of International Relations and Political Science, but also serves specific social forces and forms of social power rather than other ones. By assumption, by fiat, the disciplines of Political Science and International Relations recreate and reinforce a socially, culturally and historically specific view of the world, and present it as timeless, as natural, as empirical.

The third assumption is that the discipline has historically relied on a clear distinction between economics and politics. This has enormous consequences. From the inception of the discipline as an academic subject, its central concern has been to explain international political relations, not economic ones except insofar as they are part of definitions of international power. Of course international political economy has been a thriving and significant subfield of the discipline, but it has never constituted the challenge to the mainstream that its assumptions and, crucially, its ontology imply. In the mainstream, politics and economics are separate areas of social activity, and thus the discipline is able to exclude from its consideration a multitude of issues dealing with power, violence, death, and the distribution of resources. In this way, while death in state-to-state armed conflict is part of International Relations, death by economics, or by the market is not. This is not so much a debate about where to draw the borders between economics and politics, but about the disciplining power of the border.

The fourth assumption concerns the power of the notion of a common progression of humanity toward one end-state as exemplified in most accounts of globalization. This kind of thinking dominates the literature on globalization, portraying it as one process that all states and societies must follow. They differ only in terms of where they are on the conveyor belt of progress. This notion, which underlay Fukuyama’s notion of the “End of History,” sees subjectivity and difference as temporally defined and as limited to a phase of history’s unfolding. Ultimately, human nature is seen as a constant, which both allows statements about regularities and merges difference into sameness. Under this gaze, “others” are essentially like “us,” and any differences in world views or values are seen as evidence of underdevelopment, or of the fact that these societies are at an earlier stage of development. The notion that they are not in progression toward becoming like “us,” like the West, is rejected and instead these differences are explained away as “merely” hangovers from some earlier historical form of consciousness. The drivers of this progression toward a unity of humankind are the twin, and related, forces of liberal democracy and, especially, the market.
The fifth feature of International Relations theory is the absence of considerations of gender and ethnicity from the main theories. The dominant accounts are white, male accounts and thus paint at best incomplete, and at worst totally distorted, pictures of international relations, ones that support existing forms of social power. Yet the discipline is rarely self-conscious about these biases, presenting itself as gender and color-blind. The assumptions about who acts in international politics invariably see actors as genderless, and at the same time ascribe to actors motivations and ways of thinking that are male. International Relations requires specific forms of masculinity and femininity of its participants. Similarly, theories omit ethnicity and offer explanations of international relations that define such issues as outside the remit of the discipline. In a world fundamentally constructed by ethnicity and gender, International Relations theory does not see these constructs and thus reinforces those social forces that benefit from silencing them or downplaying their relevance.

The sixth core assumption involves the definition of violence that pervades International Relations theory. The discipline was effectively invented in response to war, notably the First World War, and war remains its defining focus. My point here is not that war is not a central feature to be understood, only that it is privileged as a form of violence, and the discipline chooses not to see other forms. Thus, International Relations tends to ignore conflicts within states, unless they threaten the survival of the discipline’s referent object, the state. Similarly, that referent object is reified at the expense of other possible referent points, most notably the individual and the ethnic group. Finally, the form of violence defined as most central to International Relations is violence caused by military conflict whereas by far the most violence on the planet is economic in origin.

The seventh relates to the stress on structure over agency in International Relations theory. The most powerful and popular theories in the discipline are those that explain the behavior of units, usually states, in an international system of states. Such theories compete for explanatory power by their ability to deduce the behavior of states from the system’s structure. Of course this does not mean that agency is ignored, but it is set within a structure and its explanatory power is limited to accounting for those things that structural theories cannot explain. International Relations theory focuses on explaining constancies, not change, and thus downplays agency; the history of the reaction to social constructivism indicates the limited role that the mainstream will accord to agency and to the limits on our attempts to make anarchy what we want it to be.

The eighth feature is the significance of the idea of one, universal rationality underlying the most popular theories. Although this is most clearly evident in rational choice theories, the assumption pervades the discipline, precisely because of the power of structural accounts of international relations. The role of structure in constructing the identity and interests of the actors is linked to the assumption that these actors are therefore forced, via socialization, into accepting a common rationality. Again this is also linked to assumptions about the progression of humanity toward one future, the role of the market and a very narrow conception of participatory democracy. In such an emerging world, actors everywhere, regardless of historical and cultural location, ultimately share an underlying rationality.

The ninth assumption concerns the consequent underplaying of the importance of issues of identity in theories of international relations. For all the reasons discussed above, International Relations has tended to ignore questions of identity, preferring instead to develop accounts on the basis of sameness. Little attention has been paid to the subjective understandings of actors, and even less to the impact of their identity on their definitions of the issues in world politics. Relying on assumptions about sameness has meant that the discipline has taken the policy
agendas of the dominant powers, and hence the dominant identities, in the world as those of all the world. This has created a chasm between the world as seen in the textbooks of the discipline and the world as seen in most of the world. This leads to a fundamental problem for the discipline, namely that it has played, and continues to play, a significant role in recreating the world of the powerful, which it sees as the “natural” focus for explanation.

Finally, the discipline is dominated by the search for explanation rather than understanding (for my developing work on this see Hollis and Smith [1990], Smith [1995, 1996, 2000]). For the last 50 years International Relations has been engaged in the task of explaining the world, rather than understanding it. This has been rooted in the dominance of behavioralism and empiricism in the social science academic community in the U.S., and thus the discipline throughout the world has been very much focused on providing narrowly defined social science accounts of international relations. There has been little work that has tried to understand the mind-sets and world views of non-Western “others,” with the result that a very specific view of the world has emerged, one which can be explained by narrow social scientific approaches. Intentions have been imputed rather than empathized, and values have been assumed rather than comprehended. An effect of this domination has been the downplaying of normative questions, seeing these as in some way lying outside of the realm of “legitimate” social science; introducing normative concerns is seen as illegitimate, as allowing values to dominate what should be neutral evidence-based accounts. The problem is that such a position is absolutely dependent on the prior, and hidden, assumption that such a value-neutral position is indeed possible.

For all of these reasons, the discipline of International Relations has been a very partial one. It has been a view decidedly from somewhere, and that somewhere has been the world of the wealthy, imperial powers. Just as the discipline in the 1930s reflected British self-interest, so since the end of the Second World War it has reflected U.S. interests. In the name of explanation it has recreated the hegemony of U.S. power and U.S. interests; in the name of legitimate social science it has supported narrow versions of the agenda of international relations, and in the name of objectivity it has self-consciously avoided normative or moral stances. And yet my argument is that this retreat to the methodological and epistemological bunker supports one version of the world over competing versions; that version, of course, is the one that underpins the power of the dominant social forces and sources of social power. In this context we now need to look at the events of September 11.

**Violence and September 11**

The events of September 11 have had an enormous effect on our view of violence. The number of people murdered that day, about 3,000, was magnified by the ways in which they died. The public nature of many of those deaths has had consequences far greater than the simple number of people involved, with images of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre etched forever on the minds of much of the world’s population. My point here is simply to note that the ways in which the discipline of International Relations deals with such events simply cannot be explained by the number of deaths involved; it has much to do with how we see deaths by political violence as compared with deaths by “economics,” or deaths by “naturally occurring diseases.” As I have just shown, I believe that our discipline makes very important assumptions about what constitutes violence and what kinds of deaths are relevant to explaining the world of international relations; I also believe that these assumptions rely on a prior set of assumptions about the social world, and that these in turn reflect social, political, and ultimately economic power.
The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been at the forefront of challenging these assumptions in recent years, notably by developing the concept of human security. This was first discussed in the 1994 UNDP (UNDP, 1994), which proposed a shift from a focus on nuclear security to one on human security: “With the dark shadows of the cold war receding, one can now see that many conflicts are within nations rather than between nations. For most people, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Will they and their families have enough to eat? Will they lose their jobs? Will their streets and neighborhoods be safe from crime? Will they be tortured by a repressive state? Will they become a victim of violence because of their gender? Will their religion or ethnic origin target them for persecution? In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons—it is a concern with human life and dignity.” (UNDP, 1994:229). The report notes four main components of the concept of human security: it is a universal concern, relevant to people everywhere because the threats are common to all; its components are interdependent since the threats to human security do not stay within national borders; it is easier to achieve through early rather than later intervention; it is people centered, in that it is concerned with how people “live and breathe” in society (UNDP, 1994:229). The UNDP argues that although there have always been two main components of human security, freedom from fear and freedom from want, the concept of security has tended to be more concerned with the former rather than the latter and accordingly the concept needs to shift from stressing territorial security to stressing people’s security, and from concentrating on achieving security through weapons to concentrating on achieving security through sustainable human development (UNDP, 1994:230). The report notes seven areas of human security: economic security; food security; health security; environmental security; personal security; community security; and political security (UNDP, 1994:230–234). It also identifies six main threats to human security: unchecked population growth; disparities in economic opportunities; migration pressures; environmental degradation; drug trafficking; and international terrorism (UNDP, 1994:234–236).

In its 1997 Human Development Report, the UNDP refined the concept by introducing a distinction between income poverty and human poverty: the former refers to an income of U.S.$1 a day and less, the latter factors such as life expectancy and illiteracy (UNDP, 1997). The concept has also been taken up by international bodies such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as by some governments, most significantly those of Canada and Japan.

The UNDP Report for 2002 (UNDP, 2002) makes for sober reading for anyone concerned with violence in international politics, except, of course, that the violence discussed there does not really fit within the International Relations discipline’s definition of international violence, as a result of the powerful assumptions discussed above. Among the statistics about violence found in the UNDP Report are the following:

- Every day more than 30,000 children around the world die of preventable diseases, a total of over 11 million a year (UNDP, 2002:11).
- The richest 5% of the world’s people have incomes 114 times those of the poorest 5% (UNDP, 2002:10). The richest 1% receive as much income as the poorest 57% (UNDP, 2002:19)
- The income of the richest 10% (25 million) of the U.S. population equals that of the poorest 43% of the world (2 billion) (UNDP, 2002:19). In the U.S. the income of the top 1% of families, which had been 10 times that of the median family in 1979, was 23 times in 1997 (UNDP, 2002:20)
Among the 73 countries with data (comprising 80% of the world’s population) in 48 cases inequality has increased since the 1950s, and in only nine (with 4% of the world’s population) has inequality declined (UNDP, 2002:20)

- 2.8 billion people live on less than $2 a day, with 1.2 billion of them subsisting on less than $1 a day (UNDP, 2002:17). In 1997–1999 an estimated 815 million people were undernourished (UNDP, 2002:21).
- During the 1990s the number of people in extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa rose from 242 million to 300 million (UNDP, 2002:10)
- By the end of 2000 almost 22 million people (now updated by the UNDP to 24.8 million) had died of AIDS, 13 million children had lost their mother or both parents to the disease and more than 40 million people were living with HIV. Of these, 90% were in developing countries and 75% were in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2002:11).

- The HIV adult prevalence rate is 38.8% in Botswana, 33.7% in Zimbabwe, 33.4% in Swaziland, and is over 15% in Kenya, South Africa, Zambia, Namibia, and Lesotho (UNDP HIV/AIDS Fact sheet)
- Just .1% of the 28.5 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa have access to HIV/AIDS drugs (UNDP HIV/AIDS Fact sheet)
- There are 100 million “missing” women who would be alive but for infanticide, neglect and sex-selective abortion (UNDP, 2002:11). In one clinic in Bombay, 7,999 of the 8,000 aborted foetuses were female (UNDP, 2002:23).
- Every year there are 300 million cases of malaria, 90% of them in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2002:28).
- More than 500,000 women die a year as a result of pregnancy and childbirth (UNDP, 2002:26).
- A newborn in Afghanistan has a one in four chance of dying before age 5 (UNDP, 2002:13)
- In the 1990s genocide occurred in Europe and Africa, with 200,000 people killed in Bosnia in 1992–1995 and 500,000 killed in Rwanda in 1994 (UNDP, 2002:11)
- The 1990s saw a large decrease in deaths from interstate conflicts to 220,000 people over the decade, down from nearly three times that in the 1980s, but nearly 3.6 million people were killed in wars within states in the 1990s (UNDP, 2002:11)
- During the 1990s the number of refugees and internally displaced persons grew by 50% (UNDP, 2002:11)
- Half of all civilian war casualties are children and there are an estimated 300,000 child soldiers worldwide (UNDP, 2002:11)
- 90 countries are still heavily affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance, with 15,000–20,000 mine victims a year (UNDP, 2002:11)

The picture that these data paint is of a very violent world, with violence taking many forms. But the discipline of International Relations does not “see” these forms of violence as core concerns. Of course they are absolutely central to the work of scholars in areas such as international political economy, gender, and development, but these areas of the discipline are not defined as being part of the core of International Relations. For neorealism, for neoliberalism, for strategic studies these forms of violence are simply marginal if not irrelevant. But if our purview is indeed world politics, as distinct to the subset of relations between nation
states, then surely these dimensions of violence are no less central to understanding than are the more traditional forms of state-to-state violence.

And yet, some of these aspects of violence are absolutely critical to explaining September 11 because they help explain why much of the world’s population celebrated the attacks, and why the West generally, and the United States specifically, are so unpopular, even hated. The problem is that the discipline of International Relations has defined its core concerns in such a way as to exclude the most marked forms of violence in world politics, in favor of a relatively small subset which ultimately relies on the prior moves of separating the outside from the inside of a state, separating economics and politics, separating the public from the private, separating the “natural” from the “social” worlds, separating the female from the male, separating the moral from the practical, and separating causes and effects. One can add that the discipline’s definition of violence looks very closely linked to the concerns of the white, rich, male world of the power elite.

But this does not have to be so. We construct, and reconstruct, our disciplines just as much as we construct, and reconstruct, our world, and thus the question becomes one of why does the discipline of International Relations “see” only this part of the world of international violence? There are three aspects to the answer. The first is that the discipline has developed out of a focus on the “Great Powers,” and on the structural consequences of the interactions of states as actors. The forms of violence that this “sees” are essentially related to the balance of power and war, traditionally defined. Violence is what happens, or is threatened to happen, between national states. Second, International Relations as a discipline has developed in what can be called the leading powers, first the U.K., then the U.S., and has therefore not surprisingly adopted the policy concerns of those countries as if they were the policy concerns of the world. Given that these states did not exhibit the forms of violence outlined in the UNDP data discussed above, then International Relations did not see them as core components of the emerging discipline. Thirdly, the discipline has long been based on a definition of what constitutes knowledge that works most effectively when explaining the interactions between measurable variables in a tight deductive framework. Now, while such a method could easily be utilized in the study of the wider forms of violence just discussed, once it was set up and focused on questions of interstate conflict, systems structure, and the utility maximizing behavior of states, then this became the self-fulfilling definition of the subject matter of the discipline.

The other main feature of the discipline that relates to September 11 concerns the importance of identity in accounts of world politics. International Relations has tended to subsume issues of identity under catch-all definitions of instrumental rationality, a rationality limited to the calculation of interests as defined by the very specific notion of international relations assumed by the discipline. In other words, identity has been assumed to be exogenous to parsimonious accounts of international relations. Indeed, it is one of the great strengths, and attractions, of realist, neorealist, and neoliberal theories of international relations that they can account for behavior of actors with very different identities because they see these identities, despite what the actors may say or believe, as dominated by the requirements of human nature, or the structure of the system, or the institutional context. Positivist International Relations theory, licensed by an empiricist methodology, focuses on explaining rather than understanding, and as such deems secondary to that task of explanation the identities and the subjectivities of the actors. In the process of explaining the world, understanding is at best supplementary. This search for cover-all explanations carries with it a number of assumptions about social action, the most important of which is the notion of finding a generally applicable explanation, one that applies to all actors regardless of identity, and regardless of their subjectivities. Positivist International Relations explains the behavior of predefined actors, with predefined interests, in a
predefined structure. It does not take “their” agenda or “their” perception of their interests as the subject matter for the discipline.

Instead of this focus, the discipline needs to pay much more attention to questions of subjectivity and to try and examine these in terms of understanding them rather than by imposing one narrow view of social science to explain them. There is no Archimedean point to pronounce on the “truths” of international relations, no firm foundation on which to build a legitimate social science that eschews normative considerations in the search for the ultimate truth. Above all, truth is not “out there,” waiting to be discovered. The puzzles and conflicts of international relations cannot be “solved” in the manner of a logical puzzle; instead they have to be unwrapped and understood from the viewpoints of the actors involved. Finally, the discipline should step back from the notion that its accounts and theories can determine and demarcate the truth about the world, if by truth is meant one truth, imposed by epistemological fiat. Instead, truth is always contingent, always a matter for debate and always partial. To pretend that it can be discovered, and above all to claim that it can be discovered in only one way, mine not yours, is the ultimate act of politics. Truth is to be represented not mirrored.

Art, Interpretation, and Representation

All of this leads me to art, and I want to use two painters to offer a rather different notion of understanding and representation to that found in the social sciences generally and in International Relations specifically. The first is Rene Magritte (1898–1967). Magritte interests me because he subverts the normal, the accepted, and problematizes the way we represent reality (the discussion that follows is based on Foucault [1983], Meuris [1998], Kemp [2000:415–424]). Magritte’s images challenge our understandings of the everyday. They are realistic, though also surrealistic. They are truly disruptive since they challenge our assumptions about art and reality and crucially they are without any meaning in so far as they resist explanation without interpretation. Magritte was a realistic painter, and thereby went against the prevailing attitude to realism in art. Art in the twentieth century largely rejected realism denying that painters and painting had any mission to reproduce nature; in its place modern art has preferred to focus on emotions, feelings, sensations, etc. Magritte’s work has none of these features. His painting was based on the idea that via the faithful reproduction of objects, things, and people, one can force the beholders of painting to question their own condition. To do this he combined everyday things in some unexpected or unaccustomed manner, turning traditional logic inside out, like a glove, and thereby undermining the commonly accepted meanings of things and their relationship. Thus, the notion of “the real” of “reality” takes on a different meaning from that which it occupies in everyday life, and of course in the fine arts! Think now about the implications of this for the artist. Before the twentieth century artists had to work within the framework of painting reality as it was, albeit as they saw it. But despite the problem that every person sees things in slightly different ways, the rules of western fine art meant that artists had to obey a set of rules about how to paint “reality.” Magritte, along with others, especially the surrealists and the cubists, shatters this assumption. But note that Magritte does it through painting that is realistic, and not at all like Picasso’s cubism, for example. Magritte wants to use the known to reveal the unknown.

My use of Magritte is simply to point to the move his painting represents a move from art as representing the world as it was to art as fundamentally questioning the relationships between the artist and the viewer, and between the realism of the painting and the lack of realism of the total image. For Magritte, these questions lead us to rethink the human condition, and crucially to question the processes by which we represent that reality. The one thing that is clear is that we cannot simply
de-code his pictures by deciding which one corresponds best to “reality.” As such the observer is unavoidably caught up in the process of interpretation. It cannot be avoided, it cannot be decided by fiat or rule; rather the human condition is one of having to make judgments and interpretations of a reality that we can never directly access. I think that his painting captures something vital about the social world that rational choice theory literally cannot see. For rational choice theory, the social world is something that we observe. The use of our theories depends on how accurately they correspond to reality. I hope Magritte gives you cause to worry about such a view of the relationship between the scholar and the world he or she studies.

I now want to turn to one painting, Velazquez’s Las Meninas, a painting that seems to me to raise the most fundamental issue about our relationship as scholars with the social world we study. This picture was painted in 1656 and became the topic of the introductory chapter of Michel Foucault’s “The Order of Things” published first in 1966 (Foucault, 1966 [1973]). I am not so much interested in discussing Foucault’s reading of the painting, as in trying to show briefly just why this is seen by art historians as one of the most influential paintings in art history (the discussion that follows is based on Foucault [1966 (1973):3–16], Brown [1988:241–264], Lopez-Rey [1999:208–218, 306–311], Kemp [2000:232–233]). Originally called “the family of Philip IV” the painting has been seen as one of the most important statements on easel painting. Already by the end of the seventeenth century it had been called by the Italian artist Luca Giordano “the theology of painting.” The picture was painted by Diego Velazquez, a Spanish painter who lived from 1599 to 1660. It was painted when the Spanish empire, and the Spanish monarch, Philip IV, were on the brink of collapse.

The central figure is the five-year-old Infanta Margarita, daughter of Philip IV and his second wife, who are reflected in the looking glass on the back wall. She is attended by two maids (from which the title of the painting derives). Two court dwarfs stand behind the large sleepy dog, a lady in waiting and a court official are engaged in conversation, and a member of the queen’s staff can be seen in the doorway at the end of the room. Then there is Velazquez himself, palette and brushes in hand. This was a first in the history of painting since it portrays an apparently casual incident of no significance and painted on a scale hitherto reserved for large-scale portraits of royal figures. But behind the painting there are several layers of meaning. The first point to note is that this is a picture of a moment in time, and indeed looks like a snapshot rather than a formal painting. But without going into the details, this effect is achieved by a quite magical use of light and shade, of lines and of the use of pigment. Art historians point to both the use of diagonal lines in this painting, and to the three light sources. The structuring of space is literally architectural. A second layer concerns the artist’s elevation of art in this painting. Not only is Velazquez dressed in court official’s clothes but the paintings hanging at the rear of the room are versions of two of Rubens’s paintings showing the role of divine intervention in the arts. But the issue that interests me most, and which has fascinated art historians since the picture appeared, is who is the subject of the canvas that Velazquez is painting? At first sight it is the Infanta, or possibly the two maids, but he is standing behind them, and looking at none of them. So perhaps the subject is the King and Queen as reflected in the mirror, but there are three problems with this interpretation: there was no mirror in the room in which the painting was painted; the canvas is too large for a double portrait; and Velazquez never painted the King and Queen in a double portrait. Interestingly, the King and Queen are clearly in the foreground of the painting, either in front of us, the observer, or standing where we are. In fact the mirror lays a trap in the picture. Think about it: it is reflecting nothing that is in the picture, and yet the perspective in the painting, and the mirror’s position would suggest that it ought to reflect the painter’s back, or that of the Infanta. The mirror is in a central position...
in the picture, and thus ought to reflect the rear view of what we see. What it is reflecting is what all the figures in the picture are looking at, not what lies between the mirror and front of the painting. The really disturbing thought is that perhaps Velazquez’s subject is none of the above, and instead is us, the viewer? Note that Velazquez is looking directly at us. No picture before it had so questioned the relationship between painting and reality. As Foucault puts it, “the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable...subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity...the great canvas with its back to us...prevents the relation of these gazes from ever being discoverable or definitely established...Because we can see only that reverse side, we do not know who we are, or what we are doing. Seen or seeing?” (Foucault, 1966[1973]:4–5).

My point here is that, like Magritte, Velazquez is questioning the nature of representation. We are simply not clear who is being painted in this picture, and indeed it is literally impossible to make sense of this painting in terms of who is its subject. Such a perfectly architectural painting contains the problem of the mirror’s perspective and its lack of an accurate reflection of what is in its line of view. The angles simply do not add up and we cannot come to a definitive answer as to who is being painted. Again we are caught up in a circle of understanding, and there is no Archimedean point of reference, no definitive ground on which to pronounce on the “correct” interpretation of this picture.

Another way of thinking about this relationship is to imagine a child looking at a mobile hanging over his or her bed. They see its main features, the sheep jumping over the stile, etc., and in one sense the social world is like this mobile. But there is an important difference when it comes to our relationship to that mobile as compared with our relationship to the social world. If you now imagine yourself standing over the child’s bed looking at the mobile you would see it slightly differently, from a different angle, and so you would describe it differently. Yet your view and the child’s view could be reconciled by simple computer graphics; you could show easily how the two views were compatible with the actual shape of the mobile. But the social world is not like that. Our perceptions of it literally construct that social world. They need not be in the slightest bit compatible with one another, and they do not necessarily admit to reconciliation. We see different mobiles, different realities, not simply the same reality from different perspectives. So the social world is not like the mobile, it is not something that we observe, it is something we inhabit, and we can never stand in relationship to it as neutral observer, however much we might like to pretend that we can. To repeat, there is no view from nowhere, and our views of it are not simply contextual, but instead are that social world.

**Conclusion**

I started this paper by arguing that the discipline of International Relations had ignored, to its cost, ethical questions in the pursuit of value-neutral explanations. I argued that the discipline has been complicit in recreating a world of international relations that has quietly supported the views, and ultimately the interests, of specific forms of social power. By eschewing accounts that seek to understand and celebrate difference in favor of explanations based on a decidedly Western view of rationality, International Relations has effectively served as a handmaiden to Western power and interests. The ontology of the discipline has been that of the powerful, and the epistemology and methodologies that give rise to that ontology have reflected very historically and culturally specific notions of rationality and identity. As such the discipline has helped to sing into existence the world of September 11, 2001 by focusing on specific, and partial, notions of violence and inequality; by taking its referent object to be the state rather than the individual;
and by subsuming difference and identity into sameness. Above all, this has been
done in the name of legitimate social science, very narrowly defined.

None of these claims implies that the key writers in the discipline have been self-
consciously trying to sing that world into existence, although there have been
some very notable examples of writers trying to avoid this fate (e.g., Richard Falk,
Ken Booth, Cynthia Enloe, Robert Cox, Christine Sylvester, Johan Galtung, and
David Campbell). For the majority of us writing about international relations,
especially those of us taught during the heyday of behavioralism, we were not
trying to do anything except provide evidence-based explanations of the world.
What we never realized was the extent to which the discipline was, as E.H. Carr
argued, written by people with a view from somewhere for some contemporary
purpose. In this sense, any history of the discipline is, like all history, a history for
the present.

My main worry about the discipline today is that in the main IR academic
community there is a powerful rationalist orthodoxy, fueled and legitimized by a
rational choice consensus on matters of how we know and how we construct our
knowledge. I am not denying that this approach should be an essential part of the
teaching of the discipline of IR, but I do not think that it should be all that the
discipline is. I believe strongly and passionately in an intellectual pluralism, and I
fervently believe that this is an essentially political statement. Ultimately, you see, I
think the social world is like Las Meninas or the paintings of Magritte; the key issue
is not accurate representation, but is interpretation, and interpretation without the
possibility of ever pronouncing definitively on which one is correct. In the social
world there are indeed always at least two stories to tell. No recourse to intellectual
foundations can solve this problem, though rational choice theory most certainly
claims to be able to do this. I feel that rational choice theory hides its normative
commitments behind a seemingly steadfast castle wall of certainty about its claims to
secure knowledge. The problem is that this narrow focus cannot deal with the
problems of world politics in the new millennium. What it has done has been to
help sing into existence the world that resulted in September 11. International
Relations theory has concentrated almost exclusively on a particular world of
international relations, and that has not been a world that most of the world’s
population could relate to. Their concerns, the violences that affected them, the
inequalities they suffered, were all invisible to the gaze of the discipline, and in that
very specific way the discipline, my discipline, my work, was culpable in serving
specific social interests and explaining their agenda.

What kind of International Relations theory do I want to see in this new
millennium? Above all, I want to see a discipline that is open to a variety of issues,
subjectivities, and identities rather than taking the agenda of the powerful as the
natural and legitimate focus for the discipline. I want to see a discipline that
enquires into the meanings and subjectivities of individuals in cultures different to
those of the dominant world powers rather than assuming their rationality,
interests, and thus identities. I want to see a discipline that admits of many routes to
understanding, rather than treating one model of social science as if it was the sole
bearer of legitimacy and thus beyond criticism. I want to see a discipline that
realizes the limitations on correspondence theories of truth, and instead treats truth
not as a property of the world waiting to be discovered, but as a matter for
negotiation and interpretation. Finally, I want to see a discipline that does not hide
behind the mask of value-neutrality and empiricism. These positions serve specific
social interests and are thus ineluctably political and partial. It is only through
realizing the nature of the human condition, of realizing the problems of
interpreting and representing social behavior, that we can construct an Interna-
tional Relations theory which exhibits both the ethic of responsibility and the
humility of being in Velazquez’s gaze, and in turn gazing back at him. We sing our
worlds into existence, yet rarely reflect on who wrote the words and the music, and
virtually never listening out for, nor recognizing, voices or worlds other than our own until they occasionally force us into silence.

References
