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The Game of Thrones and Popular Understandings of International Relations

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Given the centrality of competition among distinct political entities, this Game of Thrones, it is easy and inevitable to invoke international relations theory to understand the world of Westeros. Various scholars have done so online with realist and constructivist approaches. My task here is to consider what do the books and TV series tell us about how people (non-IR scholars) understand international relations. That is, what do readers and viewers pick up about the nature of international relations from the series and perhaps what would IR theorists notice that others would not?[1]

First, one of the basic contrasts between students of international relations and everyone else is how much to value the role of individuals. While the canonical text of IR supposedly emphasizes individuals as one of three key angles to understand international relations, it is often over-looked.[2] In Game of Thrones, the personalities of individuals are crucial to the choices and the outcomes, just as many non-experts see International Relations. Rather than events being driven by institutions and unseen structural forces, individual Presidents, Prime Ministers, autocrats are seen as the primary movers and shakers—Bush, Obama, Thatcher, Merkl, Netanyahu, Hussein, Qadaffi, Bin Laden, Khomeini, and so on.

In the first book/season of Game of Thrones, events seem to be driven by Ned Stark's honor—that he not only leaves his home to keep his commitment, but he ultimately tells Queen Cersei, his rival, of his plans to thwart her. The personality flaws of the old King and the new (drunk and crazy, respectively) are key to understanding the outbreak of the war. While one can argue it is about legitimacy as the new King, Joffrey, may not be the blood of the old King, it is his cruelty that alienates and motivates. In the books, there are far more references to the correlation between major wars and “bad” Kings and between peace and “good” Kings. This is far too simplistic for most IR scholars, but, to be sure, we need to be reminded that individuals do matter. French Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy came from the same part of the political spectrum, but had very different stances towards NATO, for instance. So, Game of Thrones reinforces a tendency among ordinary people to emphasize personality and individuals.

The second consistent theme in the books is treachery. The way to win the Game of Thrones, like other popular models of International Relations,[3] is to take advantage of the trust of allies and others. It seems that the most successful players in the Game are those that know when and how to betray allies: Tyrion, Littlefinger, and so on. This certainly accords well with at least American understandings of diplomacy as a world of secret deals and backstabbing. The reality that scholars tend to focus on is actually the prevalence of cooperation and the need to make binding commitments. More academic attention is paid to signaling commitment than to surprise betrayals.

The third aspect of the TV show is that the economy tends to be de-emphasized. IR scholars are long conditioned to understand that the power of countries and outcomes in war tend to depend significantly on economic processes. In the books, there are some references to “international” finance as the Lannisters were borrowing money to pay for their rule, but in the TV show, there is almost no serious consideration of the economic bases of each rival. Only Daenerys faces significant problems economically, as she does not have the resources to buy the mercenaries and ships necessary to return to Westeros. Otherwise, the various contenders do not dwell much on trade and finance at least not on TV.

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The fourth theme in Game of Thrones is the power of technology. Dragons are the equivalent of nuclear weapons, which explains why Dany and her “kids” become targets of much admiration, fear and envy. While it becomes clear that one cannot win with dragons alone—one needs to have boots on the ground to hold the throne, they are game changers in this world. More clearly, Wildfire is the key to winning the Battle of the Blackwater. This plays into some basic attitudes about modern warfare—that those with the big bombs or the latest equipment win the battles and the wars. Of course, the opposite has been true for some time—that the weaker, less advanced side has won many of the wars of the last seventy years. Indeed, the question ahead is whether a side facing defeat in the quest for the thrones might resort to insurgency.

The joy of Game of Thrones is that the world that is drawn and televised is complex enough that people can read into it what they want. For normal people who are not schooled in IR scholarship, they will see individuals and lies but not the economic constraints nor the limits of technology. For IR scholars, we can see that anarchy (no one legitimate authority) can provide incentives for pre-emption and security dilemmas, but also varied reactions as there is more than one way to survive the Game of Thrones. There will be plenty of opportunities to deploy IR theory to make sense of George R.R. Martin’s world. That is probably the only sure thing when one begins to play this most dangerous of Games.

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[1] As season three is about to be televised as I write this, I am only going to focus on the first two seasons. To be clear, the basic trends in the first two books that I identify here continue in the series.

[2] A quick search of e-international relations finds references only to Waltz’s third image.

[3] The game of Diplomacy hinges almost entirely on the use of lies and betrayal to win the game.

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