

Action and Reaction in the World System: The Dynamics of Economic and Political Power. Thierry de Montbrial. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780774824736

Thierry de Montbrial's *Action and Reaction in the World System: The Dynamics of Economic and Political Power* is new to most Americans who study international relations. Originally published in French in 2002, this translation is an excellent example of European thought on international relations theory. In the area of international relations the names Zbigniew Brzezinski, Max Weber, and Carl von Clausewitz are often the first used to establish credibility. With *Action and Reaction in the World System*, Thierry de Montbrial has cemented his name to this list of luminaries. For students of history, particularly those students of diplomatic history, Montbrial's contribution is an ambitious analysis of the post-Soviet era.

In this work, Montbrial does not focus on any one theory of international relations. Chapter by chapter he goes about constructing a new conceptual framework for a 'science of action,' or praxeology. Combining the methods of the various international relations theories, he has developed a model to analyze multiple problems on the international stage.

International relations is a Political Science field often viewed with derision by historians. This is unfortunate because historical interpretation is based on asking the right questions and theory is the instrument from which that analysis flows. Since the goal of historical analysis is to understand the logic used by leaders (world leaders or business leaders), or why things happen, it is important for historians to have a sense of how things work. Theory provides this intangible core. By providing readers with a view that is based on literary as well as historical thinking, *Action and Reaction in the World System* offers a scholarly examination that connects theory to reality so craved by historians. Through the use of an intellectually rigorous approach to international relations theory, Montbrial does a splendid job of connecting his theory to more recent historical events. The author's use of

eminent thinkers such as Clausewitz, Raymond Aron, and André Beaufre as grounding mechanisms, challenges the reader to understand why particular decisions were made in history and where they went wrong. He challenges the reader to use the science of action, to understand how decisions were strengthened due to an understanding of strategy. To accomplish this, Montbrial breaks the book into two parts: Theory and Aspects of Praxeology.

The division of the book is seamless and well organized. Part one of this book provides the building blocks of understanding international relations. Each chapter is designed to build upon the previous chapter's information, guiding readers from power and potency, to the concept of strategy, to the issue of economics in international relations theory. This development of knowledge is done by connecting the various aspects of international relations theory to a variety of historical events – primarily current events. For instance, when discussing the 'legality' of state actions he uses the example of the 2011 intervention in Libya. The author also brings up Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks as an example of causes and unforeseen events. Unfortunately, Montbrial does not go into much detail on the events. In this reader's opinion, this is both a positive and negative. For the book's thesis, it does little to support it. As a learning tool, the lack of in-depth discussion could allow students the opportunity to seek out more clarifying information to gain a full understanding of the issue and how the theory of praxeology was implemented or not.

As the book moves into part two, the focus ostensibly moves from building the framework of praxeology to a study of how the theory has been put into action. In doing so, Montbrial continues to identify actions and reaction, primarily from the eighteenth century, to support his theory. Engaging the ideas of globalization, the formation of new states, the European Union, and ethics *Action and Reaction in the World System* describes how global governance has been implemented. By tying these events to the actions taken by states and

individuals earlier in history, and examining them against the theories of Clausewitz, Aron, and others, the author allows readers to fully comprehend the differences and similarities in the various theories of international relations.

As is all too often found in books that focus on theory, part one is frustratingly full of theoretical jargon. Authors writing on ‘theory’ seem to find the need to create labels for the concepts they are discussing which in turn forces them to then provide definitions for those very labels and Montbrial is no different. This may be all well and good but for most readers, including this one, it is rather annoying to have names of leaders or countries replaced with phrases such as, ‘An ‘active unit’ – which is defined as ‘a human group unified by a common Culture (capital letter)’. Another example of this is Montbrial’s attempt to explain how deterrence works. In attempting to give the reader a more clear understanding of deterrence Montbrial writes ‘The higher p is, the higher pC becomes, thus raising the probability that deterrence will work.’ While this reader understands the idea behind this, it is hard to believe that most readers will find this use of mathematical equations easy to follow. If the idea is to clarify, the author has not succeeded in this instance.

As the sub-title suggests Montbrial emphasizes economics as an integral part of international relations. From start to finish, *Action and Reaction* is focused on how resources, or the lack thereof, influence the thought patterns in leaders in their planning. The idea that political power comes from calculations of a nation’s potential power, but from a combination of that power and its actual use, is an integral part of international relations theory.

Montbrial has an understanding of international policy and the various strategies used throughout history, but *Action and Reaction* assumes a large amount of prior knowledge that makes this book suited only for practitioners of international relations, professors, and graduate students. Therefore, I do not recommend this book for undergraduate students.

Because of the type of information covered, the way it is covered, and quite possibly the translation, this book is a tedious read. Nevertheless, if the reader is brave enough to wade through the prose, he or she will be rewarded with an insight to the strategies and thinking processes that world leaders have gone through and continue to go through as they make history.

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