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Author(s): J. Samuel Barkin

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Realist Constructivism

J. SAMUEL BARKIN

Department of Political Science, University of Florida

Constructivism appears to have taken a place in the literature on international relations (IR) theory in direct opposition to realism. Constructivists who claim their methodology is incompatible with realism focus on the association between realism and both materialism and rationalism. Realists who claim their paradigm is incompatible with constructivism focus for the most part on a perceived tendency for constructivists to be idealists or utopians. Neither argument, however, holds up. This essay examines constructivist epistemology and classical realist theory, contending that they are, in fact, compatible; not that constructivism is necessarily realist, but that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other. Having a realist constructivism could prove useful in IR theory beyond clarifying methodological debates, including helping to specify the relationship between the study of power in international politics and the study of international relations as a social construction.

Constructivism appears to have taken a place in the literature on international relations (IR) theory in direct opposition to realism. Examples of this opposition can be found in a number of places. Constructivist theory came into the IR mainstream as a critique of a variant of realism: structural realism (Wendt 1987; Dessler 1989; Onuf and Klink 1989). Self-proclaimed constructivists often have (or at least are seen to have) worldviews that fall within liberalism, broadly defined, and often accept that categorization. Moreover, some recent constructivist theorizing argues explicitly that constructivism and realism are logically incompatible (for example, Wendt 1999; Patomäki and Wight 2000) or, at least, antagonistic (Lebow 2001). International relations pedagogy is also increasingly defining realism and constructivism as being categorically distinct, as witnessed by the increasing tendency in IR textbooks, even at the introductory level, to define realism and constructivism as two of three or more distinct paradigms in the field (for example, Hughes 2000; Kegley and Wittkopf 2001; Lieber 2001).

To claim that constructivism is an IR paradigm in the way that realism or liberalism are is misleading, and the tendency to do so in textbooks is rarely mirrored in the scholarly literature. In the latter, constructivism is usually identified as an ontology, epistemology, or methodology. As such, it is usually defined as being distinct from either materialism or rationalism. Recent state-of-the-field exercises (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998; Ruggie 1998), in fact, identified the rationalism–constructivism controversy as the central debate in contemporary IR theory. Constructivists who claim their methodology is incompatible with realism focus on the association between realism and both materialism and rationalism. Realists who claim their paradigm is incompatible with constructivism focus for the most part not on the methodology per se but on a perceived tendency for constructivists to be idealists or utopians.

Neither argument, however, holds up to careful scrutiny. Claims by constructivists that realist theory is incompatible with intersubjective epistemologies and methodologies are based on either caricatures or very narrow understandings of realism. And realist critics of constructivism are similarly guilty of inferring from the worldviews of some (perhaps many) practicing constructivists that the methodology is inherently biased toward liberalism. An examination of constructivist epistemology and classical realist theory suggests that they are, in fact, compatible; not, of course, that good constructivism is necessarily realist, but that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other.

The purpose of this essay is to conduct such an examination. The first step in doing so is to define terms and to clear up some of the terminological confusion surrounding the discourse connecting constructivism and realism. The second step is to make the argument that a realist constructivism (or, for that matter, a constructivist realism) is epistemologically, methodologically, and paradigmatically viable. The final step is to discuss what a realist constructivism might look like, and where it fits in the study of international relations more broadly. Having such an approach could, among other things, fulfill several useful functions. One function is to clear up a number of debates in the field in which the protagonists speak past, rather than to, each other. Another function is to clarify the relationship between, on the one hand, the study of power and the study of ideals in international relations and, on the other, the study of the social construction of international politics. A final function is to act as a bridge between mainstream approaches to international relations and critical and postmodern approaches that view both constructivism and realism as problematic, albeit for different reasons.

Definitions

Part of the reason so many scholars in the field talk past each other when discussing issues of paradigm and epistemology is terminological confusion. Scholars tend to redefine terms frequently, creating a situation in which the same term is used by different authors with very different meanings. This observation holds for most of the key terms in this essay—and certainly for the two main concepts: realism and constructivism. The confusion is exacerbated by individual authors who provide different definitions for the same words. For example, Alexander Wendt (1999) speaks of both political and scientific realism, arguing that the two are incompatible. He also provides two definitions of idealism, as the 'ism of ideas and the 'ism of ideals—two quite different concepts. We will address idealism and scientific realism shortly. The first step, however, is to define the two terms most central to this essay—constructivism and realism (political)—and to specify how they will be used here. Both terms are defined in a way that includes as many scholars in the self-defined constructivist and realist research communities as possible.

Constructivism is the easier of the two terms to define inclusively. Most (possibly all) self-described constructivists would agree that the defining feature of this approach is a focus on the social construction of international politics. Constructivists see the facts of international politics as not reflective of an objective, material reality but an intersubjective, or social, reality (Onuf 1989). In other words, what actors do in international relations, the interests they hold, and the structures within which they operate are defined by social norms and ideas rather than by objective or material conditions.

Within this broad definition, constructivists differ considerably. One plane on which they differ is the extent to which there is an empirically identifiable reality to be identified and studied. Opinions tend to coalesce into one of two epistemologies: one argues that an identifiable reality exists out there and can be accessed through empirical research; the other contends that we can never know for sure if what we observe really exists independently of our observation of it and, therefore, no true

reality exists for empirical research to find. These two epistemologies are known variously as “neoclassical” and “postmodernist” constructivism (see Ruggie 1998) as well as “thin” and “thick” constructivism (see Wendt 1999). The case for a realist constructivism will be made in this essay by focusing on the neoclassical variant of constructivism because it is the more difficult case to make. Postmodern constructivism is generally more accepting of the centrality of power in politics, and power, as is argued below, is the core concept of realism. The postmodernist response, that realism is inherently foundationalist, will be addressed later in this section and in the next.

The harder to define of the two basic terms is realism because so many definitions abound that seem, on their face, to be mutually incompatible. To get to the point, the common feature of realism—that is, the concept which is to realism as intersubjectivity is to constructivism—is power. This observation may seem to some readers obvious to the point of banality. But many contemporary definitions of realism give power little prominence and fail to indicate the extent to which they ultimately rely on it (for example, Mearsheimer 1994/1995; Jervis 1998; Legro and Moravcsik 1999). Power, to other readers, may seem too broad a category to be particularly useful in the analysis of international relations; this criticism will be addressed below. To make the case that power is the core concept of realism, we must look at the range of definitions of realism that exist, noting the extent to which they are ultimately derived from propositions about the centrality of power in international relations.

The term realism came into the IR discourse in reference to the need to study international politics as they are, not as we feel they should be (see Schuman 1933; Rommen 1944; Kirk 1947; Morgenthau 1948; Carr 1964). The logic behind this need centered around power. We cannot, by wishing politics were different, make them so because we do not have the power; therefore, we must work within the existing power structure (Lasswell 1935; Wight 1946; Morgenthau 1948; Carr 1964). The seminal works developing realist theory in the United States explicitly defined realism as being about power. Hans Morgenthau (1985:31–32), for example, made all the study of international politics about power by definitional fiat. He defined political science as the social science concerned with power. If we were to study some element of international relations that did not revolve around power, we would be studying international economics, or international law, or international sociology rather than international politics. In taking this stance, Morgenthau (1948:15) was not arguing that international law, economics, or sociology are irrelevant. What he was saying, however, is that, in the international domain, politics defined as power is important and merits study in its own right.

In the more than half a century since *Politics among Nations* (Morgenthau 1948) was first published, this basic definition of realism has been built upon to the point that power, the original kernel of the definition, has occasionally gotten lost. Beyond power, contemporary definitions of realism usually contain some combination of the following: the analytic centrality of states, their interest in survival, the primacy of material capabilities, and rationality (for a review of definitions of realism, see Donnelly 2000). Together these elements show a clear lineage from the core realist concept of power, but often with little recognition of how they relate to the ideas from which they descend. Looking at these concepts one at a time allows us to reconnect them.

Many contemporary definitions of realism assume that the state is the central actor in international politics. For early realists, this premise was more a matter of observation than of deduction. The major political events during the first half of the twentieth century were the two world wars, and these wars were fought by and between states. States were the organizations in international politics with power. Indeed, no other organizations had much effective power internationally; therefore states mattered. But E. H. Carr (1964:224–235) concluded that though states were

currently the locus of power in global politics, they need not necessarily remain the central actor. Since then, however, states have, almost by habit among realists, been presented as a definitional element of realism in their own right (see, for example, Jervis 1998). One effect of this removal of states from observational to definitional centrality is the argument, advanced by both critics of realism and some neorealists, that what happens within states does not matter to realists. But few realist theorists (and few seminal neorealist theorists, for that matter) make this argument. In realist theory, what goes on within the state both determines the extent to which states are powerful and defines what their goals for that power are.¹ Classical realist theory is, in fact, very much a first image theory, which was Kenneth Waltz's (1959, 1979) critique of it. Attempts by IR theorists, such as Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik (1999), to draw the distinction between realist and liberal theory by proposing that the former was a third-image theory and the latter combined both first- and second-image theories are, thus, misplaced. In realism, states matter because they have power; people and domestic institutions matter because they determine how much power states will have, and how that power will be used.

The assumption that states share an interest in survival flows from the just discussed premise of state centrality. For realist theory, assuming an interest in survival is a generalization rather than a categorical rule: states that are not interested in their own survival are not likely to last in an anarchical world. Therefore, we can assume that those states that have lasted and populate our contemporary world are those with an interest in survival (Morgenthau 1948:13; Waltz 1979:74–77; Jervis 1998:980–981). Survival need not be the only, or even the key, motivator of state behavior; however, in situations in which survival is relevant, states are likely to take it into account. Some critics of realism contend that the assumption that states value survival borders on the trivial, and, therefore, there must be some further implicit assumptions in realism about state preferences (see, for example, Legro and Moravcsik 1999:14; Wendt 1999:235). But the triviality of this assumption is precisely the point. In a world in which power matters, states need only have in common a basic concern for survival to think in terms of relative power (see, for example, Waltz 1979; Grieco 1997; Schweller 1998).

The third concept that often appears in contemporary definitions of realism is rationality. To many, perhaps most, current students of political science, the term rationality invokes rational choice theory (see Kahler 1998; Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998). This approach to the study of politics begins with the premise that we can usefully study political actors, given their exogenously defined preferences, as if they were instrumentally rational. The use of rationality in the context of realist theory, however, does not invoke the assumptions of rational choice theory. Two elements concerning rationality arise in classical realism. The first is that we, as scholars, should be rational, which is to say ordered and “scientific” in a loose usage of that term, in our study of politics. In other words, we should look for general patterns of behavior, an admonition accepted by a wide range of (though certainly not by all) social scientists.² The second way in which rationality is discussed in realism is more prescriptive than predictive—not that statespeople necessarily *will* behave rationally, but that in order to pursue the interests of their states they *should*. That is, if national policymakers want to make a difference rather than just a statement in international politics, they must rationally

¹Note that Kenneth Waltz (1979:121–122) refers to this sort of thing as the study of foreign policy as distinct from the systemic study of international politics and argues that it can only be done in a reductionist way. But he never dismisses it as unimportant.

²This admonition, however, does not imply a commitment to a pure deductive model of social science, the model ascribed to rationalists by constructivists such as Ruggie (1998:880) and Wendt (1999:48). Morgenthau (1946), in fact, used the term “scientific man”—one who would deduce solutions to the problems of international politics from first principles—as his polemical foil to realists in the same way that Carr (1964) used “utopians.”

marshal their power resources. In Morgenthau's (1985:10) words, "foreign policy ought to be rational in view of its own moral and practical purposes." Thus, what is often read as an assumption of rationality is, in point of fact, a prescription for rationality based on an assumption of the centrality of power.

The fourth concept, the assumption of the primacy of material capabilities, is something more often ascribed to realist theory by its critics than claimed by realists themselves (see, for example, Kratochwil 1984:310; Wendt 1999:30). Realists, it is true, often focus more on military power than on other forms of power, whether economic, organizational, or moral (for example, Mearsheimer 1994/1995). This predisposition can be attributed to the assumption that the military power of an adversary can threaten the very existence of a state, whereas other forms of power cannot. (Of course, whether or not this assumption is valid is open to debate). It can also be ascribed to the context in which much of the seminal realist work took place, the Cold War (see Oren 2000), or to the ease with which the tools of military power can be counted. But in situations in which no imminent military threat exists, as is currently the case among many of the world's major powers, no a priori reason exists within realist theory to privilege military power over other forms of power. During the Cold War, there was a cottage industry in counting up military manpower and hardware that owed more to the behavioral revolution than to realist theory, and it is, perhaps, from this development that realism has come to be associated with material capabilities.³ But few realist theorists subscribe to such an assumption, and many argue explicitly that the sources of power are nonmaterial (see, for example, Waltz 1979:131; Morgenthau 1985:34–36).

When the assumption of materialism is ascribed to realism by its critics, then, one has to wonder why this particular straw man is being created. One reason might be to make realism more compatible with rational choice theory. It can, in fact, allow us to treat power the way that formal theorists treat preferences. For classical realist theory, however, power is at least partially endogenous: one cannot know how much power one has without knowing how it is being used. The materialization of power resources has the effect, though, of making power an exogenous variable; it becomes something that is out there, measurable and independent from immediate political activity. Formal theory must similarly take the preferences of actors as exogenous to the game being played. So through the materialization of power, realism becomes "rationalized" both for rationalists and their critics (for example, Legro and Moravcsik 1999 and Wendt 1999 respectively).

The previous discussion implies that power is the core, and common, element of realist theory. Of the four concepts imbedded in contemporary definitions of realism, the analytic centrality of states and an interest in survival are descended from the original realist focus on power; the third concept, rationality, when used in the realist rather than the rational choice manner, suggests a focus on power as well. The fourth, the primacy of material capabilities, is more an effect of the behavioral turn in political science research during the mid-Cold War period and its rationalist turn in the late-Cold War period than an expression of a core realist idea. And, yet, it is this fourth feature, rather than a focus on power, that is most often invoked to argue that constructivism and realism are incompatible.

Realism and Constructivism

Many constructivists explicitly accept that power matters in international relations. Wendt (1999:13–14), for example, notes that to the extent realism is about power, he too is a realist. He and other constructivist theorists often part company with

³It is important to note, however, that the most dedicated of the counters of material capabilities, such as those involved in the Correlates of War project, described themselves as peace theorists or conflict resolution theorists and as anti-realist (see, for example, Singer 1990; Vasquez 1998).

realists because of the belief that, at its core, realist theory sees politics as having “a material rather than a social basis” (Wendt 1999:13–14). This charge has three parts: that realist theory (1) focuses on material capabilities, (2) views human nature as materialistic, and (3) emphasizes empiricism. These three charges are distinct from one another, and, if any of them were to hold, it would indicate an incompatibility between realism and constructivism. But, under scrutiny, none of them are sustainable.

The first of these charges, that the realist understanding of power favors a focus on material capabilities, has already been alluded to above. It is certainly true that many self-described realist researchers have attempted to reduce the idea of power to quantitative measures. But no reason exists to believe that such a procedure is inherent to realist theory. Indeed, the behavioral, and thus quantitative, turn in IR is generally considered to have happened decades after the realist turn, suggesting that the latter cannot be inherent to the former (Bull 1972; Vasquez 1983; Holsti 1985). Many seminal realist theorists, furthermore, have argued explicitly that nonmaterial factors are central to a complete understanding of power in international relations (see, for example, Morgenthau 1948; Wolfers 1962; Carr 1964; Waltz 1979; Gilpin 1981; Strange 1987). Moreover, students of power analysis, some of them self-described realists, have pointed out how complex and multifaceted power analysis can be (see, for example, Lasswell and Kaplan 1950; Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Baldwin 1989; Hall 1997). Even studies of military issues conducted by those calling themselves realists after the behavioralist turn often focused on such nonmaterial elements as doctrines (see, for example, Mearsheimer 1983; Posen 1984). The fact that some realist researchers use quantitative measures of brute material capabilities should, therefore, not be interpreted to mean that this sort of materialism is inherent in realism.

The second charge is that realist logic requires certain materialist assumptions about human nature and human needs that govern the behavior of actors in international politics (Wendt 1999:30, 131–133). The particular assumptions ascribed to realist understandings of human nature often include the presence of insecurity and fear (Waltz 1959; Wendt 1999). It is true that realists must begin with some theory of human nature. Indeed, as Wendt (1999:131) has observed, all social theory must begin with some theory of human nature, even if it is that human nature is infinitely malleable. There exist theories of human nature that are incompatible with political realism, including those that argue that human nature is infinitely malleable or ultimately perfectible. But we can also identify a broad range of theories of human nature that are compatible with both realist and constructivist theory, including those that suggest that individuals differ. (For a general discussion of this literature, see Sterling-Folker 2002). Realist logic does not require that all individuals be aggressive or self-interested, simply that some of them are. In other words, the theory requires that all individuals cannot be nonaggressive and other-oriented. As long as some people will try to accumulate power, and no countervailing power stops them, other people face insecurity. This logic is, for example, the heart of Randall Schweller’s (1998) distinction between status quo and revisionist states. Critics might respond that, phrased as such, realist logic is sufficiently broad and obvious as to be banal; this criticism will be addressed below.

The third charge is that political realism is, variously, “positivist” or “empiricist” and, as a result, incompatible with constructivist methodology (see, for example, Pettman 2000 and Wendt 1999 respectively). This charge seems on its face to be methodological, but a number of constructivist theorists have recently taken to making it at the ontological level. This criticism is made via a reference to “scientific” (Wendt 1999) or “critical” (Patomäki and Wight 2000) realism, a concept in the philosophy of science that bears no relationship to “political” realism. The essence of scientific realism as applied in the social sciences is the idea that real social structures exist out there, independent of our observation of them.

In short, the view is that a “there” actually exists out there (see Hellman 1983; Leplin 1984; Bhaskar 1986; Archer et al. 1998). This perspective contrasts with the logical positivist-empiricist notion that we can only know what we observe (for example, Ayer 1959; Lapid 1989) and the postmodern-deconstructivist notion that, because all social knowledge is discursively created, no social structures can exist out there independent of our discourses about them (for example, George 1994). Both the logical positivist and deconstructivist positions share the premise that there can be no knowledge of social phenomena separate from the observer, whereas the scientific realist position is that social phenomena can exist apart from the observer and can be adduced even when not directly observed (Patomäki and Wight 2000). The constructivist critique political realist ontology associates with these anti-scientific realist positions.

This last charge has evolved over time. Postpositivists (for example, Ashley and Walker 1990a) in the positivist-postpositivist debate often dismiss realism as positivist and, as a result, incompatible with new trends in thinking about IR. But, from a constructivist perspective, such a dismissal is problematic because any definition of positivism broad enough to capture the range of realist thinking (as in, for example, Walt 1987; Snyder 1988) is broad enough to capture much of contemporary constructivist thinking as well. Many critics of realism also conflate it with neorealism, understandable given the prominence of Waltz’s (1979) work in the last two decades of the last century, but problematic given that his work is itself an explicit critique of classical realism.⁴

Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight (2000) argue that political realism is too close to both the logical positivist position and the deconstructivist position, in that all share an anthropocentric view of knowledge that is incompatible with the scientific realism that they argue should underlie constructivism. They (Patomäki and Wight 2000:219–223) trace this anthropocentrism back through the seminal realists of the middle of the twentieth century, all the way back to the ontological writings of Hume and Kant in the eighteenth century.⁵ In doing so, they associate the development of political realism, and its introduction into IR within the United States by Morgenthau, both with the empiricism of Hume and the postmodernism of Nietzsche. The point of this genealogy is to posit a sharp disjuncture in realist thought between the realms of the empirically observable and of moral thought. In a sense, it provides a way of restating the charge that political realism is positivist and of arguing that positivism understood narrowly is incompatible with scientific realism.

Morgenthau’s writing on the “science” of political science can, indeed, seem confusing at first reading. In *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, he (Morgenthau 1946) argues that “scientific man,” who would solve the problems of politics through the application of reason, is incapable of successfully addressing those problems. In contrast, in *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau (1985:5) speaks of political realism as “believing . . . in the objectivity of the laws of politics” and “the possibility of developing a rational theory that reflects” those laws. Some constructivist critics of political realism posit that Morgenthau underwent a radical change of mind in the period between writing the two books. Patomäki and Wight (2000:222), for example, interpret the earlier work as an expression of skepticism that we can find scientific knowledge about the world, an interpretation that seems irreconcilable with the Morgenthau of *Politics among Nations*.

But to make this claim is to confuse predictive with prescriptive rationality, as was discussed above. What Morgenthau (1946:122–131) is arguing against in *Scientific*

⁴On the “rationalization” of realism suggested by neorealism, see Spegele (1996), who speaks of “commonsense” and “concessionary” realism rather than classical and neorealism.

⁵This genealogy is contestable; in some places Morgenthau seems quite dismissive of the phenomenal–noumenal distinction that they accuse him of implicitly sharing (see, for example, Morgenthau 1946:170–171).

Man is the attempt to understand the world as a rational place rather than to rationally understand the world. What he (Morgenthau 1948:3–5) is contending in *Politics among Nations* is that there is a problem in attempting to rationally understand the world, when the world is not, in fact, a rational place. In other words, both books are arguing the same point but coming at it from different directions. This interpretation does suggest an incompatibility between classical realism and rational choice theory, or what Ruggie (1998) calls neo-utilitarianism.⁶ It also, however, suggests a compatibility between classical realism and neoclassical, or thin, constructivism. The antipathy to “scientific man,” the acceptance of the importance of ideas, and the insistence that historical context matters found in the works of Morgenthau (see 1946:130 for a discussion of “social causation”) fit quite well into a statement of constructivist epistemology, whether neoclassical or postmodern. And the ontology of classical realism, accepting a reality separate from subjective opinion but not, as a result, denying the role of unobservables such as morality, is hardly the sort of brute materialism that constructivist critics sometimes associate with realism.

All of this leaves us having dealt with the proposed incompatibilities between constructivism and political realism, the latter being defined as the study of IR that focuses on power relations in the international sphere. Many readers, no doubt, will have begun to wonder by this point, so what? Has realism been made compatible with constructivism by defining the concept so broadly that it fails to exclude anyone. To answer this question, we return to an earlier observation about the terminological confusion in the field. Recall, we noted that Wendt (1999) uses the terms realism and idealism in two different ways. The distinction between realisms, political and scientific, was the subject of this section. The distinction between idealisms, a focus on ideas versus a focus on ideals, is the subject of the next.

Ideas, Utopias, and Liberals

“Ever since Carr’s devastating critique, ‘idealist’ has functioned in IR primarily as an epithet for naivete” (Wendt 1999:33). Wendt makes this point after distinguishing between idealism as a theory of social politics and Idealism (which he capitalizes) as a theory of IR. The first idealism refers to social theory that looks at the importance of ideas, whereas the second refers to a theory of IR based on ideals rather than on realism. Wendt makes the claim that he is involved in doing the former, not the latter. This claim is disputed below. Interestingly, in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, Carr (1964) does not use the term idealism at all; instead, he discusses utopianism. Similarly, Moravcsik (1997:514) tries explicitly to distance himself from “liberalism’s historical role as an ideology” in his redefinition of liberal theory in IR. Liberalism is the foil to realism in Morgenthau’s (1946) *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*. Both Wendt (1999:39) and Moravcsik (1997:514) share in common a desire to liberate the label each applies to himself, idealist and liberal respectively, from normative associations in an attempt to create “scientific” and, presumably therefore, value-free, social science.

Both these scholars are, in fact, trying to rehabilitate the terms idealism and liberalism (although in very different ways) from the charge that these concepts reflect a normative approach to social science: an ideology. The goal in this section is to rehabilitate the normative approach to IR from which both Moravcsik and Wendt are striving to distance themselves. As rhetorical foils to realism, Carr (1964)

⁶This observation speaks to some recent attempts, such as that by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik (1999), to redefine realism in rationalist terms. Such attempts can be seen in the context of this essay more as entries in the rationalist–constructivist debate than as entries in interparadigmatic debates. In effect, redefining classical realism in rational choice terms can be viewed as a way of associating the traditional approach to postwar IR with rational choice, thereby increasing the marginalization of critics of rationalist approaches.

used “utopianism” and Morgenthau (1946) used “liberalism” and “scientific man.” Although the terms that Carr and Morgenthau employed seem quite different, both were, in fact, referring to the sort of liberal idealism and scientific humanism often associated with political scientists in the tradition of Woodrow Wilson (see Kegley 1993; Schmidt 1998). The essence of this school of thought is that people have consistent and reasonable (or at least predictable) preferences, which they pursue rationally.⁷ As a result, well-designed political institutions within which people can rationally pursue their preferences in a way that interferes as little as possible with the abilities of others to do so will appeal sufficiently to people’s reasonableness as to obviate any necessity for power politics. In other words, for the liberal idealist the right political structure can, indeed, insure perpetual peace, to use Immanuel Kant’s phrase (1957).

The classical realist response is that no ultimate solutions are available. “Peace is subject to the conditions of time and space and must be established and maintained by different methods and under different conditions of urgency in the every-day relations of concrete nations. The problem of international peace as such exists only for the philosopher” (Morgenthau 1946:217). That is, the right institutions can deal successfully with particular political problems at a particular time and place, but this nexus of problem, time, and place is historically unique; there will inevitably be other problems in other times and places. To the extent that many, if not most, international political problems have at least some distributional ramifications, the relative gains or preferential distributions in the solutions to new problems, or problems in different times and places, will likely reflect the interests of the actors best able to stake their claim to those gains, that is, the actors with the greater power. As such, no matter how well designed the structure of political institutions, power will always be the ultimate arbiter of outcomes in international politics.

So, then, is there ultimately nothing other than power that matters in international relations? Quite the contrary, for Morgenthau (1946:177–178), people are inherently moral as well as political animals; all political acts have ethical significance. For Carr (1964:235), “it is an unreal kind of realism which ignores the element of morality in any world order.” In classical realism, moral theory in the absence of a recognition of power is a futile exercise as the use of power in the absence of morality is an empty exercise. The latter is the case for two reasons, one practical and one philosophical. The practical reason is that, because humans are moral beings, they will not accept power without morality. Subjects of political domination will recognize the distinction we are trying to make here: between power used for good and power used for evil and will support the former and oppose the latter (see, for example, Morgenthau 1946:176–178 and the discussion of Thucydides in Johnson Bagby 1994). The philosophical reason is that power for its own sake is hollow; it gets you nowhere without some notion as to what to do with it. Indeed, “the characteristic vice of the utopian is naivete; of the realist, sterility” (Carr 1964:12). Classical realism, thus, views the art of international politics as the practical balancing of the demands of power on the one hand and morality on the other—as a dialectic between power and morality (see Kubáľková 1998).

In short, from its inception realism has been viewed as a necessary corrective to idealism, but *not* as a replacement. Idealism, for the classical realist, is necessary to inform our actions and underlie our interests in the pursuit of international politics, but realism will always remain a necessary part of relations among states. Herein lies the difference between realists and “utopians” or “scientific men.” Whereas the

⁷A key difference between this school of thought and contemporary rationalist approaches in the study of IR is that in the latter the assumption of reasonableness falls out. People are assumed to be instrumentally rational, but are not necessarily assumed to respect the rights and well-being of others when to do so would not be demonstrably instrumentally rational.

latter believe that we can ultimately build a world politics not based on power, the realist believes that we cannot. For realism, however well designed our international institutions, however well aligned our national interests, and however well intentioned our ideas, power will remain the ultimate arbiter (note, not the ultimate source) of outcomes. Because neither human nature nor human institutions are ultimately perfectible, we will always have to remain diligent both in identifying those who would subvert the system to their own ends and in dealing with them effectively.

Well and good, but does anyone actually disagree with the realist premise stated in this way? "The proposition that the nature of international politics is shaped by power relations invariably is listed as one of the defining characteristics of Realism. This cannot be a *uniquely* Realist claim, however, since then every student of international politics would be a Realist" (Wendt 1999:96–97). With this statement, Wendt would seem to preempt the usefulness of the broad definition of realism being used in this essay. But it can be argued that many members of the groups that Wendt identifies as accepting the centrality of power, including both neoliberals and himself, in the end do not. Moravcsik (1997:531), for example, includes in his list of scientific approaches to liberal theory proponents of the idea of a democratic peace.⁸ The logical conclusion of the presence of a democratic peace is that if all countries were to become democratic, there would be no more war. Universalizing the right domestic political structures, in other words, would eliminate the threat posed by military power. This idealist conclusion is, as the terms are defined here, incompatible with realism. Neoliberal institutionalists argue that international cooperation in specific issue areas can happen given properly designed international institutions (see Keohane and Nye 1977; Keohane 1984; Haas, Keohane, and Levy 1993; Keohane and Martin 1995).⁹ Once these institutions are in place, power is no longer an issue. Thus, at least in reference to particular issue areas, neoliberal institutionalists are idealists; they claim that perfecting institutions can obviate the need for national power.

All of which is to say that there are still idealists; there are still liberals by the old normative or ideological definition. Not every student of international politics is a realist. But what of constructivists? Despite the quotation by Wendt in the previous paragraph, an argument can be made that most current constructivist theorists working in the United States are, in fact, liberal idealists. Support for this argument can be presented in two ways: through what might be called the macroperspective and through the microperspective. The former examines the way in which constructivism is, and has been, characterized as a general approach; the latter looks specifically at the work of leading constructivist theorists.

Using a macroperspective, reviews of constructivism by both practitioners and critics tend to characterize it, either explicitly or implicitly, as liberal-idealist. Moreover, such characterizations are rarely, if ever, disputed. A recent review of the study of norms in IR (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:916), for example, once again explicitly distances the contemporary study of norms from Carr's utopianism, but it argues that a fundamental part of the reintroduction of the study of norms is "aimed precisely at showing how the 'ought' becomes the 'is.'" The claim of distance from Carr's utopianism is based on the improved standards of empirical research employed by today's scholars, making constructivist work an exercise in the systematic use of empirical evidence rather than an exercise in political theory (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:890). In essence, what Finnemore and Sikkink are

⁸He calls this variant more broadly "republican liberalism." On the idealist nature of republican liberalism as the route to peace more generally, see Doyle (1983a, 1983b) and Kant (1957).

⁹None of these scholars make a universal idealist claim; but they do claim a limited, and increasing, scope for the cooperative effects of international institutions. This school of thought seems recently to have lost the "neoliberal" part of its label, being more often referred to simply as "institutionalists."

contending is that Carr's utopians failed in methodology, not in worldview. They clearly imply that the study of norms and ideas in IR theory, the hallmarks of constructivism, involves examining the ways in which these two phenomena independently make the world better. Another recent review of constructivism by one of its originators, Nicholas Onuf (2001), clearly identifies it politically with liberal institutionalism (see also Sterling-Folker 2000).

Critics of constructivism, from both the neorealist and postmodernist directions, also associate constructivism with a liberal idealism that is not sufficiently cognizant of the role of power in international relations. For example, in a recent review of the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prügl (2001) compliment constructivism for its "transformational" characteristics, but criticize it for not accepting the central role of power in the construction of international politics. This observation sounds very much like the classical realist critique of liberal idealism, that it puts too much stock in the ability of ideals alone, without power, to change the world.

Neorealist criticism of constructivism is remarkably similar. In "The False Promise of International Institutions," for instance, John Mearsheimer (1994/1995:37–47) characterizes critical theory, in which he includes constructivism, as focusing on the transformation of world politics without addressing the role of power in creating and disseminating ideas and modes of discourse. Mearsheimer's missive resulted in a set of responses in a later issue of the same journal, two of them by self-described constructivists. In one, Ruggie (1995) argues from a traditionally liberal perspective that the right international institutions do, in fact, make the world a better place, aside from considerations of power politics. In the other, Wendt (1995) corrected Mearsheimer's polemical portrayal of constructivism, but in doing so he showed the sensitivity to being branded a utopian that we have already seen.

Which brings us to the microperspective approach to showing that constructivist theorists are, in fact, predominantly liberal idealists. A complete review of the constructivist literature is, of course, impossible here. Instead, the focus here will be on two specific tendencies toward liberal idealism in the work of self-described contemporary constructivists.¹⁰ The first tendency involves choosing to study issue areas compatible with liberal idealism in relatively noncritical ways. The second is to use as philosophical touchstones theorists of a liberal-idealist bent.

We cannot, of course, reasonably ascribe a normative bias to a methodological approach based on the topical foci of some of its practitioners. However, we can note a tendency to approach certain types of issues in a non-self-critical fashion. The fact that many of the well-known mainstream constructivists focus on issues like human rights (Sikkink 1993; Klotz 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Burgerman 2001), security communities (Adler and Barnett 1998), or multilateralism (Ruggie 1993) does not make them liberal idealists. Rather, it is the way in which they focus on such issues that makes them so. Illustrating with the first of these issues, constructivists who write about human rights generally look at the role of international civil society, however understood,¹¹ as changing the behavior of states for the better. This work is applied constructivism—intersubjective norms affect definitions of interest. But it is also liberal-idealist, in the sense that these norms are accepted largely uncritically as good ones, as are the elements of international civil society involved in spreading these norms.

¹⁰The purpose of this discussion is not to imply that those included are more important or central to constructivist theory than those not included—the selection is, in this sense, not systematic.

¹¹Sikkink (1993) speaks of principled issue-networks, Keck and Sikkink (1998) of advocacy networks, and Burgerman (2001) simply of activists. None would likely object to having what they are studying characterized as an element of global civil society. Burgerman speaks uncritically both of the activist community and of multilateralism.

Similarly, we cannot reasonably ascribe a normative bias to a methodological approach based on the theoretical antecedents upon which some of its practitioners draw. But to the extent that constructivists in the United States draw on the work of political theorists (as opposed to the social theorists upon which they draw methodologically and epistemologically), these theorists often have liberal-idealist leanings. A good example is Wendt. He claims to accept the role of power in international relations and, thus, the basic realist premise as defined here. But he also argues, with reference to Kant, that the endogenous dynamic of international anarchy is progressive. In other words, absent exogenous shock, the culture of anarchy will tend to evolve from the Hobbesian world of enemies to the Lockean world of rivals and, ultimately, to the Kantian world of friends (Wendt 1999: 308–312). Once we have arrived in the Kantian “role relationship” (Wendt 1999:309) of friend, international politics is unlikely to regress. Changing the social construction of anarchy can thereby obviate the worry that our neighbors will become enemies or rivals.

Another example involves constructivist research that draws on the work of Jürgen Habermas (for example, Linklater 1990, 1998; Lynch 1999; Risse 2000). Using ideas such as communicative rationality, Habermas argues that communicative action and a well-structured public sphere can be an emancipatory force. He is generally identified as a critical theorist, but in certain respects he is a liberal idealist. Idealist in the sense that he has a clear notion of what constitutes political progress and the political good life, and liberal in the sense that this notion of the political good life is based on individual self-expression and a form of rationality (albeit not an instrumental rationality). Constructivist research that draws on Habermasian theory cannot easily separate the social theory (public spheres matter) from the normative theory (public spheres are good).

To be sure, neither of these tendencies—to choose particular issue areas or to rely on philosophical touchstones sympathetic to the liberal-idealist project—is universal. For example, Rodney Bruce Hall (1997) speaks explicitly of legitimacy as power; Martha Finnemore (1996) takes liberal theory to task for its ideological commitments. Perhaps, more telling, all of the constructivists discussed above work in the United States; it is probably both fairer and more accurate to ascribe the liberal-idealist tendency only to US constructivism, not constructivism more broadly. Indeed, for surveys of constructivist theory by scholars not working in the United States, see Ralph Pettman (2000) and Karen Fierke and Knud Erik Jørgensen (2001). The relationship between US constructivism and liberal idealism itself is something that a realist constructivism might do well to examine.

Realist Constructivism

This discussion leaves us with the observation that constructivism as a methodology in the study of international relations need not be idealist, but that in practice in the United States it tends to be liberal-idealist. Such a statement is in no way a derogation of either constructivism or liberal idealism. The classical realists argued quite explicitly that moral ideals are an integral and necessary part of the practice of international politics and that political realism in the absence of morality, in the absence of a vision of utopia, is both sterile and pointless. A realist constructivism would, thus, serve to help rehabilitate idealism by requiring as its corollary a self-consciously idealist constructivism and by contending that the study of ideals, as well as ideas, is integral to a full understanding of international politics. The original constructivist starting point was more a critique of the “structural” part of structural realism than of classical realism; the former allows much less scope for incorporating moral ideals than the latter. The classical realist argument is that to have an impact, any politics of moral ideals must be tempered by a politics of power.

A corollary of this argument is the observation that without addressing “the compromise between power and morality” (Carr 1964:210) we cannot successfully address the phenomenon of political change. Interestingly, this inability to account for change is one of the standard charges leveled against neorealism, particularly Waltz’s (1979) variety (for example, Ruggie 1983; Walker 1987). In this sense, Waltz has come full circle to meet the Wilsonian idealists who provided the foil for both Carr and Morgenthau. Waltz’s theory of the structure of power, without scope for morality, becomes static in the same way that theories of the structure of morality without power do. Neither pure realism nor pure idealism can account for political change, only the interplay of the two, subject to the assumption that morality is contextual rather than universal.

Therefore, to the extent that constructivist methodology can illuminate the workings of international politics, both an idealist constructivism and a realist constructivism—distinct from, but in a dialectical relationship with, each other—are necessary to account for and explain change in the international system. The idealist constructivism would be freed from any perceived need to claim to study only ideas in an attempt to distance itself from the study of ideals. The realist constructivism would look at the way in which power structures affect patterns of normative change in international relations and, conversely, the way in which a particular set of norms affect power structures. Many of the theorists labeled above as idealist constructivists could respond that they already do one or the other of these things. Someone studying human rights networks in Latin America, for example, might respond that he or she is explicitly arguing that human rights norms are changing the power structure by empowering nongovernmental organizations at the expense of traditional governing elites. But underlying this research is inevitably a moral idealism that sees power in the hands of such organizations as better than power in the hands of the traditional elites. Therefore, the more power that flows from the latter to the former, the better.

We may well agree with this moral perspective. But the realist response is that power will ultimately be used by those who accrue it for a specific set of ends. Furthermore, not all ends toward which power can be invested, even if used in the interest of a moral ideal, will be compatible, because not all moral ideals are compatible. In other words, even once the human rights norms in question are generally accepted in the relations among countries, power will still matter. The specific groups that have been empowered by the norms will at some point find that their goals differ; at that time the relative power among them will begin to become important. Even if all actors in the international system at a given point in time accept the same basic set of normative structures, they will differ in their interpretations of those structures, whether for rationally self-interested reasons or for psychological reasons (see, for example, Jervis 1976; Rosati 2000; Shannon 2000). When interpretations differ, the power of the interpreter continues to matter. The role of a realist constructivism, then, is to examine, skeptically from a moral perspective the interrelationships between power and international norms (see Loriaux 1992).

In this moral skepticism lies a key difference between idealism and realism. Idealism recognizes a single ideal, a universal political morality toward which we should strive. Realism argues that no universal political morality exists and, therefore, if we want ours to triumph, we must arrange to have it do so through the application of power. But the classical realists, particularly Carr, warn us that the relationship can be used both ways: morality can also be used as a tool of power. So that when we apply power to promote our preferred political morality, others might see it as a use of power simply to promote our interests. Political psychology (see, for example, Jervis 1976) suggests, furthermore, that when we justify a use of power to ourselves as being for moral purposes, we may simply be fooling ourselves and rationalizing an action as moral that we want to take for other reasons. As

such, even though power is hollow without political morality, the classical realist argument is that we must, nonetheless, apply to that morality, ours as well as others, a certain skepticism when it is used to justify power.

Stated as such, classical realism begins to sound much like certain kinds of critical theory as applied in IR (see, for example, Ashley 1984). Parts of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (Carr 1964), in fact, sound like a Foucaultian critique of Wilsonian idealism (Foucault 1980; see also Der Derian 1990; Ashley and Walker 1990b; Walker 1993). These sections include the argument that political actions in the international domain, even when motivated by the best of intentions, have ramifications on the distribution of power that can affect both the ultimate effectiveness of the actions and the way those actions are viewed by others. Thus, the League of Nations, even if it was created by the status quo powers to promote international peace, was viewed by others as an exercise in supporting the relative power of the states that created it. The tendency of US constructivism toward liberal idealism can similarly be viewed from outside the central status quo power as an exercise in maintaining that status quo—and clearly has been by some postmodern critics of IR theory (see, for example, George 1994:127).

A realist constructivism could specifically address these sorts of issues. It could study the relationship between normative structures, the carriers of political morality, and uses of power. And, as a result, realist constructivism could address issues of change in international relations in a way that neither idealist constructivism (with its ultimately static view of political morality) nor positivist-materialist realism (with its dismissive view of political morality) can manage. In doing so, a realist constructivism could fill a gap in theorizing in IR between mainstream theorizing and critical theory.¹² It could do so by adopting the focus on power found in most critical theory without the negativity inherent in that theory's emancipatory project with its interest in emancipation "from" rather than "to." (see Spegele 1996; Wæver 1996; Patomäki and Wight 2000). Realist constructivism could also do so by including in any exploration of power, not only postmodern theory's study of subjective text and positivist realism's study of objective phenomena, but also constructivism's study of intersubjectivity—of norms and social rules.

What, in the end, does this line of argument have to say about the conduct of research and discourse in the field of IR? To constructivists, it suggests that constructivism—whether understood as a methodology, epistemology, or ontology—should not be understood as a paradigm in the way that realism and liberalism and, for that matter, Marxism are. By paradigm is meant here a set of assumptions about how politics work. Constructivism is a set of assumptions about how to study politics. As such, it is compatible (as are other sets of assumptions about how to study politics, such as rationalism) with a variety of paradigms, including realism. To idealist constructivists (idealism here referring to ideals rather than ideas), this line of argument suggests that a realist constructivism should be seen as an opportunity. By distinguishing questions concerning the role of ideals from questions about the role of ideas, it allows idealists to focus on the ideals specifically and encourages them to be explicit about their idealism, to move beyond the stigma that has been associated with utopianism since *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (Carr 1964). In other words, it suggests that they not hide their ideals behind the claim of objective science. To realists, it says not only that constructivism can be a useful research methodology, but that addressing constructivist epistemological and ontological premises can provide a useful corrective to the assumptions of

¹²The relationship between mainstream constructivism and critical theory is itself open to dispute. See, for example, Price and Reus-Smit (1998) and Kubáľková, Onuf, and Kowert (1998) for different perspectives on this relationship.

individual rationalism and materialism that have been confusing definitions of realism for the past few decades.

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