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*Social Theory
of International
Politics*

Alexander Wendt

Social Theory of International Politics

Drawing upon philosophy and social theory, *Social Theory of International Politics* develops a theory of the international system as a social construction. Alexander Wendt clarifies the central claims of the constructivist approach, presenting a structural and idealist worldview which contrasts with the individualism and materialism which underpins much mainstream international relations theory. He builds a cultural theory of international politics, which takes whether states view each other as enemies, rivals, or friends as a fundamental determinant. Wendt characterizes these roles as “cultures of anarchy,” described as Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian respectively. These cultures are shared ideas which help shape state interests and capabilities, and generate tendencies in the international system. The book describes four factors which can drive structural change from one culture to another – interdependence, common fate, homogenization, and self-restraint – and examines the effects of capitalism and democracy in the emergence of a Kantian culture in the West.

ALEXANDER WENDT is an Associate Professor at the University of Chicago. He has previously taught at Yale University and Dartmouth College. He is the author of several articles in leading journals on international relations theory.

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For Bud Duvall

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Acknowledgements

In this book I develop a theory of the international system as a social construction. Since the term is used in many ways, the first half of the book is a conceptual analysis of what I mean by “social construction.” The issues here are philosophical and may be unfamiliar to some students of international politics. However, I have tried throughout to be as clear as possible, keeping in mind a comment James Caporaso made about my first publication in 1987, that “there is nothing so profound here that it cannot be said in ordinary language.” I cannot really say that what follows is “ordinary language,” but his plea for clarity has become for me an important demand of this kind of work. The other half of the book is a theory of international politics based on that philosophical analysis. Juxtaposed to the Realisms that tend to dominate at least North American IR scholarship, this theory is a kind of Idealism, a Structural Idealism, although I refer to it only as a constructivist approach to international politics. As such, the book might be seen overall as a work of applied social theory. While not reducible to social theory, many debates in IR have a social theory aspect. My hope is that even when the arguments below prove problematic, the contours of those issues will have been brought into sharper relief.

I approach this material as a political scientist, which is to say that I have little formal training in social theory, the primary analytical tool of this study. To address this problem I have read broadly but without much guidance, in mostly contemporary philosophy and sociology. To credit these sources I have followed a generous citation policy, even if specialists – in IR and social theory alike – will still find much that is missing. By the same token, however, it was not possible here to properly address all of that scholarship. The bibliography should be

Acknowledgements

seen as a resource for further reading rather than as a measure of what I have seriously engaged.

Over the long course of writing this book I have acquired a number of significant debts.

The book is descended from a dissertation done at the University of Minnesota, was mostly written at Yale University, and then completed at Dartmouth College. I am grateful for the time and support provided by all of these institutions. Among many esteemed colleagues I have benefitted especially from the advice and role models of David Lumsdaine, Ian Shapiro, and Rogers Smith.

The most sustained debt is to my classmates in the “Minnesota School” of constructivism, and especially Mike Barnett, Mark Laffey, Rhona Leibel, and Jutta Weldes. Although their thicker constructivisms should not be identified with the thin one on offer below, this book is in a real sense a joint product of our conversations over the past 15 years.

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The book is dedicated to Raymond (Bud) Duvall, dissertation advisor and father of the Minnesota School. He cannot be blamed for all of what follows, but without him the book would not have been written.

No science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics which tacitly it presupposes.

Alfred North Whitehead

1 Four sociologies of international politics

In recent academic scholarship it has become commonplace to see international politics described as “socially constructed.” Drawing on a variety of social theories – critical theory, postmodernism, feminist theory, historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, symbolic interactionism, structuration theory, and the like – students of international politics have increasingly accepted two basic tenets of “constructivism”:¹ (1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature. The first represents an “idealist” approach to social life, and in its emphasis on the sharing of ideas it is also “social” in a way which the opposing “materialist” view’s emphasis on biology, technology, or the environment, is not. The second is a “holist” or “structuralist” approach because of its emphasis on the emergent powers of social structures, which opposes the “individualist” view that social structures are reducible to individuals. Constructivism could therefore be seen as a kind of “structural idealism.”

As the list above suggests there are many forms of constructivism. In this book I defend one form and use it to theorize about the international system. The version of constructivism that I defend is a moderate one that draws especially on structurationist and symbolic interactionist sociology. As such it concedes important points to materialist and individualist perspectives and endorses a scientific approach to social inquiry. For these reasons it may be rejected by more radical constructivists for not going far enough; indeed it is a

¹ A term first used in International Relations scholarship by Nicholas Onuf (1989).

thin constructivism. It goes much farther than most mainstream International Relations (IR)² scholars today, however, who sometimes dismiss any talk of social construction as “postmodernism.” Between these extremes I hope to find a philosophically principled middle way. I then show that this makes a difference for thinking about international politics.

The international system is a hard case for constructivism on both the social and construction counts. On the social side, while norms and law govern most domestic politics, self-interest and coercion seem to rule international politics. International law and institutions exist, but the ability of this superstructure to counter the material base of power and interest seems limited. This suggests that the international system is not a very “social” place, and so provides intuitive support for materialism in that domain. On the construction side, while the dependence of individuals on society makes the claim that their identities are constructed by society relatively uncontroversial, the primary actors in international politics, states, are much more autonomous from the social system in which they are embedded. Their foreign policy behavior is often determined primarily by domestic politics, the analogue to individual personality, rather than by the international system (society). Some states, like Albania or Burma, have interacted so little with others that they have been called “autistic.”³ This suggests that the international system does not do much “constructing” of states, and so provides intuitive support for individualism in that domain (assuming states are “individuals”). The underlying problem here is that the social structure of the international system is not very thick or dense, which seems to reduce substantially the scope for constructivist arguments.

Mainstream IR scholarship today largely accepts these individualist and materialist conclusions about the states system. It is dominated by *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz’s powerful statement of “Neorealism,” which combines a micro-economic approach to the international system (individualism) with the Classical Realist emphasis on power and interest (materialism).⁴ Waltz’s book helped

² Following Onuf (1989), capital letters denote the academic field, lower case the phenomenon of international relations itself.

³ Buzan (1993: 341).

⁴ Waltz (1979). I will use capital letters to designate theories of international relations in order to distinguish them from social theories.

generate a partially competing theory, “Neoliberalism,” stated most systematically by Robert Keohane in *After Hegemony*, which accepted much of Neorealism’s individualism but argued that international institutions could dampen, if not entirely displace, the effects of power and interest.⁵ The fact that Neorealists and Neoliberals agree on so much has contributed to progress in their conversation, but has also substantially narrowed it. At times the debate seems to come down to no more than a discussion about the frequency with which states pursue relative rather than absolute gains.⁶

Despite the intuitive plausibility and dominance of materialist and individualist approaches to international politics, there is a long and varied tradition of what, from the standpoint of social theory, might be considered constructivist thinking on the subject. A constructivist worldview underlies the classical international theories of Grotius, Kant, and Hegel, and was briefly dominant in IR between the world wars, in the form of what IR scholars now, often disparagingly, call “Idealism.”⁷ In the post-war period important constructivist approaches to international politics were advanced by Karl Deutsch, Ernst Haas, and Hedley Bull.⁸ And constructivist assumptions underlie the phenomenological tradition in the study of foreign policy, starting with the work of Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin, and continuing on with Robert Jervis and Ned Lebow.⁹ In the 1980s ideas from these and other lineages were synthesized into three main streams of constructivist IR theory:¹⁰ a modernist stream associated with John Ruggie and Friedrich Kratochwil,¹¹ a postmodernist stream associated with

⁵ Keohane (1984).

⁶ See, for example, Grieco (1988), Baldwin, ed. (1993), Kegley, ed. (1995), and Schweller and Priess (1997).

⁷ On inter-war idealism see Long and Wilson, eds. (1995).

⁸ Deutsch (1954, 1963), Haas (1964, 1983, 1990), Bull (1977). Less widely cited, Andrews (1975) comes as close as any to anticipating contemporary constructivist IR scholarship. Keohane and Nye’s (1977/1989) work on interdependence can also be seen as a precursor.

⁹ Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1954), Jervis (1970, 1976, 1978), Lebow (1981).

¹⁰ The work of neo-Gramscians like Robert Cox (1987) and Stephen Gill (1993, ed.) also could be put into this category, although this is complicated by their relationship to Marxism, a “materialist” social theory. Additionally, Hayward Alker deserves special mention. Impossible to classify, his ideas, often circulating in unpublished manuscripts, were an important part of the revival of constructivist thinking about international politics in the 1980s. He has recently published a number of these papers (Alker, 1996).

¹¹ Ruggie (1983a, b), Kratochwil (1989).

Richard Ashley and Rob Walker,¹² and a feminist stream associated with Spike Peterson and Ann Tickner.¹³ The differences among and within these three streams are significant, but they share the view that Neorealism and Neoliberalism are “undersocialized” in the sense that they pay insufficient attention to the ways in which the actors in world politics are socially constructed.¹⁴ This common thread has enabled a three-cornered debate with Neorealists and Neoliberals to emerge.¹⁵

The revival of constructivist thinking about international politics was accelerated by the end of the Cold War, which caught scholars on all sides off guard but left orthodoxies looking particularly exposed. Mainstream IR theory simply had difficulty explaining the end of the Cold War,¹⁶ or systemic change more generally. It seemed to many that these difficulties stemmed from IR’s materialist and individualist orientation, such that a more ideational and holistic view of international politics might do better. The resulting wave of constructivist IR theorizing was initially slow to develop a program of empirical research,¹⁷ and epistemological and substantive variations within it continue to encourage a broad but thin pattern of empirical cumulation. But in recent years the quality and depth of empirical work has grown considerably, and this trend shows every sign of continuing.¹⁸ This is crucial for the success of constructivist thinking in IR, since the ability to shed interesting light on concrete problems of world politics must ultimately be the test of a method’s worth. In addition, however, alongside and as a contribution to those empirical efforts it also seems important to clarify what constructivism is, how it differs from its materialist and individualist rivals, and what those differences might mean for theories of international politics.

Building on existing constructivist IR scholarship, in this book I address these issues on two levels: at the level of foundational or second-order questions about what there is and how we can explain

¹² Ashley (1984, 1987), R. Walker (1987, 1993).

¹³ Peterson, ed. (1992), Tickner (1993). ¹⁴ Cf. Wrong (1961).

¹⁵ See Mearsheimer (1994/5), Keohane and Martin (1995), Wendt (1995), and Walt (1998).

¹⁶ For a good overview of recent efforts see Lebow and Risse-Kappen, eds. (1995).

¹⁷ Keohane (1988a).

¹⁸ See, for example, Campbell (1992), Klotz (1995), Price (1995), Biersteker and Weber, eds. (1996), Finnemore (1996a), Katzenstein, ed. (1996), Bukovansky (1997, 1999a, b), Adler and Barnett, eds. (1998), Barnett (1998), Hall (1999), Weldes (1999), and Weldes, *et al.*, eds. (1999), Reus-Smit (1999), and Tannenwald (1999).

or understand it – ontology, epistemology and method; and at the level of substantive, domain-specific, or first-order questions.

Second-order questions are questions of social theory. Social theory is concerned with the fundamental assumptions of social inquiry: the nature of human agency and its relationship to social structures, the role of ideas and material forces in social life, the proper form of social explanations, and so on. Such questions of ontology and epistemology can be asked of any human association, not just international politics, and so our answers do not explain international politics in particular. Yet students of international politics must answer these questions, at least implicitly, since they cannot do their business without making powerful assumptions about what kinds of things are to be found in international life, how they are related, and how they can be known. These assumptions are particularly important because no one can “see” the state or international system. International politics does not present itself directly to the senses, and theories of international politics often are contested on the basis of ontology and epistemology, i.e., what the theorist “sees.” Neorealists see the structure of the international system as a distribution of material capabilities because they approach their subject with a materialist lens; Neoliberals see it as capabilities plus institutions because they have added to the material base an institutional superstructure; and constructivists see it as a distribution of ideas because they have an idealist ontology. In the long run empirical work may help us decide which conceptualization is best, but the “observation” of unobservables is always theory-laden, involving an inherent gap between theory and reality (the “underdetermination of theory by data”). Under these conditions empirical questions will be tightly bound up with ontological and epistemological ones; how we answer “what causes what?” will depend in important part on how we first answer “what is there?” and “how should we study it?” Students of international politics could perhaps ignore these questions if they agreed on their answers, as economists often seem to,¹⁹ but they do not. I suggest below that there are at least four “sociologies” of international politics, each with many adherents. I believe many ostensibly substantive debates about the nature of international politics are in part philosophical debates about these sociologies. In part I of this book I attempt to clarify these second-order debates and advance a constructivist approach.

¹⁹ Though see Glass and Johnson (1988).

Social theories are not theories of international politics. Clarifying the differences and relative virtues of constructivist, materialist, and individualist ontologies ultimately may help us better explain international politics, but the contribution is indirect. A more direct role is played by substantive theory, which is the second concern of this book. Such first-order theorizing is domain-specific. It involves choosing a social system (family, Congress, international system), identifying the relevant actors and how they are structured, and developing propositions about what is going on. Substantive theory is based on social theory but cannot be “read off” of it. In part II of the book I outline a substantive, first-order theory of international politics. The theory starts from many of the same premises as Waltz’s, which means that some of the same criticisms commonly directed at his work will have equal force here. But the basic thrust and conclusions of my argument are at odds with Neorealism, in part because of different ontological or second-order commitments. Materialist and individualist commitments lead Waltz to conclude that anarchy makes international politics a necessarily conflictual, “self-help” world. Idealist and holist commitments lead me to the view that “anarchy is what states make of it.”²⁰ Neither theory follows directly from its ontology, but ontologies contribute significantly to their differences.

Even with respect to substantive theorizing, however, the level of abstraction and generality in this book are high. Readers looking for detailed propositions about the international system, let alone empirical tests, will be disappointed. The book is about the *ontology* of the states system, and so is more about international *theory* than about international politics as such. The central question is: given a similar substantive concern as Waltz, i.e., states systemic theory and explanation, but a different ontology, what is the resulting theory of international politics? In that sense, this is a case study in social theory or applied philosophy. After laying out a social constructivist ontology, I build a theory of “international” politics. This is not the only theory that follows from that ontology, but my primary goal in building it is to show that the different ontological starting point has substantive import for how we explain the real world. In most places that import is merely to reinforce or provide ontological foundations for what at least some segment of the IR community already knew. On the

²⁰ Wendt (1992).

substantive level IR scholars will find much that is familiar below. But in some places it suggests a rethinking of important substantive issues, and in a few cases, I hope, new lines of inquiry.

In sum, the title of this book contains a double reference: the book is about “social theory” in general and, more specifically, about a more “social” theory of international politics than Neorealism or Neoliberalism. This chapter makes two passes through these issues, emphasizing international and social theory respectively. In the first section I discuss the state-centric IR theory project, offer a diagnosis of what is currently wrong with it, and summarize my own approach. In a sense, this section presents the puzzle that animates the argument of the book overall. In the second section I begin to develop the conceptual tools that allow us to rethink the ontology of the international system. I draw a “map” of the four sociologies involved in the debate over social construction (individualism, holism, materialism, and idealism), locate major lines of international theory on it, and address three interpretations of what the debate is about (methodology, ontology, and empirics). The chapter concludes with an overview of the book as a whole.

The states systemic project

Constructivism is not a theory of international politics.²¹ Constructivist sensibilities encourage us to look at how actors are socially constructed, but they do not tell us which actors to study or where they are constructed. Before we can be a constructivist about anything we have to choose “units” and “levels” of analysis, or “agents” and the “structures” in which they are embedded.²²

The discipline of International Relations requires that these choices have some kind of “international” dimension, but beyond that it does not dictate units or levels of analysis. The “states systemic project” reflects one set of choices within a broader field of possibilities. Its units are states, as opposed to non-state actors like individuals,

²¹ I have been unclear about this in my previous work (e.g., 1992, 1994). I now wish to draw a sharper distinction between constructivism and the theory of international politics that I sketch in this book. One can accept constructivism without embracing that theory.

²² On levels of analysis see Singer (1961), Moul (1973), and Onuf (1995). In much of IR scholarship units and levels of analysis are conflated. I follow Moul (1973: 512) in distinguishing them, and map them onto agents and structures respectively.

transnational social movements, or multinational corporations. The level of analysis on which it tries to explain the behavior of these units is the international system, as opposed to the personality of foreign policy decision-makers or domestic political structures. Waltz was one of the first to articulate the states systemic project systematically,²³ and the particular theory he helped erect on that basis, Neorealism, is so influential in the field today that project and theory are often equated. There is no question that the assumptions of the states systemic project significantly shape, and limit, our thinking about world politics. These assumptions are controversial and there are other theories of the states system besides Neorealism. I am offering a theory of the states system critical of Waltz's. Given my critical intent, one might wonder why I choose such a mainstream, controversial starting point. In this section I first address this question, and then discuss what I think is wrong with current states systemic theorizing and how it might be fixed.

State-centrism

Regulating violence is one of the most fundamental problems of order in social life, because the nature of violence technology, who controls it, and how it is used deeply affect all other social relations. This is not to say other social relations, like the economy or the family, are *reducible* to the structures by which violence is regulated, such that we could explain all social relations solely by reference to structures of violence. Nor is it to say that the most interesting issue in any given setting concerns the regulation of violence. The point is only that other social relations could not exist in the forms they do unless they are compatible with the "forces" and especially "relations of destruction."²⁴ If people are determined to kill or conquer each other they will not cooperate on trade or human rights. Power may be everywhere these days, but its forms vary in importance, and the power to engage in organized violence is one of the most basic. How it is distributed and regulated is a crucial problem. That is the aspect of world politics in which I am interested in this book. Since the state is a structure of political authority with a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence, when it comes to the regulation of violence internationally it is states one ultimately has to control.

²³ Waltz (1959).

²⁴ Cf. Deudney (1999).

States have not always dominated the regulation of violence, nor do they dominate unproblematically today. In pre-modern times states in Europe competed with two other organizational forms, city-states and city-leagues,²⁵ and outside Europe they competed with all manner of forms. These alternatives eventually were eliminated. But states have continued to struggle to assert their monopoly on violence, facing challenges from mercenaries and pirates well into the nineteenth century,²⁶ and from terrorists and guerrilla groups in the twentieth. Under these and other pressures, some states have even “failed.”²⁷ This suggests that the state can be seen as a “project” in the Gramscian sense, an on-going political program designed to produce and reproduce a monopoly on the potential for organized violence. Still, overall this project has been quite successful. The potential for organized violence has been highly concentrated in the hands of states for some time, a fact which states have helped bring about by recognizing each other as the sole legitimate bearers of organized violence potential, in effect colluding to sustain an oligopoly. My premise is that since states are the dominant form of subjectivity in contemporary world politics this means that they should be the primary unit of analysis for thinking about the global regulation of violence.

It should be emphasized that “state-centrism” in this sense does not preclude the possibility that non-state actors, whether domestic or transnational, have important, even decisive, effects on the frequency and/or manner in which states engage in organized violence. “State-centrism” does not mean that the causal chain in explaining war and peace stops with states, or even that states are the “most important” links in that chain, whatever that might mean. Particularly with the spread of liberalism in the twentieth century this is clearly not the case, since liberal states are heavily constrained by non-state actors in both civil society and the economy. The point is merely that states are still the primary medium through which the effects of other actors on the regulation of violence are channeled into the world system. It may be that non-state actors are becoming more important than states as initiators of change, but system change ultimately happens *through* states. In that sense states still are at the center of the international system, and as such it makes no more sense to criticize a theory of international politics as “state-centric” than it does to criticize a theory of forests for being “tree-centric.”

²⁵ Spruyt (1994).

²⁶ Thomson (1994).

²⁷ Helman and Ratner (1992/1993).

This state-centric focus is not politically innocent. Critics might argue that its insights are inherently conservative, good only for “problem-solving” rather than radical change.²⁸ That is not my view. Neorealism might not be able to explain structural change, but I think there is potential in IR to develop state-centric theories that can. A key first step in developing such theory is to accept the assumption that states are actors with more or less human qualities: intentionality, rationality, interests, etc. This is a debatable assumption. Many scholars see talk of state “actors” as an illegitimate reification or anthropomorphization of what are in fact structures or institutions.²⁹ On their view the idea of state agency is at most a useful fiction or metaphor. I shall argue that states *really are* agents. Decision-makers routinely speak in terms of national “interests,” “needs,” “responsibilities,” “rationality,” and so on, and it is through such talk that states constitute themselves and each other as agents. International politics as we know it today would be impossible without attributions of corporate agency, a fact recognized by international law, which explicitly grants legal “personality” to states. The assumption of real corporate agency enables states actively to participate in structural transformation.

In sum, for critical IR theorists to eschew state-centric theorizing is to concede much of international politics to Neorealism. I show that state-centric IR theory can generate insights that might help move the international system from the law of the jungle toward the rule of law. It is true that knowledge always is more useful for some purposes than for others,³⁰ and knowledge gained from an analysis of states and organized violence might do little to empower non-state actors interested in trade or human rights. But that simply means that state-centered IR theory can only be one element of a larger progressive agenda in world politics, not that it cannot be an element at all.

Systems theory

States are rarely found in complete isolation from each other. Most inhabit relatively stable systems of other independent states which impinge on their behavior. In the contemporary states system states recognize each other’s right to sovereignty, and so the state-centric “project” includes an effort to reproduce not only their own identity,

²⁸ Cox (1986); also see Fay (1975).

²⁹ For example, Ferguson and Mansbach (1991: 370).

³⁰ Cox (1986).

but that of the system of which they are parts: states in the *plural*. In this book I am interested in the structure and effects of states (or “international”) systems, which means that I will be taking a “systems theory” approach to IR. In order to avoid confusion it is important to distinguish two senses in which a theory might be considered “systemic”: when it makes the international system the dependent variable, and when it makes the international system the independent variable.³¹ My argument is systemic in both senses.

A theory is systemic in the first, dependent variable sense when it takes as its object of explanation patterns of state behavior at the aggregate or population level, i.e., the states system. This is what Waltz calls a “theory of international politics.” Theories of international politics are distinguished from those that have as their object explaining the behavior of individual states, or “theories of foreign policy.”³² It is important that IR do both kinds of theorizing, but their dependent variables, aggregate behavior versus unit behavior, are on different levels of analysis and so their explanations are not comparable. Their relationship is complementary rather than competitive. Like Waltz, I am interested in international politics, not foreign policy. Most of the substantive theories discussed in this book are systemic in this sense, and so the question of the appropriate object of explanation, the explanandum, does not really come up. One implication of this systemic orientation is that although I criticize Neorealism and Neoliberalism for not recognizing the ways in which the system shapes state identities and interests, which might be seen as in the domain of theories of foreign policy, in fact explaining state identities and interests is not my main goal either. This is a book about the international system, not about state identity formation. I show that the former bears on the latter in ways that are consequential for thinking about international politics, but state identities are also heavily influenced by domestic factors that I do not address.

The second, independent variable, sense in which IR theories are commonly called systemic is more at stake here. In this sense, which is due to Waltz,³³ a theory is considered “systemic” (or, sometimes, “structural”) when it emphasizes the causal powers of the structure of the international system in explaining state behavior. This is distinguished from “reductionist” theories of state behavior that emphasize

³¹ This framing is due to Steve Brooks.

³² Waltz (1979: 121–122).

³³ *Ibid.*: 38–59).

“unit-level” factors like decision-makers’ psychology and domestic politics. The behavior in question might be unit or aggregate; the systemic–reductionist distinction is usually only invoked among theories of international politics, but it could also be applied to theories of foreign policy.³⁴ Systemic theories explain international politics by reference to “structure” (of the international system), while reductionist theories explain international politics by reference to the properties and interactions of “agents” (states). The relationship between the two kinds of theory is competitive, over the relative weight of causal forces at different levels of analysis. Neorealism is a systemic theory in this second sense because it locates the key causes of international life in the system-level properties of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities. Liberalism is sometimes considered a competing, reductionist theory because it locates the key causes in the attributes and interactions of states.³⁵

Like Waltz, I aim to develop a systemic as opposed to reductionist theory of international politics. However, in taking this stance I take issue with his exclusion of unit-level factors from systemic theorizing, on the grounds that he has misconstrued what divides the two kinds of theory. I argue that it is impossible for structures to have effects apart from the attributes and interactions of agents. If that is right, then the challenge of “systemic” theory is not to show that “structure” has more explanatory power than “agents,” as if the two were separate, but to show how agents are differently structured by the system so as to produce different effects. Waltz’s two kinds of theory *both* do this; both make predictions based on assumptions about the relationship of structure to agents. The debate, therefore, is not between “systemic” theories that focus on structure and “reductionist” theories that focus on agents, but between *different theories of system structure* and of how structure relates to agents. To capture this shift in the understanding of “systemic” it may be best to abandon Waltz’s terminology, which is not in line with contemporary philosophical practice anyway. In chapter 4 I argue that what he calls “systemic” theory is about the “macro-structure” of international politics, and “reductionist” theory is about its “micro-structure.” Both kinds of theory invoke the structure of the system to explain patterns

³⁴ For discussion of how Neorealism might be adapted to explain foreign policy see Elman (1996).

³⁵ Keohane (1990), Moravcsik (1997).

of state behavior and as such both are systemic in Waltz's sense, but both also invoke unit-level properties and interactions – just in different ways because their respective structures are on different levels of analysis.

The possibility of systems theory, of whatever kind, assumes that the domestic or unit and systemic levels of analysis can be separated. Some might disagree. They might argue that international interdependence is eroding the boundary between state and system, making domestic policy increasingly a matter of foreign policy and vice-versa,³⁶ or that the boundary between state and system is a social construction in the first place which needs to be problematized rather than taken as given.³⁷ For them, “levels” thinking is a *problem* with IR theory, not a solution.

There are at least two responses to such criticism. One is to argue on empirical grounds that international interdependence is not rising, or that the density of interactions remains much higher within states than between them.³⁸ If so, we can continue to speak of domestic and systemic politics as distinct domains. This is not a particularly strong defense of the systemic project, however, since it means the probable growth of interdependence in the future will erode the utility of systemic theorizing. Moreover, because it assumes low systemic density, this response also paradoxically suggests that systemic factors may not be very important relative to unit-level ones in the first place.

Juridical grounds offer a stronger rationale for systems theory. Regardless of the extent to which interdependence blurs the *de facto* boundary between domestic and foreign policies, in the contemporary international system political authority is organized formally in a bifurcated fashion: vertically within states (“hierarchy”), horizontally between (“anarchy”).³⁹ This is partly due to the nature of states, and partly to the international institution of sovereignty, in which states recognize each other as having exclusive political authority within separate territories. As long as global political space is organized in this way, states will behave differently toward each other than they do toward their own societies. At home states are bound by a thick structure of rules that holds their power accountable to society. Abroad they are bound by a different set of rules, the logic, or as I shall argue, logics, of anarchy.

³⁶ Hanrieder (1978).

³⁷ Campbell (1992).

³⁸ Waltz (1979: 129–160), Thomson and Krasner (1989).

³⁹ Waltz (1979: 114–116).

Even if we agree that the unit and system levels can be separated, there is still the question of whether the international *political* system is a separate domain. Is it fair to assume institutional differentiation within the international system between political, economic, and perhaps other functional sub-systems? States are the core of any international system, since they constitute the distinct entities without which an “inter”national system by definition cannot exist. In international systems that are institutionally *undifferentiated* the logic of inter-state relations is the only logic, and historically this has been the dominant modality of international politics.⁴⁰ In such worlds there might still be distinct “sectors” of economic, political, or military interaction,⁴¹ but as long as these are not institutionally distinct they will not constitute distinct logics. States have interacted in the economic issue area for centuries, for example, but usually through mercantilist policies that reflected the logic of their military competition. In the past two centuries and especially since World War II, however, the international system has experienced substantial institutional differentiation, first into political and economic spheres, and more recently, arguably, into a nascent sphere of global civil society as well. The ultimate cause of these changes is the spread of capitalism, which unlike other modes of production is constituted by institutional separations between spheres of social life.⁴² The transposition of this structure to the global level is far from complete, but already it is transforming the nature of international life. This does not vitiate systemic theorizing, which has a distinct role as long as states are constitutionally independent, but it does mean that the content of “the international” is not constant.

In sum, the states systemic project assumes that its object can be studied relatively autonomously from other units and levels of analysis in world politics. We cannot study everything at once, and there are good reasons for marking off the states system as a distinct phenomenon. This does not make one a Realist. Systemic theorizing is sometimes equated with Realism, but this is a mistake. Nor does it mean that the states system is the only thing that IR scholars should be studying. IR scholars have sometimes neglected non-state units and non-systemic levels, but that is hardly an argument against also

⁴⁰ Cf. Chase-Dunn (1981).

⁴¹ Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993: 30–33).

⁴² Wood (1981); cf. Walzer (1984). See Rosenberg (1994) for a provocative exploration of some of the effects on international relations of the capitalist separation of economy and polity.

studying the states system. There are many things in world politics that states systemic theorizing cannot explain, but this does not mean the things which it does explain should be lost.

*Neorealism and its critics*⁴³

The states systemic project does not commit us to any particular theory of how that system works. In principle there are many systemic theories. One of the basic issues that divides them is how they conceptualize the “structure” of the system. Neorealism offers one such conceptualization, one so dominant today that systemic IR theory is often equated with it. Earlier systemic theories contained at least implicit conceptualizations of structure,⁴⁴ but *Theory of International Politics* was the first to think in self-consciously structural terms. Since its publication in 1979 it has probably been cited more than any other book in the field, and it is today one of IR’s foundational texts. There are few such works in social science, and in an academic world given to fads it is easy to forget them in the rush to catch the next wave of theory. If parsimony is over-rated as a theoretical virtue,⁴⁵ then cumulation is surely under-rated. With that in mind I shall take Waltz’s structuralism – and Ashley and Ruggie’s conversation with it – as my starting point, but from there engage in some substantial “conceptual reorganization”⁴⁶ that will ultimately yield a structural theory different in both kind and content from Neorealism. This theory competes with Waltz’s argument in some ways, and supports it in others. But I see it primarily as trying to explain the latter’s cultural conditions of possibility, and in so doing the basis for alternative, “non-Realist” cultures of anarchy.⁴⁷ Because I wrestle with Neorealism throughout this book I will not present it in detail here. Instead, I summarize three of its key features, identify some of its problems and principal responses to those problems, and then outline my own approach.

Despite Waltz’s professed structuralism, ultimately he is an individualist. This is manifest most clearly in his reliance on the analogy to neoclassical micro-economic theory. States are likened to firms, and

⁴³ The phrase is Keohane’s, ed. (1986).

⁴⁴ See Kaplan (1957), Scott (1967), and Bull (1977). ⁴⁵ Lebow (1998).

⁴⁶ Denis (1989: 347).

⁴⁷ On some possible relationships among theories see Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996: 68–72).

the international system to a market within which states compete. "International-political systems, like economic markets, are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated and unintended."⁴⁸ From the standpoint of structural theorizing in the social sciences more generally this analogy is surprising, since most structuralists are holists. Yet Waltz goes further than traditional economic theory in emphasizing the feedback effects of international structure on state agents. Competition eliminates states who perform badly, and the international system socializes states to behave in certain ways.⁴⁹ Thus, the top-down story that holists tell about agents and structures seems on the surface to get equal billing in Waltz's framework with the bottom-up story told by individualists. Nevertheless, I argue that his top-down story is considerably weaker than it should be because of the micro-economic analogy. Economists are uninterested in the construction of actors, which is one of the most important things a structure can explain, and this neglect is largely mirrored in Neorealism.

A micro-economic approach to structure does not tell us what structure is made of. Some economists see the market as an institution constituted by shared ideas, others see only material forces. A second feature of Neorealist structuralism, therefore, is its materialism: the structure of the international system is defined as the distribution of material capabilities under anarchy. The kinds of ideational attributes or relationships that might constitute a *social* structure, like patterns of friendship or enmity, or institutions, are specifically excluded from the definition.⁵⁰ Variation in system structure is constituted solely by material differences in polarity (number of major powers), and structural change therefore is measured solely by transitions from one polarity distribution to another.

Finally, writing at a time when the autonomy of the systemic project was not clearly recognized, Waltz is also very concerned to maintain a clear distinction between systemic and unit-level theorizing. To this end he argues that the study of interaction between states, or what is sometimes called "process," should be seen as the province of unit-level rather than systemic theory. In his view this follows from a concern with international politics rather than foreign policy. He seeks to explain aggregate constraints and tendencies in the system rather than the actions of particular states. Since theories of interaction have particular actions as their explanatory object, this seems to place them

⁴⁸ Waltz (1979: 91).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 74–77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 98–99.

outside the concern of systemic theory. Waltz's neglect of international interaction has left it in something of a theoretical limbo: consigned by Neorealism to the purgatory of unit-level theory, students of foreign policy decision-making tend to be equally uninterested because of its apparent systemic dimension.⁵¹

Individualism, materialism, and neglect of interaction form the core of Neorealist structuralism, and to many in IR this simply "is" what a structural theory of international politics looks like. Over the years it has come in for substantial criticism, but critics sometimes throw the systemic theory baby out with the Neorealist bathwater. That is, much of the criticism is aimed at the Neorealist *version* of systemic theory, i.e., at its individualism, its materialism, and/or its neglect of interaction processes. Since a proper review of this literature would take an entire chapter, let me simply mention three important criticisms that animate my own search for an alternative.

One is that Neorealism cannot explain structural change.⁵² To be sure, Neorealism acknowledges the possibility of structural change in one sense – namely transitions from one distribution of power to another.⁵³ But the kind of structural change the critics have in mind is less material than *social*: the transition from feudalism to sovereign states, the end of the Cold War, the emergence of peace among democratic states, and so on. Neorealists do not consider such changes "structural" because they do not change the distribution of power or transcend anarchy. As a result, while no doubt conceding the importance of something like the end of the Cold War for foreign policy, their emphasis in thinking about such change returns always to the macro-level logic of "plus ça change . . ." The logic of anarchy is constant.⁵⁴

A second problem is that Neorealism's theory of structure is too underspecified to generate falsifiable hypotheses. For example, virtually any foreign policy behavior can be construed as evidence of balancing. Neorealists could argue that during the Cold War confrontational policies were evidence of Soviet balancing of the West, and that after the Cold War conciliatory policies were. Similarly, in the old days states balanced militarily, now they do so through economic

⁵¹ Though see Herrmann and Fischerkeller (1995).

⁵² See, for example, Ruggie (1983a), Ashley (1984), R. Walker (1987), Wendt (1992), and Kratochwil (1993).

⁵³ For a Realist approach to structural change see Gilpin (1981).

⁵⁴ For example, Mearsheimer (1990a), Fischer (1992), and Layne (1993).

means. Given this suppleness, it is not clear what would count as evidence against the balancing hypothesis. Perhaps the “bandwagging” behavior of the post-Cold War period, but on this point Neorealists have given themselves a generous time frame. Christopher Layne, for example, argues that it may take fifty years before Germany and Japan adjust to the collapse of the Soviet Union by balancing militarily against the United States.⁵⁵ Neorealism admittedly is not designed to explain foreign policy. But if any policy short of national suicide is compatible with balancing, then it is not clear in what sense “states balance” is a scientific claim.

Finally, there is doubt that Neorealism adequately explains even the “small number of big and important things” claimed on its behalf.⁵⁶ I am thinking in particular of power politics and again of balancing, tendencies which Waltz argues are explained by the structural fact of anarchy alone. In 1992 I argued that what is really doing the explanatory work here is the assumption that anarchy is a self-help system, which follows from states being egoists about their security and not from anarchy.⁵⁷ Sometimes states are egoists and other times they are not, and this variation can change the “logic” of anarchy. I take that argument further in chapter 6. The “sauve qui peut” egoism of a Hobbesian anarchy has a different logic than the more self-restrained egoism of a Lockean anarchy, which differs still from the Kantian anarchy based on collective security interests, which is no longer “self-help” in any interesting sense. This suggests that even when the character of the international system conforms to Neorealist predictions, it does so for reasons other than Neorealism is able to specify.

These and other problems have contributed to a widespread sense of crisis in the systemic project. Few scholars today call themselves Neorealists. Simplifying hugely, we can group IR scholars’ responses to this situation into two categories. One is to set aside states and the states system and focus instead on new units of analysis (non-state actors) or new levels (individuals or domestic politics). This has generated much interesting work in recent IR scholarship, but it is no substitute for systemic theorizing. Non-state actors may be increasingly significant, but this does not mean we no longer need a theory of the states system. Similarly, individuals and domestic politics may be important causes of foreign policy, but ignoring systemic structures

⁵⁵ Layne (1993).

⁵⁶ Waltz (1979).

⁵⁷ Wendt (1992).

assumes that states are autistic, which usually is not the case. This first response changes the subject rather than deals with the problem.

The second response might be called reformist: broaden Neorealism to include more variables, without changing its core assumptions about system structure. Simplifying again, here we see two main directions, post-Waltzian (my term) and Neoliberal. The former retains a focus on material power as the key factor in world politics, but supplements it with ideational or other unit-level variables. Stephen Walt argues that perceptions of threat are necessary to fill out Waltz's theory, and that these stem from assessments of intentions and ideology.⁵⁸ Randall Schweller looks at variation in state interests, and especially the distinction between status quo and revisionist states.⁵⁹ Buzan, Jones, and Little extend the purview of systemic theory to include the study of interaction.⁶⁰ And so on. In developing these insights post-Waltzians have often turned to Classical Realism, which has a richer menu of variables than its leaner Neorealist cousin. Neoliberals, on the other hand, have capitalized on Waltz's micro-economic analogy, which has rich conceptual resources of its own. By focusing on the evolution of expectations during interaction, they have shown how states can develop international regimes that promote cooperation even after the distribution of power that initially sustained them has gone.⁶¹ And more recently Neoliberals have turned to "ideas" as an additional intervening variable between power/interest and outcomes.⁶²

Although their portrayals of international politics differ in important ways, post-Waltzians and Neoliberals share a basic premise: Waltz's definition of structure. Post-Waltzians are less wedded to micro-economic analogies, but have not fundamentally abandoned Waltz's materialist assumptions. Neoliberals have exploited his micro-economic analogies in ways that attenuate those assumptions, but have been reluctant to abandon materialism altogether. They acknowledge that "ideas matter," but they do not see power and interest themselves as effects of ideas. This has left Neoliberals vulnerable to the charge that their theory is not distinct from, or that it is subsumed by, Neorealism.⁶³ As noted above, the latter is heavily underspecified

⁵⁸ Walt (1987). ⁵⁹ Schweller (1994).

⁶⁰ Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993); also see Snyder (1996).

⁶¹ Krasner, ed. (1983), Keohane (1984), Oye, ed. (1986).

⁶² Goldstein (1993), Goldstein and Keohane, eds. (1993).

⁶³ See Mearsheimer (1994/1995).

and so the significance of this charge is unclear. However, what is important from my perspective is what is *not* being talked about. That is, whatever the outcome of their debate, it is unlikely to yield a substantial rethinking of structure – certainly, talk of social construction is anathema to them all.

It would be useful to consider whether the efforts to reform Neorealism are all compatible with the “hard core” of the Neorealist research program, and particularly its ontology, or whether some of these efforts might constitute “degenerating problem shifts.”⁶⁴ Rather than challenge the ontological coherence of Neorealist-Neoliberalism, however, let me just stipulate the core of an alternative. The basic intuition is that the problem in the states systemic project today lies in the Neorealist conceptualization of structure and structural theory, and that what is therefore needed is a conceptual reorganization of the whole enterprise. More specifically, I shall make three moves.

The most important move is to reconceptualize what international structure is made of. In my view it is exactly what Waltz says it is not: a social rather than material phenomenon. And since the basis of sociality is shared knowledge, this leads to an idealist view of structure as a “distribution of knowledge” or “ideas all the way down” (or almost anyway). This conceptualization of structure may seem odd to a generation of IR scholars weaned on Neorealism, but it is common in both sociology and anthropology. Chapters 3 and 4 explain this proposal, but the intuition is straightforward: the character of international life is determined by the beliefs and expectations that states have about each other, and these are constituted largely by social rather than material structures. This does not mean that material power and interests are unimportant, but rather that their meaning and effects depend on the social structure of the system, and specifically on which of three “cultures” of anarchy is dominant – Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian. Bipolarity in a Hobbesian culture is one thing, in a Lockean or a Kantian culture quite another. On a social definition of structure, the concept of structural change refers to changes in these cultures – like the end of the Cold War in 1989 – and not to changes in material polarity – like the end of bipolarity in 1991.

A sociological turn is also evident in the second move, which is to argue that state identities and interests are more constructed by the

⁶⁴ Lakatos (1970). For a good discussion of this issue see Vasquez (1997) and subsequent rejoinders.

international system than can be seen by an economic approach to structure. If we adopt a holist conceptualization of structure we can see two aspects of state construction that an individualist approach ignores: the ways in which state identities rather than just behavior are affected by the international system, and the ways in which those identities are constituted rather than just caused by the system (I explain these distinctions below). Because of the low density of international society I do not claim that states are constructed *primarily* by international structures. Much of the construction is at the domestic level, as Liberals have emphasized, and a complete theory of state identity needs to have a large domestic component. But these identities are made possible by and embedded in a systemic context.

My last move follows Buzan, Jones, and Little in arguing that interaction or process is a proper concern of systemic theory, but takes the argument considerably further.⁶⁵ Buzan, Jones, and Little's innovation is important for showing that more outcomes are possible in anarchic systems than are suggested by Waltz's model. But like him they assume that anarchies have a certain "logic" independent of process (hence their title, *The Logic of Anarchy*), and that interaction is not itself "structured." Against this I shall argue that anarchy has no logic apart from process and that interaction *is* structured, albeit not at the macro-level. Neorealists may worry that this move undermines the autonomy of systemic theory. I disagree. The distinctiveness of the systemic project lies not in its ostensible independence from unit-level properties, but in its concern with the effects of how *inter*-national relations are structured, which cannot be explained by theories that treat states as autistic. Recognizing this allows us to broaden systemic theorizing to include structures of interaction, and opens up the possibility of explaining changes in the logic of anarchy by processes within the international system.

My concern with interaction also has a practico-ethical motivation. The daily life of international politics is an on-going process of states taking identities in relation to Others, casting them into corresponding counter-identities, and playing out the result. These identities may be hard to change, but they are not carved in stone, and indeed sometimes are the only variable actors can manipulate in a situation. Managing this process is the basic practical problem of foreign policy, and its ethical dimension is the question of how we *should* treat the

⁶⁵ Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993).

Other. I shall not say very much about these practical and ethical issues in this book, but they motivate my project insofar as managing relationships and determining how we ought to act depend in part on answers to the explanatory question of how certain representations of Self and Other get created. This cannot be answered by unit-level theorizing alone.

These three moves are an attempt to rethink the dominant ontology of international structure. IR scholars often unnecessarily disparage ontology talk. In our daily lives we all have ontologies, since we all make assumptions about what exists in the world: dogs, cats, and trees. Normally we do not think of these assumptions as an ontology, much less as problematic, because most of their referents present themselves directly to our senses. If we can stub our toe against it, it must be real. Ontology gets more controversial when it invokes unobservables. Physicists legitimately disagree about whether quarks exist. Compared to physicists, however, who can test their ontological intuitions in sophisticated experiments, IR scholars have virtually no direct empirical access to the deep structure of the reality they study. Waltz's theory is based on a particular ontology of international politics. This ontology may be wrong, but it cannot be overturned by a few anomalies, overlooked events, or strained interpretations, since it is difficult to separate what we "see" in international life from our conceptual lenses. By the same token, however, it is useful for IR scholarship to contemplate more than one ontology. Constructivism is one such alternative, and my aim is to articulate it and explore its substantive implications.

A map of structural theorizing⁶⁶

The previous section showed that saying that one's theory is "structural," as Neorealists do, tells us little until we have specified what kind of structuralism we are talking about. Systemic theories of international politics conceptualize structure in different ways. In this section I interpret different forms of structural IR theory in light of two debates in social theory. One is about the extent to which structures are material or social, the other about the relationship of

⁶⁶ I want to thank Ron Jepperson for his contribution to my thinking in this section. Earlier versions of this map appeared in Wendt and Friedheim (1995) and Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996).

structure to agents. Each debate contains two basic positions, which yields four sociologies of structure (materialist, idealist, individualist, and holist) and a 2×2 "map" of combinations (materialist-individualist, materialist-holist, and so on). This map is applicable to any domain of social inquiry, from the family to the world system. It is important for me because it sets up the choices we have in thinking about the ontology of international structure. I sort out and identify types of structural theorizing and show the implications of these choices for the types of questions we ask and answers we can find.

Four sociologies

I'll begin by explaining each pair of sociologies of structure, making a continuum for each. The first pair is material-ideational. The debate over the relative importance of material forces and ideas in social life is an old one in IR scholarship. For purposes of creating a single continuum, let us define its central question as: "what difference do ideas make in social life?" or, alternatively, "to what extent are structures made of ideas?" It is possible to hold positions anywhere along this continuum, but in practice social theorists cluster into two views, *materialist* and *idealist*. Both acknowledge a role for ideas, but they disagree about how deep these effects go.

Materialists believe the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and organization of material forces. At least five material factors recur in materialist discourse: (1) human nature; (2) natural resources; (3) geography; (4) forces of production; and (5) forces of destruction. These can matter in various ways: by permitting the manipulation of the world, by empowering some actors over others, by disposing people toward aggression, by creating threats, and so on. These possibilities do not preclude ideas also having some effects (perhaps as an intervening variable), but the materialist claim is that effects of non-material forces are secondary. This is a strong claim, and in assessing it it is crucial that the hypothesized effects of material forces be strictly separated from the effects of ideas. Unfortunately this often is not done. In contemporary political science, for example, it has become commonplace to juxtapose "power and interest" to "ideas" as causes of outcomes, and to call the former "material" forces. I agree that power and interest are a distinct and important set of social causes, but this only supports materialism if their effects are not constituted by ideas. The materialist hypothesis

must be that material forces *as such* – what might be called “brute” material forces – drive social forms. I argue in chapter 3 that understood in this way material forces explain relatively little of international politics.

Idealists believe the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and structure of social consciousness (what I later call the distribution of ideas or knowledge). Sometimes this structure is shared among actors in the form of norms, rules, or institutions; sometimes it is not. Either way, social structure can matter in various ways: by constituting identities and interests, by helping actors find common solutions to problems, by defining expectations for behavior, by constituting threats, and so on. These possibilities need not deny a role for material forces, but the idealist claim is that material forces are secondary, significant insofar as they are constituted with particular meanings for actors. The material polarity of the international system matters, for example, but *how* it matters depends on whether the poles are friends or enemies, which is a function of shared ideas. In contrast to the materialist tendency to treat ideas in strictly causal terms, therefore, idealists tend to emphasize what I call the constitutive effects of ideas.

Given that the term “idealism” also refers to a theory of international politics, it should be noted that idealism in social theory does not entail Idealism in IR. Indeed, there are so many potential misunderstandings of idealist social theory that it might be useful to summarize briefly what it is NOT. (1) It is not a normative view of how the world ought to be, but a scientific view of how it is. Idealism aims to be just as realistic as materialism. (2) It does not assume that human nature is inherently good or social life inherently cooperative. There are bleak idealist theories as well as optimistic ones. Materialists do not have a monopoly on pessimism or conflict. (3) It does not assume that shared ideas have no objective reality. Shared beliefs and the practices to which they give rise confront individual actors as external social facts, even though they are not external to actors collectively. Social structures are no less real than material ones. (4) It does not assume that social change is easy or even possible in a given, socially constructed context. Actors must still overcome institutionalization, power asymmetries, and collective action problems to generate social change, and, indeed, sometimes this is *more* difficult in social structures than material ones. (5) Finally, it does not mean that power and interest are unimportant, but rather that their meaning and effects

depend on actors' ideas. US military power means one thing to Canada, another to a communist Cuba. Idealist social theory embodies a very minimal claim: that the deep structure of society is constituted by ideas rather than material forces. Although most mainstream IR scholarship is materialist, most modern social theory is idealist in this sense.

Materialists and idealists tend to understand the impact of ideas differently. Materialists privilege causal relationships, effects, and questions; idealists privilege constitutive relationships, effects, and questions. Since I address this distinction at some length in chapter 2, let me just preview here. In a causal relationship an antecedent condition *X* generates an effect *Y*. This assumes that *X* is temporally prior to and thus exists independently of *Y*. In a constitutive relationship *X* is what it is in virtue of its relation to *Y*. *X* presupposes *Y*, and as such there is no temporal disjunction; their relationship is necessary rather than contingent. Causal and constitutive effects are different but not mutually exclusive. Water is caused by joining independently existing hydrogen and oxygen atoms; it is constituted by the molecular structure known as H₂O. H₂O does not "cause" water because without it something cannot *be* water, but this does not mean that that structure has no effects. Similarly, masters and slaves are caused by the contingent interactions of human beings; they are constituted by the social structure known as slavery. Masters do not "cause" slaves because without slaves they cannot *be* masters in the first place, but this does not mean the institution of slavery has no effects. The distinction is an old one, but poorly appreciated today. I think the blurring of causal and constitutive relationships has helped generate much of the current confusion in IR scholarship about the relationship between ideas and material forces. Resurrecting the distinction will probably not end these debates, but may help clarify what is at stake.

These broad-gauge definitions of materialism and idealism constitute the hard cores of alternative research programs, ontologies, or "sociologies," and as such are not specific to IR. To some extent each can accommodate the insights of the other, but only on its own terms. Some materialists concede that shared beliefs can affect behavior, and some idealists concede that material forces can affect social possibilities, which move both toward the center. A truly synthetic position is hard to sustain, however, because materialists will always object to arguments in which the ideational superstructure bears no determinate relation to the material base, and idealists will always object to

arguments in which it does. This reflects the competing directives of the two sociologies: “start with material factors and account as much as possible for the role of ideas in those terms,” and vice-versa. This tends to create a bimodal distribution of substantive theories along the continuum, with no true middle ground.⁶⁷

The second debate concerns the relationship between agents and structures. The “agent–structure problem” has become a cottage industry in sociology, and increasingly in IR.⁶⁸ For purposes of defining a continuum let me frame its central question as: “what difference does structure make in social life?” *Individualism* and *holism* (or “structuralism” in the Continental sense)⁶⁹ are the two main answers. Both acknowledge an explanatory role for structure, but they disagree about its ontological status and about how deep its effects go. Individualism holds that social scientific explanations should be reducible to the properties or interactions of independently existing individuals. Holism holds that the effects of social structures cannot be reduced to independently existing agents and their interactions, and that these effects include the construction of agents in both causal and constitutive senses. People cannot be professors apart from students, nor can they become professors apart from the structures through which they are socialized. Holism implies a top–down conception of social life in contrast to individualism’s bottom–up view. Whereas the latter aggregates upward from ontologically primitive agents, the former works downward from irreducible social structures.

The disagreement between individualists and holists turns in important part on the extent to which structures “construct” agents. In order to understand this idea we need two distinctions: the one made above between causal and constitutive effects, and a second one between the effects of structures on agents’ *properties*, especially their identities and interests, and effects on agents’ *behavior*.⁷⁰ To say that a structure “constrains” actors is to say that it only has behavioral effects. To say that a structure “constructs” actors is to say that it has

⁶⁷ Cf. Adler (1997b).

⁶⁸ On the latter see Wendt (1987), Dessler (1989), Hollis and Smith (1990), Carlsnaes (1992), Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993), Doty (1996) and Clark (1998).

⁶⁹ Given that all sides claim the concept of structure as their own it seems better to use “holism” here and then let the protagonists argue about the nature of structure.

⁷⁰ Robert Powell’s (1994) distinction between “preference over outcomes” and over “strategies” makes the same point.

property effects. In systemic IR, theories that emphasize such effects have become known as “second image reversed” theories.⁷¹ Property effects are deeper because they usually have behavioral effects but not vice-versa. Both property and behavioral effects, in turn, can be either caused or constituted by structures. Since constitutive effects imply a greater dependence of agents on structures, I shall treat them as deeper as well.

Individualism tends to be associated with causal effects on behavior, but I shall argue that the individualist view is compatible in principle with more possibilities than its critics (or even proponents) typically acknowledge, most notably with structures having causal effects on agents’ properties, for example through a socialization process. I say “in principle,” however, because in *practice* it is holists and not individualists who have been most active in theorizing about the causal construction of agents. Most individualists treat identities and interests as exogenously given and address only behavioral effects.⁷² This is particularly true of the form of individualism that dominates mainstream IR scholarship, namely rationalism (rational choice and game theory), which studies the logic of choice under constraints. In a particularly clear statement of this view, George Stigler and Gary Becker argue that we should explain outcomes by reference to changing “prices” in the environment, not by changing “tastes” (identities and interests).⁷³

Rationalist theory’s restricted focus has been the object of much of the holist critique of individualism. Still, individualism in principle is compatible with a theory of how structures cause agents’ properties. What it rules out is the possibility that social structures have constitutive effects on agents, since this would mean that structures cannot be reduced to the properties or interactions of ontologically primitive individuals. The constitutive possibility is the distinctively holist hypothesis.

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the international system is a hard case for a holist argument, since its low density means that the identities and interests of states may be more dependent on

⁷¹ Gourevitch (1978).

⁷² This may stem from the fact that while the “denotation” of individualism is compatible with the structural determination of interests, its “connotation” is that given individuals must be the starting point for theory. On the connotative and denotative aspects of theories see Krasner (1991).

⁷³ Stigler and Becker (1977); Becker’s (1996) later work relaxes this assumption.

domestic than systemic structures. The challenge for holists in IR becomes even more acute if we grant that individualism is compatible at least in principle with the *causal* construction of states by systemic structures. Perhaps under the influence of rationalism, however, in practice individualists in IR have neglected that possibility, and they do not acknowledge even in principle any *constitutive* effects that systemic structures might have on states. I believe the structure of the international system exerts both kinds of effects on state identities. These may be less than the effects of domestic structures, and certainly a complete theory of state identity would have a substantial domestic component. But explaining state identity is not my primary objective in this book – it is to clarify the nature and effects of international structure, which is a different question.

This discussion, and the behavior-property distinction, may shed some light on the confusion in IR about the character of Waltz's theory, which is seen as structuralist by some,⁷⁴ and individualist by others.⁷⁵ What is going on here, I think, is that different scholars are focusing on different senses in which his theory is structural. On the one hand, Waltz argues that the international system selects and socializes states to become "like units."⁷⁶ This is a construction argument – not merely state behavior but also state properties are seen as effects of international structure. On the other hand, the effects of structure to which Waltz is pointing are all causal rather than constitutive, which supports an individualist interpretation of his approach. And while arguing that the structure of the system tends to produce like units, in most of his book Waltz treats state identities and interests in rationalist fashion as given, which supports that reading even more strongly. In the end, therefore, Waltz's structuralism is mixed, though tending toward the individualist view that there is relatively little construction of states going on in the international system.

As with materialism and idealism, individualism and holism constitute the ontological hard cores of research programs in which certain propositions are treated as axiomatic and inquiry is directed at reconciling reality with them. This creates the same kind of limited flexibility with bimodal tendencies that we saw before. Some individualists are interested in identity and interest ("preference") for-

⁷⁴ R. Walker (1987), Hollis and Smith (1990), Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993).

⁷⁵ Ashley (1984), Wendt (1987), Dessler (1989). ⁷⁶ Waltz (1979: 95, 128).

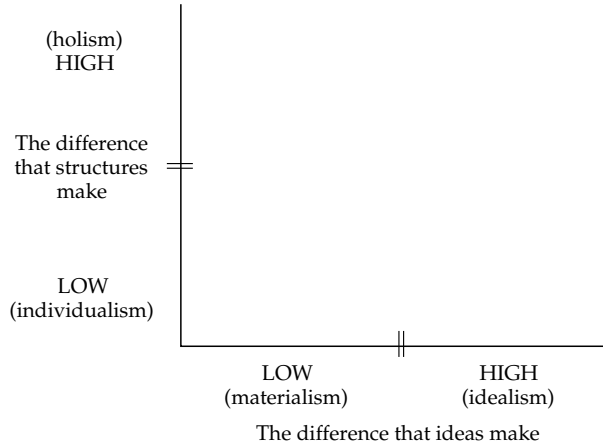


Figure 1

mation, and some holists concede that agents have intrinsic attributes. Yet, even as they struggle toward the center of the continuum, both sides cling to foundational claims that constrain their efforts. Individualist theories of preference formation typically focus on agents rather than structures, and holistic theories of intrinsic attributes typically minimize these as much as they can. Here too, in other words, we get a clustering of substantive theories around two basic poles.

If we put the materialism–idealism debate on the x -axis, and individualism–holism on the y -, then we get the picture as shown in Figure 1. If one purpose of this book is to clarify the concept of “social construction,” then the x -axis is about the first term in this phrase, the y - about the second.

Locating international theories

Figure 1 provides a framework for thinking about the second-order differences among IR theories that are considered “structural.” Each sociology constitutes the ontological core of a research program that exerts a centripetal force on substantive theorizing along the portion of the spectrum which it occupies, which undermines the continuous nature of each dimension in favor of a dichotomous one. What I mean is, research programs have specific ontological centers of gravity, so that even as they reach outward to incorporate the concerns of others – as materialists incorporate ideas, as holists

incorporate agency – the resulting theories or arguments remain somewhat truncated.

In this section I suggest where different theories of international politics might fall on the map, including my own. My purpose is only illustrative; I will not make much further use of this classification. It should also be emphasized that the map, while applicable to any level of analysis, is applicable to only one level at a time. This will affect how we classify theories. If the designated level is the international system, then a theory which assumes states are constructed entirely by domestic structures will be classified as individualist. If we move to the domestic level of analysis, that same theory might be holist relative to a theory of the state which emphasizes individual people. The latter may itself be holist relative to one which emphasizes brain chemistry. And so on. What follows, therefore, is a map of *systemic* IR theory.

Theories in the lower-left quadrant have a materialist and individualist attitude toward social life. (1) *Classical Realism* holds that human nature is a crucial determinant of the national interest, which is an individualist argument because it implies state interests are not constructed by the international system.⁷⁷ Classical Realists vary in the extent to which they are materialists, with some like E.H. Carr granting a significant role to “power over opinion,”⁷⁸ but their focus on human nature and material capabilities place them generally in this category. (2) *Neorealism* is more clearly materialist than Classical Realism, and attaches more explanatory weight to the structure of the international system. But insofar as it relies on micro-economic analogies it assumes this structure only regulates behavior, not constructs identities. (3) *Neoliberalism* shares with Neorealism an individualist approach to structure, and most Neoliberals have not challenged Waltz’s view that power and interest are the material base of the system. But unlike Neorealists they see a relatively autonomous role for institutional superstructure.

Theories in the upper-left quadrant hypothesize that the properties of state agents are constructed in large part by material structures at the international level. At least three schools of thought can be found here. (1) *Neorealism* bleeds into this corner to the extent that it emphasizes the production of like units, although in practice most Neorealists take state identities as given, and the absence of constitu-

⁷⁷ See especially Morgenthau (1946, 1948/1973).

⁷⁸ Carr (1939).

tive effects from its conceptualization of structure in my view makes it ultimately compatible with individualism. (2) *World-Systems Theory* is more clearly holistic,⁷⁹ although its materialism must be qualified to the extent that it emphasizes the relations rather than forces of production (see chapter 3). (3) *Neo-Gramscian Marxism* is more concerned than other Marxisms with the role of ideology, pushing it toward the eastern hemisphere, but it remains rooted in the material base.⁸⁰

Theories in the lower-right quadrant hold that state identities and interests are constructed largely by domestic politics (so individualism at the systemic level), but have a more social view of what the structure of the international system is made of. (1) *Liberalism* emphasizes the role of domestic factors in shaping state interests, the realization of which is then constrained at the systemic level by institutions.⁸¹ (2) And *Neoliberalism* moves into this corner insofar as it emphasizes the role of expectations rather than power and interest. But to my knowledge no Neoliberal has explicitly advocated an idealist view of structure, and I shall argue in chapter 3 that at the end of the day it is based on a Neorealist ontology.

The Neorealist–Neoliberal debate that has dominated mainstream IR theory in recent years has been basically a debate between the bottom-left and bottom-right quadrants: agreeing on an individualist approach to system structure, the two sides have focused instead on the relative importance of power and interest vs. ideas and institutions.

The principal challenge to this debate has come from scholars in the upper-right quadrant, who believe that international structure consists fundamentally in shared knowledge, and that this affects not only state behavior, but state identities and interests as well. I shall call any theory in this quadrant “constructivist.” In addition to the work of John Ruggie and Friedrich Kratochwil, which has not become associated with a particular label, at least four schools might fit here. (1) The *English School* does not explicitly address state identity formation, but it does treat the international system as a society governed by shared norms, and Timothy Dunne has argued convincingly that it is a forerunner of contemporary constructivist IR theory.⁸² (2) The *World Society* school focuses on the role of global culture in constructing

⁷⁹ See Wallerstein (1974), Bach (1982), and Wendt (1987).

⁸⁰ Cox (1987), Gill, ed. (1993). ⁸¹ Doyle (1983), Russett (1993), Moravcsik (1997).

⁸² Bull (1977), Dunne (1995); also see Wendt and Duvall (1989).

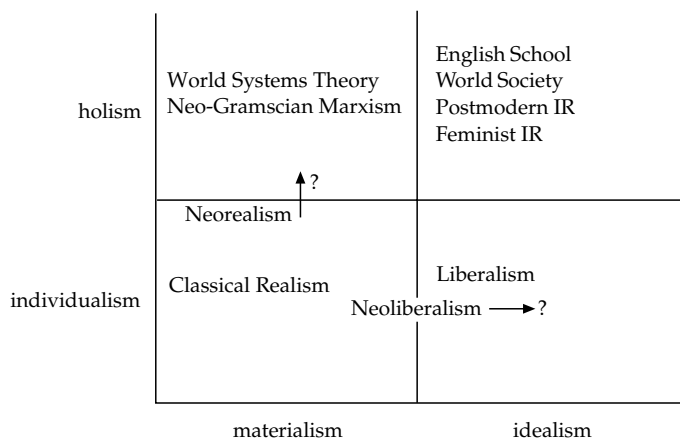


Figure 2

states.⁸³ (3) *Postmodernists* were the first to introduce contemporary constructivist social theory to IR, and continue to be the most thorough-going critics of materialism and rationalism. (4) And, finally, *Feminist* theory has recently made important inroads into IR, arguing that state identities are constructed by gendered structures at both the national and global levels. Summing up, then, we get something like Figure 2.

The argument of this book falls in the upper-right quadrant, and within that domain it is particularly indebted to the work of Ashley, Bull, and Ruggie. IR today being a discipline where theoretical allegiances are important, this raises a question about what the argument should be called. I do not know other than a “constructivist approach to the international system.” In general opposed to method-driven social science,⁸⁴ I have in effect written a book arguing that a new method can advance our thinking about international politics. This is justified insofar as social theory methods shape the theories with which we in turn observe the world, but it means that the argument is rooted more in social theory than in IR. Despite the author’s training as a political scientist, in other words, the book is written from a philosopher’s point of view. As a result, its substantive argument cuts across the traditional cleavages in IR between Realists,

⁸³ Meyer (1980), Thomas, *et al.* (1987), Meyer, *et al.* (1997); for a good overview see Finnemore (1996b).

⁸⁴ See Shapiro and Wendt (1992), Wendt and Shapiro (1997).

Liberals, and Marxists, supporting and challenging parts of each as the case may be. Readers will find much below that is associated usually with Realism:⁸⁵ state-centrism, the concern with national interests and the consequences of anarchy, the commitment to science. There is also much associated with Liberalism: the possibility of progress, the importance of ideas, institutions, and domestic politics. There is a Marxian sensibility in the discussion of the state. If I knew more about Hegel and the Idealism of the inter-war period perhaps that would be an appropriate affiliation, but ever since Carr's devastating critique "Idealist" has functioned in IR primarily as an epithet for naivete and utopianism, connotations which naturally I want to avoid.⁸⁶ In any event, however, these connections should be seen not as evidence of some desire for grand synthesis, but simply of a starting point outside the traditional categories of IR theory. "A constructivist approach to the international system" is the best description of the theory presented in this book.

Three interpretations

Now that I have positioned IR theories within my map of social theory assumptions, the question is: what is at stake with their second-order commitments? We can approach the answer from three perspectives, methodology, ontology, or empirics. Since these affect how we subsequently think about the differences among systemic IR theories, each bears at least brief scrutiny. For purposes of illustration I will focus on the debate along the *y*-axis between those who take identities and interests as given (rationalists) and those who do not (constructivists). A similar illustration could be developed along the *x*-axis.

A methodological difference

On one level the difference between rationalism and constructivism is merely that they ask different questions, and different questions need not involve substantive conflict. All theories have to take something

⁸⁵ Apart from Waltz, among Realists I see particular affinities to the work of Arnold Wolfers (1962).

⁸⁶ Carr (1939). For an overview of Hegel's views on international relations see Vincent (1983); cf. Fukuyama (1989). On inter-war Idealism, see Long and Wilson, eds. (1995). With the end of the Cold War Kegley (1993) has suggested that we are now in a "neoidealist moment."

as given, and in so doing “bracket” issues that may be problematized by others.⁸⁷ Rationalists are interested in how incentives in the environment affect the price of behavior. To answer this question they treat identities and interests as if they were given, but this is perfectly consistent with the constructivist question of where those identities and interests come from – and vice-versa. If the issue is no more than methodological, in other words, identities and interests can be seen as endogenous or exogenous to structure *with respect to theory only*, not reality. Neither approach is intrinsically “better” than the other, any more than it is “better” to inquire into the causes of malaria than smallpox; they are simply different. It is important to keep this in mind in view of the polemics that surround rational choice theory. On one level the theory is nothing more than a method for answering certain questions, and as such it makes no more sense to reject it than it did for early Marxist economists to reject mathematics because it was used by “bourgeois” economists.

While questions and methods do not determine substantive theory, however, they are not always substantively innocent. There are at least two ways in which our questions and methods can affect the content of first-order theorizing, particularly if one set of questions comes to dominate a field.

First, whether we take identities and interests as given can affect the debate along the *x*-axis about the importance of ideas and material forces. Neorealists, for example, argue that state interests stem from the material structure of anarchy. If we start with this assumption, then ideas are reduced a priori to an intervening variable between material forces and outcomes. Ideas may still play a role in social life, for example by determining choices among multiple equilibria, but to take the Neorealist analysis of identity and interest as given is nevertheless implicitly to concede that the fundamental structure of international politics is material rather than social. This is what Neoliberal regime theory did in the 1980s when it defined the theoretical problem as showing that international institutions (which are shared ideas) explained additional variance beyond that explained by material power and interest alone – as if institutions did not also constitute power and interest. The pattern is repeating itself in recent Neoliberal scholarship on ideas, in which the null hypothesis is that “actions . . . can be understood on the basis of egoistic interests, in the

⁸⁷ Giddens (1979: 80–81).

context of power realities”⁸⁸ – as if ideas did not also constitute power and interest. That is, Neoliberalism concedes too much to Neorealism a priori, reducing itself to the secondary status of cleaning up residual variance left unexplained by a primary theory. A theory to challenge Neorealism must show how intersubjective conditions constitute material power and interests in the first place, not treat the latter as an idea-less starting point.

A second danger, as noted by Ruggie, is that a methodology can turn into a tacit ontology.⁸⁹ Rationalist methodology is not designed to explain identities and interests. It does not rule out explanations, but neither does it offer one itself. However, Neoliberals increasingly acknowledge that we need a theory of state interests. Where should we look for one? One place would be the international system; another, domestic politics. Neoliberals overwhelmingly favor the latter. This may be because state interests *really are* determined by domestic politics, but it may also be because Neoliberals have so internalized a rationalist view of the international system that they automatically assume that the causes of state interests must be exogenous to the system. By conditioning how rationalists think about the world, in other words, exogeneity in *theory* is tacitly transformed into an assumption of exogeneity in *reality*. The latter ultimately may be the right conclusion empirically, but that conclusion should be reached only after comparing the explanatory power of domestic and systemic theories of state identity formation. It should not be presumed as part of a method-driven social science.⁹⁰

In sum, legitimate methodological differences may generate different substantive conclusions. The dependence of theory on method is an occupational hazard in all scientific inquiry, but it becomes especially problematic if one method comes to dominate a field. To some extent this has happened with rationalism in mainstream systemic IR theory. In such a context certain questions never get asked, certain possibilities never considered.

An ontological difference

Perhaps the most common interpretation of the dispute between rationalists and constructivists is that it is about ontology, about what kind of “stuff” the international system is made of. Two early

⁸⁸ Goldstein and Keohane (1993: 37).

⁸⁹ Ruggie (1983a: 285).

⁹⁰ On the latter see Shapiro and Wendt (1992).

expressions of this view in IR came from Ashley and from Kratochwil and Ruggie.⁹¹ Ashley was one of the first to problematize Waltz's micro-economic analogy, which he argued was based on an individualist ontology, while Kratochwil and Ruggie argued that there was a contradiction in regime theory between the intersubjectivist epistemology implied by the concept of regime and the individualist ontology of regime theory's rationalist basis. The subsequent discussion of the agent–structure problem in IR followed these leads and also focused on ontology, notably on whether systemic structures are reducible to preexisting agents or have a relatively autonomous life of their own. I explore the latter question in some detail in chapters 4 and 6 below.

A related ontological issue, which is the frame for chapter 7, concerns how we should think about “what’s going on” when actors interact, and in particular about what it means to take identities and interests as “given.” Taking *something* as given is necessary in any explanatory endeavor by virtue of the simple fact that it is humanly impossible to problematize everything at once. Even postmodernists who want to problematize agents “all the way down” will end up taking certain things as given. This inescapable fact points back toward the methodological difference noted above. However, in taking identities and interests as methodologically given there is also an implicit ontological question of whether they are seen themselves as processes that need to be socially sustained (but which we just happen not to be interested in today), or as fixed objects that are in some sense outside of social space and time. In the latter view, the production and reproduction of identities and interests is not going on, not at stake, in social interaction. If that is true then how states treat each other in interaction does not matter for how they define who they are: by acting selfishly nothing more is going on than the attempt to realize selfish ends. In the constructivist view, in contrast, actions continually produce and reproduce conceptions of Self and Other, and as such identities and interests are always in process, even if those processes are sometimes stable enough that – for certain purposes – we plausibly can take them as given.

The difference matters for the perceived nature of international politics and for the possibilities of structural change. In chapter 7 I ask how egoistic states might transform the culture of the international

⁹¹ Ashley (1983, 1984), Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986).

system from a balance of power to a collective security system. One possibility is that they learn to cooperate while their egoistic identities remain constant. It is hard to be optimistic about this given the collective action problems that confront egoists, but it could happen. On the other hand, if certain foreign policy practices undermine egoistic identities and generate collective ones, then structural change might be easier. It all depends on what is going on when states interact. This is a matter of ontology because differences of opinion cannot easily be settled by appeals to "the facts," since any facts we collect will be shot through with ontological assumptions about what we are looking at that are not easily falsified.

This book is based on the conviction that despite their seeming intractability, ontological issues are crucial to how we do and should think about international life, and that IR scholarship today is insufficiently self-conscious about them. Having said this, however, I also want to inject this concern with ontology with an empirical sensibility. One might conclude from the ontological interpretation of their debate that rationalists and constructivists face a situation of radical incommensurability, such that we should simply pay our money and take our choice. This is unwarranted. Different ontologies often have different implications for what we should observe in the world.⁹² Empirical evidence telling against these ontologies might not be decisive, since defenders can argue that the problem lies with the particular theory being tested rather than the underlying ontology, but it may still be instructive. The possibility that different ontologies are incommensurable should not be treated as an excuse to avoid comparison.⁹³ Ontology-talk is necessary, but we should also look for ways to translate it into propositions that might be adjudicated empirically.

An empirical difference

There are at least two empirical issues at stake in the debate between rationalists and constructivists. First, to what extent are state identities and interests constructed by domestic vs. systemic structures? To the extent that the answer is domestic, state interests will in fact be exogenous to the international system (not just "as if" exogenous), and systemic IR theorists would therefore be justified in being rationalists about the international system. This is basically the

⁹² Kincaid (1993).

⁹³ Wight (1996).

Neoliberal approach. To the extent that the answer is systemic, however, interests will be endogenous to the international system. Rationalist theories are not well equipped to analyze endogenous preference formation, and thus a constructivist approach would be called for. Second, to what extent are state identities and interests constant? Rationalism typically assumes constancy, and if this is empirically warranted we would have an independent reason for being rationalists about the international system regardless of how the first question was answered. Even if states identities and interests are constructed within the international system, if the results of that process are highly stable then we lose little by treating them as given.

Answering these questions would require an extensive program of theory building and empirical research, which is not the goal of this book. My point is that these questions are useful for IR because they are amenable to substantive inquiry in a way that ontological debates are not. Of course, I still maintain that IR scholars cannot escape ontological issues entirely, since what we observe in world politics is closely bound up with the concepts through which we observe it. In sum, then, my attitude toward these debates, to quote Hacking paraphrasing Popper, is that "it is not all that bad to be pre-scientifically metaphysical, for unfalsifiable metaphysics is often the speculative parent of falsifiable science."⁹⁴

Epistemology and the via media

Figure 2 is meant to capture second-order differences among systemic IR theories about the nature and effects of international structure. The rest of this book is an attempt to clarify these differences and advocate one particular ontology of international life.

However, if asked on a survey to name the most divisive issue in IR today, a majority of scholars would probably say *epistemology*, not ontology. The importance of the epistemological issue in IR as a discipline is reflected in the fact that it is considered one of our Great Debates. In this "Third Debate"⁹⁵ the field has polarized into two main camps: (1) a majority who think science is an epistemically privileged discourse through which we can gain a progressively truer understanding of the world, and (2) a large minority who do not recognize a privileged epistemic status for science in explaining the

⁹⁴ Hacking (1983: 3).

⁹⁵ Lapid (1989).

world out there. The former have become known as “positivists” and the latter as “post-positivists,” although this terminology is not particularly clarifying, since strictly speaking “positivism” is an early twentieth-century philosophy of science that probably few contemporary “positivists” would endorse. Given that an important part of what divides the two camps is whether they think the methods of natural science are appropriate in social inquiry, it might be better to call them “naturalists” and “anti-naturalists,” or advocates of “Explanation” and “Understanding” respectively.⁹⁶ In any case, the two sides are barely on speaking terms today, and seem to see little point in changing this situation.

There are many – going back to Kratochwil and Ruggie’s influential analysis of the supposed contradictions between Neoliberal regime theory’s ontology and epistemology⁹⁷ – who might argue that the ontological debates of concern to me can be subsumed by this epistemological divide. The rationale begins with positivism’s assumption of a distinction between subject and object. Such a distinction is relatively easy to sustain if the objects of inquiry are material, like rocks and trees, and perhaps even tanks and aircraft carriers, since these do not depend on ideas for their existence. Tanks have certain causal powers whether or not anyone knows it, just as a tree falling in the forest makes a sound whether or not anyone hears it. This seems to line up a materialist ontology with a positivist epistemology, and indeed most materialists in IR are positivists. Conversely, it is harder to sustain the subject–object distinction if society is ideas all the way down, since that means that human subjects in some sense create the objects their theories purport to explain. This seems to line up idealist ontologies with a post-positivist epistemology, and indeed many idealists in IR are post-positivists. From this standpoint the ontological choices in Figure 2 come down to an epistemological choice between two views of social inquiry.

Given my idealist ontological commitments, therefore, one might think that I should be firmly on the post-positivist side of this divide, talking about discourse and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing and objective reality. Yet, in fact, when it comes to the epistemology of social inquiry I am a strong believer in science – a pluralistic science to be sure, in which there is a significant role for “Understanding,” but science just the same. I am a “positivist.” In

⁹⁶ Hollis and Smith (1990).

⁹⁷ Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986).

some sense this puts me in the middle of the Third Debate, not because I want to find an eclectic epistemology, which I do not, but because I do not think an idealist ontology implies a post-positivist epistemology. Contrary to Kratochwil and Ruggie, I see no contradiction in Neoliberal regime theory. Rather than reduce ontological differences to epistemological ones, in my view the latter should be seen as a third, independent axis of debate.

In effect, therefore, I hope to find a “via media”⁹⁸ through the Third Debate by reconciling what many take to be incompatible ontological and epistemological positions. This effort, which I make in chapter 2, injects significant tensions into the argument of this book. Some will say that no via media exists. They may be right, but I nevertheless press two arguments: (1) that what really matters is what there is rather than how we know it, and (2) that science should be question-rather than method-driven, and the importance of constitutive questions creates an essential role in social science for interpretive methods. Put more bluntly, I think that post-positivists put too much emphasis on epistemology, and that positivists should be more open-minded about questions and methodology. No one can force positivists and post-positivists to talk to each other, but in trying to construct a via media I hope to show that at least there is something to talk about.

Plan of the book

The book is written so that it may be read “à la carte.” Each chapter is a relatively freestanding discussion of a particular theoretical issue, and although they follow a clear progression, by building in some redundancy I hope to have made it possible to see the larger picture without reading everything at once. To this end the book is organized into two parts, “Social theory” and “International politics.”

Part I lays out the version of constructivism that I think is most plausible. I focus on epistemology and ontology, but examples from international politics and IR theory ground the discussion.

Chapter 2, “Scientific realism and social kinds,” develops the epistemological basis for the argument. This chapter asks: how can we be both positivist and constructivist? Using a realist philosophy of science (no relation to Political Realism) I make three main arguments.

⁹⁸ This description was suggested to me by Steve Smith.

On one flank, I attempt to block post-positivist critiques by defending the view that constructivist social theory is compatible with a scientific approach to social inquiry. Constructivism should be construed narrowly as an ontology, not broadly as an epistemology. On another flank, I use scientific realism to block empiricist claims that we should not make ontological claims about unobservables. On the surface this does not change how we practice science, but it has implications for how we think about the objects of social science, “social kinds.” Scientific realism legitimates a critical social science committed to discovering the deep structure of international life. Finally, the chapter develops the distinction between causal and constitutive questions and effects, which is crucial to understanding the difference that ideas and social structures make in international politics.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift the focus to ontology. Chapter 3, “‘Ideas all the way down?’: on the constitution of power and interest,” examines the idealist–materialist debate along the *x*-axis of figure 1. I show that two ostensibly materialist explanations associated particularly with Realism – explanations by reference to power and interest – actually achieve most of their explanatory power through tacit assumptions about the distribution of ideas in the system. My argument here posits a distinction between two kinds of stuff in the world, brute material forces and ideas, which means that the answer to the question posed by the chapter’s title is actually negative – it is *not* ideas *all* the way down. Brute material forces like biological needs, the physical environment, and technological artifacts do have intrinsic causal powers. However, once we have properly separated material forces and ideas we can see that the former explain relatively little in social life. Using Waltz’s theory of structure as a foil I first show that the meaning and thus explanatory power of the distribution of capabilities is constituted by the distribution of interests in the system. Then, shifting my focus to rational choice theory, I argue that those interests, in turn, are ideas. The argument that interests are themselves ideas (of a particular kind) raises the question of whether rational choice theory is ultimately a materialist or idealist theory. It is usually seen as materialist, but I argue that the theory is actually better seen as a form of idealism. Understood in this way it is fully compatible with – if subsumed by – a constructivist perspective. Power and interest are important factors in international life, but since their effects are a function of culturally constituted ideas the latter should be our starting point.

Chapter 4, "Structure, agency, and culture," addresses the ontological debate between individualists and holists along the *y*-axis of figure 1, with particular reference to how a constructivist approach to analyzing the structure of culture differs from an individualist, game-theoretic one. Again using Waltz as a launching point, this time focusing on his definition of structure, I distinguish between two effects of structure, causal and constitutive, and between two levels of structure, micro and macro. Individualist theories are useful for understanding causal effects at the micro-level, and, construed flexibly, can be stretched to cover macro-level causal effects as well. As in chapter 3, therefore, I argue that mainstream approaches have considerable validity as far as they go; they just do not go far enough. My argument is that an individualist ontology is not equipped to deal with the *constitutive* effects of cultural structure. As such rational choice theory is incomplete as an account of social life. Holist theories capture these constitutive effects, and since these effects are a condition of possibility for rationalist arguments, the latter should be seen as depending on the former. This synthetic position is made possible by the essentialist proposition that individuals are self-organizing creatures. This step concedes a crucial point to individualism, but I argue that most of the attributes we normally associate with individuals have to do with the social *terms* of their individuality rather than their individuality *per se*, and these are culturally constituted. Up to this point the argument focuses on agents and structures separately; a concluding section focuses on system process. Here I argue that culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., actors act on the basis of shared expectations, and this tends to reproduce those expectations. Still, it is in these processes of reproduction that we also find transformative potential. Under certain conditions the processes underlying cultural reproduction can generate structural change. This argument is the basis for the claim that "anarchy is what states make of it."

In part II I turn to a substantive argument about the nature of the international system which is conditioned but not determined by the social constructivist approach outlined in part I. This is the part of the book that can be considered a case study in social theory. I organize it around the three main elements of the agent-structure problematique, with chapters on state agency, international structure, and systemic process respectively.

Chapter 5, "The state and the problem of corporate agency," has

two main objectives. The first is to defend the assumption that states are unitary actors to which we legitimately can attribute anthropomorphic qualities like identities, interests, and intentionality. This assumption, much maligned in recent IR scholarship, is a precondition for using the tools of social theory to analyze the behavior of corporate agents in the international system, since social theory was designed to explain the behavior of individuals, not states. Drawing on both Weberian and Marxian forms of state theory, I argue that states are self-organizing entities whose internal structures confer capacities for institutionalized collective action – corporate agency – on their members. Having established that states are unitary actors, my other objective is to show that many of the qualities that Realists think are essential to these actors, including most importantly their self-interested and power-seeking character, are contingent and socially constructed. States' essential qualities matter because they impose transhistorical limits on world politics that can only be escaped by transcending the state. But offering a more stripped down conceptualization of the essential state and its national interests reveals possibilities for new forms of international politics within a state-centric world that would otherwise be hidden. This argument is developed through a conceptual analysis of four concepts of "identity" – personal/corporate, type, role, and collective – which includes a brief discussion of "self-interest" that attempts to make that concept useful by clearly delimiting its referential scope.

Chapter 6, "Three cultures of anarchy," uses the framework developed in chapter 4 to explicate the deep structure of anarchy as a cultural or ideational rather than material phenomenon, and to show that once understood in this way, we can see that the logic of anarchy can vary. After clearing the ground by arguing that even highly conflictual anarchies can be based on shared ideas, I begin with the proposition that different cultures of anarchy are based on different kinds of roles in terms of which states represent Self and Other. I identify three roles, enemy, rival, and friend, and argue that they are constituted by, and constitute, three distinct, macro-level cultures of international politics, Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian respectively. These cultures have different rules of engagement, interaction logics, and systemic tendencies. The contemporary international system is mostly Lockean, with increasing Kantian elements. Most of the chapter is taken up with an analysis of the three cultures. I make the argument that they can be internalized to three different "degrees" in

state identities, which correspond to different reasons for why states might comply with systemic norms – coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy. These different reasons for compliance generate different pathways by which a given culture can be realized, and correspond roughly to how Neorealists, Neoliberals, and constructivists explain rule-following. Since the more deeply that cultural norms are internalized the more difficult they are to change, the chapter shows – perhaps counter-intuitively given the association of constructivism with ease of social change – that the more that culture matters in international politics the more stable the international system becomes.

Chapter 7, “Process and structural change,” looks at how processes of interaction reproduce and transform systemic structures. I begin by distinguishing two models of what is going on when states interact – a rationalist model which treats identities and interests as exogenously given and constant, and a constructivist model, drawing on symbolic interactionism, which treats them as endogenous and potentially changeable. Developing the latter suggestion, I argue that identities evolve through two basic processes, natural and cultural selection, the latter consisting of mechanisms of imitation and social learning. In the rest of the chapter I apply this framework to the explanation of structural change in international politics, which, building on chapter 6, I define as a change from one culture of anarchy to another (and in particular, for purposes of illustration, from a Lockean to Kantian culture), rather than in the Neorealist fashion as a change in the distribution of material capabilities. Cultural change involves the emergence of new forms of collective identity, and so it is on the determinants of the latter that I focus. I discuss four “master variables” or causes of collective identity formation: interdependence, common fate, homogenization, and self-restraint, each of which can be instantiated or realized concretely in multiple ways. The result is a model of structural change that provides the social theory underpinnings for Liberal arguments about the consequences of a proliferation of liberal democratic states, while leaving open the possibility that other pathways might achieve the same result.

In a brief concluding chapter I summarize the central themes of the book and raise questions about the practice of IR and the potential for reflexivity in international society.