What are the Key Elements of the Neo-Neo Debate?

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It is of the utmost importance to define clearly that inter-paradigm debate tends to overlook much more than this essay discusses including morality, international ethics, deeper concern of domestic policies and new threats to security. Nevertheless, this essay will be narrowly focused on cornerstone points where inter-paradigm debate apart company to challenge the question that 'what is missing' in the debate is not as essential as an account points of state-centric approaches that are still far more relevant in describing, explaining, prescribing and predicting the state of current world affairs than critical theorists might agree. In order to determine if traditionalists fail to bridge over relevant issues of world politics discussion will revolve around four main segregations, namely the effects of the international system and the extent to which cooperation can be achieved, the importance of relative and absolute gains, the conflict between state capabilities and interests and the relevance of international regimes and institutions, which in turn, will be concisely introduced while addressing criticisms from critical theorists who claim that 'mainstream IR theories have difficulty explaining 'systemic change'[1] and fails to apprehend new challenges in global politics.

Accordingly to Charles Lipson "Rosetta stone of international relations"[2] is frequently referred to international system and its effect on cooperation. Both traditional theories agree that "international system is anarchical"[3] but they apart company arguing as what that means. Waltz offers an account of self-reproducing international system, embedded in a "structure of constraints to which no state is immune"[4]. He contends international anarchy fosters competition among states and inhibits their willingness to cooperate[5]. While neo-liberals are sure "anarchy is what states make of it"[6] and that such a system will not "constrain […] the options of the state to survival".[7] As a result, both theories appreciate cooperation possibility in separate ways too. According to Waltz, "in a state of anarchy, the desire to "ensure" one's own safety leads to war or to the endangerment of one's own safety"[8]. Hence states consider possibility for cooperation primarily if their security is assured. On the other hand neo-liberals do not agree that closer cooperation is contentious. Keohane believes "international system is anarchic, but normatively regulated too"[9]. It leads to an argument that "cooperation in areas of mutual interest may mitigate the effects of anarchy"[10]. The main critique about the structure of the system comes from structuralists, who argue that traditionalists fail to account for the "structural change"[11] of the system and treat states' identities and interests as "exogenously given"[12] ("take the world as they find it"[13]). Contrary to traditional theorists, cognitivists think that changes in belief and cultural systems can trigger changes in policy[14]and especially in how we perceive constraints of international system. They are more concerned not to 'take the world as given'[15] and as a consequence, want to develop an alternative conception of world order, where different actors play more important roles than states. However, what critical theorists fail to realize, Waltz states, is that in the international system "there is a structure of constraints and conditions to which no one is immune […] and has capacity to frustrate virtually all anti-systemic forces"[16], therefore, "theories can account for change within the system but not a change of the system"[17]. As a result, a self help system constantly reproduces itself, thus leaving us with the same standpoint (state-centric approach) through which international affairs are taken into account.

The debate between the neos continue on the importance of international regimes; [18] Neo-liberals argue that nevertheless anarchy constrains the willingness of states to cooperate states still can work together and can do so especially with the assistance of international institutions.[19] However neo-realists tend to regard the effectiveness of regimes as more narrowly circumscribed,[20] and argue that, "international institutions are unable to "mitigate anarchy's constraining effects on inter–state cooperation"[21]. Critical theorists charge neo-realists and neo-liberals

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for failing to appreciate potential of cooperation and especially through other types of institutions, than those defined as 'legitimate'[22] in order to create world society. Nevertheless, the account of traditional theorists who are more assertive on international institutions is more convincing, especially considering UN failure to stop Iraq war or failure of the League of Nations to hold aggressive actions of Germany, Italy and Japan in the 1930s to be more cautious. It is common to quote the transition of the power from the state as the primary actor to other international players, namely, political and social institutions that overcome the constraints of state. Unfortunately, neither former nor this claim seems adaptive to current international affairs. Discussing about cooperation, one should ask why does the US administration refuse to cooperate with the Kyoto Treaty, even if it touches global issues such as environmentalism? Or why America "could not support […] boost aid to developing countries?"[23] The answer lies in a discussion of another key aspect of the debate – relative and absolute gains.

On this key issue, the point where neo-liberals and neo-realists part company is in their respective specifications of states' behavioral models.[24] Neo-liberals see states as rational "egoistic value maximizers"[25], who are concerned only with their own gains and losses and are "indifferent of the gains achieved by others"[26], whereas neo-realists insist that state's willingness to cooperate is interdependent with 'how well their competitors do'[27] and may diminish willingness if others gain more[28]. In spite of the wish to treat both theories equally in the essay it is difficult to overlook that in practice states "are compelled to ask not "will both of us gain?" but "who will gain more?""[29] This theoretical view adds a key relevant point that critical theorists tend to reject state-centric view too soon. It is obvious, that international cooperation will not take place unless "states make it happen"[30] and cooperative actions will be "within states interest". To depict this argument even more clearly, George W. Bush said that "he wouldn't ratify the Kyoto Protocol because it could significantly damage the country financially"[31] and America "could not support […] boost aid to developing countries" as "it [did] not work for the United States", with the acknowledgement that "it [worked] for other countries".[32] It is still seen that current international affairs, no matter if cooperation or description of international regime, in practice returns to analysis of state-centric approach.

Finally, capabilities and intentions of the state form a dichotomy between converging theories. Neo-realists "concentrate on capabilities rather than intentions"[33] and Grieco points out that uncertainty about the future intentions and interests of other states lead statesmen to pay close attention to capabilities, "the ultimate basis for their security and independence."[34] Nonetheless, one could argue that by accepting deep cuts in their strategic arsenals, Russia and the United States violated the neo-realist's first rule that states should always "increase military capabilities"[35] supporting neo-liberal position, who look more at intentions and perceptions.[36] It is hard to relate criticism from cognitivists to this particular issue, as discussion on this key aspect between neo-liberals and neo-realists happen exclusively in the framework of the state, whose importance is rejected by critical theorists. However both traditional theories point out that "high levels of economic interdependence early last century failed to prevent the First World War, nor did economic integration forestall the break-up of Yugoslavia at the end of the century",[37] thus they still point out that the primary source of stability is the state and power relation, even if neo-liberals put more emphasis on alternative sources of stability and cooperation.

In conclusion, it can be seen that states are still primary medium through which the effects of other actors are channeled into the world system. It may be that non-state actors are becoming more important than states as initiators of change and world society is forming, but system change "ultimately happens through states"[38]. In that sense states 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' and not accountant for other actors than it does "to criticize a theory of forests for being 'tree-centric'"[39]. It is true that traditionalists' theories fail to bridge over all relevant issues their theories could but it is still the balance of power and state interests that drives world politics and unless the situation changes in the near future, these two complementary theories still explain the key relevance points and the base of standpoint from which other theoretical backgrounds can develop their analyses.

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