



FROM REALISM TO CONSTRUCTIVISM: THE SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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Abstract

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has been a graveyard of theoretical paradigms. Each attempting to entomb the other in a perpetual struggle for intellectual hegemony. For decades, the landscape was dominated by the state-centric, power-political paradigm of Realism. Its narrative of anarchy, material power, and the inevitability of conflict provided a compelling, if grim, explanation for the recurrent tragedies of world politics. However, the constructed nature of this narrative itself remained largely unchallenged. This paper expostulates that the subsequent shift towards Constructivism represents not merely an additive theoretical process, but a profound epistemological rupture. It is a move from a positivist understanding of international politics as a realm of objective, material forces to a post-positivist conception of it as a socially constructed realm of inter-subjective beliefs, norms, and identities. Deviating from the conventional linear history of IR theory, this paper argues that the Realist paradigm, while powerful in explaining continuity, suffers from a foundational detachment from the empirical reality of systemic change and the endogenous nature of state interests. The Constructivist revolution, therefore, is by far a more significant development for understanding the complex tapestry of global politics, yet its adoption is not without its own security dilemmas for policy-makers accustomed to the certitudes of material power. This research paper takes a cursory examination of the implications and challenges that ensue from this paradigmatic shift, arguing that the failure to appreciate the socially constructed nature of international politics has led to profound policy failures, much like the misguided counternarcotics templates imposed on Afghanistan.

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Introduction

International Relations as a discipline has been 'off-and-on' the agenda of great power politics, its theoretical contours often shaped by the very geopolitical realities it seeks to explain. The Cold War, a period of intense superpower rivalry, found its intellectual mirror in the dominant paradigm of Realism (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). This perspective, with its emphasis on material capabilities, survival, and the inescapable logic of anarchy, provided a parsimonious framework for a world perpetually on the brink. Its sober, often pessimistic, outlook became the dominant episteme, the lens through which the dynamics of power were interpreted.

However, the sudden and unexpected end of the Cold War, which Realist theories struggled to anticipate or explain, acted as a catalyst for a profound intellectual re-evaluation (Lebow & Risse-Kappen, 1995). This was the discipline's own state-formation moment, creating space for alternative voices that challenged the very foundations of the Realist graveyard. Constructivism emerged from this ferment, not to refine the existing narrative, but to question its ontological and epistemological premises. Unlike Realism, which takes the structure of the international system and the interests of states as a given, acontextual reality, Constructivism probes how these structures and interests are socially constructed through ongoing processes of interaction, discourse, and shared understanding (Onuf, 1989; Wendt, 1992, 1999). This article traces this pivotal intellectual journey. It contends that the shift from Realism to Constructivism is a move from a detached, moralistic constraint of positivism towards an engagement with the obverse reality of world politics, i.e., a world of our own making.

The Graveyard of Paradigms: The Contending Epistemes of IR

To understand the seismic shift from Realism to Constructivism, it is essential to delineate the core ontological commitments of each paradigm, much like understanding the historical layers of an archaeological site.

Realism: The Anarchic Status Quo as a Social Fact

Realism, in its structural form, rests on the leitmotif of anarchy. In the context it is the absence of a central authority as the timeless, objective constraint that dictates a logic of self-help and power maximization (Waltz, 1979). For Neorealists, the distribution of material capabilities is the primary determinant of international outcomes. In this view, institutions, ideas, and norms are largely epiphenomenal, reflecting rather than constraining the underlying distribution of power. This paradigm, while powerful, is akin to the colonial episteme imposed on Afghanistan; it interprets a complex social reality through a rigid, external template, neglecting the internal, constitutive dynamics of that reality. The Cold War bipolar structure is thus explained not by the shared understandings of the superpowers, but merely by the inert fact of their material parity.

The Neoliberal Interregnum: Anarchy Managed, Not Transformed

The challenge from Neoliberal institutionalism in the 1980s accepted the core Realist premises of anarchy and state rationality (Keohane, 1984). However, it argued that institutions could mitigate its worst effects by facilitating cooperation for absolute gains. Yet, this challenge remained within the rationalist and positivist research program, debating the effects of anarchy rather than problematizing its very nature. It was an attempt at policy reform within a system whose foundational rules were taken as immutable.

The Constructivist Revolution: The Social Construction of World Politics

Constructivism, ascending in the 1990s, launched a more fundamental assault by targeting the ontology of both Realism and Neoliberalism. Its core proposition is that the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material (Wendt, 1992). These structures are shaped by shared ideas, beliefs, norms, and identities. Constructivism makes three key moves, which fundamentally alter the security discourse:

1. **The Primacy of Ideational Factors:** While not denying material forces, Constructivists argue that their meaning is socially allocated. A British nuclear submarine means something different to the United States than an identical North Korean one because of the intersubjective ideas of alliance versus enmity (Wendt, 1995).
2. **The Mutual Constitution of Agents and Structures:** Structures influence agents, but these agents, through their practices and discourse, simultaneously constitute and reproduce those structures. This is a dynamic, co-constitutive relationship, echoing the banditry state-formation processes in 1990s Afghanistan, where warlords both shaped and were shaped by the opium economy.
3. **The Social Construction of Identity and Interests:** A central Constructivist claim is that state interests are not pre-given but are shaped by state identities, which are themselves forged through interaction. A state's identity as a "responsible stakeholder" or a "revolutionary vanguard" defines its interests in a way that cannot be deduced from material factors alone.

Alexander Wendt's (1992) seminal argument that "anarchy is what states make of it" encapsulates this challenge. The self-help logic is not an inevitable consequence of anarchy but is itself a socially constructed structure.

Obverse Reality of IR: A Case of the Constructivist Turn

The intellectual movement from Realism to Constructivism reveals an obverse reality of international politics, where ideational forces provide security and shape political outcomes in ways materialist theories cannot apprehend.

Reconceptualizing Anarchy and Power

For the Structural Realist, anarchy is a fixed constraint. For the Constructivist, it is a variable. Its effects are dependent on the intersubjective understandings, the "cultures of anarchy" that states construct through their interaction (Wendt, 1992). Consequently, power is not merely material and coercive but also discursive and normative. It is the power to shape identities, define interests, and establish legitimate behaviour (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). The global prohibition on landmines (Price, 1998) was not a function of material power but of normative power, which reconfigured state interests and security calculations.

The Social Construction of State Interests

In the Realist worldview, the national interest is a straightforward deduction from survival. Constructivism fundamentally challenges this. Martha Finnemore's (1996) work demonstrates how state interests are taught and socialized by international organizations. The interest in promoting human rights or scientific development is not primordial but a socially constructed preference, much like the Afghan rural population's dependence on opium poppy, a rational adaptation to a constructed socio-economic reality where alternatives are absent.

Explaining Systemic Change

Realist theories are often static, unable to explain transformative change. The end of the Cold War is the case in hand. For Realists, the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union was a puzzle (Mearsheimer, 1990). Constructivists, however, point to the ideational shifts

initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. His policies of glasnost and perestroika, and his promotion of "new thinking," fundamentally altered the Soviet Union's identity and its relationship with the West (Kosłowski & Kratochwil, 1994). By changing the shared ideas, the agents transformed the very structure they inhabited.

Implications and Challenges of the Paradigmatic Shift

The ascendancy of Constructivism has profound implications, not merely for academic discourse but for the very formulation of security and foreign policy.

Constructivism's primary contribution is its expansion of the ontological scope of IR. It provides compelling explanations for phenomena that Rationalist theories found puzzling, bringing agency and the potential for change back into the field. However, it is not without its critiques. Realists charge it with being unfalsifiable and unable to explain the persistent, grim realities of security competition in regions like the South China Sea. This critique mirrors the argument that ignoring the material reality of the opium economy in Afghanistan is a recipe for policy failure.

The relationship, therefore, is not of replacement but of a necessary, if tense, dialectic. Realism explains the "how" of power politics within a given structure. Constructivism explains the "why" i.e., the origins of that structure and the reasons for its transformation (Fearon & Wendt, 2002). A synthetic approach is the most viable. The rise of China, for instance, is both a material power shift (a Realist concern) and a story of contested identities and social understandings about what a "rising China" signifies (a Constructivist domain).

Conclusion: Recommendations for a Synthesized Understanding

In conclusion, the curtailment of the Realist monologue has profound implications for how we understand state, societal, and individual security. The study, therefore, concludes with a set of rudimentary recommendations for scholars and policymakers alike:

1. The IR discipline needs to develop a broader consensus on accepting the constructed nature of political reality. This would require moving beyond the moralistic constraint of a purely materialist framework.
2. Policy frameworks, particularly in conflict zones, must be based on the empirical realities of local normative structures and identities, not externally imposed templates. The failure of top-down counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan is a stark reminder.
3. Analysis of international crises must be phased, acknowledging both the material constraints (the Realist contribution) and the dynamic, ideational processes that constitute interests and identities (the Constructivist contribution).
4. The need to reduce epistemological poverty should be central to the training of diplomats and strategists. A multi-paradigmatic toolkit, embracing both material and ideational forces, is essential for navigating the complex tapestry of 21st-century global politics.

The journey from Realism to Constructivism has not provided final answers, but it has equipped us with a richer set of questions and a more profound appreciation for the intricate, socially constructed, and ever-evolving nature of global politics.

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