

# *Theory Talks*

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THEORY TALK #50

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BEATE JAHN ON THE STATE OF NATURE,  
LIBERALISM'S OTHER, AND CLASSICAL THEORY  
IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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## BEATE JAHN ON THE STATE OF NATURE, LIBERALISM'S OTHER, AND CLASSICAL THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



International Relations Theory is profoundly entangled with the thought of classical theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Their concepts and ideas serve as the universal foundations upon which the edifices of our discipline are built. Yet rarely are the core concepts we borrow from them problematized as cultural constructs that in and by themselves served to legitimate violence and domination. Beate Jahn has dedicated herself to unearthing some of contemporary IR's classical underpinnings, linking contemporary

intervention to classical constructions of self and other through philosophy. In this *Talk*, Jahn—among others—elaborates on the cultural construction of the state of nature; relates it to the identity processes at work in liberalism; and explains the importance of classical theory in International Relations.

**What is, according to you, the central challenge or principal debate in International Relations? And what is your position regarding this challenge/in this debate?**

Well, recent debates on the end of theory suggest that there is no clear candidate for this at the moment. But I think that the central challenge to understanding contemporary international politics is the fragmentation of the subject matter of IR. By that I don't mean the fact that there are a plurality of approaches—that is, in principle, a good thing. But what I've noticed in my own work is that we're cutting up the subject matter, and that seems to me to be seriously damaging to our understanding of international politics in general. We all know that politics has something to do with economics and that economics has something to do with norms and that norms have something to do with politics—you can't properly explain either of those on its own. And yet, the approaches that we have very often do focus on just one of these aspects of international politics. And they say—no doubt about it—very interesting and insightful things about them, but I'm not sure that this really tells us more about how international politics in general works.

So it seems to me that that is really the biggest challenge that we're facing: that we're confronted with a discipline in which the subject matter is itself divided into different issue areas, separate spaces, separate times. You study America and then you don't know anything about Europe; you do Europe and then you don't know anything about Africa. Most damagingly, it tells us nothing about the relations between the different spaces, times, issues that *are* connected in and through global politics.

As far as solving that problem is concerned: the standard answer is that we need interdisciplinary approaches because this fragmentation maps onto the fragmentation of the social sciences. So we borrow from political science, or economics, or philosophy.

But I think that this doesn't work. Interdisciplinary approaches are basically starting from disciplines that are already separate and that you then somehow try to put together. This either takes the form of applying the tools of one discipline to the subject matter of another – that's what you see in Waltz ([Theory Talk #40](#)) when he applies tools of economic modeling to the subject matter of IR with the result of an economic understanding of international politics where states behave like firms in the market. The alternative is to apply the tools of different disciplines to the subject matter of IR and the outcome is again a fragmentation albeit a different one. While this kind of importing can certainly contribute to a different understanding of some aspect of IR, it does form problem since each of these approaches grasps only that aspect of social life for whose internal dynamics it was developed. Actually, it doesn't tell us anything about the relations between these different issue areas.

I think it is more promising to use a pre-disciplinary approach. I use a lot of classical authors and to me, the most valuable thing about classical theory is that a lot of it is pre-disciplinary. What does that mean? It means that these people did not actually start out from the assumption that economics was separate from politics and that politics was separate from, say, religion. And so, what you can get from classical theory is actually a theorization of the relations between all of these different dimensions of political life. That gives us a starting point in which these dimensions are connected. And we can then trace the fragmentation that arises subsequently, identify its roots but also the continuing connections that we miss when we begin with an already separated or fragmented point of view.

### **How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about IR?**

Well, I have a particular interest in liberalism and liberal internationalism and especially in the way in which liberalism relates to its 'others'. I do think that the root of this interest is actually quite biographical. Growing up in Germany in the 1960's and 70's, there was only one politically correct or accepted ideology—or worldview, if you want—which was liberalism. If you developed any sort of halfway systematic critique of liberalism from the left, you were immediately told 'Well, if you don't like it here, you can go across'—meaning to East Germany—'and live there'. If you developed any more systematic critique of liberalism from the right, of course you were immediately accused of being a Nazi. So I grew up in this extremely 'intolerant' liberal world; intolerant in the sense that everything else was more or less taboo.

And the other thing that I've noticed at the time was that we had all these foreigners living in Germany with whom I interacted on an everyday basis—lots of students particularly from the Middle East, from Turkey, from Algeria, from Iran—with lots of rich histories, all of whom had particular reasons to be in Germany. Some of them just studied there but others had fled their countries for political reasons. Now in my high school education, we learned nothing, and I mean *nothing*, about these parts of the world: where these people came from; what their histories were; their languages—what were they doing here? It just didn't exist in our curriculum. I've always found that extremely frustrating and embarrassing. And if I wanted to find out about these things, I had to go to my father's encyclopedia and read up on whatever part of the world I was interested in. I have always had the feeling that there is a connection between liberalism, this dominant, hegemonic liberalism on the one hand, and on the other, the exclusion of all those other parts of the world that didn't seem to be playing any role in its self-understanding at all.

So I first studied Arabic, Oriental studies, and Islamic sciences. It was only when I found that Medieval Arabic poems, beautiful as they are, could not really tell me anything about the

contemporary Middle East either that I switched over to political science and specialized in IR. And I basically pursued this interest in the connection between liberalism and its ‘others’ in various different forms ever since: my PhD thesis was about the perception of Mahatma Gandhi and his movement in the Weimar Republic. And then, as you know, the book on the invention of the state of nature (*The Cultural Construction of International Relations*, 2000) is about the role of Indigenous Americans in the construction of modern Western social sciences and IR in particular. And right now, I am finishing a book on liberalism and the role of colonialism in its constitution and reproduction. So this is the red thread running through my intellectual interests.

This interest of mine also means that I am inspired mostly by books outside of IR. When I was working on the discovery of the Americas, for instance, [Todorov](#) was very important, and also the work of [Anthony Pagden](#). Then there was a wonderful book by Urs Bitterly (*Die ‘Wilden’ und die ‘Zivilisierten’*) which exists in English only in a very, very abridged version. But the German version is really a great resource—hundreds of pages—covering all aspects of the impact of the discoveries on politics and social thinking, religion in Europe. But, like I say, they are not IR books. I couldn’t honestly say that there’s a particular book in IR that has been a great inspiration.

### **What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?**

If one wants to become an IR scholar, I think there are three things that are needed. The first is that you really need to feel passionately about international politics because this is what provides the motivation—the drive—to actually come up with your own thoughts and some sort of original contribution to international relations thinking. Of course it’s possible to learn the existing theories and methodologies and apply them even very well to particular cases, but I think that tends to end up being a little bit mechanical. I do think that a deep political interest in international politics is really quite necessary!

If one wants to become a good IR scholar, and actually also have fun doing what one does, I think the second thing—which seems like a contradiction, but such is life—is that one has to be able to live with the fact that one very rarely, if ever, has an impact on international politics. So while, on the one hand, one needs to be driven by the desire to change things, one also needs to be able to live with the fact that one rarely changes anything at all.

And I think the third thing is one really needs to love theory and thinking and reflecting, partly because this is what we mostly do, but also because inasmuch as we have an impact, I think it is mostly through teaching students. So, one needs to be able to impart this love of thinking and theorizing and reflecting on international politics to the students and enable them to think about IR in a different way. So I think those would be the three main things.

### **What is classical about classical political theory? What makes it classic and why is it so important for understanding contemporary international politics?**

What makes classical theory classical? The first thing one has to say is that one cannot define classical theory in terms of dates: on what grounds would we decide that say, John Stuart Mill in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was classical, while Max Weber in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not? What makes classical theory classical, to my mind, is simply that it reflects

on a different historical context; classical authors or texts provide us with a historical reference point. Now whether that historical reference point lies 500 years back or only 50 years back doesn't matter. What matters is whether the text in question reflects on a different political context. Obviously I would not call Robert Cox ([Theory Talk #38](#)) 'classical theory' because basically he comments on the same world that I'm living in, so in a way, he doesn't provide me with that reference point that's outside my own cup of tea.

As I said earlier, what is most fruitful about classical theorists is, at least for the older ones, that they tended not to think in disciplinary terms—disciplines did not exist. So, in classical texts, what strikes you most, is that politics, economics, religion, domestic and international are not separated from each other, and it gives you a good understanding of where society and international society is coming from in an integrated way.

We can use classical theory to look at what actually inspired people to properly distinguish and separate out domestic from international politics: what actually led to the separation between politics and economics? And this is what we can't really do so easily when we start from today, because we're going to read the present fragmentation back into history. We're going to go back to ancient Greeks and identify economics and politics as separate issues, which doesn't work and distorts the classics, too. I think what really is important is that we read these classical texts in their proper historical context. If we take them out of their historical context we end up with 'timeless wisdom', and that does not allow us to bridge any gaps at all.

**Do you consider that much of the use of classical theorists by IR scholars is actually a disfiguration of the classical authors by taking them out of their historical context?**

I think, traditionally, definitely: the original traditional mainstream IR scholars that engaged with classical authors (many of them, anyway) read these authors very much out of context and they were, of course, also not interested in that context. They were exactly *not* interested in the connections between different issue areas, precisely because their goal was to set up IR as a separate discipline. They were basically saying 'look, political science and thought has proven unable to deal with the question of peace and war and other international issues. And so we need to look at this international area in particular and focus on that alone'—which, in the context, made perfect sense, but it also meant that classical authors were read in a very selective way. Luckily, this doesn't really happen any longer, but that is how classical authors first came to play a role in IR.

I also think that the idea of timeless wisdom and the aim to find answers to our contemporary problems in classical theory is wrong. I don't read them to get answers; I read them, for analytical purposes, to establish historical continuities and differences—and these enable me to analyze the contemporary problems I am interested in better. But this doesn't provide answers, as far as I am concerned.

I think there is no other way of understanding contemporary problems or critically investigate and analyze contemporary concepts than by finding a reference point outside—whether spatial or temporal. Nevertheless, such analyses will always remain an interpretation; they will always be relative. There's always the truth/power connection and I don't think it can be severed. So I think it's a case of just keeping at it and focusing on the dominant nexus at any one time.

**There is a view that is popular with many IR theorists or articles to say that we are living in a time that is a radical break with the past, both meaning we need a radically novel approach to understand the issues. How can we judge this issue of whether the classical theorists still exert influence or not or whether we can speak about radical breaks with the past?**

I think there are two different issues here. On the one hand, empirically, there is absolutely no question that classical authors themselves clearly play a role in the present. They do so in broadly three different ways.

One is that they are being used quite widely to justify particular policies. Kant, for example, is today widely used not just in academic approaches like cosmopolitanism or the democratic peace thesis but also in daily newspapers and by politicians in support of certain policies. Think of Kagan's identification of Europeans as Kantians and Americans as Hobbesians (*Power and Weakness*, read it [here](#)), which was taken up in newspapers. The other day, I read an article in the Guardian that used Adam Smith. Second, they are being used in IR to structure our thinking, in providing justifications for particular schools of thought – Hobbesianism/realism, Kantianism/liberalism, Grotianism/English school, and so on.

And I think the third way in which classical theory plays an obvious role is that it simply provides the general cultural backdrop for political thinking in the West in general and IR in particular. These authors were used to define the subject matter of the discipline, so there is a kind of historical continuity there.

But the more interesting question is the one about the radical break. Personally, I don't think much about claims about radical breaks, precisely because I think there are a lot of continuities. I am always struck by how many continuities there are with the past. However, I think the more important question is: if you want to make a radical break with existing approaches to IR, how are you going to do this? Since we can't pick radically new concepts out of thin air we are forced to develop them by reinterpreting the past. I can't see any other way. Obviously one can do all kinds of reformulations, but there will always be continuities. So I'm quite suspicious of claims regarding radical breaks.

**The idea of anarchy is foundational for realist IR theory and it is basically a juxtaposition to the interstate level of the political philosophy concept of the state of nature, which is itself a hypothetical construct of social contract theories. What does it matter that it's a hypothetical or cultural construct?**

I think it matters a lot because when you present a particular idea as a hypothetical construct, what you do is you simply hide the fact that it was developed in a particular kind of context—that it is an abstraction from a particular context and the interactions that have given rise to this concept. So this abstraction, if you present it as hypothetical, hides what those conditions were and therefore also hides the baggage that these concepts carry with them.

In the case of the state of nature, I've argued that it was actually developed (or reformulated) in the context of the discovery of the Americas, the discovery of people who, according to the bible, were not supposed to exist: they didn't fit into already existing Christian world views; they didn't fit into the legal tools we had to deal with other people. So the state of nature was a solution to this problem in that it allowed the Europeans to integrate these new peoples and



lands into their worldview, but also to integrate them politically and economically and so to justify conquest in the Americas.

If we understand the state of nature as a hypothetical concept, then we lose track of the fact that this concept was developed in order to establish hierarchical relations between the Europeans and non-Europeans at the time. And it carries that baggage with it in that it allows us to develop conceptions of development and underdevelopment, conceptions of progress and backwardness, or in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, concepts of civilization and barbarism—all of these are based on the assumption that there is a state of nature and a linear logic of development for humanity as a whole. And I think, unless we show that these are actually cultural constructs and not hypothetical categories; that these are actually political concepts that were developed for particular purposes and do not describe the way in which the world works in any kind of meaningful or defensible way, then we carry on reproducing those kinds of hierarchies.

And this is not particular to the concept of the ‘state of nature’. I think all such purported ‘universals’ are never really neutral—they are always abstractions from particular social and political settings and practices and institutions derived from these particular circumstances. Of course, they exist as theoretical concepts. But I think as soon as you put practice back in—as soon as you take a concept like that and either look at where it came from or how you could apply it in practice—it immediately turns into a particular concept. So I think empirically, we only have particular concepts and never universal ones.

**One sees the term ‘liberal’ everywhere in IR—especially among more critical approaches. Yet it is hard to pin it down what it actually means... Is it a historically constant term and what do we do with such a contested concept?**

Liberalism, first of all, is a very contested concept that entails both continuities and changes. The reason for the contestation lies partly in the contradictions that are inherent in liberalism. For example, historically, liberalism was passionately anti-democratic, and now it is intimately associated with democracy! It was historically deeply implicated in colonialism and then it was committed to the principle of self-determination—and now we see liberals again advocating a move to neo-colonialism!

These contradictions, I think, lead observers of liberalism to split it up in a variety of ways - and then to fight over its proper meaning. So you get people understanding liberalism on the basis of its empirical behavior; others approaching liberalism on the basis of its core norms; others yet see liberalism in terms of its political institutions; or in terms of its economic foundations like private property, free-trade, markets, all that. These divisions are reflected in the large number of different liberal approaches—republican liberalism, commercial liberalism, normative liberalism, sociological liberalism—you name it, it’s there! So I think it’s the historical richness and diversity, but also contradictory nature of liberalism that leads people to come up with all these different conceptions of it.

Now, to my mind, there is a core to liberalism and I would follow [Locke's theoretical construction](#) in which private property establishes individual liberty; individual liberty then leads to liberal political culture; and the need to reflect this liberty in political institutions which results in government by consent or democracy; and this government’s main purpose is to protect private property, because it’s the basis of individual liberty. So I think in terms of the theoretical construction, these things hang together; they are mutually constitutive. There is no such thing as

liberalism only understood in terms of political institutions. There are lots of states with democratic political institutions, but we do not consider them all as liberal. There are lots of states out there that are capitalist but that is not enough to make them liberal.

So to me, all three elements—normative, political, and economic—hang together in liberalism and you only have liberalism if you have all of these constituting each other. And I think historically, there are two more dimensions that are really important for liberalism—crucial, actually: one is that of course in the time when Locke came up with this idea, there were only very few people who were constituted as liberal individuals through private property. Most people didn't *have* private property and could therefore also not be expected to maintain liberal principles in politics, which is why they had to be excluded from equal political rights, which is why liberalism originally was actually anti-democratic.

This disjuncture between theory and practice led to the introduction of a liberal philosophy of history which presents liberal norms like equality as rooted in the nature of the human being but historically displaced and only recoverable in the future. It explains the absence of empirical evidence for liberal claims and establishes a political program (and promises) for the future. This philosophy of history provides the basis for the temporal fragmentation of liberalism—with its weaknesses (generally, though not always) relegated to the past, its ideal realization projected into the future, and the present constituting a mixed bag of liberal achievements and failings.

And second, you get the distinction between domestic and international politics which allows liberal actors to appropriate property abroad, to import the economic benefits and to export the negative political consequences thereof. And this distinction provides the basis for domestic political emancipation and economic development based on international '[beggar thy neighbor](#)' policies. In other words, it provides the basis for the domestic/international separation—with liberalism generally defined in terms of its domestic achievements.

I think this accounts both for the continuities as well as for the discontinuities that we have in liberalism. Continuous is the need for a government that protects private property but how this can be achieved depends on the political context that accounts for the discontinuities.

So liberalism is a dynamic process which covers all the core areas of life and constitutes and re-constitutes all of us in its image. But that of course includes the non-liberal parts. It is an incredibly dynamic political force, which is much more powerful than liberals themselves realize in that it constitutes nonliberals as well. At the same time, it is less powerful than they claim in that its internal contradictions prevent it from ever generally realizing its universal promises. And to me, realism is actually a part of liberalism; realism, in a way, is the intellectual other that is produced by liberalism.

But I am sitting here criticizing liberalism—I've made it kind of my life's work to explore this concept and to be quite critical about it—and yet, I would say in many ways, I'm a liberal! I can't help being a liberal! I've been brought up within a liberal world order and to me, that world order was already liberal during the Cold War in that Communism—or Marxism if you want to put it intellectually—is also a product of liberal policies, not something outside of it.

**You look at much of the origins of universal concepts in modern political philosophy in concrete colonial encounters. Can one say that the origins of Western thought are by nature not purely Western, but always distributed?**

I do think that what usually counts as 'Western' or 'European' concepts or institutions have largely been developed in more or less extensive interaction with non-Western or non-European



societies. In fact, we can only call something Western or European if we first assume that there is a Non-western alternative out there. In that sense, I do think that Western institutions are ultimately not ‘Western’. But in a more narrow sense—of course they are. We can say [Francisco de Vitoria](#) was a Western author in that he was born in Spain and was very much shaped by that culture and so on—never mind how important the discovery of the Americas were for his work. So in a narrower sense, it’s not entirely meaningless to use those terms, but ultimately, I think they are misleading in suggesting that these are different, separate, independent developments or entities.

What are the implications of recognizing that? Well, they are highly relative! They force us to constantly reflect on the constitutive role of others for our own identities and politics. But I would say that I don’t think that this is particular to Western thought. All theoretical conceptions, worldviews, identities reflect the nature of interaction of all the people that play a role in their constitution to a greater or lesser degree. So I don’t think this is a terrible shortcoming of European thought.

**Beate Jahn studied Political Science, Sociology and German Literature at the University of Frankfurt, Germany, where she received her PhD in 1991. She subsequently taught International Relations at the Graduate Faculty of the New School University in New York. From 1994 to 1997 she received full research funding to write *The Cultural Construction of International Relations* (2000) for which she received her Habilitation (higher doctorate) in 2001. In 1998 Beate Jahn was appointed Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sussex. She is currently Director of the [Centre for Advanced International Theory](#) and will take over as editor-in-chief of the European Journal of International Relations in January 2013.**

#### *Related links*

- [Faculty Profile at U-Sussex](#)
- Read Jahn’s *IR and the state of nature: the cultural origins of a ruling ideology* (Review of International Studies, 1999) [here](#) (pdf).
- Read the first chapter of *The Cultural Construction of International Relations* (2000, Palgrave) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Jahn’s *Barbarian thoughts: imperialism in the philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (Review of International Studies, 2005) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Jahn’s *Humanitarian intervention - What's in a name?* (International Politics, 2012) [here](#)(pdf)