
Social Theory of International Politics

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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 “bandwagoning” 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.