Essentials Of International Re Essay, Research Paper

Mingst, Karen, Essentials of International Relations. W.W. Norton & Company: London, 1999. 297pp. $33.50. 0-393-97287-9 (pbk.)

Reviewed

By

Essentials of International Relations is a text that says the same thing as any good international relations textbook but in simpler, more compact terms. Karen Mingst does this by telling the reader exactly what he needs to know without any unnecessary extras.

Chapter one, entitled , Approaches to International Relations is basically an introduction/ history of International relations. Mingst discusses the three major types of approaches in studying international relations: traditional, behavioral, and alternative. The author states, ” These approaches emerge out of different academic disciplines and require us to use different methods of study”. ( Mingst 3 ).

The author then proceeds to give examples of traditional approaches to conducting diplomacy including the Moscow summit. Earlier philosophers including, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbs, and Jean-Jaques Rouseau are mentioned along with a brief description of their works. Summing up the work of the philosophers, the author states, “The tradition laid by these philosophers contributes to the development of international relations by calling attention to fundamental relationships: those between the individual and society, between individuals in society, and between societies ” (Mingst 6). The author sums up chapter one by calling the history of international relations ” as a result of scholarly dissatisfaction with prior approaches ” ( Mingst 15).

Chapter two, entitled, The Historical Context of Contemporary International Relations is a historical description of the state and international system. The author states that the predecessors of the current international system can be found in European centered western civilizations. In order to justify this concept, the author gives us a historical overview. ” The purpose of this historical overview is to trace important trends over time- the emergence of the state and the notion of sovereignty, the development of the international state system, and the changes in distribution of power among key states “. ( Mingst 19 ) The author uses Rome and Greece as the first examples of state emergence. She then proceeds to discuss the middle, and late middle ages. Mingst credits French philosopher Jean Bodin with coming up with the concept of sovereigny. She writes, ” To Bodin, sovereignty is the ” absolute and perpetual power vested in commonwealth. ” (Mingst 27) However Bodin didn’t feel that sovereignty was without limits. He felt that leaders were subject to divine, or natural law.

Chapter three, entitled, Contending Perspectives: How to think about International Relations Theoretically analyzes the three schools of thought liberalism, realism, and Marxism. Prior to this at the beginning of the chapter, Mingst describes the various levels upon which we can analyze events and trends. In order to do this analysis, the author uses Kenneth Waltz’s idea of levels of analysis. There are three levels: the individual level where ” the personality, perceptions, choices, and activities of individual decisionmakers and individual participants provide the explanations” (Mingst 65), the state level, which is based on state characteristics, economic systems, and internal interest groups. The last level is the international system level, which focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of international and regional organizations. Mingst defines liberalism as holding that, ” human nature is basically good and that innate goodness make societal progress possible”. (Mingst 66) She goes on to describe the origins of liberal theory, which she says is found in enlightenment optimism. Many theorist are now using liberal theorizing as an answer to hard to answer questions such as why don’t democracies fight each other. The exact opposite school of thought from liberalism is realism. “Realism is based on the view of the individual as primarily selfish and power seeking.” (Mingst 70). The author cites Thucydides as contributing four of the essential assumptions of realism. First is the principal actor, which is the most important. Secondly, the state is considered a unitary actor. Third, rational actors are the decision makers. Lastly, there was a concern for security issues, which dealt with the protection of the state from foreign and domestic enemies. Marxism is the last theoretical perspective to international relations. “Marxist are concerned most with explaining the relationship between production, social relations, and power. Marxist hold that economic domination and suppression are the means of power in the world. All of these views differ, but all international relations are based on one of the three.

Chapter 4, entitled, The International System, is the author’s analysis of the international system. The international system is very important to realist, and Marxist, but does not factor in one way or another to the liberal point of view. Mingst defines a system as, “an assemblage of units, objects, or parts united by some form of regular interaction.” (Mingst 89) Liberals see the international system as a process of interaction between multiple actors and parties, but not at all as a structure. Liberals see change coming from two areas in the international system. As a result of ” exogenous technological developments” , and as a result of ” the willingness of the various actors to enter into new kinds of relationships, and because of the ability of individuals to learn new behaviors.” (Mingst 92) Realist on the other hand characterize the international system as anarchic. For both neorealists and traditional realists,” anarchy is the basic ordering principle and each state in the system must, therefore, look out for it’s own interest above all else. Realist seek to define the international system ” in terms of structure and the political power of interacting states, Marxist seek to describe and explain the structure itself.” (Mingst 102) Marxist desire change, and an explanation as to why change is so difficult to achieve. Marxists feel that there should be a continuos cycle of power, struggle, and then a new power. Realist define the international system in terms of polarity, Marxist in terms of stratification. Liberals see it as being a positive arena for interaction.

Chapter 5, entitled, The State, is the author’s analysis of what exactly makes a state. There are four conditions to being a state. ” First, a state must have a territorial base, a geographically defined boundary. Second, within it’s borders, a stable population must reside. Third, there should be a government to which a population owes allegiance. Finally, a state has to be recognized diplomatically by other states.” ( Mingst 110) Liberals see the state as having to maintain the basic rules of the game. Realist believe that the state is a minor player constrained by the international system. Marxist see the state from two different views. One view sees it as the ” executing agent of the bourgeoisie ” (Mingst 113) The other view sees the state operating within the capitalist system. A states major source of credibility is power. This is the ability to influence other states, and to have the ability to control situations, and make the outcome different than it would have been. There are both tangible and intangible sources of power. There are many challenges to a state, the biggest being, the increasing international

I feel that the book was excellent for various reasons. “Pedagogical elements including introductory questions to each chapter, informational boxes, tables, and maps are fully integrated into the book s design to reinforce the central topics. With so much supplementary material in journals, newspapers, and on the Web that can be incorporated into international relations courses, Essentials of International Relations provides students with a firm foundation for study in this dynamic field.” I would definitely recommend it to other readers.