Realist and Constructivist Approaches to Anarchy

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Anarchy is a central concept in international relations (IR) theory, as such this essay aims to compare and contrast two approaches to anarchy, namely the realist and constructivist approaches. It is hoped that by exploring two competing approaches to anarchy in IR theory that one can identify the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches, perhaps even eliminating one approach in order to better understand international politics. Adem notes that "the major theories of international relations embrace the view that the international system is anarchic", however distinctions can be made as to how each major theory tackles the anarchic nature of the international system (Adem: 2002: 19). It is these distinctions, which I will compare and contrast in order to discover how anarchy can be approached and perhaps even overcome in international politics.

Before beginning a comparison of the realist and constructivist approaches to anarchy in IR theory, it may be useful to outline the key aspects of both approaches. This will highlight the significant features of their conceptions of anarchy, while also allowing for the exploration of differences existing within each approach.

Realism has long been the dominant perspective in IR theory and as such it seems logical to begin by outlining the key features of realism's approach to anarchy. A key principle of realist theory is that of survival and it could be argued that in the domestic politics governments create and enforce laws to protect citizens, thus reducing the prospect of conflict or civil war, however the same cannot be said of international politics (Lebow: 2007). A central assumption of the realist approach to anarchy is thus that the rules of the international system are dictated by anarchy; in this sense, anarchy is perceived as a "lack of central government to enforce rules" and protect states (Goldstein & Pevehouse: 2006: 73). Realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, link this lack of a 'world government' to the continued occurrence of violence among states (Cudworth & Hobden: 2010). The absence of an authority higher than nation-states, it is argued, leads to a self-help system among states (Weber: 2009; Cudworth & Hobden: 2010); Lebow cites Mearsheimer's characterisation of this anarchical, self-help international system as "a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other" (Lebow: 2007: 55). This characterisation can be linked to the perception that international relations "cannot escape from a state of anarchy and will continue to be dangerous as a result" (Goldstein & Pevehouse: 2006: 74). Such perceptions demonstrate that realists have a largely pessimistic view of the international system (Grieco: 1988). In sum, all realists appear to subscribe to the belief that states are the only relevant actors in international politics and as there is no central authority to regulate or govern nation-states, a state of anarchy exists, where conflict and war is a constant threat as each state seeks to ensure its own survival at the expense of others.

However, there exists internal divisions within the IR theory of realism; this overview will concentrate on the distinction between classical realism and structural or neo-realism to illustrate this internal tension. While both predict that in an anarchical international system war is an inevitable outcome, there is disagreement over how anarchy will cause war.

Classical realists contend that human nature is destructive and thus causes war while neo-realists prefer to focus on social causes of war arguing that it is social relations among states that are responsible for conflict (Weber: 2009). Classical realists are often associated with the Hobbesian view of man as flawed and "tainted by original sin" (Weber: 2009: 16). Albert Einstein would agree with this to the extent that he judged man to have "an active and instinct for hatred and destruction" (Garnett: 2010: 28). In this sense, classical realists appear to be arguing that due

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to human nature war is to be expected at any time. Related to this point, Morgenthau would argue that all politics "is a struggle for power" and that in the international arena this struggle "cannot so readily be tamed" (Lebow: 2007: 55). This suggests that it is human nature to fight for power and survival and while constraints have been placed on man at a domestic level to reduce the likelihood of conflict in this struggle, without such constraints at an international level war will continue to be unavoidable. The classical realist view of politics as a struggle for power is perhaps best captured by reference to the security dilemma. The security dilemma is simply explained as "a situation in which states' actions taken to assure their own security tend to threaten the security of other states" (Goldstein & Pevehouse: 2006: 74). Realism would thus argue that an anarchical international system prevents the security dilemma being overcome, which in turn causes conflicts to arise. Theorists of a realist perspective would further this point by suggesting that it is unrealistic to think anarchy can be overcome as the states will never feel secure enough to cede sovereignty to a higher authority in some form of world government (Weber: 2009).

While classical realists would argue that the inevitability of war in an anarchical system is due to the destructive tendency of human nature, structural realists argue that this has little to do with why states engage in the struggle for power (Mearsheimer: 2007). Structural or neo-realism, often associated with the work of Waltz, argue, "internationally states operate in a context of anarchy which dictates certain kinds of priorities and behaviours…to ensure international order and relative advantage within it" (Hutchings: 1999). In this sense Waltz appears to be arguing against Morgenthau's notion that there is little distinction between domestic and international politics and that as states operate in an international context of anarchy that their behaviour and relationships at an international level will be very different from those at a domestic level. Structural realism thus concentrates on the structure of international society to explain why states behave in the (often conflictual) manner that they do. In seeking to explain the causes of war, Waltz argues that not even the growth in numbers of democratic states can override the structure of international politics to creating an increasingly peaceful international system (Waltz: 2000). Whereas classical realism assumes war to be a constant threat, neo-realists argue that, although there is no automatic harmony in anarchy, it is possible create a sense of order within anarchy through the balance of power (Weber: 2009). For neo-realists it is not only states that are relevant actors in international politics but great power states who are crucial to the balance of power in the international system (Mearsheimer: 2007). It is argued that power ratios among great powers, such as the US or China, affect the prospects for peace demonstrating that the structure of the international system in terms of unipolarity, bipolarity or multi-polarity and any resulting power shifts can increase or reduce the likelihood of international conflict (ibid.). In this case, structural realism suggests that anarchy is still the "permissive cause of war", however elements of anarchy can be overcome by structuring the balance of power in a way that reduces the chance of conflict (Weber: 2009: 14).

Having discussed the key features of the realist approach to anarchy and the internal tensions existing within the realist school of thought, I will now move on to discuss the key features of the constructivist approach after which I will offer an analysis of the debate between realists and constructivists with regards to anarchy in international politics.

The constructivist approach to anarchy is often summed up by Wendt's assertion that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt: 1992: 391). In this sense Wendt is arguing that "people act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of meanings objects have for them" (Wendt: 1992: 396); this suggests that our approach to anarchy is dependent upon the meaning we attach to anarchy and it is possible of "thinking of anarchy as having multiple meanings for different actors" (Hopf: 1998: 174). Central to the constructivist approach to anarchy is the inter-subjective meanings we attach to social contexts (Hopf: 1998). Social constructivism would thus ague that international relations are socially constructed and "imbued with social values, norms and assumptions" (Fierke: 2007: 168). Adem clarifies this argument by stating things only 'exist' because we believe them to and that "if states as well as non-state actors interact with the 'belief' that they are in an anarchic environment, we would be bound to witness a particular set of behaviour" (Adem: 2002: 20). This appears to suggest that a state or non-state actor's understanding of anarchy will lead them to behave in particular ways in the social context of international politics. Constructivists, such as Hopf, argue that anarchy can be perceived as an "imagined community" where a "continuum of anarchies is possible" (Hopf: 1998: 174). This means that certain issue areas of international politics can be understood as more, or less, anarchic; the distinction between how states approach arms control and economic trade is used to exemplify this, with states worrying more about the enforcement of arms control agreements as the costs of

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"ceding control over outcomes to other states or institutions" are greater than they would be in trade agreements (ibid.). Again, this emphasizes the importance of inter-subjective meanings, which can be seen to predict certain behaviours in international politics. In this sense, constructivists dispute the realist notion that self-help and power politics are essential features of anarchy but rather that they are institutions effecting the process rather than structure of international relations (Wendt: 1992).

By distinguishing between the process and structure of international politics, constructivists can be viewed as being more optimistic in their outlook. While realists view the international system as static and war as unavoidable, constructivists would dispute this arguing that interests and identities change over the course of history allowing cooperation between states where previously there had been conflict, an example of this would be the states within the EU who were formerly enemies but have now learned to cooperate (Fierke: 2007). The EU example demonstrates that the effects of anarchy can be lessened through the creation of institutions as it internalizes identities and interests thus creating new understandings of self and other (Wendt: 1992); this suggests that institutions can help reconstruct identities for example Germany was viewed as an aggressive state but as a member of the EU, Germany is no longer viewed in this manner. In summary, although constructivists recognise anarchy's existence in the international system, they argue that the effects of anarchy are dependent upon the inter-subjective meanings we attach to it; constructivists do not appear to subscribe to the view that war is inevitable in the international system but suggest that conflict is overcome by observing and reconstructing identities and interests. It appears to this author that although constructivists agree that self-help and power politics can be identified in international relations, these features are not permanent but shift or disappear when the meaning of anarchy is modified, i.e. when identities and interests are transformed creating new behaviour to be explained and understood.

With the key features of the realist and constructivist approaches to anarchy outlined, it is now possible to discuss the similarities and differences between these two approaches. While distinctions between realism and constructivism have been noted above, the final part of this essay aims to provide a more detailed discussion of the contrasts and also any similarities they share.

It may be useful to begin this discussion by noting what each of these IR theories has in common. In terms of this discussion, the most fundamental point to note is that each theory recognises the international system as being anarchic, in fact it has been argued that assumption of anarchy is what sets IR apart from other disciplines (Adem: 2002). There are other similarities. Both appear to accept states as the "fundamental actors in international politics" (Weber: 2009: 67). This illustrates from a constructivist viewpoint that although non-state actors are present in the international politics, it is the constructed relationships between states that have the greatest influence on the structure and process of the system. The other feature which both theories share is the commitment to an "epistemology indebted to positivism" in order to explain and understand the world (Fierke: 2007: 172; Smith: 2007). This is the claim that scientific reasoning underlies the ideas of all the major schools of IR theory, of which realism and constructivism are part (Adem: 2002).

Although it is possible to identify similarities between the constructivist and realist theory, it is also possible to note distinctions among these theoretical perspectives with regards to anarchy. It is the distinctions on which I will focus on in order to determine which theory offers the most persuasive argument.

A starting point of the contrasts that can be made is the way in which constructivists challenge the structural realist conception of anarchy. As has been alluded to earlier, constructivists dispute the claim that "anarchy and the distribution of relative power drive most of what goes on in world politics" (Copeland: 2000: 187). Constructivists, through the work of Alexander Wendt, challenge the neo-realist notion that anarchy forces states into "recurrent security competitions" but rather that anarchy can be conflictual or cooperative (Copeland: 2000: 188; Weber: 2009). It was noted in the description of the realist approach to anarchy that the main priority of states is to ensure their own survival, which often leads to conflict thus allowing realists to argue that the anarchical nature of the international system makes war inevitable. It is possible to suggest that while constructivists agree all states try to survive, the way in which they achieve this survival is an "open question" illustrating that state survival need not entail the use of force or engagement in conflict (Weber: 2009: 67). In this sense constructivists would assert that "anarchy does not dispose actors to do anything in particular", while realists claim that anarchy leads states to war thus illustrating a

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clear distinction between realism and constructivism (Dessler & Owen: 2005: 598).

Following on from the argument that anarchy does or does not generate certain behaviours from states, it is possible to draw the distinction between anarchy as a factor of international relations and anarchy as the defining feature of international relations. The realist interpretation, as offered by Waltz, would have us believe that international anarchy dictates how states must behave in the state system rather than how they might behave thus making anarchy the defining feature of international relations (Weber: 2009). In this sense Waltz's argument that war occurs because there is no authority to prevent them appears to suggest that, because of this absence of a international governing body, states should actively pursue conflict in order to ensure their own survival (Grieco: 1988). Constructivists would counter this view by arguing that neo-realists are viewing states as more or less identical thus limiting their ability to observe social change (Hopf: 1998); by failing to observe the differences in identity and interests between individual states, realists are unable to see the possibilities for cooperation in an anarchical system. In this sense constructivists, with their perception of multiple meanings, can see the opportunity for cooperation where realists only consider the possibility of conflict. Realists justify the continued threat of violence in the international system by adding the element of fear to their approach of anarchy. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz appears to suggest anarchy is location of fear (Weber: 2009: 32). States are seen to be in constant fear of the intentions of other states within the anarchical structure. This means that the security dilemma is not a feature of international politics but a feature of international anarchy suggesting that security concerns are only overcome by the change in structure of the system away from anarchy (ibid.).

Thus, realism dictates that in anarchical system states have no choice but to put their own interests ahead of the interests of other states and that fear will never be reduced to an inconsequential level (Mearsheimer: 2007); this will result in continued fear where so long as anarchy exists so too will conflict. The constructivist critique of this argument is that, due to inter-subjective understandings, fear can be overcome through interaction with other states (Copeland: 2000). This line of critique emphasizes the role of identity as it is argued that the production and reproduction of identities can play a role in modifying the structures of the international system as these structures "exist only through the reciprocal interaction of actors" (Copeland: 2000: 190). In this sense fear is not located in anarchy but produced by relations between actors operating within the structure of anarchy. Constructivists would thus argue that diplomatic relations between states helps to reduce states' fears and foster cooperation; this argument can be linked to the earlier example of EU states where the creation of diplomatic (and economic) ties helped reduce the fear that Germany would rebuild its military capabilities and allowed cooperation among European states to take place despite the anarchical nature of international politics.

In conclusion, this essay has outlined how both realism and constructivism approach the concept of anarchy in international politics. Both theoretical approaches accept that the structure of the international system is anarchical, however there is debate as to whether or not the effects of anarchy, such as self-help, can be overcome without fundamentally changing the structure of international politics. Realists, such as Waltz, argue that anarchy and its resulting security dilemma cannot be overcome unless a 'world government' is created, a situation that realists cannot envision occurring, as states will never feel secure enough to do so. This is a highly pessimistic view, which suggests we are to continually expect conflict with periods of peace being explained by the balance of power. On the other hand, constructivists dispute this approach, arguing instead that anarchy itself does not explain the behaviour of states but that we need to recognise the importance of identity, interests and inter-subjective understandings of these factors when seeking to explain international politics. I felt that as constructivism could better account for both conflict and cooperation in the international system that its explanation of anarchy was more persuasive. With more time I resources I would have been able to articulate this view more fully, however, the primary purpose of this essay was to offer a comparison of the realist and constructivist approaches to anarchy and as such the focus was on defining and discussing their respective viewpoints.

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