Understanding and Applying Theoretical Lenses—Sample Essay

In 2003, the United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, launched an invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. According to the Bush Administration, the rationale behind the invasion was that Iraqi Saddam Hussein posed an immediate threat to US national security as a result of his possession of weapons of mass destruction and his support for terrorists. Subsequently, the rationale behind the prolonged occupation of Iraq was the need to build a stable, democratic government in Iraq, though this initiative proved difficult, as violence and insurgency persisted in Iraq for years. Below, this essay applies the theories of international relations addressed in class—realism, liberalism, constructivism, and Marxism—to explain this important event in world politics. I conclude by assessing these theories and explaining how they both differ from and complement one another.

An explanation of the Iraq War from a realist perspective would emphasize two concepts: that of international anarchy and that of the security dilemma. Realism focuses on the distribution of power in the international system as the key driver of international politics. Further, realism characterizes the international system as operating in a state of anarchy—that is, there is no ultimate arbiter to settle disputes. In this regard, realism usefully explains both the events leading up to the Iraq War and the rationale for the invasion itself. Though the United States initially tried to pursue action against Iraq through the United Nations, it was unable to gain support to do so. A realist perspective might underscore the idea of international anarchy—that there is no true
world government and therefore states exist in a “self-help” world. Thus, if states are to address threats to their security, ultimately they must do so on their own.

The perceived threat that Iraq posed to the United States, particularly the charge made by the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein both had and intended to use weapons of mass destruction, can in part be explained by the realist concept of the security dilemma. According to the security dilemma, because a state can never truly know the intentions of other states, any effort to increase a state’s power, even defensive efforts, can be perceived as offensive. Even though it was later learned that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction, the security dilemma in part explains why the United States might have thought that Iraq posed a threat.

Realism’s focus on the distribution of power also calls attention to issues such as polarity, the balance of power, and alliances. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the international system ceased being a bipolar system and became a unipolar system, with the United States as the only true global hegemon. Realism would say that in its effort to maintain its hegemony, the US would try to prevent the emergence of any major regional powers. Viewed from this perspective, the US invasion of Iraq could be understood as an effort to directly confront Iraq’s power in an important region like the Middle East. Further, the desire to build a democratic, pro-Western government in Iraq could be understood as an effort to counterbalance the emergence of another hostile power in the region (particularly, in this case, Iran). With regard to alliances, though many countries initially opposed the US war with Iraq, a realist perspective would say that the Bush administration hoped that a successful initial
invasion and defeat of the Iraqi army would cause other countries to bandwagon and support the United States.

Finally, it is important to draw a distinction between how a classical realist explanation of the Iraq War would differ from a neorealist explanation. While neorealism emphasizes the distribution of power in the international system as a whole and views states as unitary actors, classical realism would draw our attention to the calculations and decision making of the particular leaders involved in this issue. In this regard, the fact that George W. Bush’s father, former president George H. W. Bush, had previously gone to war with Saddam Hussein and that Hussein once tried to assassinate George H. W. Bush, would play an important role in a classical realist explanation of the Iraq War.

A liberal explanation of the Iraq War could either critique or support the Iraq War, depending on which concepts from liberalism we emphasize more. Given liberalism’s emphasis on the role of international institutions in mitigating conditions of international anarchy, a liberal perspective might criticize the United States’ unilateral approach to attacking Iraq. This perspective might emphasize the importance of working through the United Nations and point to the lack of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as evidence that the UN inspections program was a success.

However, an important concept from liberalism is the idea that the regime type in a state is an important factor with regard to how that state behaves in the international system. In particular, one of the main ideas in liberal thinking is the democratic peace thesis, which holds that democracies do not go to war with one another. In this regard, the Bush administration’s decision to oust Saddam Hussein’s government and build a
democratically elected government is consistent with the democratic peace thesis, though the method of doing so may not be consistent with liberalism more broadly.

A constructivist approach to understanding international relations would focus on the role of identity and norms in the international system, and, more generally, the mutual co-constitution of agents and structures. In this regard, constructivism emphasizes change in the international system. According to Alexander Wendt, while the international system may indeed exist in a state of anarchy, “anarchy is what states make of it.” That is, while states are indeed constrained by the structure of the international system, they continuously influence and remake this structure through their actions. For example, the decision of the United States to unilaterally take action in Iraq undermined the norm that such an action must have international approval. On the other hand, had the US chosen to constrain its actions to those approved by the United Nations, it would have strengthened international norms pertaining to global governance and the role of international institutions.

Constructivists also emphasize the role of identity in world politics. Thus, while many countries in the world possess weapons of mass destruction, those weapons that were purported to be in Iraq were seen as a threat because of the identity of Iraq vis-à-vis the United States. Again, the actions taken by either country can reinforce or undermine these identities, as exemplified by the changing relationship between the US and Iraq in the decades preceding the Iraq War (Iraq under Saddam Hussein was once an ally of the United States).

Finally, a Marxist perspective would emphasize the class basis of the Iraq War. In this regard, the fact that a rich “first world” country in the “global north” was attacking
a relatively poor but resource-rich country in the “global south” is consistent with the pattern of exploitation of the masses by the ruling class that characterizes Marxism’s historical narrative. The desire to control Iraq’s oil reserves underscores the material element of “historical materialism” and the Marxist idea that history is shaped by the material basis of society. A Marxist perspective might also draw our attention to the transnational capitalist class (oil company executives, oil-rich autocratic governments of Gulf states that were unfriendly to Saddam Hussein, etc.) colluding to influence the US government to go to war in Iraq. In addition, Marxists would note the ideological elements of the superstructure that enabled such aggressive behavior on the part of the United States, especially attitudes regarding militarism and the high status of the military in American society.

This essay demonstrates the importance of applying different theoretical lenses to understand issues in international relations. While no one theory has the “right answer,” each theory highlights different elements and concepts to explain international affairs. For example, according to realism, power cannot be ignored, yet leaders nonetheless frequently seek to justify their actions in the context of the liberal emphasis on the important effect of spreading democracy throughout the world. Constructivism highlights the important role of norms and identity, which are also frequently invoked by leaders. Constructivism also draws our attention to the possibility of change in the international system, an aspect that scholars contend is absent from realist thinking. For example, critics of realism often point out realists’ failure to anticipate the end of the Cold War. Finally, Marxism usefully draws our attention to the role of class and the
material basis of historical change, and in emphasizing the role of class, also instructs us to look beyond national boundaries for sources of power in international relations.