

Young, L.D. and Carranza Ko, N. (2019) *Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations*. London: Lexington Books.

Author: [Aristidis V. Agoglossakis Foley](#) 

Aristidis V. Agoglossakis Foley (who prefers the far easier “Aris”) is a PhD candidate at the University of St Andrews. His research attempts to understand the workings of dystopian thought through a genealogical study of the genre. The end goal, if attainable, is to establish a dystopian tool of analysis, through which one can examine and critique contemporary political and societal phenomena. With a background in literature and political theory, Aris is particularly interested in finding links between the two. Additionally, he is fascinated by the study of governmentality and biopower/biopolitics in the works of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben.

Keywords: [International Relations](#); [International Relations theory](#); [Game of Thrones](#)

Published on **April 2023** | Peer Reviewed | CC BY 3.0

The Author(s) retain Copyright of this article.

In their book *Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations*, Young and Carranza Ko have identified a didactic opportunity within the long-running TV show, *Game of Thrones (GoT)*. Based on the fantasy book series *A song of ice and fire* written by George R.R. Martin, this fantasy is set in the fictional world of Westeros and Esos. Heavily based on historical events (mainly the War of the Roses), the series follows a plethora of characters who attempt to navigate lives full of war, death, love, mistrust and deceit, drawing in immense viewing figures weekly. The application of International Relations theories to this widely watched show has two potential positive outcomes: the introduction of other media, which deviate from traditional historical examples, through which students of the field can easily understand the topic at hand, and the enablement of people with a less traditional academic background to discuss and analyse concepts and ideas that are usually confined deep within the scholarship of International Relations. This book attempts to follow the same concept set out by other works that also apply IR theories to pop culture. Some examples include Neumann and Nexon’s *Harry Potter and International Relations* (2006), Daniel Drezner’s *Theories of International Politics and zombies* (2011), Campbell and Gokcek’s *The final frontier: International Relations and Politics through Star Trek and Star Wars* (2019), and

the edited volume *The interplay between Political Theory and movies: bridging two worlds* (2019), which includes a chapter by Wolfgang Muno titled “‘Winter is coming?’ *Game of Thrones* and Realist thinking’.

Young and Carranza Ko justify their decision to apply International Relations theories to the world of *Game of Thrones* using two arguments. The first is that due to its exceptionally wide audience (an estimated 18 million), there are many people who are familiar with the events that take place in this fantastical world. It is this familiarity that allows one to apply concepts and ideas to phenomena easily, without the need of much ‘in-depth historical knowledge’ (2020, p. 6). Additionally, this also benefits people who ‘do not like history or prefer pop culture’ (ibid.), thus allowing them to examine the concepts at hand. The second argument that the authors make for applying theories of IR to *Game of Thrones* is that, due to its relation to real events, different theories can very easily be used to analyse the progressing storyline. The book is split into three thematic sections: traditional IR theories, critical theories and, finally, major issues in the field of IR. For each theory, the authors apply three levels of analysis, employing Kenneth Waltz’s ideas developed in *Man, the state, and war*. Focus is first drawn to the individual level, then to the state/domestic and, finally, to the international/systemic, a format which is prevalent throughout the text.

Starting with the traditional IR theories, Liberalism and Realism, *Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations* broadly examines the ways in which the TV show can provide good examples for viewers interested in IR to understand these theories. The book pairs three different ‘types’ of Realism and three ‘images’ of Liberalism to each level of analysis (individual – state – international). First, classical realism is used to examine the position and influence of the individual. Political realism is then applied to action at the state/domestic level and, finally, neo-realism is employed to observe the international system. Waltz and Mearsheimer’s conceptions of realism feature heavily in this chapter, and examples drawn from *GoT* are used to aid in the analysis of each level. For the individual, the actions of kings and queens such as Robb Stark, Daenerys Targaryen and Joffrey Baratheon are used to create the image of the ongoing, existing war, which is a ‘result of the actions of the different self-interested leaders vying for power in an anarchic world to preserve their own self’ (2020, p. 25). Following this, the prisoner’s dilemma is explained through the actions of the states within *GoT*, along with an examination of the various forms that state-level power can take. Finally, the application of neo-realism to the world created by Martin seems to be slightly overreaching. It is understandably hard to examine the international system in a world that is seemingly devoid of one but the authors are able to provide an adequate analysis, considering the circumstances. Drawing mainly from Mearsheimer, they apply the hierarchy of greater and smaller powers and states as rational actors to the world of *GoT*, making short sporadic references to the three major powers in the show (King’s Landing, the North, and the Kingdom of Daenerys). With regards to the liberal analyses of this text, though the format followed is roughly the same, the authors have split this section in

what they dub ‘images’. ‘Image I’ focuses on domestic society through idealism (or classical liberalism), examining the ‘international system from an individual level of analysis’ (2020, p. 42). ‘Image II’ performs a state-level analysis and places great emphasis on diplomacy between states that want to avoid war. Diplomacy maintains a key role in this subsection, as the authors compare the actions of JFK and Khrushchev to the negotiations between Jon Snow and Mance Rayder, using both cases to provide examples of how the individual wish for peace may help circumvent war. Though focusing primarily on the state level of analysis, this part also observes the position of the individual in international diplomacy. Finally, ‘Image III’ applies neo-liberal institutionalism to the world of Westeros and Esos. A link is created between the Iron Bank and the IMF, observing the positionality of either institution. Though an interesting comparison, due to the nature of each institution, the link between the two could be seen as rather weak, as they do not actually share many similarities. Overall, this section on traditional theories provides a simple, yet adequate, examination of how both Realism and Liberalism, in their various forms, can be applied to the study of International Relations. Although the authors also employ the overarching lens of Liberalism to examine the themes of human rights and the international duties of the individual, it is evident that Realism is far more suited to the world of *Game of Thrones*. Despite this, an interesting argument is made for the appearance of democracy and institutions in the show. The main shortcoming of this application seems to be that, in Martin’s creation, very few of the characters desire peace over war and the accumulation of power, which, though not the sole focus of Realism, is a very central aspect of the theory.

Following this application of traditional IR theories to the narrative of *GoT*, the authors turn the focus of their analysis to critical theories, drawing from thinkers such as Wendt, Marx and Tickner. Although this section does not only concentrate on the individual level of analysis, the majority of the discussion is focused on the identity of the individual. The way in which these theories are presented may mislead the readers, as the authors have mostly excluded key aspects of critical theories, namely power relations, structures and oppression. During their examination of constructivism, Marxism and feminism, the authors provide a rather basic explanation of how each theory can be applied as a lens, through which one can conduct their analysis. The differences between these critical theories and the two more traditional ones are indicated, drawing on the nuances of each. Out of the three critical theories, Marxism is applied best. As *GoT* presents a classic feudal society, with its ingrained hierarchy and oppression, it provides fertile ground for a Marxist analysis. In their analysis, however, the authors manage to frame the application of Marxism not only on the individual/state level, but also on the international. This helps the audience to understand how Marxist theory can, in fact, be applied to the field of IR. With regards to feminist theory, this section provides an interesting analysis of the female characters in *GoT*. A rather unnecessary and incomplete comparison, however, is drawn between Brienne of Tarth and Hilary Clinton. Though both could be considered as showing strong feminist characteristics, the comparison falls short since it omits important aspects of Brienne’s character that are not mirrored in

Clinton. Brienne does not conform to traditional Westerosi gender norms, donning armour and preferring to fight as a knight in King Renly's personal guard, a position exclusively held by men. This opposition to gender normativity is so ingrained into the character of Brienne that it cannot be overlooked. A better comparison could be drawn between Clinton and Daenerys, as they share more similarities as strong female leaders.

Finally, the book concludes by examining two major IR themes: human rights and the depiction of indigenous peoples. The authors observe the position that each holds within the fictional world of *GoT*. First, by focusing on human rights and international law in the field of IR, *Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations* provides the historical context around two conventions: the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). While this section provides an ample description of the human rights and international law themes within IR, their application to *GoT* is tenuous at best. Being a show that became popular for its visceral brutality and extreme violence, any attempt to apply the notion of human rights is unnecessary; it is obvious throughout the show that the rights of the individual, especially the lower classes, are non-existent. Rather than focusing on human rights and international law, the authors could have used these themes to examine notions of morality that may exist in *GoT*. As there is no black and white, and right or wrong conception of morality, this approach could provide a far more fruitful analysis of the show: 'despite the absence of human rights norms in the feudal context of the televised series, there may be some parallels in the standards of morality in the fiction and international politics today' (2020, p. 87). Second, the authors examine the position of the Dothraki in *GoT* and observe them as the indigenous counterpart of that fictional world. The book questions the depictions that are usually applied to indigenous peoples and argues for the inclusion of more indigenous voices in IR scholarship. By focusing on the description of the Dothraki as a violent, savage race, and the hierarchy of language, the book also examines the influence that other actors (in this case Daenerys) have on their actions. This, however, is rather detrimental when attempting to question the dominant hierarchy between races. In their analysis, the authors imply that the Dothraki may not be violent by their own choice, but rather this is because of 'Daenerys' own political ambition of power' (2020, p. 96). This removes all agency from the Dothraki, negating their ability to commit violent acts of their own volition, inadvertently placing them lower in the *GoT* hierarchy, and not affording them the chance to be 'equally evil' to their non-indigenous counterparts. It seems that this section, rather than providing an IR-based analysis of *GoT*, wishes to create questions for the reader. By examining the positionality of the indigenous peoples in the field of IR, the audience ponders the exclusionary tactics that have plagued Western scholarship. The questions that this book poses, however, do not make an innovative contribution to the study of IR, as the field has, through Postcolonial and Decolonial analyses, already made progressive steps towards the goal of inclusion over the past years. The authors ignore and subsequently exclude any progress that may have been made through such work, thus bolstering and reinforcing

the exclusionary practices in IR, rather than actively combating them. The professed aims of this book would have been greatly supported by the inclusion of key postcolonial texts, such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations by Young and Carranza Ko is a good first attempt to introduce the groundwork needed for one to study the field of IR, though it focuses heavily on traditional IR theories. The book provides an interesting and fun way of making each theory manageable by applying it to the intricate, yet thrilling, world of *GoT*. Any fan of the series (or the books, for equal measure) will be able to follow the application of the theories to the world of Westeros and Esos without much issue. Also, it provides the audience with an adequate bibliography of "classic" IR texts, into which they can delve in order to research each theory further. Compared to other analyses of novels of the same genre, mentioned above, *Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations* follows a similar format. It focuses, however, on fewer IR theories and, as has been examined, provides a very slapdash application of critical theories – unlike, for example, *The final frontier*, which introduces the traditional theories and simultaneously affords equal space to Marxism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, feminism and gender politics, and environmentalism. Furthermore, the role that the show has in this book is, especially in the final two chapters, rather diminished. Instead of providing an in-depth analysis of Martin's fantasy, the reader is presented with an overview of the theories/topics, interjected by small sections which apply the chosen theory to *GoT* in a superficial manner. Therefore, the main "star" of this book is not the TV series but IR theory, which strays from the main goal of the book, as set out in the introduction. Thus, even though this book would provide an interesting way to introduce IR theories to first- and second-year IR students, it does not provide a full picture of the IR field. Hierarchies that exist in the scholarly field, especially with regards to traditional critical theories, are reproduced. Realism and Liberalism each get their own chapter, whereas critical theories are bunched together. This leads to a rather simple analysis and application of constructivism, Marxism and feminism. Furthermore, important critical theories are excluded entirely. Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism and Decoloniality are nowhere to be found in this book, diminishing their crucial contributions to the study of IR.

Bibliography

Campbell, J.R. and Gokcek, G. (2019) *The final frontier: International Relations and Politics through Star Trek and Star Wars*. London: Lexington Books.

Drezner, D. (2011) *Theories of International Politics and zombies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Muno, W. (2019) "Winter is coming?" *Game of Thrones* and Realist thinking', in Hamenstädt,

U. (ed.) *The interplay between Political Theory and movies: bridging two worlds*. Cham: Springer, pp. 135–149.

Neumann, I.B. and Nexon, D.H. (2006) *Harry Potter and International Relations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Said, E. (2003) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

Young, L.D. and Carranza Ko, N. (2020) *Game of Thrones and the theories of International Relations*. London: Lexington Books.