

Student Book Features: Two Essential IR Textbooks

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, AUG 16 2011

Finding a good international relations textbook to see you through your studies is no small matter. Books are not cheap, and if you buy one that doesn't meet your needs, or if you don't 'gel' with its style/layout, a hasty purchase can be an expensive mistake. Fortunately for students of International Relations (IR), this year is a good year regarding 'big' textbooks.

The long-standing torch bearer for catch-all textbooks on IR has been OUP's ***The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations***, which has recently been updated in a 2011 Fifth Edition. The book remains an impressive, and broad introduction to IR and its related fields. The new edition banks upon the best elements of its predecessors, with a colourful layout and an online add-on component. In over 600 pages (which are magazine style glossy, rather than standard book paper – just in case that bothers you!) it represents a genuinely comprehensive introduction – a first step into international relations/international politics.

Following an exploration of the historical context of IR, a series of individual chapters are dedicated to explaining the major areas of IR theory, from the classics right through to modern reflectivist approaches. The book includes detailed chapters on Post-colonialism and International Ethics – exposing its readers to perspectives which are too often underplayed in undergraduate IR courses. These brief but clear introductions, each written by noted expert, merit the purchase price alone.

What makes the *Globalization of World Politics* stand out is that, unlike many smaller theory-only textbooks, it places the theory in context – examining it in relation to the major issues, structures and processes of international politics, from the UN and nationalism to gender and the changing nature of war. In this sense, the book continues to be a resounding success. You will find enough in each chapter to get you started, but don't expect it to be your only port of call when writing essays! This book represents a great companion when first approaching an issue, but it is merely an introduction. You will also have to invest your time in dedicated texts to get to the heart of the subject, whilst picking up *Globalization* for a quick reminder of something old, or an introduction to something new. If you are wondering 'do I need to buy the 5th edition if I have the 4th, or even the 3rd edition' – the answer is no.

Whilst the *Globalization of World Politics* is aimed primarily at first year students, a more comprehensive and advanced entrant into the market in 2011 is ***The Oxford Handbook of International Relations***. It represents something of a 'big brother' to *The Globalization of World Politics*. This book contains a more advanced structure that necessitates a fair understanding of International Relations as a discipline – it should *not* be the first IR book that you read!

The Handbook, despite its title suggesting a smaller footprint, weighs in at a hefty 772 pages. It charts the entire path of IR scholarship, with few, if any stones left unturned from both a theory, and practice point of view. The handbook has substantial chapters on each of the theoretical approaches in IR scholarship, each coming with a twin chapter detailing the ethics of the approach. It therefore engages the reader in significantly more depth than *Globalization*. Students will further benefit from five chapters devoted to IR's various sub-fields such as Strategic Studies, International Law and International Political Economy. Whilst those of you majoring in these sub fields would be better served by a textbook that deals predominantly with your specialist area, these analyses represent an excellent aid for gaining a holistic picture of the discipline.

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Moving beyond isolated examination of theory, the Handbook devotes an entire section to examining the vitality of the discipline of IR; this is of real utility to students attempting to situate and understand the various schools of thought and mitigates the risk of simply decoupling the various theoretical approaches. As such, it clearly highlights the separate and often contradictory natures of each approach, but at the same time illustrates how the discipline is held together (albeit it – loosely!). Not stopping at political theory, the Handbook goes into political science and methodological issues, representing a surprising, yet very successful addition to the book. This reflects an emerging approach within politics departments to merge the teaching of IR with political science, and dedicated textbooks are already starting to emerge for this market.

The methodology section details sociological and psychological approaches, quantitative approaches, case study methods, and also focuses on the historical and social science methodologies that often underpin IR theory. Each of these chapters can be read and approached in isolation offering a useful point of reference for any student who suddenly finds themselves in uncharted methodological waters. With the idea of theory and methodology well situated in an academic sense, two chapters attempt to account for the relevance of IR theory to real world practice, offering students an account of theory's usefulness (or lack thereof) in policy making. In this sense, the book is conscious of its place and time, and these are amongst the most interesting chapters in the book.

The final section of the book banks further on that strength by exploring the 'big issues' such as concepts of power, responsibility, moral agency and the need for dynamic approaches to IR. The final section provides readers with an opportunity to utilise the methodological and theoretical issues covered earlier in the book, and ponder issues of global significance with a substantial vocabulary and depth of understanding. In short, the Handbook provides a tour de force, and is the single best catch-all textbook currently out there for an intermediate or advanced IR student.

While *The Globalization of World Politics* is perfect for first years and those doing introductory IR-themed modules, *The Oxford Handbook* is an absolute must buy for students who progress beyond this stage, or for those who are thinking of taking a Masters in the discipline. Every IR student would benefit from having at least one of these books close at hand during their studies.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.