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# Intersections between Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism in IR Theory

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### Intersections between Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism in IR Theory

The works of Albert and Cederman, Ferguson and Mansbach, and Onuf respectively, can be said to be neorealist, neoliberal, and constructivist. The three distinctions on perspective are said to delineate the three different theoretical frameworks that dominate the field of International Relations. Of course, Nicholas Onuf is apparently the only one who self-identifies as his respective framework, that of a constructivist. However, while not made explicitly clear, the other authors also express ideas bearing the hallmarks of the different theoretical frameworks. Thus, Albert and Cederman couch the neorealist perspective in terms of ‘systems’ theorizing, Ferguson and Mansbach rhetorically discuss issues and non-issues which are readily addressed within the neoliberal perspective, and of course, Onuf is unabashedly a constructivist. Below, I discuss each theoretical perspective relative to the articles assigned, and, thereafter conclude with some observations on the three articles and theoretical frameworks. While neorealist and neoliberal perspectives do share some in common, it can be said that the constructivist perspective is fundamentally different than the others. This is also discussed further below. The aim of this short analysis is to pinpoint where the three theoretical frameworks intersect, thus accounting for ontological and epistemologic difference and similarity.

Systems Theory incorporates observations of the large and derives explanation, whether causal or correlative, for the small—and vice versa. That is, the relationship between the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ in terms of societal phenomena and/or the relationship between the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ ought to provide understanding of matters of world politics *broadly*. Systems Theory utilizes this assumption to explain the reciprocal relationship between the large and the small and provides an accounting for social phenomena in general. As such, there is an inherent assumption that *societies* across the globe share enough in common that generalizing on phenomena that is ubiquitous amongst *all* or *most* societies is possible. Therefore, attempts at falsification of concepts of behavior should succeed in identifying societal-behavioral outliers rather than world society—in *general*. The Systems Theorist takes into account individual behavior and broad behavioral trend within cultural and institutional structures, and/or ‘identity constructs’, and applies historical context to explain broad, structural phenomena in global politics. Here, the theorist’s perspective is essentially broad: it attempts to account for all behavioral phenomena relative to particular political ‘systems’ over vast amounts of time and space. By this, the theorist assembles knowledge based on such *broad* observations. Such theorizing, where successful, sheds light on the utterly foundational. If one can explain *global* phenomena, one can account for individual and group behavioral trend within politico-social systems that amount to *global* phenomena. Of course, given that social phenomena rarely emerges out of a clear-cut causal chain of individual behavior, the systems theorist is not necessarily committed to teasing out general theories on human behavior. Rather, the systems theorist makes use of observations on behavior that amass to or amount to the realm of the political, taking into account States’ self-perception of identity, relative to issues regarding the *global*, such as economic globalization or State-Hegemony. Hence, within this *way* of knowing, representative units, or ‘blocks’, of categorizable behavior do not necessarily correlate with

broader political phenomena in easily quantifiable ways. Herein lays the necessity for theory on the systemic, systematic, and/or broadly structural. This accounting of world politics, based on its insistence on systemic phenomena, fits squarely with *neorealist* IR theory, and indeed, the authors of *Systems Theorizing in IR* commit to persuading the reader that the neorealist perspective is a valuable one. Unlike so-called 'classical realism' whereby broad behavioral phenomena are tied to individual human behavior, Systems Theory accounts for what its name implies: 'systems' or systemic phenomena, i.e., broad and structural events that appear to amass or manifest into larger, *global* political behavior, and the evident relationship between the *global* and the so-called 'micro-foundational'. Although the authors do not explicitly espouse the assumption of an anarchic certainty behind all international-political phenomenon, such a certainty is implied by the terms in which political 'systems' emerge out of an order-less, chaotic state.

Alternatively, there is the perspective encouraged by Ferguson and Mansbach, which can be characterized as *similar* to neorealism, but with some variance, and thus, identified as *neoliberal* in conception. This perspective wishes to account for global political phenomena by observing the development or evolution of political structures/institutions over time, largely understood within a system of *States* which exercise control and influence to varying degrees within the international system of *States*. Further, this perspective incorporates an assumption that state 'identities and loyalties' remain constant, albeit transforming over time; and, by correlating changes in politics over time to respective 'identities and loyalties', the neoliberal can account for existent interdependence between the state and individual subject, and the resultant interdependence between states, which ultimately amounts to the international political system of states. In other words, this accounting for world political phenomena does not solely rely on 'states-as-actors' or state-structure-vs-anarchy for analysis, but also cooperative behavior relative to the state within a *particular* polity, as well as cooperative interrelation between societies. This suggests that the 'relativeness' of states are not essential for analysis; rather, the state's influence upon individual subjects within a particular polity is of equal value for understanding global political phenomena; the relativeness between states is thus a given. This provides an accounting for the complex relations that exist between actors, actors and states, and states and states. While these relations are not necessarily easily expressed in a formulaic manner, there are basic *intra*-interests and behaviors that can provide space for explaining such complexity and the larger, more global implications of same, i.e., individual interests, goals, and values. Of course, Ferguson and Mansbach put forth this perspective in the rhetorical, having structured comments into 'issues' and 'non-issues'. Nevertheless, the point is there: the aim is to identify the operative conditions which reveal causes and correlations in international political phenomena. For the authors, change over time, patterns of governance, and the respective implications on 'identities and loyalties' are representative of such operative conditions. Further, they call into question contemporary notions of the 'State' in light of developing and/or transforming political conditions and such individual 'identities and loyalties'. This is well in-line with the neoliberal tendency to view 'states' as ultimate units for observation and measurement when explaining international political phenomena.

In opposition to both neorealist and neoliberal tendencies is constructivism, of which Nicholas Onuf self-reports to have first introduced upon the field of International Relations. In this view, all relations are socially constructed, and flowing out of the basic units of human interaction, that being *language*. Hence, 'international' relations are socially made constructs which occur relative to the intricacies of basic human interaction. Constructivists posit

the fundamental unit of analysis to be the agent, whose decision-making along limited choices and preferences, ultimately manifests into broader behavioral patterns which can be observed, correlated, and analyzed. Out of this, basic constructs of language amount to written imperatives or *rules*; rules in turn limit and determine individual *agency*, and establish the conditions in which such agency amounts to behavioral trend or pattern. There is a tendency to memorialize or ‘institutionalize’ such patterns of behavior, which in turn provides for the distinguishing between ‘formal rules’ from ‘informal rules’; but it is the constructivist’s point that such institutionalized patterns of behavior remain product of socially constructed phenomena, fundamentally arising out of human interaction by virtue of speech. Such ‘constructions’ ultimately amass into multiple layers of human interaction, from micro-level human relations to international state relations—hence Onuf’s title: *Worlds of Our Making*. Given these multiple layers of interaction, and the different characteristics of each, the constructivist makes use of any available methodology—whether quantitative, qualitative, or both—in describing and explaining international relations. This perspective largely stands to rebuff neorealist and neoliberal conceptions of international politics which belie the belief that existent politico-structures necessarily form out of a natural need to mitigate anarchy. In contrast to there being an ‘anarchic’ constant in which global political structures arise, constructivism posits there to be a ‘social’ constant, which society ‘constructs’ into larger, observable patterns of global-political behavioral phenomena.

To some extent, one can argue that the International Relations field is suffering from ‘Physics-envy’. The three perspectives: neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism can be analogized with General Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, and a Theory of Everything. Neorealist focus is on systemic structure, neoliberal-focus is the same, but takes into accounts smaller-scale human interaction that gives rise to the large-scale international system of states, and, constructivism is focused on unifying basic human interaction via speech with international political phenomena, and explaining both in terms of each other. The examples of each provided in the readings appear to be highly abstracted, arguments of the merits of each analytical perspective. All three perspectives seek to account for global political phenomena—a shared epistemic virtue. The three perspectives, however, differ ontologically, in that the observer takes differing perspectives and focuses on different ‘characteristics’ of political human-behavior, whether on the ‘macro’ *or* ‘micro’ level—or both. Respectively, global society, therefore, is a set of systems/structures, a set of interdependent relations, or a set of socially constructed observable frameworks from within different perspectives. Epistemologically, all three perspectives attempt to account for the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels of socio-political phenomena; three differ in choice of analytical analog or framework. For me, it remains to be seen whether any bear any particular merit over the others. From this perspective, all three appear to bear analytic and conceptual value. After all, it is true that one can observe systems phenomena in terms of global politics as well as socially constructed phenomena that appear to take on a political form. However, which framework is *better* in terms of explaining global politics is again—yet to be determined through additional reading.