

Systemic Theorizing: Traversing Between Constructivism and Structural Realism

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Abstract

This research paper looks at the constructivist theoretical framework and the systemic level of analysis in International Relations (IR). The paper examines the levels of analysis issue and the evolution of this issue in the light of the great debates in IR. The research provides a description of basic tenants of constructivism, a description of the varieties of constructivist theorizing and a brief account of how the different varieties compare to each other. The research paper then focuses on Alexander Wendt and examines Wendt's constructivist theoretical framework and particularly how he sees analysis at the systemic level. The issue of structure and agency figures in the debate on levels of analysis and the paper examines this facet of systemic theorizing. The research paper compares how Wendt's systemic analysis is a departure from the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz. Waltz's theory was and remains an influential theory of IR and by comparing these two important theories a better understanding is obtained not only of systemic theorizing in the constructivist theoretical framework but also aspects of the systemic level of analysis in IR in general.

Keywords: Constructivism, Theories of International Relations, Systemic Analysis.

Introduction

International Relations (IR) scholarship includes a variety of theoretical frameworks and their commensurate manners of analyses. The main theoretical frameworks of realism, liberalism, constructivism, and Marxism have their differing perspectives and their ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. Within each theoretical framework there are again several different sub-approaches. One way in, which the evolution of the discipline of IR has been viewed, is by looking at the "great debates" that have occupied the field. Though there is some contention regarding the exact nature of the "debates", and if they really can be classified as debates, still, they reflect protracted and important divisions and academic positions within the discipline (Wilson 1998).

During the period of the first two debates, generally speaking, the dominant framework in IR theorizing was that of realism, or its later form of structural realism, and the contention was primarily between realism and its competing IR theory of liberalism. The first major debate was specifically revolved around realism and

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utopianism or idealism (Dunne, Cox and Booth; 1998, pp. v-xii) and the second debate was centered around methodology and, that too, a rather limited study of methodology (Lapid, 1989). We will not get into a detailed description of the great debates in this research and the purpose of making reference to the debates is that we can, in very basic terms, see how constructivism as a theoretical framework evolved in relation to the major theoretical divides in IR. Also, exploring the theoretical inquiry of this paper with the backdrop of the historically relevant question of the debates places foregrounds a very disciplinary context that is of consequence in studying and how the systemic or structural level of analysis developed in IR theorizing. This manner of analysis can help, for example, show how the theory of IR, when examining the relations between states, places importance on polarity and balance of power and in the liberal theorizing in IR the relations between states is seen with a focus on processes and interaction between states (Mingst, 2003). Also, though the contention between the neo-liberalism and neo-realism was and remains intense, still, both these major theoretical frameworks share commonalities on a variety of factors, including, the emphasis on states as major actors in IR, a commitment to rationalism (Wendt, 1992b) and an adherence to positivism as the appropriate epistemology for pursuing social science research. The challenge to the positivist epistemology was undertaken during the course of the third great debate in IR. The challenge, in part, came from a view that the international structure is shaped by shared knowledge and this influences identities and actions (Mingst, 2003).

The unit of analysis debate also was influenced by the way in which theorizing in IR evolved. These debates also display a temporality and a variability, for example, in the late fifties the idea of international politics being conceptualized as a system gained popularity. Realism as a theoretical framework coupled with behavioralism, contributed to the initial push towards this conceptualization of the international system. These debates and the contending theories within these debates propose a description of international politics and of the actors that play a role in influencing the behavior of the states. Key to approaching the systemic level of analysis is understanding the notion of the international system. The conceptualizing of the international system poses a challenge of sorts given its relative intangibility. Bringing clarity to this concept begins with firstly defining what may constitute a system. The definition of a system could be thought of as “an assemblage of units, objects, or parts united by some form of regular interaction” (Mingst, 2003). The approach to IR in general has been to great extent influenced by the theoretical frameworks that have dominated at different periods of the discipline’s development. The dominance of realism during the first and second great debate meant that the conceptualization of

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the international system that was commensurate with realism was also popular. However, by the third great debate in IR the doors for examining and striving to understand the appropriate unit of analysis also further opened-up (Lapid, 1989). The new theoretical frameworks introduced during the third debate included critical theory, post-structuralism, constructivism and postmodernism.

The third great debate in IR was focused around epistemological and ontological issues in the wake of the emerging alternate post-positivist theoretical frameworks (Lapid, 1989). One post-positivist theoretical framework that obtained a certain amount of prominence in the 1990s was the constructivist framework, and many IR experts felt that constructivist theorizing is significant to the further development of IR as a field (Weber, 2010, p. 6). Beginning with the 1990s the constructivist theoretical framework started gaining popularity in the study of IR (Brown and Ainley, 2005). The growing popularity of applying the constructivist theory in studying the events occurring in the realm of the International system has also resulted in theoretical research on constructivism as a theoretical framework. A review showed that there is much research, theoretical and otherwise, on diverse aspects of the constructivist framework (Hopf, 1998; Palan, 2000; Lezaun, 2002; Varadaraian, 2004; Zurn and Checkel 2005). However, theoretical research publications on constructivism that focus on the level of analysis and then particularly on analyzing the systemic level of constructivist theorizing could not be readily located.

The ongoing third great debate is quite unlikely to resolve into a conclusive wide-ranging consensus, as is usually the case for debates that involve meta-theoretical positions (Lapid, 1989). This article recognizes this limitation and therefore focuses on the constructivist theoretical framework without either rationalizing constructivism as the appropriate choice of theory in IR or aiming, in any substantial way, to resolving the epistemological contentions of the third great debate in IR. This is not to say that there is not a substantial body of IR scholarship available that engages in analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of choosing one particular level of analysis over another. Though there may be some inherent advantages that a certain level of analysis provides over other levels but these advantages are general in nature and their application to a particular research project is again to be evaluated in the context and specifics of the research that is being conducted and the phenomenon that is problematized. The systemic level has the advantage of providing comprehensiveness, a claim that is often weakened by a commensurate deficiency of details (Singer, 1961). Also this comprehensiveness diminishes the impact of a sub-

systemic level actor and may also fail to distinguish the differences that exist at the sub-systemic level (Singer, 1961).

This article does not aim at evaluating the effectiveness of a particular level of analysis over other levels. The purpose of this article is to take constructivist theorizing and see how it addresses the systemic level of analysis. In the course of this endeavor the article will elaborate on some of the main tenants of constructivism and will then focus on the theoretical framework developed by Alexander Wendt. Wendt is perhaps the most prominent systemic IR constructivist and the details of his theory are developed in his book *The Social Theory of International Politics* (1999). The article will then explore how Wendt's theorizing compares on certain relevant aspects with Kenneth Waltz. Waltz's structural theorizing is depicted in his book *The Theory of International Politics* (1979).

Constructivism and its Various Forms

It is usually recognized that the term constructivism was coined by Nicholas Onuf (1989). Some core foundations of broadly constructivist theorizing in IR are that shared ideas contribute to the determining of social structures, identities and interests (Wendt, 1999). Identity is a central concept in constructivism. Identity again is a complex phenomenon though, and is an outcome that incorporates processes and social learning (Wendt, 1999). The intersubjective understandings of norms, rules and ideologies can influence identities, interests and actions (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 7). In constructivist theory the context in which the meanings are being constructed is important. The influence of the context may be driven by a variety of individual factors, such as political, social or economic factors, or a combination of these individual factors. The meanings may be contested, and even then certain meanings may dominate over others (Klotz & Lynch, 2007). An important ontological assumption of constructivism is that of mutual constitution (Klotz & Lynch, 2007). Identities and interests are important concepts of the constructivist theoretical framework. In very general terms, identities may be thought of as "a sense of self" and the identities that are created are not fixed and are open to modification (Klotz & Lynch, 2007). Identities help in defining national interests and the constructivist theory challenges the liberal, realist and the Marxist position on the sources of the identity and interests of the state (Klotz & Lynch, 2007).

There are different divisions between constructivists theorizers. One sphere along which constructivists are divided is between the adherents of positivism and post-

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positivism. These different epistemological stances have major implication on the nature of the inquiry that is pursued. The positivist

position sees norms as being stable and less inclined to change and the post-positivist position sees the norms and so on much more likely to change (Klotz & Lynch, 2007). Sometimes, with some overlap with the positivist and post-positivist categorization, constructivist theorizers are divided between conventional and critical constructivist (Hopf, 1989). The conventional constructivist view can be partly seen in the work of Wendt, and suggests the possibility of constructivist working within the methodological and epistemological frameworks of traditional, or relatively positivist, IR theory (McDonald, 2008). On the other hand, critical constructivists are involved in taking a more post-positivist view towards theorizing IR. Another basis for dividing the constructivist theorizing is between the categories of modern and the postmodern constructivist (Wendt, 1992b). It is important to realize that sometimes the demarcation between these different categories of constructivism is not clear and easy to make and there is considerable overlap within the categories (Buzan and Hansen, 2009).

More relevant to this research paper is the divide between constructivist theorizers on the basis of the level of analysis or the unit of analysis pursued. This manner of categorizing constructivist sees three levels of analysis: the unit-level, the systemic level, and the holistic level. The unit level and the systemic level are the extremes of the divide and the holistic level constructivist can be seen as a combination of the two. In broad terms, systemic constructivist researchers study how the structures of the international system shape IR while unit level constructivists focus on the domestic level (Reus-Smit, 2005).

Levels of Analysis and Wendt's Constructivism

Wendt's 1999 book *The Social Theory of International Politics* is recognized as a seminal work in the promotion of the constructivist theoretical framework and this book is a comprehensive elaboration of the systemic level of IR theorizing. The ontological details of Wendt's theoretical framework provide an insight into understanding the Wendtian systemic theorizing. The importance of the social is a key element of the ideational thrust of Wendt (Wendt, 1999). This ontological position does not necessarily privilege casual investigations (Wendt, 1999). Wendt also feels that ontological issues deserve more importance than has been accorded to them (Wendt, 1999). The study of IR and the social sciences has given a lot of importance

to the epistemological issues and part of this importance is a consequence of the importance that has been accorded to positivism (Wight, 2006).

Research inquiry that is conducted at the systemic level can perhaps be better understood by contrasting it with the other possible levels of conducting research and there are several levels at which the level of analysis debate can be seen to function in the study of IR. These other levels may include the state system or the international system, and the state level can also be further divided between different junctures within the nation state (Hollis and Smith, 1992). Singer's work (1961) along with others that followed later on, such as Waltz, helped establish that the international system was a distinct and meaningful level of analysis (Hollis and Smith, 1992).

Though it is possible to carry out IR related research that cuts across various levels of analysis but to better examine the effects of an IR related phenomenon it is perhaps prudent to focus on one level. Therefore, usually researchers have to make a conscious choice between selecting one level from among the different levels of analysis when conducting research and making this choice can be quite challenging (Singer, 1961). Part of the difficulty lies in there not being a sweeping verdict on which level is most appropriate level for conducting IR research (Griffiths, Callaghan and Roach; 2008). Nonetheless, the importance and the relevance of selected factors to a research situation are mostly driven by the context of the research. Factoring into this decision can include the importance the research assigns to description, explanation and prediction (Singer, 1961). There is need to recognize that the choice regarding which level of analysis is pursued in a given research, while driven by context still, does not necessarily imply that a particular level of analysis is uniquely appropriate to a particular research and that this most appropriate level of analysis can be objectively uncovered. The choice of level comes laden with ramification and, primarily, has implications on the conclusion that the research arrives at. These conclusions may be in consonance or may not be with explanations that emanate from a different level of analysis (Klotz and Lynch, 2007). The systemic level of inquiry while growing in popularity in the 1950s has not remained uniformly popular in IR theorizing. In the 1990s systemic theorizing faced detraction with the end of the Cold War when the researchers undertaking this approach were faced with questions about the quick collapse of the structure of the international system (Hollis and Smith, 1994). This article focuses on systemic level of inquiry and the manner in which this sort of inquiry is undertaken in the constructivist framework but the research and is not looking to arrive at a widely applicable and conclusive endorsement of a particular level of analysis. This research recognizes the existence of the various levels of

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analysis and the choice of the appropriate level is to be decided on the basis of an examination of the specifics of the particular research that is undertaken by a particular researcher (Griffiths, Callaghan and Roach; 2008). The level of analysis issue is in many ways a complex issue and the selection of a level of analysis for a particular research may bring with it a difficulty in dividing the level issue into neatly segregated categories. The effects one level may also seep into the other level and the relative impact of one particular level may be hard to isolate (Hollis and Smith, 1994).

One parallel structure that provides an insight, from a decidedly different perspective, but, nonetheless with important implications is the debate about structure and agency. The agency and structure debate is long drawn and often seems intractable (Carlsnaes, 1992). The debate on this divide is evident in explicit discussion about the theoretical significance of either side of this division but when not explicitly pursued the choice between one or the other is implicit in the manner in which a researcher chooses to position the agential capacity of selected actors in a given social science research (Wendt, 1987).

Generally speaking, social scientific theories embody an explicit or implicit position on the agent and structure problem. The position situates agents and social structures in relation to one another. They can also take an ontological position that does not privilege one level or the other in light of the recognition that each is important. Wendt seems to favor a balancing between these two facets, without necessarily privileging one or the other (Wendt, 1987).

The State and the System

The influence of the state level versus the international system level, in the constructivist theorizing, may be seen in discussions that try and decide the ability of the systemic level to shape IR. Some view the international system as historical and one that is shaped by the context in which the interaction being research is being carried out (Wendt, 1992). Wendt also sees systemic level focused inquiry as a project that does not necessarily not incorporate the state level and his view is at odds with the structural realist. To see an example of the different shapes that theorizing at the systemic level may take it is insightful to examine the differences between the systemic theorizing of Wendt with that of Waltz. This comparison will also highlight some on the salient aspects of Wendt's theorizing and will put a perspective on how two important theoretical frameworks of systemic theorizing in IR relate to one another. Wendt's point of view is mostly portrayed in his book *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) and Waltz's view is covered in his book *The Theory of*

International Politics (1979). This comparison, while highlighting the diversity that is found at the systemic level of analysis will also help in further understanding Wendt's systemic framework.

Waltz structural realism is different from the classical realist like Hobbes and Morgenthau. The classic realist see the source of power politics as human nature and The structural realist emphasize the anarchy prevailing in the international system as the driver of realpolitik (Wendt, 1992). The initial and relatively through description of the foundations of Waltz's thought is detailed in his 1954 book *Man, State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (2001). In this book Waltz examines the contribution of human behavior as a cause of conflict in the relations between states and says that attributing the conflict to human nature, among other reasons, also has questionable validity, since human nature can also be seen to be charitable and good (Waltz, 2001). The internal structures of the state could also possibly be a major cause of international conflict and Waltz says that defects within the state, such as type of government, may be contributing causes (Waltz, 2001). The threat to peace posed by militaristic and communist states has been propagated during the Cold War era by liberal states or the opposite by Marxist who insist the problem is capitalist states. Looking the structural level, Waltz says that there is always the possibility of war among states that are seeking their own self-interest in a situation where there is no international authority above the states to regulate their action (Waltz, 2001).

In his 1979 publication the *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz more fully develops the theoretical framework for structural realism. Waltz says that the systemic level of analysis is needed when we are looking at a situation where the sub-systemic level is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon being studied in light of the way that it is organized (Waltz, 1979, pp. 38-39). Waltz defines a system as composed of a structure and interacting units. The structure is defined as "system-wide component that makes it possible to think of the system as a whole" (Waltz, 1979). The positioning of the units is required to understand the structure of the system (Waltz, 1979). The influence of structures produces performance and these are similar as long as the structures are similar (Waltz, 1979). The systems in international relations are formed by the action of state actors and the state actors operate on a self-help basis (Waltz, 1979). Waltz talks about the distribution of capability or power within the system as key to defining the system (Waltz, 1979).

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Wendt and Structural Realism

Comparing the two structural theories of Wendt and Waltz will facilitate the understanding of systemic theorizing in Wendt's constructivist theory and also will provide an understanding of systemic theorizing in IR in general. While there are significant differences between the two theories still there are some similarities between Wendt's constructivist theorizing and the structural realism of Waltz. Waltz emphasizes the importance of security for the states (Waltz, 1979). and Wendt also recognizes the importance of security and survival of the state (Wendt, 1999). The structural realist theorizing is looked upon as a parsimonious form of theory making (Hobson, 2000) and the critics of neorealism see that this minimalism has left out many important facets of the international system. Wendt differs considerably from the structural realist in theorizing the international system. Wendt examines anarchy and says that the states identity and interests are key factors in foreign policy choices of the state and in shaping the nature of the international system, but the relations between these concepts is constitutive (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, the international system also has influence on the nature of the state (Wendt, 1999).

Wendt recognizes that Waltz has developed a well organized theory of structure (Wendt, 1999) and Waltz sees the structure taking shape due to the prevailing anarchy in the international system where functionally undifferentiated states behave on the basis of the distribution of power (Wendt, 1999). Security and survival are of primary concern for both Wendt and Waltz but Wendt talks about the assumption that are implicit in Waltz's conceptualization, particularly the formations of norms and ideas as influencing a states perception of threats and interests (Wendt, 1999). Wendt supports the Waltz's claim that the structural level is relatively autonomous but criticizes Waltz's conceptualization by not agreeing with the premise that anarchy is the only defining element of the systemic level (Wendt, 1999).

In understanding the constructivist theorizing, in particular Wendt's theoretical framework, it is useful to look at how the state is viewed and how it is related to the international system. Wendt uses a conceptualization of the state as capable of contributing to the formulation of an identity and capable of taking decisions (Wendt, 1999). This is at odds with a conceptualizing of the state with given qualities but qualities that are immutable (Hansen, 2011). Constructivism on the other hand treats identity as contingent on context and history driven (Hopf, 1998). Wendt says that the changing identities of the state can have implications for the international system and can bring about change (Harrison, 2004). Wendt says that the description of the states in the international system as competitive units pursuing self-help is flawed in the way

the cause of the state behavior is explained. Wendt argues that this state behavior is not exogenously derived but is established primarily on the basis of the interaction between states (Wendt, 1992). Wendt clarifies that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992b), and argues that there is no logic of anarchy and the self-help system can be changed on the basis of the practices of the states (Weber, 2010).

Conclusion

The evolution of IR scholarship is sometime characterized by the great debates that have occupied the field. When the first and second debates gave way to the third debate, there was a push towards examining and comparing the epistemology of the positivist and the-post positivist theorizers in IR. This third debate along with raising questions of epistemology also opened up the debate on what are the appropriate levels of analysis for pursuing scholarship in IR. The systemic level of analysis had started gaining in popularity with the earlier development of the realist theoretical framework and broadened its support with Waltz’s structural realism, which emphasized the systemic level of analysis. As an outcome of the third great debate the constructivist theoretical framework started gaining in popularity in the 1990s. The basic tenants of constructivism included that identities and interests are of consequence in a world shaped by ideas and norms. However, within what was broadly considered the constructivist framework there was a diversity of approaches and each approach has its own inclination towards what would be an appropriate level of analysis. The theorizing of Wendt was an important development of the constructivist theory and Wendt focused on the systemic level of analysis. It is not possible to conclude without contention that a particular level of analysis is privileged over another level and it is usually the context of the research that drives the choice of what is the appropriate level of analysis. The level of analysis approach is also reflected in the debate on structure and agency and this examination also sheds a useful light on this theoretical matter. The decision on the appropriate level of analysis by a researcher requires an understanding of how the state and the international system are conceptualized in different theoretical frameworks and approaches. To understand Wendt’s theoretical systemic view it is useful to compare and contrast Wendt’s theory with the theory of the structural realist. Whereas Wendt and Waltz agree on the importance of the security and survival for the state still important differences exist between these two structural theorists. The conceptualization of the state and the international system are widely different and the incorporation of the identities and interests of the state along with the social structure of norms and ideas places Wendt’s ideas on the international system in great variance to Waltz. Also, the

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nature of the state and its interest are quite different in the two theories. Waltz sees the International system characterized as anarchic and in this system he sees state interest as given and unchanging and focused on power and survival. Wendt sees the state behavior being shaped in light of the interaction between states and he sees the state interests as open to change and even though anarchy may exist in the international system “anarchy is what the states make of it”.

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